

THE LORD OF BEMBIBRE

BIBLIOTECA



GIL Y CARRASCO

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The Lord of Bembibre
The Spanish Templar

The first translation into English of
Enrique Gil y Carrasco's *El Señor de Bembibre*

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Translated into English
by Margarita Núñez Gonzalez,
Brian Morrissey and Alonso Carnicer

Prologue

Here we have the long-awaited first English version of Enrique Gil y Carrasco's historical novel *El Señor de Bembibre*, generally regarded as the best of its genre in the Spanish Romantic period. It has indeed been reprinted in an unusual number of new editions in Spain but has never achieved such wide readership elsewhere, something that we hope this English version may remedy.

How will an English reader of the 21st Century react to this work written in 1844 but depicting the early years of the 14th? A time when the huge power of the Crusader Knights of the Temple, extending over France, Spain and elsewhere in Europe, was coming to its end.

Armoured knights, picturesque castles and ladies in distress have acquired a certain popularity in our modern TV series or films but they in no way convey the complexity of Medieval chivalry, the immense power and influence of the Church. Or, for example, the subjugation of noble women as pawns in great power games.

Gil has chosen an ancient structure on which to build his concept of those days: ambitious domineering father, docile unhappy daughter, ill-starred lovers one, or both of whom doomed to die. Such tragedies have formed the basis of innumerable works of fiction, drama, painting and music, each artist giving them a personal “habitation and a name”. The originality of Gil's novel lies precisely in its unusual setting, in a relatively unknown region of Spain, El Bierzo, his own homeland, which he records with great fidelity.

Gil is essentially a pictorial writer who invites his reader to visualize his scenes, painted with the utmost clarity and precision. Some derive from his own recollection of his homeland, El Bierzo, capturing the seasonal changes as reflected in skies, mountains, rivers and vegetation with a profound awareness of Nature reminiscent of English Romantic poets such as Keats or Wordsworth who preceded him.

At other times he surprises us with vivid, almost cinematographic action as he leads us through the besieged

Castle of Cornatel or narrates the desperate duel between the old veteran Commander Saldaña and the Count of Lemos, scenes that make us think of Alexandre Dumas' hugely successful *Les Trois Mousquetaires* published in the very same 1844 and pointing towards a new concept of historical fiction.

Gil's novel is basically sombre. A veil of melancholy overshadows the story as we follow the changing moods of a confused and lachrymose young woman, Doña Beatriz, entangled in a terrible network of opposing loyalties and fervent spirituality. The feverish episodes of her final delirium are in accordance with an age when so many young men and women, including the author himself, were destined to an early death.

The light relief comes with the delightful secondary characters: the vivacious and resourceful handmaiden Martina, the stalwart and loyal squire Millán or the noble hunter, Cosme Andrade, sturdy representatives of that country known as El Bierzo.

El Bierzo? What and where is El Bierzo? I asked this question long ago when Europe was just recovering from the most destructive period of its history —World War II— and I was living in the centre of its ruins. El Bierzo, I was told, is a wondrous region of North-West Spain, a land of high mountains circling fertile plains, many rivers, giant chestnut trees, ancient ruined castles and extraordinary Roman remains. "You certainly must visit El Bierzo". So I went and have now been going there repeatedly for more than 60 years. I have loved its beauty, its towns and villages, its captivating landscape and the warm hospitality of its inhabitants.

El Bierzo has long ceased to be the terrain of Knights Templar resplendent on their war horses. Nor is it quite the landscape that Enrique Gil may have recalled nostalgically on his untimely deathbed in far off Prussia, but today most of its topography remains. We hope that the readers of this book will feel inclined to visit or revisit the land he so vividly described.

DOIREANN MACDERMOTT

The Lord of Bembibre in Spanish Romanticism

The Lord of Bembibre can justly be claimed to be the greatest achievement in the historical novel popularised in the period of Spanish Romanticism. It was also the culminating moment in the writing career of its author, Enrique Gil y Carrasco, who was to die young just two years after its publication. It is, in many ways, entirely representative of the dominant trends in Spanish literature of the period, as even a cursory appraisal makes clear.

The slow penetration of Romantic ideas in Spain, over a twenty-year period initiated in the immediate aftermath of the Peninsular War, together with the progressive assimilation of the tenets of Romantic literary theory as most fully developed in Germany by the brothers August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel between 1808 and 1812 and most clearly articulated in their series of lectures in the city of Vienna, made it almost inevitable that Spanish writers would predominantly seek inspiration in the Middle Ages, considered the Romantic age par excellence. In narrative poetry, in drama and in the novel, the Middle Ages would hold unquestionable sway, almost to the exclusion of other periods of history. The acquaintance of the brothers with the Spanish language and their preference for the country's literature carried also a powerful note of cultural patriotism that would ensure that a large majority of works published in Spanish would have mediaeval Spain as their setting.

So far as the historical novel is concerned, one hugely dominant factor was the influence of Walter Scott; not the Scott of the majority of the Waverley novels set at the time of the 1745 rebellion and the product in part of eye-witness accounts of that time, but the Scott of the early narrative poetry – 'Marmion', 'The Lady of the Lake' and 'The Lay of the Last Minstrel' – and, especially, of *Ivanhoe*. When Ramón López Soler, another Romantic writer to die tragically young, penned the prologue to his *Los bandos de Castilla* of 1830, his short series of prefatory remarks would constitute something of a template for the series of historical narratives that were to follow. López Soler acknowledged the mastery of Scott in the genre by stating that there was much of conscious imitation of *Ivanhoe* in his own novel. His encapsulation of the inspiration of the Romantic muse stressed also the essential melancholy of its outlook, the

tempestuous nature of the powerful feelings it would express and their close affinity with the Sublime natural world ('the storms of nature and those of the human heart', as he put it), and the thematic centrality of lost love.

Gil y Carrasco's choice of the declining days of the Knights Templar, in *The Lord of Bembibre*, would be a paradigmatic choice, the fortunes of the military-religious orders of knighthood proving a fertile source of inspiration for many Spanish writers. As the genre became more fully established, so the protagonism of the natural landscape in the broader narrative became more active, and the features of the descriptive, sometimes close to static, presence of the natural world came to be more fully defined. In this Enrique Gil would draw extensively on his love for his native region, the Bierzo, and the landscapes of that distinctive area of North-West Spain would acquire something of the air of a participant creature in the unfolding of his narrative. Gil y Carrasco's own melancholy disposition, to which so much of his literary production bears testimony, would reveal itself to be in profound accord with the tenor of Romanticism, and the pain of absent love would create some of the most memorable passages in the novel.

It should be noted, further, that Spain's Romantic drama, like its Romantic historical novel, would reach a culminating point in 1844: with José Zorrilla's play *Don Juan Tenorio* and with Enrique Gil's *The Lord of Bembibre*. This is surely more than just coincidence. The high point of Spain's Romantic literature involved canonical texts predicated on violent conflict between individuals and between factions, works recreating the civil wars of earlier points in Spanish history at a time when the contemporary nation was riven by political divisions, from the aftermath of the Peninsular war into the internecine Carlist War of 1833-1839. With the settlement of 1843, and the movement forwards into the 'moderate decade' presided over by General Narváez and a period of much-needed governmental stability, so the tumultuous years of Spanish Romanticism would themselves reach a conclusion and give way to less frenetic and somewhat less fertile literary production. Enrique Gil y Carrasco died at the height of his powers, and it is tempting to speculate on what any remaining years of his active writing career would have contributed. In his poetry, Gil brought a note of intimacy and an absence of rhetorical effusion that may be considered to have most clearly paved the way for the great post-

Romantic poet Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer. With Enrique Gil's premature death, however, it is *The Lord of Bembibre* which bestows his greatest legacy as the most enduring historical novel of Spain's Romantic age.

DEREK FLITTER,
UNIVERSITY OF EXETER

Editor's note

This is the first translation into English of Enrique Gil y Carrasco's Spanish classic *El Señor de Bembibre*, *The Lord of Bembibre*, written in 1844 about a much earlier age, "the earliest years of the fourteenth century".

The Lord of Bembibre is considered the best novel of the Spanish romantic tradition, and is highly regarded within European romanticism, often compared with *Ivanhoe* by Sir Walter Scott, whom Enrique Gil admired.

The author, Enrique Gil y Carrasco (Villafranca del Bierzo, Spain, 1815-Berlin, Germany, 1846) had a short life. He died when he was thirty-one years old. Enrique Gil was a brilliant writer, with an outstanding intelligence and a prodigious memory, who pursued his career in the city of Madrid and in the king's court, frequenting the literary, revolutionary and Masonic circles of the writer Espronceda, his faithful friend.

After only a decade of writing, he left us a solid and incisive body of work, which still offers rewards to the modern reader. Poet, travel journalist, theatrical and literary critic, novelist, diplomat: everything that his hand touched acquired a nuance of elegance and beauty.

His poetry prefigured, three decades earlier, Bécquer's *Rhymes* and Rosalía de Castro's *Galician Songs*. As a theatrical critic, his writings set the criteria for the whole scene in Madrid. Despite his short life, this indefatigable traveller's articles about customs and habits are still a model for today's journalists.

Enrique Gil was sent by the government of Isabel II on a diplomatic mission to the court of the King of Prussia in Berlin, where he became friends with Alexander von Humboldt. There, the unromantic illness, tuberculosis, that had afflicted Enrique Gil since adolescence, cut short his life and work at the height of his career.

A History of Enrique Gil's novel

In the spring of 1844, before embarking on the romantic Grand Tour, in the manner of Lord Byron and Chateaubriand, travelling through the heart of Europe as part of his preparation for the diplomatic mission he was entrusted with, Enrique Gil finished his novel, originally entitled *El Señor de Bembibre*, at his office at the

National Library in Madrid.

He handed the manuscript to the printer Mellado, left for Berlin and was unable to attend to his corrections of the manuscript. However, a few months before his death he had the joy of receiving in his home in Berlin the first printed copies of the novel. Enrique Gil presented one of them as a gift to King William Frederick IV of Prussia. It is believed that, on receiving the novel, the king became interested in El Bierzo, asked for a map of Spain and, with the help of the writer, located the town of Bembibre.

Whether this anecdote is true or not, the curiosity of the King of Prussia and of his counsellor and friend von Humboldt concerning Enrique Gil's novel had another motive. The plot of *The Lord of Bembibre* —set in the Middle Ages but without strict historical rigour, as it is a novel in which much of the chronology, characters and events are fictitious—, recounts the fall from grace, persecution and trial of the Order of the Temple. This tragic episode shook the foundations of the monarchies and the Church in the early fourteenth century.

The choice of the Templars as the main protagonists of the novel was not made simply on historical grounds; there are other reasons. Firstly, Enrique Gil spent his childhood and youth in the city of Ponferrada, in El Bierzo, where he played in and around the medieval battlements of the Templar Castle, and these surroundings made a deep impression on the poet, which is manifested in the novel and also in his poems and stories.

The second reason can be found in Freemasonry, to which the King of Prussia, von Humboldt, Espronceda and Enrique Gil himself belonged, as did Lord Byron, whom he admired, and Sir Walter Scott, among many others. In 1844, when Enrique Gil was travelling on his secret mission to Berlin, the Prussian branch of Freemasonry, which was of Scottish origin, claimed to be the heirs of the Templars. So, when the king had in his hands the Masonic novel, *El Señor de Bembibre*, he immediately recognized its rites, customs, meanings and ideals.

The novel served as a literary passport and paved the way for Enrique Gil's friendship with von Humboldt, which although close, was not necessarily a carnal one, because in 1844 the great sage, who was a homosexual, was already a venerable old man. Thanks to the novel, Enrique Gil enjoyed the highest consideration in the court of Berlin and Sanssouci, as tutor of the princesses.

The Lord of Bembibre has been, since then, Enrique Gil's

passport to posterity and to the canon of Romantic writing, read in the past in the schools and homes of El Bierzo as a devotional, whose first lines were known to all the school children there. Now, schoolchildren in many countries can read these lines in our English translation: "One afternoon in May of one of the earliest years of the fourteenth century, three men, presumably the servants of some of the great lords who at that time shared the dominion of El Bierzo, were returning from the fair of San Marcos in Cacabelos."

The early death of Enrique Gil left his work adrift and abandoned: the successive editions of *The Lord of Bembibre* repeated for a century and a half the mistakes of Mellado's first edition of 1844, which the author could not correct. The rest of Enrique Gil's poetic and journalistic writing suffered an even worse fate and fell into oblivion.

In 2015 the II Centenary of the poet's birth was celebrated, especially in El Bierzo, with an International Congress. The proceedings have been published in the book *Enrique Gil y Carrasco and Romanticism* by Editorial Andavira; and also in the *Complete Works* edition, carried out by the undersigned, in the ten books, in paper and digital format, that make up the BIBLIOTECA GIL Y CARRASCO [GIL Y CARRASCO LIBRARY, editorial Paradiso_Gutenberg and eBooksBierzo].

Since 2016 and thanks to the BIBLIOTECA GIL Y CARRASCO, all the works by Enrique Gil are in modern, illustrated and annotated editions, available to download for free. Since 2017, the site www.bibliotecagilycarrasco.com, which I had the honour of managing, has been donated to the University of León and is now integrated into its main website, which places our novelist within reach of the academic community and of any interested reader.

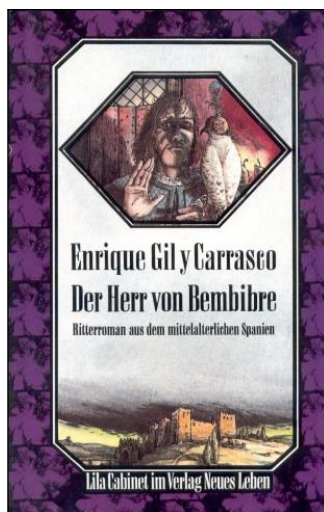
We had, however, a pending task, a priority among others: the production of an English version of *The Lord of Bembibre*. With this edition, we hoped to make this foundational novel of the literature of León and El Bierzo available to countless potential readers worldwide.

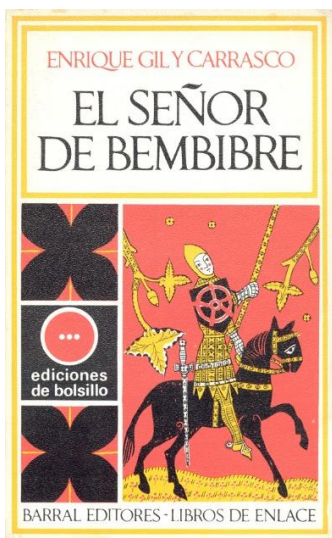
The English edition

Since 1844, more than one hundred editions and many re-issues of *The Lord of Bembibre* have been published, all catalogued by the bibliophile Jovino Andina, from Bembibre, among which there is

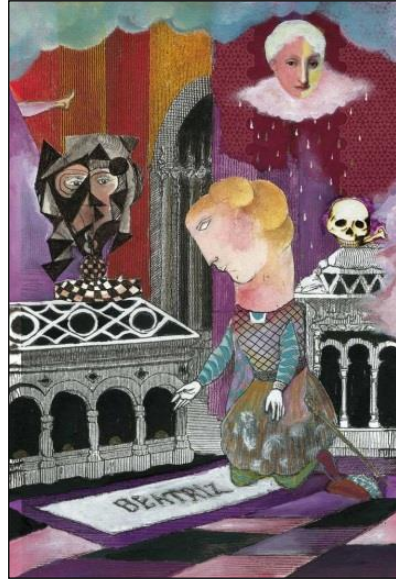
only one translation into German published in the former East Germany and practically lost.

For the edition of the II centenary, we compared six editions for the selection of the text: the *princeps* edition (Mellado, 1844), that of Jorge Campos (BAE, 1954), that of Ramón Carnicer (Barral Editores, 1970), that of Picoche (Castalia, 1986), that of Enrique Rubio (Cátedra, 13th ed., 2014), and that of Mestre and Muñoz (Austral, 2004).





As with the Spanish edition of the II centenary, this first one in English seeks the complicity of the twenty-first century reader. It is published with twenty-one avant-garde illustrations inspired by the novel itself. They have been created by the poet and painter, Juan Carlos Mestre, who reinterprets the engravings of the 1844 edition by Zarza and Batanero, in the same way in which Picasso reinterpreted *Las Meninas*.



This English edition is aesthetically completed with the adornments and vignettes from the first edition of a bibliographic gem, *The Castle of Ponferrada*, which reproduces real inscriptions in the fortress itself, hand-drawn by José María Luengo in 1929. Are these simple masons' marks, or perhaps mysterious cabalistic signs, like the corbels of the rose and the Baphomet, the idol or deity that the Knights Templar were accused of worshipping, or the two perfect squares, which as Enrique Gil describes, “intersect at absolutely equal angles, and on the right side there is a kind of sun, and on the left a star”?



The translation into English

The translation that the reader has in his hands is the result of an arduous task, which must be acknowledged. Brian Morrissey and Margarita Núñez González, who worked from Dublin for many months, facing a very considerable literary and linguistic challenge, did the first version of the text. In a second phase, the whole translation was revised and improved by Alonso Carnicer,

philologist and journalist, who unified criteria and literary style, revising with thoroughness every detail both from a linguistic and historical perspective, to bring the translation as close as possible to Enrique Gil's expression.

Alonso Carnicer is the son of the most important writer of El Bierzo in the 20th century, Ramón Carnicer (Villafranca del Bierzo, 1912), the major editor of *El Señor de Bembibre*. Of all the editions published for over two hundred years, no other revises the text and punctuation, corrects hundreds of typographical errors and fixes the canon like Ramón Carnicer's edition for Barral Editores in 1970. All previous editions and even some of the later ones constantly repeat the errors, especially those of punctuation, of Mellado's edition, until Carnicer recovered the authentic rhythm and style of Enrique Gil, whose periods, almost Latin, are perfectly constructed: he was a Neoclassic in Romantic guise.

Alonso Carnicer has had the expert advice of his mother, the distinguished philologist Doireann MacDermott, (Dublin, 1923), Professor of English Philology in the University of Barcelona, author of many translations into Spanish and English and an expert in Aldous Huxley; founder of Commonwealth Studies in Spain and, with Ramón Carnicer, of the *Escuela de Idiomas Modernos* in Barcelona. Both Doireann and Alonso know Gil y Carrasco's work well and are closely connected to Villafranca and El Bierzo, its geography and history. Their altruistic contribution to this edition is a gift of great generosity, which deserves the acknowledgement of the whole Bierzo.

And so, with the text fixed by Ramón Carnicer in 1970, the basis for our edition of the *Complete Works* of 2016; the first English version by Brian Morrissey and Margarita Núñez; Alonso Carnicer's revision supervised by Doireann MacDermott and with the illustrations by another distinguished native of Villafranca, Juan Carlos Mestre, the result could only be splendid.

This unique edition opens with Doireann MacDermott's prologue, as an invitation for our English-language readers around the world and is completed with a short essay by the literary critic Derek Flitter, Professor of Hispanic Studies in the University of Exeter, an expert on Espronceda, Gil y Carrasco and Rosalía de Castro, author of *Spanish Romantic Literary Theory and Criticism* and other essential works about European Romanticism.

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to all who have made this

Romantic dream possible. To Enrique Gil who from his grave will be delighted to see his work in the language of Shakespeare and his beloved Lord Byron. To Ramón Carnicer, who showed the way. To Brian Morrissey and Margarita Núñez, for sharing my audacity. To Doireann MacDermott and Alonso Carnicer for their infinite patience, their rigour and their precious time. To Juan Carlos Mestre for dressing our dreams in avant-garde clothing. To Derek Flitter for his analysis. To Denis Fernández for the cover and Sacauntos Cooperative for printing with such care. To Manuel Otero, Mayor of Bembibre and Ángel Calvo, Mayor of Páramo del Sil, for believing in the project. And to Miguel Ángel Fernández, cultural delegate in the *Instituto Leonés de Cultura*, and to the *Diputación de León*, for their economic support. To all, for making this translation possible and so do poetic justice to the father of Leonese letters.

VALENTÍN CARRERA
DIRECTOR OF BIBLIOTECA GIL Y CARRASCO



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Chapter I – Servants gossip on their way from the fair

One afternoon in May of one of the earliest years of the fourteenth century, three men, presumably the servants of some of the great lords who at that time shared the dominion of El Bierzo, were returning from the fair of San Marcos in Cacabelos. The first one, called Nuño, who was about fifty-six years old, was riding a Galician nag of no great merit but which at the range of a crossbow revealed a robustness and endurance suitable for the sports of hunting. In his left fist, which was covered with a glove, stood a hooded falcon. Searching both sides of the road, but attentive to his master's voice and signals, went a well-bred bloodhound. Nuño had a lean and flexible body, with a lively, sunburned face and in all his bearing and movements, he revealed that he was a huntsman.

The second traveller, named Mendo, was aged about thirty-six, and he was the opposite side of the coin. He had a bulging face, showing very little expression, and a massive and heavy body whose contours, never very elegant, obesity had begun to erase. The presumptuous air with which he managed the superb Andalusian foal on which he rode, and the precision with which he forced his mount to all kinds of movements, made it obvious that he was a horse trainer or groom.

The third man, called Millán, was riding a good war horse and was a little more luxuriously dressed than the others. He was a young man of very agreeable presence, great ease and self-assurance, with a somewhat malicious face and in the flower of his years. Anyone would have identified him without hesitation as the squire or spear bearer of some illustrious lord.

The three men were having a lively conversation, as one might expect, about their respective masters, often praising them but also intermingling compliments with the usual layer of gossip.

"I am telling you Nuño," said Mendo the groom "that our master is doing as a man should, because to give his only daughter and heiress of the house of Arganza to a fellow that is only a second-rate country squire, when he can marry her to a gentleman as powerful as the Count of Lemos would be worse than throwing fat into the fire. A fine match a lord of Bembibre would have been!"

"But my friend," replied Millán the squire, sarcastically, even if the words of Mendo the groom were not addressed to him directly,

"what fault does my master have if your young lady's handmaid is friendlier to me than to you, for you to be so set against him? I would have asked God to give you a little more understanding and leave you a little less flesh, so that Martina would look on you differently, and the master would not suffer for the sins of the servant. "

Mendo's face lit in anger, and stirring the colt, he began to stare at the squire. For his part, Millán repaid in the same coin, and laughed his head off, so that without the mediation of the huntsman Nuño, we do not know what would have been the outcome of that ill-started conversation.

"Mendo," Nuño said to the groom, "you have shown little restraint in speaking about the Lord of Bembibre, who is an important knight whom everyone in the country loves and esteems for his nobility and valour. And you have exposed yourself to Millán's somewhat excessive mockery, who undoubtedly cares more for the honour of his lord than for the charity to which we Christians are bound."

"What I say is that our master does very well not to give his daughter to Don Álvaro Yáñez, the Lord of Bembibre, and that *velis nolis*, like it or not, she will come to be Countess of Lemos and the mistress of half of Galicia."

"He doesn't do well," replied Nuño the wise huntsman, "because Doña Beatriz does not care for the count any more than I would an old and blind falcon. Even if the count has the advantage over the Lord of Bembibre in terms of property, he falls far behind him in virtues and good reputation, and above all in the desires of our young lady, who has certainly shown more discernment in her choice than you."

"The Lord of Arganza, our master, has not committed himself," replied Mendo, "and so Don Álvaro should go back where he came from and run off to Galicia, his mother's homeland."

"It is true that our master has not committed his word or made a pledge, as I understand the matter. But in that case, he should not have welcomed Don Álvaro as if he were to be his son-in-law and allow his daughter to associate with a person who has captivated the whole world by his behaviour and gallantry, and that a maiden of such discretion and beauty as Doña Beatriz was bound to fall in love with."

"Well, if she fell in love, let her fall out of love again," replied the stubborn groom Mendo. "And besides, she will cease to love him

as soon as her father raises his voice, because she is as humble as the earth, and as affectionate as an angel, the poor girl."

"You are very misguided in your judgments," answered Nuño the huntsman, "I know her better than you do because I have known her from birth. And although Doña Beatriz will give her life for a good cause, if they force her will and treat her badly, only God will be able to cope with her."

"But speaking now without passion or anger," Millán said, "What has my master Don Álvaro done to you, Mendo, for you to be so hostile? No one on this earth, as far as I know, speaks of him as you do."

"I do not dislike him so badly," said Mendo, "and if it had not been for the Count of Lemos, I wouldn't have minded having him as master in our household. But what do you want me to say, my friend? Nobody would exchange a count for a mere lord."

"But my master, Don Álvaro, though he is not a count, is noble and rich, and what is more, he is the nephew of the Master of the Templars and an ally of the Order."

"A bunch of heretics and sorcerers," said Mendo.

"Quiet!" Nuño said in a low voice, pulling his arm in anger. "If they could hear you, they would crucify you like they did Saint Andrew."

"Do not fear, my friend," replied Millán, to whose ready ear not a single word had escaped, though spoken in a low voice. "Don Álvaro's servants were never spies, nor malicious, thank God. Because in the end, those who follow after knights always try to be like them."

"The Count of Lemos is also a lord, and he has done more than one good deed."

"Yes," said Millán, "he does so, provided he can go before people to proclaim it at once. But would your admired count be able to do for his own father what Don Álvaro did for me?"

"What was it?" Asked the two companions at once.

"A thing that I will never forget. We passed the old Ponferrada bridge, which, as you know, does not have handrails, with a tempest raging, and the river running from one bank to the other, roaring like the sea. Suddenly a cloud bursts and a flash of lightning passes in front of my palfrey so that it reared up, blinded with the brightness. Without knowing how, splash, we both go head over heels into the river! What do you imagine that Don Álvaro did? Well, sir, without committing himself to God or the

devil, he spurred on his horse and threw himself into the river to save me. In short, we were lucky that we did not both drown, with our horses too. At last my nag was swept down the river, and I, half stunned, made it to the shore, because Don Álvaro dragged me there by the hair. When I recovered, I really did not know how to thank him, because I got a lump in my throat and could not speak. But he just smiled and said: 'Come on man, it's all right. It was nothing, just a dip in the river. Calm down and don't go talking about what has happened, or else people might think you are a poor rider.'"

"A brave deed, upon my life," exclaimed Mendo, with an enthusiasm that could scarcely be expected from his previous prejudices and his lymphatic temperament, "and without losing his stirrups! Ah, good knight! The devil take me if a deed like this is not worth almost as much as the best county in Spain! But, well," he went on as if controlling his enthusiasm, "if it had not been for his gallant horse *Almanzor*, God knows what would have happened to him ... Animals are quite something!" he continued, caressing his foal's neck with almost paternal satisfaction, "And tell me, Millán, what happened to your horse, finally? Did the poor thing drown?"

"No," said Millán, "he ended up a good way further down the river, and there he was rescued by a Moorish slave of the Temple who had gone to Pajariel for wood. But the poor animal had been so knocked about that he was not right for more than three months."

With these and other stories, they arrived at the town of Arganza, and dismounted at their master's manor house, the residence of the illustrious Don Alonso Ossorio, Lord of Arganza.





Chapter II – The last hopes of two great houses

By now our readers may have surmised something about the situation in which the Arganza family and the Lord of Bembibre found themselves at that time, thanks to the loquacity of their respective servants. However, even if their reports do not entirely depart from the truth, they are so incomplete that they oblige us to provide new and essential details to explain the events of this lamentable story.

Don Alonso Ossorio, Lord of Arganza, had had two sons and one daughter. But the first of his sons died before leaving childhood, and the other died fighting valiantly in his first campaign against the Moors of Andalusia. So all Don Alonso's hopes had come to rest on his daughter, Doña Beatriz, who was then only a child, but who already promised as much beauty as talent and generosity. There was in her character a mixture of the energy that distinguished her father and the sweetness and melancholy of Doña Blanca de Balboa, her mother, a saintly lady whose life had been a living and constant example of goodness, resignation and Christian piety. Although with the early loss of her two sons, Doña Blanca's complexion, unfortunately very delicate, had been completely ruined, this was not an obstacle to the use of her uncommon education in her daughter's careful upbringing, and to enhance the favourable gifts with which nature had lavishly endowed her. Doña Blanca had no other hope than her daughter, a creature so dear and beautiful, and on this child she accumulated her tenderness, her dearest expectations and her dreams for the future. Doña Beatriz grew like a gentle, fragrant lily in the warmth of her maternal affection, defended by the name and power of her father and surrounded on all sides by the respect and love of her vassals, who saw in her a reliable mediator to alleviate their hardships and a constant dispenser of benefits.

The years flew by as fast as they usually do, and with them flew the childhood of that noble, gracious and rich young woman. And for this reason, her father thought to seek for her a husband of superior qualities, worthy of her class and wealth. In El Bierzo at that time, there were only two houses whose estates and vassals were suitable: one, that of the Arganza family and the other, that of the ancient Yáñez family, whose dominions included the fertile banks of Bembibre and most of the surrounding mountains. This

lineage had provided two masters to the Order of the Temple and was very honoured and respected in the country. By a rare coincidence, in the same way that the surname Ossorio hung from the fragile existence of a young woman, the continuance of the Yáñez lineage was linked to that of a single man, a situation no less fragile and unstable in those times of affliction and turbulence. Don Álvaro Yáñez and his uncle Don Rodrigo, provincial Master of the Temple in Castile, were the only two remaining members of that illustrious and numerous race. The one was a dry and barren branch, by age and vows, and the other stem was full of sap and freshness that promised long life and seasoned fruits. Don Álvaro had lost his parents as a child, and his uncle, then a commander of the Order, had brought him up as befitted a noble knight, having the satisfaction of seeing his efforts and dedication crowned with the most brilliant success. Don Álvaro had fought his first campaign in Andalusia, under the orders of Don Alonso Pérez de Guzmán, and returned with a distinguished reputation, mainly because of his efforts to save the Infante Don Enrique from the hands of the Moors. Moreover, the high esteem in which he was held by all, as we have heard from the account of the three servants in the previous chapter and the story told by his own squire, will testify better than our own words to Don Álvaro's chivalrous and generous character.

The potent influence of the stars seemed for all these reasons to bring together the fate of these two young people, and yet we must confess that Don Alonso had to overcome a powerful aversion to enter into such a plan. The close alliance that the Yáñez family had always established with the Order of the Temple was a thousand times on the point of disrupting this project that would result in the enlargement of two illustrious houses and the happiness of two universally esteemed people.

The Templars had reached their period of wealth and decay, and their pride was truly unbearable to most of the independent lords. The Lord of Arganza had experienced it more than once, and devoured his wrath in silence, because the Order, which owned the castles of that land, could flout the wishes of them all. But his spite had turned into hatred for that military order, as courageous as it was unlucky. Fortunately, Don Rodrigo Yáñez was promoted to provincial Master of Castile, and his temperate and prudent character curbed the excesses of some knights and won back the friendship of many disgruntled neighbours. Of these Don Alonso

was the first who could not resist the courteous and delicate conduct of the master, and without being completely reconciled with the Order, he ended up embracing Don Rodrigo Yáñez with sincere friendship. And so the plan to join the two houses by marriage was cemented, although the Lord of Arganza could not quell the uneasiness caused by the idea that one day his duties as a vassal to the king could force him to fight against the Order which was already the object of jealousy and envy, and also against his future son-in-law whose honour would not allow him to abandon his allies. However, the power of the Templars and the weakness of the crown seemed to remove this contingency indefinitely, and it did not seem wise to sacrifice to these fears the honour of his house and the happiness of his daughter.

Don Alonso and Don Rodrigo would have wished that such a union should have been carried out promptly. But Doña Blanca, whose heart was all tenderness and kindness, did not want to abandon her only daughter into the arms of a man almost unknown to her. This was because she reasonably believed that knowledge of each other and consonance of feelings are more certain guarantors of peace and domestic happiness than reasons of state and calculations of convenience. Doña Blanca had suffered greatly from the harsh and violent character of her husband, and she was eager to spare her daughter the regrets that had embittered her life. She pleaded and begged so much that at last she won her noble husband's consent that the young people should get to know each other without being aware of their intended fate. A baleful and bitter request for all, as it turned out!

This was the beginning of a love whose splendid dawn was soon to become a day of mourning and darkness. Shortly after, a storm began to form in France, which finally caused the downfall of the famous chivalric Order of the Temple. Similar menacing clouds were piling up on the horizon against the Spanish Templars, and the fears of the Lord of Arganza were awakened. For he understood Don Álvaro, the Lord of Bembibre, was incapable of abandoning in misfortune those Templars who had been his friends in fortune and, seeing the course this noisy dispute appeared to be taking, it was not impossible that his own family would come to offer the painful spectacle that always darkens civil struggles. To this motive, which at heart was not lacking in reason or good sense, another unfortunately more powerful one was added. The Count of Lemos had requested the hand of Doña Beatriz in marriage

through the Infante Don Juan, who was an uncle of King Don Ferdinand IV, with whom Don Alonso himself had relations of duty and friendship from the time of his short-lived reign in León. And attentive only to his ambition of connecting his own lineage with one so rich and powerful as that of the Count of Lemos, he ignored his pact of marriage with the Templar Master Don Rodrigo Yáñez, neither did he hesitate in violating his daughter's wishes to achieve his own desires.

Such was the state of affairs in both families on the afternoon that Don Alonso's servants and Don Álvaro's squire returned from the fair in Cacabelos. Don Álvaro, the Lord of Bembibre, and Doña Beatriz, meanwhile, were seated in the hollow of a pointed arch window, open because of the lovely weather, which illuminated a room that was splendidly furnished and decorated. She was of tall stature, of slender, regular proportions, white-skinned, with black eyes and hair, and a Greek profile of extraordinary purity. The normal expression of her features manifested an angelic sweetness, but in her mouth and on her forehead any average observer could have discovered signs of a passionate and lively character. Although she was seated, you could tell that in her walk and movements, style, majesty and decorum would reign. The rich dress embroidered with flowers in very vivid colours that covered her body enhanced her bearing, already full of a natural attractiveness.

Don Álvaro was tall, gallant and vigorous, with light brown eyes and hair, an open and noble face, and features of admirable regularity. His gaze was piercing, and his manners showed great ease and dignity. He was wearing large gold spurs, a sword with a rich hilt and around the neck, a finely crafted silver hunting horn, that stood out over his exquisite dark doublet, which was trimmed with fine furs. In a word, he was one of those men who show to advantage the noble qualities that adorn them, and involuntarily captivate the attention and sympathy of everyone who looks at them.

The sun was setting behind the mountains that divide the regions of El Bierzo and Galicia and covered them with a kind of luminous aureole that contrasted curiously with their dark areas. Some clouds of capricious and changeable shapes, scattered here and there in a beautiful and very pure sky, were tinted in different colours as the rays of the sun touched them. In the groves and orchards of the house all the roses and most of the fruit trees were

in flower, and the wind that gently moved them was laden with perfumes. Some nightingales and goldfinches sang melodiously, and it was difficult to imagine a more delicious afternoon. No one could really believe that a theatre such as this would be the stage for so painful a scene.

Doña Beatriz set her wandering, tear-stained eyes sometimes on the sunset, at others on the trees in the grove, and then on the ground. And Don Álvaro fixed his eyes on hers, watching all her movements intently. Both were in a painful state of anticipation, without daring to break the silence. They loved each other with all the depth of a new, generous and delicate feeling, but they had never confessed it. True affections have a characteristic modesty and reserve, as if words would take away their brightness and purity. This is exactly what had happened to Don Álvaro and Doña Beatriz who, imbued with their happiness, had never thought of naming it or pronouncing the word "love". And yet this happiness seemed to leave with the sunset, and it was necessary to remove the fallacious prism from their eyes, which had hitherto presented life to them as a delightful garden.

Don Álvaro, naturally, was the first to speak.

"Will you not explain to me, my lady," he said in a low and melancholy voice, "what is the meaning of your father's reserve towards me? Is it true what my heart has been prophesying to me since certain poisonous rumours about the Count of Lemos have begun to go around? Are they really thinking of separating me from you?" he continued, rising to his feet with a very rapid movement.

Doña Beatriz lowered her eyes and did not respond.

"Oh, so it's true?" continued the sorrowful knight. "And will it also be true," he added in a trembling voice, "that they have chosen your hand to strike this blow?"

There was another moment of silence, and then Doña Beatriz lifted her beautiful eyes, bathed in tears, and said in a voice both sweet and painful, "It's also true."

"Listen to me, Doña Beatriz," he said, trying to calm himself. "You do not yet know how I love you, or how much you subjugate and overwhelm my soul. Never before have I told you ... Why should I make a statement that the tone of my voice, my eyes and the smallest of my gestures were unceasingly revealing? I have lived in the world alone and without family, and this impetuous heart has not known the caresses of a mother or the sweetness of a family home. As a pilgrim, I have crossed the desert of my life to

this point. But when I saw that you were the sanctuary where my uncertain steps were directed, I would have wished my sufferings a thousand times greater, so that I would come to you proven and purified. It was too proud a thought, to want to come up to you, an angel of light. Now I see that. But who, who in the world, Beatriz, will love you more than I?"

"Oh, none, none," Doña Beatriz exclaimed, in a heart-rending voice, wringing her hands.

"And yet they separate me from you!" continued Don Álvaro. "I will always respect your father. No one would honour his house more than I, because since I love you, new forces have developed in my soul, and all the glory, all the power of the earth seems to me little to lay at your feet. Oh Beatriz! Beatriz! When I came back from Andalusia, honoured and praised by the noblest knights, I loved glory because a secret voice seemed to tell me that one day you would adorn yourself with its rays. You are the light of my way; without you, I will dash into the abyss of despair and turn against Heaven itself!"

"Oh, my God!" murmured Doña Beatriz, "is this to be the end of so many dreams of happiness and sweet joys?"

"Beatriz," exclaimed Don Álvaro, "if you love me, if you look into your heart, it is impossible for you to comply with your father's wishes that would be my undoing and perhaps yours too."

"You are right," she said, trying to calm down. "I will not be the one to drag this heavy burden. But now that I speak to you for the last time for the sake of your happiness and that God reads in my heart, I will reveal its secret to you. If I do not give you the name of husband at the foot of the altar and in front of my father, I will die with the veil of the virgins. But it will never be said that the only daughter of the house of Arganza stains with a disobedience the name she has inherited."

"And if your father forces you to give your hand in marriage?"

"You know him; my father has never used force against me."

"Pure and innocent soul, you do not know how far ambition leads men!" And if your father did force you, what resistance would you offer?

"In front of the whole world I would say: no!"

"And would you have courage to resist the idea of the scandal and the embarrassment of your family?"

Doña Beatriz rolled her eyes, slowly and terribly as if she had a violent convulsion, but then she recovered suddenly, and said:

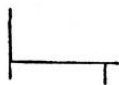
"Then I would ask the Almighty for help, and He would give me strength. But I repeat the promise, I will be yours or I will be no one's."

The strength with which those short words were uttered revealed a determination that no human force could alter. Don Álvaro contemplated her as if spellbound for a few moments, after which he said with deep emotion:

"I have always revered and adored you, my lady, as an almost superhuman creature, but to this day I had not known the heavenly treasure that you embody. Losing your love now would be like falling from the sky to crawl among the miseries of men. The faith and trust that I place in you is blind and without limits, as is the trust we put in God in the hour of our misfortune."

"Look," she said, pointing to the sunset, "the sun has set, and it is time we said good-bye. Go in peace and keep yourself safe, noble Don Álvaro, even if they can take you away from my sight, it will not be so simple for them to overpower my determination."

With this the knight bowed, kissed her hand with a silent gesture, and slowly left the chamber. When he reached the door, he turned his head, and his eyes met those of Doña Beatriz to exchange a long and painful look, which seemed as if it would be their last. Then he hurried to the courtyard where his faithful Millán held with his right hand the famous horse *Almanzor*, and rising onto his mount, Don Álvaro emerged like a thunderbolt from that house, where only an unhappy maiden thought of him. And she, at that moment, despite her efforts, was falling into bitter tears.



Chapter III – The Templar Master, Don Rodrigo Yáñez

When Don Álvaro, the Lord of Bembibre, left the palace of Arganza, amidst the storm of sentiments that were disputing within his soul, there was one that fitted very well with his spite and bitterness, and consequently was dominating every other feeling. It was the urge to challenge the Count of Lemos in mortal combat and defeat him man-to-man, and thus remove the most powerful obstacle between himself and Doña Beatriz. That same day he had heard that the count was in Cacabelos apparently intending to spend the night there, and so that was the road he took. But his squire Millán, who knew from Don Álvaro's inflamed eyes, his abrupt and violent gestures and his harsh and hasty speech, what his intentions might be after the encounter with Doña Beatriz, said in quite a loud voice:

"Sir, the count is no longer in Cacabelos, for this afternoon, before I left, a messenger arrived from the king with a letter that persuaded him to return immediately to Lemos.

Don Álvaro, in the midst of his agitation, could not see without anger that the good Millán had by chance hit upon his secret thoughts, so he said with a frown:

"Who are you to meddle with your master's thoughts?"

Millán endured the scolding, and Don Álvaro, as if speaking to himself, continued:

"Yes, yes, a letter from the court ... and then leave in such a hurry to Galicia ... No doubt, the hellish plot is going ahead ... Millán," he said at once, in a tone entirely different from the first, "come closer and ride beside me." And then, "I have nothing to do in Cacabelos anymore, and we will spend the night in the castle of Ponferrada," he said, turning his horse and changing direction, "but while we journey there, I want you to tell me what rumours you heard at the fair about the Knights Templar."

"Strange ones, by my life, sir!" said the servant. "They say that they do terrible things and perform heathen ceremonies, and that the Pope has excommunicated them in France, that he has imprisoned them and intends to punish them, and if what is said is true, then it would be a good thing, because they behave more like Jews and gentiles than Christian knights."

"But what things and what ceremonies are these?" asked Don

Álvaro.

"They say that they venerate a cat and worship him as God, that they deny Christ, that they commit a thousand foolish things, and that by covenant with the Devil they make gold and so have got very rich. But people are very wary about saying these things because they are all more afraid of the Temple than of the Evil One."

After this, the good squire began to enumerate all the gross slander that at that time of credulity and ignorance was invented to undermine the power of the Temple, and which had already begun to produce in France such tremendous and atrocious results. Don Álvaro who, thinking of discovering something new in such a thorny affair, had listened at first with keen attention, soon fell to thinking about his own troubles, and let Millán, who despite his acuteness and ingenuity was not exempt of common ignorance and superstition, speak. But on arriving at the bridge over the Sil, which on account of its many iron reinforcements had given the town the name *Ponsferrata*, as it was called in the ancient documents, Don Álvaro warned the servant harshly that he should henceforth not only speak with more restraint, but should think better of an Order with whom his master had established alliance and friendship, warning him not to believe the gossip of a foolish and malicious mob. The squire hastened to say that he only told what he had heard but believed none of it. And talking in this manner, they arrived at the barbican of the castle. There Don Álvaro blew his horn, and after the usual formalities, because in the militia of the Temple the drill was carried out with the most rigorous discipline, the door was opened, the drawbridge fell immediately, and master and squire entered the courtyard.

This beautiful fortress is still preserved, although now it is but a skeleton of its ancient grandeur. Its structure is not very regular, because the Templars added a more modern body of fortifications to an old fort of massive and heavy proportions. Although this deprived the fortress of its harmony, the place still presents a bold and picturesque structure. It is situated on a beautiful hill from which the whole of El Bierzo can be seen, with the infinite variety of its features. And the river Sil running at its feet to join the Boeza a little further down, seems to pay homage to the fortress.

Now nothing remains of the power of the Templars except some sacred verses inscribed on tombstones, as a symbol of their rites and ceremonies and the famous cross, terror of the infidels, carved here and there on those very strong walls; but at the time of which we speak this

castle was a good example of the power of its possessors. Don Álvaro left his horse in the hands of African slaves and accompanied by two aspirants went up to the master's hall, a magnificent room with a chequered red and gold decoration on the ceiling and walls, arabesque windows, oriental carpets and every part adorned with all the splendour corresponding to the temporal and spiritual leader of an Order so famous and wealthy.

The aspirants left Don Álvaro at the door, after the usual *benedicite*, and the one guarding the antechamber showed him into his uncle's room. Don Rodrigo was a venerable old man, tall and thin, with white beard and hair and an ascetic and calm expression, tempered by great kindness. He was beginning to stoop under the weight of the years, but it was evident that vigour had not yet abandoned those limbs that were so accustomed to the fatigues of war and hardened in fasts and vigils. He wore the white habit of the Order, and outwardly he was barely distinguishable from a mere knight.

The dangers that seemed to threaten the Temple, and on the other hand the problems which, as he had seen clearly for some time, appeared to overwhelm that beloved nephew, the last offspring of his lineage, spread a cloud of sadness over his brow and gave him an even more serious aspect.

The Templar Master, Don Rodrigo, who had come out to meet Don Álvaro, after having embraced him with a little more emotion than usual, led him to a kind of cell where he spent his time. The furniture and trappings of this cell revealed that primitive severity and poverty that Hugo de Paganis and his companions had established as guiding principles of the Order and which were so eloquently symbolized by the emblem of the Templars, two knights mounted on the same horse.

Don Rodrigo, because of the position he occupied and the austerity innate in his character, wanted to show this example of humility and modesty. Don Rodrigo and Don Álvaro sat down on wooden stools at a rough walnut table upon which an enormous copper lamp burned. There Don Álvaro gave the old man a detailed account of all that had happened, which Don Rodrigo listened to with the greatest attention.

"In all this," Don Rodrigo said finally, "I see the hand of the Infante Don Juan, the man who beheaded Guzmán *el Bueno*'s child before the battlements of Tarifa, and in the sight of his father. The Count of Lemos is allied with him and other lords who dream of the ruin of the Temple to adorn themselves with the spoils of our

destruction. And fearing that your marriage to a lady so powerful in lands and vassals would increase the fearsome forces that we already muster in this country, they have flattered the ambition of Don Alonso, and used all their bad arts to separate you and your lady. Poor Doña Beatriz!" he added with melancholy, "who would have told her pious mother, when she was raising her daughter with such zeal and solicitude, that her child was to be the prize of such a terrible scheme?"

"But, sir," said Don Álvaro, "do you think that the Lord of Arganza will be deaf to the voice of honour and nature?"

"Totally deaf, my son," replied the Templar. "Vanity and ambition dry up the fountains of the soul, and with them man departs from God, from whom derive virtue and true nobility."

"But is there no formal agreement between you and the Lord of Arganza?" asked Don Álvaro.

"No agreement whatsoever. Your fate was determined from the cradle, Don Álvaro, otherwise it would not happen that Doña Blanca, who holds you in such a high esteem, would now be the cause of your grief. She at first objected to your union because she wanted her daughter to know you before she gave you her hand in marriage, and Don Alonso, bending his haughty character for the first time, yielded to his wife's requests. So even if his conscience condemns him, we can do nothing to change his position."

"That is to say," exclaimed Don Álvaro, "that I have no other road than that which despair points me toward."

"You have confidence in God and in your own honour, that no one can take away from you," replied the master in a deep voice, both stern and affectionate. "Besides," he went on more calmly, "there are still human means that might be powerful enough to divert Don Alonso from the path of perdition where he wants to lead his daughter. I will speak to him only as a last resort, because in spite of my prudence, perhaps the hatred towards our noble Order would increase, but tomorrow you will go to Carracedo and deliver a letter to the abbot on my behalf. His spiritual position may give him some influence over the proud Lord of Arganza, and I hope that if I ask him he will not deny it to a brother. His Order and mine were born in the bosom of Saint Bernard, and from the holiness of his heart they received their first precepts. Blissful times when we followed the flag of the invisible captain in pursuit of a kingdom that was not of this world."

Don Álvaro, hearing him, was a little embarrassed, seeing that

in the selfishness of his own pain he had forgotten the regrets and troubles that like a crown of thorns surrounded that grey, respectable head. Then he began to talk to his uncle about the rumours that were circulating and the old man, leaning on his shoulder, went with him down the stairs and took him to the end of the great court whose walls face the river.

The night was quiet and the moon shone in the middle of the transparent blue skies. The weapons of the sentinels glimmered in its rays, flashing bright reflections as they moved, and the river, like a strip of silver, ran at the foot of the hill with a dull, muffled rumble. The forests and mountains were clothed with those vague and soft forms with which the moon usually envelops them, and all contributed to the growth of that seed of melancholy, which generous souls always find in the depths of their feelings. The master sat on a stone seat on one side of the battlements, and his nephew occupied the one opposite.

"You may believe, my son," he said, "that the power of the Templars is incontestable. In Castile, the Order possesses more than twenty-four strongholds, without counting many other less important forts. In Aragon, we own entire cities, and throughout Europe we have more than nine thousand houses and castles. It may seem to you that the Order has enough possessions to justify the pride and arrogance with which it is generally portrayed."

"I believe so," replied his nephew.

"So do most of us," replied the master, "and that is why pride has seized us, the pride that condemned the first man and will damn so many of his children. In Palestine, we have responded with disdain and pride to the complaints and envy of others, and the result has been to lose Palestine, our homeland, our only true homeland. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, a city of perfect decorum, the joy of the whole earth!" Don Rodrigo exclaimed in a solemn voice, "the strength of our arms stayed behind in you, and as we left Saint John of Acre, we breathed our last! Since then, pilgrims in Europe, surrounded by powerful rivals who covet our goods, the humble and modest customs of our origins corrupted, the whole world is roused against us, and even the Papal tiara that has always served as a shield, seems to favour our enemies. Already in France, our brother knights moan in King Philip's dungeons, and God knows what end awaits them. But let them be on guard!" the old man cried again in a thunderous voice. "They have surprised us there, but here and elsewhere they will find us ready to fight. The Pope may

dissolve our brotherhood and scatter us across the face of the earth, like the people of Israel, but to condemn us he will have to hear us, and the Order of the Temple will not walk to the stake under the rod of any earthly power like a flock of sheep."

The master's eyes seemed to shoot lightning, and his face was animated by a fire and energy that no one would have believed compatible with the heavy burden of years he carried.

The Temple was an irresistible magnet for all fiery imaginations because of the Order's mysterious organization and because of the strong and hardy spirit that at the same time invigorated the community and its members. Behind such a powerful and united brotherhood, it was difficult, especially for inexperienced youth, to see more than indestructible strength, for at such a young age one believes that courage and willpower cannot be defeated. For these reasons, Don Álvaro could not help replying:

"Uncle and lord, do you believe that this will be the prize reserved by Almighty God for the two-centuries long battle that the Order has sustained in honour of his name? Do you imagine God is so estranged from your cause?"

"It is we," replied the old man, "who have strayed from Him, and that is why we are becoming the centre of scandal and reproach. And I," he went on with the greatest bitterness, "will die far from my own, failing to protect them with the shield of my authority, and the reward of my old age will be loneliness and exile! May the will of God be done, but whatever the fate reserved for the Templars, they will die as they have lived, faithful to the cause and unblemished by all unworthy weakness."

At that moment, the castle bell announced the hour of recollection with gloomy and melancholy tones, which, pouring through those solitudes and breaking among the rocks of the river, died in the distance mixed in a prolonged and strange murmur.

"The hour of the last prayer and silence," said the master, "go to your chamber, my son, and prepare yourself for tomorrow's journey. Perhaps I have allowed you to see too much of the weaknesses of this old heart, but even Christ our Lord was sad at his own death and said 'Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.' But apart from that, I am the master and father of the Temple in Castile, and in the hour of trial, nothing in the world will weaken my spirits."

Don Álvaro accompanied his uncle to the old Templar's room,

and after kissing his hand, went to his own, where, after a great deal of restlessness, he succumbed to sleep, prostrated with the strange scenes and sensations of that day.





Chapter IV – The grandeur and ruin of the Templars

The Order of Chivalry of Solomon's temple had been born in the greatest fervour of the Crusades, and the sacrifices and austerities imposed upon the members of the Order by the rule by which they lived, dictated by the enthusiasm and ardent zeal of Saint Bernard, had won them universal respect and applause. The Templars, in fact, were the living and eternal symbol of that generous idea which turned the eyes and heart of all Christendom towards the tomb of Christ. In their war with the infidels, they never gave or admitted truce, nor were they allowed to retreat, even in the face of superior enemy numbers, and this meant that a great many Knights Templar died in battle. When they landed in Asia, the pilgrims and inexperienced warriors of the Crusades found the flag of the Temple, under whose protection they reached Jerusalem without experiencing any of the troubles of that dangerous journey. Both the contemplation of the monk and the glory and worldly pomp of the soldier were equally forbidden to the Knights Templar. For them, their entire life was a web of fatigue and self-denial. Europe had naturally hastened to reward an Order which had in its beginning so many heroes as soldiers, and the honours, privileges and riches that began to rain on the Order soon made it fearful and powerful, not least for possessing, as Don Rodrigo said, nine thousand houses and the associated soldiers and men-at-arms.

However, the passage of time, which undermines everything, the wealth that makes the humble feel proud, the fragility of human nature that eventually gets tired of superhuman efforts, the exasperation caused to the Templars by the disasters in the Holy Land, and the quarrels and disagreements with the Knights Hospitaller of Saint John, came to stain the pages of the history of the Temple, which were at first clean and resplendent. From the height to which their exploits and virtues had elevated them, their fall was great and pitiful. Eventually, they lost Saint John of Acre. As the fire of the Crusades, in whose heat they had grown and prospered, began to die out, their star began to fade, and the memory of their faults, the envy of their riches and the misgivings they inspired began to grow. Their military power was the only thing they brought from Palestine, their homeland of adoption and glory, to ancient Europe, a true place of solitude and exile for spirits accustomed to the tumult of war and the incessant activity of the camps.

To be sure, the fears of the monarchs were not without foundation, for the Teutonic knights had just extended their rule into Prussia with less strength and less power than the Templars, founding a state whose splendour and strength have been increasing to this day. Their forces were reduced in number, but their arrogant and resolute spirit, their strong and compact organization, their experience in arms and their fearsome cavalry, advantageously balanced the inert and heavy forces that feudal Europe could muster at that time.

To ward off all these risks posed by the Templars, Philip the Fair, King of France, aspired to become Grand Master of the Order in Europe. But the snub he received from the Templars, along with the greed inspired in him by the sight of the treasure of the Temple, during the days that the king took shelter against a popular revolt, was enough to persuade his vengeful soul to embark on the atrocious persecution of the Templars that will eternally tarnish the king's reputation. The Pope, as sole judge of an ecclesiastical organisation, should have opposed the illegal intrusions of a temporal power in these matters. But the Pope did not dare to antagonize the King of France, afraid as he was to see the life and memory of his predecessor Boniface subjected to the judgement of a general council, as King Philip vehemently desired. Many people, and especially the ecclesiastics, who saw the half-heartedness with which the head of the Church defended the cause of the Templars, were inclined to the worst, as is usually the case, and thus Philip's vile and monstrous calumnies became more popular and more widely believed every day among a superstitious and ferocious mob.

It is true that among the Spanish Templars, the continuous war with the Saracens kept them purer and gave a noble and glorious purpose to their daily existence that the Order was lacking in France. But it is also true that the vices developing after the constitution of the Order were also noticed in our homeland. In addition, the Temple was after all a foreign order whose head resided in distant lands, while the chivalric orders which had emerged in Spain, such as Calatrava, Alcántara and Santiago grew in fame and reputation and were all capable of filling the void left by their brothers in the Christian squadrons. Any comparison, therefore, between these indigenous orders and the Knights of the Temple would in the long run be unfavourable for the Templars. On the other hand, knowing the close ties of their brotherhood, it

was difficult to distinguish between the Templars in Spain and those in France in terms of responsibility for the accusations levelled by the French court. Thus, the Spanish Templars, somewhat more respected and a little less abhorred than those of other countries, nevertheless were the object of the envy and greed of the high-born and the aversion of the low-born, losing their strength and prestige amid the moral pestilence that consumed their entrails.

These reflections on the rapid splendour and sudden ruin of the Order of the Temple which we have presented, at the risk of tiring our readers, had often appeared to the thoughtful and grave character of the Master of Castile, Don Rodrigo, and were the cause of the melancholy and abstraction which had long been observed in him. However, most of his knights blamed Don Rodrigo's attitude on the somewhat austere piety that had always distinguished his life. Don Álvaro, as we have already indicated, more ardent and less reflective, could not understand the low spirits of a person as courageous and wise as his uncle. So the next day, riding towards Carracedo, he was somewhat more concerned with his own sorrows and troubles than worried about the dangers that threatened his noble allies the Templars. From the talk he was to have with the Abbot of Carracedo, perhaps the sweetest hopes of his life were hanging. This was because this prelate, as confessor of the Arganza family, exercised a great influence on the mind of its master, Don Alonso. Moreover, the abbot's temporal power also gave him considerable prestige and ascendancy, for after the bailiwick of Ponferrada, none had more wealth or a greater number of vassals than the famous monastery of Carracedo.

Don Álvaro was thus struggling with a thousand opposing feelings, silent and thoughtful, ignoring the splendid landscape that unfolded under the first rays of the May sun. Behind him lay the fortress of Ponferrada. To the right stretched the pasture land of Fuentes Nuevas with beautiful hills planted with vines that rose behind the oak trees. On his left, the river flowed between the groves, villages and meadows that stand on its blessed shore and adorn the slopes of the Aquiana range. And straight in front of Don Álvaro, standing out among chestnuts and walnut trees, almost covered by treetops and exuberant vegetation, was the majestic monastery built on the margin of the river Cúa by Don Bermudo *el Gotoso* and rebuilt by Don Alfonso the Emperor and his sister Doña Sancha. The birds sang happily, and the fresh morning air

was full of the scents of the many wildflowers that opened to receive the first glances of the sun, father of the day.

A delightful sight, in which a soul unburdened with sorrows would not have ceased to find secret and intense joys!

Thanks to the speed of his horse *Almanzor*, which Don Álvaro had won in the Andalusian campaign from a noble Moor whom he had vanquished, he soon found himself at the door of the convent. It was guarded by two mace-bearers, more out of decorum than for custody or defence. They paid the Lord of Bembibre the homage corresponding to his rank, and one of them pulled the cord of a bell, giving notice of the arrival of such an illustrious guest. Don Álvaro dismounted in the courtyard and accompanied by two monks who came down to meet him, of whom the elder gave him the kiss of peace, pronouncing a verse from Sacred Scripture, he went to the reception chamber where the abbot used to receive visitors of distinction. This was the same room where the Infanta Doña Sancha, sister of the Emperor Don Alfonso, had administered justice to the people of El Bierzo, pouring on their misfortunes the treasures of her merciful heart. It was a graceful room with light columns and arabesque arches with a ceiling festooned with delicate plaster work. To reach it Don Álvaro climbed a stone staircase adorned with an intricate balustrade. A small but elegant gallery framed the room's entrance, and the chamber received light from a rather high dome and some rose windows with delicate tracery, all of which, along with the rich but severe furnishings decorating it, gave it a majestic and grave appearance.

The two brothers left Don Álvaro in this room for a few minutes, after which the abbot entered. He was a fifty-year-old monk, bald, with very marked features, in which Don Álvaro detected more austerity and rigour than evangelical meekness. The abbot was gaunt due to fasts and penances but still vigorous in his movements. One could tell at first glance that his austere and sombre character, though upright and sound, inclined him rather to brandish the thunderbolts of religion than to cover human miseries with the wings of mercy. Despite all, he received Don Álvaro with kindness and we could even say with effusion, notwithstanding his character, because he held the Lord of Bembibre in great esteem. After the customary formalities, the abbot began to read the Templar Master's letter. As he read on there were storm clouds gathering on his hard, wrinkled forehead,

sad omens for Don Álvaro, until finally he concluded and said in his strong and sonorous voice:

"I have always esteemed your house. Your father was one of the few friends that God gave me in my youth, and your uncle is a just man, despite the habit he wears. But how do you want me to involve myself now in mundane business, alien to my years and character, or to disrupt a project through which the Lord of Arganza intends to win such honour for his lineage?"

"But Father Abbot," said Don Álvaro, "your love for the girl whose confession you hear, the delicacy of my conduct, and perhaps the tranquillity of this region, are matters worthy of your august ministry and the seal of holiness that you impress on everything that you deal with. Do you imagine that Doña Beatriz will find great happiness in the count's arms?"

"Poor dove without a blemish," said the abbot in a voice almost tender. "Her soul is as pure as the crystal waters of the lake of Carucedo when at night all the stars of the sky are painted in its depth. But that stream of iniquity will finally muddy and embitter this clean and serene water."

They remained silent for a long time, until the abbot, in the manner of a man adopting an immutable resolution, said:

"Would you do anything to attain Doña Beatriz?"

"Do you doubt it, Father?" replied the knight, "I would do anything that would not disgrace me in her eyes."

"Then," said the abbot, "I will make Don Alonso desist from his ambitious plans, on one condition, that you withdraw from your alliance with the Templars."

Don Álvaro's face flushed with anger, and then he lost his colour as if he were dead on hearing this proposition. However, he was able to restrain himself, and simply answered, though in a somewhat shaken and hesitant voice:

"Your heart is blind, for you do not see that Doña Beatriz would be the first to despise one who gave such a bad account of his honour; happiness is always less than honour. How do you expect me to abandon my good uncle and his brothers in their hour of need? I thought I deserved a different opinion."

"Never was honour," replied the abbot vehemently, "to contribute to the work of darkness, nor to make common cause with the wicked."

"And is it you," said the knight with feeling, "a son of Saint Bernard, who speaks in those terms of his brothers?" Is it you who

obscures in this way the cross that shone in Palestine with such glorious rays and which in Spain has eclipsed the Saracen moon? Do you humble your wisdom so much as to heed the words of fierce and foul-mouthed commoners?"

"Ah!" replied the monk with the same warmth, though with a painful tone, "it would please Heaven if the name of the Temple should be only in the mouth of the plebs! But the Pope sees the outbursts of the King of France without striking the rays of his power upon him, and do you think that he would abandon his children, withdrawing his blessing, if innocence had not abandoned them before? The head of the Church, my son, cannot err, and if punishment has not yet fallen upon the criminals, it is the fault of his benign and paternal heart. O what pain!" he added, raising his hands and eyes to the sky. "O vanity of human greatness! Why have they followed the ways of perdition and pride by turning from the humble and sure path which our common progenitor pointed out to them? Because of their unruliness, we have just lost the Holy Land, and it will be necessary to obliterate that fortress, under the shelter of which the whole of Christendom rested happily but has now become a temple of abomination."

Don Álvaro could not help but smile with some disdain, and said:

"It would be a long way for your war machines to reach."

The abbot looked at Don Álvaro severely, and without a word he grabbed his arm and led him to a window. From it could be seen a very beautiful hill, its slopes shaded by vineyards, below which ran the river Cúa, and whose summit ended not in a peak but in a beautiful esplanade with the blue of the sky in the background. A confused pile of ruins adorned it; some columns were standing, though most of them were without capital stones. In some places a large stretch of building overgrown with ivy could be discerned, and the whole enclosure was still surrounded by a wall where vines and brambles climbed. These "solitary fields, this shapeless mound" was once the Roman *Bergidum*.

Don Álvaro knew the place well, but the gesture of the abbot and the moment in which he put before him that example of human vanities and arrogance left him confused and silent.

"Take a good look," said the monk, "take a good look at one of the great and many sepulchres enclosing the skeletons of that town of giants. They, too, in their pride and injustice turned against God, as your Templars have done. Go therefore, as I have gone amid the

silence of the night, and ask these ruins about the greatness of their lords. The whistling of the wind and the howling of the wolf will not fail to give you an answer."

The Lord of Bembibre, who had been confused, was now astonished and could not answer a word.

"My son," said the monk, "think it over and leave the alliance, while there is still time. Turn away from those wretched men without looking back, like the prophet who was fleeing from Gomorrah."

"When I see for myself what you are telling me," replied Don Álvaro, with firm resolve, "then I will follow your advice. The Templars may be haughty and intemperate, but it is because injustice has soured their noble character. They will appear before the Sovereign Pontiff and their innocence will be revealed to be as clean as the sun. But, Father, you who see the nobility of my intentions, will you not do something for the good of my soul and for Doña Beatriz, whom you cherish so much?"

"Nothing," replied the monk, "I will not help to consolidate the fortress of wickedness and pride."

The knight rose then and said:

"You are a witness that you have shut all the ways of peaceful resolution. May it please God that you should not one day blame yourself for it!"

"Heaven preserve you, good sir," answered the abbot, "and open the eyes of your soul."

He immediately escorted Don Álvaro to the courtyard of the monastery, and after bidding him farewell, he returned to his cell, where he gave himself up to sad reflections.



Chapter V – Her father's will, opposed

Although Don Álvaro did not put great hopes in his meeting with the abbot, the result still surprised him. Such is the incurable weakness of the poor human heart, which only when faced by inexorable and cold reality, manages to separate itself from the talisman that beautifies and sweetens life - hope. The Master, Don Rodrigo, on the other hand, knew very well the store of fanaticism that in the soul of the Abbot of Carracedo overpowered an endless number of noble qualities. Though foreseeing no success, he acted as much to comfort his nephew as to obey that generous impulse which always inclines the high-minded to conciliation and gentleness. The same motives impelled him to visit Don Alonso, the Lord of Arganza, although the critical situation of the Order on the one hand and the well-known ambition of Don Alonso on the other seemed to be arrayed against any effort he might make. But the tenderness that the good old man had for Don Álvaro, the only relative he had left, verged on weakness, although he seldom let it show.

Therefore, on one of the days following the events just described, Don Rodrigo left Ponferrada with his usual retinue and went to Arganza. The visit was very tense and fraught because Don Alonso, desirous of sparing himself a cordial and sincere explanation on a matter that his conscience was the first to condemn, was enclosed in the preserve of a cold and studied courtesy. Don Rodrigo, the Templar Master, was convinced that Don Alonso's decision was irrevocable and, jealous of the honour of his Order and of the dignity of his person, rather than lower himself to useless supplications, he took leave forever of that household which he had so often crossed with his heart full of happy plans.

However, Don Alonso, somewhat alarmed by the intention which Don Álvaro's apparent affection for his daughter seemed to reveal, decided to speed up the marriage that he had arranged, to put an end to any kind of complications. He did not worry about any resistance on the part of his wife, accustomed as he was to always see her give way to his wishes. But the character of his daughter Doña Beatriz, who had inherited much of his own firmness, caused him some uneasiness. However, as a man of discretion as well as energy, he counted on filial loyalty and the

strength of his authority to attain his purpose. And so, one afternoon when Doña Beatriz was sitting next to her mother embroidering a cloth that she intended to give to the nunnery of Villabuena, where her aunt was the abbess, her father entered the room. When Don Alonso said that he had to talk to her on a matter of great importance, she put down her embroidery and began to listen to him with the greatest modesty and composure. On both sides of her beautiful face there were numerous black curls like ebony, and the anxiety she could barely suppress made her features even more interesting. Don Alonso could not help feeling some pride when he saw her so beautiful. But her mother Doña Blanca's eyes filled with tears, thinking that such beauty and wealth would perhaps be the cause of her daughter's eternal misery.

"My daughter," said Don Alonso, "you know that God has deprived us of your brothers and that you are the only and last hope of our house."

"Yes, sir," she answered in her sweet, melodious voice.

"Your position, therefore," continued her father, "forces you to give regard to the honour of your lineage."

"Yes, my father, and God knows that I have not for a moment harboured a thought that would not accord with the honour of your grey hairs and with the peace of my mother."

"I was expecting no less from the blood that runs through your veins," said Don Alonso. "I want to tell you now, that a situation has come about that may see my efforts rewarded and crown my most ardent desires. The Count of Lemos, lord most noble and powerful of Galicia, favoured by the King and especially by the Infante Don Juan, has requested your hand in marriage and I have granted it."

"Is that count not the same," said Doña Beatriz, "who, after having obtained from the noble Queen Doña María the town of Monforte in Galicia, abandoned her banners to join those of the Infante Don Juan?"

"The same," said Don Alonso, dissatisfied with his daughter's question, "and what do you have to say about him?"

"That it is impossible for my father to give me as husband a man whom I could neither love nor even respect."

"My daughter," replied Don Alonso, in moderation, because he knew the enemy with whom he was dealing and did not want to use force except as the last extreme, "in times of civil strife, it is not easy to walk without falling, because the road is full of obstacles

and pitfalls."

"Yes," she replied, "the path of ambition is strewn with difficulties and stumbling blocks, but the path of honour and chivalry is as smooth and gentle as a meadow. The Count of Lemos is certainly powerful, but although I know of many who fear and hate him, I have not yet heard of one who loves and esteems him."

Although Doña Beatriz's attack was directed at the heartless ambition of the Count of Lemos, her rejection of him in these terms unknowingly wounded her father and excited his anger so much that he forgot his previous purpose and answered with the greatest harshness:

"It is your duty to obey and be silent and accept the husband your father chooses for you."

"My life is yours," said Doña Beatriz, "and if you order me, I will take the veil in a convent tomorrow, but I cannot be the wife of the Count of Lemos."

"Do you hold some other passion in your heart, Doña Beatriz?" her father replied, his eyes searching her features. "Do you love the Lord of Bembibre?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes, father," she answered with the greatest candour.

"And did I not tell you to forsake him?"

"You did, father," replied Doña Beatriz, "and so I sent him away."

"But why did you not also send away this senseless passion from your heart? Then you will have to extinguish it."

"If such is your will, I will extinguish it at the foot of the altar," the sweet maiden replied. "I will exchange for the love of the heavenly husband the love of Don Álvaro, who by his faith and purity was worthier of God than of me, unhappy woman that I am. I will renounce all my dreams of happiness, but I will not forget him in the arms of any man."

"To the cloister you will go," answered Don Alonso, beside himself with indignation, "not to fulfil your mad cravings, not to take the veil, for which your rebellious character makes you unworthy, but to learn in solitude, far from my sight and that of your mother, the obedience and respect that you owe to your father."

Saying this, he stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him angrily. Left alone, the mother and daughter by a natural and spontaneous impulse, rushed into one another's arms, Doña Blanca bathed in tears and Doña Beatriz struggling valiantly

to restrain her own but inwardly full of courage. In generous souls, injustice awakens a strength whose existence was unknown, and such feelings Doña Beatriz was experiencing now. She had enough detachment and respect not to argue with her father that if she loved Don Álvaro it was because everything seemed at first to indicate that he was the husband chosen by her family. But her restraint and enforced silence only made her feel her grievance more acutely. What was breaking Doña Beatriz's courage was the grief felt by her mother, who did not cease sobbing and holding her daughter tightly.

"My daughter, my daughter," she said at last, as soon as her grief allowed her to speak, "how did you dare to irritate him that way, when no one has the courage to resist his gaze?"

"In this you will see that I am his daughter and that I have inherited his strength of will," said Doña Beatriz.

"And I, miserable woman," exclaimed Doña Blanca, with the greatest expressions of pain, "that with my foolish prudence have driven you away from the harbour of bliss when I could now be enjoying you safely on the shore!"

"Mother," said the young woman, wiping her mother's eyes, "you have been full of kindness and affection for me, and what happens tomorrow is in the hands of God. Be calm and take care of your health. The Lord will give us strength to cope with a separation and remember that I am young and strong."

The idea of parting with her daughter, who had not been away from her for a single day in her young life, made the sad mother return to all her display of bitterness. And Doña Beatriz had to use all her resources to soothe her mother's distress. The old lady, who by her gentle nature was accustomed to give way at every occasion and whose marriage had begun by a sacrifice somewhat similar, though infinitely less demanding than the prospect now facing her daughter, wanted to tell her something, but did not dare. Finally, she bade farewell with these words:

"But, daughter of my life, would it not be better to give in to your father?"

To this entreaty, Doña Beatriz made a very expressive gesture, but did not reply to her mother, only hugging her and wishing her a restful sleep.



Chapter VI – Old Nuño bears a letter

The scene which we have just described caused a great deal of uneasiness in the Lord of Arganza's mind, for it was now very clear how deeply rooted in his daughter's spirit was that ill-fated passion for Don Álvaro, which threatened to upset all his plans for advancement. Unaccustomed to contradiction by anyone, even less by his daughter who had hitherto been the epitome of submission and respect, Don Alonso's pride was greatly irritated. However, and almost despite himself, he seemed at times pleased to find in a person so close to him, such noble and serene valour and elevated feelings. Nevertheless, anxious above all to preserve his paternal authority, Don Alonso decided after two days to take Doña Beatriz to the convent of Villabuena, where he hoped that the contemplative setting, the living example of obedience that she would witness at her every step, and the example of her pious aunt, the abbess, would help to change the inclination of her mind.

As much as Don Alonso endeavoured to keep secret the reason for his decision to send his only daughter to a convent, the truth was widely known in the household and even the village. And as they all worshiped that young woman so full of grace and kindness, the day of her departure was one of weeping and general consternation. Even Mendo the groom, who seemed to favour his master's plans and hoped to wear the heraldic arms of a count, could barely contain his tears. Don Alonso acted with as much serenity as possible, despite the regret he experienced. He explained that her absence of a few days had no other purpose than to satisfy the desire that the Abbess of Villabuena had always expressed to enjoy the company of her niece for a few days. But everybody felt in their heart that this was not true, and the efforts of the old lord were in vain.

Doña Beatriz said goodbye to her mother alone in the most private rooms of the house. But this time she could no longer contain her feelings and broke into sobs and lamentations, all the more violent because they had been suppressed until then. The heart of a mother often has superhuman strength, and Doña Blanca showed it by becoming the comforter of her daughter and the one who gave encouragement. At last Doña Beatriz slipped from her arms, wiped away her tears and went down to the courtyard where almost all her father's vassals awaited her. Her

beautiful, still moist eyes flashed sun-like beams, as those which pass through the rain-drenched branches of the trees after a storm. The maiden's majestic and elevated bearing, enhanced by a dark dress, showed her in all the splendour of her beauty. Most of those poor people whom Doña Beatriz had attended in their illnesses and helped in their misery, who had always seen her appear in their homes as an angel of consolation and peace, rushed to meet her with mournful cries and lamentations, some kissing her hands and others the hem of her dress. The maiden gently disengaged from them as best she could and climbed onto her small white mare with the help of the sympathetic servant Mendo. She left the palace, stretching out her hands to her vassals and without speaking a word because, from the start of her leave-taking, a knot had formed in her throat.

The air of the countryside and her own strong constitution finally restored a little serenity to her. The party was as follows: Doña Beatriz's father, Don Alonso, rode a little ahead of her as a sign of his anger, though he was really hiding his emotion; the old huntsman Nuño, mounted on his small horse, but without a hawk or a dog; the plump groom Mendo, who was out of spirits that day; and Doña Beatriz's handmaid Martina, a young, blonde, lively, pretty village girl with blue eyes and a smiling, witty face. To her great pleasure, Martina was destined to serve and accompany her mistress during her reclusion, and we do not know for sure if this was what most influenced the foul mood of the groom Mendo who, despite the jealousy and irritation that he felt on account of Martina's fondness for Millán, Don Álvaro's squire, still had the weakness to love her. Then Doña Beatriz got into conversation with the huntsman, who out of respect rode a little behind, saying to him:

"Come closer, good Nuño, because I need to talk to you. You are the oldest servant of our house, and you know how much I have always appreciated you."

"Yes, my lady," he answered hesitantly. "Who would have imagined when I took you to play with my hawks and dogs, that there would come days like these?"

"Some worse will come, poor Nuño, if those who love me do not help me," said Doña Beatriz. "You know what my situation is, and I fear that my father's indiscreet tenderness will force me to take as my husband a man who is detested by all. If I had relatives to seek help from, at least I could ask them for refuge. But, unfortunately,

I am the last of my lineage. So only he can protect me, do you understand, Nuño? Would you dare carry a letter to Don Álvaro from me?"

Nuño fell silent.

"Think," added Doña Beatriz, "that it is my happiness in this life and perhaps in the next that is at stake. Or would you too be capable of abandoning me?"

"No, my lady," replied the servant with resolution, "give forth the letter, and I will take it to Don Álvaro, even if I have to cross through all the lands of the Moors." And Nuño added, "if your father the master comes to know of this, he will send me for whipping and have me put in the pillory and throw me out of the house, which is the worst thing that could happen to me. But Don Álvaro, who is goodness and kindness itself, will not deny me a place in his castle to take care of his hawks and falcons. And above all, may it be as God wills; I do my best and He knows it."

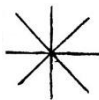
Doña Beatriz, moved by his words, handed Nuño the letter, and almost had no time to thank him, because Mendo and Martina joined them just then. So, they went on in silence along the banks of the river Cúa, where the convent of the nuns of Saint Bernard, founded at the same time as the monastery of Carracedo, was situated, and where two princesses of royal blood had been in holy orders. Nowadays the convent has disappeared, but the village of Villabuena, next to which it had stood, still exists in a bright and cheerful location at the foot of some hills covered in vineyards. Meadows and orchards, full of fig and fruit trees of every kind, and stands of thriving black poplar and white poplar trees, skirt the village. The river provides abundant irrigation and fertilizes that land upon which nature seems to have shed one of its sweetest smiles.

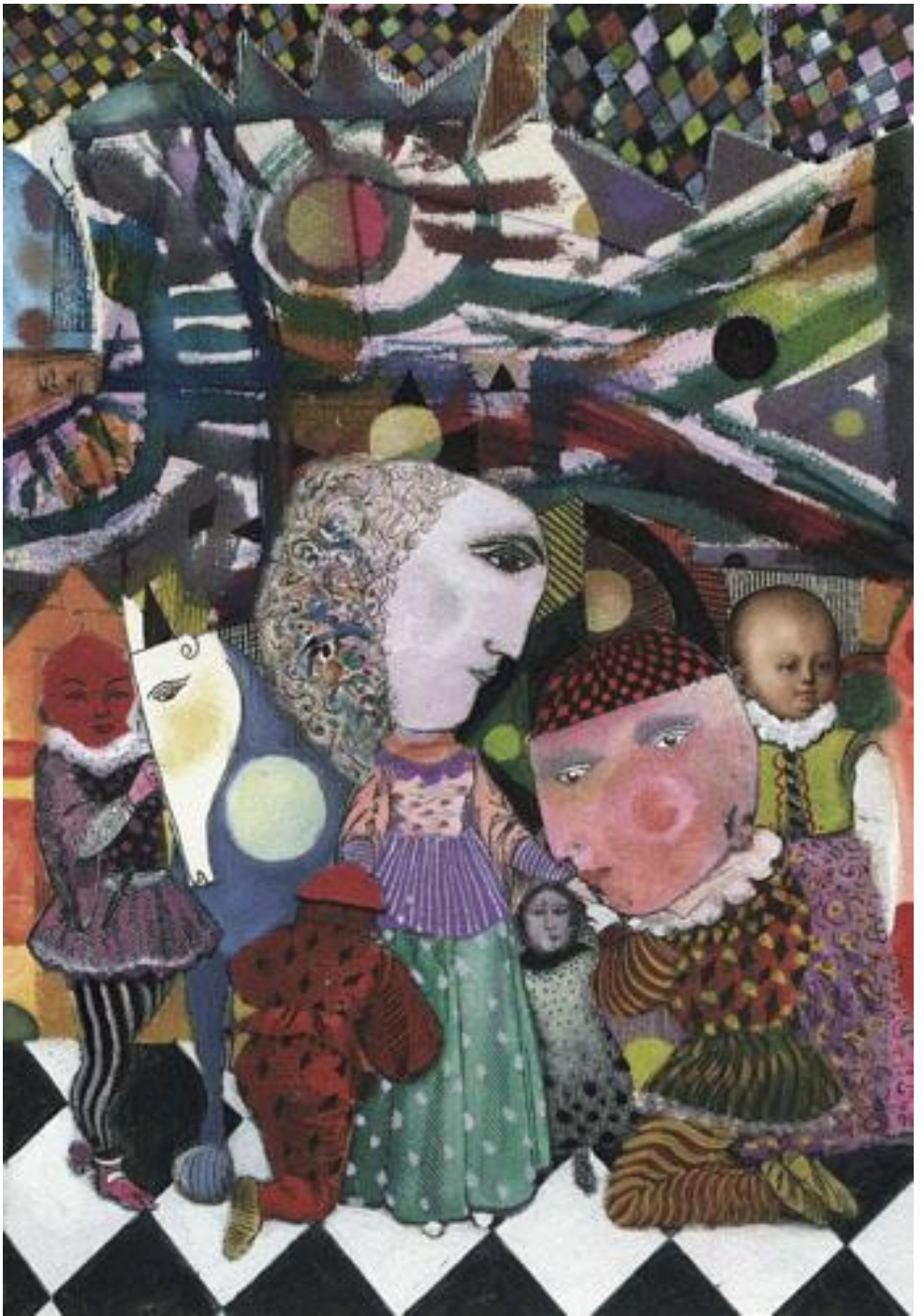
After a journey of an hour and a half, the cavalcade dismounted in front of the convent, to whose entrance the abbess came out accompanied by the greater part of the community, to receive her niece. The nuns all welcomed her with great love, captivated by her modesty and beauty. Don Alonso, after a long conversation with his sister-in-law, sneaked away from his daughter, distrusting his strength and resolve, weakened by the events of the day. Nuño and Mendo said farewell to their young mistress with more tenderness than one could expect of their sex and education. Those faithful servants, accustomed to the presence of Doña Beatriz, who as a light of joy and happiness seemed to illuminate all the darkest

corners of the house, knew that with her absence, sadness and misery would settle on their world. They knew that Don Alonso would indulge more often in his attacks of bad temper without the soft balance and mediation of his daughter. And on the other hand, it was obvious to them that Doña Blanca's habitual infirmities, aggravated by this new blow, the loss of her daughter, would finally darken the domestic scene. So they both rode without speaking a word behind their master, Don Alonso, who was no less sullen and silent than they. On reaching Arganza, Mendo went to the stables with his master's horse and his own. And Nuño, after feeding his horse and eating his dinner, left at near midnight on the pretext of hunting for a hare in a somewhat distant place, and of training a fine-looking new greyhound. But in fact, Nuño set out to reach Bembibre at an untimely hour and deliver with the greatest secrecy Doña Beatriz's letter, which more or less read as follows:

My father banishes me from his presence because of your love, and I am glad to be exiled to Villabuena. But neither you nor I must forget that he is my father and therefore, if you hold my affection dear and put some faith in my promises, I hope that you will not take any violent measures. On the first Sunday after this next, you should wait at night in the convent church, and I will tell you what I cannot tell you now. God keep you and give you strength to bear this suffering.

Nuño carried out his delicate task with great skill and success, but Don Álvaro could only make him accept a silver chain to hang his hunting horn on special occasions, as a memento. In addition, the good huntsman still had time to return to his hiding place and catch the hare he was after, which he brought triumphantly home very early, all the while praising his greyhound.





Chapter VII – An oath in the chapel at dead of night

The means used by the Lord of Arganza to pull out of his daughter's heart a love that had taken such firm root was not indeed the most suitable. That soul, pure and generous but proud, could scarcely be governed by the threat of fear and punishment. Temperance and gentleness might perhaps have persuaded her to yield to all her father's ambitions, for the idea of sacrifice is often instinctive in such characters as Doña Beatriz and becomes more acceptable when clothed in the trappings of suffering and grandeur. But Doña Beatriz who, according to the exact comparison of the Abbot of Carracedo, resembled the still and transparent waters of the calm, blue lake of Carucedo, easily became stormy when the wind of injustice and harshness ruffled its surface. The very thought of belonging to such an ignoble knight as the Count of Lemos, and being a pawn in a villainous plot, humiliated her so much that she was capable of resorting to any violent extreme to remove such an affront.

On the other hand, loneliness, absence and frustration, which are sufficient to extinguish transient inclinations or guilty affections, only serve as food and impulse to deep and true passions. An innocent and pure love refines the soul that receives it, and through its self-denial, imperceptibly becomes associated with those sublime religious sentiments, which in their essence are pure love, free of the dust and fragilities of the world. If by chance persecution embellishes it with the aura of martyrdom, then suffering engraves it deeply in the martyr's heart, and that cherished idea becomes inseparable from all thoughts, just as a mother often shows a decided preference for a child who is afflicted and ailing and does not give her a moment of rest.

This was precisely what happened to Doña Beatriz. In the silence that surrounded her, the voice of her heart rose louder and stronger, and when her thoughts flew to the one who has the will of all in his hand and searches with his eyes the darkest corners of consciousness, her lips unconsciously murmured that beloved name, Don Álvaro. Perhaps she thought that her prayers met with his in the heavens, while their hearts flew, one in search of the other, in this land of misfortune. At such times, her imagination was exalted and looked upon her tears and tribulations as so many crowns that would adorn her in the eyes of her beloved.

Her aunt, who had also loved and seen her own hopes wilt in their flowering, respected the feelings of her niece and tried to make her captivity bearable, giving her as much freedom as possible and treating her with extreme affection. Her feminine acuteness clearly suggested to the abbess that only this method could be used with a person such as Doña Beatriz, whose nature was at the same time that of the lion and the dove. The prudent lady wanted to let the slow medicine of time work before risking any other remedy.

The day that Doña Beatriz had indicated to Don Álvaro in her letter, she had chosen with great discretion, for that was when the funerals of the royal patrons of that holy house were celebrated after vespers, which usually attracted a large congregation because of the alms that were distributed, and the ceremonies usually lasted until late in the evening. So it was easy for Don Álvaro to come to the church in the garb of a commoner, move through the crowd and slip into a confessional, where he hid as best he could, while the villagers heard the sermon with the greatest attention. In the churches of that country there were, and in some there still are, confessionals closed at the front, with lattice doors, and more than once they have served as a hiding place, as they did for our knight. At last, after the offices were over, the congregation left, the nuns said their last prayers, and the sacristan put out the lights and left the church, closing the doors with his huge keys.

The temple remained in a sepulchral silence and was illuminated by a single lamp, whose weak and oscillating flame, rather than clarify the objects it shed light on, distorted them. Some heads of animals and men adorning the capitals of the Lombard columns seemed to make strange gestures and grimaces. The golden figures of the saints on the altars, in whose eyes the vague and tremulous rays of that mortuary light were reflected, seemed to throw glittering glances on the intruder who brought to the house of religion and peace other cares than those of Heaven. The choir was dark and gloomy, and the noise of the wind among the trees and the murmur of streams coming from outside, together with the occasional shriek of nocturnal birds, created a peculiar and fearful echo beneath those august vaults.

Don Álvaro was a man of his time, and on any other occasion such circumstances would have made a deep impression on his mind. But the real dangers that surrounded him if he were

discovered, the risk that Doña Beatriz was running in meeting him, the desire to clarify the dark enigma of their fate, and above all the hope of hearing her sweet voice, overcame all sorts of imagined fears. At last, he heard the inner bell of the cloister, which signalled that it was time to retire, then distant voices as of people saying goodbye, footsteps here and there, doors opening and closing, until at last everything remained in an enveloping silence.

He then left the confessional and approached the grille of the lower choir, applying his ear with unspeakable anxiety and mistakenly believing at every moment that he perceived the sound of light footsteps and the rustle of Doña Beatriz's clothes. At last, a lithe white shape appeared in the dark background of the choir, and advancing quickly and silently, presented to the eyes of Don Álvaro, already somewhat accustomed to the darkness, the pure and graceful contours of Doña Beatriz.

It was easier for her to see him, for the silhouette of his body was clearly drawn in the faint beams of the lamp behind him. She went up to the grille, her finger to her lips like a statue of silence that has suddenly come to life, and turning her head as if to direct a last look at the choir, she asked in a trembling voice:

"Is that you Don Álvaro?"

"And who but I," he replied, "would come to look for you amid the silence of the tombs? I have been told that you have suffered greatly being separated from your mother, and although in this darkness I do not distinguish your countenance well, I seem to see in it the marks of sleepless nights and many tears. Are you unwell?"

"No, thank God," she answered almost with joy, "because as I was grieving for you, heaven has given me strength. I do not know if the tears will have clouded my eyes or if grief will have stolen the colour from my cheeks, but my heart is always the same. But we are foolish," she added, as if coming to herself, "to waste in this manner these few moments that fortune has granted us, and that without great danger we may not enjoy for a long time to come. What did you imagine, Don Álvaro, when I summoned you here in this way?"

"I imagined," Don Álvaro replied, "that you read in my soul; that in your divine mercy you felt sorry for me."

"And have you not devised some reckless and violent scheme? Have you not thought of breaking the chains that bind me with your hands, overriding everything?"

Don Álvaro did not answer, and Doña Beatriz continued in a tone that sounded like a reproach:

"You see, your heart did not deceive you and I read in it as in an open book. But know that it is not enough that you love me; you must also believe me and wait with nobility. I do not want you to turn against Heaven, whose authority is exercised by my father, and as I have already told you, I would never stain my name with disobedience."

"Oh, Beatriz!" Don Álvaro answered hastily, "do not condemn me without hearing me. You do not know what it is for me to live banished from your presence. You do not know, above all, how my heart is torn apart by the idea of your sorrows, which I, wretch that I am, have caused but do not have the strength to put an end to. When I saw you happy in your house, respected and beloved by everyone, the whole world seemed nothing more than an endless celebration, a joyful pilgrimage where everyone went to give thanks to God for all the good that his hand poured out. When the birds sang in the evening, they only spoke to me of you with their music. The voice of the torrent delighted me because it was yours that I listened to. And even solitude seemed to withdraw into religious silence, only to hear your name from my lips. But now the whole of nature has darkened, people pass by me silent and sad, and in my dreams I see you walking through a dark cloister with a downcast face full of tears and your hair loose. Now the echo of the loneliness that used to repeat your name to me only repeats my groans. What can I say? Despair has made me remember I am a knight, that you are suffering on my account, that I have a sword, and that with it I would cut your bonds."

"Thank you, Don Álvaro," she said, touched by his words, "I see that you love me too much, but you must swear to me here before God that you will not do anything without my consent. You are capable of sacrificing your honour for me, but I have already told you, I will not disobey my father."

"I cannot swear to it, my lady," replied the knight, "for you can see now that this persecution and violence was begun elsewhere, and perhaps only the force of arms can save you. You must realise that your father may drag you to the foot of the altar, and there force your consent."

"Do not believe my father capable of such villainy," replied Doña Beatriz.

"Your father," replied Don Álvaro, in anger, "has given his word,

as he says, and he thinks this marriage will honour you and his house."

"Then I will request an interview with the count, and I will reveal what is in my heart and he will relent."

"Who, him, yield his claim?" Don Álvaro answered with a voice that resounded in the church. "Do you believe that he will give up, when all his plans are founded precisely on you? By the life of my father, lady, you are certainly mad!"

The young woman overcame the fright that his loud tone had caused her, and said gently, but resolutely:

"If that is the case, then I will let you know. But until then, you will swear what I have asked you. You know that I will never, never be his."

"Doña Beatriz!" A voice suddenly exclaimed behind her.

"Jesus a thousand times!" she exclaimed, involuntarily approaching the iron bars as Don Álvaro instinctively reached for his dagger. "Ah, is that you, Martina?" she added, recognizing her faithful servant who had been waiting as instructed, but whom she had entirely forgotten.

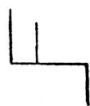
"Yes, madam," replied the girl, "and I came to tell you that the nuns will begin to rise very soon, for the dawn is already upon us."

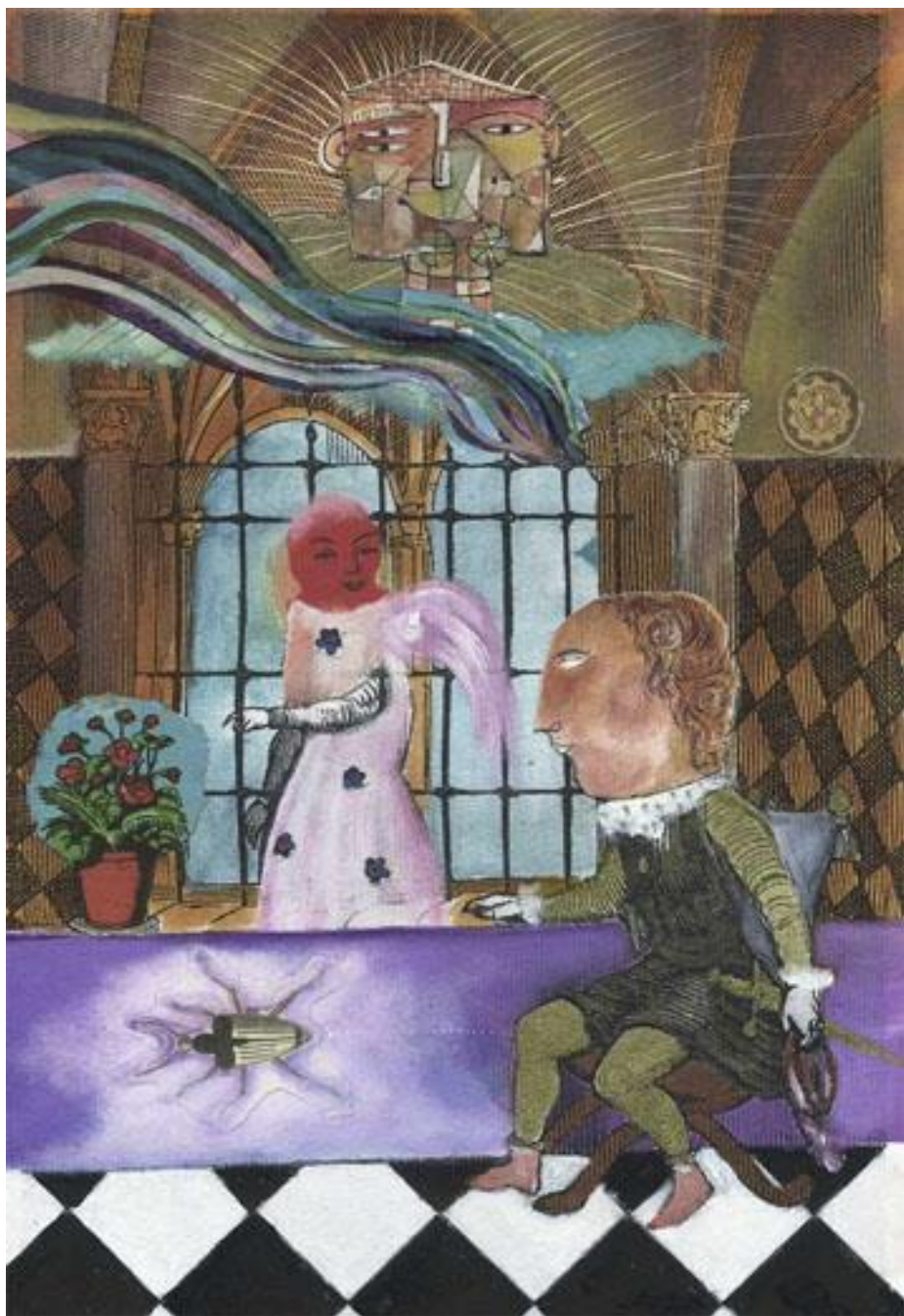
"We must part then," said Doña Beatriz with a sigh. "But we will part forever if you do not swear by your honour what I have asked of you."

"By my honour, I swear it," said Don Álvaro.

"Then go with God, noble knight, I will appeal to you if need be, and be sure that you will never curse the hour in which you put your trust in me."

The mistress and her maid then left in haste and Don Álvaro, having followed them with his eyes, hid himself again. Soon the monastery bells pealed out for the morning prayer with joyful sounds, and the sacristan opened the doors of the church and went to the sacristy, so Don Álvaro was able to leave without being seen. Then he hurried to the hills where Millán had spent the night with the horses, and riding along secluded tracks and footpaths, they soon reached Bembibre.





Chapter VIII – You do not know me, nor love me

The days that followed Doña Beatriz's reclusion were, indeed, for the Lord of Bembibre, as painful and hopeless as we have heard him say and even more so. However, his violent and impetuous nature was incompatible with a faint and apathetic acceptance, and so, day and night, he had been devising ever more desperate schemes. Sometimes he thought of storming the peaceful sanctuary of Villabuena at the head of his men-at-arms in the middle of the day under the unfurled banner of his house. At other times, he decided to send the Count of Lemos a challenge. Don Álvaro imagined asking some Knights Templar and especially Saldaña, the commander of Cornatel castle, who would doubtless have lent their support against the common enemy. And finally, although as fleeting as a flash of lightning born from the tempest that shook his soul, the thought occurred to him of an alliance with a leader of bandits and outlaws called *The Blacksmith* who from time to time appeared in those mountains at the head of a gang of men, remnants of civil dissensions that had up to then agitated the crown of Castile.

Nevertheless, arguing against each one of these chimeras, there rose the noble figure of Doña Beatriz, indignant at his audacity; the venerable countenance of his uncle, the Templar Master who reminded him with reproach of the dangers that faced the Order; and finally, the inexorable voice of his own honour that forbade him to stray from his righteous path. And then the knight returned to his struggle and his anguish, trembling for his only hope and lost in a turmoil of uncertainty. In this state of affairs the scene in the church occurred, which we have reported to our readers. And Don Álvaro was obliged to relinquish his outlandish purposes, perhaps embarrassed that the lofty spirit of a single and helpless maiden should thus curb his impatience. In any case, the conversation with Doña Beatriz, which had completely removed the veil of secrecy and displayed the heart of his lover in all her virtue and beauty, did much to calm his spirits, surrounded by shadows and fears.

Some time passed without Don Alonso harassing his daughter about the arranged marriage. In this, he was following the advice of his wife and the pious abbess. And his daughter Doña Beatriz, for her part, without complaining about her situation, was becoming an object of sympathy and tenderness for the good nuns

of the convent, who spoke highly of her beauty and peaceful resignation. She enjoyed, as we have said, a great deal of freedom in the convent, and she often walked through the orchards and groves enclosed within the monastery walls. On these walks, the young maiden's wounded heart surrendered with ineffable pleasure to those indefinable delights of the spirit offered by the spectacle of a luxuriant and peaceful nature. Her soul was fortified in solitude, and that pure passion she felt was refined and sublimated ever more in the crucible of suffering. Like a mystical tree, it sank its roots in the field of exile, raising its withered branches in search of the beneficent dew of the heavens.

This calm, however, lasted only a short time. The Count of Lemos returned to claim his rights, and Don Alonso then informed his daughter of his ultimate and irrevocable decision to proceed with the marriage. As this was an event that was destined to happen, the girl showed no surprise or displeasure and was content to beg her father to let her talk alone with the count, a request that he could not refuse.

As our readers will have to deal a little more closely with the Count of Lemos in the course of this story, it will do no harm to give them a vague idea his character. Don Pedro Fernández de Castro, Count of Lemos, the most powerful lord in all Galicia, was a man to whom turbulence, restlessness and rebellion came as an inheritance. This was because his ancestors, in order to enlarge their possessions, had wasted no opportunities among the many that were presented to them, when the glorious throne of San Fernando was tarnished with the blood of civil revolts in the hands of his son and his grandson. For his part, the count, Don Pedro, came to the world in times better suited to these designs, and in the turbulent period of the minority of King Ferdinand The Summoned, he greatly increased his own estates and number of vassals with the help of the Infante Don Juan, who in turn had seized the Kingdom of León, without any scruples about his methods for doing so. It was then that, under threat that he would change sides in favour of the usurper, Queen Doña María granted him the wealthy town of Monforte and all its surroundings, but he promptly abandoned her, swelling the ranks of her enemy. This villainous deed, which, due to its public and notorious character was well known to all, perhaps fell short of the excesses committed at that time in his extensive dominions. The Count of Lemos was cold of heart, like most ambitious men, thirsting for power and

riches with which to smooth the way of his desires. The count was feared by many, sought after by some and hated by the majority. His name had become an object of repugnance for everyone endowed with some integrity and kindness. But despite his many and grievous vices, Don Pedro still possessed conspicuous qualities, and his immoderate pride turned into bravery whenever the occasion demanded it. His manners were noble and relaxed, and he did not lack in generosity in many circumstances, though vanity and calculation were the secret motive of all his actions.

This was the man with whom Doña Beatriz had to join her lot. When the day of the interview between the maiden and the count arrived, one of the convent's parlours was decorated with care to receive such a powerful lord, the intended husband of a close relative of the convent's mother superior. The count's entourage, with Don Alonso and some local gentry, occupied a room set somewhat apart, while the count, sitting in an armchair close to the convent grille, waited with some impatience and even anxiety for the appearance of Doña Beatriz.

At last she came, accompanied by her aunt and dressed as the occasion required. Bowing a small courtesy to the count, Doña Beatriz sat in another armchair placed for her on the other side of the grille. The abbess, after responding to the gentleman's courteous salutation and compliments, retired leaving them alone. Meanwhile Doña Beatriz carefully watched the bearing and features of the man who had brought her so many troubles, and who could still be the bearer of so many more. Don Pedro Fernández de Castro, the Count of Lemos, was thirty years old and of average stature. His face, which had a certain regularity, lacked attractiveness, or rather, was repulsive because of the ironic expression on his thin lips, coated with a somewhat sardonic gesture. Or because of the uncertain and slow burning of his eyes, in which there was no glimmer of frankness or loyalty. And finally, on account of his haughty and slightly furrowed brow, which suggested venal and spiteful passions rather than thoughtfulness or sorrow. The count was dressed in rich attire and wore the cross of Santiago hanging from his neck on a gold chain. When the lady arrived, the count stood and stared at that beautiful apparition, which he undoubtedly found superior to the reports that had been made to him. Doña Beatriz now made a graceful gesture suggesting that the count should sit down.

"I will not sit down, beautiful lady," he answered politely, "for your

vassal would never want to match you, who would be the queen of beauty in every tournament of the world. May you also be the queen of love!"

"You are gallant, sir," answered Doña Beatriz, "and I was not expecting less from such a gentleman. But you know that queens like to be obeyed, and so I hope that you will sit down. I also have to tell you many things that are of great concern to us both," she added with the utmost seriousness.

The count sat down cautiously, in view of the course that the conversation seemed to take, and Doña Beatriz continued:

"It is unnecessary to remind you of the codes of chivalry, and I will speak from my heart without reserve. When you requested my hand without having seen me and without finding out if my feelings made me worthy of such honour, you have shown me a confidence that I can only repay in kind. And so I tell you in truth, you do not know me, and therefore you do not love me."

"For this you must forgive me," said the count. "It is true that my eyes had not seen the miracle of your beauty, but all have agreed in extolling it, and your virtues, known to all in Castile, are the greatest guarantor of the passion that you inspire in me."

Doña Beatriz, displeased with such fake and worldly gallantry, where she only wanted the most absolute sincerity, replied with firmness and decorum:

"But I do not love you, my lord, and I believe you noble enough to assume that without my heart, you would not accept the gift of my hand."

"And why not, Doña Beatriz," he replied with his cool, determined civility. "When you call yourself my wife, you will understand the dominion that you exercise in my heart. You will forgive me this perhaps forceful request with which I intend to gain the happiness of naming you mine. And you will undoubtedly end up loving a man who will consecrate his life entirely to giving you all pleasures and enjoyments, and who will find himself more than rewarded with one look of your eyes."

In her thoughts, Doña Beatriz was comparing Don Pedro's artificial language, in which she did not detect a single feature of the soul, with the passionate, simple, forthright words of her Don Álvaro. Doña Beatriz knew that her fate was cast irrevocably, and so, with a resolution worthy of her noble spirit, she replied to the count:

"I can never love you, because my heart is no longer mine."

Such was the rigour of domestic discipline, and daughters' submission to the will of their fathers in those days, that the count was astonished to see the depth of her feeling, which far exceeded the limits one would expect of a maiden so composed and demure. Don Pedro had some idea of the unhappy ties of love that were now becoming a hindrance to his ambitious career. Although the count was accustomed to seeing all wills bend to his own, he was surprised to find such a powerful enemy in a lady so soft and delicate in appearance. Yet his perseverance had never yielded in the face of any kind of obstacle. So, quickly recovering, the count answered with a slightly sardonic tone that all his efforts could not conceal:

"I have heard something of this strange inclination you have towards some squire from these parts. But I could never believe that you would not yield to the command of your father and the duties of your birth."

"The man whom you so pointedly call a squire," replied Doña Beatriz, unperturbed, "is a lord no less illustrious than you. The nobility of his ancestry only has its equal in the nobility of his actions. And even if my father judges that my behaviour is reprehensible, I do not think that he has delegated his authority over me to you."

The count was thoughtful for a while as if opposing emotions struggled in his soul, until finally the dominant passion overcame every other feeling, as is often the case, and he answered with temperance and with a tone of feigned sorrow:

"It grieves me, lady, that I have not known the state of your heart more deeply. But you understand that, having carried out this endeavour so far, it does not befit your father's honour or mine to expose ourselves to the malice of the common people."

"Do you mean," answered Doña Beatriz bitterly, "that I should be sacrificed to preserve your pride? Is this how you protect a grieving and afflicted lady? Why then do you wear that symbol of Spanish chivalry round your neck? Well, you should know," she added with the look of an offended queen, "that is not the way to win my heart. Go with God, and may Heaven keep you, for we shall never see each other again."

The count wanted to reply, but she dismissed him with a haughty gesture that closed his lips. Rising slowly, the count withdrew step by step and as if disturbed, more by the voice of his own conscience than Doña Beatriz's justified rebuke. The presence nearby of her father, Don Alonso, and the other gentlemen, however, restored Don Pedro's spirits very quickly to their

customary disposition, and he declared that on his part, there was no obstacle in the way of the happiness he imagined in the arms of this lady of such discretion and beauty. The Lord of Arganza, on hearing this, and perhaps believing that his daughter's inclinations had varied, entered the parlour in haste.

The young woman was still standing next to the grille, her face alight and pulsating with anger. But when she saw her father come in, who, despite his strictness, was in every way dear to her heart, her terrible feelings were transformed into incredible tenderness. And with all the violence of such transitions, Doña Beatriz fell on her knees before her father, and stretching her hands between the iron bars, and shedding a flood of tears, said to him with the greatest anguish:

"My father, my father, do not deliver me to that unworthy man! Do not throw me into the arms of despair and hell! Think that if you do, you will be responsible before God for my life and for the salvation of my soul!"

Don Alonso, whose frank and forthright nature did not understand the count's dissimulation, came to think that Don Pedro's discretion and courtly manners had won the upper hand in the interview with his daughter. And although he did not dare to believe it, such an idea had taken hold in his mind much more than could be expected in such a short time. So it was a very unpleasant surprise for him to see the weeping and desolation of Doña Beatriz. However, he said gently:

"My daughter, it is impossible to go back. If this is a sacrifice for you, then accept it as befits your blood and resign yourself to your fate. In three days you will marry the count in the chapel of our house with all the necessary pomp."

"Oh, sir, think it over! At least give me more time!" the young maiden begged.

"It has been thought through," said Don Alonso, "and the time is sufficient for you to carry out your father's orders."

Doña Beatriz then rose, and, drawing her hair back with both hands from that divine face, gazed upon her father with a look of extraordinary intent, and said in a hoarse voice:

"I cannot obey you in this, and I will say 'no' at the foot of the altar."

"How dare you, vile daughter!" replied the Lord of Arganza, beside himself with anger and disgust. "If you disobey me, my curse will fall on your rebellious head and will consume you like

fire from the heavens. You will be expelled from under your father's roof, and like Cain you will wander the earth."

At the end of these tremendous words, he left the parlour without looking back. Doña Beatriz, turning round two or three times like a madwoman, fell to the floor with a deep groan. Her aunt and the other nuns came, very bewildered by the commotion, and with the help of Doña Beatriz's faithful servant Martina, they took the lady to her cell.





Chapter IX – A letter by night messenger

The seizure suffered by the unhappy lady lasted a long time and greatly worried her diligent nurses, but at length she responded to their remedies, greatly supported by her robust nature. For a while she looked around with frightened eyes, until little by little and with great effort, she showed the necessary serenity of mind, and begged to be left alone with her maid Martina in case she needed anything. The abbess, who knew very well her niece's nature, unwilling to show any kind of weakness in the eyes of others, hastened to please her and left, saying a few words of consolation and embracing her with tenderness.

Shortly after the nuns had left, Doña Beatriz rose with the agility of a roe deer from the bed where she had been laid and, closing the door on the inside, turned to her astonished handmaid and said to her in great haste:

"They want to drag me to the house of God, to make me lie before Our Saviour and before men! Don't you know, Martina? My father has threatened me with his curse if I resist! ... Everyone, all have abandoned me! Do you hear? I must leave this house! Don Álvaro must know of this, and perhaps he will forsake me too, and so only God will protect me in his glory."

"For God's sake, madam, calm down," answered the troubled maid, "how do you wish to escape from so many bars and walls?"

"No, I will not," answered Doña Beatriz, "because they would look for me and catch me. But you can go out and tell him what state they are reducing me to. Make up any story you need to get away, even if it's a lie. You see how men abuse the ideas of justice and truth! What are you doing?" she added with the greatest impatience, seeing that Martina remained silent, "where are your energy and your wits? You have no reason to go mad like me."

As Doña Beatriz said this, she walked about the room with wild steps and murmuring other words that could barely be understood. At last, the servant's face was animated as if struck with some new idea and she said to her mistress with joy:

"Glory be, my lady! I will get out of the convent this very night, and everything will be remedied. But, by God and the Virgin of the Oak, please calm down. Because if you fall into despair like this, we're done for!"

"But what are you planning to do?" asked her mistress, astonished

not only by the sudden change in the girl but also her conviction.

"It goes like this," Martina said. "When the doorkeeper comes to light the lamps of the cloister, I will stay for a while in her place; the rest is up to me. But be sure not to be frightened, even if you hear me scream and do crazy things."

Saying this, Martina left Doña Beatriz's cell skipping like a young goat, after giving her mistress a good handshake. The warning that Martina had given Doña Beatriz was certainly not idle, for in a short time, such strange cries and wailing were heard that all the nuns stirred and went out to see who the culprit of such noise was. It was none other than our Martina, who with the gestures of an accomplished actress was shouting at the top of her voice:

"Ah, father of my soul, poor wretch that I am, and now I am going to be left without a father! Where is the mother abbess to give me leave to go and see my father before he dies?"

The poor doorkeeper hovered behind her, as if frightened by the storm that had formed as soon as she had left her place by the turn at the convent door.

"But, lass," she said at last, "who has been the bearer of that bad news? Because when I returned I heard no one's voice behind the turn, nor could I see him."

"Who would it be," replied Martina with the greatest distress, "but my brother-in-law's shepherd Tirso? The poor man went out to Carracedo to see if the apothecary priest would give him some remedy. What a place to go to! But where is the abbess, our reverend mother?"

"Here," said the abbess, who had come to the site of the commotion, "but do you want to leave at this hour, when the sun is going to set?"

"Yes, reverend mother, at this very hour," she replied, with the same agitation, "for tomorrow will be too late."

"And leaving your mistress in her weak condition?" replied the abbess.

Doña Beatriz, who was also there, answered with her eyes lowered and her face blushing at the first lie of her life.

"Let her go, reverend aunt, for the love of God. For the Lord can give her many mistresses but has only given her one father."

The abbess then consented, but in view of the hour she insisted on the girl being accompanied by the revenue collector of the convent. Martina would gladly have wanted to get rid of a witness

that might prove annoying, but she knew with her clear discernment that striving to go alone would be to risk losing the last hope of salvation that remained to her mistress. So she thanked the mother superior, and while awaiting the tax collector, she retired with Doña Beatriz to the lady's cell as if to prepare for this unexpected departure. Doña Beatriz quickly composed these lines:

Don Álvaro: In three days I will be married if you or God do not prevent it. Look to what will satisfy your honour and mine, for that day will be for me the day of my death.

No sooner had she closed the letter than a messenger came to say that Martina's escort was already waiting, as the servants of the convent lived in houses attached to the main building and were always on call. Doña Beatriz gave some gold and silver coins to her maid, and only ordered her to return soon. Although Doña Beatriz could accommodate herself to the scheme they were enacting, her noble soul was unable to happily contribute to any kind of farce or deception. The girl, who certainly had more malice and mischief than scruples, left the convent feigning the same hurry and grief as before, listening to the kind words and consolations of the revenue collector, as if she really needed them. The place where they were going was Valtuille, a very short distance from the convent, because that was where Martina was from and where her family lived. But it was already dark when they reached the outskirts of the village. There Martina turned to the collector and giving him a silver coin, dismissed him on the pretext that she did not need him anymore, and bade him reassure the good mothers in the convent. He accepted her arguments in view of the tip, and repeating some of his prudent words of advice, quickly went back to Villabuena. It occurred to him on the way that the nuns would ask him about the condition of the supposedly ill man, and he almost turned back to find out, which would have unravelled the whole plot, revealing the deception. But fortunately, he realized that with a few words and some significant gesture such as a shake of the head, he would successfully find his way out and save himself time and trouble, and consequently that is what he determined to do.

Martina, meanwhile, wanting to be safe from discovery, went around the orchards of the village, and jumping the wall of her brother-in-law's farm, entered the house when least expected. Both her sister and her sister's husband welcomed Martina with all

the cordiality that our readers can assume and undoubtedly was deserved because of her cheerful and kind nature. After the first welcomes and embraces, Martina asked her brother-in-law if he had the dappled-grey mare in the stable.

"She is," said Bruno, which was the name of the villager, "and by the way, as it has been a good year for pasture, she's as fat as a baker's basket. She's strong enough to carry the basin of the fountain in Carracedo."

"Just as well," replied Martina, "because tonight she has to take us both to Bembibre."

"To Bembibre?" replied the villager, "you are crazy, lass!"

"No, on the contrary, I am in my right mind," she replied, and immediately, as she was certain of the discretion of her family, she began to tell them the events of that day.

The husband and wife listened to her story with the greatest interest, because being hereditary tenants of the house of Arganza, and in addition having such a close relative in its service, they felt as if they were in some way part of the family. They did not miss any opportunity during the story to interject things such as: "Poor lady!" "Damn his vanity!" "How could someone turn down a man like Don Álvaro!" "Rogue of a count!" In this way these simple folk, who did not disguise their feelings, showed their affection for Doña Beatriz and the Lord of Bembibre, which was shared by many. At last, when the story was over, Martina's sister looked pensive, and said to her husband, looking very discouraged:

"Do you know that an exploit such as this could very well cost us the meadows and lands that we rent, and more than that, it could cause us to suffer the ill-will of a great lord?"

"Woman," said the intrepid Bruno, "what are you saying about lands and meadows? Does it seem to you that Doña Beatriz is a stranger or an ordinary woman with no call on our loyalty? And above all, there are more farms to rent than those of the Lord of Arganza and choosing to do good in this situation does not require a great deal of reflection. So, lass," he added, giving Martina a pinch, "I'm going to saddle the dapple-grey mare right now, and you'll see how fast we ride those paths."

"You won't regret it," replied the clever maid, shaking the bag her mistress had given her, "do not think that Doña Beatriz is ungrateful. There are more gold coins here than you earn all year long working behind the plough."

"For now," said Bruno the farmer, "your mistress will forgive us,

but the poor are also capable of a good deed without seeking payment and only for the pleasure of doing it. As long as Doña Beatriz is the godmother to the first son that God gives us, I consider us paid and happy."

Having said this, he went to the stable whistling a tune well known in that country and began to saddle the mare with all diligence. Meanwhile his wife, entirely infected with her husband's resolution, said to her sister with a certain pride:

"He's a good man, this Bruno! To do a good deed, he would fly from the peak of Mount Aquiana."

Then Bruno returned with the mare fully saddled and, taking her out by the back door of the garden to make less noise, he mounted Martina in front of him and, after saying to his wife that they would be back before dawn, they rode away at a brisk pace. This dapple-grey mare was a courageous beast, and so it was that in spite of the double burden, they took little time to arrive on the fertile banks of Bembibre, bathed by the melancholy rays of the moon that shimmered in the waters of the Boeza and in the many streams which, like so many veins, brought fertility and joy to the plain. As the night was already advancing, and so as not to wake up the people of the town, they turned left and went around the outskirts towards the castle, located on a small hill, whose now ruined walls and ramparts still have a picturesque appearance amid the verdant landscape that it presides. At that hour, everything seemed dead and silent. But the steps of the sentinel on the platform of the drawbridge, a light that burned in a room in the middle tower and illuminated its stained-glass windows, and a shadow that appeared from time to time, meant that sleep had not closed everyone's eyes. The light was that of Don Álvaro's room, and it was his shadow that appeared from time to time in the window. The poor knight had barely slept for days, unless he had given himself up to violent fatigue in the hunt.

Our adventurers arrived at the moat and calling the sentry said they had to give Don Álvaro an important message. The commander of the guard, seeing that there was only a man and a woman at the gate, ordered the bridge to be lowered and have the master informed of the arrival of the messengers. Millán who, being his squire, was the one closest to his master, came down to receive the guests. He did not recognise them until Martina gave him a good pinch and said:

"Hello, you scoundrel, it seems that your honour gives little

thought to us poor prisoners in the convent!"

"My queen, my soul is buried in those eyes of yours," he answered, with a tone half mocking and half passionate, "I did not recognise you, but what on earth brings you out here at this hour?"

"Come sir," said she, "lay aside this jesting and show us the way; and do not seek to know more than your master."

Don Álvaro's surprise was not less than that of his squire, although his loyal heart took a terrible turn. Just the day before, he had received news of the civil war which was brewing in Castile, and from which he could hardly excuse himself. And the idea of his absence on that occasion aggravated his anguish more. Martina quietly handed over her mistress's note, which Don Álvaro read with a deathly pallor. However, as we have said more than once, he was not one of those who on the occasions requiring action are overwhelmed by misfortune. So he recovered as best he could and began by asking Martina if she thought there was any way of getting into the convent.

"Yes, sir," she replied, "since it has occurred to me more than once that, with a man as stubborn as my master the Lord of Arganza, one day we would have to do our own will and not his, I have been looking at all the holes and gaps in the convent boundary. And I have found that the bars of the grate where the water comes out from the garden are almost rotten, and that with a slight effort, they could be broken."

"Yes, but if your mistress is locked up in the monastery in the meantime, we shall have no way to make use of this weakness."

"No, sir," replied the astute villager, "since my mistress likes to walk in the garden until after dark, I often take the key and bring it to the gardener. But as she always tells me to hang it on a nail, any day I can leave another in its place and keep the key that will allow us to go out to the garden at the time that suits us."

"In that case," said Don Álvaro, "tell your lady that tomorrow at midnight she is to wait for me by the water grate. The time has come to get out of this hell in which we live."

"God grant it," said the girl, with a sincere voice, because she knew a great deal about Doña Beatriz's sorrow, and something of life beyond the tedium of the cloister.

Martina said goodbye at once, because she had little time left to be in Villabuena by dawn, as her plan required, with the urgent message she carried from Don Álvaro. So she got onto the mare with the honest Bruno, but with Millán's help, and they rode again

through those solitary fields until, at daybreak, they arrived at the cool banks of the river Cúa. Just then they were calling for first prayers, so she could not have arrived more opportunely. At once, the nuns surrounded her, asking with their natural curiosity what had happened.

"What would it be," she answered with the greatest anger, "but one of Tirso's many silly ideas? He saw my father fall with the sickness that afflicts him from time to time and decided to come up here and upset everybody for no good reason. He even went to Carracedo without anyone sending him. Next time, if they do not choose a better messenger I won't go even if they're all dead."

Saying this, she went to her mistress's cell leaving the good nuns to their reflections on the dumbness of the shepherd and all the fuss. Martina's patch, though made of the same cloth, as they say, was not so well sewn that after some time the stitches could not be seen. But she hoped that by then both she and her mistress would be safe from the consequences.





Chapter X – A sanctuary at Cornatel castle

Don Álvaro left his castle shortly after Martina, heading towards Ponferrada. He went up the Montearenas, turned left, crossed the river Boeza and without entering the bailiwick, took the road to Cornatel. He rode along the shores of the river Sil, which had already been joined by the Boeza, in the pure light of dawn, and passed through those villages and valleys that the traveller does not tire of looking at, which at that hour were full of the songs of many birds. Sometimes he came across a grove of chestnut or walnut trees, or a flax field with its bluish flowers resembling the surface of a lagoon, or fresh and luxuriantly green meadows, and from time to time he would find a stretch of road covered with a canopy of vines like a rustic arbour. On the left, the mountains forming the Aquiana range, their slopes covered with vineyards, rose gently and sometimes more abruptly, and on the right, orchards and alleys of poplars with rich foliage stretched to the river. Don Álvaro heard the answering songs of wood pigeons, with their swift and serene flight. He saw the pompous golden orioles and the gaudy jays that fluttered among the trees, and the painted goldfinches and cheeky sparrows swinging on the brambles of the hedges. The cattle came out with their cowbells, and a young shepherd was playing a gentle country tune on a chestnut bark flute.

If Don Álvaro's mind were rid of the anguish and sorrows that had for some time affected his waking and sleeping hours, he would doubtless have admired the landscape which had so often sweetly captivated his senses in more cheerful days. But now his only wish was to get to Cornatel castle as soon as possible and talk to Commander Saldaña, its warden.

At last, turning to the left and entering into a deep, craggy ravine with a stream running along its bed, the imposing outline of the castle, already illuminated by the rays of the sun, appeared on the crest of the mountain, while the cliffs around it were still dark and covered in mist. A sentry was keeping watch and his armour shone brightly as he walked up and down on the battlements. It is hard to imagine a more sudden change than that which the traveller experiences entering this deep gorge. The nature of this place is rough and rugged, and the castle itself, whose walls are cut out against the sky, resembles a narrow watchtower between the huge boulders that surround it and the hills above. Although nowadays

the moat has been filled in and the inner chambers have collapsed with the weight of the years, the skeleton of the castle still stands and presents the same spectacle as it then offered from a distance.

Don Álvaro crossed the stream and began to climb the steep slope where the road wound, which after many twists and turns ended up at the castle's outworks. His spirit was a battleground between uncertain desire and more uncertain hopes. But he was determined to accept the numerous offerings of Commander Saldaña and put them to the test on that occasion, when more than his own life was at stake. Having decided to hide his plan and the results of it from the eyes of the whole world, and certain that the temperance and austerity of his uncle Don Rodrigo would not allow him to lend his aid, all of Don Álvaro's dreams and hopes depended on the help of the warden of Cornatel. Don Álvaro's castle at Bembibre did not afford him the necessary secrecy for the enterprise he was planning, at the risk of kindling a war in that peaceful region. On the other hand, no veil could be found as thick and cloaking as the fearful and deep mystery surrounding everything about the Templar Order.

The commander who, according to his custom, was out and about from the break of day, seeing a knight coming up the slope, and recognising Don Álvaro as he drew nearer, came out to receive with almost paternal affection such an illustrious guest, known among the Templars as the strongest support of the Order in that region. Don Gutierre de Saldaña was a man advanced in years and of average height, and although his hair and beard were the colour of silver, he remained as agile and strong in his movements as any young man. Saldaña's countenance would have inspired only veneration, except for the restlessness and uneasiness of soul that deprived that noble Roman face of the tranquillity and calm that are the natural ornaments of old age. His eyes were vivid and shot through with incredible strength and on his forehead, which was lofty and broad, were painted as in a faithful mirror, thoughts like the stormy clouds that crown the mountains, which sometimes dispel under the lash of wind but at other times discharge their lightning onto the trembling plain below. Anyone who saw him would say that passions had left their mark on that powerful and energetic temperament, but of those that had stirred his youth, unknown and enigmatic to all, only one had remained as the mistress of that soul, deep and unfathomable as an abyss. This passion was the love of his Order and the desire to increase its glory

and opulence, a purpose he would have done anything to achieve.

His life had been spent in the Holy Land in continuous battles with the infidels and amidst the hatred of the Knights of Saint John and the princes who had done so much harm to the power of the Christians in Syria. In his last campaign, he had witnessed the downfall of Saint John of Acre and of Ptolemais, the last stronghold of the Christians in those remote regions. Then Saldaña returned to Spain, his homeland, but his proud and rebellious soul was wounded to the quick, thinking of the Holy Land that his brother knights had lost forever. And he was burdened by all the vices that could legitimately be attributed to the Templars. It seemed to him that in view of the half-heartedness with which Europe began to regard the conquest overseas, this enterprise was reserved for the Templars alone and, in the delirium of his spite and pride, he came to imagine the whole of Europe becoming a monarchy ruled by the Templar Grand Master. Then, he believed, to the sound of the trumpets of the Order, those gathered around the Baucent war flag would move again as if animated by a single will, to the conquest of the Holy Sepulchre. He looked to the example of the Teutonic knights in Germany, which ignited his volcanic fantasy and turned his eyes to Jerusalem, working ceaselessly for the aggrandizement of his brotherhood and coveting alliances and supports everywhere. Saldaña's friends had become for him like dear children, and his opponents had become hateful creatures, as if hell itself had vomited them out. The waters of pride and revenge, which had become the most powerful of his motivations, had embittered this dark and terrible soul, frustrated by misfortune and far from self-denial and humility, pure springs of the Order. However, faith still illuminated that abyss, although its light made the darkness within more visible.

This extraordinary man greatly loved Don Álvaro, not only because of his alliance with the Order, but also because of his noble principles and his intelligence. It seemed to Saldaña that a reflection of his youthful days was painted in that figure of such noble and manly beauty. Saldaña had even been heard to speak with ill-concealed emotion of the unfortunate passion of the noble young man for Doña Beatriz, a strange thing given his austerity and stern character. The recent events in France had just given the last impulse to his strange projects, because once the gauntlet had been thrown down by the princes, the powerful Order of the Temple would have to fight the great battle, which, in his opinion, should

result in the total submission of Europe and after it the reconquest of Jerusalem. However much the darkness with which pride and error blinded Saldaña's understanding, from time to time the truth was revealed to him in glimpses which, if not enough to dispel his frustration, were sufficient to bring restlessness and suspicion into his soul. For this reason, Saldaña had become more troubled and less tractable than usual, and out of respect for his thoughts or for a less pious motive, the knights and aspirants avoided conversation with him.

Thus Saldaña walked alone in one of the towers facing west, when he saw, with his eagle sight, accustomed as he was to distinguish objects at great distances in the vast deserts of Syria, our knight, Don Álvaro, who with his spear bearer, was climbing at a good pace the steep slope that led and still leads to the castle. Saldaña went down to the gate to receive Don Álvaro, not only with the courtesy proper to his rank, but also with the sincere cordiality which the gallant young man always inspired in him.

"From where do you come so early?" Saldaña asked, embracing Don Álvaro tightly.

"From my castle in Bembibre", replied the knight.

"From Bembibre!" the commander answered in admiration. "That means that you have travelled all night and that your haste must be very great and urgent."

Don Álvaro nodded, and the old man, after examining him intently, said:

"By the Holy Sepulchre, you have the same countenance as the Templars on the day we set sail for Europe abandoning the Holy Land to the Moors! What happened to you this past month, that we have not set eyes on you?"

"I hardly know how to tell you," said Don Álvaro, "especially here," he added, looking around.

"Yes, yes, you're right." answered Saldaña, and taking hold of Don Álvaro's arm, went up with him to the same tower where he had been before.

"What matters are afoot?" asked the commander again.

The young man in reply simply drew Doña Beatriz's letter from his breast and handed it to Saldaña. Since it was so brief, the commander scanned it at a glance and said, frowning almost fiercely, albeit in a low voice:

"God's wrath upon such villains! Do they want to corner us and also destroy the hearts of people who are worth more than they?"

Then turning to Don Álvaro the commander asked, "And what scheme have you devised against this treachery?"

"I have thought to wrest her out of the convent, even though I should have to break through all the lances of Castile. But taking her to my castle presents many risks for her, and so I have come to seek your help and advice."

"Neither will be wanting," said Saldaña, "you have acted correctly, because if you were to take Doña Beatriz to your castle, you would either have to open its doors to anyone who would seek her, or war would instantly break out, which would cause your uncle great sorrow and bring advantage to no one at this time."

"If I could hide Doña Beatriz in the neighbourhood," said Don Álvaro, "until the first commotion passed, I could then find her sanctuary in a convent in Puebla de Sanabria, where a relative of mine is the abbess."

"Well, in that case," replied Saldaña, "bring her to Cornatel, because if they seek her, they will not find her here. By the stream, and covered with weeds next to a stone cross, you will find the entrance to the underground passage of this castle, and you can bring her in by this route. No one ever enters my chambers, so nobody would see her there. But according to what the letter says, you will need to act quickly to prevent an event that is set to be concluded the day after tomorrow."

"So quickly," replied Don Álvaro, "that this very night I intend to carry out the enterprise." And then he told Saldaña about Martina's visit and the agreed plan of action, which the commander approved.

Then they stood silent as if absorbed in the contemplation of the superb view offered by that narrow and steep-walled fortress that, like an eagle's nest, dominated the plain below. To the east and north it was surrounded by terrible cliffs and ravines, in whose depths ran the stream that Don Álvaro had just crossed, flowing with a muffled and distant sound like a continuous groan. Between the north and the sunset, a section of the nearby Sil valley was visible, full of trees and verdure, beyond which lay the great plain of El Bierzo, then covered with forests and pastures, and finally, the mountains that form that beautiful and fertile amphitheatre. The river Cúa, half hidden by the endless woods and groves along its banks, ran to the left at the foot of the mountain range, kissing the slopes of ancient *Bergidum* and flowed toward the monastery of Carracedo. To the west, finally, the blue and transparent lake of Carucedo, much larger at that time than it is today, seemed to serve

as a mirror to the places that adorn its banks and to the gently sloping hills that enclose it. At the very edge of the lake waters, grew large oaks with their branches drooping like willows which are still there today, black poplars, tall and pliant like osiers that swayed at the slightest wind, and strong chestnut trees with rounded crowns. From time to time, a flock of pochard ducks or moorhens flew in wide circles and then rushed into the reeds by the lake shore or, flying away, disappeared behind the red peaks of Las Médulas.

Saldaña had his eyes fixed on the lake, while Don Álvaro, observing the banks of the Cúa, sought in vain to discover the convent of Villabuena hidden by a bend of the mountains.

"Happy shores of the Dead Sea!" the old commander finally cried with a sigh. "How much more pleasant and blessed were their sands to me than the greenness and freshness that adorns that lakeside!"

This sudden exclamation, which revealed the substance of his long meditations, drew Don Álvaro from his reverie.

Then he approached the Templar, and said:

"Do you not have faith that the horses of the Temple will drink again from the water of the river Kidron in Jerusalem?"

"Not have faith!" exclaimed the knight in a voice like a trumpet. "And what but this faith keeps the fire of my youth burning under the snow of these grey hairs? Why do I keep this sword by my side, but in the hope of washing it in the Jordan of the rust of waning and defeat?"

"I confess," replied Don Álvaro, "that in seeing the storm which seems to be forming against your Order, I have sometimes come to doubt the Templar Knights' future glories and even your continued existence."

"Yes," said the Templar bitterly, "that is the reward given by King Philip in France to those who saved him from the clutches of a mutinous mob. That is undoubtedly the reward prepared by King James of Aragon for having raised in our nest the eagle that with glorious flight settled upon the mosques of Valencia and the mountains of Mallorca. That perhaps is the reward that Ferdinand IV reserves for the only knights who among the hungry wolves of Castile have not attacked his badly guarded flock. But we shall come out of the shadows of slander as the sun comes out of the darkness of the night. We will bring down the proud and raise the humble. We will gather the world

at the foot of Calvary, and there the new era will begin."

"Have you ever heard my uncle's thoughts?" asked Don Álvaro.

"Your uncle is a bright and unblemished star in the sky of our Order," replied the commander, "and what he says may be true. But your uncle forgets," Saldaña added with proud enthusiasm, "that the first gift of Heaven is the valour which still dwells in the heart of the Templars as in its sacred tabernacle. It may be true that pride has corrupted us, but who has shed more blood for the cause of God? Who but we renounced the loving warmth of the domestic hearth, the noble pursuit of science, and the repose of the cloister? What remained to us but power and glory? Whatever may be our faults, we will wash them away with our blood and our tears in the ruins of the palace of David. But who are those vile worms who have left the tomb of Christ in the possession of the dogs of Mohammed to judge us, when all the power of heaven and hell was barely enough to throw us from those shores?"

For a while he was silent and then he held his companion's hand and said in an almost tender tone:

"Don Álvaro, your soul is noble and there is nothing that you do not understand. But you do not know what it is to have owned that miraculous place, the Holy Land, and to have lost it. You cannot imagine Jerusalem in all her glory and majesty. And now," he continued, his eyes almost bathed in tears, "she is sitting in solitude weeping in the night, tear after tear falling on her cheeks. The lute of the troubadours has fallen silent like the harps of the prophets, and both moan to the sound of the wind rustling through the willows of Babylon. But we will return from exile," he added in an almost triumphant tone, "and we will again raise up Jerusalem's walls with the sword in one hand and the trowel in the other. And we will sing the song of Moses at the foot of the cross on which the Son of Man offered himself up for our salvation."

Saldaña face, furrowed by the years, was now illuminated. And with his noble figure animated by the fire that all true passions inspire, and dressed in that beautiful white robe that so well suited his age, leaning over the precipices of Cornatel that by their depth and darkness could be compared to the valley of death, he seemed to be the prophet Ezekiel calling the dead from their graves for the final judgment. Don Álvaro, who was so easily overcome by all generous emotions, clutched the old man's hand tightly and said:

"I would be happy to contribute to that holy work. The strength of my arm will not be lacking."

"There is much you can do," said Saldaña, "may God crown our noble endeavours!"

Then they went down to the commander's quarters, which were a few roughly built chambers, one of which had a ladder descending into the underground passage. Saldaña gave Don Álvaro the key to the outer door, and coming down with him, showed him all the tunnels and hidden ways. They returned to the apartments where they had a frugal meal, and when the sun went down Don Álvaro left again with his squire. Saldaña had offered him some reliable soldiers to escort him, to carry out his attempt with greater safety. But the young man prudently refused, making him see that the plan relied on cunning, not force, and that anything that might attract attention would hinder its success. He went, therefore, only with his squire to the edge of the river Sil, which he crossed by the boat at Villadepalos. Then he went into the pasture lands that at that time covered most of the lower part of El Bierzo and taking a great detour to avoid the passage through Carracedo, well into the night, he took the road to Villabuena.





Chapter XI – Taking flight in darkest night

It is now time for us to return to Doña Beatriz, whose situation was undoubtedly the most violent and terrible of all. The nervous and feverish agitation that the dreadful scene with her father had caused her and the imminence of peril had given her the strength to resort to any measure to flee the dangers that threatened her. But when Martina disappeared to carry her message and her violent agitation calmed down so that she lay in a sort of prostration, Doña Beatriz began to see her conduct from a different viewpoint. She began to tremble about what was going to happen, just as she had trembled for what had happened in the past. And she began to find a thousand doubts and pitfalls in her plan, where before, her passion had only seen resolution and clear roads ahead. She had felt no embarrassment, at the beginning of her reclusion, to arrange an interview with Don Álvaro in the church, because such a step was only directed to contain him within the limits of duty and incline him to respect all that came from her father. The peace of that land and her own opinion had determined her to take such a step. But this time, perhaps to ignite this war, to entrust herself to her lover's protection, to throw herself on the uncertainty of the future without the support of her father, without the blessings of her mother, was what she called Don Álvaro for. This was her first act of rebellion, the first step so far off the beaten track of her duties. The propensity for sacrifice that lies at the bottom of all generous souls stood up to reproach her for being attentive only to her own happiness and that she did not think of the solitude and affliction that would poison the last days of her old parents. Especially her poor mother, so sick and hurt, she imagined succumbing under the weight of her fault and extending her arms to her daughter who was not there to close her eyes and receive her last breath.

If these had been her only thoughts, the enterprise would have failed, but the intense resentment which her father's violence caused her, and the coldness of the count's soul, whose villainous intentions even the veil of courtesy had not been able to conceal, restored all the presence of mind that was necessary in such a critical moment. And as she then imagined the noble and grieved figure of Don Álvaro coming to demand the fulfilment of her pledge and asking with sardonic laughter what she had done with

his love, with the profound adoration which in true worship he had shown her, her previous feelings at once gave way to those which found an easier and more natural place in her heart. In this way, doubts, fears, resolutions and regrets struggled for control of her embattled and troubled spirit.

The return of Martina, who had carried out her arduous mission with such diligence and ingenuity, frightened Doña Beatriz more than it gladdened her heart, for it was a sign that this terrible crisis was coming to an end. The girl told her mistress all the details of her errand with joy and vivacity, and concluded with the news that that same night, at twelve o'clock, Don Álvaro would enter by the water grate in the garden, and both of them would leave with their lovers wherever God decided because, as the Lord of Bembibre said, this was too much hell just for three people.

Doña Beatriz, who had been striding across the room, crossing her hands over her chest now and then, and raising her eyes to the sky, turned to Martina and said, frowning:

"But how could you? Were you mad or dazed to suggest such a plan to him? Do you think these are childish games?"

"They're not games for me," answered the servant, "but it seems that they are so for your obstinate father and that cocky count from Galicia. Those two seem to be making child's play of your life, putting a rope around your neck and dragging you to the altar against your will. What kind of a marriage would that be, with the wife crying in corners and the husband scheming and then nagging if things don't turn out right?"

Doña Beatriz, hearing this exact description of the fate that awaited her, raised her eyes to the heavens wringing her hands, and Martina, somewhere between tenderness and anger, said to her:

"Come, come, that won't happen, God willing! With so many sorrows you have already lost the colour in your cheeks, the same as the other one, who looks like a corpse! Tonight, we will make our way out of troubles and you will see how we gallop across those blessed fields. A pound of wax candles I've promised to light in honour of the Virgin of the Oak if all goes well tonight."

All these things, coming out of the girl's rosy mouth like a whirlwind, were not enough to draw Doña Beatriz out of her restless, aching absorption. The afternoon finally arrived, and as she was not getting ready to leave the cell, her servant girl made her realize that they could hardly attempt their escape if they did

not go to the garden. Then the lady rose as if a spring had moved her, and as if to discard any untimely reflection, she hurried to the place of her accustomed walks.

It was a most pleasant and mild afternoon, and the breeze that lazily ran through the trees barely drew a faint whisper from their leaves. The sun was approaching its end through clouds of varied shades, and its last light bathed the nearby hills, the treetops and the severe monastery buildings in changing colours, with soft and gentle tones. The turtledoves cooed among the chestnut trees, and the murmur of the Cúa had a vague drowsiness that inclined the soul to meditation. It was difficult to gaze unmoved at this serene and melancholy scene, and Doña Beatriz's soul, so continually predisposed to this kind of emotions, surrendered to them with all the yearning felt by suffering hearts.

It was true that she could point out few happy days among those she had spent in that sanctuary of peace, but the affection with which she had been welcomed, and the charm that poured into her breast from the holy calm of the cloister had a natural appeal to her. Who knows what the future had in store for her in its faraway regions? ... Doña Beatriz sat down at the foot of a poplar, and from there, as if saying farewell, she looked painfully at all those places, witnesses and companions of her sorrows, the flowers she had taken care of with her own hands, the birds whom she had brought crumbs from the table more than once, and finally the streams, which murmured so sweetly and sonorously. Immersed in these sad thoughts, she did not notice that the sun had set and the turtledoves and little birds had become silent, until the convent bell rang out for evening prayers. That sound, which echoed through the solitudes and lost itself in the shadows of twilight, frightened Doña Beatriz, who listened as if she were receiving a warning from Heaven, and turning to her maid said:

"Do you hear, Martina? That is the voice of God that says to me: 'Obey your father.' How could I have had the crazy idea to ask for Don Álvaro's help?"

"Do you know what I hear?" replied the girl with some annoyance, "it is neither more nor less than a warning for you to return to your cell and try to get some rest, so you can find more sense and courage."

"I'm telling you," interrupted Doña Beatriz, "that I will not run away with Don Álvaro."

"Well, that's fine," replied the maid, "but you go and tell him

yourself because I will not be the one to give him the bad news and pay the consequences. What I regret is to have hurried along those roads, so that there is not a bone in my body that doesn't ache, and now it seems to me that I've got a fever. A fine lot of trouble for nothing, so help me God!"

Talking in this way, they entered the convent, and Martina went to the gardener's cell where, against her mistress's orders, she switched the keys, as planned.

The last nights of May are short, and so it was not long before they heard the clock of the convent strike twelve midnight. Even before they rang, the diligent Martina had reconnoitred the dark cloisters and then, turning to her mistress, she said:

"Come, madam, for I am sure that he has have already filed or broken the bars and awaits us as the Fathers in Limbo awaited the coming of the Saviour."

"I do not have the strength, Martina," replied Doña Beatriz in distress. "You had better go alone and tell Don Álvaro my decision."

"Me, eh?" Martina replied wickedly. "A fine mission! I'm a woman and although he is a most courteous knight, I'd be lucky if he didn't pull my tongue out. Come on, madam," she added impatiently. "Little do you know the lion you are playing with. If you are late, he is liable to come to your cell, breaking through all obstacles. Do you want to get all three of us caught?"

Doña Beatriz, no less frightened than overcome by her passion, came out leaning on her handmaid, and they both came groping to the door of the garden. They opened it very carefully and, closing it again behind them, they hurried toward the fence where the irrigation water came out. As the grate, which was put there in the time of Don Bermudo *el Gotoso*, was all rotten with rust, it had not been difficult for a vigorous man like Don Álvaro to pull the bars apart sufficiently to allow the passage of a person. So when they arrived, the knight was already on the inside. He silently took Doña Beatriz's hand, which was as cold as ice, and said:

"Everything is ready, my lady; not in vain have you placed your trust in me."

Doña Beatriz did not answer and did not move, so Don Álvaro said impatiently:

"What are you doing? How much time do you think we have left?"

"But Don Álvaro," Doña Beatriz asked, just to save time, "where do you intend to take me?"

The knight then explained quickly but clearly all his plan, which had been carefully worked out, and at the end of his account, Doña Beatriz was still silent. Then anxiety and anguish began to seize the heart of Don Álvaro, who also remained a while without speaking a word, his eyes fixed on those of Doña Beatriz, which she did not raise from the ground. Finally, silencing his misgivings as much as possible, he said in a somewhat trembling voice:

"Doña Beatriz, speak to me with your accustomed sincerity. Have you changed your mind?"

"Yes, Don Álvaro," she answered in a muffled voice, not daring to look up, "I cannot abscond with you without dishonouring my father."

Then he let go of her hand, as if it had suddenly become a poisonous snake in his own, and gazing at her with an almost ferocious look, he said in a hard, almost sardonic tone:

"And what does your distressed and strange message mean then?"

"Ah!" she answered in a sweet, heartfelt voice, "do you pierce me with such a look in my hour of weakness?"

"Forgive me," he said, "for when I think that I might lose you, my reason forsakes me, and pain makes me forget even generosity. But tell me, ah! tell me," he continued, throwing himself at her feet, "that your lips have lied when you said that you did not want to leave with me. Will you not come with your true husband, the husband of your heart? This change can only be a fleeting impulse."

"No, it is my true resolution," replied the lady.

"But have you thought about it?" Don Álvaro replied. "Do you not know that tomorrow they will come to take you to the church and force from you the fateful words, accepting the count as your husband?"

Doña Beatriz twisted her hands, groaning, and said,

"I will not obey my father."

"And your father will curse you, did you not hear that yesterday from his own mouth?"

"True, true!" Doña Beatriz said, shocked and rolling her eyes, "he said it himself. Ah!" she added with the greatest dejection, "then let the will of God and his own be done."

Don Álvaro, on hearing this, rose from the ground where he was still kneeling, as if he had become an iron bar, pulled burning from the forge, and stood in front of the lady with a wild and sombre gesture. He scrutinised her from top to bottom with a furious look. Both women felt overwhelmed with terror, and Martina could not but whisper to her mistress:

"What have you done, madam?"

At last Don Álvaro made one of those efforts that only extremely energetic and haughty characters are capable of, and said with an ironic and disdainful coldness that pierced like a sword the heart of the unfortunate maiden:

"In that case, I can only ask forgiveness for the many annoyances I have caused you with my importunities, and I here pay a respectful and courteous tribute to the illustrious Countess of Lemos, whose life may the heavens fill with prosperity."

And with a deep reverence, he made to turn his back on her, but Doña Beatriz, seizing him by the arm with desperate violence, said in a hoarse voice:

"Oh, not so, not so, Don Álvaro! Stab me if you will, and since we are alone here no one will charge you with my death, but do not treat me that way, a thousand times worse than all the torments of hell!"

"Doña Beatriz, do you want to trust me?" asked the knight.

"Listen to me, Don Álvaro, I love you, I love you more than my soul, I'll never be the count's ... but listen to me, and do not cast those angry looks at me."

"Will you trust me and be my wife, the wife of a man who will find no other woman in the world than you?" the knight asked again.

"Ah!" she answered anguished and as if lifeless, "Yes, with you, with you to death!" And then she collapsed in the arms of Martina and the knight.

"And what shall we do now?" he asked.

"What shall we do?" replied the maid, "but set her before you on your horse, and go as fast as we can. Come on, come on, haven't you heard her last words? Your tongue is quicker than your hands."

Don Álvaro judged it prudent to follow the handmaid's advice and, putting Doña Beatriz on his horse with the help of Martina and Millán, he galloped away through that solitary countryside, while the squire and maid did the same on another mount. The knight's gallant horse *Almanzor*, as if he knew the importance of his burden, seemed to have doubled his strength and he ran proud and conceited, neighing joyfully from time to time. In minutes, they came like a whirlwind to the bridge of the river Cúa and crossing it, they began to race along the opposite shore at the same speed.

The cool wind of the night and the impetuosity of the race had begun to dispel Doña Beatriz's faint; seized by that arm, at once affectionate and strong, she seemed transported to other regions.

Her hair, which became loose from the agitation and movement, waved around Don Álvaro's head like a perfumed cloud, and from time to time it touched his face. As her bright, white dress stood out in the moonlight against Don Álvaro's dark armour, appearing and disappearing among the trees like a celestial exhalation between clouds, she resembled a sylph riding on an enchanter's hippogriff. Don Álvaro, full of happiness, did not notice that they were near the monastery of Carracedo, when a black and white shadow suddenly appeared in the middle of the road and in an imperious and terrible voice shouted:

"Where are you going, thief of maidens?"

The horse, despite his courage, stopped and, by a common impulse, Doña Beatriz and Martina immediately jumped to the ground, the mistress restored to her senses by that terrible cry, and the maid almost out of her wits with fear. Don Álvaro roared with rage, laying hand to his sword and, prodding his mount with both spurs, he hurled himself against the spectre, which he recognized with great surprise to be the Abbot of Carracedo.

"How so," the abbot said harshly, "a nobleman from Bembibre turned into a night robber!"

"Father," interrupted Don Álvaro, "you know that I respect you and your holy habit, so for the sake of God and peace, let us go on our way. Do not force me to stain my soul with the blood of a servant of Almighty God."

"Misguided young man," answered the monk, "who does not respect even the sanctity of the house of the Lord. How could you believe that I would not anticipate your transgression and try to stop it?"

"You have done wrong," replied Don Álvaro, gritting his teeth. "What right do you have over this lady or me?"

"Doña Beatriz," replied the abbot with restraint, "was in a convent where I exercise legitimate authority and from which you fraudulently carried her off. As for you, this bald head will tell you more than my words."

Don Álvaro then dismounted and while sheathing his sword and trying to calm down, he said:

"You see, Father Abbot, that all roads of conciliation and good agreement were closed to us. No one can judge my intentions better than you, for not many days ago I revealed my soul to you as if I were speaking in the court of confession. So be generous, protect the afflicted, help the fugitive, and do not remove from the

path of virtue and hope two souls who undoubtedly shared the same feeling in their homeland as they now do in the land of exile."

"You have violently snatched a noble maiden from the refuge in which she was kept, and this is a grievous sin in the eyes of God and men," said the Abbot of Carracedo.

Doña Beatriz then came forward with her accustomed and enchanting modesty, and said in her sweet voice:

"No, Father, I have asked for Don Álvaro's help, I have resorted to his courage, I have thrown myself into his arms, and here I am."

Then she quickly told the abbot, with great feeling, the scenes of the parlour, her despair, her doubts and inner struggle, and becoming more excited as she spoke, finally seized the monk's scapular with the utmost despair exclaiming:

"O Father, free me from my father's will, free me from this unfortunate lover who I have robbed of his tranquillity, and above all, free me from myself because my reason is surrounded by darkness and my soul is lost in the cliffs of anguish which have surrounded me for so long."

Then everything remained in a deep silence that the abbot finally interrupted when he spoke, his voice harsh and intemperate, but trembling because of the involuntary tenderness he felt towards the lady.

"Don Álvaro," he said, "Doña Beatriz will remain with me and return to her convent, and you will go back to Bembibre."

"Since you are trying to tear her from my hands, you should first take my life," said Don Álvaro. "Let us go our way. Even if you do not want to contribute to the workings of love, do not provoke the anger of one who has respected you even in your injustices. Stand aside I tell you, Abbot of Carracedo, or else, by what I am, I will break through every impediment, even the very sanctity of your own person."

"Unhappy wretch!" said the old monk, "the eyes of your soul are blinded by your idolatry for this creature. Smite me if you will, and my blood will haunt you hereafter, shouting for revenge like Abel's".

Don Álvaro, beside himself with anger, made as if to take Doña Beatriz from the abbot's hands, using if it was necessary the ultimate violence against the old man, when the lady intervened and said to him calmly:

"Stop, Don Álvaro, all this has been but a dream that I wake from now, and I want to go back to Villabuena, where I should never have left."

Don Álvaro remained numb with astonishment and as if petrified in the midst of his angry outburst against the abbot, and could only reply in a dull voice:

"Are you so resolved?"

"I am so resolved," she replied.

"Doña Beatriz," Don Álvaro began to say, in a voice that wanted to convey at the same time the thousand ideas that crossed each other and clashed in his spirit, but as if distrusting his strength, he contented himself with saying only:

"Doña Beatriz ... goodbye!"

And he marched off to his horse.

The unhappy lady burst into tears and bitter sobs, as if the only link that bound her to bliss had just broken at that moment. The abbot, then, his heart pierced with mercy, quickly approached Don Álvaro and seizing him by the arm, brought him as if against his will before Doña Beatriz.

"You will not part on these terms," he told him. "I do not want you to leave here with a heart full of hatred. Have you no confidence in my grey hair or in the fidelity of your lady?"

"I only have confidence in the Saracens' lances and that God will grant me a death worthy of a Christian and a knight."

"Listen to me, my son," the monk added, with more tenderness than could be expected from his stern, gruff character. "You are worthy of better fortune than this, and only God knows how your sorrows trouble me. God in his justice will ask a great account from those who thus destroy his work. I, who am his delegate here and exercise spiritual jurisdiction, will not consent to that ill-fated plan which is the source of your misfortune. I have seen how badly they reward your nobility and in me you will always find a refuge. You are the lost sheep, but I will put you on my shoulders and I will bring you to the fold of consolation."

"And I," said Doña Beatriz, "here, before a minister of the altar, I renew the oath I have already made, and which not even my father's curse will make me forswear. Oh, Don Álvaro, why do you want to part with me in anger? Do you care nothing for the persecutions I have suffered and suffer for your love? Is that the trust you put in my tenderness? How can you not see that if my resolve seems to falter it is because my strength falters, and my mind is troubled in the agony that I suffer unceasingly? I, a wretched woman, abandoned by my family, and with no more shelter than God and you?"

Don Álvaro's anger turned into pity when he saw that the abbot's discovery and the unexpected change in Doña Beatriz had been transformed into paternal kindness and tender words. His natural character was sweet and temperate, and that propensity to anger and harshness that had been visible in him for some time, came from the setbacks and troubles that surrounded him on all sides.

"As you can see, venerable sir," he said to the abbot, "my heart has not strayed from the path of submission except when the iniquity of men has thrown me out of it. They have wanted to seize my lady from me, and that is impossible. But if you want to mediate and promise me that this abominable marriage will not take place, I will depart from here as if I had heard the word of God himself."

"Touch this hand that the majesty of Heaven descends upon every day," replied the monk, "and be sure that as long as you live and Doña Beatriz harbours the same feelings, she will not pass into anyone's arms, even if they were those of a king."

"Doña Beatriz," Don Álvaro said, approaching her and doing his best to control his emotions, "I have been unjust to you and I beg you to forgive me. I do not doubt you nor have I ever doubted you. But affliction changes and embitters the noblest character. I have nothing more to say to you, for neither tears nor laments nor words will reveal to you what is happening in my heart. In a few days, I will leave for the war that is again breaking out in Castile. To God, then, I commend you, and pray to him to grant us happier days."

Doña Beatriz gathered her last remaining strength for such a painful moment, and approaching the knight took off a ring and put it on his finger saying:

"Take this ring, a token and a symbol of my fidelity, pure as gold." And immediately, taking Don Álvaro's dagger, she cut a braid of her long black hair that still lay around her shoulders and neck, and also gave it to him. Don Álvaro kissed them and said:

"The braid I will put inside my breastplate next to my heart, and the ring will not depart from my finger. But if my armour-bearer should ever return these things to you, then pray for my eternal rest."

"Even so, I will await you for a year, and afterwards I will retire to a convent," said the maiden.

"I accept your promise, because if you should die, no other woman would ever be called my wife."

"Heaven preserve you, noble Don Álvaro," said the abbot. "But do not give yourself up to bitterness. Remember that hope is a divine virtue."

It seemed as if these should have been their last words. But far from moving, the pair of lovers seemed fixed to the earth and held together by their reciprocal and painful gaze, until at last, moved by an irresistible impulse, they threw themselves into one another's arms, Doña Beatriz saying in a flood of tears:

"Yes, yes, let me hold you in my arms, here, next to my heart ... what does it matter that this holy man sees it...! God has already seen the purity of our love!"

For a few moments, they remained thus like two pure and crystalline rivers that mix their waters, at the end of which they separated. Don Álvaro, after receiving the abbot's embrace, got on his horse and slowly rode away, turning his head back until the trees hid him from sight. The faithful Millán remained, by order of his master, to accompany Doña Beatriz and her handmaid to Villabuena. Then the abbot gave a short whistle, and a lay monk, who was hiding behind some walls, appeared at once. The abbot whispered a few words to him, and after a short time the lay monk returned with the convent horse-litter, driven by two strong mules. Doña Beatriz and her maid got in and the layman left while Millán took hold of the front mule. The abbot mounted on his horse, and so they all set out towards Villabuena, where they arrived still at night. The fugitives entered the convent through the breach in the grate, and Martina led her mistress to her room, almost in her arms. Meanwhile the abbot made his way back to Carracedo, well satisfied with his prudence, through which everything had been remedied without anybody knowing about this nocturnal adventure, apart from his walking companion.

The next day, when the count's servants and those of the Lord of Arganza went to the convent carrying the wedding gifts, they found that Doña Beatriz was suffering from a burning fever, unconscious, and in the midst of an alarming delirium.

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Chapter XII – Dispositions for battle

Perhaps it will seem strange to our readers that the Abbot of Carracedo should be so at hand to destroy Don Álvaro and Doña Beatriz's plans for their happiness, in whose plight we suppose their kind hearts have not ceased to be interested; and yet it is not surprising. When the Lord of Bembibre took leave of the abbot after their first interview, Don Álvaro's resolution and his very words gave the monk to understand that the knight's natural energy, stimulated by the violent passion that dominated him, would not retreat before any obstacle, nor would he tire of inventing plans and stratagems to gain his end. Doña Beatriz was the abbot's spiritual charge, he heard her confessions, and all things relating to her inspired his care and solicitude. Since she was in Villabuena, the abbot strove to protect the honour of one of his order's monastic houses that was under his authority, and his vigilance had been redoubled, not without bearing fruit.

One of the servants at Carracedo had seen a villager riding on a superb horse on one of the hills near Villabuena, apparently with a squire, as if skirting the inhabited areas by trails and hidden paths. The strangeness of the case prompted him to tell the abbot and the latter, by these indications and the direction he had taken, knew that Don Álvaro was prowling around, and that in view of the Count of Lemos's insistence, Don Álvaro might try to steal away his lover. The abbot communicated his orders to all the monastery rangers and the boatman of Villadepalos (for the boat belonged to the monastery), so that they should be on the lookout with the utmost vigilance and give him an immediate report of all that they observed. The escape of the discreet and clever Martina, however, did not reach the abbot's ears. But the guards noticed Don Álvaro's arrival at Cornatel, and the studied way he undertook to bypass the monastery. And the abbot was especially conscious of the fact that on the following day the time limit indicated to Doña Beatriz by her father would expire. These were the many rays of light that made the abbot certain that this would be the night for the execution of the daring plan. Assuming with good reason that Cornatel was the point chosen for the planned escape, he had the boat withdrawn to the other side of the river, and as the river Sil flowed stronger with the melting snows of the mountains, so that no one could ford it, the abbot assured himself that his plan would not fail. It is true that

Don Álvaro could take Doña Beatriz to Bembibre, or cross the river by the Ponferrada bridge, in which case the lovers would elude the abbot's efforts to thwart their escape. But both these alternatives involved such difficulties that they must certainly have made Don Álvaro avoid them. The bridge was fortified and without an order from the Templar Master, no one could cross it at such an unusual time of night without raising alarm, which our knight especially wanted to avoid. Thus, the prelate's nets were well deployed, and the result of Don Álvaro's attempt was none other than what it was doomed to be.

The good abbot, however, did not believe that Doña Beatriz's passion had so deeply rooted in her soul, or that the desire to flee an abhorred marriage would impel her to such extremes. Accustomed to seeing all the maidens of high and low birth yield to paternal authority in such matters, he imagined that only a fleeting fascination could move Doña Beatriz to such a resolution, and it was the consequences of this fault that he set out to tackle. But when he saw with his own eyes the violence of that frustrated love and the source of misfortune that the Lord of Arganza's obstinacy could open, he determined to oppose him resolutely. The abbot's heart, though possessed with fanatic zeal, had not discarded any of those generous impulses proper to his class and state, and he loved Doña Beatriz with almost paternal tenderness. In the secret of the confessional, that pure and spotless soul had appeared to the abbot in her divine nakedness and captivated his affection, as was inevitable. On the other hand, the abbot understood that Don Álvaro, a true and honourable knight if ever there was one at that time, was only thrown into such a desperate enterprise because he was harassed by despair and injustice. So, very early the next day, the abbot went to carry out his noble purpose, but he was grieved to learn that Doña Beatriz's illness had already delayed the wedding. It did not seem right to the abbot to deepen the anxiety of the Lord of Arganza, who was already beginning to reap the fruit of his injustices, but he did not leave off a single point of what he had determined to do.

Don Álvaro, meanwhile, from Carracedo went straight to Ponferrada, where he arrived before dawn. But not wanting to disturb anyone at such an untimely hour, and in order to recover before presenting himself to his uncle, he wandered about on the banks of the river until the first light of day returned to their natural colour the battlements and towers of that majestic fortress,

which the moon had covered in a pale tint. Then he entered the fort, and with the frankness of his character, he told his uncle Don Rodrigo all the events of the previous day, though he first asked for his word as a knight to keep his account in the secret of his bosom and not to say anything about what he was about to hear. The old Templar listened with keen interest and when he finished he said:

"Well, you have found a good ally in the Abbot of Carracedo, and misfortune has brought you to the very point where I wanted to place you when this storm had not yet been unleashed. I know the abbot, and no matter how great the enmity and resentment with which he views our Order, his soul is just, and he will not depart from the path of truth. But Saldaña, that is another matter! ... He is one of the elders of our Order, grown old in battle. For him to lend you his aid, and what is more, to give you shelter in the castle that he governs, for such purposes! To consent to a woman passing through the threshold of the Temple, when even the kiss of our mothers and sisters is forbidden, that is extraordinary!"

Don Álvaro tried to apologize.

"No, my son," said the master, "what he has done because of his affection for you, he would have done for any stranger, as long as it made us grow in power and thwart our enemies. I know Saldaña well. His angry and arrogant soul has become exasperated with our misfortunes, and he only dreams of ambitious purposes and purely human means to restore our decorum. In his eyes, all paths are good if they lead to this end. In him, the decadence of our Order can be clearly seen, alive and manifest!"

Don Álvaro then told his uncle that he intended to leave for Castile at once, and the old man gave his approval, not only because as leader of an armed retinue he was obliged to serve the king as the occasion required, but also because he hoped that the dangers and hardships of war, which fitted his character so well, would distract him from his troubles and sorrows. On this occasion Don Álvaro's flag, normally the inseparable companion of that of the Templars, had to go alone to face the enemy. For the Templar Knights, who were mistrustful with good reason of the king's authority and were waiting to see how the abuses committed in the neighbouring Kingdom of France against their Overseas Grand Master and the rest of the knights developed, thought it prudent to remain neutral in the domestic war playing out in the hapless Castile.

The next day, Don Álvaro left Bembibre for Carrión with part of

his company of soldiers, leaving Melchor Robledo, one of his officers, in charge of the rest of his forces, and his castle in the hands of the Knights Templar of Ponferrada. While he arrives and joins the host of King Ferdinand IV, we must give our readers some idea of the new disturbances that in different ways called both townsmen and nobles to arms.

The Lara family, one of the most powerful in Castile, had always incorporated in their house both turbulence and restlessness, no less than nobility and opulence. The current head of this lineage, Don Juan Núñez de Lara, had long been exiled from Castile, and entered it by the force of arms when the glorious Queen Doña María held the reins of government. But when Don Juan de Haro defeated his squadron, Núñez de Lara became a prisoner of the queen. They then stripped him of all his castles and estates, but these were soon returned to him. And in order to seal this truce more strongly, they made him the king's steward, the most favoured and coveted position in the royal house. But the times were so turbulent and confused, and Núñez de Lara's character was so contrary and difficult, that all this largesse was not enough to correct his propensity to do wrong.

The Infante Don Juan, who has left such a disastrous legacy in our history, and who serves as a contrast to the great name of Guzmán *el Bueno*, was displeased with the loss of his dreamed Kingdom of León. So he soon forged a friendship and alliance with Don Juan Núñez de Lara. The infante wished to make use of him in his aspirations to rule the lordship of Biscay, which belonged to his wife, Doña María Díaz de Haro, as heiress to her father, the count Don Lope. However, these lands had not left the hands of Don Diego, her uncle, still in possession of them at this time. This dispute was very difficult to solve, and to make matters worse few lords sincerely wanted it settled, because with such factions and enmities, the power of the crown declined in favour of the lawlessness of usurpers and nobody could put a stop to this growing weakness that attacked the heart of the state. The revolts during the king's minority had taught the lords the ways of rebellion, and so the king's diplomacy and strength were both too weak to deal with such grievous harm.

Nevertheless, through the discretion and skill of Queen Doña María, the dispute between Don Diego de Haro and the Infante Don Juan was pacified, with the former handing over the lordship of Biscay to his niece Doña María Díaz, and the infante receiving in

exchange the towns of Villalba and Miranda. But the king, whose fickle and inconstant nature very often caused the failure of wise political arrangements, excluded from this compromise and agreement in which all the principal lords of his kingdom had taken part, his steward Don Juan Núñez de Lara, with whom he had started to fall out. As was to be expected from his conceit and arrogance, Núñez de Lara regarded this as a bloody outrage, and bidding farewell to the king with harsh and unbridled words, he left to secure himself in his stronghold of Tordehumos. He stationed his forces at Íscar, Montejo and other places, and providing them with weapons, provisions and equipment, he prepared to face the king's wrath.

The king, on the other hand, no less resentful of the excesses of Don Juan Núñez de Lara, after consulting with his court, sent a messenger to Lara requiring him, as a punishment for his ingratitude, to leave the land and hand back the towns of Moya and Cañete which he had granted him not long before. Núñez de Lara answered with his accustomed insolence, saying that he would not leave a land which he felt was his, and as far as the towns were concerned these had been well earned by him. With this the king gathered his troops and prepared to besiege him in Tordehumos.

In spite of these dissensions, both the monarch and the lords on Núñez de Lara's side were agreed on one point, their hatred of the Templars and above all the desire to share their spoils. It is true that the king had suffered no harm from the Order in the past revolts, and that the knights had remained neutral at least during that chaotic time. But it is also true that a member of the Order, Commander Martín Martínez, had surrendered to the Infante Don Juan the castle and bridge of Alcántara.

The king, however, took more account of this isolated fact than the decorous behaviour of the whole Order. And, on the other hand, the desire to repair the calamities of the crown with the Templar's properties and to silence the greed of his aristocrats with their wealth, finally tipped the balance of his spirit against this illustrious militia. Nevertheless, since Pope Clement V had neither condemned them with his anathemas nor taken that much-persecuted chivalric order under his protection, spirits were in suspense and the swords half drawn out of their sheaths.

In any case, efforts never ceased to undermine the foundations of the Temple and to contrive secret plans for the day hostilities would begin. The Infante Don Juan, at the centre of all these

schemes, did not rest for a moment, and as we have already indicated, the projects of the Count of Lemos and the bitterness of Doña Beatriz and Don Álvaro were the work of his hands, as capable of murdering innocent children in the cradle as the two lovers' most holy and legitimate hopes. The Templars controlled the access to Galicia by way of the mountain pass of Piedrafita and Valdeorras, as well as the castles of Cornatel and Valcarce. The fortresses of Corullón, Ponferrada and Bembibre dominated El Bierzo's richest plains. And on the other hand, if the houses of Yáñez and Ossorio came to join the Templars, their numerous mountain vassals from the sources of the Boeza and Burbia rivers would close a large portion of the entrances and would make the position of the Order in that region almost impregnable. This was clear to the infante and his lords, and this was the cause of the Count of Lemos's persecutions. Rather than coming to the siege of Tordehumos, the count stayed in the boundaries of Galicia and El Bierzo, to carry out his own particular purpose and to gather forces against the Templars with whom it seemed that war would be inevitable.

Don Álvaro, as we have said, found himself alone in Castile in the midst of the king's army, but he was eyed with resentment and suspicion due to his close and sincere alliance with the Templars, his valour, his dexterity in arms, and the reputation that preceded him. At last the royal army, and the Lord of Bembibre's forces, now complete with the arrival of its second regiment led by Robledo, left Carrión and set out to Tordehumos with much equipment and war machines.



Chapter XIII - A fever of the mind

As Don Álvaro, the Lord of Bembibre, was leaving El Bierzo, a fever attacked Doña Beatriz with terrible fury and the unhappy woman shouted for him in her delirium. Who would have told him that this was happening, when on the highest point of the mountain that divides El Bierzo from the plains of Castile, he turned his horse to look again at that land whose memories filled his heart? Who would have told him that angelic maiden, his only love and his only hope for the future, lay on a bed of pain looking with gleaming and wandering eyes at those who were around her, as the feverish heat consumed her delicate limbs? But this was indeed the terrible reality, and while the blade of death threatened one lover, the other hastened toward innumerable risks and dangers. Thus, as two leaves from the same branch swayed by the same wind, one falls at the foot of the paternal tree, while the other flies away with the winds of autumn to an unknown and distant field.

Imagine, dear reader, what dismay there was in Arganza at the sad news of the illness of their sole heiress. Doña Blanca, for the first time in her life, forgot about her own pain and her complaints and burst out in reproaches and invectives against her husband's obstinacy and against the wedding plans that thus threatened that beloved creature, her daughter Doña Beatriz. In spite of her formal hospitality, some measure of her anger was also directed against the Count of Lemos. Despite her ailments, Doña Blanca immediately declared her determination to go to the convent and assist her daughter. Her husband, Don Alonso, fearful of causing a new misfortune by opposing his wife in the midst of her agitation, arranged for her to be conveyed to the convent in a kind of travelling chair. As soon as Doña Blanca arrived, her limbs, which were usually almost paralyzed, seemed to untie and her usual pains ceased, so that everyone was amazed to see the change in her. Such is the admirable energy of maternal love, a holy spark of divine love, which finds strength for everything and never tires of the most unbearable sacrifices and fatigues!

Doña Beatriz did not seem to recognise her mother, though her eyes were fixed on Doña Blanca incessantly and the girl seemed to pay attention to all the words of tenderness that came from her mother's lips. But it was that kind of intense and distracted attention

of the insane. Her delirium had very strange and diverse phases, so that sometimes it was calm and melancholic, and other times it was full of convulsions and anguish. The names of her father and of her lover were the ones that most often escaped her lips, and although the count's name was sometimes heard, she always covered her face with the sheets or made some gesture of disgust when she mentioned him.

An elderly monk from Carracedo, well versed in healing and who knew almost all the medicinal plants that grow in those hills, was constantly at Doña Beatriz's bedside, watching the progress of the illness that beset her, and he had already given the sick maiden several beverages and cordials. But the illness, far from waning, seemed to be worsening and approaching a fearsome crisis. One night when her mother, her aunt and the kind monk were seated around her bed, Doña Beatriz sat up, and looking around her carefully, noticed the dim light of a lamp which was flickering in the farthest part of the room. She stared at this for a while, and then asked weakly, though her voice had not lost its harmonious tone:

"Is it the moonlight? But I do not see it in the ripples of the river! ... Neither does heavenly bliss come down to make our hearts rejoice!" She sighed heavily, then exclaimed sharply, "Never mind, never mind! From the skies the light will come to us ... Yes, yes, your Moorish horse! ... I see it now! Oh! I think I am losing my life and a spirit carries me through the air, but the beating of your heart has awakened mine! I am losing my mind with joy! Let me sing the psalm of gladness, 'When Israel came out of Egypt'. But my mother, my poor mother," she exclaimed with regret, "ah! I will write to her, and when she knows that I am happy, then she will be glad too!"

She smiled then, in a melancholy way, but in a sudden change in her rambling speech, she shouted uncontrollably with terror, throwing herself out of bed with such violence that the abbess and her mother could barely hold her.

"The shadow! The shadow! Ah, pity me! I have fallen from the heavens! ... Who will lift me up? ... Goodbye! ... Do not turn your head back to look at me or you will break my heart. He is already lost among the trees! ... Now I must die! ... Poor Christian soul, prepare your wedding clothes and go to find your heavenly husband!"

Then, tired, she fell again on the pillows amid the tears of the

two ladies and began to breathe with much anguish and distress. The monk took her pulse and looked into her eyes very carefully. Then he went to sit at one end of the cell with a downcast face, shaking his head. Doña Blanca, who saw him do this, fell on a kneeling stool and seizing a crucifix that was above it and holding it tightly, exclaimed in a hoarse, strangled voice:

"Oh my God, not her, do not take her, but me! She is my only child! I do not have another daughter! Look upon her, oh Lord, so young, so good and so beautiful! Take my life but spare hers! See that my tears are not the only ones that will be shed for her, because she is a vessel of blessing in everyone's eyes. Oh Lord! Oh Lord, have mercy!"

The abbess, who, although she had more need of consolation herself than power to give it to another, went to calm her sister by telling her that if she abandoned herself to her pain, she could scarcely take advantage of the little strength she had left to assist her daughter. This advice had the desired effect, for Doña Blanca, thinking about this idea, became very calm, such was her fear of being separated from her daughter.

In this way, a few days passed, during which the nuns did not cease to pray to God for the health of Doña Beatriz. It was necessary to establish turns for attendance on the girl, because they all, at the same time, wanted to stay to watch over and assist her. Mourning seemed to have entered that house without waiting for death to open its way. However, after Doña Blanca, no one was as troubled as Martina, whose pretty and cheerful countenance had lost its colours, so fresh and animated that they had been a marvel to all. The Lord of Arganza, who despite his rigours loved his daughter with true passion, oppressed by the double weight of sorrow and remorse, scarcely dared to appear at Villabuena, but spent days and nights without enjoying a moment of real rest and at every instant was sending messengers, who always returned with worse news.

At last the doctor declared that his science was exhausted, and that only heavenly power could cure Doña Beatriz. Then she was given extreme unction, because as she had not regained consciousness, she could not be given the viaticum, the holy Eucharist administered close to death. The whole community, flooded in tears, went to the ceremony, and each nun took leave of that affectionate and sweet companion who, despite the troubles that had continually surrounded her, while she had lived in the

convent, had not given anyone the slightest trouble.

No human force could tear Doña Blanca from her daughter's side the night she was to die, so they had to consent for her to witness her child's last hours. Toward midnight, however, Doña Beatriz seemed to awaken from the lethargy that had followed her agitated delirium and, fixing her eyes on her faithful servant, she said in an almost imperceptible voice:

"Is that you, poor Martina? Where is my mother? I thought I heard her voice in my dreams!"

"It is true, madam," replied the girl, controlling herself so as not to reveal the joy, perhaps unfounded and irrational, she had felt on hearing those words, "look on the other side of your bed, and there you will find your mother."

Doña Beatriz then turned her head and, stretching out both arms, so slender and well-formed not so long ago, but now so extremely thin, she threw them around her mother's neck and pressed her to her chest with more force than could be thought possible. She then exclaimed, bursting into tears:

"Mother of my soul! Dear mother!"

Doña Blanca, beside herself with joy, but trying to contain her emotion, replied:

"Yes, daughter of my life, I am here. But calm down, since you are still unwell, and this excitement could harm you."

"Do not believe it," Doña Beatriz replied, "you do not know how much these tears relieve me, the only tears of joy I've shed in a long time. But you are thinner than ever ... Ah, yes, it is true! We have all suffered so much! And you too, my aunt! And my father, where is he?"

"He will come soon," replied Doña Blanca, "but come now, be calm, my love, and try to rest."

Doña Beatriz, however, continued to weep and sob for a long time, so many were the tears that had filled her eyes and lain heavily on her chest. Finally, utterly exhausted, the troubled maiden fell into a deep, peaceful sleep, during which she broke into an abundant sweat. The old physician then approached her, and carefully examining her regular and calm breathing and her pulse, raised his eyes and hands to the heavens and said:

"Thank you, oh Lord, you have remedied the ignorance of your servant and saved her."

And leading Doña Blanca, astonished and troubled, he brought her in front of an image of the Virgin and, kneeling with her, began

to pray the Hail Mary in a low voice but with the greatest fervour. The abbess and Martina followed their example, and when they finished, both sisters threw themselves into one another's arms, and Doña Blanca was also able to relieve her overburdened heart.

The sick woman's sleep lasted until late the next morning, and as soon as she woke up and the doctor made sure that the danger had completely passed, the convent bells began to ring a full peal and there was a great celebration. Don Alonso returned to see his daughter, but although he had not renounced his plan, to which he had pledged his word and which would so flatter his ambition, he decided not to go against Doña Beatriz's wishes. In this, he was following the impulses of his own heart and the advice of the prelate of Carracedo. As for the Count of Lemos, he had momentarily left the country, and in any case Doña Beatriz was not subjected to any kind of pressure while she recovered. The convalescence, however, seemed to require a long time, and as the convent could more easily bring to her imagination the unpleasant scenes of which it had been the setting, she was moved. Following orders from the monk of Carracedo who had assisted her with such paternal solicitude, she was taken to her own house in Arganza, where all her memories were more peaceful and comforting. The whole town, that had given her up for dead, received this news as our readers can imagine, with parties, dancing and a joyful clamour that the master's generosity made even more cheerful and lively. There was dance and celebration, a maypole as tall as a tower and a farce was represented, half warlike, half in jest, arranged and led by our friend Nuño the huntsman, who on that day seemed to be twenty years younger. As for the plump Mendo, he was so delighted with Martina's return that one could have thought the cunning girl was corresponding to his feelings. Many were the drinks and dishes with which he celebrated her return, but if he had got wind of her nocturnal errands, and especially the last one, he probably would have got indigestion. In any case, ignorance made him happy as it does many others, and although he became the butt of Martina's mocking and even rebuffs, he was as a happy as could be. Add to this that Millán was far away breaking his neck against the walls of Tordehumos, and that Martina had become more interesting with the slight pallor that her vigils and anguish had brought on her, and we will have fully explained the gaiety of the good groom.



Chapter XIV – Millán joins his master in the dungeons

Let us now return to Don Álvaro, who was quite unaware of these events and had come to Tordehumos with the king's host. This town, which Don Juan Núñez de Lara had provisioned and repaired with the greatest diligence, is on the slope of a hill presided by a castle, and not far from the river called Rioseco. The position is a good one. The castle walls were then in the best condition possible, the garrison soldiers were courageous enough and their chief skilled, experienced and brave. Some time before, the king had already besieged Don Juan Núñez de Lara in Aranda, from where he escaped despite the king's wrath, and this memory encouraged him to challenge the king from the fortified position of Tordehumos, a place more suited for defence. Núñez de Lara also had a well-founded hope that the siege would never reach a critical situation, for he had informers and supporters whom he trusted in the enemy's camp. The Infante Don Juan, although he served under the banner of his nephew King Ferdinand, nevertheless maintained the old bonds of friendship that tied him to Don Juan Núñez de Lara. It was among his enemies where he intended to serve him best, a devious plan that could only have been conceived in the duplicity of his villainous spirit. Hernán Ruiz de Saldaña, Pedro Ponce de León and some other principal lords were also part of the plan, although they did not conceal their thoughts or conduct under the mantle of hypocritical zeal for the king's interests as the Infante Don Juan did. And so the siege, waged at first with great intensity, was loosening and declining from day to day, to the great regret of the king, who was not long in understanding his predicament.

However, the knights who were more loyal to the king continued to fight with ardour against the frequent forays that the besieged made. And Don Álvaro who, being isolated, was not aware of these plots and, by the honesty of his feelings, was unable to get involved in them, was among the knights who excelled most. It so happened that one night the besieged left the fort with great secrecy and unexpectedly attacked the royal enemy, the greater part of which was off its guard, falling more furiously on the wing of the Lord of Bembibre and other knights loyal to the king. Don Álvaro, who was not in the habit of ignoring the precautions and vigilance that are

proper in war, rode out at once with half of his well-prepared force to repulse the unexpected attack, immediately sending notice to the king's headquarters asking for support in the counterattack he was beginning. Due to the chaos that ensued and, no doubt, the malicious intention of the infante, the requested reinforcements did not arrive.

The night was very dark, the enemies were increasing at every moment, the cries of rage, fear and pain mingled with the orders of the officers. Weapons and shields sent sparks into the darkness with the incessant hammering of battle, and the scene became truly fearsome and horrible. At last, the enemy forces began to spread around the wings of the small, isolated squadron, and Don Álvaro, now under some duress, began to withdraw in an orderly way, resisting the opposing thrust with his habitual courage. Finally, his men began to disband, and Don Álvaro, already wounded in the breast, received another wound on his head. And so he fell to the ground beneath his noble horse, which had also been wounded for some time but seemed to have held on to life just to help his rider. Then came a new fight around the fallen knight, for his soldiers made desperate efforts to wrest him from the hands of the enemy. But the number of combatants was already so great and the encouragement they received from Don Juan Núñez, who commanded this cohort in person, was such that finally, bloody and broken, they had to take flight leaving Don Álvaro in enemy hands. Núñez de Lara, who recognized Don Álvaro and already held him in high esteem, had his wounds bandaged and ordered the knight to be carried with great care to his castle. Finally, as the king's reinforcements were coming, he retreated in good order without suffering any injury or punishment. His soldiers, rejoicing with the spoils collected, also withdrew, in sharp contrast to the king's troops, disgusted and unhappy with what had happened.

The faithful Millán, who had fought as was his duty side by side with his master on that fatal night, was separated from Don Álvaro by the retreat of the fugitives at the critical moment. Thus, the squire appeared very early in the morning at the gates of Tordehumos, demanding that they take him prisoner with his master, whom he came to care for during his recovery. Núñez de Lara sent for him at once and calling him into his presence, he greatly praised Millán's faithfulness and presented him with a silver chain, bidding him to take good care of a knight so accomplished as his master. As for the rest of Don Álvaro's forces,

which were reduced in number by almost half after the tremendous night battle, those who survived were mostly wounded. They gathered under the command of Melchor Robledo and were placed in the rear of the field to be cured and recover as much as possible.

The king, although he had no great love for Don Álvaro because of his alliance with the Templars, regretted his imprisonment and his wounds, because he well knew that such a good warrior with a heart so noble was infinitely valuable to him amid the less sincere characters that surrounded him.

Don Álvaro took many hours to come round, dazed by his fall and the great loss of blood from his wounds. The first thing his eyes saw when he opened them was his faithful Millán who, standing beside his bed, was watching all his master's movements with special solicitude. At the foot of Don Álvaro's bed stood a knight of noble aspect, although with a habitual scowl, dressed in splendid blue armour decorated with exquisitely worked inlays and gold engravings. Finally, at the head of the bed was a character of disreputable appearance, with dark clothes and a kind of turban or white headdress. The knight was Don Juan Núñez de Lara and the other individual was Rabbi Ben Simuel, his physician, a man well versed in the secrets of the natural sciences, and whom the common people therefore considered as an oriental necromancer or sorcerer. His race and religion made him odious to many Christians of the time, and his physical appearance was not likely to win the affection of anyone.

Don Álvaro looked around and, finding the walls of a room instead of the canvases and draperies of his tent and people unknown to him, understood his misfortune and could not suppress a sigh. Núñez de Lara then approached Don Álvaro and taking his hand assured him that he was in the power of a knight who admired his valour and his qualities. He urged the patient to rest and recover quickly from his wounds, which although serious, promised a speedy recovery.

"Finally," he added, pressing Don Álvaro hand, "do not look upon Don Juan Núñez de Lara as your jailer, but your physician, your servant, and your friend."

Don Álvaro wanted to answer but Ben Simuel objected, saying the patient needed silence and repose. Then, making Don Álvaro drink a soothing potion, he went out with Don Juan Núñez, leaving the wounded knight in the company of Millán. As soon as they left, Don Álvaro asked in a very weak voice:

"Can you hear me, Millán?"

"Yes, sir," said he, "what can I do for you?"

"If I die, take the ring from my finger, and from the left side of my breastplate take the braid that Doña Beatriz gave me on that fatal night, and bring these tokens to her, and tell her from me... No, do not tell her anything."

"It's all right, sir," said Millán, "if God calls you, all will be done as you say. But for now, be still and look after yourself."

Don Álvaro tried to rest, but despite the medicine he only achieved some interrupted and uneven sleep, such were the pains that his wounds caused him.



Chapter XV – The potent arts of Rabbi Ben Simuel

A few days after Don Álvaro had fallen prisoner, a very significant event finally occurred, which everyone in the king's camp had been waiting for with great anxiety. Letters arrived from Pope Clement V containing the order to proceed with the arrest and prosecution of all the Templars in Europe and the confiscation of their property. They also contained news of the horrible tortures suffered by some knights of the Order in France. That feeble and cowardly pontiff had consented that the Knights Templar be taken out of his jurisdiction, handing them over to a special commission, which was equivalent to putting them in the hands of the executioner. Clement feared that King Philip the Fair wished to bring to trial the majesty of the pontificate in the person, or rather, in the memory of his predecessor Boniface, and to avoid it, allowed him to bathe in the blood of the Templars and gorge himself on their property. In France, the audacity of the king and the shock at such an unexpected coup against the Order, and the rash conduct of the Overseas Gran Master, Jacques de Molay, had paved the way for such a complex and difficult undertaking. But in Spain, where the Order was on its guard and was perhaps more powerful than in any other nation, the enemies of the Templars needed to employ infinite skill and courage.

It is true that neither in Portugal, Aragon or Castile were the Templars deprived of their rights, and were subject instead to the authority of provincial councils. But after what had happened in the neighbouring kingdom, it seemed natural that they should distrust civil authority and should not want to surrender their arms. On the other hand, it was not surprising that they wanted to avenge the insults suffered by their Order, for whose honour and continuance they were obliged to sacrifice even their own lives. So it was necessary to comply as much as possible but at the same time be prepared to resist by force of arms.

King Ferdinand IV, despite such momentous news, for which he seemed to need the help of all his noblemen, did not, however, renounce his wrath against Don Juan Núñez de Lara, determined as he was to return to his crown the brilliance which it had lost in the past revolts. The Infante Don Juan was the mediator between the king and his rebel vassal, and as this position made it easy for him to make frequent visits to Tordehumos, he soon agreed with

its owner the plan he had been maturing for so long.

Don Álvaro was the strongest supporter of the Templars in the Kingdom of León and the most ardent and powerful of their allies. Although soldiers of the Order guarded his castle of Bembibre, it was clear that if its master died, these soldiers would have to vacate the place and the vassals of the Yáñez house would soon desert their banners. The infante was not a man who recoiled at the prospect of shedding blood. The rival of his protégé the Count of Lemos was in the hands of Don Juan Núñez de Lara, and with his capture, there collapsed one of the main barriers that separated the rich inheritance of the Temple from his greedy hands. What more could he want?

As soon as Pope Clement's bulls arrived, the Infante Don Juan journeyed to Tordehumos and, going up to a solitary tower of the castle with its owner Don Juan Núñez, began a lively and heated discussion.

There was great surprise and even fear among those who looked up at them when Don Juan Núñez, with irate gestures, drew his sword as if he had received an offense from his guest. But no doubt he changed his mind, for he soon returned his steel to its scabbard with great signs of courtesy and both men shook hands. The Infante Don Juan came down from the tower soon after and took the royal road, showing signs of great satisfaction and contentment.

The great loss of blood and the severity of his wounds had greatly weakened Don Álvaro. But Ben Simuel's science and Millán's cares, together with the attentions of Don Juan Núñez, had succeeded in getting him out of the jurisdiction of death and returning him, albeit with very slow steps, to the path of life. The fever had subsided, and his pains were no longer so intense. But there is no doubt that without the weight of his thoughts, his convalescence would have been speedier.

One afternoon Don Juan Núñez de Lara entered Don Álvaro's chamber and took a seat at his bedside while Millán left them alone to speak more freely. Don Juan then asked the knight, holding him by the hand:

"How do you feel, noble Don Álvaro? Are you happy in my jail?"

"I am already much better, sir," replied the wounded man, "thanks to your gifts and care, which would almost make me thank Heaven for my prison."

"In that case you are well enough to hear an important thing that

I have to tell you," said Don Juan.

"You can begin, if you wish," said Don Álvaro.

Núñez de Lara then began to tell Don Álvaro in detail the news arrived from France and the imprisonment, seizure of property and prosecution of the Templars ordered in Pope Clement's letters, received not long ago in the King of Castile's encampment.

"I well know," Don Juan concluded, "that your noble spirit will not allow you to abandon an alliance you have established with knights like yourself. But as you can see, helping the Templars whom the vicar of Jesus Christ has abandoned and that bear the grave weight of an accusation in the criminal lawsuit that they are going to face, would be to betray both your duties as a Christian and a high-born person. If, therefore, you value the good will I have shown in caring for you and serving you, I advise you that from now on you break the alliance you have with that Order which is the object of universal hatred and no longer set yourself apart from your friends and natural allies."

Don Álvaro, who was intimately convinced of the iniquity of the accusation levelled against the Templars and who would never have thought the supreme head of the Church capable of such guilty weakness, listened to Don Juan Núñez's account with violent and deep emotion. Don Álvaro's colour changed many times and he involuntarily clenched his fists and ground his teeth with signs of pain and anger. At last, restraining as best he could the tumultuous movements of his spirit, he replied:

"The Templars will accept the judgment which will be brought against them, in due obedience to the mandate of the Supreme Pontiff, the only authority they recognize on Earth, although the Pope so wrongly prostrates himself before the King of France. But they will not give up their arms nor consent to being imprisoned, nor will the Order relinquish their property and castles unless the councils sentence them to do so. As far as I am concerned, Don Juan de Lara, I forgive you the opinion you have formed of me, in view of all the gifts and care you have bestowed, but I beg you to learn to know me better."

Don Juan's legitimate humiliation aroused his wrath and spite, but desirous that the matter should improve and at the same time willing to try out all means of conciliation and temperance, he replied:

"But sir, don't you fear to tarnish the brilliance of your fame, binding yourself to a body festering with so many infamies and

abominations and which all Christendom rejects like a leper?"

"My Lord Don Juan, your efforts are in vain, trying to persuade me of what you yourself may not believe in. Moreover, not all Christendom rejects the Knights of the Temple, for it is not unknown to you that the wise King of Portugal has sent his ambassadors to the Pope to protest the outrages and misdeeds against this illustrious militia."

"Portugal is an ill-advised king!" said Lara.

"You are the ill-advised," replied Don Álvaro impatiently, "in so reducing your own decorum. Go with God and know that neither my heart nor my arm will ever be found wanting in defence of those persecuted knights."

Lara frowned and asked in a haughty voice:

"Do you forget that you are my prisoner?"

"Yes, I had indeed forgotten, because you told me that you were my friend and not my jailer. But since you return to your natural role, you must know that although you have me at your mercy, my heart and spirit laugh at your threats."

Don Juan bit his lips and was silent for a long time, during which no doubt his naturally noble and upright soul was assailing him with reproaches for his own behaviour. But with stubborn obstinacy, he held on even more to his adopted position. Finally, getting up, he said to his prisoner:

"Don Álvaro, you have no doubt heard of my impetuous and violent nature. The prime movements of this affair are not in our hands. Forget what I have said and judge me only as you have before this conversation."

Having said this, he left the chamber, and Don Álvaro, with the indifference of brave men when it is only their own life that is at stake, returned to his habitual reflections. The rest of the afternoon Núñez de Lara could be seen pacing on the platform of one of the towers with unequal steps, talking to himself at times, gesticulating vehemently and sitting down from time to time deeply lost in thought. Finally, long after the sun had set, when the arid surrounding fields disappeared among the veils of the night, Don Juan went down the narrow spiral staircase and, entering the main hall of the castle, sent for a page to call his physician Ben Simuel.

The sly face of the astute Jew soon appeared in the doorway and, sitting down next to his lord, they began a lively conversation in a very low voice, of which the page heard nothing although he remained at the door. Then finally Ben Simuel got up and after

listening to the last words of Don Juan Núñez, who accompanied them with a very expressive gesture and an almost threatening countenance, left the room with all diligence.

It was about ten o'clock at night when the same Jew appeared in Don Álvaro's cell with a cup on a salver. After seeing to Don Álvaro's bandages, he made the knight drink a potion that, he told him, would help him to sleep. He left almost at once, and Don Álvaro began to feel a certain heaviness that after so many sleepless nights seemed an omen of quiet repose. He barely had time to tell Millán to leave him alone and to close the door on the outside without entering until he called and soon he was fast asleep. The good squire, no less in need of rest than his master, did all that he was told to do and, turning the key and putting it in his pocket, he stretched his long frame on a bed placed in a nearby alcove and did not wake up until the next day, when the sun was already quite high. Then Millán went to the door to see if his master was stirring or complaining, but he heard nothing. "Well," he said to himself, "this time, his melancholy has given way to sleep, and when he wakes up, God willing, he will be himself again." So he waited for a considerable time, during which he began to fret, thinking that so much sleep could harm his master. But after an hour and a half, he could no longer contain his impatience, and putting the key in the lock and turning it very cautiously, he tiptoed into Don Álvaro's bedroom. After a little hesitation, he finally decided to call his master, while at the same time gently shaking him. Don Álvaro neither moved nor gave any reply and Millán, really alarmed, went to open a window for some light. But how astonished and dismayed he must have been when he saw his master's body, inanimate and cold, with his bandages removed, his wounds torn open, and the whole bed flooded with blood.

At first, Millán remained as rigid as a statue, seized by terror, surprise and pain. But as soon as he could move he went out screaming, with his hair still bristling, through the corridors of the castle. In response to the noise, some men-at-arms and servants came and finally Lara himself arrived, followed by Ben Simuel. Millán, choking with the sobs that had finally made their way through his amazement and astonishment, led them to the bed of his unfortunate master and fell upon him, holding him tightly. Don Juan could not contain a distraught and terrible look that he gave his doctor. But returning to himself and looking around fiercely, fixing his gaze alternately on his soldiers and on Millán, he

demanded with an imperious voice to know what had happened. Millán recounted the affair with all the simplicity and ingenuity of his despair, but when he said that he had left Don Álvaro alone the night before, the Jew, who had been examining the body, turned to Millán with angry eyes and said:

"Look, you wretch, look at your work! Your master either in a dream or in a frenzy has broken his bandages and bled to death. How could you leave a knight so badly wounded alone?"

The unfortunate squire began to pull at his hair until Núñez de Lara used his authority to put an end to this exchange, and then, sympathising with his sorrow, he said to Millán:

"You have done nothing but obey your master, and you are not guilty at all. Besides, we have all been deceived. Which of us did not believe this noble young man was already out of harm's way? God has wanted to afflict me by allowing a castle of mine to witness such misfortune! Tomorrow this illustrious knight will be buried in the pantheon of this castle."

"It will not be so for your life, sir," Millán interrupted, "you must hand his body over to me so that I can take him to Bembibre and bury him with his elders. Oh my God! he exclaimed in a strangled voice. "My God, and what shall I say to his uncle, the Templar Master, and to Doña Beatriz, when they ask me about him?"

"Don Álvaro's body," Don Juan replied, "will rest in this castle until, when peace is restored and these disastrous dissensions come to an end, I may, with all the knights of my house and my allies, transfer him to his family's pantheon as befits his lineage and prestige."

As this seemed to be in accordance with the honour due to his ill-fated master, and on the other hand, knowing that Don Juan Núñez was unswerving in his will, Millán had to comply with this arrangement. Don Álvaro's body lay all that day in the castle chapel, accompanied by the inconsolable squire, and escorted by four men-at-arms who from time to time were relieved. The chaplain performed the burial services as appropriate, and that same night he deposited the remains of that unfortunate young man in the vault of the castle, in a new tomb.

The next day, Millán asked Don Juan to give him permission to return to El Bierzo, and after much praise of his fidelity, the lord granted this, along with a bag full of gold.

"Thank you, noble lord," Millán said, refusing. "Don Álvaro made his will before coming to fight in this unfortunate war, and I

am sure he will have looked out for his poor squire, whose fidelity he was quite sure of."

"That does not matter," replied Don Juan, forcing him to take the bag of gold. "You are a good boy, and the only pleasure we men of power enjoy is to give."

Millán then left the castle, and going to meet Robledo, told him about the tragedy that had happened. The news, which immediately ran through the camp, filled everyone with dismay. Although they did not look on Don Álvaro fondly, they did not fail to appreciate his bravery, of which they had recent memory. The remnant of Don Álvaro's armed retinue returned to their native meadows and mountains full of mourning and sadness at the death of their lord, a true father of his vassals. They also mourned their many brothers in arms whose bones were already bleaching in the moonlight in the barren fields of Castile. Millán left them behind and went ahead to bring the sad news of Don Álvaro's passing to Arganza and Ponferrada.

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Chapter XVI – Tokens of love, returned

The lady Beatriz, as we have said, returned to her father's house, to the great joy of her family, who had so many reasons to love her. Her father Don Alonso, as if eager to erase past discord, or convinced that force would never subdue such a brave spirit as his daughter, treated Doña Beatriz with his former goodness, and made no mention of his favourite projects. The Count of Lemos, who was frequently a guest of the house of Arganza, seemed moved by the same feelings, or rather, was convinced that the road that led to the fulfilment of his desires was other. Therefore, his visits to Doña Beatriz were infrequent, and he exchanged his importunities of the past for deep respect and deference, always being courteous and tactful. The politeness of his manners and the profound duplicity of his character, accustomed to the most tortuous ways, helped him effectively in the difficult task of changing the opinion that Doña Blanca had about his person and feelings. Doña Beatriz, however, could never silence the voice that repeated in her memory this man's cold and haughty words in the parlour of Villabuena. The count knew this well enough, and that was why all his efforts were directed to washing away this stain that undoubtedly discredited him in the eyes of the young woman. And finally, it must be admitted, despite the harshness and coldness of the count's soul, Doña Beatriz's candour and beauty had managed to penetrate it and had at times softened his rough character.

As often happens to people who are driven by a passion, Doña Beatriz's mother, the lady of Arganza, had remained in good health despite her infirmities while the illness and convalescence of her daughter lasted. Pain and joy had successively given her strength, and only when the two extremes had given way with her daughter's recovery, did nature resume its course with all the intensity resulting from such a long suppression. So when Doña Beatriz returned, if not to her natural robustness, at least to herself, her mother began to falter, and soon fell fully under the rigour of her ailments. In this way, the lively ray of joy that had illuminated this noble family soon darkened altogether and again the tortures and anguish of uncertainty began.

Doña Blanca's ills had frequent and lucid intervals in which her reason cleared. But then, a deep melancholy spilled into all her thoughts and utterances. Her soul, passionate and tender but

humble and placid, had known no other path than resignation, no other response than obedience. She had felt a strong inclination towards Don Álvaro while his wishes had agreed with those of her noble husband. And she still retained an involuntary feeling for the knight despite the disagreements that had occurred. But lately the force that had dominated her spirit all her life ended up tilting her towards the manifest will of her husband, the Lord of Arganza. In a timid and calm character like hers, the idea of further discord between father and daughter was a kind of nightmare that was continually oppressing her. In her own youth, her inclinations had been thwarted but, in the end, domestic cares, religious conformity and the love of her children had provided her with moments of tranquillity and even happiness. Who can guess what is going on in the heart, and who would be bold enough to assure that, when the terrible flames of youth were forever extinguished, Doña Blanca's daughter would not end up thanking her father for the arranged marriage, consoling herself as Doña Blanca had, and finally be happy to leave her children an illustrious name and the riches that always enhance a title? And in this way, the bad opinion that Doña Blanca had originally formed of the count had gradually faded, thanks to the perseverance, cunning and dexterity of his conduct, and the good lady judged that the same thing should happen in the mind of her daughter.

Unfortunately, all these arguments, which had much weight in Doña Blanca's mind, had no bearing on the lofty sentiments and strong resolution that distinguished her daughter. Doña Beatriz would never have contented herself with obeying her husband, because she needed to respect and esteem him. And on the other hand, she was one of those who never succeed in compromising with injustice and would fight it without respite until the last moment. Worldly goods and the incentives of vanity had never fascinated her eyes. But these traits of character had been strengthened in the solitude of the cloister with its religious atmosphere, where all the impulses of that generous soul had been severely tempered. It seemed as if on the edge of eternity, which she had come so close to, her soul had been initiated into the mysteries of the nothingness of all earthly things, and so she had adhered even more deeply to the passion that filled her, the living image of pure and sincere heavenly love. However, the change of ideas and the new turn that apparently took hold in the thoughts of her mother, so loving and so beloved, affected her heart.

Although Doña Beatriz did not dare to contradict her mother's wishes in the midst of her sufferings, this new image of the Count of Lemos did not sit well with her memory of the absent Don Álvaro. This insidious enemy with whom she had to fight was of a new species, and certainly more fearful than the abuses her father and the count had previously employed.

Such was the situation of the Arganza family, when one summer afternoon the two ladies were sitting in the same room and at the same window where we saw Don Álvaro for the first time saying goodbye to the lady of his dreams. Doña Blanca seemed distracted after a painful episode, lying wearily on a large armchair. Her daughter had just left the harp with which she had tried to entertain her mother's sorrows. Doña Beatriz's eyes were fixed on the setting sun, which had illuminated Don Álvaro's exit from this household and which had not yet brought the day of consolation so wished for. Her thoughts, of course, flew to the wide plains of Castile in search of that young man worthy of a more benign fate, when suddenly the gallop of a horse passing beneath the window drew her out of her meditations. Doña Beatriz quickly leaned out of the window, but the rider and horse had turned round the corner in search of the front door, and she could only catch a glimpse that seemed to bring to her mind a familiar figure. At once the horseshoes rang out in the courtyard, and the footsteps of an armed man were heard on the stairway a short distance from the room. Soon after Martina rushed in, her face as white as death, and spoke as though she did not know what she was saying:

"Mistress, it's Millán..."

The same pallor of the maid spread instantly to the features of her mistress who nevertheless answered:

"I know what he brings me. My heart has just told me that this is the moment I have dreaded. Tell him to come in at once."

The maid left and shortly afterwards Millán came in by the door at which Doña Beatriz had been staring fixedly. Doña Blanca, greatly alarmed, got up, though with great difficulty, and went to stand next to her daughter. Martina stood at the door wiping her eyes with one end of her apron, while Millán came forward with uncertain and shaky steps until he stood before Doña Beatriz. He wanted to speak, but his voice knotted in his throat, and he stretched out his hand to present to Doña Beatriz a ring and a braid of hair, without saying a word. All explanation was useless because both objects were stained with blood. Martina burst into sobs, and

Millán was not long in accompanying her. Doña Beatriz had fixed the same distraught and terrible look on the ring and the braid until finally, lowering her eyes and exhaling a hysterical sigh, she said in an almost calm voice:

"God gave him to me, God took him from me. May he be forever blessed."

Doña Blanca then hung on her daughter's neck and, bursting into tears, she said:

"No, dear child, do not manifest that calm that scares me more than your own death. Cry, weep in your mother's arms! Great is your loss! Look, I also cry, because I loved him too! Oh, who did not love that divine soul enclosed in such a beautiful body!"

"Yes, yes, you are right," cried Doña Beatriz, pulling away from her mother. "But leave me now. And how did he die, Millán? How did Don Álvaro die? Tell me, I beseech you."

"He bled to death in his bed, abandoned by all and even by me," replied the squire in a low voice.

It was then that Doña Beatriz's limbs began to tremble with a painful convulsion that finally deprived her of consciousness. It took her a long time to come back to herself, and the agitation of her body, already broken by the previous illness, became less violent. At last, when she returned to herself, the many moans that her mother purposely used to bring on her daughter's tears, and above all the religious consolations of the Abbot of Carracedo, who had just arrived, untied the spring of Doña Beatriz's weeping. This crisis, however, was no less violent than the other, because such were her grieving and sobbing that they often believed she would suffocate. In this fatal state Doña Beatriz spent the whole night and the next morning, until at last a voracious fever arose. However, within a few days she felt better and was able to get up. Her countenance, however, began to lose its freshness and in her eyes there were signs of some inflamed and restless passion. Her character became more thoughtful and composed than ever, and her religious devotion took a more ardent and passionate turn. Her words were bathed in a particular tone of fervour and melancholy, and although they were very few, they were never sweeter, more affectionate and consoling. The name of that adored lover was never heard on her lips, nor did she complain of her misfortune. Only Martina believed that Doña Beatriz saw Don Álvaro in her dreams and in the movement of her lips when she prayed. For the rest, Doña Beatriz cared for and assisted the sick with unequalled

solicitude and tenderness, with constant almsgiving, and her charity was truly inexhaustible. Finally, the aura surrounding her in the eyes of these simple people seemed to be sanctified and shone more vividly and her beauty, though worn by the hand of pain, seemed to detach itself from its earthly charms to adorn itself with purely mystical and spiritual finery.

The Count of Lemos, with his natural discretion and good judgement, disappeared from Arganza at that time to Galicia, where he was recalled by his schemes and machinations. When he returned after some time, his conduct was more reserved, circumspect and decorous than ever.

After taking the sad news to the house of Arganza, Millán carried his message of loss to Don Álvaro's uncle, the Templar Master of Castile, Don Rodrigo Yáñez. Anyone can imagine the sad and heartfelt welcome that the old master gave his nephew's squire, bearer of such painful news. Don Rodrigo had just received the terrible news from France, after which he foresaw the inevitably coming ruin of his glorious Order. Then Millán was shown into his room. The news of Don Álvaro's passing was such a blow that it overwhelmed his courage. As a nobleman, he was proud of the glory of his lineage, which had now been extinguished by the death of that young man whose wisdom and actions he had moulded to make him a paragon of nobility and a mirror of chivalry. That venerable old man, tried in battles and famous in the Order for his courage and austerity, abandoned himself to his emotion and wept like a woman. Only after a long time and as if ashamed of his weakness, did he regain control over himself.

Millán, continuing his bitter pilgrimage, finally went up to the castle of Cornatel and brought Commander Saldaña the news of what happened to Don Álvaro. The knight received the news with courage, although in his heart he felt an acute grief. Don Álvaro was the only person who had long ago crept into Saldaña's heart, entirely occupied with the zeal for his Order and his plans for its aggrandizement. In that valiant and generous young man the Templar had also placed a large number of his most ardent hopes, and both in his heart and his mind Saldaña felt a great emptiness. He remained thoughtful for some time, and finally, as if struck by a sudden idea, said to Millán:

"Have you not brought back your master's body?" Millán then told him the reasons and pretexts of Don Juan de Lara, but at this Saldaña shook his head, and finally said:

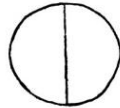
"There is some mystery here."

The squire, who was listening intently to the commander, then asked him:

"How, sir, do you think it is not true?"

"How? How?" replied the commander, recovering himself, and then adding sadly, "it is true enough, my poor young man!"

Millán, who had looked to find some hope in the words of the commander, was then convinced of its madness, and bidding farewell to the knight, he returned to Bembibre. A few days later, he had his lord's will read judicially. Millán found that he had inherited lands, vineyards and pastures, and so his fortune was secured. According to the will, the rest of Don Álvaro's property was to be transferred to the Order of the Temple, after the provision of a great many bequests to charity and almsgiving.



Chapter XVII – Doña Blanca's last request

Some months went by with the lady in this state, until one morning when returning from the chapel where they had been praying for a long time, Doña Beatriz declared to her mother in a very serene voice her wholehearted desire to take the veil and become a nun, a bride of Christ, in Villabuena.

"You see, my mother," she said, "this is not a determination made in the outburst of a specific pain. I have purposely allowed many days to pass, during which this resolution has taken root more and more in my soul, so constant that it seems inspired by another better world, a world that is oblivious to the vicissitudes and miseries of ours. The loneliness of the cloister is the only thing that can correspond to the deep solitude that surrounds my heart, and the immensity of divine love alone can fill the immeasurable emptiness of my soul."

Doña Blanca was struck as if by lightning by this statement that she had never foreseen, though it was only natural to expect. This news meant that all her husband's hopes and even her own wishes for the future would come to naught. However, when she partly overcame her astonishment, she had enough strength to respond:

"My daughter, the days of my life are numbered, so do not think of depriving me of your care, the only balm that prolongs them. After my death, you will consult your conscience and if you have the courage to thus put an end to your lineage and let your old father die in solitude, may the Lord forgive and bless you, as I forgive and bless you."

Doña Beatriz's soul, naturally generous and detached, and thus more inclined to sacrifice the more painful it was to her, was deeply moved by these words, at once affectionate and heartfelt. It was not easy to change a resolution such as hers, which was founded on so many reasons, but the idea of causing pain to her mother, who had only ever given her comfort and tenderness, undermined the foundations of Doña Beatriz's strong determination. Therefore, Doña Blanca had little difficulty to extract from her daughter the promise that she would never again during her mother's lifetime mention her resolution to take holy orders. But she did not dare to ask Doña Beatriz to desist from her plan entirely, as much because she trusted that time and her own successive efforts might help, but also because she knew her daughter's character well.

However, Doña Beatriz's promise only involved a small obligation on her part because the days of the sick and exhausted Doña Blanca were indeed numbered, and she immediately took to her bed, her usual ailments becoming more acute. Her age, her weak complexion, the loss of her two sons and especially the illness and sorrows of Doña Beatriz, together with the fatal uncertainty that her announced vocation had caused her, had all contributed to severing the last strands of her life. The young woman, distracted with pain, could not but attribute to herself much of the guilt for that unhappy event, and for the first time the scourge of remorse began to torment Doña Beatriz's soul. Even her father's grief seemed to oppress her with its weight. Misplaced remorse no doubt, for the end of her mother's life was irrevocably marked, and only the exaltation of Doña Beatriz's sensibility could depict as reprehensible a conduct as disinterested and loving as her own.

During her illness, Doña Blanca never ceased to give her daughter very significant and penetrating glances while firmly holding her hand. It seemed that, although desirous of declaring her thoughts, she restrained herself from making the hour of separation more bitter and pitiful. At last, when the sickness reached its final crisis, the Abbot of Carracedo, who as a friend and confessor of the family had not left Doña Blanca's side, administered all the aid and comforts of religion.

With these ceremonies, the sick woman seemed to take courage, and finally got through the night when everyone believed that she would take her last breath; but Doña Blanca's anxiety seemed to grow greater. The dawn of a rainy and sad day was already beginning to colour the stained glass in the windows when Doña Blanca, holding her daughter's hand, said in a faint voice:

"I have been pondering for many days a means by which you could release me from worry and allow me a restful, sweet death, my daughter."

"Mother!" said Doña Beatriz effusively, "my life, my whole soul, are yours. What would I not do so that you might arrive at the throne of God, happy with your only surviving child?"

"You know," continued the sick woman, "that I have never wanted to go against your inclinations ... Why should I try to do so at this hour, when eternity opens its doors to me? Your will is free, free as the birds of the air. But you do not know the anguish that I carry to the grave concerning your future and the fate of our lineage..."

"Speak, mother," replied Doña Beatriz, with painful resignation, "I am ready to do anything."

"Yes," replied the mother, "but only with your full and complete consent ... if only the noble Count of Lemos were no longer so disagreeable in your eyes, if he had disarmed your severity as he has disarmed mine ... Heaven knows that my end would be very peaceful and happy."

Doña Beatriz then drew a painful sigh from the depths of her breast and said:

"Let the count come right away, and I will give him my hand at once, in front of you!"

"No, no!" said the mother and also the Abbot of Carracedo, who was sitting on the other side of the bed, though with different tones. "That cannot be!"

Doña Beatriz calmed them both with a dignified gesture, and immediately replied with great serenity:

"It will be so, because such is the will of my parents, and also my own. Where is the count?"

Her father, Don Alonso, signalled to a page, who immediately brought the noble guest into the chamber. The abbot, meanwhile, had been speaking earnestly and with vigorous gestures to the Lord of Arganza, and for his part Don Alonso excused himself to the ardent monk. The Count of Lemos arrived with decorum into the presence of Doña Beatriz and her ailing mother.

"One word, sir," said the young woman, taking the count aside to the end of the room, where she spoke with him for a moment, after which the count bowed deeply with his hand on his breast as if giving his consent. Then the pair returned and stood in front of Doña Blanca's bed, and Doña Beatriz, addressing the abbot, said:

"What doubts do you have, Father Abbot? My will is invariable, and we only need you to say the sacred words."

The abbot, hearing this, albeit with disgust and a heart pierced with bitterness at the sight of that tremendous sacrifice, uttered in a husky voice the words of the sacrament of marriage. And so, Doña Beatriz and the Count of Lemos were tied by that tremendous bond, which can only be untied by the hand of death.

Such was the wedding of Doña Beatriz, in which a mortuary bed served as an altar and the bridal torches were the candles of the tomb. Doña Blanca finally died that same afternoon, so that tears, lamentations and funeral chants were the hymns of the wedding day. These would have been strange and discordant sounds on any other such occasion, but they were a perfect reflection of that marriage, whose fruits would be bitterness and misery!

Doña Beatriz, as soon as her mother had expired, clung to her body with such a tight and convulsive embrace that it was necessary to use force to separate her from that place of sorrow. The abbot and Don Alonso were alone for a moment in front of the still warm corpse, and the abbot spoke:

"Poor and angelic lady, your blind solicitude and extreme tenderness have wrought the misfortune of your only daughter. Peace be upon your remains! But you," he added, turning to the Lord of Arganza, speaking like a prophet, "you have wounded the tree at the root! And its branches will not shelter your house, nor will you sit in its shade, nor will you see its branches green with leaves and flowering with blossom. Loneliness will surround you in the hour of your death, and the dreams that now fascinate you will be your most painful torments."

His prophecy ended, the abbot left the room, leaving Don Alonso shattered. He fell into a chair until the Count of Lemos, who came looking for him, brought him out of his despondency. He took his father-in-law away and immediately, two or three maids and a priest went in to watch over the corpse of the lady, whose greatness and riches were already consigned to the narrowness and misery of the tomb.



Chapter XVIII – The chalice of affliction

In such strange ways, the generous and brave soul of Doña Beatriz succumbed under the weight of her self-denial and she sacrificed to a dreamed-of atonement the short respite that the future offered her. With such an unusual combination and interlinking of circumstances, each more unfortunate than the last, one by one her dreams of happiness faded away and, on waking, she found herself the wife of a man whose perversity and vileness were still to be revealed in all their infernal crudeness.

The days of her glory had passed and the crown had fallen from her head, but Doña Beatriz still found comfort in the midst of so many evils, and this was in the hope of an early death to meet her true husband, Don Álvaro, the one she had chosen in her youth and whose memories went everywhere with her, like the pillar of fire that led the Israelites through the desert in the middle of the night. No one knew better than she that the source of life was beginning to dry up in her bosom with the sands of loneliness and despair, and that her impetuous and ardent soul, that ceaselessly struggled to break free from its prison, would soon end up rising in flight from it. Since her illness at Villabuena her nights were restless, and the subsequent events had increased her anxiety and uneasiness.

Her mother's death had just closed the circle of solitude and helplessness in which she was beginning to be imprisoned. Her body had been shaken with so many blows and upheavals, her breathing became laboured, and sometimes her heart throbbed so violently that only a torrent of tears could alleviate the oppression she felt. At other times she felt a burning fire running through her veins and her pulse racing wildly for a long time, either exalting her imagination or sending her into a kind of stupor that often lasted many hours. That noble and well-formed body, with so many graces and perfections, had long since lost the delicacy of its forms and the joyful colours of health. The lady's features were thinning imperceptibly and the pale colour of her face was enhanced by the rosy shade that coloured a small part of her cheeks. Her eyes acquired that kind of brilliance that reveals, even to the less knowledgeable, that the body and the spirit suffer at the same time. And to these physical signs of a deep inner suffering was added that rapid transition from exaltation in ideas and feelings to dejection and melancholy, which so clearly indicates the intimate union of

body and spirit.

Autumn had come after spring flowers and the heat of summer and was already spreading its cloak of many colours among the groves, woods and vineyards of El Bierzo. The leaves of the trees began to fall, the swallows gathered to depart for more temperate regions and the storks, circling the towers where they had made their nest, were also preparing for their journey. The sky was covered with brown, thin clouds, through which a ray of sun, warm and discoloured, made its way from time to time. The first rains of the season, which had already fallen, piled thick and heavy clouds on the horizon, which, sometimes thinned by the wind and scattered between the cracks of the cliffs and the mountain crests, looked like feathers lost by the spirits of the air in their swift flight. The rivers were already rather muddy and swollen, little birds flew from tree to tree without sending out their harmonious trills, and the sheep ran along the hillsides and the meadows freshly stripped of their grass, bleating huskily and sadly. The whole of nature seemed to bid farewell to joyful weather and prepare for the long, dark mourning of winter.

It was around three o'clock in the afternoon of one of these days, when two fully armed knights came down from the mountain pass of Manzanal and entered the luxuriant lands of Bembibre. They both had their visors lowered and were only attended by a squire of swarthy features and curly hair. One of them, who looked as if he were the younger, wore black armour, a shield without a device, and a black helmet also crowned with a very beautiful tuft of the same colour, whose feathers trembled elegantly at the mercy of the wind. He clearly did not want to be recognised, concealing himself under such a disguise. The other, who seemed a little older by his slightly bent body and lesser ease of movements, was undoubtedly a Templar, for he wore the red cross of the Order on his white mantle, and on his shield two knights mounted on a single horse, which was the emblem of the Order. At a considerable distance from these two figures, there followed about fifteen or twenty men-at-arms, who also displayed the colours of the Temple.

It was on the day that the Church traditionally commemorates those who have died, and the bells of all the villages called their inhabitants to vespers so that they would pray for the souls of their own dear departed. The women came to the church covered with their shawls of black cloth, each carrying in her wicker basket the customary offering of bread and yellow wax candles. The men, enveloped in their large

cloaks, also went silent and solemn to the religious ceremony.

Because in El Bierzo the population is and always was very dispersed, the proximity of the villages makes their bells heard distinctly from one to another. The chimes at the hour of prayer, whose music reaches the hunter in some high and solitary peak, have an indefinable charm and solemnity, because the various sounds, some near and sharp, others confused and muffled, and the most distant imperceptible and vague, spreading among the shadows of twilight and the silence of the valleys, cross an infinite and melancholy range and fill the soul with unknown emotions.

Our two travellers rode along on a clear day, and consequently the landscape and the music of the bells lacked the sense of mystery that the proximity of night lends to all kinds of scenes and sensations. But as they advanced in deep silence, it seemed that those slow and sharp bell tones, which, like a funeral symphony for the end of the world, came from all the hills and plains around the travellers, deeply penetrated their souls. Who knows where these two outsiders came from and if they were natives of that land? Who knows if those deep metal voices, which now spoke only of death, had sung a hymn of joy on the day of their birth, awakened them on feast days with their chiming and thus brought to their mind a thousand stories and memories of the past? Perhaps these were the ideas awoken, but they did not communicate them to one another. Silent and absorbed in their meditations, the travellers rode at a brisk pace, not paying any attention to the simple peasants who looked at them. At last they turned the slope of Congosto and followed the way down to El Bierzo.

That same afternoon, Doña Beatriz, accompanied by all her servants and vassals of the town of Arganza, had gone to the common funerals of the great family of Christ and prayed fervently over the barely sealed grave of that mother whom she had loved so much and still felt the loss of. She had also prayed to the Supreme Lord God for the eternal rest of the one who worshiped her with such deep faith and whose bones rested in a strange land far from those of his parents and brothers. On that day of common sadness, she saw, as in a living panorama, the short joys of her life, the scenes of pain that followed them, the sepulchre that had silently devoured her earthly hopes and the prison of her fatal bonds, that incessantly lifted her thoughts on the wings of religion to the regions of the future.

With such impressions, her heart had been more anguished

than usual, and when the religious services were over, she had felt the need to breathe the open air, a necessity that by its violence showed very well the upheaval that her body was suffering. With her faithful servant Martina, she walked down one of the tree-lined avenues that crossed the groves and orchards of the noble, old house, and, tired from her short walk, sat down at the foot of a leafy walnut tree, where ran a small, clear brook, with its banks covered with clover and mint. There, with her elbows on her knees and her cheek resting on her hand, her eyes followed those crystal-clear waters in that dejected mood that usually followed her more intense attacks.

Martina, the faithful and affectionate handmaid, perhaps the only one who fully knew the sorrows of her mistress and conceived serious fears about the end of that fatal melancholy, had moved away a little, accustomed to respecting these moments of daydreaming and abandonment, which in the midst of the silent, internal agitation of Doña Beatriz could pass for a respite. The poor girl had not wanted to part from her mistress in the hour of mourning. Having grown up in the house, Martina had all the tenderness of a sister towards her mistress, along with the respect and complete obedience proper to her station in life. Millán, now well established, wished to crown his sincere feelings for Martina with marriage, but he had always found postponements and difficulties in his path. Although not very much to his liking, he always found these excuses acceptable, because he realized that if his master had lived and needed his help or company, all the Martinas in the world would have to wait until the very same day of the last judgement. Only one thing distressed him, and it was to see that the cheerful and lively character of the village girl had changed a little, living in the shadow of so much fear and sorrow, and that the very roses on Martina's cheeks had lost their lively blossom. However, she still retained her grace and charm, and above all that excellent heart which made everyone love her.

"At last, today," Martina said to herself, looking at her mistress, "the poor girl will be a little more at ease, for her old father and that rascal of her husband are walking in the mountains, whatever it is they are up to. God forgive me, although the count is now my master and he has given me the earrings I wear and a chain I keep in my coffer, I still can't stand him. It is true that anyone who knew Don Álvaro, however damned his spirit was sometimes, will think that the count, even with all his lands and his conceitedness, does

not reach the sole of his shoe. I would have as likely married him as I would fly. I don't know what evil spirit put that stubborn idea in Doña Blanca's mind at the hour of her death. God have mercy on her! As for my master the Lord of Arganza, who unlike his wife was not dying and had the full use of his senses and faculties, I do not know how well his arrogance and fantasies will turn out. I heard what the Abbot of Carracedo told him very plainly, and by the way, the abbot has not set foot in this house since then. Truly, indeed, I have often thought of those words, and when I see how my lady spends the night awake with her sorrows, I also feel something queer in my heart. My God, how happy we could all have been! I hope God on the Day of Judgment does not call him to reckoning for his sins."

As Martina was lost in these reflections, she sensed footsteps behind her. She turned her head and saw the bulging frame of Mendo the groom who hurried towards her puffing and blowing, with the expression of a very great surprise painted on his spacious and healthy face.

"What is it, Mendo?" asked the girl, who never missed an opportunity to tease the groom a little. "What do you bring with that frightened pigeon face of yours, which looks as if you are seeing the usual vision of disaster?"

This allusion to the uneasiness and irritation that the groom felt because of Millán's frequent visits to Martina was not much to his liking. And he would surely have answered in kind if something clever had occurred to him. But since quickness of wit was not the quality most prevalent in him, and on the other hand because the message he brought was urgent, Mendo just answered:

"As for the vision, I could shoo it away by making the sign of the cross on its rump, but this is not the case. I must tell you that when I was bringing the horse *Reduán* inside the enclosure, suddenly two knights approached me; the first was one of those Templar necromancers and the other not. They asked me where they would find Doña Beatriz, because they wanted to speak a few words to her. By the way, I seem to recognise one of the horses."

"It would have been better for you to recognise the rider. Tell me about them."

"Both wear their visors down, and the one who is not a Templar wears black armour and looks like he might be the Devil himself."

"Do you know, my man," replied Martina, "this visit worries me, and I don't know whether to tell the mistress about it."

"Tell Doña Beatriz, yes, do," said Mendo fearfully, "because I have to go back to them with a reply, and although they spoke to me in a reasonable manner, if I don't return with the answer, God knows what will happen, because I don't care for the look of either of them."

Doña Beatriz, who had heard the last words of the conversation, saved them their doubts and scruples by asking them what it was, to which Mendo replied, telling word for word, what he had said to Martina.

"A Knight of the Temple!" said Doña Beatriz as if talking to herself. "Oh, perhaps they will want to propose to my father or the Count of Lemos some honourable agreement for the war that threatens, and they want me to act as intermediary. Let them come immediately," she said to Mendo. "It seems that the hour of misfortune has also come for this noble Order! I hope it is not bad news about the Templar Master!"

"But, my lady, do you want to receive them alone and here in this place?"

"You are a fool, Mendo," said Doña Beatriz, "what fears can a lady have in the presence of two knights?" Go and fetch them so they have no reason to complain about our courtesy."

"The devil is in our mistress," murmured the horse groom, "she wouldn't even be afraid of a horrible monster! Beware of the Templars who are declared sorcerers and could even turn her into a rat! Well, as soon as I give them the message, I will warn the people at home just in case something might happen!"

The concealed knights, as soon as they received permission, rode into the enclosure and following the groom's directions made their way to the place where his mistress was.

"Well!" said Mendo, dissatisfied with such rudeness, "they go in as if this was their own house! If they stray one inch from what is proper, I promise they will be sorry."

And saying this, Mendo went to the house.

The strangers dismounted shortly before arriving at Doña Beatriz's side, and the knight with the black armour, with unsteady step, approached her followed by the Templar. The lady, with frightened eyes fixed on him, watched all his movements with amazement, as though in the presence of an extraordinary and supernatural event. If it were possible that the tomb could ever break its chains, she would doubtless believe that it was Don Álvaro's shadow that appeared before her. The knight slowly raised

his visor and said in a deep voice:

"It is I, Doña Beatriz!"

Martina gave a tremendous cry and fell to the ground in a sudden faint, closing her eyes so as not to see the spectre of Don Álvaro, or so it appeared to her from the pallor of his features and his voice trembling and hollow. Her mistress, on the contrary, on seeing the same deceptive illusion, far from fearing the image of her lover, threw herself at him with open arms, fearing that he might disappear between them, and exclaimed in words that came from the depths of her heart:

"Oh, it's you, dear shadow, is that you? Who sends you again to this vale of tears and offences that you did not deserve? Since your death my eyes have only followed the trail of light that your soul left in the air as it rose up to the ethereal domain. I have had no other desire but to join you."

"Wait, Doña Beatriz," replied the knight (for as our readers, less worried than the unfortunate woman in our story, will imagine, it was Don Álvaro himself and not his spirit that appeared), "because I still do not know if I should bless or curse this moment that brings us together."

"Ah!" replied Doña Beatriz, not paying attention to what the knight was saying and feeling his hands and arms, "but is it really you, and not some spirit? Are you alive?"

"I am alive, yes," Don Álvaro replied, "although it may well be said that I have just emerged from the tomb."

"Divine justice!" she exclaimed in despair, when she no longer doubted him, "it is he, my Don Álvaro, the very same! Woe is me! What have I done?"

Saying this, she retreated a few paces to rest on the trunk of a tree, twisting her arms.

Don Álvaro cast a glance at the Templar who had also lifted his visor and was none other than Commander Saldaña, who seemed to beg his pardon. At once Don Álvaro approached Doña Beatriz and said with an accent apparently respectful and calm, but in fact angry and fierce:

"My lady, the commander you see here has assured me that you are the wife of the Count of Lemos, and even though I owed him my freedom and my life, and his age ensures everyone's respect, I nearly ripped out the tongue with which he told me this news and pulled his heart out from behind his back. I am beginning to see

that he did not lie, but I still have so many doubts that if you do not clear them, I will never believe it."

"What he has told you is the absolute truth," answered Doña Beatriz. "Go with God, and end this conversation, which will undoubtedly be our last."

"Without doubt it will be the last," Don Álvaro replied in the same tone, "but you must hear me out. The absolute truth, you say? Well, I am sorry for you more than for myself because you have fallen in a pitiful way and have deceived me in a wicked and base manner."

"Oh no!" cried Doña Beatriz, clasping her hands, "never, I never betrayed you..."

"Listen to me further," said Don Álvaro, interrupting her with a hard and imperious gesture. "You still do not know how great was the love that I had for you. In my life, I had not known a family, or a father other than my good uncle. And you were everything for me on this earth. All my hopes rested on your love, as eagles rest on the towers of the temple when they are weary of flying. Yes, your soul was a temple most holy to me, and when joy opened its gates, before entering I tried to divest myself of all human frailties and poverty. With you my life changed entirely. The fantasies of the imagination, the illusions of desire, the dreams of glory, the instincts of courage, everything had an aim, because it was all directed towards you. My thoughts were purified by your memory and I saw your image everywhere as a reflection of God's goodness. I tried to ennoble myself in my own eyes so as to enhance your opinion of me. And I adored you, as would a fallen angel who thought to climb again to the heavens up the ladder of mystic love. I thought it was divine fortune to find grace in your eyes and, imagining you a creature more perfect than those of the earth, my mind constantly worked to resemble you. The heavens know, however, that a single smile of yours or the joy of reaching my lips to your hand were sufficient rewards for all my efforts."

Don Álvaro's manly voice, at first hardened by anger, despite his efforts had slowly softened until at last his speech resembled the cooing of a turtledove. Doña Beatriz, who had been deeply moved from the beginning, had remained with her eyes downcast, until at last two tear-strewn threads began to flow down her withered but still beautiful face. When she heard Don Álvaro's last words her sorrow was redoubled, and with the saddest of looks, she said in a voice interrupted by sobs:

"Oh, yes, it is true! We would have been too happy! There was no room for such good fortune in this narrow vale of tears."

"And there was no room in your heart for my devotion," answered the gentleman. "Do you remember the night at Carracedo?"

"Yes, I remember," she replied.

"Do you remember your promise?"

"It is present in my memory as if it had just passed my lips."

"Well, here you have me, and I come now to claim what you promised, because a year has not yet passed, and I ask you to recognise the love I placed in you and my boundless trust. What have you done with your loyalty? Why do you not answer me but cast your eyes down? Answer me; remember that it is I who asks you. I command you, in the name of my destroyed hopes, my present misery and the loneliness and bitterness you have stored up in my future!"

"All this is in vain," she replied. "The commander has told you the truth; I am the wife of the Count of Lemos."

"Beatriz," exclaimed the knight, "for your sake and mine, you must explain. In this turn of events, there is some infernal mystery, no doubt. Look, I do not want to despise you! I want you to apologize, to justify yourself. Since I am to lose you, I do not want to do so cursing your memory. Tell me that you were dragged to the altar; tell me that you were threatened with death, that they disturbed your reason with infernal machinations. Tell me, in short, something that will restore to you the light that I see now darkened, that has filled my breast with gall and darkness."

Doña Beatriz relapsed into silence. But Martina, recovered from her fright and seeing that it was the Lord of Bembibre who stood before her, not in spirit but in body and soul, could not help answering for her mistress:

"Yes, sir, yes, her mother forced my lady to marry, and forced her in the worst possible way. My mistress wanted, of course, to go to the convent and wait for you there, although everyone said that you were in the other world. But if it was true, my mistress intended to remain in holy orders, just like her aunt the abbess. What's more..."

"Silence, Martina," snapped her mistress, "and you, Don Álvaro, believe nothing that this maid has said, for I have given my hand freely and voluntarily before the Abbot of Carracedo who bestowed the nuptial blessing. You see then, that no coercion could have occurred."

"So, you alone have turned away from the path of truth?" Don

Álvaro responded. "For you I am truly sorry. And I tell you again, it is because you degrade my love for you, which was the purest flame of my life. I could never have believed that one day I would find you more vile and contemptible than the dust of the roads!"

"Don Álvaro!" interrupted the Templar, "how can you forget yourself like this and insult a lady?"

"Leave him, noble old man," said Doña Beatriz. "He has reason to be angry and even to curse the day he saw me for the first time. Don Álvaro," she continued, addressing him, "When the day arrives God will judge between us, because he is the only one who holds the key of my heart, and his ways are not knowable to us mortals. I only ask that you forgive me, because my life will certainly be brief, and I would not want to die with the weight of your hatred on my heart. Goodbye, then, go soon, because your life and perhaps my honour are at stake now, even as we bid farewell forever. And at this time, I beg you again to forgive me and forget the person who so badly rewarded your renowned nobility."

These words, uttered with such modesty and sweetness, but in which a special intonation vibrated, seemed to reveal to Don Álvaro amid his grief and his anger the immense sacrifice that this sweet and celestial creature imposed upon herself. The tone of Doña Beatriz's voice had at the same time something resonant and faint about it, as if its music was an echo of the soul that the organs of her exhausted body vainly tried to repeat in all its purity. Don Álvaro also noticed the damage that her woes and ills had wrought in that countenance that had been the model of noble grace and at the same time healthy and fecund. His anger and disgust again turned into involuntary tenderness, and coming nearer her, with all the outpouring of his heart, he said:

"Beatriz, for God's sake, because it may be of some value for you in this life or in the next, decipher this dismal enigma that oppresses me and paralyzes me like a mantle of ice. Dispel my doubts..."

"Do you think," she said, interrupting him with the same pathetic and grave tone, "that we have drunk too little of the chalice of affliction, that you thirst for new sorrows?"

"Oh, Holy Mother of God!" cried Martina in distress, "What do I see on the large tree-lined avenue below? Oh, pity us poor wretches! It is my master the Lord of Arganza and the count and all the servants of the house! My God, what will happen now?"

Doña Beatriz then passed from her resigned calm to the most

tremendous agitation, and grabbing Don Álvaro by the arm with one hand and pointing the other to a path hidden among the trees, she said with distorted eyes and in a hoarse, hurried voice:

"This way, this way, unfortunate soul! This path leads to the boundary wall. Take this short cut, and you will arrive before them. Oh, my God, was it for this that you have brought him back again before my eyes? But why are you not going? Look, they are coming!"

"Let them come," said Don Álvaro, whose eyes had shone with a singular expression at the mere mention of the count's name.

"Good Heavens, are you aware of your situation?" Doña Beatriz said. "Do you not see that you are alone and they are many and come armed? Oh no, do not smile contemptuously! I am a poor woman and do not know what I am saying! I know well that your courage will triumph over everything. But think of my honour which you are going to drag to the ground, and do not sacrifice my good name to your pride!" Then to Saldaña she pleaded, "Oh, by God, noble commander, take him away, take him away, for if they find us here, he will be killed and I will be disgraced!"

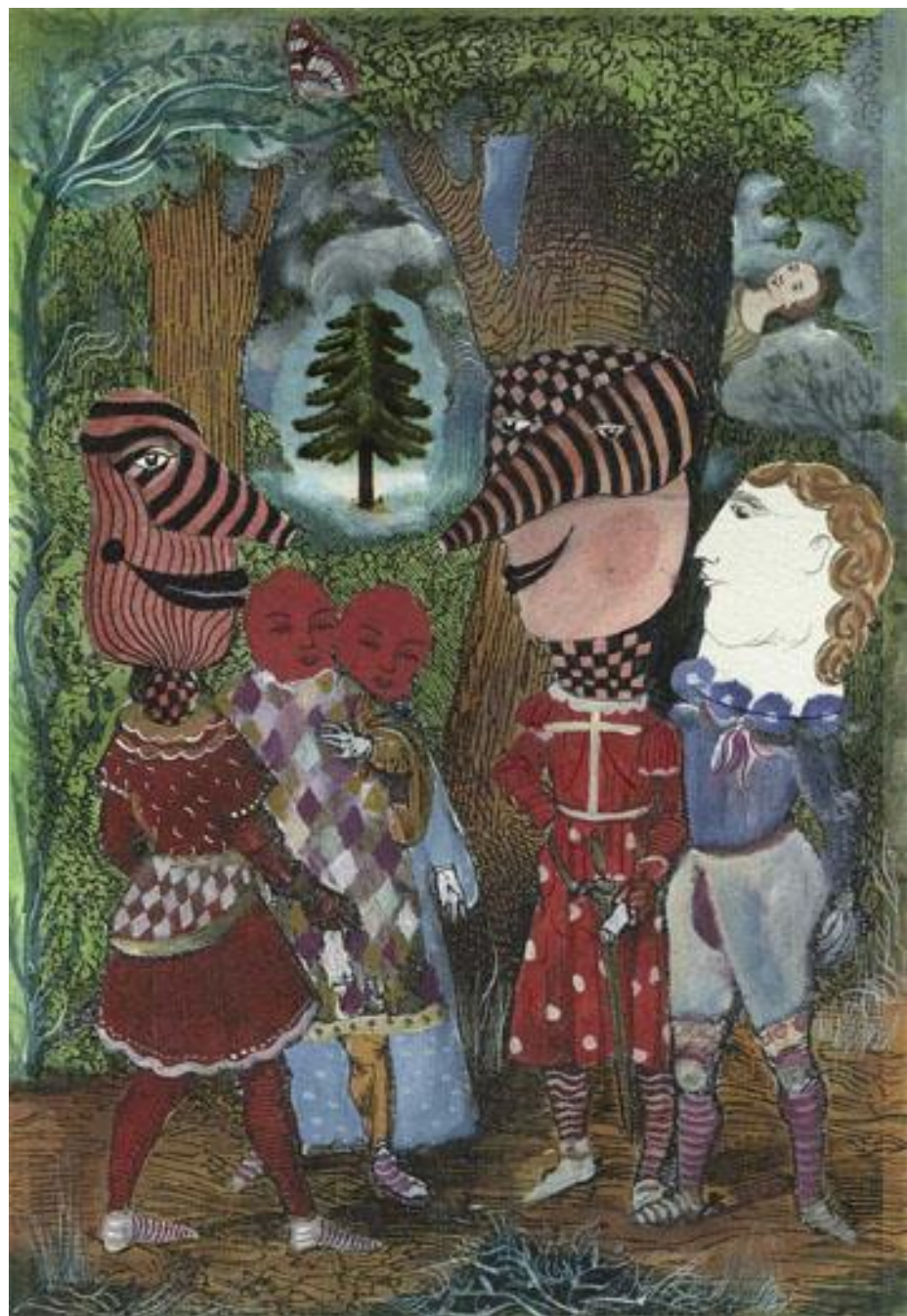
"Calm down, my lady," answered the old Templar, "to take flight would dishonour us all the more, and as for your honour, no one will doubt it when my grey hairs are the guarantor."

The noise was heard closer and the many voices and heated conversation seemed to indicate some decisive resolution.

"You see, it is already too late," said Don Álvaro, "but calm down," he added with a wry smile, "for this is not the place, much less the occasion, for the shedding of blood."

Doña Beatriz, seeing the uselessness of her efforts, gave up helplessly and sank to the ground at the foot of the walnut tree that shaded the stream.





Chapter XIX – Encounters in a grove in Arganza

As our readers will presume, the foolish panic of the groom Mendo was the cause of this unpleasant occurrence. For as soon as he took leave of the strangers, he ran to the house, spreading an alarm that had no foundation. By chance, Don Alonso and the Count of Lemos, who had not been expected that day, had come back by surprise and, finding their people a little flustered and ready to go in aid of their mistress in her imagined danger, they went there with the servants. They were also a little suspicious, because the implacable and ignoble war waged against the Templars and the unceasing preparations of every sort led them to fear some sort of revenge or retaliation.

When Don Álvaro and the commander felt the crowd coming closer, as if by some unspoken agreement they lowered their visors and like two bronze statues awaited the company's arrival. The first one that showed his broad face and his stout body was the good Mendo, who greatly valued his role in the affair and did not want to give anyone the lead. He came all puffed and out of breath, sweating a drop from every hair of his head.

"Martina! Martina!" Mendo said as soon as he arrived. "And the mistress? What have they done with her?"

The girl pointed to Doña Beatriz and said in a low, angry voice:

"You wretched fool! What have you done?"

Then they all arrived, and while Don Alonso and his son-in-law the Count of Lemos stood facing the strangers, their servants formed a circle around them, restrained and confronted by their imposing and calm attitude. The count then advanced with his arrogant courtesy and addressing the knight in black armour, said:

"Will you excuse me, sir, if I ask you the reason for such a strange visit and beg you to reveal your name and face?"

"I am," replied the knight in black, raising his visor, "Don Álvaro Yáñez, Lord of Bembibre. And I have come to claim from Doña Beatriz Ossorio the fulfilment of a vow that she made some time ago."

"Don Álvaro!" They both exclaimed at the same time, albeit with a different accent and expression, for Arganza's voice revealed the candour and sincerity of his astonishment, while

the count's showed at the same time spite, surprise, shame and humiliation. He had taken two steps back and, disconcerted and trembling, exclaimed, "You, here!"

"Does my coming here startle you?" Don Álvaro asked sarcastically. "It is no wonder, by Faith. You thought that death or old age would carry me away from the dungeon that you and your friend, the generous Infante Don Juan, had thoughtfully prepared for me, did you not?"

"Ah, Núñez de Lara!" murmured the count in a low voice, still reeling from his surprise.

"Do you have any complaint about him?" Don Álvaro answered in the same ironic tone. "How can you be ungrateful toward him, because in the six months of my imprisonment, I have been told that you have reached the fulfilment of your aspirations and married Doña Beatriz. So that now that you are so powerful, and with the Templars destroyed, you could almost be crowned King of Galicia. However, if I have arrived before the prescribed time and in this I inconvenience you, I will return to my delightful palace until your order comes for my release. What will I not do to win the good will of a gentleman so courteous to the fallen, so generous to the strong, so frank and so loyal?"

Don Alonso and his daughter, as if attending a spectacle from beyond the grave, listened to these words silent and disturbed. Through Don Álvaro's speech, they began to untangle the accumulation of horrors and deceits that formed the knot of the pitiful drama that had ensnared them all. Finally, Don Alonso, giving voice to the tumult of sensations that rose in his breast, said to the count:

"Is it true what Don Álvaro says? For you were not afraid to see him, but to see him here. Is it true that I, my daughter, and all of us are the playthings in an infernal plot?"

The count, already irritated by Don Álvaro's irony, felt his pride and arrogance revived, and retaliated thus:

"For my actions, I answer to no one in this world," he replied to the Lord of Arganza, with a frown. "And as for you, Lord of Bembibre, I declare that you are lying, as one expects from a villain and low born, which you are. Who is the guarantor of your ill-contrived slander?"

"Here, I am the guarantor," replied the commander, revealing his venerable, wrinkled face. "In Castile, Don Juan Núñez de Lara,

the king's steward is guarantor, and everywhere else and before the king's courts, these papers testify to the truth of what Don Álvaro speaks," he added, showing some documents that were enclosed in a wallet.

"Ah, traitor!" cried the count, drawing his sword and advancing towards Don Álvaro. "Right here I am going to wash my affront with your blood. Defend yourself!" he shouted.

"Stop, count!" Don Alonso intervened, "these knights are in my house and under the protection of my hospitality. Moreover, the offence you are charged with cannot be washed away with an obscure challenge. You must petition the king for a lawful duel in the presence of all the noblemen of Castile and cleanse your honour, which is unfortunately much besmirched."

"You must also consider," replied Don Álvaro gravely, "that this affair is of lesser worth, and having debased yourself by your attack in the manner of a commoner, you are no longer my equal, nor can I measure myself against you in single combat."

"All right," replied the count, "I know your tricks, but they will be of no use. Ah, brave vassals!" he continued, turning to the group of men, "tie up those impostors, who are rebels and traitors to King Ferdinand of Castile." Then to the knights, he said, haughtily, "Lord of Bembibre and Commander Saldaña, I am taking you prisoners in the name of the King!"

"None of my men must move," ordered Don Alonso, "if anyone does, I will have him hanged from the tallest tree in the grove."

But it happened that among all the bystanders only three or four were servants of the Lord of Arganza. The others all belonged to the count's host and, accustomed to complying promptly with all kinds of orders, they were also prepared to obey the one they had just received. Although they were no more than a dozen, they seemed resolute and reasonably well-armed, so that, guided and led by a person of valour such as their lord, it was not difficult for them to deal with only two knights, one being elderly and the other, although young, not very strong to judge by his countenance. The knights were also within an enclosed area surrounded by walls and on foot, which made any escape seem impossible. But they did not appear to be willing to surrender and prepared instead to undertake a vigorous defence. Don Alonso, seeing the uselessness of his protests, stood beside the newcomers with the intention of helping them, but as he was unarmed, it would have been easy for his son-in-law's men to take him away by force from the place of combat.

Doña Beatriz then stood up, and interposing between those bitter enemies, she told the count with quiet severity:

"Those knights are equal to you, and you can exert no authority over them. In addition, the laws of chivalry prohibit the use of force between persons whose grievances have God and men as judges. Be noble and confess that an outburst of anger has led you astray from the path of courtesy."

But the count coldly replied: "The King has ordered all the Knights of the Temple to be arrested, and all those who may help them. And I, as his vassal, am bound to obey only him."

"As you obeyed the king's noble mother in the matter of Monforte," exclaimed Commander Saldaña sarcastically.

"Besides, my lady," continued the count, as if he had not felt the point of Saldaña's insult, "surely you forget that you are not in your proper place praying for your lover, with whom I have found you, alone and in an unusual setting."

"It is not I who is dishonoured by those suspicions," she answered gently, "for heaven knows that I have not offended you with such thoughts, but it is your malevolent soul that gives them life and nurture. Anyway, I will forgive you this slight, if only you do not harass these noble knights."

"Do not worry about us, generous Doña Beatriz," replied the commander, "this debate will end without blood, and we will be the masters of that flawed knight, the Count of Lemos."

At the end of these words the commander made a sign to the page or slave that accompanied him. This man, grabbing a hunting horn that hung on his back from an embroidered shoulder strap, applied it to his lips and sent from it three sharp and sonorous blasts that resounded into the distance. At once, and like an earthquake, they heard the runaway gallop of several war horses. Soon the guards who we saw earlier, following the two knights as they crossed the river at Bemibre, appeared. They had remained hidden among trees and hedges near the gate of the enclosure, with orders to prevent them from being entrapped.

Mendo, in his haste, did not think of impeding their entry, and consequently none of the count's vassals could foresee such an event. The men-at-arms of the Temple, superior in number, far better armed than their enemies and also mounted on fearless horses, showed themselves in the eyes of those people so suddenly that they could not but imagine that by one of the diabolical arts the Knights Templar practiced, the earth had vomited them forth

and a legion of evil spirits followed behind in their aid. So the count's vassals ran about the forest with loud cries, invoking all the saints of their devotion. As for the count, he did not move, for although imminent danger threatened him, after the disgraceful behaviour he had just witnessed, his pride could not accept the idea of fleeing. Therefore, he stood looking at his enemies haughtily, as if the roles were reversed.

"And now, villainous count" Saldaña said angrily, "what treatment do you expect from us, if not that with a good rope we hang you from the battlements of the castle of Ponferrada, so that those who resemble you will learn to respect the laws of chivalry?"

"That is what I would have done with you if I had held you in my power," the Count of Lemos answered coldly. "I will not complain if you pay me with the same coin."

"Your coin does not pass among the noble; go in peace, because we must differentiate ourselves in such matters," said Don Álvaro. "But understand that if as a knight and as an independent lord I have not accepted your challenge, you will hereafter find me in the service of the Temple, because from tomorrow I will become a Templar."

A flash of ferocious joy gleamed in the count's sinister features, and he replied:

"There we shall meet, and as God lives, I swear that you will not escape from my clutches as you now escape, and that the locks of the dungeon I will throw you into will not open so easily as those of Tordehumos and its treacherous warden."

With these words he turned away with a look of spite and without meeting the eyes of his father-in-law or of his wife. But this was no small mercy, because no doubt the vile soul of the count would have enjoyed the kind of stupor that Doña Beatriz had fallen into on hearing Don Álvaro's terrible announcement.

"Is it a dream what I just heard?" said the unhappy woman, staring at Don Álvaro with straying eyes and the colour of death on her cheeks. "You intend to become a Templar?"

"Do you doubt it?" he answered. "Had your heart not told you this would come to pass?"

"Ah, and what about your noble house?" replied Doña Beatriz, "your distinguished lineage, which will be extinguished with your passing?"

"And have you not seen other even nobler, more distinguished and holy things extinguished?" answered the knight. "Have you not

seen the statue of loyalty overturned from its pedestal, the stars going black and falling from the sky, and the universe left in the darkest night? Your eyes may not have witnessed these scenes, but I have seen them with those of my soul and I cannot keep them from my mind."

"Oh, yes," replied Doña Beatriz, "despise me, mock me, say that I have deceived you treacherously, drag me down, but do not take the habit of the Temple. Do you know of the tragedies in France? Do you know the hatred that has been kindled against the Order throughout Christendom?"

"What would you have me do?" said Don Álvaro. "That persecution you describe, in fact, is what has determined me to follow the flag of the Order. Do you think that I am one of those who abandon their allies who have fallen on hard times?"

"Yes!" she replied. "Hurt me, wound me in the heart with the sharpness of your words. I will not defend myself. But fight as a man, fight against your pain, and do not close up the illustrious blood that runs through your veins!"

"You argue in vain, lady, I have pledged my word to the commander," the knight said solemnly.

"Indeed," replied the old man, "but remember that I did not accept it, because you gave your word in a fit of pain."

"Well, I now ratify my vow," said Don Álvaro. "What power do such specious arguments have to come between me and my purpose, and what interest can the powerful Countess of Lemos take in my fate?"

Doña Beatriz, overwhelmed by such terrible blows, only responded with soft and muffled moans. Don Álvaro, whose injured heart moved with the impulse of contrary passions like the sea to the blast of opposing winds, then exclaimed in an expression of the deepest pain:

"Beatriz! Beatriz! Justify yourself; tell me that you have not betrayed me! My heart is crying out to me that you do not need my pardon! Cast aside that veil that presents you to my eyes with the stains of wickedness and baseness."

Then the Lord of Arganza came forward with a grave and mournful bearing, and asked Don Álvaro:

"Do you know nothing of the circumstances that accompanied my daughter's wedding?"

"No sir, by my honour," he replied.

Don Alonso then turned to his daughter and, looking at her with

an inexplicable mixture of sadness and tenderness, said to Don Álvaro:

"You shall know everything."

"Oh, no, my father! Leave him with his reckless judgments, that he may heal the wounds of his soul with the cautery of pride. Do not speak of these things, you will only make him more unhappy!"

"You speak of pride, Doña Beatriz!" replied the sad knight. "My pride was you and my humiliation was your fall."

"No, my daughter," said Don Alonso, "the holy Abbot of Carracedo warned me, but until this day the blindfold had not fallen from my eyes. What does it matter if you cover me with the cloak of your pity, if you cannot silence the voice of my conscience?"

Then he told Don Álvaro in full detail, and painting his own conduct in dark colours, all the circumstances of Doña Beatriz's sacrifice and the abbot's threats, which so sadly were beginning to be fulfilled that day. The old man's behaviour had been truly culpable, but the gold, glory and power of the world together would not have moved him to give his only child into the arms of a man so stained as the Count of Lemos. The girl's noble behaviour, her fortitude in bearing such grave guilt as that which her lover accused her of, so that he could more easily console himself with the loss of her love, thinking her unworthy of him, in a word, that imponderable self-denial, had torn apart the old man's spirit, and he ended his account in terrible lamentations and beating on his chest. They all remained in a profound silence that lasted a long time, until Don Álvaro said with a deep sigh:

"You were right, Doña Beatriz, to say that such an explanation would make me even more unhappy. Twice I have loved you, and twice I have lost you. Hard is the test to which providence holds me! Heaven, however, knows how ineffable is the consolation I receive on seeing you pure and shining like the sun in the middle of its journey. We will not see each other again, but behind the walls of the Temple, I will remember you."

Doña Beatriz again broke into bitter tears, seeing Don Álvaro persist so tenaciously in his resolution. But then he continued to speak:

"Do not weep, for my purpose will certainly be fulfilled. They say that imminent destruction threatens this Order. I do not think so, but if it were to happen, how can you wonder that I bury the ruins of my hope under those great and magnificent ruins? And then, are

you not much unhappier than I? Think of your pains, not mine. Goodbye, I do not ask to kiss your hand, because it belongs to another master, but the thought of you will live in my memory like those mysterious flowers that only open their chalices at night, while remaining pure and fragrant. God be with you."

Don Alonso signalled with his hand to end the painful scene.

"Yes, yes, you're right. Goodbye forever because we will never, oh, never meet again!" the knight added.

"Yes, yes," she replied with religious exaltation, raising her eyes and hands to the sky. "There, in the heavens, we will meet without a doubt!"

At the end of these words, she threw herself into the arms of her father. And Don Álvaro, without hesitating further, leaped onto his horse and urging it on, disappeared like a flash of lightning, followed by the commander and his small troop. When the noise they had made faded away, Doña Beatriz wiped her eyes, and, softly pulling herself out of her father's embrace, began to look at the old man's altered countenance. He, staring at the ground and as pale as death, seemed to have fully understood the horror he had wrought. His generous daughter met his gaze and, coming to him with a calm and almost smiling face, said:

"Come, Sir, be at peace. Who has not had trials and tribulations in this world? Do you not know that this earth is but a place of passage and a land of exile? Time brings many good things, and God never ceases to watch over us from his throne."

"I would that Our Lord did not see me!" said the old man, shaking his head. "I wish that neither his eyes nor mine should penetrate the darkness of my conscience! My daughter, daughter of my pain! And am I the one that has delivered you, angel of light, into the arms of an evil one? Yes, you can be calm, because your sacrifice will elevate you in your estimation and give you strength to endure whatever befalls. But I, wretched creature that I am, how will I find comfort? I, the murderer of my only daughter, how can I find pardon in the court of the Almighty?"

"But what can we do?" Doña Beatriz said to him. "You sought for my happiness and you did not find it. You were deceived as I was! Let us resign ourselves to our fate, for it is God who sends it to us!"

"No, my daughter, do not try to comfort me. But I will not leave you to suffer such indignity. I will go to the King, I will go to Rome

on foot with the pilgrim's staff in my hand, I will throw myself at the feet of the Pope and I will beg him to return your freedom, to undo this abominable knot, to annul this cursed marriage..."

"Take good care not to allow your honour be the gossip of the common people," Doña Beatriz said earnestly. "Besides, my father, what good would freedom do me? Did you not hear that the day after tomorrow Don Álvaro will become a Templar?"

"That is another weight on my guilty conscience!" exclaimed the Lord of Arganza, covering his face with both hands. "Will such a perfect knight also have his life destroyed because of me? Alas, all the waters of the Jordan would not wash away my guilt!"

For a while Doña Beatriz deployed in vain all the resources of her wit and all the treasure of her tenderness to distract her father from his grief. At last, already dark, the two returned home followed by the thoughtful Martina, who, having witnessed all the scenes of that afternoon was very confused and sad. When they arrived, they found several servants who had come looking for them. For although the count had told them that the two strange knights had come on a peaceful mission, and that his anger had been unjust, adding that they should not disturb their master's conversation, the servants had begun to grow impatient and did not want to wait any longer.

The count, for his part, anxious to avoid the unpleasant scenes that were bound to occur with his father-in-law and his wife, rushed off to Galicia, leaving to time and his hypocrisy the task of repairing this fracture. This was a decision that, as our readers will imagine, was a great relief to both father and daughter in the supreme anguish that surrounded them. It is a sad consolation, when we feel better in the absence of those people who should be dear to us owing to the bonds of nature and yet become, through a cruel game of destiny, objects of indifference and hatred!

Chapter XX - Don Juan Núñez de Lara's prisoner

Our readers will forgive us if we force them to go back a little way in our story to let them know how the strange events that we have just related were set in motion. We do not only wish to make this true story known to them, but also to put to rights a knight who they undoubtedly think badly of, but who was not so bereft of all noble feelings as they may believe. This knight was Don Juan Núñez de Lara.

Given his propensity for rebellion and restlessness, his friendship with the Infante Don Juan and his ungratefulness to the favours and gifts bestowed on him by the king, one would surely be inclined to believe that such traits would suffice to suffocate whatever good instincts his soul might shelter. Don Juan Núñez, however, was not dishonourable. He was rebellious, tenacious and restless, but he had not failed in spite of everything to abide by the sacred laws of honour and chivalry. So it was that when Don Álvaro fell into his hands, we saw the courtesy with which he began to treat the wounded knight and the hospitality with which he received him in his castle of Tordehumos. The talks with the infante about Pope Boniface's bulls concerning the trial against the Templars soon took place. And that is when the infante, that perfidious old schemer, convinced Núñez de Lara to disengage Don Álvaro from his alliance with the Order in one way or another. Both men were convinced that if this occurred, the Templar's cause would receive a painful blow, especially in El Bierzo. The infante would have wanted poison or the dagger to rid him of such a formidable enemy as Don Álvaro. But his mere suggestion of this plan met such a hostile reception from Don Juan Núñez that we already saw him draw his sword to give his answer. Therefore, the infante had to change tack with his accustomed cunning. Even so, all he obtained from Núñez de Lara was that the Lord of Bembibre should be given a narcotic which would make him pass for dead and arrange for Don Álvaro to be held in close keeping until their common enemy was broken and vanquished, and then bring back into the light of day a knight so courageous and famous.

Good care was taken by the perfidious infante to conceal the second part of his infernal plot, because he well knew that if Núñez de Lara even suspected that the plan was to do violence to a lady like Doña Beatriz, he would undoubtedly have released Don Álvaro

on the spot and without any kind of ransom so that he might cut the threads of such vile intrigue with his sword. So it was, with the outward appearance of doing something that was in the public interest, that Núñez de Lara was persuaded to go ahead with a plan that was to produce such bitter results later. But nevertheless, Lara was not decided to go ahead without first trying persuasion, more for his own satisfaction than from any hope that his words would bear fruit. The result of his efforts was the conversation we heard between Núñez de Lara and Don Álvaro. On the same night, Ben Simuel prepared a concoction with which all of Don Álvaro's vital functions were completely paralyzed. With the knight in such a state, the physician entered the chamber through a concealed door and, tearing Don Álvaro's dressings and drenching the bed with blood prepared for the purpose, established the scene that we already witnessed, which so deeply afflicted the good Millán and also unsettled Lara himself because of the tremendous likeness of death. Nothing, therefore, could have been more natural than Núñez de Lara's resistance to let Millán take away the supposed corpse, which on the night after the funeral was transferred by Lara and his physician to a very deep dungeon that lay under one of the corner towers, the least frequented part of the castle. There they secured Don Álvaro firmly and left him alone so that when he regained the use of his senses, he would receive no more impressions than those that would least harm him in the weakness produced by such a long paralysis.

Don Álvaro came to himself very slowly and took a long time to discover the state to which he had been reduced. He saw the darkness around him, but he thought it was the dark of night. But then, as he tried to move, he felt the chains and handcuffs holding his feet and hands, and realized his situation. However, with the help of a beam of light penetrating through a narrow and very high vent which opened obliquely on the wall, he saw that his bed was very rich and soft and that some stools and seats that were around the room contrasted strangely with the bareness of the walls and the dreariness of the place. His wounds were bandaged with the greatest care, and in an alcove near the bed he found a silver cup containing an aromatic drink. The narrow enclosure where he was being held and at the same time such meticulous courtesy, was a contradiction that would have disconcerted an even more sound and temperate imagination than his own.

Then a sound of footsteps that felt close and seemed to descend

a steep spiral staircase brought him out of his delirium. Someone opened a lock and two or three bolts, opened the door, and at last two people entered the cell. In spite of his weakness, Don Álvaro instantly recognized Núñez de Lara and the rabbi, his physician Ben Simuel. Lara carried a lamp and a bunch of keys, and the physician held a small tray with drinks, refreshments and some preserves. Don Juan then approached the prisoner with visible embarrassment and said:

"Don Álvaro, you will no doubt marvel at what is happening to you, but the welfare of Castile demands it and I have not been able to do otherwise. However, a single word of yours will give you freedom. Renounce your alliance with the Templars and you are a free man. Otherwise, you will not leave this place, because, I must tell you, the whole world believes you dead, except for Ben Simuel and myself."

As Don Álvaro had lost his memory of the previous day because of his weakness, he was surprised to see Núñez de Lara and his physician come into the cell. But then he understood everything with a single glance, and with that realisation, he regained some of his energy and strength. So he replied:

"This is not the way to treat a knight like me, who in all things is your equal, only less fortunate than you, let alone to wrest a consent that would dishonour me. You will answer for all this, Don Juan Núñez, on foot or on horseback, as soon as my imprisonment is over."

"There's no need to doubt that," Lara said quietly. "But in the meantime, I wish to act as is my due and make more bearable the evils of this prison, which only the force of circumstances compels me to impose on you. Give me, therefore, your word as a knight that you will not try to leave this confinement until such a time as I grant you freedom or am compelled to surrender this castle by force or by agreement."

Don Álvaro was thoughtful for a moment after which he replied: "I give you my word."

Lara then released his chains and handcuffs and handed Don Álvaro the keys to the dungeon, saying:

"In case of assault, perhaps I could not save your life from the horrors of fire and plunder. That is why I am placing your security in your own hands. For the rest, I would like to know if you need anything, and your wishes will be satisfied at once."

Don Álvaro thanked him, but he also repeated his challenge

nonetheless.

On his next visit, Lara brought the prisoner his arms, telling him that the siege was closing in, and that if the enemy came to storm the castle, he wanted to leave his guest with means to defend himself against the enemy's abuses. This new proof of confidence left Don Álvaro very obliged. In addition, Don Álvaro had been lavished with attentions and hospitality in a thousand ways, and he was already healed of his wounds.

When he gave his word not to attempt his escape by any means, the memory of Doña Beatriz made him a little hesitant, when he imagined her exposed to so many dangers and machinations. But blind faith in her had dispelled all his misgivings. As for the help that he could provide to his uncle the Templar Master and his knights, he modestly thought it would be of little use. And since he had left them the owners of his castle, he did not so much grieve on that account, to be confined in this way. Finally, as the Infante Don Juan had included in his agreements with the king that he would expel Núñez de Lara from Tordehumos willingly or by force, Don Álvaro found no objection in making such a solemn pledge to Lara.

Nevertheless, although he was little inclined to complain and disdained to ask for mercy, he never ceased to sigh in the depths of his breast for the hills of the Boeza and the mountains of Noceda, where he so often used to hunt the large-tusked wild boar, the fearsome bear and the swift roe deer. Accustomed as Don Álvaro was to the pure air of his native meadows and mountains, inclined by nature to roam aimlessly the whole day along the edge of the cliffs, in the most hidden valleys and the craggy peaks, happy to see the sun rise and the moon appear, and the stars dimming with the dawn, the prison air became unbearable and fetid for him, and his vigour faded like a plant gnawed at the roots by a hidden worm.

At night, he saw in his dreams all the cool murmuring rivers of his picturesque country, skirted by ash trees, poplars and osiers swaying gracefully in the soft winds. And there, in the distance, he saw a woman dressed in white, sometimes radiant like a meteor, others pale and sad like the twilight of a rainy day, as she glided through the groves that surrounded a solitary monastery. This woman, always young and beautiful, had the appearance and soft contours of Doña Beatriz, but he could never quite distinguish her features. Then Don Álvaro would jump out of bed to follow her, and as he stumbled against the walls of his dungeon, all his beautiful visions were transformed into the bitter reality that surrounded

him.

With such a struggle, which his pride forced him to conceal and which thus became increasingly distressing, Don Álvaro's countenance had already lost the living colour of health. Ben Simuel, who knew the limitations of his skills to heal this kind of ailment, was limited to advice and proverbs drawn from Scripture, which had some effect on Don Álvaro, who was naturally given to contemplation. It seemed that Don Juan Núñez, having yielded unwillingly to such an odious request, wanted to erase his poor conduct with gifts and acts of courtesy, at least so far as this was possible given the violent state of affairs.

Meanwhile the siege of the castle continued, with great pressure on the besieged, for the king was not willing to give up his efforts to subdue his rebel vassal. Many of the lords, Lara's friends and allies, regretted this obstinacy, and others feared to see the royal authority grow to the detriment of their own rights and privileges. But none of the lords had so far abandoned their alliance with the king.

One day, shortly before dawn, Don Álvaro was awakened by the gallop and neighing of horses, the clamour of trumpets and drums, the shouting of the garrison and the people outside, the creaking of chains on the drawbridges, the steps and running of men-at-arms and crossbowmen, and finally a great tumult both inside and outside the castle. After some time, the voices, confusion and rumbling were heard in the inner courtyards of the fort. Don Álvaro, believing that the battle was in full swing, was ready to lay hands on his arms, but controlled himself. He was surprised not to hear the hammering of weapons, the laments and curses of combat and that kind of fearful and terrible disorder that always besets a position overcome by assault. The voices, on the contrary, seemed to be of concord and joy, and after a while no more was heard than that dull murmur which always rises from a great crowd.

From all these signs, Don Álvaro gathered that Don Juan Núñez de Lara had no doubt reached an honourable settlement with the king, whose host had entered peacefully and amicably into the fortress. He was very glad at this thought, and with great impatience he began to wait for the visit of one of his two wardens, pacing up and down in his dungeon. Soon his hope was satisfied, for at the break of day, Don Juan Núñez entered the cell with a face radiant with jubilation and pride and the bearing of a man who has triumphed over difficulties by perseverance and courage. He

addressed Don Álvaro:

"No, it is not the lineage of the Lara family who will succumb before a King of Castile. It is no longer in his power to harass me in Tordehumos, nor even to stand in front of my castle's walls for a long time. Now that young and ill-advised king will learn at his own expense not to disdain his noblemen, who are his equals".

These were the first words that poured out of the fullness of that arrogant heart, and which at once put an end to the vain thoughts and hopes of Don Álvaro. Lara, after that outburst of joy and seeing his prisoner's forehead cloud over, regretted his lightness and made a thousand delicate and courteous apologies for announcing in this way news that naturally would grieve Don Álvaro.

Then Don Álvaro asked Núñez de Lara to tell him the reason for his proud joy, which was that Don Pedro Ponce de León and Don Hernán Ruiz de Saldaña had come over to his side, no less out of friendship to him than anger at the long siege and the king's obstinacy. With such a significant desertion from the royal army and such an increase in Don Juan Núñez's strength, the monarch would have to bend to the rigour of circumstances and accept the conditions of his fortunate vassal. Núñez de Lara also told his prisoner about the ill will and rancour that were growing against the Templars all over Spain, and that the king was waiting for the end of the siege, to dispossess the Templars of all their estates and castles, which they had yet to surrender.

"And is it possible," exclaimed Núñez de Lara, "that a knight such as you should depart from his fellow knights just to defend a cause that all have abandoned?"

"I tell you again," replied Don Álvaro angrily, "the whole world will not keep me from the path of honour. But you, I repeat, will find someday at the tip of my spear the reward for this iniquitous and unjust prison that you force me to suffer."

"If I die at your hands," Lara answered quietly, "such a death will not dishonour me. But strange as my conduct may seem, it would appear much more maligned in my eyes if I did not restrain the arm that would come to the aid of such a house of indignity and reprobation."

Saying this, he closed the door and disappeared. Was he really convinced of the Templars' guilt, or were his words but the fruit of ambition and politics? Both were contending for the mastery of his mind, for although his ambition was great and his education did not allow him to accept the coarse beliefs of the common people,

Don Juan Núñez did not know how to rise above the level of an ignorant and rude age which welcomed the slanders raised against the Templar Order, all the more willingly the more clumsy and monstrous they were.

It can be said that it was then, as Don Álvaro began to relinquish his last vestiges of hope, that he began to feel the full rigours of his prison. The conflict in which according to all appearances, his uncle Don Rodrigo was to be caught up in, spurred Don Álvaro's ardent desires to come to his aid. And Don Álvaro also came to think with concern of the snares that during his absolute isolation from the outside world could harm Doña Beatriz. In his hand were the keys to his prison, his armour and sword hung on the wall, but he was much more closely guarded and imprisoned by his word of honour than he would have been by all the locks and wardens of the world. More than once, however, he cursed the lightness with which he had given his word. For if it had not been for that pledge, even tied up and in chains, he might have been able to do for his freedom what he could not even consider because of his pure and chivalrous soul. With so many setbacks and troubles, his strength grew less and less, to such a point that Ben Simuel came to have grave fears for his life if the seclusion should continue much longer.





Chapter XXI – The veil is drawn aside

The unfortunate captive was quite unaware that far from Tordehumos, in the mountains of his native country, there was a man whose loyal heart, refusing to accept the idea of his death by an involuntary instinct, only thought of drawing aside the veil that concealed the truth, and worked unceasingly to that purpose. This man was Commander Saldaña, to whom a voice, no doubt from Heaven, had inspired many doubts about the true fate of Don Álvaro. It seemed to Saldaña, and quite rightly, that Don Juan Núñez de Lara's insistence on keeping the corpse, when there was no blood relation with the Lord of Bembibre, departed from the established practice of delivering the dead to friends or relatives, without delaying the honour of a burial. On the other hand, the circumstances that preceded the tragedy had in themselves an appearance of mystery that made Saldaña more certain of his idea, because he could never tarnish Núñez de Lara with the suspicion of a deliberate and cold-blooded murder. However, because the statement of events brought by Millán had left everyone convinced and satisfied, and as Saldaña's conjectures were more like a presentiment than a rational argument, he scarcely dared to compromise the gravity of his years and counsel, by giving voice to a line of thought that no doubt everyone would call senile delirium and infirmity.

However, this idea took root in him day by day until, tired of struggling with it even in his sleep, he wrote a letter to the Templar Master in which he asked in a resolute tone for leave to go to Castile and find out the whereabouts of his nephew. Don Rodrigo Yáñez replied expressing great surprise at his doubts about Don Álvaro's demise and denying him the permission he requested. He also thought it unwise for Saldaña to abandon his defence of such an important position running after an impalpable chimera. The implacable Count of Lemos was already gathering forces around Valdeorras, and his strength and his experience were needed in the face of such a great peril. The master's refusal only strengthened Saldaña's strange conclusion that something was amiss and gave greater impulse to his desires, a natural thing in characters as vehement as his, whose strength and courage always grow in proportion to the obstacles encountered.

In the truce conceded to the Temple by the king and the

noblemen of Castile while engaged in the assault of Tordehumos, it happened that Don Pedro Ponce and Don Hernán Ruiz de Saldaña entered the citadel. Very close ties of kinship bound the latter and the old commander. Consequently, Saldaña found this a propitious occasion to verify all his misgivings and suppositions. Just at that time the Templar Master visited the fortress of Cornatel to find out about the preparations and fortifications. And Saldaña made so many entreaties and appeals that finally the master had to give him some kind of mandate for the king's camp, and from there, with a safe-conduct sent by his relative, he got into the castle of Tordehumos.

The news that he bore was so fateful that more than once the desire entered his mind to find Don Álvaro in the arms of eternal sleep, so certain he was of the deep wound which would open in his heart on hearing of the ill-fated end of that love whose nature, both pure and explosive, was not unknown to the commander. Beset by such thoughts, he arrived at Tordehumos, where he was received by his kinsman with affectionate cordiality and by Don Juan Núñez de Lara and the other knights with the courtesy and respect that they owed, if not to his Templar habit, then to his age and his bravery, well known since the war in Palestine. The Templars certainly inspired great hatred and aversion, but their courage, the only one of their primitive virtues they had not lost, their power and the very mysteries of their association, shielded them from all disdain and contempt. Saldaña asked Don Juan Núñez for a private conversation with his relative Don Hernán as a witness, if he had no qualms about sharing his secrets. Núñez de Lara agreed at once, telling the commander that Don Hernán was not only his friend, but that the great favour he had just done him by joining his forces deserved his unlimited obligation. The three of them then went to a more secluded chamber, and there, taking a seat beside a window, Saldaña addressed Lara in these terms:

"I have always taken you, Don Juan de Lara, for one of the most honourable knights of Castile, not only for your rank, but for your nobility, and I have always defended you against your enemies, seeing that you did not degenerate from the illustrious blood of your ancestors."

"Save yourself the praise that I do not deserve," said Núñez de Lara, cutting him off, "all the more valuable because it comes from you."

"I am indeed not in the way of praising," answered Saldaña, "but

my words are always sincere. How great then was my surprise to see you serve as an instrument to wicked plans, imprisoning Don Álvaro in the bowels of the earth, as if covered by the slab of the tomb!"

Nothing could have surprised Núñez de Lara more than this charge, so sudden and severe. And without being able to prevent it, he was troubled. The commander sensed it, and then his doubts and suspicions were over, for he was sure that Don Juan Núñez would release his prisoner as soon as he had heard the dark tale he was about to tell of Doña Beatriz's marriage to the Count of Lemos. However, Lara recovered and answered with a contorted face:

"By the life of my father, if it weren't for your grey hairs you would not wrong me in this way. If Don Álvaro died, it was due to his own misfortune, not my ill will. When this siege is over, I will bring you his body to the door of his castle with all the required ceremony, if his uncle, the Templar Master, has commissioned you to receive his remains."

"Ah, Don Juan Núñez!" the commander replied, "these deceitful lies do not sit well with you, they are the fruit of a tainted discourse entirely alien to the laws of honour! I repeat: you have served as a stepping stone for the feet of an evildoer, and because of your deeds, a noble lady has been injured. Because of you, Lara, who wear spurs of gold, who were obliged by birth to protect all those who are destitute, because of you, truly, the most noble, discreet and beautiful maiden of the Kingdom of León has been wronged for ever."

Then he told in a rapid and vivid manner of Doña Beatriz's marriage, which was the true purpose of the machinations of the Infante Don Juan, who thus sought to elevate his favourite the Count of Lemos, whose help he needed to carry out all his plans and hopes. Saldaña, with that inflexible and solid reasoning based on the wisdom of years and knowledge of the world, explained to Núñez de Lara the unseemly role to which the crafty and perfidious scheming of the infante and the Count of Lemos had reduced him, to better secure the achievement of their own villainous intentions. During this account, Don Juan Núñez manifested the anger and resentment that gradually seized his heart, until at last, his expression became so intense and terrible that his tongue was tied for a while, agitated by a convulsive tremor and his eyes turned blood red. Three times he tried to get up from his stool, and each time his trembling knees refused to support him. The commander, knowing what was going

on inside his soul, opened a window so that the knight could breathe fresher air. He tried to give vent to his anger with words adapted to his intent, until at last, after the first outburst of rage, Don Juan Núñez let out a stream of complaints and curses against the infante and the Count of Lemos.

"To do this to me!" he said, gritting his teeth and flashing lightning from his eyes, "Such a treacherous and perverse plot! Turning a Núñez de Lara into a murderer of beautiful ladies, while true knights are buried in a dungeon! Ah, Infante Don Juan! Ah, Don Pedro de Castro! I will wash with your blood this mark of bastardy with which you have stained my coat of arms! Yes, yes, noble Saldaña, Don Álvaro is in my power. But how can I appear before him with the ugly disgrace of my conduct? How can I tell him, 'I am the one who has stolen the bliss that should have been yours'? Ah, never mind! I want to confess my crime; I want to bow my head in contrition! I would pray to Heaven that such a step would humble me, for that would be good proof that my conscience was not so obscured and turbid! Come, come!" he said, rising with tremendous resolution. "I will take you to Don Álvaro. And in his hands I will place my judgement and my punishment."

"No, Don Juan," answered the commander, taking his arm, "you do not know the generous, but terrible and passionate nature of Don Álvaro, and in spite of all his nobility, perhaps he will take your life."

"He can take it when he wants," said Lara, disconcerted and beside himself, "if he does not take this sharp harpoon of remorse and shame from my heart. Let us go to the dungeon!" and saying this, he hastily led the two men away.

Don Álvaro sat sadly on a stool, his eyes fixed on that ray of light that entered through the iron bars and lost in bitter reflections about the remote end of his confinement, now that in the war with the Temple, which was so imminent according to Don Juan Núñez, his uncle Don Rodrigo and even Doña Beatriz herself might be in need of his assistance. Then he heard footsteps on the stairs and the rattling of weapons against the steps and walls, which greatly surprised him, accustomed as he was to Núñez de Lara's cautious walk and the tentative steps of the Jew. Then the door opened with great impetus and three knights entered, one of whom exclaimed at once:

"Where are you, Don Álvaro, that I can hardly see you in this dim light?"

Our readers can imagine what surprise such an apparition caused in the unfortunate and noble prisoner. If he had not seen Lara with him, he would certainly have thought it was the work of sorcery. But after that moment of astonishment, he rushed to embrace Commander Saldaña, who in turn pressed him to his bosom between his vigorous arms as if he were a miraculously resurrected son. Moved by that scene in which Don Álvaro's joy contrasted so painfully with Saldaña's melancholy effusion, Lara attempted to unburden himself of the terrible weight that overwhelmed him and hastened to say to his captive:

"Don Álvaro, you are free from this moment. I would have been blessed a thousand times if my eyes had been opened sooner! But before you leave, I wish to have your forgiveness or lose my life on the edge of your dagger, for which you have my bare chest here. Heaven knows, gallant young man, that my purpose in keeping you so strictly imprisoned was none other than what you already know, but my foolish candour and the plots of wicked men, together with your ill-starred fate, have made you lose Doña Beatriz. The commander, whom you see here, has drawn aside the veil and I have come to repair the fault I am guilty of, either with my life or by vowing to challenge the count de Lemos and the Infante Don Juan in reparation of my affront."

This revelation was a bitter blow that Don Juan Núñez de Lara had inflicted on Don Álvaro. The blood drained from his face and he was about to fall. But recovering promptly, he answered with restraint:

"Don Juan, although I had decided to demand a reckoning from you for such an unjust confinement, now you release me when I am at your mercy and you are more powerful than ever. This is an action certainly very worthy of you. As for what you have been told about Doña Beatriz, it is plain to see that you do not know her, otherwise you would not believe such vulgar gossip. It is true that she will take me for dead, because by this time my squire will have given her the tokens of love that I received from her hand. But she promised to wait for me for a year, and she will do so. Otherwise, if you want to know the truth, standing very close to you is one who can tell you the whole story, because he comes from that country. Is it not true, venerable Saldaña, that the news Don Juan Núñez bears is absolutely false? Why do you not answer? I beg you to dispel our host's doubts, because my words will not convince anyone."

"Doña Beatriz," replied Saldaña, "has given the Count of Lemos her hand, and this is the truth."

"You're lying!" shouted Don Álvaro, in a voice choked with anger. "I do not know why I do not tear your tongue out as a warning for impostors! Do you know who you are insulting? You are not worthy to put your lips on the print that her foot leaves in the sand ... Who are you, who are you to insult her in this way?"

"Don Álvaro," exclaimed Núñez de Lara, interposing, "is this the payment you give Commander Saldaña, who has come to remove the blindfold from my eyes and to pluck you out of the darkness of your dungeon?"

"Ah, forgive me, pardon me, noble Don Gutierre de Saldaña!" Don Álvaro replied in a sweet and temperate voice, raising the wrinkled hand of the old man to his lips. "But how can I remain calm and respectful when I hear those calumnies, daughters of some vile and treacherous bosom? Did you attend this wedding? Did you see it with your own eyes?"

"No," replied Saldaña, in a voice more concerned than angry, because he no doubt expected such an outburst from that unfortunate young man's anger and passionate affection. "I was not a witness to the ceremony, but the whole country knows and..."

"And the whole country lies," replied Don Álvaro without letting him finish the sentence. "Tell me to doubt the sun, the whole of nature, my heart itself, but do not cloud over with suspicion or with the breath of a lying rumour that mirror of courage, innocence and tenderness."

Then Don Álvaro began to walk in front of the astonished knights, who did not dare to dig any further in his troubled heart to pull out that deeply rooted plant, saying to himself in a low voice:

"Ah, who knows if Doña Beatriz grew tired of persecutions and sacrifices, and found it very onerous to wait in the convent for a long year as she promised me? On the other hand, when has good fortune smiled on me, to now await its beneficent influence?"

He went on walking a short while, murmuring confused words until, suddenly turning to Don Juan de Lara, he said with excitement:

"Did you not say just a moment ago that I was free? Come, then, a horse, give me a horse immediately! I would rather die than live in such dreadful agony! Is there no one to help me clasp up the buckles of my armour?"

The commander helped him to arm with great haste, while Don

Juan Núñez answered:

"Your own horse, whom I had nursed back to health because I knew the great esteem in which you hold the beast, is waiting for you ready in the yard. But Don Álvaro, think about what I have asked of you a little while ago. Perhaps I have caused you very grievous harm, but if I was aware of the wicked vileness of which we are both victims, God should not to forgive me in the hour of my last judgment."

"Don Juan," replied Don Álvaro, "I see that your heart is not corrupted or deaf to the voice of honour. But if your fears are legitimate and you thus plunge me into an abyss of pain the depths of which you will never fathom, it will be more difficult for you to obtain forgiveness from God than from me. Mine I sincerely grant, in the presence of these two noble witnesses, together with my gratitude for the hospitality that I have received from you."

With this, they immediately went up to the castle courtyard, where his gallant horse *Almanzor* let out a long, sonorous whinny as he recognized his master. Don Álvaro climbed into his saddle, after bidding farewell to all the knights, and left the castle with the commander and his men-at-arms, leaving in Lara's heart a vexation only equalled by the anger that had been aroused in him by the foul betrayal of the Count of Lemos and the Infante Don Juan. In case it might be of use, he had given the commander the correspondence between these two characters, in which their plot was evident, but he still could not forgive himself for his part in their schemes.

Don Álvaro and his companion easily passed the entrenchments of the besiegers because of the Templar's credentials, and they set out with great speed upon the road to El Bierzo. They had galloped for two leagues when Don Álvaro abruptly stopped his horse and said to Saldaña in a deep voice:

"If it were true..."

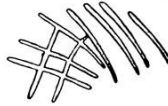
Don Gutierre de Saldaña could only shake his head sadly, and the young man added impatiently:

"All right, but do not interrupt me or make me despair when we are so close to discovering the truth. Hear what I want to tell you. If it is true, if Doña Beatriz has married, it will not take me longer to ask for the habit of the Temple than it will take me to get to Ponferrada. I give you my word as a knight."

"I do not accept it," replied Saldaña, "because..."

Don Álvaro gave him a sign of impatience so that he would not

tire himself in vain, and the commander was relieved so as not to irritate the knight further. And so, hardly saying anymore, they arrived at the end of their journey, not very happy indeed, as we have already seen.



Chapter XXII– The Templar Don Álvaro

A less ardent man, one with a soul less impetuous than that of the Lord of Bembibre, would probably not have taken such a reckless decision as it was to become a member of the Templar Order when Heaven and earth seemed jointly intent on obliterating it. But the unfathomable emptiness that the wreck of his sweetest and most flattering hope had left in his heart, the need to employ the fervour and energy of his character in some worthy enterprise and most of all perhaps the desire for revenge, were very powerful motives. The occasion could not be more favourable, because the sad drama of that brotherhood, both religious and warlike, was already drawing close to its end.

All men's spirits were held as if suspended because the Knights of the Temple had more means of resistance in Spain than in any other nation, and these events found them not only prepared, but enraged and fired with a desire for revenge. The centre and heart of such dispositions was King Don Dionís of Portugal, the wisest and most prudent prince then ruling in the Iberian Peninsula. The King of Portugal, well informed about the unjust persecution of the religious order, had sent his ambassadors to the Pope to complain and protest about the abuses and misdeeds committed against the Templars. But the King of Portugal was also determined to uphold the Templar Order in Spain and Portugal, and for this purpose, he had reached an understanding with the Master of Castile and with the Lieutenant of Aragon and arranged with them the means to preserve its existence and above all its reputation unharmed. The Templars, thus supported by the King of Portugal, were convinced of their innocence and still more of their strength in battle and their integrity. Some anxious for revenge and others putting their hopes in chimerical plans, the Templars could well have held the fate of Spain in their hands by making the monarchs of Castile and Aragon falter before beginning the fight.

Nevertheless, the armies were gathering everywhere, and both sides seemed determined to lead this great confrontation towards a decisive battle. One side was justly suspicious to surrender defenceless and helpless into the hands of their declared enemies, and the other, upheld by the papal bulls, was wary of the dangers that threatened the nation if men accused of such serious crimes were allowed to remain armed and in possession of their castles.

Don Rodrigo Yáñez, the Templar Master, less worried than his brothers, and intimately convinced that this venerable institution had declined due to the destructive hands of time, did not seem willing to resist the orders of the Supreme Pontiff, nor was he afraid to submit to the jurisdiction and judgment of the Spanish prelates, who were at the time a model of wisdom and evangelical virtue. But the general chapter of the Knights felt exactly the opposite, exacerbated by so many iniquities and bad judgments that malicious people spread among the common folk, and by the legal murders committed in France. Therefore, Don Rodrigo Yáñez yielded to the general opinion of his Templar brothers, as much to avoid abandoning his family of adoption and glory, as not to cause with his opposition a pitiful schism and disunity that might wreck the little prestige that the Order retained in the eyes of the people. On the other hand, the demands of the Templar majority were not exorbitant, since they did not deny the jurisdiction of the Holy See and they rejected the loss of their castles and vassals only to retain the means of lawful self-defence. It seemed that nothing, therefore, could prevent a terrible and disastrous clash in which no one could be given the advantage. For, if on one side there was the strength of numbers, public opinion and the materials of war, the Templars on the other hand fought with courage, chivalric pride, the sense of grievances done to them and, above all, the strength of will which triumphs over obstacles and determines the course of events.

Such was the state of affairs when Don Álvaro, with his heart pierced and sundered, set out from Arganza never to return again to those places, sweet and flattering when God wanted, now sad and already full of bitter memories. Faithful to his promise, he went to Ponferrada immediately, firmly resolved not to leave its walls unless it was with the red cross emblazoned on his robe. Before arriving, Don Álvaro arranged that Commander Saldaña would ride ahead and warn his uncle of his coming. This was a very prudent measure, no doubt, because the old man had experienced such extremes of pain with the news of Don Álvaro's death, that the sudden joy he would receive on seeing his nephew alive was likely to compromise his health. The commander therefore took the path that seemed best to him, and when at last he had come to give the news in all its truth, only then did Don Álvaro cross the drawbridge. As if the joy had discharged him of the weight of years, Don Rodrigo descended the stairs with the speed of a young man. At the foot of the steps, he found his nephew surrounded by many

knights, who welcomed and greeted him with signs of infinite satisfaction. Uncle and nephew embraced there amid the great emotion Don Álvaro felt to meet his uncle in moments of such bitterness for him, and no less so for the old man, who did not know how to thank God for the sight of his nephew, a comfort granted to him in his old age.

At last, after the first moments of joy, and having satisfied the curiosity of that venerable old man about his imprisonment, his sufferings and how he had regained his freedom, they naturally fell into talking about the desolate quick sands of the present, now that the Order was like an eaglet that, leaving the nest too soon, after a short and exhilarating flight, finally falls to the bottom of a cliff. Don Álvaro then told Don Rodrigo about the painful interview he had just had with Doña Beatriz, and that he had resolved to join the ranks of his uncle's brothers in arms, the Templars. Don Rodrigo, astonished and troubled, at first barely knew how to respond to a decision which implied the end of his lineage, the risk of losing a life so precious to him, as well as the endless evils that threatened the future of the Order. Once a little recovered from his great agitation, he said to his nephew in a deep voice:

"So you not only wish to spill the divine liquor of hope, but also want to throw the cup into the abyss? Is the terrible wall that separates you from her not sufficient, that you want to put another greater one between you? Now your fortune hangs from the life of a single man, so fragile in these times of discord. How do you want to deal with it, thus putting an obstacle in your way that can only be removed by death?"

"My lord and uncle," replied the young man bitterly, "and what is hope? You know that I took it into my heart as a noble, beautiful and welcome guest whom I celebrated with all my strength and affection. But that guest murdered me and set my house on fire. What has been left in its place and what remains of its owner? Nothing but a few drops of blood and a pile of ashes! Fragile, you call the life of that man! But what is truly fragile, transient and perishable is our own life, which has not deviated from the narrow path of honour. Unlike the count's, which is a fabric of vileness and iniquity! Long days of power and ambition await him perhaps in this miserable country! ... I hope God moves him against the Temple, and now that I am only a soldier of the Order, we will meet in combat!"

Don Rodrigo understood the mortal wound that the realization

of the truth had just opened in his nephew's soul, and he changed his course trying to present another kind of obstacle.

"My son," he said with apparent calm, "your grief is just, and your determination is natural. But it is not within my power to grant what you ask. Our Order is summoned to trial, our rights are suspended, and we are without the authority, therefore, to admit you to our ranks."

Don Álvaro, with his lucid intelligence, at once understood his uncle's attempts to dissuade him and answered resolutely:

"My lord and uncle, if such is your scruple, and as the case is altogether new, call together the chapter of knights and it will decide the issue. Otherwise, if the Temple closes its doors to me, I will go to the island of Rhodes and enlist among your enemies the Knights of Saint John. Believe me, my resolution is absolute, and all the power of the world combined would not make me retreat a single step."

Don Rodrigo was finally persuaded of the futility of his efforts, but in spite of this, he assembled a chapter of the knights present to express his doubts. Their answer showed Don Rodrigo that his refusal to induct Don Álvaro would only irritate those ardent knights and compromise his authority, and so he decided to give his nephew the habit as soon as he was properly prepared for it. Soon the news got around the bailiwick, and the knights received it with extreme joy, thinking about the mighty warrior who now consecrated himself to defend the Order's failing power. Saldaña, who for reasons of delicacy and rigorous justice had refused to accept Don Álvaro's promise, seeing how the knight persisted in his purpose, was overjoyed. His dark and ambitious soul, increasingly exalted by the threats that surrounded his faith, rejoiced not only for the triumphs heralded by the entrance of a champion as brave as he was loyal, but also because in his passion for that noble and luckless knight, Saldaña aimed to place Don Álvaro on a throne of glory and make him forget, if possible, his past troubles by means of triumphs, honours, and respect. Though it is true that the desire to take revenge was one of the most powerful motives that compelled Don Álvaro to join the Order, the commander knew very well that the acclamations of fame, the generous emotions of valour and the fervour of battle were the only ambition that had not abandoned that wounded and desolate heart.

Some rites that are observed in modern secret societies,

especially on the admission of members, are said to derive from the ceremonies of the Templars. Whatever their true character and origin may be, what does not admit any doubt is that these knights practiced some ceremonies whose symbolic and mysterious sense was the offspring of a more poetic and enthusiastic time than the one in which our story occurs.



In the castle of Ponferrada there are still preserved above a door, two perfect squares intersecting at absolutely equal angles. On the right side there is a kind of sun, and a star on the left. The existence of such strange figures, quite unusual in heraldry, is sufficient proof that the view held at that time about their mysterious and terrible practices was not without foundation. One of them was particularly shocking, namely, the insults thrown at the crucifix, whose meaning was none other than the rehabilitation of the sinner, from impiety and crime, to climb the steps of purification and sacrifice to the sanctified regions of grace. This fatal rite, not altogether unlike the *Festival of Madmen* and some other practices of the ancient Church, was one of the chief causes of the ruin of the Temple, when its mystical sense had already been lost in the mists of a more sensuous and rude generation. Explaining such enigmas to his nephew, forbidden to the eyes of the common people, was the aim of the master's efforts in the days preceding Don Álvaro's profession of fealty to the Order.

At last the moment came for this illustrious youth to bid farewell to a world that, if it had ever spread flowers in his path, had soon turned them into thistles. The professions in all other religious orders were carried out in daylight and publicly, but the Templars, no doubt to give more solemnity to their rites, held their initiations at night and behind closed doors. When darkness had spread all over the land, Commander Saldaña and another very old knight came to look for Don Álvaro, who stood waiting for them wearing rich black armour with gold inlays and a helmet adorned with a beautiful plume of red feathers. On his belt hung a sword and dagger with the hilt studded with precious stones, and on his heels he wore great gold spurs. Those who aspired to join the Temple were adorned with all the finery of the world, only to leave it at the foot of the altar. The two knights then led Don Álvaro to the beautiful chapel of the castle and stood outside for a moment, knocking at the door with measured and steady strokes.

"Who knocks at the door of the temple?" asked a hollow voice from within.

"He who is possessed with zeal for his glory, humility and disillusion," answered Saldaña as the first godfather.

Then the doors were thrown wide open, and the church appeared before them in darkness with a very small number of yellow and green wax candles burning on the altar. On its steps, the master was seated on what looked like a throne, surrounded by the commanders of the Order, and below, in a semicircle, stood the professed knights, who were the only ones admitted to this ceremony. Wrapped in their white mantles, they looked like so many grim, silent ghosts. Don Álvaro, in whose ardent and exalted imagination all this pomp produced a great impression, made his way through the assembled knights with his two elderly godfathers and went to kneel before the steps of the master's throne. The Templar Master pointed his sceptre towards the supplicant and asked to know his wishes. Don Álvaro replied:

"Considering that the Saviour said: 'Whoever wants to be of my flock, let him take up his cross and follow me,' I, though unworthy and sinful, have aspired to join the Temple of Solomon and follow Our Lord."

"Heavy is the burden that will be placed on your young shoulders," the master replied in a quiet, sonorous voice.

"The Lord will give me strength to carry it, as He has given me the resolve and courage to ask for it despite my sins," replied the neophyte.

"Have you thought," said the master, "that the world of men ends at this silent and austere threshold and the world of God begins?"

"At this door, I have stripped myself of the man I was, to clothe myself as the new man."

"Is there any among all the brothers present who can attribute to the aspirant some evil action for which he deserves to be stripped of the dignity of a knight?" asked the master.

There was a sepulchral silence. The commander then demanded that the rite begin. Two knights brought forth a crucifix of great height, roughly carved and with a very painful expression on the countenance of the Crucified Christ, and laid it on the ground. Don Álvaro, according to the ceremony, spat and trod on the cross, and then the two knights stood it upright and he addressed the

Crucified Christ upon it with the sacrilegious words that the Jews uttered on Golgotha:

"If you are a king, why do you not come down from that cross?"

Then they covered the crucifix with a black veil and took it away, after which the master said:

"Your crime is black as hell and your fall as that of the rebellious angels. But your God will forgive you, and your blood will flow in atonement for his tremendous anger and justice."

Don Álvaro then knelt on a black velvet cushion with gold fringes and tassels and unrolled a large parchment bearing the cross of the Temple in a field of gold and, by the light of a candle with which Saldaña illuminated the document, he read his profession composed in these terms:

"I, Don Álvaro Yáñez, Lord of Bembibre and the mountains of the Boeza, promise blind obedience to the Master of the Order of the Temple of Solomon and to all the Knights of the Order constituted in dignity, perpetual chastity and absolute poverty. I also promise to keep strict secrecy about all uses, rites and customs of this faith, pursue the honour and expansion of the Order by all means that are not at odds with God's law, and especially to work unceasingly in the conquest of the earthly Jerusalem, the sure first step and path of light toward the heavenly Jerusalem. God reward me in proportion to my works, and you as his delegates."

Then the godparents began to disarm him and the knights to sing the psalm *Nunc dimittis servum tuum, Domine*ⁱ, in their strong and solemn voices. Don Álvaro was fitted with steel spurs and of polished steel also were the leg armour greaves, breastplate, back plate and gauntlets with which they replaced his splendid armour. Finally, they girded him with a sword of Damascus steel and put on his belt a sharp and finely tempered dagger, but without any kind of ornament. At last they threw the white cloak of the Order over his shoulders, his eyes were blindfolded and he fell prostrate on the ground, while the congregation sang the penitential psalms with which Christians bid farewell to their dead.

At last the song ended, with its last notes vibrating in the vaults of the church amid the deep silence that reigned within. Then Don Álvaro's godfathers came to raise him up and uncovered his eyes, which he closed again, because as they were accustomed to the darkness, they could not endure the vivid light which, like a celestial halo, illuminated the temple, so dark and gloomy moments before.

The black hangings had been put away and the entire altar glowed with countless torches. The air was embalmed with delicate incense, which in vague and uncertain festoons disappeared among the arches and columns, and the knights all held white candles of burning wax. As soon as Don Álvaro's eyes had been uncovered, they all sang in joyful and soaring voices the psalm *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*ⁱ, during which, led by his godfathers, he embraced all his brothers and received from them the kiss of peace and fraternity. After this, all the knights brought their seats close to the master's throne, leaving Don Alvaro in the middle, at the foot of the altar. There he stood and with his arms crossed he heard the speech that is customary for the master or his immediate second to deliver to the newly professed Templar. In happier times, they spoke of the glory and prosperity of the Order, of the reputation it enjoyed throughout Christendom and finally of the rigorous and terrible duties of the new knight. But now, when the Order was being put to the test and that luminous star suffered such a terrible eclipse, Don Rodrigo's words had that religious, deep and melancholy nature characteristic of all those catastrophes that astound and overwhelm the world. Finally, his words dwelt on the serious and terrible duties that the soldier of God took upon himself when entering that militia. Then rising from his throne, raising the sceptre and straightening his majestic frame, he concluded in a severe and serious tone:

"But if God abandons you and allows you to go against your oaths, your life will be extinguished at once like these candles, and an even deeper darkness will surround your soul for all eternity!"

When the master spoke these words, all the knights extinguished their candles and at the same instant, the thick black veils of the altars descended, leaving the church in a dreadful darkness. Then the knights murmured in low voices some verses from the book of Job about the brevity of life and the vanity of the joys of crime. Then, in the light of the funeral candles still burning on the high altar, they went to the door in a slow and solemn procession. There they stopped again, and the master stepped forward to sprinkle his nephew's head with holy water, as if to wash and purify him from even the last traces of guilt, and from there they all dispersed to their respective chambers.

Don Álvaro was also left in his own cell and the light of the new day, which soon coloured the eastern sky, found him changed into another man and bound with vows that only the power of death

seemed capable of untying. How blessed he would be if, with his former position, his freedom and his sweet hopes, he could have set aside his old, devouring passion! But only time and the help of the Almighty could wipe his heart clean of the bitter recollections and erase from his memory those images branded there by fire.

At last, Don Álvaro's courage and energy presented him with the broad field of war and the noble endeavour to defend a just cause. But what consolation could be sought in the world for Doña Beatriz, who had no company but solitude, her own affliction, and the presence of an old father who was full of regrets and riddled with a late repentance for his misdeeds? Such are the sad contradictions and weaknesses of the poor human heart! The heiress of Arganza had as husband a man still young, full of vigour and strength. But her own health deteriorated day by day. Heaven and earth seemed to have conspired to separate her from her first love, Don Álvaro, who by all appearances could not have been more lost to her. And yet the news of his vows caused her a very deep pain. What could she look forward to? What could her eyes discover in the clouded horizon of the future, but solitude and sorrows without end and without meaning? Hope is a mysterious thing! For it is like a plant that sprouts in the heart, and if it does not flower when pain has changed the place where it grows into a desert, it still retains its upright trunk, like a funereal column, and even though it is only watered by a well of tears, it may yet produce some withered and yellowish leaves. Doña Beatriz had been separated from her lover by a small stream. But her unhappy marriage had turned that stream into a deep and mighty river. And now Don Álvaro's profession into the Templar Order had changed it into an immense sea. The unfortunate woman, seated on the shore of that vast ocean, saw in the distance the broken ship with tattered sails in which her sweetest dreams departed, never to return.





Chapter XXIII – Millán re-enters service

Three days after the events just described, it seems that the good Millán came by Arganza to tell Martina of how he was going to manage the properties that his master the Lord of Bembibre had bequeathed to him. He came from the mountains very satisfied with his lands and with some cattle he had bought, with which he thought to improve his pastures and gather some income to offer his future wife. Millán was somewhat uneasy about the rumours that were about in the countryside concerning the coming war against the Templars. But he put his faith in the favour of God. And above all, he was like so many others that undertake rash enterprises, who believe the answer to everything is in the saying that "He who does not risk getting wet, does not cross the sea". So it is no wonder that he came happy to a house from which the little joy that remained had recently fled.

"Oh, Millán of my soul!" cried Martina, hurrying to meet him, "and what things have happened since you left! I tell you! I haven't yet got the shivers out of my body, nor have I slept for an hour since. And Doña Beatriz, the poor girl! I don't know what is in my heart when I think about her!"

"But, Martina, tell me, what has happened?" the young man asked, a little puzzled.

"You won't believe it!" she answered, quite pleased despite her memories of dread, at having the opportunity to tell such a fantastical tale, "Your master Don Álvaro has turned up here."

"Jesus Christ! Most Holy Virgin of the Oak!" exclaimed the squire, crossing himself, "has he come to ask for masses and suffrages? To tell the truth, he was so good I didn't think he would go to Purgatory, but straight to Heaven!"

"Suffrages and prayers, eh?" replied the girl. "You're joking! He has come in body and soul to demand the hand and vow of Doña Beatriz."

"Martina," replied the squire, staring at her, "what's the matter, girl? Have you been given a potion that has bewitched you? In body and soul, you say, the man I left buried in Tordehumos? By the way, I would have brought his body with me for burial here if it had not been for that stubborn Don Juan Núñez. Well, well, if Mendo had told me such a story, I would instantly have asked if he came from the wine cellar."

"That's not my way, gallant sir," replied the girl, a little peeved, "because I don't drink."

"No, my girl. Who would say such a thing about you? Not me," said Millán politely. "I would cut the tongue off the one who said it."

"Believe it or not," she said, "what I tell you is that I and Mendo and my master Don Alonso and that jewel of a count and in short the whole household, have seen and heard Don Álvaro next to the walnut tree by the stream. And what's more, he came with Commander Saldaña, the warden of Cornatel."

"O most pure Virgin Mary!" cried Millán, making the sign of the cross and looking to the heavens, "so my lord Don Álvaro lives! The best of masters, the most valiant knight in Spain! Where is he, Martina? Where is he? That even if he were at the end of the world, I would go after him!"

"Well!" said the girl sadly, "and being as you are a gentleman, so to speak, you're going to follow your master as before, and as for our wedding, only God knows when it will be!"

"You're right," Millán said in the same tone. "And to think that I had leased the meadow of Igüeña so profitably to Uncle Manolón, and bought some fine looking cows! But what can we do?" he added after a moment of silence, "will I not rejoice over my master's return from the dead? I would give up all the pastures of El Bierzo and all the cows of the world for the life of my Don Álvaro who is the most important person. Martina," Millán said earnestly, "you know that duty comes before devotion. And that's why, although I was longing to be with you, as God knows, I never wanted you to leave Doña Beatriz ... But God help me!" he exclaimed in surprise, "I didn't remember to ask you about her! And what did the unfortunate woman say? What about her?"

Martina then tearfully told Millán all that had happened, a story that left the poor man confused and troubled with the Count of Lemos's perfidy and the dark plot that his master had been ensnared by.

"And now," the girl ended, "the old man Don Alonso wanders about in corners weeping and moaning, and Doña Beatriz, of course, is sadder than ever. But as neither of them wants to show their real feelings, they both spend the time trying to see how they can deceive each other, and in the end neither can. Because if their eyes meet, they start to cry like two lost souls. To tell you the truth, I don't know which of them I feel more sorry for."

"Good grief!" Millán answered with a sigh. "But where is my master Don Álvaro, because I haven't heard about that yet?"

Martina, who well knew how little her suitor cared for the Temple Order because of the common superstitions he believed in, had avoided the matter of Don Álvaro's profession in her story, but since it was no longer possible to hide it, she had to tell him.

"God of my soul!" cried the dismayed young man, "wouldn't it have been better if he had really died, than save him for the bonfire that will burn all those wretches who have been excommunicated by the Pope? No, I'm sorry! If he wants to lose his soul, that's up to him. I'm on good terms with mine, and it will not be my mother's son who will stay to serve a Templar, so people go around saying I too am a necromancer and a sorcerer."

"Do you know what I think, Millán?" replied the girl. "There must be a lot of untruth in those rumours about the Templars. When a knight as Christian and important as Don Álvaro has entered the Order, I find it very hard to believe those stories that people tell of magic and heresy."

"And what do you know? Millán replied, a bit harshly. "Don Álvaro is deranged by his ill-fated love and is capable of doing any desperate deed. Anyway, I'll go there, to Ponferrada, because that's what I have to do, but I believe staying with him will be impossible. I wish I had never become his servant, nor that he had rescued me half-drowned from the Boeza river! And as for you," he added, frowning at his future wife, "it's also your fault that you and I are not married in peace, in the grace of God and free from all these troubles. And instead of that, God knows what will become of us."

"But Millán," Martina said sweetly, "what would you want me to do, with Doña Beatriz in such a state?"

"Yes, yes," he replied, absent-mindedly. "Don't listen to me, because I don't know what I'm saying ... What a devil of a man! To become a Templar! But, anyway, there I go, and be it as God wills! Goodbye, Martina."

And after embracing her, he hurried down the stairs without any further delay, mounted his nag and rode so quickly that in just over an hour he was in Ponferrada. His decision not to serve Don Álvaro, that Millán had so categorically announced at first and while his anger lasted, as we have seen, gradually weakened and as he approached the bailiwick, it was melting like the snow of the mountains under the May sun. The good Millán was of excellent character, and the love and fidelity he felt for Don Álvaro were

mixed in his imagination with the memories of his early years, because he had grown up in his master's castle and been the companion of his childhood. Don Álvaro's noble qualities, the largesse with which his last will had attended to his servant's future, and the misfortunes that had formed the fabric of his young years, were so many links that united servant and master. So when Millán arrived at the castle, his determination had been swept away as if by the wind, and he thought only of attending and serving his former master while those troubled times lasted. Such a sacrifice is much to be praised in a man steeped in the rude beliefs of the time, and consequently only with a terrible effort could he be decided to overlook all the rumours against the Templars.

Despite his haste, Millán went first to the Templar master's cell. Don Rodrigo Yáñez received him with his accustomed goodness and, desirous of giving his nephew a surprise that might alleviate his oppressed feelings, led him immediately to Don Álvaro's chamber.

"Here I bring you, my nephew, an old acquaintance of yours," he said as he entered, "a sight which I trust will gladden your eyes."

"That will be my faithful Millán," said Don Álvaro, "what other person would remember me in this world?"

Millán then, unable to contain himself, came out from behind the Templar Master who stood in the door and hastened to throw himself at the feet of his master, hugging his knees and bursting into tears and sobs that would not let him articulate a word. Don Rodrigo left and Don Álvaro, moved but controlling himself because he was not used to showing any kind of emotion in front of his servants, said:

"Not so, poor Millán, come to my arms, embrace me, my friend ... as soon as I arrived I asked for you. How are you? Where have you been?"

"But, sir, how is it possible," exclaimed the squire, "that after weeping over your dead body, I see you now in the habit of a Templar?"

"You never had a strong liking for these garments," replied the knight, trying to smile, "but now that I wear them, you will have to look on them with more favourable eyes, if only for the love of the one who was your master."

"What do you mean, 'was my master'?" interrupted the squire, as if with anger. "You are, now as before, my master, and you will be for as long as I live."

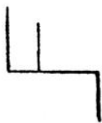
"No, Millán," replied Don Álvaro, with restraint, "I no longer have power over my own will, but must obey my uncle the Templar Master and his delegates. The properties that I left you in my will as a reward for your fidelity no longer belong to you strictly because my death was false, but I will intercede with my uncle to leave them to you, because really I am dead to the world and I want to give you that land in memory of me."

"Sir," replied the squire, without letting him speak further, "I do not need those properties, being in your service. If you cannot admit me, then I will go and ask the master, your uncle, to give me leave to serve you."

"No, Millán," said Don Álvaro, more forcefully. "I know you have better hopes than to come and serve a Templar amidst the dangers that surround this noble Order. You still have an old mother at home, and moreover, you have Martina, with whom you will undoubtedly live peacefully and with all the happiness you can reasonably desire in this life."

"As for my mother," replied the squire, "it was enough for me to leave your body behind to earn her curse. And as for Martina, she can be patient and wait for me just as I have waited for her. Also, do not think that Martina will be angry, because the poor girl loves you well and..."

Don Álvaro, fearing Millán might add anything further which he did not want to hear, stopped him saying that his decision was final and he did not want to involve anyone else in the misfortunes that might befall him. There ensued a generous dispute between master and servant, one firm in his resolution and the other no less firm in his will. It was a quarrel that the Templar Master settled, making his nephew see how unwise it was to discard such a generous heart in circumstances such as these. With this, Millán was reinstated in his old functions, and Don Rodrigo, in order to reward the servant's loyalty and to please his nephew, confirmed the gift of lands made in Don Álvaro's testament, so that the good Millán would never have to repent of his attachment to his master.



Chapter XXIV – Doña Beatriz returns to the convent

The differences between King Ferdinand IV and Don Juan Núñez de Lara were settled at last, more to the satisfaction of the proud nobleman than to the requirements of royal decorum. This was because the king's power, eroded by the long siege of Tordehumos and weakened further by the defection of several noblemen and the withdrawal of others, was not enough to defeat that arrogant vassal. And so, the conditions and agreements dictated by the occasion were set down: Don Juan de Lara recovered his stewardship, he kept Moya and Cañete and other towns that he had, and the king had to restore his favour. These were great concessions on the part of the crown, but nevertheless they had advantages. For, besides it being prudent to compromise in a case of necessity, now at last the king's hands were free to bring to a conclusion the affair of the Templars, which, as it turned out, could only be settled by force of arms. No doubt the foundations of the Order were undermined and unsteady, but nevertheless, that strong body was sustained by the vigorous cohesion of its parts, by its memories of glory and the fear inspired by its great power, which was the true cause of its ruin.

The knights did not refuse to appear before the Spanish prelates, nor did they reject their jurisdiction, but they alleged that, in view of the slanderous rumours that were being spread among the common people, the murders in France and all that unheard-of persecution, they would not surrender defenceless into the hands of their enemies, and that they would await the sentence of the bishops and the final resolution of the Pope in their castles and monasteries. Moreover, they proclaimed themselves loyal and obedient, they asserted with the greatest determination that their defence was their only motivation, and with their firm and prudent behaviour, they seemed to reveal to the eyes of the populace the falsehood of the charges against them. They also maintained their firm resolution to defend the Order's honour and existence to the very last.

Among all the men who, with so much laxity and disloyalty, served King Ferdinand at the siege of Tordehumos, he did not now find anyone remiss or fainthearted, such was the greed aroused in all those hearts by the thought of the tremendous wealth of the Temple that was to be the spoils of war. It was easy, therefore, to

gather a numerous and outstanding host, though indeed barely sufficient for such a difficult mission. And again the outcry of war began to resound throughout Spain because, as the desire to fight was just as great in Aragon as in Castile, on both sides, preparations for combat were going on in many places. Only the King of Portugal remained as an apparently neutral spectator, although his spirit was very inclined to the side of the Temple. He even used his good offices with the Supreme Pontiff to persuade him to avert the fatal storm that was building up in the most remote corners of Europe. This king, wiser than the ignorant age in which he lived, knew the real reasons that lay behind the plot for the persecution of the Order and, chivalrous as well as discreet, regretted that this should be the reward for so many glories, honours and triumphs, when those invincible Templars still had enemies in the Peninsula to continue the glorious Spanish crusade of seven centuries against the Moors. Thus, both in Aragon and in Castile, all were waiting for that fatal combat, whose end and dire consequences were not easy to anticipate. Because one side counted on their numbers and force, and the other on knowledge of warfare, discipline and the excellence of the combatants, and these qualities were of great value amid the disorder of the time.

Don Alonso Ossorio, the Lord of Arganza, as *Merino Mayor*, the king's appointed representative in El Bierzo, was ordered to immediately enlist as many crossbowmen and soldiers as he could and join the squadrons of his son-in-law the Count of Lemos on the borders of Galicia. It was an honour that he would have very gladly excused himself from had it not been for his nobility, because the lessons learned from experience and the sorrows he was suffering were beginning to show him this enterprise in its true colours. His enmity towards the Temple, which had received no further stimulus, had gradually subsided. And the conduct of Saldaña and Don Álvaro in the grove of his palace of Arganza, along with the decorum and chivalry the Templar Master Don Rodrigo had never ceased to exhibit, had also weakened his hatred of the Order. Don Alonso Ossorio's dreams of ambition, on the other hand, were clad in dismal colours in view of the inexorable reality that clearly showed him the black perfidy of the count and the sad, abundant harvest of tribulations and anguish he had sown for his only daughter. And now, to his dismay, he was called by destiny to fight against the only man who had conquered and deserved that angel's heart, and whose image was probably engraved upon it in spite of

everything that had happened. In addition, he was also beset by domestic troubles because, knowing the count's villainy and how, since his absence, he had not even by way of courtesy sent a single word of apology or message of any kind, Don Alonso did not think it fitting to send him his wife. And on the other hand, it was neither proper nor prudent to leave Doña Beatriz exposed to the hazards and setbacks of a war that threatened to be uncertain and bloody. Perplexed and confused amid so many difficulties, he had to consult Doña Beatriz who, as if forewarned by her discretion and sadness, showed little surprise and less hesitation.

"My father," she replied, "do not worry about me, for you know that the unfortunate are safe and defended everywhere. As good fortune protects the happy ones, my star protects me. However, as in moments like this no place is sacred except at the foot of the altar, I will lock myself up in Villabuena for the duration of this fratricide war."

"In Villabuena, Beatriz?" replied the old man, "and will you be able to withstand the memories that the place will awaken in your heart?"

She smiled wistfully and answered her father in a sweet tone:

"The days I spent in the shadow of its cloisters and groves were not the worst of my life. I wish that by changing places one's thoughts would also change! But then, man would be the master of his sorrows and Heaven would not test him in the school of adversity. Take me to Villabuena, where you already know that they love me well, and go to war without worry and without care, for there I will remain calm and secure. One thing, however, I would like to entrust to you," she added, in a tone of voice that revealed what was going on in her heart. "You know that among those you are going to fight as enemies there is a person to whom we have done much evil. You also know that the serpent of slander is wrapping him in its venomous coils ... Look out for him and try, if not to remedy, then at least to alleviate the pain that we have caused him."

"Not by your hand, angel of God," replied the old man, "but by mine was Don Álvaro wronged. May Heaven forgive me! I had always thanked God Almighty for the illustrious family into which I was born and the riches that surrounded me from childhood. But now, with one foot in the grave, I acknowledge how ill-fated such a gift was, and I have often said to myself in my sleepless nights, 'How much happier my daughter would have been to be born in a

cottage in these valleys!' Yes, my daughter, your wishes will be fulfilled. You shall go to the monastery at Villabuena and I will do what is expected of me. I wish my eyes had always been as open as they are now!"

After this brief conversation, the trip to Villabuena was arranged and occurred after two or three days. It had only been a few months since her father's strictness had led Doña Beatriz there. At that time, her mother was left at home bathed in tears and she was banished from her father's house and separated from Don Álvaro. But hope had inspired her, courage sustained her, an apparently inexhaustible germ of life and beauty enhanced the graces of her body, and finally a spring full of splendour and sweetness seemed to presage to her a prosperous and flourishing existence. Oh miserable instability of human affairs!

Since then, in a very short time, that loving mother had passed into the regions of eternity and Doña Beatriz's courage had not succeeded in defending her against the iron hand of fate and her freedom had been sacrificed on the altar of her generosity, to a man stained by evil acts. Her health was consumed and her beauty had faded. Her departed love, Don Álvaro, had risen from the tomb only to die again and forever in the eyes of her hope. And finally, instead of those leafy groves, birdsong and gentle May breezes, now winter winds whistled sadly among the bare branches of the trees, the streams were imprisoned with chains of ice, and only a few waterfowl passed silently over their heads or screeching harshly at great heights. What painful correspondence between a muffled and numb nature and the girl's heart, bereft of joy and empty of the perfume of hope!

The cavalcade was composed of the same people as the previous time. But whether the mood of the masters also affected the servants, or because the muddy road and the cold and unpleasant weather made them look to their mounts and removed all desire to speak, the result was that during the trip hardly a word was heard.

Mendo himself, whose clumsy and rude instincts often drove him away from more delicate emotions, seemed gloomy and sorrowful on that occasion. Undoubtedly, the poor groom was realizing that, no matter how important this Count of Lemos was, he did not possess those other qualities required of a noble, such as rightful and manly behaviour and goodness of character. Accustomed to seeing both these qualities in his masters and even many more, the unfortunate Mendo believed these traits to be

inherent to all nobility and power. But now, disillusioned by his reflections and the evidence of his eyes, since the encounter in the grove, which had been caused by his imprudence, he was heard to exclaim more than once:

"What a devil of a man, this counterfeit count! So lordly and such a scoundrel! Who would have believed it, with so much gold and such fine clothes! So much show and look what he is! ... And I, fool that I am, preferred this rogue to the valiant Don Álvaro! Well, well! I pray that God doesn't take me to task for this, which he certainly won't because anyone can see I'm just a dog, and only fit to deal with horses!"

With these confessions, the good groom proved if not his cleverness, at least his good heart. And no doubt he went through them again and again under his breath, as he went gloomily to Villabuena. As for the hunter Nuño and Martina, they were fully aware of the details of that terrible drama, so they felt a deep concern.

After two or three hours, they finally arrived at the monastery where the nuns, already forewarned, were all waiting for the arrival of such a noble lady. And they all wished to welcome one who had been a sister to them in their house of prayer during her last stay. Everything was in the same order as previously and animated by the same spirit of purity and modesty. The nuns had the same expression in their faces, the same tranquillity in their eyes and the same serenity and composure in manners. Only Doña Beatriz had changed. The nuns, who had hoped to find her restored to her former strength and vigour, fully recovered from her past ailments and filled with happiness by her marriage to her illustrious husband, were astonished to see Doña Beatriz's exhaustion, her eyes, both languid and piercing, and the thinness of her body. And above all to hear the tone of her voice, in which something deep and melancholy vibrated and which made them feel a kind of anguish. Most of those candid women were unacquainted with the tempests of the heart and the bitter experiences of the world, so they were lost in conjecture about the causes of that sudden and pitiful change in a person whom fortune had looked upon with benign eyes from the day of her birth.

As Doña Beatriz had not uttered a single complaint during her previous reclusion in the convent, they believed that her love of solitude and her frequent daydreaming stemmed from the natural tendency of her character and her delicate sensitivity, but not from

her deeply wounded soul. Only the abbess, who was more versed in the pains of the heart and in the disappointments of life, knew the state of that young girl so close to her. The meeting of aunt and niece was sad and distressing, as was to be expected, for it renewed the memory of the recent loss of Doña Blanca, Doña Beatriz's mother and the abbess's sister. But Doña Beatriz shed only a few tears. Her noble character was becoming more withdrawn with each passing day, like flowers that at night close their chalice and fold up their leaves. But she was also composed because the troubles she suffered were of a kind that only the ministrations of religion can heal. And with that noble pride and modesty of elevated souls, she sought to hide her troubles from the eyes of the common people and present them only to the sight of the supreme dispenser of good. However, Doña Beatriz's apparent calm confused the poor nuns who could not reconcile her bearing with the visible traces of grief that were revealed in the lady's countenance.

Doña Beatriz retired to her old cell, refusing a better and more comfortable one that they had prepared for her, giving as excuse the attachment that she had to her first home with them. The sisters attributed this to her Christian modesty and humility, and in this they were partly right, for these were qualities that always shone in Doña Beatriz. But the real cause of her indifference and easy contentment was another. What did she care for vain courtesies and a comfortable lodging, when her thoughts belonged to another world and only came to rest for a moment on this earth from their incessant flight?

Don Alonso left Villabuena the same afternoon to fulfil, as a nobleman should, his king's commands and speed up the preparations for war that were being made everywhere. The convent itself had become more and more painful to him and so he hurried away. Don Alonso therefore entrusted his daughter to the care of the abbess with special insistence and went to the mountains at the source of the Burbia to raise the inhabitants to arms and organize their forces. Not least among his troubles was the fact that fate had destined him to fight with Don Álvaro who, under a more benign influence, was destined to be his son-in-law. And he well knew the anxiety Doña Beatriz would feel if there were a fatal combat between her father and the man who was lost to her but not erased from her memory. His personal feelings, moreover, had undergone great alteration, and the tree of his ambition began

to bear such bitter and unpalatable fruits that at the cost of his life he would have wished to tear it from the ground. But as its roots had ensnared the heart of his daughter, his purpose could only have been achieved by pulling it out together with the tree. The obligation to join the Count of Lemos and to arrange with him everything pertaining to the war was very painful to Don Alonso's upright character now that the veil, which had concealed so much dishonesty and wickedness, had been pulled aside. And so it was that Don Alonso's path, whichever way he chose, was strewn with thorns and troubles.

The Abbot of Carracedo, who since Doña Beatriz's marriage and her mother's death had stayed away from Arganza, was moved now by his love for peace. Eager to stop the torrent of evils that once again troubled the exhausted Castile and above all El Bierzo, he attempted to mediate between the Count of Lemos, the Lord of Arganza and the Templar Master Don Rodrigo. Although his character was extremely hard and austere and his animosity against the Temple was intense, this was founded on his blind deference to the Roman Catholic See, and he was not, as we have seen before, deaf to affectionate and pure sentiments. Now that the greatest catastrophes and miseries were hanging over that Order, which like his own had taken shelter at birth under the mantle of Saint Bernard, his charity was keenly awakened and his old friendship with the Templar Master Don Rodrigo was rekindled. But all his zeal and diligence came to nothing, however, because the crown was determined to wipe out the Templars from the land of Spain. And the Templars, who were ready to stand trial and accepted the Pope's authority, refused to be stripped of their natural means of defence, as they harboured well-founded suspicions that the excessive cruelties that had occurred in France would be repeated in Spain. Thus, seeing every one of his attempts frustrated, the Abbot of Carracedo had to join his small host to that of the Lord of Arganza and obey, as a Catholic priest and a faithful vassal, the orders of the king and of the Pope.

The war preparations therefore continued with the greatest activity on the part of the Castilian troops. The Templars, forewarned and making use of the enormous advantages that their riches, their subordination and discipline gave them over their opponents, did no more than keep their forces on the defensive as they had decided and wait for the moment of combat. The dangers they faced were hidden to them because of their proud and haughty

valour, and they were tired of the peace with the Moors that had been imposed upon them by Castile's alliances with the kings of Granada and internal disputes, and so the Templar knights craved to win new laurels in defence of their Order and its honour. Don Rodrigo himself, in spite of his gloomy forebodings and his age, seemed animated by a youthful ardour when he saw the time draw close to risk his life for the honour of his Order. He was like an aged horse in battle that neighs and shudders, despite his weakness, upon hearing the trumpets of war.

Whatever enthusiasm there might be on both sides to wage this war, there was one man in each faction who greeted the bloody dawn of battle with particular glee and hope. These two men were the Count of Lemos and the Lord of Bembibre. The sorrows of the heart and the disappointments of life in the one, greed and wild ambition in the other, and in both, hatred and courage, ensured the battle to come was in keeping with their desires. Don Álvaro had humiliated the Count of Lemos by refusing to meet in the field of honour on the grounds of the inequality between them created by his villainous behaviour. But on this occasion, stripped of his free will and of his former rights as an independent lord, Don Álvaro could complete his revenge and wash away the count's offense with blood. The count, with the memory of the humiliation he had suffered still rankling, and also ashamed at his own previous conduct, yearned to close for ever the mouth of that inexorable and terrible witness, and to redress his offended pride with his enemy's death. So they both waited with unutterable anxiety for the opportunity to measure their strength, oblivious to the fatal outcome that destiny had in store for them.



Chapter XXV – The Count of Lemos gathers forces

The military position of the Templars in El Bierzo, as we have already said elsewhere, could not have been more advantageous. In Castile they had nothing to fear, because the fortresses and estates they possessed there would be too much for the king's forces to contend with. And in El Bierzo Don Álvaro's vassals, who because of his profession had passed into the hands of the Temple, were sufficient counterweight to the forces of the Abbot of Carracedo and the Lord of Arganza. The Templars' own forces were more than enough to maintain possession of the land and close both entrances to Galicia with the forts of Cornatel and Valcárcel.

However, the people from all over Galicia that the Count of Lemos was gathering in Monforte were already forming a powerful host. They were mostly agile mountain people, robust men, full of spirit and accustomed to the exercise of hunting and also very accomplished crossbowmen. The count was also a very skilful captain, and although hated in the country, his liberality and munificence whenever the occasion demanded, earned him the loyalty of the forces assembled for war. By his cunning, moreover, he had taken advantage of the credulous and superstitious nature of the mountaineers, painting the Templars with the blackest of colours, and increasingly stirring up the secret horror with which they regarded the devilish and mysterious arts and the impious rites they supposed were practised by the Knights of the Order. With such encouragement, it seemed as if they were embarking on a crusade against infidels, in view of the number of soldiers that ran to put themselves under the count's banners, some wishing to serve the king, others greedy for booty and gain, and all spurred on by the desire to bring to a speedy end an evil presented as so great. At last, a regiment was formed and began to move up the Sil valley, led by the count himself, like a menacing cloud that was about to pour down on the castle of Cornatel.

This was the greatest danger that had to be attended to, and thus Commander Saldaña, who had stayed some days in Ponferrada to serve as godfather to Don Álvaro, returned promptly to his post as warden of the castle. Don Álvaro asked for his uncle's permission to accompany him and received it immediately. This was just what the old knight desired, more possessed than ever by his strange thoughts of glory and conquest. The idea of being the first to fight

for the honour of his Order and to have as opponent the fiercest enemy that it faced in Castile filled him with pride and joy. Even though his motives were somewhat different to those of Don Álvaro, the resentment he harboured against the count was no less profound. The fondness he had taken to his godson, as violent as all his affections, had fanned this fire with all the sorrows that the perfidy of the Galician nobleman had shed on that soul, so generous and full of goodness. Now Saldaña's desire to fill Don Álvaro's heart with the emotions of glory, and to establish his fame upon the ruin of the enemy, had charged new energy into all his movements and moods, and seemed to remove from his eyes the deep wounds that his cause was being inflicted in the rest of Europe. Soon his presence was felt in the castle, for both his strong arm and his intelligence instilled courage and confidence everywhere, and his companions and soldiers received him with extraordinary joy. From that rocky height, Saldaña gazed out, calm and satisfied, at the precipices that surrounded the fort, the lake of Carucedo then swollen with the waters and currents of the winter rain, and the plains of El Bierzo that could be seen from there. He stretched out his hand and holding Don Álvaro's tightly said to him with eyes raised to the heavens and with a profound religious tone: "*Dominus mihi custos et ego disperdam inimicos meos*"ⁱⁱⁱ.

Don Álvaro only responded by clasping Saldaña's hand tightly and placing it immediately on his heart with a vehement and expressive gesture. The commander immediately went through the castle with the utmost care, examining its walls very thoroughly and, assured of their good condition, he retired to his chamber, calm and confident in his people and the castle's defences. Truly the fortress is so impressive, even now when its advanced works have disappeared and the moat is completely filled in, that the governor's confidence at that time is hardly surprising.

However, soon the enemy forces filled with the noise of their weapons that region that the commander had contemplated. Two or three days later, the soldiers of the garrison gradually left the posts which stretched as far as Las Médulas and left the count and his forces in possession of the field. They were not very experienced or disciplined, but extremely picturesque and colourful. Their pike men and men-at-arms were correctly equipped, and their horsemen too wore the usual defences, but the foot soldiers were attired in very varied dress.

The Galicians from Valdeorras and other valleys and villages

that make up most of the province of Orense, came armed with well-tanned ox hide jerkins, and they also wore cloth caps on their heads that covered them almost completely. Very broad breeches of white linen covered their legs to the knees leaving the rest bare except for their feet, covered with huge wood and leather clogs. As for weapons, some of them carried pikes, while others wielded very heavy clubs, trimmed with iron spikes, whose blow must have been fatal in those stout, strong arms. All of them were distinguished by their corpulence, their strength and the heaviness of their movements.

Those from the mountains of La Cabrera all wore lambskin caps, a very long reddish-brown chamois jerkin, tight-fitting breeches of dark cloth, and pelts round the calves, fastened with their sandal straps. These mountain people were lively, agile and nimble. Their bodies were lean and their faces were sunburned and dry, because their hard life as hunters and shepherds exposed them to all the harshness and rigours of the mountain climate. The weapons they used were a great hunting knife on their belt and a crossbow, with which they were very accurate and fearsome. The Galicians were the men who composed the infantry of the line of that small army, and the Cabrerans were the flankers and light troops. The latter, because of the abruptness of the terrain, were bound to have the greater glory and danger during the fighting.

All these people camped at the foot of the old *Medullium* mountain, so celebrated for the extraordinary amount of gold it produced during the Roman domination over the Iberian Peninsula. This mountain, pierced and mined in a thousand places, presents a singular and fantastic aspect, with deep gullies and ravines of red clay that have been formed by the gradual collapse of the subterranean galleries and the action of the water that flowed through canals which cross the mountain in uncertain and tortuous directions. This landscape is covered with wild chestnut and oak woods, and crowned here and there with reddish peaks, of a rather crude colour, that match well with its extravagant and capricious forms. Its extraordinary height and the countless heaps of blackish mossy stones that spread around below, remnants of the immense Roman excavations, lend this landscape an air of grandeur and weirdness that causes a mysterious emotion in the spirit. Many parts of the excavated galleries are preserved entirely and reveal the black mouths of the tunnels amid those inaccessible precipices. All this adds the last brushstroke to that picture in which the magnificence

of nature and the power of centuries preside over the ruins of human greed and the vanity of its memory.

At the foot of the mountain lies the village of Médulas, of little significance in our day, but which at the time we speak of was much poorer and smaller still. Here the count established his camp, surrounded by the most select and best-armed portion of his forces. Those of his men who could not be accommodated in the few hovels to be found there were sent to the mines and caves to look for a shelter against the season's weather. The cavalry turned to the left and extended along the shores of Lake Carucedo, which provided abundant pastures and grazing for the horses. Thus installed, they spent the last hours of that cloudy and sad December day and, posting their watchmen and guarding themselves as the proximity of a bold and fearful enemy demanded, they waited for the new day around their fires.

As it dawned, the clarions, bagpipes and small drums saluted the first light of day. The neighing of horses on the lake shore, the echoes of the rude instruments, the voices of command and the warlike ballads of those cheerful and animated troops echoed noisily among those rugged cliffs. The roe deer and wild boar fled frightened along the slopes, with terrible leaps and snorts. All this noise and commotion contrasted strangely with the quiet and silence of the castle, whose knights, motionless as statues, reflected the early rays of the sun on their burnished armour. The hoarse murmur that was heard among them was the sound of the morning psalms and prayers they recited, on their knees, with their heads uncovered, their spears and swords lowered to the ground and their faces turned toward the east. When this religious ceremony was over, the knights returned to their usual silence and recollection, awaiting undaunted for the arrival of the enemy that was drawing closer, judging by the distinction and clarity with which the Templars heard their musical instruments. Don Álvaro asked for permission to foray and reconnoitre the field, but the commander did not grant it, resolved, despite his ardour and anger, not to be the first to initiate hostilities, as the Spanish Templars had agreed. He was also afraid that Don Álvaro, heeding no other voice than his own resentment, would act too rashly. Another older knight went on patrol, and after surveying the enemy position well and after a few skirmishes, he returned and gave Saldaña a report on his expedition.

Meanwhile, the tops of the surrounding hills were crowned with

mountaineers who never ceased playing their rustic tunes. The Galicians spread out along the gentler slope stretching towards Bermés. And the cavalry, who by the nature of the terrain and the type of attack could not aspire to much danger or glory, positioned themselves in the narrow plain that crowns the slope of Río Ferreiros, occupying the only road to Cornatel and cutting off all communication with Ponferrada.

The Count of Lemos appeared shortly after dawn, followed by the nobles of his house. He was mounted on a superb chestnut war horse with reins and trappings of blue silk embroidered with silver, which the fiery animal splashed with froth with each movement of its head. The count's armour was of the same colour and adornments, with a red band that crossed it, and his golden helmet was surmounted with a beautiful plume of white feathers that fluttered to the slightest breath of wind. He came, in short, gallantly attired in the midst of his splendid retinue, and all his host greeted him with cheers and with the sound of their bagpipes and drums, expressive rather than melodious. The count graciously saluted his forces, brandishing his sword in all directions, and immediately began to survey the position with that sure military eye which in many wars had earned him the reputation of a skilled and experienced leader. He went down the slope of Río Ferreiros step by step, crossed the stream, which at the time was swollen by the rains, and at once was convinced that the castle was impregnable on that side, because nature had endeavoured to fortify it with fearful precipices. For greater security, however, he placed a detachment of cavalry in the neighbouring village of Santalla, thereby ensuring his complete control of the Ponferrada road. He immediately went up the hill again, and then decided to make his attack from the west and southern side, where the fortress has two fairly good fronts, then carefully protected by a very strong wall and a very deep moat.

Following the rules of war, he sent a missive to the besieged knights before commencing the attack, informing them of the king's orders and demanding their surrender with threats and arrogant words purposely employed to exacerbate them and worsen their cause with resistance. Saldaña replied, as was to be expected, that he did not recognise the authority of the monarch of Castile over his forces that, as members of a religious order, were only obedient to the Pope. He also said that of the instructions of His Holiness the Pope, the Templars obeyed only the one that

commanded them to appear for their trial, but not the one that dispossessed them of their properties and means of defence before judging them, for it was clear that this order was the result of the King of France's violence. And finally, Commander Saldaña told the count that he had not been forgiven for his felony at Tordehumos, committed on the person of Don Álvaro Yáñez, and warned him that they would not treat him as a chivalrous knight, and that any messengers he sent would be received as spies of a captain of bandits and hanged from the highest battlement. Although the count was expecting such an answer, the terms of contempt and insult in which he was described made him grind his teeth in anger and drained the colour from his face. The worst of it was that his conscience repeated word for word the commander's insults, and he was persuaded that with an enemy so relentless and fierce, haughty words and disdain were to no avail.

But as soon as this first impulse had passed, he returned to his natural disposition. And the count felt a ferocious delight at the prospect of a mortal combat, in which the numerical superiority of his troops and the support of the king, the pontiff, and all Christendom seemed to ensure that he would be the victor. He had received the news of Don Álvaro's profession to the Templar Order with sinister joy, because he believed this meant his enemy was caught in a web of events that would spell his ruin. So, delighted to count Don Álvaro and Commander Saldaña as his own two hated enemies, that very day he hastened to organise the besieging trenches and indicate with great skill the position of the sentries and guard posts to close in on that bulwark in which the Order placed such great hopes. For the Count of Lemos knew that encircling a castle in an isolated situation requires only a small force but taking possession of it is where immense difficulties arise.

The Galicians immediately began to dig the trenches, and the Cabrera mountaineers came down from the mountain crests to the south of the castle, and sheltering behind bushes and rocks, protected their work with a cloud of arrows directed with great accuracy. They were led by a lesser nobleman from that country named Cosme Andrade, renowned as an archer and crossbowman, and the way he distributed his forces was very precise, for as soon as one of the defenders appeared, an arrow reached him. Of these, some of the worst armed fell pierced to death and others were badly wounded. But the Templar Knights, with their finely forged damask armour, had no fear of those shafts shot from a distance,

and above all so badly tempered that they could never pierce their breast or back plates. On the other hand, for the crossbowmen of the castle, when one of the enemies came in sight, he immediately became a target. And as the bushes and branches did not always hide the Galician excavators altogether, and as their enormous outfits did not protect them well, naturally the result was that they received many injuries. In any case, the archers' shots were extremely uncomfortable to the defenders of the castle, and the work of the besiegers continued in its shadow.

All that first day continued like this, with the knights not making any sortie from their stronghold or any kind of hostile demonstration, and both sides spent the night in their respective posts. Cornatel, enveloped in silence and darkness, stood in stark contrast to Lemos's camp, resplendent with countless bonfires on which quarters of cow and portions of deer were roasted as in the time of Homer, and the camp was populated by a murmur like an immense beehive. The count rested little all that night, and he was continually seen passing through his army, as if encouraging and promising rewards to his people. His splendid armour shone in the light of the fires, and his white plume, which looked red in the flames, was stirred by a strong wind that had risen, and floated like a will-o'-the-wisp on the top of his helmet. In addition, many fires were lit on the hillside above and their flames, now ablaze and shining, at other times murky and dark, depending on the dampness or dryness of the fuel, oscillated at the mercy of the wind with a thousand capricious forms, filling the air with fantastic festoons of smoke, creating a colourful and surprising spectacle. The main fire burned in front of the count's tent, above which the Castro flag was hoisted, also lashed by the night wind, blasting and whistling through the rocks and trees. The picture was completed by a group of women who had followed their fathers, husbands, lovers or brothers on that expedition, some dressed in white skirts, a red embroidered cape and a white handkerchief on their heads, others in dark petticoats, a cape and a jerkin of the same colour and a headdress of black skins, according to whether they were from Galicia or from Cabrera, many of them young and graceful, and moving busily around the camp. At a certain hour, however, all movement ceased, except for the sentinels walking near the fire and the rhythmic sound of hammering as of something being nailed together.

Saldaña, who with his eagle-like eyes had followed the enemy's movements all day, guessing their intentions as if they were his own,

was now in one of the highest towers of the castle, accompanied by the Lord of Bembibre, no less occupied than the old man in observing everything carefully.

"Don Álvaro," he said at last, with barely concealed excitement, "tomorrow they will come."

"I know," said the young man. "I can hear them nailing the ladders or the bridge of timbers with which they intend to cross the moat and attack the gate when they have captured the barbican."

"Those poor highlanders!" replied Saldaña, with a smile and a tone that revealed both contempt and pity. "They think they are going to hunt us like the bears and wild boars on their mountains, and they will certainly wake up very late from their dream."

"Will you forgive me if I ask what you intend to do?" the young man asked respectfully.

"I will not tell you everything now," said the commander, "only that I have reserved for you the most honourable and most brilliant part of tomorrow's operations. Before dawn, you will descend with all the horses that are in the castle by the secret staircase that you already know about. The stairs will bring you to the very edge of the stream, and following its shore, you will attack the rear of the count's cavalry. Thinking we are completely isolated, no doubt they will be caught unawares, and you will rout them. But for this plan to work, your forces must remain hidden in the forest and wait to spring the ambush until the castle bell gives you the signal to attack."

"But, sir," said Don Álvaro, "is it possible for the horses to descend that long and steep stone staircase?"

"Everything is planned," answered the old man, "the steps of the staircase have been covered with dirt so that the horses will not slip, and you know that the Temple horses are of the best breeds from Syria and Andalusia, renowned here and throughout Europe, and our infidel slaves train them and accustom them to everything."

"And have you considered," insisted Don Álvaro, "the advanced body the count has posted in Santalla?"

"That is what will completely undo our opponent," replied the commander. "Because those forces are only watching the road to Ponferrada, so you can pass between and take them unawares. Ah, Don Álvaro!" he added sadly, "I have fought campaigns against the Arabs and the Mamelukes, so do you think that I would be without tricks and stratagems?"

"Yes, yes, I see that you have thought of every eventuality. But will the older knights of the Order be content to fight under my command?"

"They all esteem and respect you for your ancestry, your character and your valour," said Saldaña, "and all will obey you willingly. But why is it that you have done nothing but find problems and difficulties instead of thanking me for the preference I am giving you in this mission?"

Don Álvaro remained silent and hesitated for a few moments, and then he again asked Saldaña:

"And do you suppose the count will fight alongside his men tomorrow?"

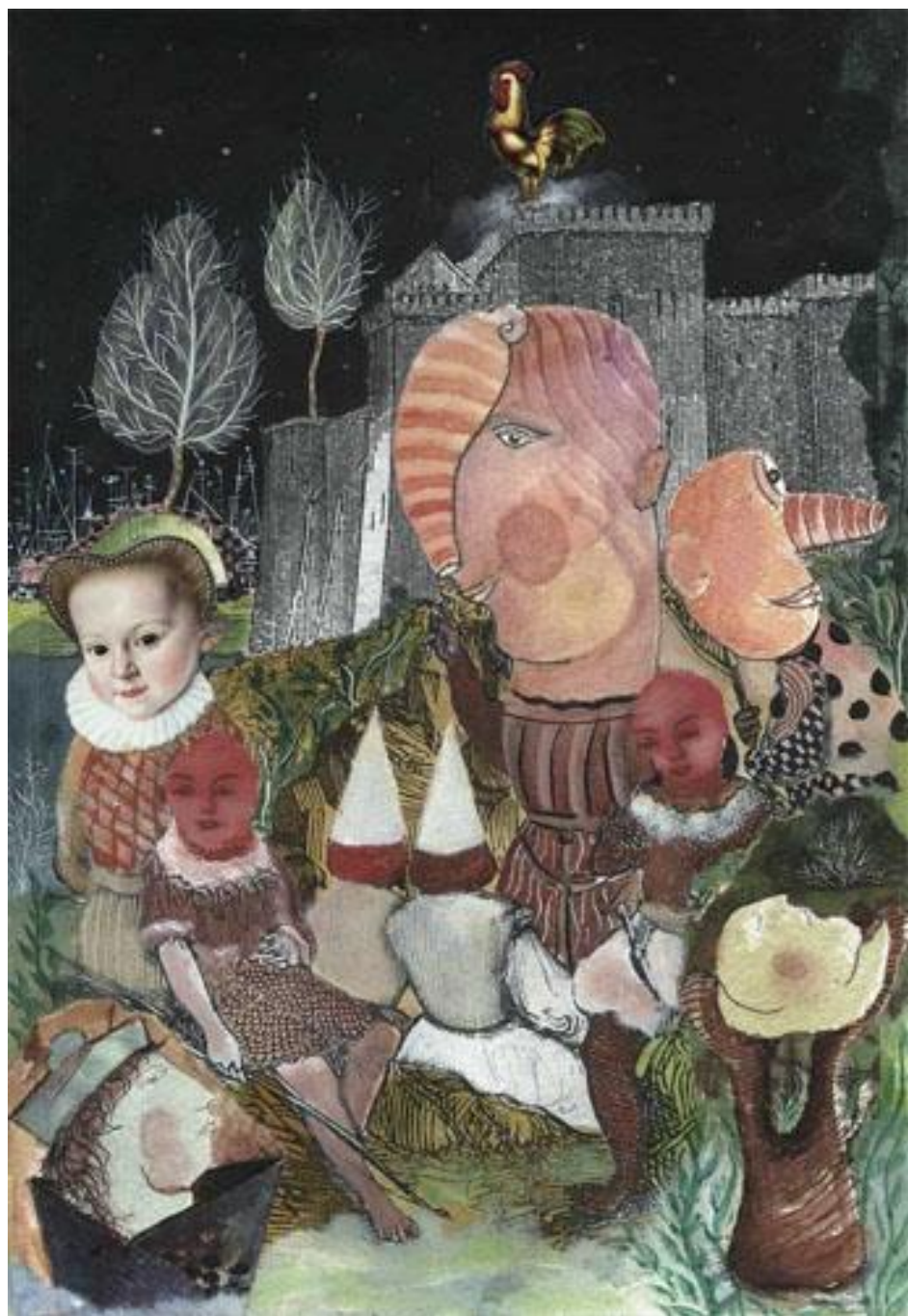
"No, certainly not," Saldaña answered, "because you know that our enemy will not move from the place of attack where there is the greatest peril. Just because of our hatred, we are compelled to do him justice."

"Well, then," replied Don Álvaro, "I would be grateful if you would leave me in the barbican of the castle."

Saldaña then raised his head and gave him a terrible look that Don Álvaro did not see in the darkness of the night, but the old commander's gesture made the knight lower his eyes.

"Don Álvaro," the old man said sternly, "for many years, no man has been as dear to my heart as you have. Therefore, I will not warn you that your only duty is obedience. But I will not fail to tell you that personal detachment is what most honours a knight. I need you for this enterprise, now go and fulfil the mission I have given you. Do not trouble yourself today with your hatred, no matter how legitimate it may be, and wait for tomorrow, when perhaps luck will place him in your hands. Anyway, if fate leaves him in mine, maybe things will turn out worse for the Count of Lemos."

Don Álvaro, somewhat ashamed of having wanted to put the interest of his vengeance before the glory of the military order that had received him with so much love into its ranks, made his apologies to the commander, who accepted them with benevolent affection. Don Álvaro then went to prepare himself for his perilous assignment. The commander left the knight and went to give the final orders and finish his preparations, already in an advanced stage, with which he planned to meet the besiegers' assault on the following day.



Chapter XXVI – The attack on Cornatel

A long time before the pallid and colourless dawn appeared among the mist on that day in which so many pitiful events would occur, Don Álvaro, followed by a great troop of knights, went down the stairs that he had trod only once before and with very different hopes in his heart. The horses also got down without difficulty to the edge of the stream, which rushed with a tremendous tumult, ideal to disguise the sound of their progress. They proceeded silently and very attentive to the imminent peril that surrounded them, for they advanced along a slippery slope on a narrow and tortuous path at the very edge of the huge ravines that the stream excavates just before it joins the Sil. They rode in single file, in great danger of falling to the bottom at the slightest slip. And no lesser was the risk that they might be discovered in such a tight spot by the neighing of a horse. But these generous animals, as if they knew the importance of the occasion, not only walked the difficult road without taking a false step, but scarcely let loose a short snort. At last they came out of that narrow passage, and before dawn they already lay in ambush in the forest of wild olive trees that borders the village of San Juan de Paluezas, very close to the Count of Lemos's cavalry camp. There, carefully concealed, they waited for the agreed signal.

It was not long before the watery skies of the east were faintly coloured by the light of dawn, and the clarions, bagpipes, and drums of the besiegers awakened those who still slept by the embers of the camp fires. All the count's forces rose up in exultation, and, with terrible cries, immediately formed up under their banners. The Count of Lemos left his tent and, on a white horse where the terrain permitted, and on foot in the most difficult places, passed through the ranks and squads distributing money, rations and liquor, and encouraging them with his natural and cunning eloquence against those unholy idolaters who worshiped a cat and who, abandoned by the hand of God, would soon fall into their grasp. These arguments impressed and exalted those gullible and simple people and redoubled their high spirits, so that the shouting and the outcry were like deafening thunder in the air. On the other hand, the Templars, after their accustomed prayer, maintained their natural gravity, and the commander, who had intended to harangue them, seeing their bold looks, felt there was

no need to exhort men in whose breasts the flame of courage burned as on an altar of their own. Saldaña contented himself with repeating to the assembled Templars, with that majestic intonation that so well suited the Psalm, the verse which he had spoken to Don Álvaro a few days earlier when he took command of the castle for the second time: *Dominus mihi custos, et ego disperdam inimicos meos*, "The Lord is my guardian, and I will annihilate my enemies." The knights, aspirants and men-at-arms repeated in a low voice, and then each one remained in his place without another word.

The moments that followed were full of the anxiety and anguish that usually precede a battle, when fear, hope and the desire for glory mingle with fond memories and ties that bind the heart to other places and other people and a throng of contradictory feelings struggle for mastery in every heart. At last the trumpets of the besiegers gave the signal, to which the long Moorish trumpets and clarions of the Templars responded with sharp resonant notes as in defiance. The squadrons designated to launch the assault were rapidly set in motion, preceded by a cordon of crossbowmen that fired a cloud of arrows and supported by many others who from the rocks and undergrowth helped them mightily. They advanced, as was expected, against the barbican of the castle, separated only by the moat and connected to the fortress by the drawbridge. The assailants fired their arrows and bolts against the knights defending the barbican, who repelled the besiegers with discharges that smote and wounded many. However, their defence of the barbican was less tenacious than the count had expected, and so his forces began a more daring attack on the door, beating upon it with many axes.

The knights, no doubt seeing how little those weak planks could withstand such violent blows, soon crossed the drawbridge that was raised at once. Just at that moment, the Cabrerans and Galicians forced the door and rushed into the barbican. All the attackers, and Lemos especially, were astonished at such a poor defence and believed that the final hour of the Temple had arrived, seeing the shining star of its valour fade so suddenly. They began to insult the Templar warriors with offensive words, which the knights did not respond to, except by firing from time to time an arrow or stone, but carefully guarding themselves on the battlements. Far away, the cavalry, who saw the triumph of their side and spied the count's banner waving on the barbican, burst into a loud and joyous outcry, cheering and brandishing their

spears from below. The count's cavalymen were on foot, each holding the bridle of his horse in his right hand, resting in their position on the road to Ponferrada. They had their eyes and souls set on the drama occurring above in the castle, which, to their great annoyance they could only watch as mere spectators.

The besiegers at the barbican immediately brought forward the bridge of timbers they had been nailing together and preparing on the previous night. They had not, of course, brought it up before, believing that the first attack would be longer and more contested. Since things had turned out differently, they immediately appeared with their makeshift but solid frame by the inner door of the barbican to throw it over the moat. The defenders then seemed to revive and appeared on the platform that overlooked the door, throwing stones and darts. However, the hail of arrows sent by the mountaineers made them withdraw immediately. There was such a throng of these wretched attackers that the barbican was crowded with people, each more eager than the next to rush to the castle gate and throw it to the ground, to sack and slaughter those cowardly warriors. Finally, with a lot of work, the bridge was set in place and countless mountain people and men from Valdeorras crowded together to strike the castle's iron-clad gates with their axes.

No sooner had they struck the first blows than a cry of horror rang out among those unfortunate men, a great many of whom fell into the moat while others, on the bridge, were uttering dreadful howls and writhing desperately. Those who followed them, pushed by the immense crowd behind, though horrified because they scarcely knew what the cause of that sudden accident was, ran towards the door as well. It was clear then what had caused such screams and such great havoc. Those poorly armed wretches met their end, scorched under a shower of molten lead, oil and boiling pitch that came from the platform. From here also flew many arrows covered with tar and burning cloth that could not be detached or torn out without burning their hands. Some wanted to retreat, but the extraordinary thrust that came from outside not only hindered them, but also ceaselessly pushed fresh victims onto the bridge.

Those who were under the arch of the door, aware of their danger and believing themselves covered for a few moments, continued their blows eager to bring an end to that horrible scene. But when they were least alert, through holes that had no doubt

been left in the masonry on purpose, the infernal liquid began to rain upon them, and when they tried to retreat, the stones that fell through the openings finally destroyed them. Then the castle bell began to ring as if it were tolling for those who were dying in its moats and at the foot of its walls. The battlements and the platform were crowned with knights who, covered in steel from head to toe and with the white mantle on their backs and the red cross emblazoned on one side, appeared like visions of the other world in the eyes of that frightened crowd. Then some black slaves who were pouring out from the battlements that voracious fire onto the suffering crowd, showed their flattened jet-black faces, animated by a devilish smile. And those frightened people, thinking that all hell was fighting against them, began to throw down their weapons in dismay and take flight.

The count, who had found himself overwhelmed by the crowd in the barbican, was able to detach himself at that critical moment. Fighting his way to the bridge to revive his fleeing soldiers, passing over the dead and wounded and ignoring the rain of stones and boiling oil that fell on his impenetrable armour, he came to the castle gate, accompanied by a well-armed close relative of his. They grabbed the axes from the hands of two dead men and began to hammer at the gate with blows so hard that the timbers shuddered from top to bottom despite their iron plating. Then a huge granite ball, coming down one of the openings, crashed onto the head of the count's relative, who at once fell to the ground dead, with his neck and skull broken. Seeing this, other noblemen of the count's retinue, who had remained at the door of the barbican, hurried across the bridge and forcefully pulled their chief to relative safety.

Meanwhile the cavalry, as we have said, were enviously watching their companions fighting, when they heard the castle bell ring. Then they thought that the count's forces had taken the fortress, and with wild presumption they began to congratulate themselves on seeing such a happy day. Suddenly, a shiver went down their spines when a trumpet sounded in their ears like that of the day of judgement, and when they turned, their astonished eyes beheld Don Álvaro's small but gallant squadron charging at them at full gallop with their lances at the ready. Many horses, no less frightened than their riders, broke their bridles and raced down the slopes leaving their owners on foot, and these were the first to fall to the iron of the Templars' spears. The rest, who were able to get into their saddles amid the tumult, milled around and closed themselves in a tight circle, but only managed to make a

very short resistance. During this engagement, many of the count's cavalry bit the dust, and soon the remainder dispersed, some of them descending to join the detachment that was on the road to Ponferrada, others running up the hillside to join the bands of foot soldiers, and the rest fleeing in a mad race along the road to Las Médulas. Then Don Álvaro, eager to catch up with the retreating cavalymen who were going to join the main body of the count's host, galloped after them along the slope, with the firm intent not only to drive them away, but to attack his enemy from the rear.

Saldaña, well informed of the success of this risky enterprise, then came down followed by his most select knights, and letting down the drawbridge, because the other was already half consumed by fire, attacked the barbican with a battle axe in his hands. Each of its strokes cut the thread of life in one of those men still crowded and crammed together there. Amid that tumult and slaughter, he spotted the count, who was struggling to return to the bridge, accompanied by his most loyal retainers and kinsmen.

"Treacherous count!" cried the commander, "how so far from danger?"

"Here I come, hellish sorcerer, servant of Satan!" he replied, his mouth full of foam and grinding his teeth. And with a furious lunge he charged at the old Templar with blind determination.

The count came upon Saldaña and with the greatest courage made a superb thrust with his sword that the commander was able to dodge. And raising his axe with both hands, Saldaña was going to cleave it through his head when one of the count's kinsmen came between them. The commander brought down his weapon like a bolt of lightning, dividing the man's shield as if it were made of wax and, splitting his helmet, cracked the skull of that ill-fated servant who fell to the ground with a deep groan. Then a fierce battle ensued, for when the count's soldiers saw that they were fighting with men and not phantoms or infernal spirits, they took courage. But since they were worse armed and less skilled than their enemies, they were losing the day. Just then a rider on a horse all white with foam and breathless, appeared at the door of the barbican and said with a loud voice:

"Count of Lemos! Your cavalry has been disarmed by a squadron of these Templar dogs, which will arrive here in less than six minutes."

"Are there more misfortunes to come, merciless heavens?" the count cried, lifting his sword to the sky and shaking it in anger.

"Yes, there are," said Saldaña, in a voice of thunder, "for the one

who, with a handful of knights, has destroyed your numerous cavalry, is none other than Don Álvaro, the Lord of Bemibre, your enemy!"

The count roared like a tiger, and again wanted to attack the commander. But his men stopped him and dragged him away, for the cries and gallop of the knights under Don Álvaro's command were heard very close by. Saldaña did not think it prudent to rush out of his castle with the few men that were defending it, to face an enemy that still had considerable numbers and who had already shown repeated signs of valour. The knights who accompanied him had blocked the door with their bodies, and had entrapped a great many mountain people who, although they did not attack, seemed unwilling to surrender without fighting again. So the wise old commander spoke to the enemy soldiers facing him:

"And you, unfortunate souls, what fate do you expect, after attacking us for no reason?"

"You will sacrifice us to your idol," said one who looked like the captain, "and you will dress him with our skins, just as people say you do, but it will cost you dearly. And as for coming against you in war, the King and the Count of Lemos, our natural lords, have decreed it thus and as we are obliged to serve them, that is why we have come."

"And who are you that speaks to me with such assurance, when you are so close to your last hour? What is your name?"

"Cosme Andrade," he replied firmly.

"Ah," replied Saldaña, "then you are the archer whose name is celebrated all over Cabrera?"

"My name would have been more celebrated today," he replied, "but for your accursed armour, because I would have pierced your body at least five times with my arrows."

"And what would you have done to me if I had fallen into your hands?" Saldaña asked.

"I was not the one who commanded, and therefore your fate would have nothing to do with me," the archer replied. "But if the count had ordered you to be burned alive, as he says they have done with your sort in far off lands, I would have stoked the fire."

"You mean that you would not feel offended if I command that you be hanged, because that is still treating you better than having you burned alive?"

"Well, sir," said the mountain man, "no one likes to die when, like me, he can still kill many bears and chamois and deer. But when I came to war, I realized that in such an occupation it is not easy to arrange to die in bed, nursed by your wife and with the

priest standing by. So, Sir Knight, do what you will with us, but do not be surprised that we defend ourselves, because all animals do so when they are harassed."

"You have no need to defend yourselves from me," replied Saldaña, "because your courage frees you all from captivity and punishment." "Knight Carvajal," he said to one of his companions, "let a hundred gold coins be given to the valiant Andrade so that he learns how to properly treat his vanquished enemies, and accompany him until he meets Don Álvaro, in case some misadventure should befall him."

The mountaineer took off the fur cap he had been wearing until then, and said:

"I appreciate you sparing my life and giving me this money, because I understand you do so notwithstanding the fidelity I owe to my king and to the count my lord." The commander nodded. "Well, then," added the mountain man, "may God reward you, and if one day, you or one of your own are persecuted, then make your way to Cabrera, for Andrade is there, and he will teach a lesson to anyone who tries to harm you."

With these words, the archer left, very pleased, followed by his men and accompanied by the knight Carvajal, and saying to himself:

"No, however much the count goes on about the Templars being sorcerers or not, and even if they did have a close covenant with the Devil, neither the Devil nor the count can deny these Templars are true knights! I pray that God will give me an opportunity to do something for them in return for their goodness to me!"

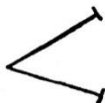
Saldaña's precaution could not have been wiser, for after a few paces they met Don Álvaro's knights who, upon seeing the mountaineers' reddish jerkins, immediately readied their lances. Carvajal stepped forward, and Don Álvaro let them pass safely, with no more regret than the memory of the companions who had been left dead in front of that terrible castle.

Don Álvaro had not only fulfilled the purpose of his sortie, the rout of the count's cavalry, but in addition, before returning to Cornatel, he had burned the palisades and huts of the besiegers, seized their provisions and equipment and dragged the enemy flag behind him. All this happened in the sight of the count, as he climbed the steep slope of the hills, desperately trying to control the terrible panic within his forces and bring them back to carry out his plans. From his vantage point, the count saw his hated rival,

Don Álvaro, laying waste and destroying everything, while he himself fled among his men, who at that moment looked like a herd of roe deer pursued by hunters.

So the count gathered his people as best he could, and that same night he returned to Las Médulas, the place he had left with very different thoughts two days earlier. There he chose a strong and advantageous position, in which he established a camp with the utmost care, and where, little by little, his scattered forces joined him. That long night passed with the voices of those who called out to each other as they arrived, amidst the cries of the wounded and the mourning of women who had lost someone dear to them. The bravest had perished in the fray, and when their respective chiefs called out their names, the only reply was silence or a bitter lament. The count himself had lost two very close kinsmen, and he saw that this enterprise from which he had hoped to win so much honour and glory, would be delayed for a long time. All these misfortunes exacerbated his offended pride and revived his burning hatred of the Templars and especially Don Álvaro, so that he was ready to try anything in order to have his revenge.

As for the Lord of Bembibre, who had won so many laurels on that day, he was received with such esteem and applause, that his entry into Cornatel was a genuine triumph.





Chapter XXVII – Finding the hidden way

After the ill-fated enterprise we have just described, the count sent to his estates in Galicia for reinforcements, firm in his intention to obliterate the affront he had received, by taking Cornatel. Before they arrived, however, the troops of Arganza and Carracedo crossed the Sil under the command of Don Alonso Ossorio and went to swell the count's decimated ranks. This was a very opportune relief in the unfavourable circumstances he faced, not only because of the number and quality of these warriors, but also because of the prestige that the Lord of Arganza enjoyed in that country, and above all because of the approval of the Church, as evidenced by the intervention of the Abbot of Carracedo, justly respected for his austere virtues. With this, confidence was restored in his small army and a few days later, fresh bands of men began to arrive from Cabrera so that the count's habitual and hopeful ambitions blossomed once again.

The conversation between father-in-law and son-in-law was, as our readers may imagine, very ceremonious, because in front of their respective vassals they had to show the example of union and concord of wills, which could bring so much profit to the cause they defended.

It was not the least of Don Alonso's displeasures having to impatiently suffer while serving under the command of a man who, united to him by the ties of the most immediate kinship, was far from his heart because of the foulness that blemished him. The count knew very well the difficulty of purging himself of his guilt in the eyes of his father-in-law. But it pleased him to see the vassals of Arganza marching under his own banners, as this had always been one of his calculated aims and, trapped in his pride, he did not want to engage with his father-in-law in any kind of explanation. Don Alonso, on the other hand, maintained a similar conduct and although in front of his own people and in all public acts he treated the count with deference and even with cordiality, when chance brought them together alone, they would speak only of military affairs and the mission that lay ahead. This situation was painful for both, but above all for Don Alonso, whose frank and noble character was at odds with such falsehood and duplicity. However, the desire to conceal from the eyes of the common folk the sorrows and discord of his family forced him to devour his

bitterness in silence. Unfortunately for him, he had awakened too late, and this made it even more insufferable to compare the fate that had befallen his daughter in her marriage to the count with what might have occurred if her father had made another, better choice.

The Galician reinforcements were a long time in coming, both because of the greater distance they had to travel and because the count, chastened by the last encounter with the Templars and convinced that Cornatel was not to be won in a single assault, had ordered blunderbusses and other war machines to be brought and this had greatly hindered the progress of the troops. During this time, serious events occurred which accelerated the outcome of that terrible and entangled drama. The Templars of Aragon, abandoned by all their allies and struggling with a stronger and more powerful throne than that of Castile, could scarcely resist. They were besieged in Monzón and other castles, with the forces of that entire region contending against them and were already negotiating their surrender.

The King of Portugal, in spite of his attachment to that noble Order, seeing the difficulty of calming public opinion and fearing the wrath of the Vatican, had yielded in his purpose, more generous than political. He therefore advised Don Rodrigo Yáñez and the Lieutenant of Aragon to accept his mediation, rely on the judgement of the provincial councils and deliver their castles and properties, in obedience to the papal bulls. This had been the opinion of the Master of Castile at first, but the outrages suffered by the Order, the difficulty of calming the consequent anger among his knights, and finally the imprudence of King Ferdinand IV, to choose as captain of that faction the Count of Lemos, the fiercest enemy of the Temple in the Kingdom of León, had forced him to reconsider such a plan.

In any case, the inexorable hand of fate now seemed to indicate this path, and so he sent letters to Saldaña, informing him of what was going on and urging him to put an end to the bloodshed and enter honourable capitulations with the count. The old commander answered that the Count of Lemos's ruthless hatred and rancour made any fair and decorous agreement impossible, for he only dreamed and breathed revenge for the defeat he had experienced before the walls of Cornatel. He said that with a man such as the count, devoid of all nobility, he could not guarantee the lives of his knights. But Saldaña also conceded that if the king

transferred to any other of his noblemen the office and authority exercised by the count, he would of course initiate the necessary talks.

News of these events soon circulated in the besieging camp, and the count took full advantage of them in his pursuit of hatred and revenge. His father-in-law Don Alonso did not fail to remind the count of how far from the law of chivalry it was to deny an honourable settlement to an enemy with such an illustrious reputation as the Order. And how much damage could result for the hapless Castile from the prolongation of a fratricidal struggle. But the count replied that his orders were final, and that Arganza's only role was obedience. They parted, more at odds than ever, and the Lord of Arganza threatened the count saying that he would reveal to the king the preference he gave to his own quarrels and private interests over the common good of the land and the crown. The count, not unaware of the justice and prudence of such claims, was rightly afraid that the court would eventually agree to them. And as his troops were already provisioned and reinforced, he decided to launch the final assault on Cornatel.

He soon discovered that the horsemen who had routed his cavalry had left the castle of Cornatel and had not come from Ponferrada, as he had at first thought they would. So the count endeavoured to discover the mysterious entry to the castle, which undoubtedly was at the foot of the precipice, eager to pay his enemy back with the same coin. He called for the intrepid Cosme Andrade, who, thanks to his serenity and his skill as a hunter, could pass through places that were inaccessible to most people. At the same time, the skilled archer also possessed great cunning and sagacity.

"Cosme," the count said as soon as he saw him, "do you think we can enter that infernal castle by going up the side of the cliff?"

"It looks very difficult to me, sir," said the mountain man, twisting his fur cap in his hands, "unless we had the wings of partridges and kites. But is there more than meets the eye, sir?" the clever hunter ventured.

"Yes, that's the danger," the count replied, "because by tossing a rock down from above, they can crush anyone ascending such narrow straits."

"There's no gain without pain," replied the quick-thinking Andrade, "and it will not be much worse than it was on that damn bridge which seemed the bridge to hell."

The count frowned at this annoying reminder of his defeat, but restraining himself as he could, he explained his wishes to the mountain man who, with the sharpness of those people, understood them at once.

"So, with the help of God," concluded the count, "we will presently bring to account those wicked sorcerers who defend themselves with their evil arts alone."

"In that, you must forgive me, sir, but I disagree," replied the sincere mountain man. "For if the devil assists them, they assist themselves no less with their own arms, which are not like feathers. And above all, magicians or not, they had me and my company prisoners and it was in their power to hang us in the sun for the crows to eat, but instead, they let us go in peace and what's more they gave us one hundred gold coins as a gift."

And then he told the count what had occurred in the castle's postern gate and Commander Saldaña's generosity. The count bit his lips with spite, seeing that in all things he was surpassed by these honourable enemies, and desiring to better the commander's liberality, he said to the hunter:

"I'll give you two hundred gold coins, if you find a way for us to enter the castle."

"I will do that without taking the two hundred," replied Andrade. "The hundred that Saldaña gave me, I have distributed among the wounded and widows of the poor men who died that day. As for me, God be blessed, I need nothing, as long as I have my crossbow and there are bears and boars in Cabrera for me to hunt."

With this, and after receiving the count's instructions, he left the tent. Andrade then gathered together a dozen of his bravest men and rounding Villavieja he went down to the stream and approached the very foot of the rock face that protects the castle in that place. With their eyes accustomed to hunting in the dark, they began to search among the bushes and rocks, and within a gap formed by two of the boulders, half covered by bushes, they soon found the iron bars of the grating. But no sooner had they approached when an arrow came whistling out of the darkness and grazed one of them in the arm. They got away quickly, realizing that it was impossible to surprise such vigilant defenders, and that a forceful attack on them would be as reckless as it would be useless. So they started to retreat, but as they passed beneath the eastern corner of the castle, Andrade stopped and began to look

intently at the cracks and thickets of that steep slope. Once satisfied with his reconnaissance, he began to climb up that rugged precipice by taking hold of any bush he found and setting his foot on the slightest prominence of the rock, until, to his men's astonishment, he reached a kind of platform a short distance from the tower. There he listened intently to see if he could hear the footsteps of a sentinel. After carefully observing for a while all the features, forms and projections of the terrain, he descended again the same way he had climbed, although with greater effort. As soon as he reached the bank of the stream, he ordered his companions to be silent and, advancing quickly, they were not long in reaching the ravines of Las Médulas. The count was sleeping at the time, but when Andrade arrived at the entrance of the tent, a page awakened him and soon the mountain man was brought in. The count made him sit down, and after offering him a goblet of wine, which Andrade consigned to his stomach without ceremony, Lemos asked for an account of his expedition.

"We found the door," Andrade said, "but it's vigilantly defended and there's no point in thinking of breaking our teeth on that bone."

"I should have known," said the count, "but impatience blinds me and consumes me."

"Do not feel sorry for that, sir," said the mountaineer, "for I have discovered another better and safer way."

"What way?" The count asked anxiously.

"The tower on the east side of the promontory," said the hunter, who was very proud to deliver his news.

The count frowned and told him harshly:

"Are you crazy, Andrade? Not even the roe deer and chamois of your mountains are capable of climbing there!"

"But we are," he replied with a little ill-concealed vanity. "Crazy, you say? In truth, for you and your lowland folk, it must seem like madness to clamber up that cliff side to a few yards from the wall. But we're used to scaling such difficult heights."

"But did you not say that partridge wings were needed for that?" the count asked, astonished.

"If I said that before," Andrade replied, "well, now I say something else. As my grandmother used to say, it is wise to change your mind when the need arises. And besides, I am not like the river Sil that cannot flow backwards, not to go back on my

judgments when they are wrong. I tell you, my lord, that from there to the castle, all we need is a ladder or a few braces of rope with a hook on the end."

"But do you think they will not have lookouts or sentinels there? It would not take more than two men up there to undo us," said the Count.

"I was listening for more than an hour," said the mountaineer, who was beginning to grow impatient with so many objections, "and I heard no singing, no praying, no whistling, and no noise of weapons or footsteps."

"Ah!" replied the count, standing up with fierce jubilation. "They are mine, and this time they will not escape me. Ask me for what you most value of all my property and lands, good Andrade, and I will give it to you instantly."

"Wealth is not what I'm asking for in reward, sir," replied the Cabreran, "but for you to spare the life of the commander in particular and of all the other knights that we capture. They spared mine and those of my men, and as you know without doubt better than I, gratitude is the sign of noble souls."

The count was disturbed by this strange request, but regaining his natural and wrathful disposition, he gritted his teeth and clenched his fists:

"The life of that dog Saldaña! Neither heaven nor hell would snatch it from my hands!" he roared.

"Well, then," said the mountaineer resolutely, "we will see how your Galicians, who are as agile as toads, climb up that goat track, for I and my men will return to our mountains and valleys tomorrow."

"Perhaps you will not return to your mountains," replied the count in a voice choked with rage, "for perhaps I will have you tied to a tree and tear your flesh with a scourge until you die. Your duty is to serve me as my vassals, which is what you are," the vindictive count retorted.

The mountaineer responded calmly but courageously:

"During the winter season, which is our time for beating the bushes on the hillsides and hunting game, you know that according to ancient custom and the rule of our elders, we are not obliged to serve you. What service we are doing now, is so that no one can say that danger deters us. As to what you say of tying me to a tree and having me flogged," he added, staring back at the count, "you had better not to try it, because that is a punishment for commoners,

and I am a gentleman like you, and I have a title of nobility that is older than yours and a bow and a hunting knife with which to defend it."

The count, though trembling with spite, by one of those efforts of the duplicity and simulation of his soul, knowing the need he had of Andrade and his men, changed his tone after a while and said amiably:

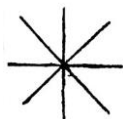
"Andrade, I grant you the lives of the men you take alive, but do not forget my anger toward them because they have wronged me greatly."

"Then we agree. The surrendered are never to be harassed," replied Andrade. "Now you have us in your service until our dying day."

"Go with God," said the count, "and arrange everything for an assault the day after tomorrow at dawn."

The mountaineer left at once, and the count exclaimed with an ironic smile:

"Poor fool! And when I have the Templar dogs in my hands, will you be the one to snatch them out of my grip?"



Chapter XXVIII – Single combat on the tower

The Templars at Cornatel were threatened by such imminent danger because there was no recorded memory of any human being ever having set foot on the top of that abyss, and this endeavour seemed beyond the reach of human dexterity, so the knights did not guard the eastern corner of the castle. The only thing that used to be done in times of danger was to visit the tower from time to time, more to survey the field from there than to prevent any attack. If an enemy were to occupy the tower, since there were no internal obstacles to stop them, it was clear that the advantage of numbers would be decisive. Attacked at the same time from the front and the flank and bewildered by that sudden and inconceivable manoeuvre, the death or imprisonment of all the knights was certain. It was only by a rare coincidence that this ingeniously conceived plan was aborted.

Saldaña, as an experienced commander, did not neglect to find out by all means imaginable what was going on in the enemy camp and his spies, under a thousand well-contrived disguises, were constantly bringing him precious news. It happened, then, that one night our old acquaintance Millán volunteered to go out on reconnaissance and, disguising himself in the clothes of a mountaineer who had died in the castle in the last fray, he went to Las Médulas at night, accompanied by another Temple servant, a native of the country, who knew all the trails and pathways like the corners of his house. The sight of the count's camp amid those deep gullies, whose reddish colour stood out even more with the quivering glow of the bonfires, was very picturesque. Most of the soldiers were sheltered from the cold in the caves and remains of the old subterranean galleries. But the sentinels who watched through the night to prevent any surprise attack were perched on the crags, sometimes visible and sometimes invisible, according to how the flickering flames of the fires rose and fell, casting more vivid or muted reflections, but always creating uncertain and confused images so that the watchers seemed to dance like so many fantastic shadows in those high places. The very form of those mounds, capricious and strange, and the darkness of the undergrowth, gave the whole scene an indefinable feeling of enigmatic and mysterious vagueness.

For someone who knows all the ramifications of the old mines,

it is easy to elude the most attentive sentinels through that complex labyrinth. So Millán's companion guided him through the most terrible darkness to a place where a group of Cabrerans were camped and were talking in great excitement. They were gathered around a large camp fire, and one of them, sitting on a log, was saying aloud to his companions:

"Well, my friends, he has insisted on coming, no matter how much I have told him that he is going to break his neck climbing up those rocks. May God bless us, because if after this we don't get into the castle, a fine mess we'll be in!"

As the mountaineer was sitting sideways, Millán could not distinguish his features, but by the sound of the voice he at once recognised the intrepid Andrade. So he paid close attention to everything that the archer said, which was of great interest to him.

"Lack of ropes and hooks will not hinder us," replied another, "because we have plenty, but did you say the count wants to be one of the first into the castle?"

"He wants to be the first," Andrade said, "but God willing, we'll go in together."

"Well," said another, "I still don't know which way we're going to go up."

Andrade explained it clearly, while Millán, not daring to breathe, was all ears.

"And will it be tomorrow?" one asked.

"No, tomorrow we will all approach the castle as we did the last time, with all our equipment, as if we were going to put up a real siege. Then the day after tomorrow, while on the other side of the fort the count's forces raise a great outcry and commotion, as if they were going to storm the walls, we will climb the cliff and slip into the castle like foxes breaking into a chicken coop. Since you are the ones destined for this adventure, it is all the same whether you know it now or later ... but keep your mouths shut!"

Everyone put their finger to their lips with very expressive gestures. Then they began to dine on cured meats, drinking generously. Millán then, giving thanks to heaven for the discovery he had just made, hurried out of his hiding place and returned to Cornatel with his companion. As he left the mine, he glanced at the hollows of those strange valleys, and he saw many people coming and going, some with torches of burning straw and others loaded with various bundles. In the same direction, too, many beasts of burden appeared, and all over the camp there was a great bustle.

This convinced the good Millán of the accuracy of the news he had so fortunately received. He went back to the castle with great haste and as soon as he entered he went to see his master and told him everything he knew about the planned assault. Don Álvaro showed signs of great joy on hearing this report, and the cloud of melancholy that almost always covered his features suddenly vanished from his countenance, which the squire could not but marvel at. Then he took hold of his servant's arm, looked at him intently, and said,

"Millán, will you do what I tell you?"

"Do you doubt it, sir?" answered the squire, "for what am I to do but obey?"

"Then do not say anything to the commander about this covert attack."

"But what if they get into the castle by this way?"

"You and I alone are enough to teach them a lesson," Don Álvaro replied. "Do you not want to come with me?"

"With my heart and soul," replied the proud squire, "and I wish my arm were that of Bernardo del Carpio in Roncesvalles."

"It will do just as it is," replied Don Álvaro, smiling, "and be of great use to us. Go and wake up the commander and tell him everything except the attack on the tower."

"Ah, so the count himself comes to fall under my sword!" the Templar Don Álvaro said to himself as soon as Millán had left. "God in Heaven, let him come safely to me! Give him the wings of the eagle and the nimbleness of the deer to make that difficult climb."

The next morning the enemies returned to their former positions and again began the siege work, which they had drenched with so much blood not so long ago. In this they spent all day, to the great indifference of the Templars, for whom the decisive moment had not yet arrived. The following day however, very early, there was a great deal of agitation in the besieging camp, and the sound of bagpipes, trumpets and drums was heard from early on. All over El Bierzo, fogs are quite frequent because of the proximity of the mountains and the abundance of rivers, and on that day the mist that covered the precipices and slopes of Cornatel was very thick. Thus, it was not until the besiegers approached the walls that Saldaña saw the good order with which they were advancing against the castle, which did not fail to inspire some fears in him. As in the previous assault, the same cloud of arrows

from the marksmen filled the air. But at the same time a good number of better-armed soldiers, with a kind of portable wall of planks, covered with wet hides to avoid the fire that afflicted their previous attack, slowly advanced towards the moat. Behind this ingenious shelter came another squadron of soldiers with hoes and shovels, and behind them another group carrying ladders on their shoulders. Saldaña understood at once what his enemies' intentions might be. They undoubtedly planned, under the cover of the wall, to straddle the moat, leaning the ladders at different points at the same time. Then, taking advantage of their number, they intended to make so many attacks on the fort, that by dividing the forces of the besieged, they would make a simultaneous and vigorous defence impossible. Against an attack planned with such skill, only one resort occurred to the old commander, a sudden and terrible counterattack from the castle that could disconcert the besiegers.

"Where is Don Álvaro?" he asked, looking around.

"I believe I saw him enter the barbican earlier," replied the knight Carvajal.

"Then go and tell him to have all our forces ready to go out against the enemy, and that the signal will be given to him as before, by the ringing of the castle bell."

Carvajal went out to pass on the commander's orders, but as our readers might suppose, Don Álvaro was not in the barbican but, like an eagle perched on a cliff, watching the arrival of the enemies, and especially the count.

The strange configuration of the terrain on which the fortress had been built had made it necessary to lengthen the castle considerably from west to east. The mist, which so favoured the plans and intentions of Lemos, concealing his dangerous assault, was no less favourable to Don Álvaro, who in that far-off niche, was invisible to the eyes of his own forces. The tower, built on a protruding rock, forms a kind of diamond shape of only a few square feet and communicates with the rest of the fortress by a narrow gorge flanked by two terrible cliffs. In such a small space, however, the fate of two warriors was to be decided. The combatants were equally illustrious in terms of their ancestry, their riches and valour, but could not have been more different in their moral qualities and chivalrous sentiments.

Although the heavy mist hid Don Álvaro and his faithful squire from the sight of his enemies, in order to better set the trap, they

both lay on the ground behind the battlements. There was a great calm in the atmosphere, and the heavy vapours that filled it faithfully transmitted every sound, so that Millán and his master heard the rattle of the iron hooks that the foremost enemies were fixing on the rocks to facilitate the ascent of the rest with ropes, and the whispered instructions that they cautiously gave them as they climbed. Andrade's sonorous voice, no matter how carefully he suppressed it, stood out among them all, and as it was he who led that singular and daring march, by listening to him, Don Álvaro could calculate the distance that still separated them from their enemies. At last Andrade's voice was heard very close and then it fell silent and no more was heard than the sounds of people who, after climbing laboriously, reached a ground on which they could stand. The Lord of Bembibre reasonably surmised that the count, Cosme Andrade and his mountaineers were already on the small esplanade formed by the very rock of the wall, not high in that place. The moment of truth had arrived.

A few minutes later, two iron hooks, each tied to the end of a rope ladder, fell onto the platform where Don Álvaro was crouching, and gripped firmly onto the battlements.

"Are you sure it is safe?" asked a voice from below, which made Don Álvaro shudder.

"As safe as if it were the main staircase of your castle of Monforte," replied Andrade, "you can climb up without care."

No sooner had these words been heard when there appeared on the battlements, on one side, the determined Andrade and on the other, the Count of Lemos. Millán then rose from the ground with a quick jump and gave the mountaineer a push which caught him off-guard and knocked him down from the walls.

"Holy Virgin assist me!" said the unhappy man, plunging down through the tremendous chasm, while his companions accompanied his fall with a cry of horror.

Millán, well prepared in advance, unhooked the ropes Andrade had used, and whipped them up in a moment. The count, fearful of suffering the same fate as Andrade, quickly leaped into the tower. Millán then pulled up his ladder in the same way and just as quickly. He immediately began to throw huge stones onto the mountaineers who, already terrified with the fall of their chief, huddled together in that small space at the foot of the wall. Then they all took flight with terrible shrieks, some of them falling off the cliff in their haste.

The two men now left alone on the battlements shared a mortal and reciprocal resentment. By one of those atmospheric accidents frequent in mountainous terrains, a terrible gust of wind that surged from the blackish rocks of Ferradillo, rapidly began to sweep away the mist, and some pale sun-rays began to illuminate the esplanade of the tower. As Don Álvaro and his squire had covered their faces with their visors, the count looked at them attentively, as if to discover their features.

"It is I, Count of Lemos," said Don Álvaro quietly revealing himself.

The anger and spite of being thus caught in his own trap flushed the count's face. Looking at the Lord of Bembibre with burning eyes, he answered:

"My heart told me I would find you here, and I'm glad it has been proven true. You are two against me alone and probably others will come to your signal. The deed is worthy of a coward like you."

"Will you never be able to measure the distance that separates the baseness of your character from true nobility?" Don Álvaro answered with a smile in which disdain and contempt verged on pity. "Millán, go back inside."

The squire began to glare at the count fiercely and was in no great haste to obey.

"Do as I say, villain!" said Don Álvaro, fired with anger, "get out of here, and count on me to cut off your tongue if one word of this escapes your lips."

Poor Millán, though very sullen and looking back, had no choice but to leave. This further display of generosity by Don Álvaro, which again humiliated the count, only served to inflame his arrogance and pride even more. The count clearly saw that his life had been at the mercy of his chivalrous enemy the moment he had set foot on that fatal battlement. Certainly, in terms of generosity and nobility, he was already defeated. Then, as ashamed as he was furious, he said to Don Álvaro, drawing his sword:

"It is high time that we settle our quarrel, so grievous that it can only end with the death of one of us."

"You will not be able to say that I have hindered you," Don Álvaro answered. "Now that I am but a soldier of the Temple and have renounced my rights as an independent lord, I am not ashamed to meet with you as your equal in single combat."

The Count of Lemos, without waiting for more conversation and roaring like a lion, lunged at Don Álvaro, who repelled him with

the serenity of mind and calm spirit that comes from an honourable heart and a clear conscience. The count was armed lightly, as was required for the climb that he had just undertaken, but this gave him the advantage of ease and swiftness in his movements over his opponent. Don Álvaro, fully armed, could not attack the count with the required zeal. But since the field of combat was so narrow, it was not long before he struck the count on the head, which was only protected by a thin steel helmet, and consequently he fell to the ground.

At once Don Álvaro threw himself on him and pressed the point of his sword to the count's throat.

"Ah, traitor!" said the count in a voice choked with rage, "you are better armed, and that's why you beat me."

Don Álvaro cast aside his sword, unfastened his helmet, and threw his shield down, saying:

"You are right; but now we are armed equally."

The count, more stunned than wounded, rose up and at once the fierce battle started again.

All this happened while the bulk of the besieging forces approached the castle as we have described and the commander sent his orders to Don Álvaro with the knight Carvajal. The knight soon returned, saying that Don Álvaro was not in the barbican. The commander was noticing with surprise the laxity with which the enemies pursued their attack, which they had begun so enthusiastically, when he received this unexpected answer from Carvajal.

"Where is he, then?" Saldaña exclaimed anxiously.

Then the idea that the enemies' obviously false assault might be related to the inconceivable absence of his godson came in a flash to Saldaña's imagination. At that moment, a gust of wind tore away the mists that were still swirling around the eastern part of the castle, and the platform of the tower was illuminated by the resplendent rays of the sun. As soon as the attackers discerned that part of the castle clearly, a cry of consternation arose from their ranks, for instead of seeing the tower occupied by their mountaineers, they could only see their leader in the hands of the enemy and fighting in single combat with one of them. Hearing their cries, the commander immediately looked round and the first thing that caught his eye was the smooth and continuous movement of swords glinting in the sun. Saldaña understood at once what this meant, and said aloud:

"Twelve knights, come with me, and the rest of you stay on the wall to defend it." Then with incredible speed for his years, the commander ran to the place of combat with his twelve knights.

"Don Álvaro," he called out from the narrow gorge between the tower and the castle, "stop in the name of obedience that you owe me."

The young man turned his head like a tiger whose prey is being snatched away, but nevertheless stopped.

"Don Álvaro," said Saldaña again as soon as he arrived on the platform, "this is not your affair, but a matter for the Order to settle, and I, who represent it here, take it into my charge." So saying, the venerable commander turned to face his enemy and said in a sonorous, authoritative voice, "Count of Lemos, defend yourself!"

"I am a Templar, too," said Don Álvaro, who barely managed to suppress his anger. "I have begun this battle and I will finish it in spite of you and the whole world."

The commander, knowing that anger was driving Don Álvaro mad, made a sign. Throwing themselves upon him, six knights seized him and pulled him away despite his struggles, threats and insults.

"At last you are brought to account, wretched knight," Saldaña said to the count, "now we will see what your conspiracies and your slanders are worth against an honourable opponent."

"I'm not in your power yet," the count spat back scornfully. "It will cost your life to try to take mine, for I do not intend to give it up."

"Your miserable life is of no use to you," replied the commander with a sardonic look. "However, you have to fight with me alone, and if victory crowns you, these knights will respect your person."

Some of the Templar knights wanted to interrupt their commander, but the old man silenced them immediately.

"I do not want anything from you," replied the count arrogantly. "And as long as my breath lasts, my arm will not cease to move against you. I only regret having to fight with a feeble old man."

"You have not long since fled from this old man," said the commander, "for it was I who drove you from the gate."

"You lie," said the count in a hoarse voice with eyes like burning coals, and without another word, the fighting began again.

The besiegers, full of anxiety for the count's fate, had moved to their right and, separated from the place where the fight was taking

place by the cliff, they waited like idle spectators to see the end of that terrible drama. Perched on a rock, Don Alonso who, in the absence of his son-in-law commanded those forces, seemed to have his soul hanging by a thread.

Despite the great power of Saldaña's arm, as the count surpassed him in agility and ease, his blows barely reached their target. Once, however, finding the old man off-guard, the count launched a furious reverse stroke at him which, if he had not avoided it quickly, would have ended the contest. But as it happened, the count's sword struck the wall and broke into pieces, leaving him completely unarmed. In such a desperate predicament, he had no choice but to throw himself at the commander before the old man recovered and engage him in an arm-to-arm struggle, to see if he could throw him to the ground and finish him off with his dagger. But this action was more desperate than anything else, because the old man was much more robust and sturdy. So, not disconcerted by the count's sudden attack, Saldaña grasped him in such a way that it left him breathless, and immediately lifting him into his arms, he threw him to the ground with such a tremendous blow that, knocking his head on a stone, the count lost consciousness. The inexorable old man then seized his opponent by the belt, and raising his limp body up onto a battlement, in a voice that seemed like the echo of a torrent in the terrifying silence that reigned below, he shouted to the besiegers:

"Here you have your noble and honourable lord!"

And saying this, he threw the count's body, as if it were a small stone, into the abyss that opened beneath his feet. The wretch stopped a little in his fall because his doublet was momentarily caught in an oak thicket. But when this bent and gave way, he continued rolling faster and faster, until finally, bloody, horribly mutilated and almost devoid of human form, his body came to a halt in the creek running along the bottom of the gorge.

A frightful howl rose up among the count's vassals, frozen with terror in the face of such a tragic event. With their hair bristling and their eyes bulging, they all followed the body of their lord in its horrible descent, until they saw it lying in the depths of the ravine. Then those who were most reliant on the Count of Lemos for their position and prosperity broke into laments. And others, uttering curses and threats, wanted to go against the castle and attack by sheer force.

Don Alonso, the Lord of Arganza, who, in spite of all his complaints and disappointments, had seen the end of that powerful lord with great pain, did not forget his duties as a leader of men. He gathered his forces in good order and raised the siege and all its warlike preparations, returning to the entrenched camp of Las Médulas determined to establish a purely peaceful and temperate settlement with those arrogant and courageous warriors who would never have agreed to the unjust pretensions of the Count of Lemos. However violent Commander Saldaña's behaviour seemed to him, he did not fail to acknowledge the appalling offenses that the Order had suffered from the deceased and the despicable means the count had used to harm and undermine the Order's reputation. So Don Alonso sent a measured and chivalrous message to the commander, expressing his wish that their pitiful differences should be amicably settled. At once he received a courteous and cordial reply, in which Saldaña manifested to Don Alonso the great consolation that it was for the Templars to have him as a mediator in the misfortune that threatened the Order. Saldaña concluded by entreating Don Alonso to come to the castle, where he would be received with all due respect for his years, character and nobility.

Once the negotiations had begun that could give an honourable solution to such a useless dispute, Don Alonso sent the mortal remains of his son-in-law to the pantheon of his elders in Galicia. The Cabrerans, who had come down from their dangerous expedition, rescued the corpse from the bank of the stream, and carrying it on a bier made of branches, they brought it to the camp with great lamentation for the departed nobleman. From there, they returned to Cabrera with the brave Cosme Andrade, who had not died of his fall, as our readers will presume. Some protective branches had suspended him over the abyss, from where his cries reached the men in the castle, who rescued him by throwing down ropes which he tied around himself and he was pulled up. However, he did not emerge from the expedition unscathed, because he broke his arm and suffered many bruises and scratches. Despite these injuries, Andrade left with his men, saying that he was more grateful than ever to the Templars and that he was eager to prove this to them on the first occasion. The good Cabreran's heart was excellent ground for anyone who wanted to sow goodness and generosity.

As for the count, it was not long before his body was deposited

in a coffin covered with sumptuous black cloths with gold fringes. His kinsmen and vassals accompanied him with lowered pikes and banners trailing. In this way, his remains were taken in procession through some of the count's estates, where far from being saddened by his death, only the fear of reprisal caused people to hide the joy that often appeared in their faces.

Such was the end of this man, remarkable for his ingenuity, his valour and greatness, but who unfortunately turned all these gifts into damage to his reputation and only used his power to make himself abhorrent, thus countering his most noble and natural destiny.





Chapter XXIX - The revival of hope

The clamour and many battles of this war have removed from our sight a person in whose fate our readers will perhaps take the same interest as she inspired at the time in all who knew her. We speak of course of Doña Beatriz, whom we left in the shadows of the cloister of Villabuena alone with her sorrows and pains, for the company of her faithful servant Martina could help little to heal a heart so deeply wounded. The seeds of a long and dreadful disease had begun, as we have said, to grow quickly and strongly in that body which, although beautiful and robust, could hardly suffer the continuous blows of the passions that, like so many tempestuous blasts from the sea wind, constantly flailed that spirit to whom it served as an abode.

The last very bitter scenes that had preceded her second entrance into that quiet monastic haven had torn the veil with which religion on the one hand, and on the other her father's contentment and the noble satisfaction which always results from sacrifice, had concealed from her eyes the desolate wilderness of reality. To mourn for Don Álvaro and prepare herself through pain and virtue for the mystical wedding that undoubtedly awaited her in the celestial abode, implied the kind of melancholy pleasure that the belief in another, better world, gives to the soul. A world much closer to the source of divine justice and goodness than the one we inhabit. But to recover her love, Don Álvaro, from an apparent death, only to lose him so horribly and see him walk on the edge of the abyss that threatened to swallow the Order of the Temple, without any other staff and support than his already faltering spear, was a continuous source of troubles, doubts and woes for Doña Beatriz. On the other hand, how much humiliation the lady's generous and elevated soul found in belonging to a man such as the Count of Lemos, in whom the qualities of his character only served to reveal his pitiful degradation even more! Until then the mask of courtesy had been sufficient to cover that pit of corruption and baseness, and as Doña Beatriz could not give love, neither did she ask for it. In this manner, the natural delicacy of her soul received no wound from the count's coolness toward her. But once the charm was broken and the disguises were removed, the ignominy which spilled over her from her husband's mean-spiritedness became a fierce and pitiful torture which altered her

natural feelings of honour and righteousness, casting an ugly stain on the banners of her house, which had been until then clean and resplendent. O great misfortune that high-born souls are unable to endure! As one of our old poets expressed with imponderable accuracy when he said:

Oh honour, thou fierce basilisk,
That if you look upon your own face,
By that sharp glance, you murder yourself!^{iv}

In such strange ways, the breath of misfortune had dispersed from Doña Beatriz's thoughts the last and iridescent skies that remained in her after the sun of her happiness had set. And to make her sadness greater, all the places that came before her eyes were full of better memories and inhabited by voices that continually brought to her ears words that were stripped of their meaning, as the tree that the woodcutter's axe has felled is stripped of its life and beauty. In this way her soul, lost and wandering in the immeasurable emptiness of the world, raised its flight with more eagerness towards the celestial regions. But so many struggles and such incessant longing exhausted the last remaining strength of that wounded lady. The pure, fragrant air of spring might have revived that burdened heart and returned to her body some of its lost freshness. But winter reigned mercilessly in those fields, numb and desolate, and the sun itself sent out little of its life-giving radiance.

From the windows and shutters of the monastery, she saw the Cúa running wild and turbid, dragging in its swelling waters the trunks of uprooted trees and innumerable plants. The vineyards planted at the foot of the hill where the ruins of the Roman *Bergidum* were still visible, were stripped of their green leaves by winter, exposing the blood-red soil that nourished them. In the distant mountains, a melancholy crown of vapours and mists oscillated in vague and capricious swirls on the wind, sometimes rapidly crossing the sky in dense masses, shedding heavy downpours, at others, opening to reveal the rays of the sun, only to envelop them again quickly in their pale damp shroud. There was no lack of picturesque features in that painting, but they were all imbued with the sadness of the season, just as Doña Beatriz's thoughts, although various in their forms, all shared the same deep sorrow.

As often happens, in the state to which she had been driven by the deep agitation of her mind, coupled with the weakness of her

body as it gradually worsened, the exaltation of her spirit increased every day.

The harp under her touch sent out ineffable vibrations and harmonies, and the nuns, who often heard her play, burst into tears that they could not understand. Her voice had taken on a deep tone, full of emotion, and in her songs, it seemed that the words had acquired new meaning, as if they came from a mysterious and unknown region, uttered by the lips of some being of a different nature than our own. Sometimes she took a pen and from it flowed a stream of words, passionate and painful, but beneficent and gentle as was her character, sometimes in verses full of candour and grace, and at other times, in pieces of delicate, harmonious prose.

All these expressions of her imagination, all these woes of her heart, she collected in a kind of memory book, lined with green silk, which she carefully guarded, no doubt because some trace of bitterness bordering on despair had sometimes slipped between those pages full of angelic resignation. In her book, interspersed with her own thoughts, she transcribed passages and verses from the Sacred Scripture, which since her return to the convent, was the book she most highly esteemed and which she continually read. And that book of her memories began with a verse in which her life seemed to be encapsulated and was perhaps a prophecy for the future: *Vigilavi et factus sum sicut passer solitarius in tecto* v.

Such was the state of Doña Beatriz when one morning she was told that the Abbot of Carracedo wanted to see her. He had not appeared in Arganza since her unhappy marriage. After that, his peaceful meditations occupied his time, and later, he was busy with the preparations that as a master of vassals he had to carry out, much against his will. All these things meant that he had been away for some time and thus removed from the eyes of Doña Beatriz.

The siege of Cornatel continued and news of the Count of Lemos's first defeat, the glorious defence of their castle by the Templars and Don Álvaro's exploits had reached that peaceful haven of Villabuena. The contenders, however, continued their battle vigorously, and it caused Doña Beatriz great anguish that people so close to her were involved in this conflict.

"God help me, what brings him here?" she said to herself, after they had gone to fetch the monk. "I do not know how long ago it is since I have seen this holy man, who perhaps in all the world has harmed nobody but me, by his virtue! How times have changed since then! God give me strength to withstand this encounter

without it disturbing me!"

And Doña Beatriz had good reason to fear that this interview would revive all her memories. But nevertheless, when the door opened and the old man appeared, the lady's confusion disappeared and with her customary courtesy she went to kiss the abbot's hand. The abbot was not so entirely in control of himself, because the shock of seeing such great beauty and freshness reduced to such a state affected him so much that he could not help taking two steps back in astonishment, as if it were the ghost of the heiress of Arganza that stood before him.

"Is that you, Doña Beatriz?" the abbot asked in a surprised tone.

"Am I so changed that you do not know me?" she answered, with a melancholy smile and kissed his hand. "Do not wonder, for you know that man is a compendium of miseries that is born and dies like the flower, and never remains in the same state. But tell me," she added, staring at the priest with her intense, brilliant gaze, "what news do you bring from Cornatel? How is my noble father and ... the count, I mean?"

"Your father enjoys good health," replied the abbot, "but your noble husband the Count of Lemos died yesterday."

"He has died?" asked Doña Beatriz, astonished. "But, tell me, did he die in the arms of religious faith and reconciled with Heaven?"

"He died even as he had lived," exclaimed the abbot, unable to muster his normal self-restraint, "full of anger and rancour, and removed from any idea of charity and temperance."

"Oh, the unfortunate man!" exclaimed Doña Beatriz, clasping her hands together in a gesture of pain, "if this is true, think what his reception in the court of eternal justice will be!"

Hearing the tone of true affliction with which these words were uttered, the abbot could not control his surprise. The count had brought untold evil upon this kind lady, whose future prospects had vanished like smoke in the hands of that man. The count's malicious plots had stolen her freedom and put an end to any hope of happiness that the unfortunate Don Álvaro might have treasured. And yet, at the thought of his enduring misfortune in the life hereafter, her heart trembled. Doña Beatriz did not love him, because it was not in her power to give her affections to a man who forgot himself and his responsibilities by birth, as the count had done. Nor could she, mournful and withered, give up the hope of better times to come now that the count was dead. But the impulse

of resentment and hatred could not contest long with the irresistible propensity to forgive that slept in the depths of her heart. Faced with the darkness of eternity, which more than once had appeared before her eyes, she well knew the smallness of human passions.

"My daughter," replied the abbot, touched by the sight of such noble detachment, and taking her hand he said, "how could you distrust the mercy of God in this way? The count's crimes were great, and peace and justice have always fled at the sound of his footsteps. But his judge is in Heaven, and our Lord God's clemency is without limits, so that nothing is impossible. Think of the good thief who died beside Christ on Calvary, who repented at the last hour, and remember that faith is the holiest of virtues."

"I pray that the count receives God's clemency, then," said Doña Beatriz calmly, "and may the Lord forgive him."

"As you forgive him?" asked the priest.

"Yes, as I forgive him," she said in a firm voice, raising her eyes to the heavens and placing her hand on her heart. "May all the words that the news of his disastrous end brings forth be no harsher than mine!"

The two remained for some time in a profound silence, during which the abbot, comparing his memory of the lady with what he now saw, perceived with astonishment and alarm the effects that sickness and passions had left on that body and countenance, once the paragon of perfection and freshness. The thought that such a spectacle aroused in his soul became so painful that without trying to contain himself, he said:

"Doña Beatriz, Heaven knows that in my whole life your wellbeing and happiness have been a constant goal of my desires. I have seen your soul naked and without disguise in the court of penitence ... How can I not love you as virtue and purity should be loved? And yet the austerity of my duties has worked against you, so that no one in the world has done you so much harm as this old man, who would have gladly shed the last drop of his blood for you. Is it not so?"

In response to these words, Doña Beatriz only gave a long sigh from the depths of her heart.

"You have said enough," continued the priest in a grieved voice, "but listen to me and you will see that I can still amend my work. Securing your happiness would be the most glorious achievement of my last years, and, although my conscience is clear, this would

free my heart from the weight with which your affliction overwhelms it. I do not know if the customs of the world allow me to speak to you of a hope that may be more flattering to me than to yourself, but your misfortune and my character have little to do with the hypocritical conventions and formalities of men. Doña Beatriz, you are now a free woman."

"What do I care about freedom?" she said more quickly than could be expected from her dejected tone. "I have heard sometimes from gentlemen who suffered captivity in the land of Moors, that the princes and lords of that land grant freedom to the women who are slaves in their harems when old age has stolen their strength, vigour and beauty. There you have a freedom very similar to mine."

"No, my daughter," answered the priest, "the gift which Heaven grants you is not so diminished. Listen to me. When Don Álvaro entered the Temple, driven there more by his pain than by his prudence, the Order was already suspended from all its prerogatives and rights. It had been summoned before the council of bishops, its property sequestered, and forbidden to admit a single soldier into their militia, bound by their solemn and terrible vows. If Don Álvaro made his profession, if his uncle the master dressed him with the habit of Hugo de Paganis and Guillem de Montredon, it was because the knights all wanted to have as one of their own a warrior so famous, and because his nephew threatened to move to Rhodes and take the habit of Saint John of Jerusalem if his induction was refused. The thought of losing him on the one hand, and on the other, the fear of introducing disunity among his own brother knights, when the presence of danger made the concord and concert of wills more necessary, forced Don Rodrigo Yáñez to ignore his own scruples. Don Álvaro could not, therefore, renounce his freedom, and I have no doubt that his profession will be nullified by the council that will shortly assemble in Salamanca and where the Templars of Castile are expected to attend, so as not to lengthen a struggle in which all Christendom has abandoned them. I will also appear before the fathers at that council and I hope that my voice will be heard, and I pray that the Lord God brings you both happier times."

Doña Beatriz who, since hearing the name of her lover, had hung on the abbot's words, fixed him with her eyes, usually beautiful and animated, and which had acquired a new glow in her illness, and said anxiously:

"So, according to that, can a day of clarity and comfort still dawn

on us?"

"Yes, my daughter," replied the monk, "and by the mercy of God, I trust that it will happen."

"Ah, it's too late, too late!" she exclaimed, in a heart-rending tone.

"It is never too late for divine mercy," replied the old man, who, already startled by her appearance, was frightened by this sudden exclamation.

"Yes, it is too late, I tell you," she replied with the greatest bitterness. "I will see that day dawn, but my eyes will close as soon as the sun shines its rays upon me. Yes, yes, do not be surprised by what I say. Sleep has fled from my eyelids, my heart chokes within my breast, my pulse and my temples do not stop beating for a moment. When I come to rest a moment in the arms of sleep, I hear a voice calling to me and I see my spirit, moving through the air with a bouquet of lilies in its hand and a crown of white roses on its head. And then another phantom, dressed in a gleaming robe like the habit of the Temple and wearing a warlike helmet on its head, meets me, and raising his visor as he did on the afternoon that we met in the grove, he tells me again, but in dulcet tones, 'It is I, Doña Beatriz!' And this shadow is his! Then I wake up bathed in sweat, my heart pounding as if it wanted to burst out of my chest, and a flood of tears running down my cheeks. My old courage has left me, my days of glory have faded, the flowers of my youth have withered, and the only pillow on which I intend to recline and rest my head is the earth of my grave. Ah!" Doña Beatriz exclaimed, wringing her hands desperately, "it's too late, too late!"

The abbot remained frozen still as he listened to that dreadful statement which, stifled and suppressed until then, burst out at last with unprecedented violence. Doña Beatriz's countenance, the thinness of her body, the brightness of her gaze and the excitement in her voice, had filled the abbot's mind with anxiety and misgivings. But now he had a fatal certainty that it would scarcely be possible for science and human ingenuity to cleanse that poor, suffering soul of the sediment that pain had left in its depth and to cure that body of its terrible ailment. However, gathering strength and emerging from his stupor, the gentle priest said with in a soft and persuasive voice:

"Doña Beatriz, it is never too late for God, nor can human pride or despair judge his power. Remember that he brought Lazarus forth alive from the tomb, and do not cast from your breast the

hope which, as you yourself said on a solemn occasion, is a divine virtue."

"You are right, Father Abbot," she replied, ashamed of the compulsion that she had not been able to subdue. And wiping away her tears said, "may God's will be done, and let Him look on us with merciful eyes, for in Him alone do I trust."

"Why so, my child?" replied the monk, "you are still young and perhaps you will enjoy many days of happiness."

"Oh no!" the lady replied, becoming excited again, "my trial has been very hard, and I have been broken by it as if I were a fragile clay pot, but I will never rise against the potter who formed me."

"Doña Beatriz, give me your permission to withdraw," said the monk, rising to his feet, "I have noticed that you have been very agitated with this conversation, but I leave you with some very important advice to remember. I shall soon be absent, for the Knights of the Temple have at last agreed to subject themselves to the council of Salamanca. I will go there. And I, who have been the cause of your troubles, though innocent, will attempt to make all well again."

The lady kissed the abbot's hand and said farewell, but she could not accompany him to the door because of the weakness she felt after such a disturbing scene. From there, the abbess and the elder nuns of the community accompanied the abbot to the monastery door. But as he left, Doña Beatriz fell into a new tumult that the unexpected hope of restoring her love had awakened in her heart. It was a great pity that her eyes, clouded with tears and accustomed to the darkness of pain, were more pained than flattered by that bright and resplendent light.





Chapter XXX – The Templars relinquish Cornatel Castle

Even as the interview between Doña Beatriz and the abbot was taking place in the monastery of Villabuena, the negotiations continued at Cornatel between Commander Saldaña and the Lord of Arganza, with hopes of an amicable and chivalrous arrangement increasing every day. The news that constantly arrived, even before the death of the Count of Lemos, were gradually bringing down the airy castle of hopes that the old and courageous Templar commander had built. After so many dreams of glory and greatness, the hand of reality showed Saldaña the nearness of the inevitable ruin of his Order, which Heaven, in its high judgement, had abandoned after having adorned it like a shooting meteor with radiant beams resembling the sun.

As soon as the enemy had retired after the death of their leader, Saldaña went to the chamber where, by his order, Don Álvaro had been confined. Knowing his impetuous and violent character, Saldaña was resigned to endure all the injustice of his anger, now exacerbated to the utmost by the injury that he believed he had received, prevented from killing the Count of Lemos in single combat and now imprisoned by his brother knights. Don Álvaro was sitting in a corner of the cell with his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands, and though he heard the bolts unlocked and the door opened, he did not leave his gloomy musings. But as soon as he heard the commander's voice, he leapt to his feet like a tiger and standing in front of the aged Templar, began to stare at him. The commander looked at Don Álvaro too, but with great calmness and with all the sweetness that his violent character could muster, and this redoubled the wrath of the aggrieved knight. Finally, controlling his anger as best he could, Don Álvaro said in a clipped and husky voice:

"Truly, if the enemies of our Order achieve their malicious desires and we are both free from the bonds that bind us, I will have to take your life or leave mine in your hands."

"Here you have it," said the commander in a mild tone, "there is little I can do with it, if I can no longer use it in the service of our holy Order. It would be better to die at your hands than in solitude and exile, but whatever may be, to have taken the count from your

hands is the greatest mercy and sign of my esteem that you have received from me in all your life."

Don Álvaro was petrified when he heard this answer. Knowing Saldaña's respectable character, he could not imagine how such a gross affront could contain within itself such an eminent service. His mind was confused by such opposing ideas, and he remained silent for a long time.

"Don Álvaro," said the old man again, "do you think Doña Beatriz could give her hand to anyone who was stained with the blood of her husband?"

"Perhaps not," said Don Álvaro, in whom the lady's name had produced an involuntary shudder.

"Well, there you have the service you owe me. I have at the same time avenged my Order and brought you closer to Doña Beatriz. "

"What are you saying?" said Don Álvaro, more and more confused and dazed, "what can there be in common between Doña Beatriz and myself, except for our common misfortune?"

"In a little while you will probably regain your freedom, and then ..." began Saldaña.

"How can you forget that my vows are broken only by death?" interrupted the young man bitterly.

"You could not pronounce your vows, nor could we receive them", explained the commander. "When you went through the ceremony, our Order had already been summoned before the council, so that all its powers had been suspended. When we appear before that assembly, I will declare that the master, your uncle, only received you into the Order due to our insistence."

"But I will say that my vows were heartfelt, and that for my part they were and are really sincere," replied Don Álvaro. "My fate, moreover, will be the same as yours, because our crime is the same. But tell me," he asked, forgetting his resentment and approaching the commander inquisitively, "how are we going to present ourselves to the council?"

"We will give ourselves up as prisoners, at the mercy of our enemies," replied Saldaña, trying to suppress some tears of anger that were appearing in his eyes. "The whole of Europe rises up against us and God has left us in the midst of the sea that was parted, where we walked on dry ground like Pharaoh's army. Today, Jerusalem is lost," he continued, turning to the east with his hands outstretched and allowing his composure to collapse into weeping and sobbing, "and tomorrow, more will be lost to us. So,

Jerusalem, buy your bread by weight and pay for your water by measure, as in the time of the prophet. For the Lord God has stretched out his nets and He does not turn his hand from your doom. All your loved ones have forsaken you, and barrenness and widowhood will come together upon you."

Then, after giving vent to his deep sorrow, the old commander told Don Álvaro about the despondency that had spread among the Templars of Aragon and Castile, who had already given up some of their fortresses. And he also spoke of the total helplessness and isolation to which slander and greed on the one hand, and superstition on the other, had reduced the Order. Finally, Saldaña showed Don Álvaro a letter he had received from Don Rodrigo Yáñez, the young knight's uncle, shortly before the onslaught in which the Count of Lemos had met his end so miserably. The letter contained all the dreadful news, and in it, Don Rodrigo insisted on the need to immediately put an end to this fateful struggle, so long as it could be done without sacrificing their honour. He also warned Saldaña that it would be convenient for his prestige for him to go to the council of Salamanca promptly, because some of the bishops who were to compose this assembly had assured Don Rodrigo in writing, in reply to his letters, that they would come to that important trial free of all prejudice and ill will and that they would never consent to any unfair treatment of the Templars, all of whom were members of the Church.

The commander had not wished to make these letters known to any of his men, because the Count of Lemos's enmity had closed the door to all honourable settlement. In addition, such news could have cooled in his knights a resolution that was essential in the face of such a wrathful adversary. At last, this invincible obstacle had been removed and negotiations of a very different character had begun under Don Alonso, the Lord of Arganza. Saldaña told Don Álvaro that they would soon settle their capitulations and hand over the fortress of Cornatel and even perhaps that of Ponferrada, to Don Alonso.

"My son," he said finally, "the blindfold has fallen from my eyes, and my dreams of glory and conquest have faded, for the flag of our order, the Baucent, will never again defy the wind on our towers. However, you are young, and happiness can still show you its face in the dawn of your spring. The only invincible obstacle that existed, I have broken in pieces against the rocks and precipices of this castle. As for me, if God preserves this already failing life

despite such fierce blows as I have suffered, I will no longer reside in this wretched and cowardly Europe which thus abandons the sepulchre of the Saviour and only wages war against those who have given their life and blood for him. Do you still hold a grudge against me for what has happened?" he asked Don Álvaro, holding him by the hand and drawing him closer.

"Oh, noble Saldaña!" exclaimed the young man, rushing into his arms and holding him tightly. "What did you see in me that you give me such goodness and affection with both hands? Who can say that your noble heart is withered?"

"That is the truth, Don Álvaro," replied the old man, "and that does not offend me. My thoughts have served me like the wings of the eagle to lift me high above the abode of men. But like the eagle, I have had to live amid the rocky crags where the winds whistle. Why did I take you into my heart? Because only you, among all those I met, were worthy to dwell with me in high places, as if you were my fledgling, to look at the sun and stalk the plain with me from our vantage point. Now the mountain has sunk, and when my wings no longer support me, I will fall into a secluded desert to die. I pray that I may then see you sitting with your loved one by the side of a fountain in the flowery valley, from which only iniquity and misery have separated you!"

With such melancholy words that conversation ended, interrupted by the arrival of the Lord of Arganza. The conversation with the two knights, witnesses of the terrible scene with Doña Beatriz in the enclosed grove in Arganza, could not fail to bring countless sad memories to Don Alonso. And so, in both the courteous welcome he gave Don Álvaro, and in the great and delicate praises for his recent deeds, Don Alonso made it clear to the knight how changed his spirit was and how much he regretted his previous behaviour.

The principles and conditions of the treaty were settled promptly to the satisfaction of the Templars, and within a few days, they vacated that castle they had defended with great courage. Saldaña, before leaving, communicated to the Lord of Arganza the same thought he had shared with Don Álvaro, and from the joyous surprise with which his suggestion was received, the old commander knew that his wishes would be fulfilled. Don Alonso accompanied the Templars to Ponferrada, and with the greatest courtesy, at his command, the banner of the Order did not cease to fly over the tower of Cornatel, so that its inhabitants could see it as

they looked back, on leaving those towering battlements that they would never defend again.

In the beautiful bailiwick of Ponferrada, all the Templars of the country gathered, leaving the fortresses of Corullón, Valcarce and Bembibre in the hands of the Lord of Arganza and of one of the regiments sent by the Marquis of Astorga. All the Templar knights came silent and sombre, mounted on their magnificent war horses and followed by their pages and African slaves, who led fresh mounts behind them. The spectacle of those indomitable warriors and sworn enemies of the infidels who now surrendered without fighting and by the force of circumstances alone was so painful that the Abbot of Carracedo and Don Alonso, who witnessed it, could scarcely conceal their tears. The same tenacity with which those proud soldiers disguised their own feelings and the serenity that they showed, only heightened even more that grim and gloomy scene.

It is the nature of well-born souls to exchange hatred for fondness and respect when the hour of misfortune comes to their enemies. And this was indeed the case with the abbot and the Lord of Arganza, who then renewed the old ties of friendship with the Master Don Rodrigo. The monk was of course determined to accompany the Templars to the solemn trial that was to open in Salamanca, to give personal testimony as to the virtue of the master and some knights, and especially to carry out his promise to Doña Beatriz that would restore the happiness that in her youth she had imagined would be hers. Don Alonso, who could not leave the country whose custody was entrusted to him by his king, used all the resources of his nobility to make the prospects of those unfortunate souls less difficult.

No matter how great the Templars' desire to get out of that uncertain and painful situation to which they were exposed, the preparations for their departure and the formalities necessary for the delivery of their estates took some time. One morning, when Saldaña was walking the battlements of the castle walls that look to the west and saw the Sil running at his feet with a dull murmur, an aspirant came to tell him that a man from the mountains wanted to speak to him. Saldaña gave the order to show him in at once, and after a few minutes he saw an acquaintance of ours, who, removing his fur cap with respect and plainness, said:

"May God preserve you, Commander. Here we all are."

"Is that you, Andrade?" replied the commander in surprise. What

brings you to this land?"

"I'll tell you, sir, in two words. The other day my cousin Damián came to Ponferrada to sell pelts of roe deer and chamois. He picked up a lot of news, saying that now you had no more castle than this one, that they were going to take you to Salamanca, and I don't know what other things he said they were going to do with you there. In short, rumours are not to be repeated, nor does it matter a fig that you should know about it. Well, sir, as I was saying, I have always learned from my father, that he who is not grateful is not well born. And since in the battles at Cornatel you saved my life twice and also gave me that handful of gold coins, more than I have ever seen together in my entire life, I have come to tell you that if the Devil entangles you, then you should come to my house, and Christ will bless us all. You will not be kept in grand style, because in the mountains even the rich are poor. But in good will not even a king would outdo us. And my wife, as soon as I told her, was happier than a pair of castanets, and at once she began to think which were the fattest chickens and kid goats for your meals. So now you know, if you come with me, no one will look for you there. Oh, and I forgot to tell you to bring along the Lord of Bembibre too, because I know you love him as much as his uncle does, and I remember how courteous Don Álvaro was to us at Cornatel."

The commander, who had not expected such a visit, even less such an offer when the whole world seemed to have abandoned the Templars, was so sweetly surprised that emotion left him speechless for a while. At last, controlling his feelings with his accustomed energy, he reached for the mountaineer's hand and shaking it vigorously, answered:

"Andrade, what I did for you I would have done for anyone. But you are the first that has rewarded me with such proofs of affection. Go with God, good Cosme, and may His goodness make you and your people prosper, as I will always ask Him. No risk threatens us, because you know that bishops are going to judge us, and as for the king and his noblemen," he added bitterly, "when they have been gorged on the abundance of our wealth, they will tire of barking and biting at the Templars."

"No," said Andrade, "that doesn't reassure me because, as the priest told me the other day, the judges of France were also priests, and still..."

"There is nothing to be afraid of, good Andrade, go back to your mountain and believe me that I am very obliged to you."

"So I see," insisted the mountain man, "that you will go to

Salamanca and submit to trial?"

The commander made a sign that he was.

"Then I want to go there to serve as witness. Commander, may God be with you. In three or four days I will be back." And without heeding the old man's reasons, he took the Cabrera road and later returned at the appointed time.

At last the time came for the Templars assembled at Ponferrada to leave forever that last bulwark of their power and greatness. As inevitable as misfortune may be, the hour of its arrival is always painful, no doubt because with it, the last thread of hope, invisible to the eyes but not detached from the heart, is broken. Those warriors, who had one by one relinquished the other castles of the region, while they were sheltered by those high walls, still breathed the air of their greatness. But when they abandoned them, their imaginations became full of baleful forebodings and even the strongest spirits faltered.

On the appointed day, very early in the morning, knights, aspirants, pages and slaves gathered in the spacious court of the castle.

There was a funereal silence, and all eyes gazed at the beautiful landscape, which, though bare of leaves and whipped by the breath of winter, still seemed graceful and picturesque because of the varying terms of its perspective and the gentle gradation of its mountains. At last the master appeared, and after reciting the morning prayers, the Templars mounted their horses and, to the sound of a warlike march they began to move towards the drawbridge.

Before reaching the bridge and above the portcullis arch, there is still a massive coat of arms whose divisions are all but eaten away, except for the cross at the centre, which still survives whole and distinct, and the first three words of a verse from the Psalms can still be read. These were the arms of the Temple, which from then on were to be left without an owner, and therefore abandoned, and without honour, after having been a symbol of so much glory and an emblem of such great power.

This thought undoubtedly occupied the mind of Don Rodrigo, who because of his rank rode at the head of the column. For when he reached the drawbridge, he halted his horse suddenly, and looking at the shield through the tears that clouded his tired eyes, he called out the words of the sacred inscription in a voice that seemed to come out of a tomb:

"Nisi dominus custodierit civitatem, frustra vigilat qui custodit eam^{vi}."

The knights also looked back, and amid the loss to which they were reduced, they repeated in a low voice the words of their master, after which, spurring their steeds, they quickly left that fortress to which they were never to return.

Don Alonso accompanied them until they crossed the river Boeza and left them there with the Abbot of Carracedo, who followed them to Salamanca, guided by his noble and holy purpose. Good Andrade rode between Don Álvaro and the commander and received many signs of courtesy and kindness that he could not understand, because his natural and simple honesty stripped of all merit his generous and selfless action. Thus the Templars made their journey to Salamanca, where the bishops composing the provincial council were already assembled, presided over by the Archbishop of Santiago.



Chapter XXXI – Moving to Lake Carucedo

The many assurances that Doña Beatriz received from the abbot and her good father about the fate awaiting the Spanish Templars could not calm the misgivings and worries that filled her mind. This was because grief had sunk such deep roots in her heart, and her imagination painted even the most joyous things with black ink. If she were to judge the opinions of the bishops as the prelate of Carracedo had long believed them to be, there were reasons to be concerned. And on the other hand, the general indignation against the Templars had become so great, that everything could rightly be feared. Add to this that her illness habitually tinged even the most brilliant events with an opaque colour, and it will be easy to imagine the many dark clouds that obscured that quick glimpse of happiness that the abbot had shown her. She was also not unaware that Don Álvaro was an object of special enmity for the Infante Don Juan since the events of Tordehumos. And her natural discretion gave her to understand that with all the disquiet that the Templars inspired, even after their fall, there would be great difficulty in restoring the freedom, power and properties of one who had so decidedly supported the Order, even to the point of accepting its vows and commitments.

Against such solid reasons, all the arguments of her father and her aunt were of little use, so that for her, hope itself became a light unceasingly buffeted by the wind, scattering shadows and doubts rather than brightness and certainty. The incessant longing and anxiety that had so powerfully contributed to the ruin of her health continued therefore to rapidly undermine Doña Beatriz, and just as her body declined, any kind of emotion became harmful, so that each day her strength diminished and the concern of those around her increased.

Don Alonso, who attributed to his daughter's sorrows and worries the ravages that could be seen in her face, became seriously disturbed when he came to realize that this sickness, which at first no doubt derived from the soul, now had an existence of its own, as a separate thing. In the affectionate father, the sting of remorse came to mingle with the fear of the nobleman who trembled for the fate and the future of his lineage, deposited in such a fragile vessel, when fate seemed to be turning its delicate glass chalice into bronze.

Now in possession of the castles of El Bierzo and with an end to all the rumblings of war, Don Alonso decided to move Doña Beatriz away from the convent and return with her to his house in Arganza. Little did she rejoice at her father's plan for, while her fate was being decided, there was no place more suited to the religious solemnity of her thoughts and to the tranquillity that her spirit so needed, than the retreat of Villabuena. Memories of childhood and adolescence, so sweet to the heart, are often embittered by the images that accompany them, and then fail to bring consolation and gentleness. Thus Doña Beatriz, who within the walls of her father's house had seen in a short time the flowering and fading of her happiness, the death of her mother, the loss of her freedom, and then the appearance of a sun that she believed had set forever and which now only blinded her eyes and left a trail of desolate light in her memory, trembled to return to that house when her future still seemed so enigmatic.

But the place held an appeal to her pure and pious soul, as it was the resting place of her mother, and she also wanted to accompany her aged father. She was also sure that the external environment could only very slightly attenuate the ideas that were branded in her soul as if by fire. And so, she decided to leave for the second time that house of prayer, Villabuena, from which she had left before to suffer so many sorrows and troubles, and from which she now departed with no more legacy than a distant and weak hope, and equally deprived of health and joy. Doña Beatriz took leave of her aunt, the abbess, and the good nuns, her friends and companions, without tears or sobs, but deeply moved and casting slow glances upon the place as if they were to be the last. Though her troubles and sorrows were like a shadow for those holy women, the lady's sweetness, discretion, kindness, and even the particular attractiveness of her figure, made them cherish her company. So when Doña Beatriz left, they cried a great deal over her departure.

At last she left the monastery, accompanied by her faithful handmaiden Martina and her old servants. Where were the days when Doña Beatriz would ride through the woods of Arganza and Hervededo on an agile, swiftly turning palfrey, with a hawk on her fist, stalking the herons in the air, like a hunting nymph? Now she could scarcely endure the slow and peaceful step of her small horse, and more than once the cavalcade had to stop on the road for her to rest at the foot of a solitary tree where she could recover her breath. The agitation of the departure had weakened Doña Beatriz

greatly, so she came to Arganza more out of sorts than usual and very tired. The images that the place presented to her, made vivid by the ardour of her fever, caused great upheaval in her mind and spoiled the happiness of the peaceful villagers she encountered, for whom her coming was like the visit of the angels to the patriarchs.

The next morning, she chose to go down to the chapel where Doña Blanca was buried, and in the afternoon, leaning on Martina and her father, who hardly dared to contradict her, she slowly made her way to the walnut tree on the bank of the stream beneath whose branches she had taken leave of Don Álvaro forever. If she had wept in abundance, she would certainly have unburdened herself of a great weight, but the desire to conceal her tears from her father kept them in her eyes, and the effort she made did her harm.

That night, the slow fever that consumed Doña Beatriz flared up so much that she fell into a terrible delirium in which she constantly talked about the count, her mother and Don Álvaro, moaning painfully from time to time. The Lord of Arganza, desolate and beside himself with worry, immediately sent for the old monk from Carracedo, who had already attended the lady in Villabuena during her previous illness. The good monk came at dawn with all diligence and found Doña Beatriz almost completely calmed because, with her body so weakened, the episodes of her ailment did not last very long. He inquired, however, about what had happened, and when Don Alonso explained it all in detail, he told him:

"Noble Don Alonso, for some time, it will be best if your daughter does not see these places that renew such painful memories in her. Move her without delay to the country house that the Templars owned on Lake Carucedo, because the air is warmer there and the country more placid and pleasing. Soon spring will come with its flowers and then Doña Beatriz's fortunes will be decided, which will only be ill starred if she stays here."

"But tell me," asked the Lord of Arganza anxiously, "are you sure that she will live?"

"Her life," answered the monk, "is in the hands of God, who commands us to trust and hope in him. However, your daughter is still young, and although illness has taken deep root in her, it may well be that a happy event, harbinger of a new time, would cure her much better than all human remedies. But let us not forget, and I tell you once more, make use of the respite that will come from a

sedative she will be given today, and take her away at once."

Indeed, the sedative provided so much relief to the patient that Don Alonso, devoured by misgivings and anxieties, after speeding up all the travel arrangements, departed with his daughter two days later. Somewhat better prepared and more attentive to her father's peace of mind than her own rest, Doña Beatriz began this new pilgrimage without displeasure, bidding farewell to those places, the theatre of her childhood games, with little hope of seeing them again. Perhaps no one could judge her state better than she, for she alone knew the ravages of her soul. But who could guess what the future held in the dark folds of its mantle? And on the other hand, the image of Don Álvaro, free from his vows, more devoted, nobler and more handsome than ever, was like a bird of good omen, whose songs remain pleasing to the ear, however rapid its flight.

The party crossed the Sil by the same boat at Villadepalos that in other happier times should have brought her, in her lover's arms, to a haven of safety and happiness. It was disturbing for her, to find such fateful memories everywhere. But that small country had been the setting of so many events that concerned her closely, that it could well be said that her thoughts and memories populated it, and from every corner these memories sprang to meet her eyes.

After crossing the river, there is a very steep slope, from which both banks of the Sil can be seen at the same time, and all the plain formed by its basin, the monastery of Carracedo with its great white edifice in the middle of a very fresh carpet of meadows, and the various prospects and features of the mountain ranges that close in on all sides and mark the border of that country.

The vegetation was beginning to break free from the shackles of winter. The Sil, a little swollen by the rain, but clean and crystal clear, ran majestically among the still bare groves that adorned its banks. The sky was furrowed with whitish clouds, between which the purest blue was to be seen. Some blackbirds and goldfinches, flitting through the bushes and undergrowth, announced with their trills and songs the coming of good weather.

On the other side stood the mountains of Aquiana with their crests then crowned with clouds, and the sharp and fiery red peaks of Las Médulas marked the end of the range with a very colourful gradation. Almost at their foot stretched Lake Carucedo, surrounded by villages whose roofs of blue slate glistened in the sun

whenever it shone. The lake ends at the foot of two mountains, the one facing south covered with trees, while the other, facing north, formed a strange contrast for its nakedness and bare rocks.

Doña Beatriz sat down to rest for a while at the top of the hill, and from there she looked out in both directions, raising her eyes from time to time, as if she begged the heavens that the memories of bitterness and trials of her youth remain behind her, like the land of Egypt was left behind by the chosen people. She wished that, on the shores of that calm and serene lake, a new era of health, hope and joy could begin, which she scarcely dared to picture in her imagination. After resting for a while, the group mounted their horses and silently rode to the beautiful country house where she was to await her fate.

This was a building with some fortifications in the manner of the time. It was built for strength, but was exquisite, because of all the fragile ornaments and carvings after the Arab style that were worked into its filigree doors and windows and in the capitals that crowned its battlements. The Templars had built it during the time of their greatest splendour. For its location, they had chosen a small hill that sloped very gently below the town of Lago, looking out over the liquid surface in whose crystal waters the hill ended. Here the lake forms a beautiful inlet beside the tower, harbouring some light skiffs used by the knights to spend their hours of leisure fishing for eels, of which there is great abundance, and hunting with crossbows some of the innumerable waterfowl that cross the lake's resplendent surface. Since the barren slopes of the northern mountain, which the natives call The Horses, were behind the manor house, all barrenness was hidden from that pleasing and gentle landscape. The rest was and still is a panorama of great variety and charm which, reflected by the mirror of the lake, sometimes appears, when the breeze stirs it softly, like a confused sea of rocks, trees, vineyards and hills unceasingly divided and joined by an invisible hand. The lake has more than one inlet, and the one that extends between east and north, lost between the curves of a valley, makes the lake waters seem even more extensive. The reeds and bulrushes that grow here provide shelter to endless moorhens and wild ducks with their iridescent neck feathers.

Not far from this inlet is the village of Carucedo, situated in a cool shore of rushes, and at its end grow some very old and massive holm oaks, whose sloping branches resemble those of willows. These great trees serve as a limit to the lake, while on the opposite,

western shore, a grove of enormous chestnut trees also marks the boundary of the lake waters.

Doña Beatriz, whose soul was open, too much for her own good, to all pure and noble emotions, could not help admiring the beauty of the landscape when the slopes of the hills that descend to the lake and its beautiful flat surface began to unfold before her eyes as she looked upon it from the heights of San Juan de Paluezas. As she approached, at every step a new fold of the landscape was revealed, and now a group of trees, now a stream that wound around some outcrop, or a herd of goats that seemed to cling to a rock, each passing feature added new charms to the picture unfolding before her. When she finally reached the country house, she went to the lookout and from there all the contours of the region were displayed and all the marvels of the place appeared before her eyes.

The sun was setting behind the mountains, leaving a bright trail of light, which stretched across the lake and at the same time illuminated the various terrains, scattering shadows and light here and there. Many herds of cows came down to the lake to drink, lowing and sounding their bells, and also flocks of sheep and goats, and a drove of mares with their playful foals also came to quench their thirst, grazing and leaping, and neighing and bleating sounds mingled in the evening air. The wild ducks and woodcocks, in orderly squadrons or scattered and solitary, swam on that gleaming expanse of water. A shepherdess, whose white petticoat and red bodice showed her to be young and single, moved with ease and grace and, as she led her sheep, gaily sang a harmonious tune. As if it were an echo, from a boat that coasted silently along the opposite shore, a warlike song was sung by a robust male voice which, muffled by the distance, lost all its harshness, as if joining the harmonious, temperate and gentle chorus that rose from the lake shore as the sun went down.

Though the banks of the Cúa and Sil rivers are beautiful, it must be said that the placid calm and pleasant weather of the lake of Carucedo has perhaps no equal in all the old Kingdom of León. Doña Beatriz, almost enraptured in the contemplation of that beautiful and gleaming mirror set in a rustic frame of boulders, mountains, meadows and groves of trees, seemed lost in her thoughts. For a heart possessed by love as was her own, the whole of creation seems but the theatre of its sorrows or happiness, its hopes or doubts, and so it seemed to that sensitive and unfortunate lady.

The image of Don Álvaro was the centre where all the mysterious strands of sentiment that those places awoke in her soul came together, and weaving them with those thoughts of happier times that were still entangled in her memory, in her imagination she created the endless fabric of a happy life, filled with sweet correspondence and that noble pride which is awakened in all well-born hearts by the possession of a legitimately acquired happiness. But these were deceptive visions that, at the slightest breath of reason, were stripped of their fantastic attire and crumbled into fine dust amid the barbs and thistles that bristled along Doña Beatriz's path. After a long meditation, in which she had seen passing as in a succession of bursts of light all those golden and gentle representations of an already vanished happiness and a very uncertain and barely sketched future, the unhappy woman exhaled a long sigh and said:

"God did not want it!"

"God has wanted to prove your worth and punish me, angel of heaven," her father answered, embracing Doña Beatriz. "But now our sorrows are over and better times are coming. God will take pity on your youth and on my grey hairs, near neighbours of the tomb, and He will not allow our family name to be erased from the face of the earth."

Doña Beatriz kissed his hand without replying, for she did not dare allow herself such happy thoughts. Nor did she manage to suppress the forebodings that had for some time possessed her soul. For she sensed that, adding to the bitterness of her sorrow, Death which she had invoked as the end and resting place from her sorrows, and which she had never seen, now appeared in the distance like an ominous flash of lightning, just when life acquired in her sight all the garlands of hope, strewing funerary flowers on the road that led to her temple.

However, Doña Beatriz, like all strong souls, once the shudder of mortal clay had passed, accepted this idea without fear or repugnance. She only regretted the grief that her premature death would cause her father and also her lover, snatched from her arms by a devastating storm but who could now be returned to them. So, without saying a word, she leaned on the old man's arm and slowly descended the staircase holding onto the ornate handrail until, in the chamber made up for her, she was left alone with Martina. Let us also leave her to the sweetness of sleep that this night dropped on her eyelids softer and more beneficent than on previous days,

and let us travel to Salamanca, where the clamorous trial that embroiled the whole of Christendom was going to take place.



Chapter XXXII – The council of Salamanca

In the midst of the tremendous storm provoked by envy and greed on the one hand, and superstition and ignorance on the other, whereby almost the entire Christian world had risen up against the Templar Order, the Iberian Peninsula can boast that its sanctuary remained free from the contagion of those gross and inept errors and of those malicious and illegitimate passions. Many bishops were aware of the fountain of evils that could perhaps have been opened in Europe with the preservation and growth of that Order whose ancient purity and virtue had decayed, and which had been turned in the eyes of the common people into a cause of reprobation and scandal. But the bishops greatly respected the members of the Order individually, as Christians and as knights, and they were not unworthy of the noble confidence that Don Rodrigo Yáñez had placed in them. Aymerico, the Apostolic Inquisitor and the Pope's commissioner appointed to accompany the Archbishops of Toledo and Santiago, vainly attempted to lead the council along the same path as in France. Also vain were all the efforts of the court of Castile, and especially the Infante Don Juan. And vain too was the attempt to twist the rectitude of the bishops' intentions. The iniquities of Philip the Fair of France were the strongest shield the knights had in the minds of those pious men who in the depths of their conscience bitterly deplored the weaknesses of Clement V, the origin of so much bloodshed and such ugly blemishes upon Christendom.

Gathered in Salamanca under the presidency of the Apostolic Inquisitor and of Rodrigo, the Archbishop of Santiago, were John, Bishop of Lisbon; Vasco, Bishop of La Guardia; Gonzalo, from Zamora; Pedro, from Ávila; Alonso, from Ciudad Rodrigo; Domingo, of Plasencia; Rodrigo, from Mondoñedo; Alonso, of Astorga; Juan, of Tuy; and Juan, of Lugo. These pious men opened the council with all the accustomed ceremonies and solemnities. Each of the fathers, in accordance with the papal bulls and the orders of their respective monarchs, had carried out in their dioceses a process of gathering information, which included the statements of countless witnesses, priests and laymen. The confrontation of these testimonies was to decide the guilt of the Templar Knights or their innocence. However, before such a solemn decision was taken, it was necessary to extend this

summary, to hear the accused, to receive new depositions, and finally justify a sentence that would put an end to an event, rightly described by a modern historian of great merit as "the most important of the middle centuries after the Crusades."

It was not long before the Infante Don Juan discovered the Abbot of Carracedo's intentions in coming to the council. And he was more than a little concerned about them, because the fate of the Order in the kingdoms of Spain was still in the balance. He feared that the Kingdom of León, under the protection of such a powerful family, could stir up new disturbances and changes, and question the infante's ownership of those possessions belonging to the Order that he so eagerly coveted to console himself for the loss of the crown he dreamed of. He therefore resorted, as usual, to his scheming and machinations, and began to sow the seeds of hatred in the minds of the bishops. In some he infused fear of conflict with the Supreme Pontiff, and he threatened others with the prospect of riots that could occur in the only barely pacified Castile, if there were a resolution to free Don Álvaro of his vows to the Order.

The elderly monk, who was well aware of the state of Doña Beatriz and who, on the other hand, knew how sharp a knife the continuous swings of uncertainty were to the thread of her life, presented his case as separate from the general cause. He alleged the nullity of Don Álvaro's profession to the Order and pleaded the injustice that it would be to try him before the council as a member of that congregation, when he could not be counted among its members. However reasonable, the abbot's arguments did not find all the response they pursued in the minds of the judges, neither in respect to his plea, nor the fate of Doña Beatriz. On the one hand, it was urgent to substantiate and decide the great lawsuit against the Order, far more important than the fate of an individual. On the other hand, when the prelates understood the little weight of the accusations against the Templars, they had no qualms about involving Don Álvaro in the general procedures, which in any case could always be amended with the appropriate exception.

Equally fruitless, therefore, were the concerted efforts of the good abbot, the Templar Master Don Rodrigo, Commander Saldaña and his kinsman Hernán Ruiz Saldaña, and especially Don Juan Núñez de Lara, who had come to Salamanca with great diligence to show the nobility of his blood and also out of his

desire to remedy as far as possible the great evil he had done to Don Álvaro in Tordehumos.

The high-born often pay dearly for their dreams of ambition, and good proof of this was Don Juan Núñez de Lara, for whom the news of Don Álvaro's misfortunes and his violent resolution to enter the Temple had been and still were a painful torment. If it had not been for the malicious plot of which he had also been a victim, Don Álvaro would be free from his past troubles and his present anguish, and whatever might have been the trials and sorrows of his love, since the outcome ultimately depended on the constancy and elevated character of Doña Beatriz, no doubt his beautiful hopes would have been attained as they deserved.

All this, of which his conscience spoke to Don Juan Núñez in loud and clear voices, was extremely distressing for him and he would gladly have redressed the damage he had caused with half the remaining years of his life and with the best of his estate. There was something else besides that greatly influenced his will, and this was the underhand means employed in the opposite direction by the Infante Don Juan, his sworn enemy since the events of Tordehumos. Reasons of great weight, and among them the welfare and tranquillity of Castile, had prevented him from challenging the infante to a duel, as he had at first imagined. But the idea of hindering his efforts now and thwarting all his artifices, spurred Núñez de Lara's will, already very determined in this matter.

All these good offices, however, were groundless, for with Don Álvaro present, it seemed natural that he should have protested on his own behalf against the grievance which appeared to be done to him. But the authority of his old friends and of his uncle, the petitions of all the Knights of the Order who were in Salamanca, the untimely request of Don Juan Núñez de Lara, and even the voice of that passion, still alive in his heart and violently awakened by the voice of hope, were not enough to urge him to take this step. The idea of separating his cause from that of his chosen brotherhood so aggravated Don Álvaro's noble pride that soon all his supporters ceased altogether in their attempts. Thus, a victim of that generous illusion of detachment and nobility that he had pursued all his life, Don Álvaro deferred the positive outcome on which all the happiness that could be in store for him in this world depended.

The trial was finally opened, and the Master Don Rodrigo, Saldaña and the eldest knights appeared before the bishops to hear the charges brought against them. Such accusations would be laughed at nowadays, but in that time of darkness, they found a tremendous resonance in the minds of common folk, and even more so when the charges drew closer to the realm of fantasy.

All the information that each prelate had gathered before the council was verified and new witnesses began to be heard. There were many who gave testimony against the Temple, blaming it for the same crimes that brought the downfall of the Order in France. Above all and as more visible things, they charged them of cupidity in alms giving and of shortcomings and lack of decorum in their ceremonies. Most of the witnesses had been bribed by the enemies of that glorious institution, others were possessed by an ignorant and fanatical zeal, and they all seemed to spur each other on in that iniquitous work. This was a natural consequence of the perfidious slander that dazzled the eyes of the common people, always thirsty for novelties, and as full of strange and malicious imaginings as they were lacking in judgment and composure.

The Knights Templar, alone in the midst of that malevolent gale which blew incessantly, were steadfastly defending themselves with temperance and brave tranquillity, intent on preserving their haughty dignity even in the face of such false and base charges.

Don Rodrigo, as head of the Order, was the target of all the attacks. Not out of hatred for his person, for his prudence, his urbanity and his austere virtues were praised by all, but because by humiliating the Order where it was wisest and most elevated, its foundations would be undermined and make its restoration impossible. The master, however, inspired such respect for his years and for that remnant of the Templars' dominion and power that still blazed in his looks, that more than once it happened that the witnesses withdrew in shame and fear when they faced the severity of his gaze.

Commander Saldaña had more work in defending himself against other attacks, which, although less concerted, were ultimately fiercer and more violent.

Our readers will doubtless remember that in the assault of Cornatel, a very close kinsman of the count died by the blow of a stone that broke his skull, and a little later another died in the barbican under the old warrior's axe. They will also remember that the flag of the Castro family was dragged into the castle, torn down

by the hand of Don Álvaro from the tent on which it fluttered in the wind.

These were offences and outrages that such a proud lineage could hardly forget. But the wretched end of their leader had fired in them a relentless hatred against the Templars, and especially against Saldaña as the author of their dishonour and mourning.

As soon as they were called to the trial, they promptly went to Salamanca, where they added their fury and recriminations to the weight of the general accusation.

When their day came, they presented their complaint to the bishops, accusing Saldaña of having used black magic arts in the defence of his castle, with a notorious contempt of the orders of his king and natural lord. They accused him of arrogantly dismissing the late count's warnings, and above all, his atrocious death, contrary to the laws of war. Beltrán de Castro, one of the count's closest relatives, who had not yet been able to reconcile himself with the affront of defeat, presented all these charges with great discretion and energy, disguising in his own way the incidents of that disastrous day.

"Commander Saldaña," said the Archbishop of Santiago, "do you confess to all the charges made by Beltrán de Castro?"

"Venerable fathers," answered the old man, "not by an act of rebellion or disloyalty did we refuse to obey the orders of our monarch, but in just and legitimate defence. Knights of such renown as we should not have been treated as the Count of Lemos wanted, with all due respect to him, since the supreme judge will by now have passed judgement on him. He wanted war because he longed to avenge the grievances he received, unfortunately with just cause, from me and from one of our noblest knights. The count loved danger and perished in it ... peace be with his soul. As for the necromancy you reproach us for, good sir," he continued turning to Beltrán and smiling ironically, "your fear no doubt disturbed both your eyesight and your understanding, for you thus confused our African slaves with demons, and you took to be the flames of hell the pitch, tar and boiling oil with which we sprinkled your pates."

The Galician grew pale upon hearing such an outrage, and gnashing his teeth, he fixed his burning eyes on the old knight. His hand went mechanically to the hilt of his sword, but remembering the place where he was, he kept the murderous impulses of his anger at bay.

"Do not be angry, good Sir, you, who come here to make firewood out of the fallen tree," said the commander in that same acrimonious and sarcastic tone. "Do not be angry now, for your courage was of little use to those unhappy mountaineers who you so mercilessly led to the slaughterhouse. When you assailed us, the Lord of Bembibre with only a handful of knights, routed all your cavalry, plundered your camp, and dragged your banner all the way to the castle, all without your superior forces having the courage to hinder him. In what opinion did you hold the soldiers of the Temple and an old knight who fought for the cross in the Holy Land at the siege of Acre, until the villains threw it to the ground as a carpet for the soldier's horses? Go to, you whose valour is like that of the vultures and crows, only fit to be used on the corpses after a battle."

"Sir Knight," said the Archbishop of Santiago gravely, "you have not yet answered the chief accusation, the death of the noble Count of Lemos. Is the account we have heard true?"

"Yes, so true," answered Saldaña, in a voice that rumbled in the room like a thunderclap, "that if I took him a thousand times in my hands, I would rip out so many lives. Yes, I took him by the belt when he fell unconscious at my feet. With him I climbed onto a battlement, and thence I threw him to his people, saying: 'Here you have your brave and generous leader!'"

"He has confessed! He has confessed!" cried the relatives of the deceased count with joy.

"Commander Saldaña," continued Beltrán, "I accuse you of treason, for only by bribing the Cabreran Cosme Andrade could you know about the unfortunate count's expedition."

"You lie, Beltrán de Castro!" answered a voice from the densely-packed crowd, which then began to swirl as if to make way for someone.

Indeed, after a short commotion and some surging to and fro among the people, a mountaineer with his long deerskin jerkin, his sandals and his hunting knife at his side, jumped like a deer into the enclosure intended for the accused, the accusers and the witnesses.

"Is it you, Andrade?" exclaimed Castro, surprised at this unexpected event.

"Yes, it's me, the bribed one, according to you, blackguard and villain!" answered the angry mountain man. "It looks like you're stunned to see me! It is plain to see that you thought I was very far from here when you offended my name with such an outrage! Some

angel touched me in the heart when, on seeing you arrive in Salamanca, I hid from your sight to confuse you here, now that I know the villainy of the Castro family! Oh, poor countrymen and companions who left their bones in the moat of Cornatel, come now to receive the prize given you by these mischief-makers! You say I was bribed! And with what would you bribe me, you lowborn cur? Or would you call it a bribe to tumble off cliffs and risk my life many more times than you ever have?"

"You received a hundred gold coins from the commander," replied Beltrán, somewhat recovered, though confused by the onslaught of the mountaineer, that hounded him like a wounded boar.

"Certainly I received them," answered Andrade innocently, "because they were offered to me with good will. But did I keep even one, you soulless liar? Did I not distribute all of them and even some of my own money to the widows of those who died there by the whims of your count? Or do you think that Andrade is like your cursed master, who sold his knightly honour and the blood of his own relatives for the chance of advancement? You should be thankful that we stand before these men of God, because otherwise my hunting knife would find the hiding place of your cowardly heart."

"Calm down, Andrade," said the Bishop of Astorga, "and tell us what you know, because your presence here could not have been more timely."

"I, reverend Fathers," he answered with his usual simplicity, "am no more than a poor mountain lord, who knows more about deer hunting and fighting with bears than these matters of justice. But to tell the truth, I was never afraid to speak, even if it were in the presence of the Sovereign Pontiff. Here goes then, this is what I saw and what happened, with nothing added and nothing taken away."

We said that when the honest Andrade fell down from the tower by the hand of Millán, some protective branches broke his fall. Fortunately, they were not far from the wall, and so he could hear almost all the words spoken between Don Álvaro and the count at the beginning of their encounter. And then Andrade also heard what happened between the commander and the count, until the Galician warlord was thrown down, disjointed and shattered to the banks of the stream. Andrade's statement, in which Don Álvaro's generosity shone out so well, and the effusiveness with which he

reported the prompt help he had received from Saldaña and all the Templar knights, made such a favourable impression on the minds of the fathers that Saldaña's accusers not only fell silent, but also, embarrassed and ashamed, they did not know how to leave the court quickly enough.

"In short, holy Fathers," concluded the mountaineer, "if good works bribe, I confess, here and before God, to being bribed, because the truth is that these good knights won my heart with their actions. So when I heard that in the end they were being taken prisoners, remembering the Count of Lemos's lies and fearing that what happened in France would happen to them, I rushed to Ponferrada, and there I told the commander that I would hide him in Cabrera and even defend him from all the world. I don't know if I did right or wrong, but I certainly would do it again always, because he saved my life twice and, as my father used to say, 'he who is not grateful is not well born.'"

"Lord of Bembibre," said the Inquisitor General, turning to Don Álvaro, "though I am new to this land, the fame of nobility and courage you enjoy in it is not unknown to me. Say then, under your faith and word, if Andrade's statement is true."

"On my honour, I swear that he has spoken the truth," replied the young man, putting his hand on his heart. "The good Cosme has only forgotten one thing, and it is that he also extended to me, without knowing me, the noble hospitality he offered Commander Saldaña."

"Yes, yes," said the mountain man, almost ashamed, "a fine thing it would be, if one were to proclaim with a trumpet the little good one does. And when you made your assault on our camp in Cornatel, you did not even scratch any of my men. And you treated those who healed from their wounds as generously as if you were an emperor. To put an end to the tale, holy fathers," he continued, addressing the council with as much respect as simplicity, "if you doubt what I have said, let the whole of Cabrera come here, and they will confirm it."

"It is not necessary," said the Bishop of Astorga, "because the secret information which the parish priests of that country have gathered by my command corroborate this account. This session, the last to be heard by this sacred council, will be the one that decides the ruling, unless my brothers believe otherwise."

"Family of the Count of Lemos," said the Archbishop of Santiago, "do you wish to proceed with the prosecution, present new evidence, and await the verdict?"

"In my name and in the name of my family, I withdraw from the accusation," replied Beltrán de Castro with displeasure, "not excluding that we may bring it before other tribunals when we can present more valid evidence."

"You should have asked for trial by combat," Saldaña said with the same bitter tone, "if only to renew the exploits we witnessed above Río Ferreiros."

On that occasion Beltrán commanded the Count of Lemos's cavalry and, caught up in the torrent of fugitives, he could do nothing in spite of his efforts, so that without being bereft of valour, his reputation had remained in doubt. Therefore, he could not have received any wound deeper and more painful than the commander's poisonous allusion. Stuttering with rage and red-faced with anger, he said:

"As soon as they set you free, I will challenge you, and then we shall see whether valour leads to fortune!"

"That duel is mine!" replied Don Álvaro to Beltrán, "since you have taken upon yourself the Count of Lemos's offenses, you will find me against you in this combat."

"No, it is I who will face you," argued Andrade, "because I have been wronged in front of so many people."

"I will take to the field against all three of you," Beltrán cried in the same tone.

"Sirs," said the Apostolic Inquisitor, "you are aware no doubt that there is no grievance or offense before the law. So, consider that all that has been spoken has no validity or effect. And you, Beltrán, since you so wisely withdraw the accusation, think of returning to your country, for the high judgments of God are not to be amended with vengeance or rancour, always ignoble when applied to the vanquished."

These grave words, spoken with an accent that reached the soul, if they did not change the malicious intentions of the Castro family, at least proved to them their impotence before the law. So that, both disgusted and ashamed, they left the courtroom and departed immediately from Salamanca, where they had found the rewards usually won by illegitimate sentiments, which are aversion and contempt.

The blind persecutions of the Castros also bore another fruit. Since it had revealed the innocence of the Templars so clearly, even

their fiercest enemies had to be satisfied with covert manoeuvres and snares.

When all the proceedings had been heard and the matter had been deliberated at length, the council unanimously declared the Templars innocent of all the charges against them, reserving however, the final decision to the Supreme Pontiff.

With this verdict, the Templars saved the honour of their name, the only thing they could aspire to amid the intense storm they were being subjected to, but much more important to them than their estates and their power. Deprived of both, their position remained uncertain and precarious until the general council, summoned to Vienne in the Dauphiné. Here, the trial against the entire Order was to be decided definitively. But there could be little hope for the Templars, since the star of their power, like that of Lucifer, as the Prophet tells us, had fallen from the heavens.

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Chapter XXXIII – Riders from a distance

While this was going on in Salamanca, Doña Beatriz, suspended between hope and fear, saw the days go by watching the road to Ponferrada, thinking that every villager could be a messenger, bearing news about the fate of her lover and of the Order. The natural elevation of her spirit made her always look upon honour as the first among the virtues. And it may well be said that at that time she thought of Don Álvaro's honour, and not about his happiness. The most infamous sentence against him could not affect Doña Beatriz's feelings, because the pure and faithful love that had glowed in her heart, and which still burned there, was incompatible with all doubt and suspicion. But the idea of seeing such a noble and honourable young man subject to infamous punishments, perhaps even death, made her tremble in her sleep and her waking hours.

In spite of everything, her father's consolations and assurances, the coming of the beautiful spring and the influence that those peaceful and picturesque places exerted on her spirit, gradually brought about some improvement in her health and seemed to diminish her anxiety and her fears.

The lake had regained the verdure along its contours and the serenity of its waters. The trees on the shore, once again covered with leaves, provided shelter for countless nightingales, wood pigeons and turtle doves that filled the air with songs and cooing. The murky torrents of winter had become clear babbling streams. The mild and benign winds brought from the mountains the aromas of wild roses and broom in flower. The wild ducks and moorhens fluttered over the clumps of reeds and bulrushes where they made their nests, and the sky itself, hitherto overcast and scowling, began to streak its blue with those lightly coloured clouds that in the spring adorn the horizon as the sun rises and sets.

Mount Aquiana had lost its resplendent crown of snow, and only a few spots of ice remained in the darker recesses of the rocks, forming a colourful mosaic on the mountainside. Finally, the whole of nature was so beautiful and gallant, as if it awakened from the sleep of death to a green and enduring life.

As the water of the rivers takes its hue from the different colours of the sky, so the spectacle of the outside world receives the tinges

that the soul transmits in its joy or pain. The bitter blows that Doña Beatriz had received and her seclusion in the monastery had changed the natural serenity of her soul into a deep melancholy that, stimulated by her illness, cast an opaque veil upon creation. Before, her thoughts were a gleaming mirror that reflected and gave life and nuances even to the seemingly most insignificant objects. This was because love poured into her imagination the treasure of her most cheerful hopes, and she in turn poured this love in torrents onto the scenes that were presented to her eyes. But the charm had been broken, and the light of her spirit had been extinguished, so that everything had grown dark. The world, looked at from a place of solitude and through the prism of tears, shows only a dim light and withered blooms.

One afternoon, Doña Beatriz was engaged in such thoughts in the lookout of the country house, glancing abstractedly at the mirror of water, when her father came to her. As she was looking towards the castle of Cornatel, planted like a watchtower on the crest of the mountains, she did not notice Don Alonso's approach and remained lost in her meditations.

"What are you thinking about, Beatriz," her father asked, with his accustomed affection, "that you have not noticed me?"

"I was thinking, my lord," she replied, putting her hand to her lips, "that my life has not lasted eighteen years, but is as long as yours. I had a lover and I lost him, I had a mother and I lost her, I had a husband and I lost him too, there," she added, pointing to the castle. "Twice I have been banished from under the paternal roof; Don Álvaro, deprived of all his hopes, took refuge in the warlike cloister of a mighty Order, and with them, he has fallen too. How is it that in the brief space of a year so many events have accumulated upon the flimsy fabric of my life? What is the glory of man, that it can be carried away by the wind of one night? My happiness left as the leaves fell from the trees last year, and here I see the trees are again decked with leaves! I ask them, what have you done with my health and my joy? But they sway happily to the sound of the wind and if I perceive any answer in their confused murmur, it is a voice that says to me, 'The tree of the heart has only a few leaves and when they fall, it remains naked and rigid, like the pillar of a sepulchre'"^{vii}.

"My daughter," answered the old man, "do you remember that the Lord caused a spring to come forth from the bowels of a rock so that his people could drink? How then do you doubt his power and his goodness? Are you feeling worse? ... This morning I have not

seen you stroll in the gardens as in other times..."

"Without doubt I feel better," Doña Beatriz answered, "I can go a long way without Martina's support, and I sleep a little during the night. I trust in God that my improvement will be greater every day and that I will soon heal from the evils that afflict my body and soul."

The young lady saw that her father was listening to her and continued with her scheme of generous pretence. But she was so far from saying what she in fact felt, that despite herself, she ended her comforting speech with a sigh. The old man gave her a look as sad as it was penetrating, and after being silent for a short while, he spoke these deeply felt words:

"Beatriz, I have been watching your efforts for a long time, but you do not know that each one of them is like a sharp arrow that pierces my heart. What good are these vain appearances? You insist on stripping the plant of my repentance and taking away even the hope of its fruits! Come back to yourself, my daughter, and remember that you are the only treasure of my old age. I beg you to discard those dark thoughts that are a continual reproach to me."

"Oh, my father!" replied the girl, throwing her arms around the old man's neck, "there will be no more talk of my mad delusions, which it is not always in my hand to control. Do you want us to take a trip on the lake?"

"Listen to me a bit more," said the kind father, "and tell me all your doubts and misgivings. What enthral and obsesses you so painfully, when the letters we receive from the Abbot of Carracedo assure us of the favourable verdict at the court of Salamanca? How do you doubt that the Order will release Don Álvaro from his vows, when the wisest scholars in the land consider they are of no value and imply no obligation?"

"I doubt my happiness because it is mine," answered Doña Beatriz, "and because Don Álvaro is so noble and high-born, that his enemies will fear him. Do you not know also how much the Infante Don Juan is striving so that the Templars should suffer the same fate here in Spain as they did in France? My fears are justified. This turbulent trial brings such worries to my mind, and even the few hours of sleep that I can snatch from the night are filled with distressing images. The other night I dreamed that Don Álvaro was in the middle of a square, tied to a pole and surrounded by firewood, and the people who looked at him, instead of shouting, as would be normal, looked at him mutely in amazement.

He wore the white habit of his Order, and on his countenance there was an expression that was not of this world. Suddenly the wood was lit and the immense crowd cried out. But I saw Don Álvaro through the flames, and his garments became whiter and his features became more and more beautiful. At last, his clothes began to blacken, and his features were altered with pain. He fixed his eyes upon me and cried out in a very loud and painful voice, 'Oh, Beatriz, these were to be the lights of our wedding!' I then, who had been petrified, found myself able to move again, and suddenly I ran to untie him, passing through the flames, but barely had I succeeded when we both fell at the stake. Then I woke up trembling like a leaf, bathed in cold sweat and with a breath so suffocated, that I thought I was going to die. That is why you find me sadder and more disheartened today than other times. But at least it is fortunate that I am prepared for all the sorrows that may come."

Don Alonso knew that all his reasons would be of little avail on that occasion. So, after a moment of silence, he said, presenting his hand to his daughter:

"The afternoon is very beautiful and as you rightly said before, we should take advantage of it."

The young woman got up quickly and, leaning on her father's arm, went down with him to the jetty, where a *falúa*, a light sailing boat with oars, awaited them with all its rigging, and silk banners aloft, displaying the symbols of the Temple. They boarded the craft, and three young men from the surrounding country, wielding their oars, began to row vigorously, and the graceful boat glided swiftly and majestically, leaving behind a long wake in the water, where the rays of the sun seemed to break into a thousand tiny sparkling shimmers.

Martina had remained in the country house. Shaking her head with some disapproval, she watched the boat in which her lady travelled. Doña Beatriz was wearing a long tenuous white robe in the Moorish style that swayed in the wind, and with her hair loose, she looked like a lake nymph. Poor Martina, who had accompanied and served her lady with such love and discretion, could not free herself from a feeling of anxiety for, being closest to Doña Beatriz, she knew her condition better than anyone else. In fact, the lady's health had improved, but Martina well knew the deadly anguish and uncertainty her mistress felt over Don Álvaro's fate, and that all the glimmers of her hope depended on his freedom being granted. As sadness is far more contagious than joy, Martina had

herself lost much of her beauty and charm, and even the brightness of her blue eyes had dulled somewhat.

It happened then, even as Martina was enthralled in her musings, that she felt some heavy steps behind her and turned her head. Standing before her, she found none other than our old acquaintance, the groom Mendo who came in a very hurried manner and wearing the same expression as he did previously, as our readers will remember, when he came to tell his mistress in the grove of Arganza of the arrival of the Templar and his companion. Martina, who since then had regarded him with some dislike and ill will, now received him with impatience and frowning.

"Martina, Martina," he said in great haste, "something must be going on, because from the tower I have seen people appear on top of the hill of Río Ferreiros."

"Go on!" she answered, with an air of indifference. "So you surely think it will be an embassy like the other time! What is it to us if there are people coming? Don't villagers come that way from Ponferrada on every market day?"

"What villagers, woman!" he answered with his habitual sluggishness. "I've seen the banners on their lances and the sun shining on their helmets, which dazzled your eyes! I tell you, they are men-at-arms, and they must bring some news."

"Well, you would have done much better to go and wait for them, and then run back again with the news," replied Martina, who, disliking his company, would have got rid of him with great satisfaction.

"I would gladly have gone," Mendo said, "but today old Nuño was bent on riding *Gypsy*, which is the horse that I like, and so I stayed. See him, there he goes," he added, pointing to the place on the lake shore where the hunter rode on his horse. "Look what a lively and airy trot! And what a lordly bearing!" said Mendo. "Hey now! What's got into the old man to put him to the gallop for nothing, as if he were riding his Galician nag?"

The groom stood with his mouth open, his eyes following the career of his favourite horse, until he exclaimed with an impetuosity that was totally alien to him:

"Yes! There they come! Look at them there, Martina ... Down there, by the oaks, at the entrance of the village ... don't you see them?"

"Yes, yes, I can see them now," said the girl, who suddenly was

all eyes. "But what news can it be?"

"No idea," answered Mendo. "Good Heavens! It seems like the whole village of Carucedo is there! Just listen to the shouting and how the children and even the young men are jumping about! ... To be sure, there is definitely something cheerful going on."

"But my goodness, what can it be?" the girl asked again, consumed with curiosity.

"Look, now Nuño arrives and speaks with them. By Saint James, the old man has gone mad! Didn't you see how he threw his hat into the air? ... Now they're all waving to the masters in the boat ... there it goes! ... By the Body of Christ, look how gallantly they row! ... and the ones waiting are so anxious too! ... Have you ever seen such cheering and waving?"

The boat was fast approaching the signs and cries of that very animated group of people of all ages and both sexes, and some armed men on horseback stood out behind them. However, the speed of the small craft did not match Nuño's impatience and, spurring his valiant mount on both sides, he galloped into the lake with a great splashing of water, which must have soaked him to the bones. This infuriated Mendo, who cursed the old man, threatening him with clenched fist, and shouted:

"Ah, you wild barbarian, you rogue! Is that how you treat the finest jewel in your master's stable? But by my faith, you are not to blame, but those who put donkeys in charge of stallions! Upon my soul, if you ever again mount that horse, may I become a Moor!"

"The devil take you and all your wretched nags!" Martina exclaimed angrily. "Shut up, let's see if we can hear something, and let me see what's going on!"

The generous steed, obedient and compliant, as those of good breeding usually are, came swimming gallantly with his rider to the side of the boat. There Nuño, gesticulating vehemently, delivered the message that had driven him on in such a hurry. Doña Beatriz, who had risen to listen to him, and whose slender form, graceful in her white dress, was like a swan on the blue surface of the lake, raised her arms to the sky and immediately fell to her knees with her hands joined together as if giving thanks to the Almighty. Her father, beside himself with joy, ran to embrace her tightly. Then, putting his hand into a bag that hung from his belt, Don Alonso took something out that he handed to Nuño. The faithful old retainer, returning to the shore with great haste, began to distribute among the villagers

coins from his master's purse, which, as our readers will presume, was what he had just received. With this, the cheers and shouting grew, while the boat carrying Doña Beatriz docked beside the oak trees. There, the Lord of Arganza, jumping ashore and hugging one of the newcomers, invited him to embark with him and his daughter, who came forward and presented her hand to the stranger. The other new arrivals, preceded by Nuño, went galloping to the country house, followed for a while by the hue and cry of all the children of Carucedo who shouted at the top of their voices.

Martina, who, with her eyes flooded with tears, had seen that spectacle, soon understood its meaning and exclaimed:

"A thousand thanks be given to God, because the Templars have been acquitted and we have no cause to fear for the generous Don Álvaro. But what are you doing there, slow wits?" the impatient girl shouted at Mendo, who stood there like a fool, "can't you see that they're coming? Go and prepare the stables."

Mendo, the plump groom, was not sorry for Don Álvaro's acquittal because, as his plans to serve a lord had turned to smoke with the death of the Count of Lemos, he imagined that none could be more suitable to replace him than the Lord of Bembibre. But this was not where the difficulty lay: the problem was, this master already had a servant, Millán, Martina's suitor. And as Mendo had not abandoned his amorous intentions toward her, he now saw all his plans coming to pieces. And so, smarting from the girl's dismissal, he went down the stairs muttering:

"Well, by my Lord God, what with that busybody Millán coming back, and if *Gypsy* has caught a fever from the wetting he won't get over in half a year, we're in a fine mess!"

Martina, for her part, also raced down to the jetty, where her mistress soon came ashore in the company of her father and the bearer of the good news, who was none other than our friend Cosme Andrade.



Chapter XXXIV – The inquisitor's device

The honest Cabreran, Cosme Andrade, who saw the cause against the Templars come to such a favourable conclusion despite the rancour against that illustrious Order, openly shown by the Castro family and through covert manoeuvres by the Infante Don Juan and other noblemen, decided to return to his native Cabrera, from where he had been missing longer than he would have wished. Because the Templars' situation was so precarious following the seizure of their property, he repeated the proposals and offers he had already made to the commander in Ponferrada. This time, he offered him sanctuary with even more insistence than before, describing with his simple effusiveness the great pleasure that this would bring his wife, the favour the knight would do him teaching his children warlike exercises, the amusement Saldaña would find in their hunting parties, and especially the peace and veneration that would surround him everywhere. The old man remained inflexible as if he had reached a resolution that all the power in the world would not be able to destroy. And so, the good Andrade had to make his travel preparations without achieving his heartfelt wish.

When the day of parting came, the knights all went out to bid farewell to Cosme on the outskirts of Salamanca and give him a public testimony of how grateful they were for his noble behaviour. This was but a small reward had it not been enhanced and given greater value by the knights' sincere will, for no one had thrown himself into the defence of the Temple with so much valour as that simple mountaineer, and no other testimony had more weight than his in the minds of the holy men who sat in judgement.

The nobility of his soul was clearly revealed when, almost single-handed, he dared to withstand the clash against the enraged climate of opinion in that superstitious century, and without hesitation fought in close combat with the powerful lineage of the Castro family.

However great the prejudice and hatred with which that chivalric order was regarded, generous actions have a capacity to galvanize others, and he soon won over most people's hearts; thus Andrade left Salamanca praised and held in high esteem by all.

At last the moment of departure came, and the Templar Master, after thanking him with words that seemed only to embarrass the

good mountaineer, judging by the vivid blush appearing on his cheeks, gave him a pure-bred Arab horse, very fine-looking and richly harnessed. Andrade would have wanted to refuse the gift, but the fine and delicate display of gratitude by those warriors made this impossible. Before mounting, however, he still called Saldaña aside once more, and with tears in his eyes again asked him to go with him to Cabrera, a request that the commander refused, but not without some emotion that he could not suppress. Finally, after many embraces and even tears, the mountaineer climbed onto his new mount and rode away from the noble city of Salamanca, accompanied by a few of the Abbot of Carracedo's knights who were returning to El Bierzo.

However, the joyful news of which he was the bearer almost completely dispelled the grief of separation, for the letters that he carried to the Lord of Arganza from the venerable abbot, and the events that he could report as an eyewitness, were certain to spread joy on the picturesque shores of Lake Carucedo.

And this was indeed the case, as we have just seen, because as those peaceful villagers had received nothing but alms and favours from the Templars, they greeted the news of the Order's absolution as the best celebration in the world. Thus, when he set foot ashore, after the Lord of Arganza had welcomed him with open arms, and having held the delicate hand of that lady, whom sorrows and ailments had not been able to deprive of her singular charm and beauty, the good hunter did not know what was happening to him, and was beside himself with joy.

As the sun was already going down when the encounter we have just related took place at the lake, Don Alonso did not break the seal of the documents until he reached the country house.

In his message, the virtuous abbot informed Don Alonso of various details of the trial and the sentence passed, he specially recommended Andrade to him, and concluded by saying that, in view of the spirit of the council fathers, he was almost certain that they would release Don Álvaro from all his vows. The letter ended with some reflections full of piety and consolation, which clearly expressed the charity that lived within his soul, despite the remarkable severity of his character.

It was of course necessary to arrange festivities and all kinds of courtesies for the bearer of such good news, and more so as Don Alonso felt a cordial esteem for this man, a model of honesty and ancient virtues.

And so it was that in the days that Andrade remained at the country house, there was a continual succession of hunting and fishing parties, banquets and dances. However, the mountaineer, who had never been absent from his house for so long, had a great yearning to see his wife's face and his children's liveliness. So, after a week Andrade took leave of his noble host and his charming daughter, to return to his native mountains. Doña Beatriz gave him some beautiful gold bracelets studded with jewels for his wife, and Don Alonso presented him with a beautiful set of hunting gear, with a horn finely inlaid with silver. In addition, as an even greater honour, Don Alonso accompanied him for a good stretch of road, and then they parted, with the most cordial expressions of friendship and good relations.

It was in his own soul that Andrade found the best reward for his actions, but he also found it in the affection he had managed to inspire in all the well-born people he had met.

Also, a little vanity mingled with these feelings, at having become the hero of those events, so that his long-standing reputation among his own people had greatly increased, even reaching astonishment and admiration.

After this sudden change of fortune, Doña Beatriz passed from the extreme of anxiety and pain to that of hope and joy. Not only did she see her suitor honoured and acquitted, but free from his vows. She imagined Don Álvaro returning to kneel at her feet, more surrendered and in love than ever, and opening, like dawn, the gates of light to the resplendent and eternal day of their love. Since then it seemed that a new vigour of life was flowing through that weakened and languid body, and that her eyes gradually regained their serenity. Doña Beatriz's cheeks began to gently recover their colour, and in all her words it was clear that confidence had returned to her soul. Foolish passions, no doubt, born more from the desire of her heart than the reality of things. Because Don Álvaro's fate was still dependent on the verdict of a tribunal, and neither reason nor religion advise us to put so much faith in the vagaries of human affairs.

Those who had counted on the condemnation and punishment of the Templars, who were the court of Castile and most of its noblemen, although they had seized the Order's property and even imprisoned their persons, returned to their misgivings and fears as soon as the knights were acquitted and set free of the charges that had been brought against them. For

this reason, they redoubled their diligence and efforts so that the severed pieces of that illustrious body, like those of the fabled serpent, could not be reunited and welded together again and return to life. Now that concerted action was impossible for the Templars and their properties were sequestered, the most effective means of reducing the Order to the greatest degree of submission was to deprive them of those alliances, which were indeed few, but therefore sincere, under whose protection the restoration of the Order could be attempted. And even if this was not achieved, the malevolent forces hoped at least to weaken as much as possible those noblemen who were still on friendly terms with the knights, to make them less dangerous.

At such a fatal juncture, Don Álvaro's case was presented for the court's resolution. Although everyone knew that the bitterness of disappointed love was what had led him to the solitude of the cloister, they also knew that, having pronounced his vows voluntarily, whatever limitations those sacred promises originally had, he would never break the loyalty he had sworn to his brothers. It was clear, therefore, that if Don Álvaro were freed from religious bonds and again became lord of his property in a land where the Temple had put down such deep roots, there could be great dangers, and even more so if he were to marry into the powerful house of Arganza.

As Don Álvaro, on the other hand, had not wished to separate his cause from that of his Order, not even in exchange for the happiness promised to him, not so much by the Abbot of Carracedo and his friends but by his own heart, it was to be imagined that as soon as the occasion arose, he would try to restore the honour of his brotherhood and repair the injustice committed against it.

It is very common to hate those whom one has unjustly wronged, for their presence is a vivid reproach and a cruel reminder to our conscience. And no doubt it is for this reason that the Infante Don Juan looked with vicious resentment upon Don Álvaro. How much, then, must his anxieties have increased when he saw the possibility that the bond that he had already broken once by Doña Beatriz's marriage to the Count of Lemos could now be tied again, as if by an invisible hand? From the very day the sentence was passed, the Infante Don Juan returned to his cabals and machinations, trying to bend the bishops' will so that they would declare Don Álvaro a Templar, and as such, without absolving him of any of his vows, subject him to the final decision

of the Supreme Pontiff. By these means, his aim was to keep their properties sequestered, so that the noble militia would lose hope of improving its cause under the protection of a mighty and brave lord, while time and decay would bring a complete end to their splendour and prestige. Only in this way could he lay his greed at rest concerning the booty he intended to obtain from the rich spoils of the Order.

But the infante had to contend with great obstacles, and not the least of them was that it should be he who was so keen on such a verdict, for his reputation could not have more despised and brought low, even though he sheltered under the majesty and pomp of being the king's uncle. On the other hand, the candid depositions of Don Álvaro, who, knowing that the honour and even the life of his brothers were out of danger, had finally quenched the generous scruples of his honour. Added to this were the letters from the Infante Don Juan to Núñez de Lara, in which the devilish plot of Tordehumos was revealed, and Lara's efforts, sincerely repentant and eager to amend his former conduct. There was also the noble detachment of Saldaña, who, to favour the Lord of Bembibre, did not hesitate to accuse himself of having coerced the master to allow Don Álvaro's admission to the Order. All these factors were more than sufficient to counterbalance the intrigues and machinations of that malevolent knight, the infante. It was not the question of government and good politics that was being subjected to the good judgement of the prelates of Castile and Portugal, but strict and rigorous justice. And so, of course, they expressed their resolve to favour Don Álvaro. On such a solid foundation lay the hopes of the Abbot of Carracedo and the no doubt reckless assurance of Doña Beatriz.

Unfortunately, the Pope's inquisitor, Aymerico, was not of the same mind, and without his help, the seal of approval could hardly be obtained for those unhappy lovers. Dragged into the dispute by the King of France, as we have already said, Pope Clement V embarked on the persecution of the Templars, and politics, more than hatred, kept him on that path, unworthy of the pontifical majesty. And consequently, his representatives came from the papal court well schooled in his instructions and determined to carry out his wishes. Thus, when Aymerico saw that the bishops of the council at Salamanca were inclined to pronounce the nullity of Don Álvaro's vows, he was disturbed by the same fears as those of the Infante Don Juan and began to present obstacles to the

council's decision. His stratagems were of little avail and soon a verdict was pronounced about this aspect within the great trial against the Temple.

The sentence declared Don Álvaro free of the vows of obedience and poverty, the only ones that bound him to the Order, and restored all his property and rights. But the virtuous work of those pious prelates could not entirely free Don Álvaro. For the vow of chastity and purity, the strongest bond of all, was subject to the special jurisdiction of the papal legate. This was because, despite the nullity of the other vows, which in the end all concerned a state of things now defunct or at least suspended, this vow, as an absolute and purely individual obligation, was not subject to time or circumstances, having been pronounced voluntarily.

This explanation, like many others which are based on a petty and sanctimonious interpretation of the law, was much more scholastic and theological than charitable and benevolent. Since there was no essential value in Don Álvaro's profession, it could hardly give strength to any of the obligations it implied. And on the other hand, there is no nobler employment that could be sought for the power of religion than to remedy the damages of iniquity and perfidy. Even though the Church was much given to such scholastic subtleties in that century, these reasons were so evident and so much in keeping with the spirit of the Gospel, that all the bishops begged the inquisitor with great entreaties that, making use of his extraordinary powers, he should break the last barrier that prevented the happiness of two people so worthy of esteem and respect, for the misfortunes they had endured and for their high character, thus rewarding Don Álvaro's exploits in Andalusia and Tordehumos and at the same time preventing the final extinction of two illustrious and ancient lineages.

These arguments were precisely the ones that most inclined the inquisitor against granting the demand and, since his influence had not been able to impede the ruling that restored Don Álvaro to the class of independent lord, the only means he had to diminish the knight's power was to prevent the desired bond with the Arganza lineage. In such ways, the cruel hand of politics and unscrupulous reasons of state destroy the most legitimate hopes and make a mockery of all the sufferings of the soul.

Persevering, then, in his purpose, the papal legate Aymerico was not only impervious to the demands of the abbot and the prelates, but also to the requests of many lords who, guided by Don Juan

Núñez de Lara and full of affection for Don Álvaro, employed all their efforts to pave the way to the knight's happiness. The verdict soon arrived, considering the vow in question valid and binding, until the Supreme Pontiff, in the general council to be held in Vienne in the Dauphiné, decided the most just resolution.

The inquisitor, in order to sweeten somewhat the bitterness of this decision, offered to interpose his good offices with the Papal court for the final resolution of this matter which, he said, his conscience had not allowed him to settle favourably. No one was deceived, however, since almost all the bishops of Christendom were to go to the Council of Vienne, and with the innumerable cases which had to be judged within the immense prosecution of the Temple, it was beyond imagination to know when it would end, nor any hope for Don Álvaro's case until it did.

The grief caused by this outcome was widespread, but the sadness of the Abbot of Carracedo, the Templar Master Don Rodrigo Yáñez, Commander Saldaña and Don Juan Núñez de Lara was very great and exceedingly bitter, though dictated by such abstruse motives. The good monk was deeply grieved by the failure of his efforts, and the old knights felt as if they were attending the funeral of Don Álvaro's last hope. But in Núñez de Lara, the most vivid remorse mingled with pain, and of all the knights, he was perhaps the one who most merited compassion.

As for that unfortunate young man, only one complaint was heard from him, on seeing his fate finally separated from that of the Templars, now that the bishops had just broken the last talisman that could make power and honours agreeable to him. From that moment until the day when he had to return to El Bierzo with the abbot, Don Álvaro did not say another word about his fate. But on that occasion, and especially when bidding farewell to Saldaña, he exposed his deep pain, and cursed a thousand times the destiny that had brought him into the world. The old man comforted him as best he could, urging him to be firm, and putting before him the immense future that his youth opened before him. Saldaña, the master and almost all the knights remained as prisoners scattered in remote monasteries and convents until the Pope's resolution arrived. And so Don Álvaro, after receiving his uncle's blessing and the embraces of Saldaña and his companions, rode out of Salamanca with the Abbot of Carracedo, forsaken and sadder than he had ever been.

After so many disappointments and severe lessons, after so

many upheavals within his own heart and in the winding paths of the world, the light of hope could only dimly and hesitantly illuminate the darkness of Don Álvaro's soul. The state of Doña Beatriz was not unknown to him, and he thought of the terrible blow that she was to receive with the news of the inquisitor's ruling. And against this foreboding, this inner voice, all the abbot's consolations and reflections were shattered. The truth was that the same fears and concerns assaulted the soul of the old abbot and deprived his voice of that tone of assurance so necessary to communicate courage and confidence to the young knight. The trip, therefore, was very sombre and silent.

The abbot had thought that he would go to the country house at Carucedo immediately and prepare Doña Beatriz for the harsh test that destiny once more had in store for her. But on second thoughts, he considered it wiser to stop and rest in Bembibre and from there, write to Don Alonso informing him of everything that had happened.

Millán had gone ahead with the unexpected news of his master's return, and all Bembibre went out to meet Don Álvaro, for not one day had they stopped praying for his happy and prompt return or missing his paternal authority. Don Álvaro tried to correspond as he always did to those simple displays of affection, but no one failed to observe with sadness how their master's face was altered by sorrow and regret. The garrison which occupied the castle in the king's name handed it over to its rightful owner, and a good number of the soldiers who had accompanied Don Álvaro in the expedition to Tordehumos rushed to guard it. In a word, the whole day and even some of the following passed in dances and rejoicing of all sorts, because in Bembibre everything had returned to its old joy. Everything but the heart of its master!



Chapter XXXV – The gnawing worm of misery

Doña Beatriz's hopes were like the beautiful flowers of the almond tree, which, hurrying to burst their buds in the spring breezes and opening their blossoms to the rays of the sun, disappear in a single night to the deadly breath of frost. Her soul, weary of suffering, and her health, stricken by the continuous onslaughts of pain, as soon as they felt the rigorous bindings loosen, rushed ardently to the source of happiness and joy to slake their parching thirst, not thinking to find the bitterness of new tribulations where they imagined such pleasant freshness and softness.

The sensible Don Alonso was not very pleased with that imprudent assurance in which his daughter found solace. But he was thankful that her strength was returning so visibly, and even her memory seemed to be purified of past tragic recollections, so he had no courage to dissuade her from the beautiful dreams that freed him from what he most feared.

The elderly physician from Carracedo was extremely satisfied with the new turn that the lady's illness was taking, and as the news from Salamanca brought only omens of a prosperous future, he believed there was nothing to stop nature in its beneficent movement.

Spring had come in full abundance, and its influence also contributed powerfully to relieve the sick woman by painting in her imagination beautiful scenes of the countryside and soothing her breast with its balmy air. This picture grew every day in beauty and pleasance, and Doña Beatriz's tender and passionate soul found in it an inexhaustible source of sweet sensations.

One morning, when she had gone with her father and her maid a good way around the shores of the lake, sometimes on foot and other times by boat, she finally lay down at the foot of a chestnut tree to rest a little from her fatigue. A turtle dove called sadly on its branches, and a woodcutter delivered hard blows with his axe into the trunk of a wild olive tree not far off, accompanying his work with a very sweet tune. And in the middle of the lake, lightly ruffled by a slight breeze, swayed a boat with a single villager on board. The sky was cloudless, the morning sun illuminated the landscape with a very pure light, and only in a slightly darker bend of that stretch of water, a thin, blue haze seemed to hide from its rays.

The three of them were silent as if they were afraid to interrupt with their words the calmness of this beautiful spectacle. Then a glint of

metal that came from beside the village of Carucedo caught Don Alonso's eyes. Fixing his gaze more carefully on that spot, he saw a man-at-arms who was trotting towards them at a good pace, and whose helmet and shield, catching the sunlight, gave forth bright reflections. The noble Lord of Arganza had not heard from Salamanca for several days, and at once he thought that this man was sent by the abbot.

The stranger, observing the boat docked nearby, and the clothes and bearing of the group at the foot of the chestnut tree, made his way toward them, and alighting with agility, presented Don Alonso with a letter bearing the Abbot of Carracedo's seal. He opened the letter quickly, and the few lines he read stole the colour from his face, his knees began to tremble, and he leaned against the tree trunk as if losing consciousness and dropped the paper from his hands. Doña Beatriz then, as fast as lightning, dived to the ground and, picking up the letter, began to read it with disbelieving eyes. But her father, seeing her actions, seemed to recover entirely and threw himself toward her to wrench it from her hands, shouting at her:

"Do not read it, do not read it, for it will kill you!"

But Doña Beatriz turned aside, and without taking her eyes from the fatal document, read on until she reached a point where, with a tremendous groan, she fell senseless into the arms of her faithful maid. The messenger came to the rescue at once and so did the oarsmen, jumping onto the shore. But Don Alonso and Martina had already reclined the lady again at the foot of the tree, with the handmaid sitting on the ground and holding her mistress's head in her lap. Then they began to splash her face with water that they brought from the lake in a jug, and to administer to her all the remedies available. But in vain, because Doña Beatriz did not come to herself, nor did she cease a kind of laboured and anxious breathing which seemed to boil in the depths of her chest. From time to time, she groaned deeply, and lifted her hands to her heart, as if she wished to remove a weight that overwhelmed her, while a copious sweat flowed from her forehead and moistened her whole body.

Doña Beatriz remained in this state for a long while, until Don Alonso realised that the seizure required more serious care and decided to put his daughter into the boat and return to the country house immediately. They carried her with the greatest care, and rowing quickly, they soon disembarked at the jetty from where,

with the same precautions, they took her to her bed. Fortunately, the old physician from Carracedo was there at the time, and closely watching her breathing and pulse, he immediately decided to open a vein to relieve the woman's distress. As this remedy began to mitigate her tremendous fatigue, Doña Beatriz soon opened her eyes, but without fixing them on any object, gazing around the room with a slow and uncertain look. Finally, she regained her senses fully, but being still caught up in her tremendous attack, the first words she uttered were:

"Air, give me air, I am suffocating!"

The monk rushed to the windows and opened them wide.

"Oh, still!" exclaimed Doña Beatriz, "I still have a weight like a mountain here!" she exclaimed, struggling to sit up and pointing to the left side of her chest.

Then Martina, the monk and her father sat her up, piling up several pillows to support her. In this posture she gradually regained some tranquillity, and the warm, gentle air that entered the windows began to calm her breathing. It was then that the memory of the scene that had just occurred was awakened in her, and staring at her father with her eyes altered and bright with the fire of fever, she said:

"Where are the letter and the messenger? Give me the paper, I have not finished reading it yet! ... Where have you put it, that I do not see it?"

"My daughter, my daughter!" said Don Alonso, "do not break my heart. What are you going to look for in that cursed message?"

"The letter! The letter!" she replied with blind and obstinate perseverance, ignoring her father's reasons.

"Give it to her and do not contradict her," the physician advised quietly, "because it can no longer do her any more harm than it already has."

Don Alonso then handed over the letter to his daughter, and she, with extraordinary eagerness, began to devour its words with her eyes. This letter, as our readers will presume, contained only what they already know, but by a fatal circumstance its contents were as far from the imaginings of Doña Beatriz as is the sky from the earth. At last she finished reading it, and letting her hands fall on the bed, as if overcome by weakness, she directed a long and melancholy gaze at the landscape which was revealed through the open windows. She spent a brief time in such sad distraction until, at last, with a deep sigh, she exclaimed:

"And yet my dream was pure and beautiful. Pure and beautiful like that lake in which one sees the sky as in a mirror, and like those forests and hills full of freshness and murmurs. I will not outlive the blossoms of this year. Fool that I am, to have thought that nature dressed in her finest array, like my youthful soul, to receive my husband, when it was only attired for my eternal farewell!"

"And I should be taken for a fool a thousand times," said Don Alonso, "that I let you surrender to that vain hope that could vanish with a mere breath of wind!"

"What else could I do, my father?" Doña Beatriz said sweetly, "my eyes were tired of weeping in the night of my sorrows, and when the sky showed me a glimmer of happiness, I thought it would last, because I had bought it at the cost of infinite bitterness. I do not mind death for myself, but who will comfort you, my father, and who will comfort him, the one who has loved me so dearly?"

"Doña Beatriz," said the monk gravely, "not long ago divine mercy brought you out of the very darkness of death, and I do not know how in your piety you can forget it so soon and so distrust the power of the Almighty. What is more, I have also read what my reverend prelate says, and I see no reason to be discouraged, given that the Inquisitor Aymerico has promised his help in putting Don Álvaro's case to the Sovereign Pontiff so that the judgement may be favourably decided. That is how you should expect things to turn out."

"Oh, Father!" she replied. "How do you suppose that in the labyrinth of this immense affair of the Templars the Pope will come upon the sheet of paper on which my tranquillity and happiness hang? What do the potentates of the earth care about the fate of an unhappy young woman who is dying of love and sorrow? Who sets his eyes on the nightingale's nest when the hurricane tears down and uproots the trees of the forest?"

Don Alonso, who had sat at the foot of the bed with his head in his hands, in deep affliction, rose to his feet at these words as if struck by a sudden idea and, standing before his daughter, he resolutely answered:

"I, who have lost you, will bring you Don Álvaro's freedom and happiness for you both! I will go to France, I will go to the end of the world, even if it is walking barefoot and carrying a pilgrim's staff. And I will throw myself at the feet of Clement V. I will tell him about the blood that my house has shed for the faith of Christ and

I will beg him to preserve the life of my only daughter. I'm leaving for Vienne tomorrow."

"You, sir!" Doña Beatriz said in alarm. "And do you think that I will consent to see you exposed to the hardships of such a long journey and your grey hairs tarnished with useless supplications, and all this just for this foolish passion that neither prayer, nor tears, nor illness have been able to pluck out of my breast? And then, my father, consider that it is already too late, and that on your return you will only find the green grass growing on the grave wherein lies the body of your daughter. Do not leave me at this moment, I beseech you!"

"Beatriz! Beatriz!" answered the old man with a commanding voice, "do not make me despair, and do not drain away the resolve that I need for your good and for mine. Tomorrow I will leave, because my heart tells me that your father's affection and repentance can outweigh the fatal star that has set itself above my house, intent on bringing about the ruin of our lineage."

Doña Beatriz wanted to answer but Martina, clasping her hands together, said to her mistress with the greatest earnestness:

"For God's sake, noble lady, let your father do what he says, for it seems to me that it is a voice from Heaven that speaks through his mouth. Let him go, all will be well, and you will also remove a weight that overwhelms his heart."

"Doña Beatriz," said the monk gravely, "in the name of your father, of your lineage, and all that you hold dear in this world, I advise you to regain all your accustomed courage and calm down, for such agitation can harm you infinitely."

And at the end of these words, the priest left the room, taking the Lord of Arganza with him. He went aside for a moment to prepare a beverage with which he intended to temper the fever of the sick girl that night, and then went back to the troubled old man.

"What are you thinking?" the priest asked Don Alonso.

"I am thinking of setting out on my journey right away," replied Don Alonso, "but I would like your abbot to come here and carry out the duties of father for my unhappy daughter, who will be left here for some time orphaned and helpless. Do you think that the sight of the abbot may worsen her state by bringing to mind painful memories?"

"On the contrary," replied the monk, "first we must soften the hard blow she has received today, erasing it as much as possible from her imagination. So, not only must the abbot come, but also

Don Álvaro, and very soon, because perhaps his presence is worth more than all my medical remedies."

"Yes, yes, let us waste no time," replied Don Alonso, calling with a silver whistle.

At once the hunter Nuño appeared.

"Has the messenger from Bembibre gone yet?" his master asked him.

"No, sir," replied the old man with assurance, "he is no doubt awaiting a reward for the good news he has brought."

"Never mind," replied Don Alonso, "bring him immediately to my presence."

The servant went away muttering under his breath, and his master, quickly sitting down at his desk, wrote a letter to the abbot, bidding him very earnestly to come soon, with Don Álvaro. He had just closed it when the messenger came.

"You have brought us bad news, my friend," said the Lord of Arganza.

"Ah, sir!" replied the man with apparent sincerity, "I am deeply sorry, and if I had known what it was, another person would have had to be the bearer."

"It does not matter," said Don Alonso, "here, have these coins for your journey. But say, are you well mounted?"

"The mare I ride carries me lighter than a thought," replied the messenger, very glad to be so generously rewarded.

"Well, you must test its lightness to get to Bembibre immediately and deliver this letter to the Abbot of Carracedo, and if you work the mare to death I will let you choose a replacement from among mine, whichever you want."

Without waiting for more, the soldier left and, untying his mount and jumping on it, he went out like a whirlwind along the road to Ponferrada, and very quickly was lost to sight.

As the day advanced, Doña Beatriz's fever grew and her understanding became more disturbed. She complained of pain and oppression on the left side and a consuming thirst. From time to time she fell asleep, and then an extraordinary sweat came at last to wake her. Alternating between these extremes, the afternoon passed, until night came on and her breathing became more fatigued and she began to have some intervals of delirium, drinking with inexpressible eagerness great draughts of the cordial that had been prepared for her.

Neither her father nor the elderly monk left the patient's chamber but for very few moments, and both were silent and equally attentive. In that sick room they had, without doubt, the saddest reflections on that life wilted in its flowering by the gnawing worm of misery. At each sentence that escaped her lips, often incoherent, Don Alonso approached as if he heard his name. But the lady either immediately stopped speaking or, after giving him a wandering and distracted look, turned to the opposite side, sometimes letting out a sigh and other times smiling to herself in a strange way. The unhappy father would then retreat, shaking his head sadly and, sitting at the other end of the room, returned to his painful reflections.

As sleeplessness and affliction together assailed his mind, Don Alonso on one occasion went out for a moment to the lookout of the country house to breathe the outside air. It was very late at night, and the moon in the middle of the sky seemed at the same time asleep at the bottom of the lake. In its vague and discoloured light, the contours of the mountains and boulders appeared strangely softened and as if covered in a light mist. Not a breath of air moved, and the notes of a nightingale singing from afar were lost with a most harmonious music in the echoes of the night.

The Lord of Arganza could not help feeling the deep contrast between the calm of nature all around him and the torments suffered by his only daughter. He then remembered the Abbot of Carracedo's prediction, and his imagination was so disturbed that he sat down trembling and distressed. Suddenly he seemed to hear, coming from the village of Carucedo, a noise that was steadily increasing. A quick flash of reflected moonlight that came from beneath the oaks excited his curiosity even more, and watching carefully, he saw three horsemen, two of them in military attire, who came along the lake shore with a rapid and steady gallop, heading for the country house. The light of the moon, which only allowed to see their shapes, gave enough brightness as they approached to discover that one of them wore the black and white habit of the Order of Saint Bernard. Don Alonso could not contain a cry of joy and surprise and hurrying down the stairs, he himself opened the door to the Abbot of Carracedo, who was the one who arrived, accompanied by Don Álvaro and his squire Millán.

"Oh, Father!" said the sorrowful man, throwing himself into the abbot's arms, "just a moment ago I was thinking of you. Your prediction has begun to be fulfilled in a frightful way, and I am very

afraid that it will come true entirely as your words described."

"Do not give credit to my hasty words, daughters of an angry impulse," the abbot said kindly. "The goodness of God is greater than the vanity of our wisdom."

"And you too, noble Don Álvaro?" added Don Alonso, going to the young man with open arms. "Is this the way we should meet after such joyful prospects?"

Then there was a knot in his throat, and Don Álvaro, without parting his lips, turned violently away from him, entering the darkness to wipe away the tears that filled his eyes and suppress his sobs. Everything was silent for a while, except for Don Álvaro's Arab horse that, despite the tiring ride, struck the ground with his hoof. Finally, the noble host, calming down a little, said to the newcomers:

"I was not expecting you until tomorrow, my good friends. But the truth is you could not have arrived more opportunely."

"Did you think so poorly of us?" replied the abbot. "God forbid that I should come so half-heartedly to help the needy and afflicted! Since we received your letter, we have not ceased to journey with the greatest diligence, and here you have us. But do you tell us nothing about your daughter?"

"A moment ago she was asleep," replied Don Alonso, "if you can call it sleep that we enjoy in the midst of such disturbance. Come, let us go to her room so that you can see her."

Some servants had come on hearing the horses and one of them, carrying a light, led the visitors to the sick woman's chamber. The strangers remained on the threshold while Don Alonso entered to see how the girl was, but he returned to them at once and brought them in.

They found Doña Beatriz lying on her bed as if submerged in an agitated lethargy, and the long eyelashes that lined her eyelids gave her closed eyes an extraordinary expression. The liveliness that the hopes and joy that had faded only a few hours ago had spilled onto her face was still not erased. On her pure and shapely forehead, there was a certain contraction, an indication of her suffering, and the fever had enamelled her cheeks with a kind of burning colour. Her long, dishevelled curls fell down her white, swan-like neck and veiled her bosom, so that if it were not for her struggling for breath and for the vivid hue of her face, anyone would have taken her to be one of those marble figures that we see lying on the ancient tombs of our cathedrals. The traces of the old ills had not yet

disappeared, and the traces of the new ones began to be deeply marked in her face. But despite all this, Doña Beatriz displayed an otherworldly beauty, as if a celestial reflection illuminated her countenance.

The abbot, after looking at her for a moment, began to speak to the attending monk in a low voice, but with vehement gestures and expression. But Don Álvaro looked at the lady with fixed eyes. Suddenly she let out a sigh and then, with a fresh and pure intonation that combined the melancholy of the turtledove and the brilliance of the nightingale, sang on a country air the refrain of a popular song that said:

Oh, my heart, my heart,
So full of sadness,
Why not as before,
Be filled with gladness?

The echoes of that voice so full of feeling and tenderness vibrated in the vaults of the room. And as it often happens in dreams, Doña Beatriz woke up to the sound of her own song. Don Álvaro, who saw her beautiful eyes open like twin stars emerging from within a cloud, had enough presence of mind to hide at once behind Don Alonso and Martina, fearing that his appearance could cause a fatal alteration in the patient. But, were it that the movement seemed suspicious to her, or that Doña Beatriz' heart told her who stood in her presence, she sat up in bed with incredible lightness, and as if she wanted to see through the bodies of her father and Martina to discover who was hiding, she asked anxiously:

"Who ... who is it that hides from my sight?"

The abbot, possessed by the same fears, wanted to continue the gentle deception, and so he said to her:

"He is a warrior who has accompanied me, Doña Beatriz. Do you not know me?"

"Oh, is it you, Father Abbot?" said the girl, grasping his hand and holding it to her lips, "but who but he would accompany you to this house of affliction?" she continued, fixing her eyes on the same spot.

Don Álvaro's height made his helmet, crowned with a feather, clearly visible above the head of the Lord of Arganza.

"It is he! It is he!" cried Doña Beatriz with the greatest vehemence, "that is the same helmet and the same plume he was wearing on that fateful night at Villabuena. Come out; come out, noble Don Álvaro!"

Oh, I thank God a thousand times that he does not abandon me in my bitter trials!"

"Ah, my lady!" Don Álvaro exclaimed, suddenly stepping forward, "neither in happiness nor in misery nor in life nor in death will my heart ever abandon you."

The young woman, still half confused by delirium, and following no other impulse than that of her heart, had reached up to throw her arms around his neck, but she at once came to her senses and restrained herself. With the emotion she had grown pale, but then a vivid crimson hue coloured her cheeks and even her neck, and she lowered her eyes.

"Here is a strange thing!" she said after a short silence, "A short while ago I dreamed that you had taken me from the convent as you did on that fateful night, and that without bringing me to the sanctuary that you had prepared, you took leave of me forever because you were going to the war of Castile. I then sat down by the side of the road and began to sing a sad song. Like all my dreams, it was a dream of separation and death, but behold, you have returned ... How could my heart have been unfaithful? What does this change mean?"

"What can it mean, my daughter," replied the abbot, "but that the Lord God, who has been testing you, is now taking the hours of misfortune away from you? Were you not worried about the life, the honour and the freedom of Don Álvaro? Well, here you have him, free and more honoured than ever. Even the last remaining obstacle to your happiness will no doubt disappear very soon. How can you not hope for what we all wish for you, that you worry us so?"

Doña Beatriz then smiled wistfully, and replied:

"My poor heart has received so many wounds that hope has spilled out of it as from a broken vessel. I thought the wounds had been healed, but they only seemed to be cured, and with this blow, they have begun to bleed afresh. May Heaven have mercy on us all!"

When she finished speaking, the sick chamber returned to that deep silence that saddens as much as the malady itself, with no more sound than that of Doña Beatriz's struggling for breath. She was the one who broke the long silence again, saying impetuously and as if her words and decision were the result of a great internal struggle:

"Don Álvaro, do not leave! ... Is it not true that you will stay? Who can forbid it? I love you, it is true, but in the same way an angel from Heaven could love you, or your mother if you had one. Think that my words come to you from the land of shadows and that it is not I that you have before you, but my image painted in your memory! But why do you not answer me? Tell me, would you be capable of leaving me in this fatal hour?"

"No, no, my daughter," replied the abbot hurriedly, "neither he nor I will depart from your side until your father returns from France with that dispensation, which is the promise of your future happiness and glory to come."

"Do you still persevere in that arduous enterprise for my sake?" she exclaimed giving her father a painful look, in which doubt and dejection were depicted.

"Yes," said Don Alonso, "I will leave tomorrow, if you do not take away my courage by displaying a weakness that is unworthy of your lineage. Courage, Beatriz! for I leave you in such good company, and I hope to be back before three months are out with the only thing that can calm your heart and my conscience, the freedom of Don Álvaro."

The doctor then signalled that a conversation so long and full of agitation could increase Doña Beatriz's distress. So, after some words of encouragement and comfort from the abbot and her father, they all left the room except the old monk and Martina. Don Álvaro did not speak or hear a single word, but the eyes of both lovers spoke a much more eloquent language when they said farewell.

Whatever misgivings Doña Beatriz may have had about her fatal state, a single idea occupied her at that moment: that she would not be deprived of the sight of Don Álvaro. It could do little to heal the evils of her body, but it was a heavenly balm for her spirit. And its influence on the lady was so mild and beneficent that, as often happens with fiery imaginations, it was enough to favourably alter the course of her distemper and allow her more rest than might be expected.





Chapter XXXVI – The book of sorrows

The next day very early, when his daughter was still resting, the Lord of Arganza left for France with only old Nuño and another servant. Both Don Alonso and Nuño were old, and therefore frail. But they were nevertheless sustained by the same sentiment, which in the father could be explained by repentance and paternal tenderness and in the hunter out of pure loyalty; and, in both, from a blind inclination towards that young woman who deserved better fortune. Don Alonso did not want to say goodbye to Doña Beatriz, following the sound advice of the physician, so as not to agitate her again with a sad scene, but more so on that occasion because of his leaving for such a long journey. So they left quietly, with the abbot and the Lord of Bembibre accompanying Don Alonso for a good stretch of road. When they had to separate, Don Alonso embraced them closely, commending his beloved daughter to their care, and above all asking them to distract her mind from the notions of death that so preoccupied her. This they promised him and, sadly bidding farewell, Don Alonso continued his journey while the others went back to the country house.

Doña Beatriz, exhausted by all the excitement of that night, had fallen fast asleep close to dawn. And although the constant symptoms of her illness did not allow her a restful sleep, balm for so many evils, nevertheless she was granted a truce in her struggles. Just as Don Álvaro and the abbot entered, she was awakened by *Almanzor's* whinny and, looking around, Doña Beatriz noticed her father was not there and inquired about him. Martina left as if in search of Don Alonso, but in his place the Abbot of Carracedo entered. Doña Beatriz understood at once that her father had left, and her countenance clouded. But the old man, with great prudence and the persuasive authority of his years, comforted her by presenting to her the speedy and happy results that could come from that separation. Doña Beatriz listened without any sign of impatience and without answering a word, but when the old man finished his speech, she exhaled a sigh that came from the depths of her heart, which meant, "All those good results you promise me will come too late." Then she called Martina and said she wanted to get up. The physician did not object, and before long Doña Beatriz was on her feet.

Her pallor was extraordinary, for the excitement of delirium and

fever of the previous night had given way to a fatal weakness and decay. It was only when Don Álvaro approached that her cheeks took on some colour. And at the sound of his voice, grave and manly as always, but as always tender and passionate, an electric tremor seemed to spread throughout her body. She had looked at him anxiously the night before, but the veil that fever had spread over her eyes and the dim light that illuminated the room did not allow her to see those features that were both harmonious and expressive, the first and only ones that had been imprinted on her soul. In the daylight, she could now satisfy her desire to see Don Álvaro, but when she did, she felt a similar impression to that which the knight had felt on seeing her. No symptom of sickness was visible in his noble countenance, but sorrow had begun to cross his brow. His eyes had lost their former serenity, sinking somewhat in their sockets, acquiring a sombre expression. Don Álvaro's face had also lost colour, and in the contours of his body a certain thinness could be observed, a result of his own afflictions and meditations.

What we have described with so many words, Doña Beatriz noticed with a single glance. But despite these changes, Don Álvaro never seemed so handsome to her. Truly he had lost nothing of his former appearance and gallantry, and in his bearing and manners, she noticed something austere and elevated that inspired respect.

Leaning on Don Álvaro and the abbot, Doña Beatriz went down the stairs leading to the garden with the intention of sitting in the shade of an arbour near a trellis of jasmine. All the flowers were open, and a swarm of golden bees buzzed through them, as they sucked the nectar and then quickly flew to the hives at the end of the garden. The pathways and flowerbeds presented an interminable arabesque of vivid hues. The walls were entwined with passion flowers and vines, and in the middle of the garden there flowed a fountain, surrounded by a crown of violets that peeped out among the grass.

The young woman, though she had almost been carried down the stairs, had grown weary and could not endure the warm and fragrant atmosphere that overwhelmed her. The very freshness of the flowers and the exuberant youth of nature created a painful contrast in her soul with the withered flower of her years and her lifeless youth. At once, the abbot and Don Álvaro moved her to the boat, which was waiting at the end of the pier. The oarsmen boarded at once and, untying the rope, they began to glide over the

blue expanse of water.

The cool breeze from the lake revived Doña Beatriz a little. She had reclined at the stern on some silk cushions with a languor and abandon that clearly showed her loss of energy. The abbot, seeing her a little calmer, took out the book of hours and went to sit at the opposite end of the boat to pray. Don Álvaro, standing in front of her, watched her with restless, roving eyes, while hers, fixed on the mirror of the waters, followed the lake's soft ripples as if in a trance. She turned from the water at last and looked at Don Álvaro, and fixing him with her eyes, beckoned with her hand that he should come and sit by her side. He obeyed her silently, and then the young woman said to him, holding his hand:

"I am calmer now, and I can talk to you. Thank God, we are alone. Listen to me then, because I have a burden on my heart that has been weighing on me for a long time. Come closer. Is it not true that you have sometimes said to yourself, 'the woman whom I loved has been the wife of a man unworthy of her, whose breath has tarnished her brow. I saw her as a lily of the valley that even the night breeze did not touch. But behold now I find her separated from the paternal plant, and its leaves are without scent and without lustre.' Have you not sometimes said this, in your heart?"

Don Álvaro remained silent and did not look up from the floor. Then Doña Beatriz, after having kept the same silence for a while, took a book bound in green silk from her breast and said:

"I knew this was so, because for so long our hearts have been beating as one, so that no movement of your heart can be unknown to me. But you ... you have not read in my soul!" she said to him in a heartfelt and almost angry tone. Don Álvaro then raised his eyes, looking at her with a pleading expression, but she silenced him with her hand, and continued:

"I do not blame you, for so many misfortunes have fallen upon your head for the love of this unhappy woman, and only they could have broken the faith of your noble heart. Take this book," she said, handing it to him, "and its contents will bring an end to all your doubts."

"But, my lady, I have no doubts!" exclaimed Don Álvaro without taking it.

"Accept it nonetheless," she said, "for soon it will be all that you will have left of me. Do not look at me with those staring eyes, and do not interrupt me. Remember that you are a man and one of the

most courageous knights in all Christendom and accept the decrees of Heaven. In this diary, I wrote my thoughts and even my ravings. It was meant for you. Receive it, then, from my hands, as you would have received it from my confessor."

"Ah, my lady, how can you harbour such ideas, when your father is certain to return, and bring with him the dispensation that will herald the spring days of our love?"

"My father will come too late," she replied, with a solemn voice. "He will return only to entrust the remains of his only daughter to the earth and to die thereafter. Before this last and fiercest blow, the sap of life flowed again through these withered limbs, but now it has completely dried up."

The abbot, who had finished his prayer, approached them and interrupted the conversation. Doña Beatriz, oppressed by her thoughts and weakened by the effort she had just made, remained taciturn and lost in her painful reflections. Don Álvaro, disturbed by that terrible scene that had just lifted the veil of reality, was also silent, convulsively pressing the green book between his hands and against his heart. The abbot, for his part, respecting the suffering of both, did not utter a single word. In this way, they crossed the lake to the inlet where the country house was, where the two men jumped ashore and took the girl upstairs again in their arms. It was already dark, and Doña Beatriz said that she wanted to be left alone with her maid, so that the two men took leave of her, retiring to their respective quarters.

No sooner was Don Álvaro in his own chamber than, closing the door and approaching a writing desk on which two candles burned, he opened the fateful book and anxiously began to read its pages. The first was marked with that melancholy verse which, as we said elsewhere, was a kind of epigraph to those disordered and extremely sad memoirs: *Vigilavi et factus sum sicut passer solitarius in tecto*, meaning, "I watch the night awake, and am as a sparrow alone upon a roof top." Don Álvaro, after having read it, repeated it mechanically. In so brief a sentence his life and that of Doña Beatriz were contained, filled with constant sleeplessness, loneliness and perennially dashed hopes. How many times would the tearful eyes of that unhappy and beautiful creature have read over those words! Don Álvaro went on, and turning the page found this passage:

When I was told that he had died, after the first anguish of pain, I thought I heard a voice calling me

from the Heavens that said to me: "Beatriz, Beatriz, what are you doing in that valley of darkness and weeping?" I thought it was his voice, but then I saw that he was alive. However, the voice has continued to call me in my dreams, and with more and more sweetness. What does he want to tell me? My health has weakened greatly, and I will no doubt die young.

On another page were the words:

How happily my poor mother closed her eyes when she saw me the count's wife! She equated her heart with mine and hoped a future of glory and happiness for me; but what did her daughter expect? The peace of the dead, and even so she held out her hand...

Death takes longer than I imagined, and yet I am happier than I could hope. A rare happiness is mine! Before my sad marriage, I called my future husband aside, and demanded his word that he would respect me all the year I had promised to wait for Don Álvaro when he set out for the war in Castile. He promised me this, and he has fulfilled it, because, since he does not love me, he has been content with the hope of my riches and the power this marriage gives him, without soliciting my heart, much less my caresses.

Thus I will die as I have lived, pure and worthy of the only man who has loved me. For him I write these lines; but who knows if they will ever come into his hands? Who knows if the wind will blow them away like the leaves of the trees that I see growing over the towers of the convent? Perhaps the breath of death will snatch the scanty leaves that remain on the tree of my youth! My poor father, how dreadful will the awakening be from his dreams of greatness!

Then came a verse from the book of Job, which read:

Ecce nunc in pulvere dormiam, et si mane me quaesieris, non subsistam!

Don Álvaro knew these words to mean, "For now I shall sleep in the dust, and thou shalt seek me in the morning but I shall not be."

On the following page, he read this painful stanza:

*O flower of the soul, your fragrance is fading,
Thoughts of yesterday such yearning inspire,
From the fresh meadows the green crown is falling,
Nothing but tears in the strings of the lyre!*

Don Álvaro passed a few pages, and found one with the following words:

Finally, I am widowed and free. My ties are loose, but who will untie those that bind him? The fate of the Order inspires me with burning fears. Who knows if my love will bring him death and dishonour? Oh, my God, why does my heart spread misery everywhere?

At last, I learn that he is imprisoned with all his noble companions, and will stand before the judges as if he were a highwayman!

What will become of them? Last night I had a raging fire inside my breast, a mortal thirst devoured me, and in the illusion of my fever, it seemed to me that all the streams and fountains of this country ran with sweet murmuring behind my head. I did not want to wake Martina, because she slept peacefully, although her heart is elsewhere, like mine. Where can the difference lie? In that she loves and waits, and I love and die!

Don Álvaro read over other passages, in which the agony Doña Beatriz experienced for her fate was described in terms of extreme anguish and grief. At last, after so many anxieties and sorrows, came the following passage:

Oh, thank the Heavens, he is acquitted of all accusations and all his companions too! I thought that I would throw myself into the lake to embrace the messenger that brought such blessed news! Finally he will return, yes, he will return, no doubt. Why else should nature be adorned with all the finery of spring, but to receive my husband?

How beautiful are these groves cradled by the

wind, how beautiful these mountains clothed with greenery, pure and fragrant with wildflowers, and the musical and rhythmic murmuring of their springs and brooks, but in the end they are only the finery of the world, and I have a Heaven inside my heart!

I will go out looking for him with my lute in my hand, my head covered with the dew of the night, and as the wife of the Song of Solomon, I will ask all the travellers by the road "Where is my beloved?"

Ah, I am mad! Such joy should kill me, and yet life returns to my heart in torrents, and it seems to me that the fawn racing along the mountain side would be less swift than I! He thought me beautiful before. But how beautiful will I seem to him now when he sees in my eyes a sunray of happiness, and in my body the grace of a lily, vivified by a beneficent rain? Oh my God, my God! For such happiness, my many hours of loneliness and tears are but a scant payment! If a paradise was to be my place of repose, few are the thorns you have strewn on my way!

Although troubled and confused, Don Álvaro had been able to read the previous passages, bathed with weeping and sorrow. But when he read these words, where a happiness was sketched with such vivid colours, that had later been dissipated like smoke, he could no longer suppress the violent outbursts of his soul and he fell on his bed, breaking into bitter sobs. At last he was alone, and only God was witness to his weakness. But tears, which so much relieve the hearts of women and children are, in the eyes of men, but tar and molten lead.





Chapter XXXVII – Between delirious joy and mortal fear

Doña Beatriz's sad predictions came true very quickly from that day, and her physical sufferings, together with the conflicts of her soul, began to visibly degrade her body, which had been undermined and broken in so many ways. The beautiful and delicate hues of health, which had again returned a rosy colour to that comely face, worthy of one of Raphael's angels, were changed little by little into the pallor of wax, just as we see the clouds of sunset lose their vivid colours as the sun goes down. The exquisite smoothness of her body, the lovely sinuosity of her limbs, the elegance of her movements that had been darkened for some time under the shadows of pain and sickness, had begun to flourish again, but now they wilted once more under the breath of disillusionment. Her appearance was more and more like that of a shadow, and all that remained in her was the reflection of the divine soul which shone in her eyes and illuminated her from within.

The illness that consumed Doña Beatriz, far from taking on any repulsive aspect, seemed to enhance her angelic resignation and her sweetness beyond compare. At times, however, her thoughts took a certain bitter turn, revealing the vigour hidden under so much gentleness, and the fire that burned under so much ruin and ashes. It was indeed an infernal torment to see the shadow of death arrive so quietly, when hope, love, peace and domestic tranquillity, the noble pride of bearing an illustrious name, riches, youth, beauty, and everything that can embellish and sublimate life, came together to make hers so priceless. Nevertheless, her piety, her elevated character and even those melancholy habits of her spirit easily dispelled these tumultuous movements in her soul, and in a moment, her ideas returned to their ordinary course.

In those fatal days, Doña Beatriz's love for nature increased even more, and her eagerness to contemplate the beautiful scenes of her surroundings was extraordinary. She was very tired of lying in bed, but as she could not walk a single step from pure prostration, her excursions were always in the boat, whose movement upon the lake water was the only thing she could bear. And so, she spent hours on end crossing the waters of the lake,

sometimes gazing at its banks in a kind of rapture, and at other times following with her eyes the flocks of wild ducks that swam in the distance in orderly squadrons, and almost always lost in her own thoughts. From time to time she looked up to the road by which her father had left, to see if his armour gleamed on the hill of Borrenes. And she turned with a kind of shudder on hearing the noise of the villagers' mares passing by the lake shore, imagining that she heard the horseshoes of Don Alonso's steed.

Don Álvaro and the venerable abbot never once failed to accompany Doña Beatriz on those melancholy outings, watching with dismay the rapid progress of her malady and the ever-increasing decline of the unhappy woman. Don Álvaro, with his eyes almost always fixed on hers, seemed to breathe with the same anguish and breathlessness, as if his chest were attacked by the same disease. Doña Beatriz, whenever she met that passionate and terrible look, turned her tear-stained eyes away. The words were scarce between them, for the strength of the sick woman had reached such a low ebb that the old doctor had ordered silence whenever possible. Both Don Álvaro and the patient were well aware of the uselessness of such palliatives, but both resigned themselves, he so as not to discard any means of improvement, and she so as not to afflict people so dear to her. In this way, the two lovers were reduced to using the language of the eyes, and the souls that seemed to escape through them flew to one another's encounter as if they wanted to be blend in the same ray of light that allowed them to communicate.

Finally, Doña Beatriz's weakness became so severe that she spent several days in bed without expressing any desire to get up, and as if lost in a delirium that seemed to alienate her reason. At the end of this episode, near twilight, she revived in a surprising way, and opening her beautiful eyes, which were brighter than usual, she called in a loud voice and with great urgency:

"Martina! Martina! Where are you?"

"Here, madam," replied the girl, almost startled by her mistress's sudden recovery. "Here I am, as always, at your side. Where else would I be?"

"Always so, dear girl, and may your love for me never take you from my bedside!" cried Doña Beatriz, looking at her with tenderness.

"Ah, my lady, don't speak of that. I only think of you and hope to see you well. Why did you call me in such a hurry? I think you

feel more cheerful now, don't you?" said Martina.

"Yes, yes, bring me my white dress, because I want to go out on the lake," she replied. "I am better, much better. And the day seems beautiful to me. You are here too, Don Álvaro! And you, venerable father! Ah! I rejoice in my soul, because you will now be rewarded, at least partly, for all the great effort and trouble you have gone through for me!"

Don Álvaro and the abbot, as if waking from a dream, did not know what to think of Doña Beatriz's almost festive tone, and especially the former could not stem the tumultuous hopes that rose in his heart. The old doctor, on the contrary, could not contain a painful gesture. All three of them left the room and Doña Beatriz dressed very quickly, with her simplicity and customary grace. The bonds of the sickness really did appear to have loosened, but nevertheless, she came down the stairs almost in the arms of Martina and the Lord of Bembibre. When she reached the boat, she set foot firmly on board and at once went to sit on the brocade cushions in the stern, not with the painful and discouraged expression of other times, but with uncommon assurance and graceful movement. Don Álvaro, attentive as ever to the lady's slightest gestures, remained, as usual, standing before her. The abbot, who had noticed the physician's ominous expression, withdrew with him to the other end of the boat to question him. Martina, for her part, sat next to the oarsmen who, without waiting for further instruction, sent the craft gliding across the bluish expanse of the lake, swift and serene as one of the many birds that swam there.

The sky was laden with pearly clouds that the last brilliant rays of sun rimmed with golden bands and vivid crests of fire; the bare and sombre tops of the Mountain of The Horses cast a mournful shadow upon the mirror of water on the north side of the lake, and on its western extremity, the last radiance of evening shone ghostlike through the leaves of the chestnut and walnut trees, while an aerial portico reverberated in the background, tinted with splendid hues and enriched by an intricate and wonderful crenellation.

The lake, illuminated by that tenuous, iridescent and fleeting light, and nestled amid that vague and melancholy landscape, appeared like a broad, enchanted, mystical and resplendent path that led straight to that clear sky shining at its end. By an effect of light refraction, a broad strip of shifting and flashing gleams girded

the shores of the lake, and the boat seemed to hang between two abysses, like an eagle suspended in mid-flight.

With a scene like this, the fleeting lightning of joy that had illuminated Doña Beatriz's spirit soon faded away. In the depths of her soul there had always slept the seed of melancholy, born of the innate desire for that which has no end, of that fiery love of the unknown that impels generous hearts beyond the abject narrowness of the world in search of a pure, eternal, inexplicable beauty, a memory perhaps of another, better homeland, or a presentiment of a higher destiny. To this secret and superhuman impulse Doña Beatriz had sacrificed what was dearest to her in the world: freedom and the external cult that she wished to devote to the memory of her lover when she imagined him dead; all to appear someday in the eyes of her mother adorned with the aura of self-denial. The misfortunes of her life, her continual swaying between hope and unhappiness, the pains of her soul and body and the prospect of an approaching death, for so long present before her eyes, had fertilized these terrible seeds and dug even deeper the channel that sadness had carved in her soul until it turned into a true abyss, where all her thoughts ended.

For the same reason, the scene that appeared before her naturally engulfed her imagination in that boundless sea where she had been sailing for so long. At last, after looking tearfully at the sky, the lake, the distant mountains and the country house where she had long waited and suffered, as if bidding farewell to them all and they had a soul to understand her, she said to the sad knight:

"Don Álvaro, do you not see how vain are earthly joys? Who would have imagined a year ago that we would find ourselves in these remote places only to bid an eternal farewell?"

The young man, who had observed with unspeakable grief the course Doña Beatriz's thoughts were taking since they left the country house, answered:

"Is it possible, Doña Beatriz, that just when you are beginning to regain your former courage, you should thus cast it away from your breast?"

"Courage!" she answered. "And do you think that I need but little courage to say my last words to you and leave you? See who inspires it! Look up and you will see the sky above. Look down and there you will find it too, beautiful and pure. Lift up your thoughts to the heights; descend with them into the gloom of the abyss, and everywhere you will find God filling the immensity with his

presence. That, that is the fountainhead where I, a weak woman, drink the courage that sustains me. Do you remember the last words you heard me speak in the forest of Arganza?"

"Oh, no, no!" Don Álvaro answered in despair. "I only remember the first words I heard from your lips when life appeared to us so blossoming and sweet in the bosom of an endless love. Do you know what my memory shows me? That alone. Do you know what a secret voice tells me? That your father will return and at last you will be my wife, before Heaven and before the world. My wife! Ah! To hear that word from your lips, I would come out of the very darkness of the tomb."

"Poor Don Álvaro!" she answered with almost maternal tenderness. "How do you expect my father's return so soon, when it is little more than two months since he left for France? Do you think they all love me as you do, to pursue my happiness with such zeal?"

"Do not destroy the little courage that sustains me," interrupted the young man, "doubting the workings of Providence in this way."

"No," she replied gravely. "On the contrary, I would thank Providence for sparing my father the spectacle of my death and my own despair in that final hour. Even now that an insurmountable obstacle separates me from you, my heart is torn apart and only a superhuman force sustains me. But if the barriers were to fall at the moment of my death, oh, then the good angel would escape in fear from my bedside and my raging and gloomy soul would go astray on the paths of eternity!"

During this terrible conversation, the boat was approaching the oaks on the lake shore, where not long ago Cosme Andrade had appeared like one of the angels who visited the Patriarchs in their cave. Suddenly, the gallop of three war horses made them all turn their eyes to that place. They were indeed three horsemen, of whom the foremost was somewhat better dressed, showing him to be the principal. All three riders, having seen the boat, raced towards it from under those venerable trees, shouting with joy and urging the horses on with both spurs. On hearing them, Doña Beatriz, as if an invisible hand took her out of her despondency with the presence and voices of the strangers, stood up quickly and, wild-eyed, she began to look at the travellers until, as they came closer and closer, she cried in both pain and joy, and stretching out her arms toward the shore, she exclaimed:

"It's my father! My dear father!"

"Yes, it is your father, daughter of my soul," replied Don Alonso, because it was indeed he. "Look, look!" he added, drawing out a green wallet from his bosom. "Here is the papal bull, and in it is the guarantee of your happiness."

"Divine mercy!" Doña Beatriz burst out with such a strident cry that it was heard on the farthest shores of the lake and terrified those present. "Divine mercy!" she repeated, twisting her hands, "hope and happiness now that I am going to die!"

As she uttered these words, because of the tremendous effort she had just made, one of the veins of her chest, so weak and tormented, ruptured, and a stream of warm, frothy blood stained her pale lips and her white dress. At the same time, she fainted so violently that she collapsed into the arms of her handmaid and Don Álvaro. But as it all happened in an instant, and the impulse given by the oarsmen was so fast, the boat quickly reached the shore. There Don Alonso jumped on board, and as soon as he reached his daughter, he found himself bathed in her crimson blood. Faced with this scene, Don Alonso stood petrified in the midst of the general commotion, his mouth half open, his arms outstretched and his eyes fixed on his dearly beloved daughter, for whose peace and happiness he had made such terrible though belated sacrifices and the long and arduous journey from which he had just returned. Doña Beatriz, without giving more signs of life than some deep sighs, lay with her head on the shoulder of her disconsolate maid and her whole body abandoned and limp like a skein of silk. The old doctor, who had attended her with such care and love, after carefully examining her, approached the abbot and whispered to him, though not so quietly that Don Alonso could not hear:

"All hope is gone. At most, she will last one more day!"

"Unfortunate father!" exclaimed the abbot, looking at Don Alonso, but to his great sorrow found him with an attentive ear, standing only half a yard away.

"I've heard it all!" Don Alonso told him in a heart-rending voice. "Do you see? Do you see how my heart was not deceiving me when I told you that your prophecy of disaster would be fulfilled at last? Oh, my daughter, the joy of my old age and the crown of my grey head!" he cried, wanting to approach her and struggling with the abbot and the oarsmen that restrained him. "Could not the Lord have taken my life in so many battles with the Moors rather than become your executioner?"

"Pray, come to your senses!" said the abbot with anguish,

"Restrain your laments, if you hold her dear, because your daughter may hear you."

At once the unhappy father fell silent, afraid of aggravating his daughter's condition, but continued sobbing, choked with grief.

The swoon was deep. The night began to show its stars, and so they had to return to the country house in the boat, which, by the lightness and silence of its passage, seemed to be the boat of souls.

Soon they crossed the lake, and hurriedly disembarking, carried the lady, still in a faint, to her room and put her in bed.

Finally, after a long while, Doña Beatriz slowly regained the life that seemed to have fled from that weary body. But not her reason, lost in delirious visions. Her father's sudden appearance and the news he had given her were the fixed and dominant idea of her delirium, sometimes cheerful and smiling, and sometimes tragic and distressed, according to the oscillations of her mood. She continually called for Don Álvaro and expressed great anxiety at the idea that he might be absent from her.

"Don Álvaro!" she cried in a voice broken by the fatigue of her breathing, "where are you? Talk to me, come, give me your hand. I see no one, I know no one but you. I see you with the eyes of my heart that follows you everywhere, as the evening star follows the sun. Can you hear me, Don Álvaro?"

"Yes, I hear you," replied the young man, in a voice that seemed to be coming out of a tomb.

"I am so glad!" she said with a tone of rejoicing, "but do not go, because then I would be alone altogether. But what madness! How can you leave, if you love me and are my husband forever? Tomorrow, I will wear my finest dress for you to take me to the altar. And listen! I want many, many alms given to the needy on my wedding day, so that everyone will be happy and bless us! If you saw how all these peasants love me! A long time will pass before they forget my memory! ... Oh, and tell me, do you still keep the book of sorrows I gave you long ago? Then, tie it to a stone and throw it in the lake, because the lines written in that book were wet with my sorrowful tears and now I have no more, only tears of joy!"

Suddenly weary, she fell silent for a while, but then her ideas took a new course and, removing the bedclothes that covered her, she said:

"Take off these clothes that smother me! Open those windows wide and let the night air come in and cool this fire that fills my

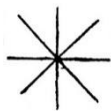
chest! ... Heavens, what thoughts I had just a moment ago! How could I thus forget that I am struggling with agony! Oh, wretched woman that I am! But here comes my father running ... Look at him, Don Álvaro; joy has rejuvenated him; he is here now; what is that he takes from his breast pocket? ... Ah! It is your freedom! ... Pitiless fortune, to die now! ... No, no, Don Álvaro, I am still very young, rich and beautiful in your eyes, despite my tears, am I not? ... No, no, this is not my hour, because I would die unrepentant and my immortal soul would be damned!"

Then she was silent again, her face pale and her eyes fixed on the wall and shrank back as if she saw something approaching that she wanted to escape from. Until at last, letting out a sharp shriek and covering her eyes with one hand, while with the other she convulsively pressed her lover's arm, Doña Beatriz exclaimed in a hoarse voice:

"There he is! There he is! Do you not see how he comes for me, step by step? Ah, hide me from him! Wrap me in your cloak ... Oh, my God, it's no use, because his hands have passed through it like smoke, and they tighten around my heart! Take his hands away, because they suffocate me! Oh, my God! No, leave them, it's all over now ... Goodbye!"

And saying this, another faint came upon her.

Between these painful alternations of delirious joy and mortal fear, more cruel perhaps to those who watched over her than to the lady herself, Doña Beatriz spent the whole night. Towards dawn she became lethargic again, as she had been more than once during that terrible illness that was now drawing to a close.





Chapter XXXVIII – Into the arms of her Lord

The situation of all those under that same roof, which had become a target for the invisible arrows of death, was deplorable. But Don Alonso's situation was more wretched than anyone else's, worse even than that of Don Álvaro himself. Ever since he had attempted to force the will of his only daughter in Villabuena, pursuing by any means his dreams of greatness, and had afterwards accepted the sacrifice that her filial self-denial had dictated to her in Arganza, all health, joy and honour had fled from his home as if, by a decree from Heaven, punishment were to follow his guilty acts immediately, without giving him even a little respite to savour their terrible fruits. After his wife's death, came the fatal encounter in the grove of his house, when the blindfold fell from his eyes. And then, as in a sudden rush of dark events, came the disasters of Cornatel, the doubts and uncertainties of the trial against the Templars and the fatal outcome of Don Álvaro's case. A very bleak picture, in whose background were the torments of Doña Beatriz and his own bitter remorse.

Hoping to purify his soul and with no other thought than the happiness and health of his daughter, his only remaining love and his last hope, he had undertaken his long journey to Vienne in the Dauphiné, with a diligence and ardour that seemed incompatible with his advanced age. There, without allowing himself to be overcome by the many obstacles which the malevolence of the French court put in his way and the sad turn that the Pope's weakness and cowardice had given to that tumultuous trial, he threw himself at the feet of Pope Clement. Don Alonso spoke to him of the blood his people had shed in the defence of the Christian faith. He presented to King Philip letters he brought from Don Juan Núñez de Lara, esteemed by the king for his power and for having given Lara hospitality when he had been estranged from Castile. By these means, Don Alonso secured a benevolent hearing at the court.

Two more things came together in his favour, which were of great help in his purposes. The first was the total annihilation of the strength of the Temple in Europe, since its warriors, where they were not condemned, were imprisoned and disarmed. And the second, the arrival of Aymerico, the inquisitor at the Council of Salamanca, who, having acted in accordance with the instructions

of the Roman see, was now determined to keep the word he had given to the Abbot of Carracedo and the bishops, and to follow the impulse of his heart which, despite his many reserves about the Templars, had warmed to Don Álvaro's nobility and chivalry during the trial. The inquisitor, who had been so inflexible, as dictated by the rigour of obedience, was now just as fervent in his services.

Thus, once the misgivings the power of that proud militia had inspired were dispelled, and thanks to Aymerico's effective mediation, the Lord of Arganza obtained the desired dispensation in an infinitely shorter time than he could well have hoped for, and this increased his happiness. Such was his anxiety to return to his daughter with the happy news, that in a very short time Don Alonso crossed part of France and almost the whole of Spain, as if carried on joyful wings, and entirely oblivious of the weight of his years. The result of this speedy journey we have already seen. For the roses that carpeted her father's way were the blood of Doña Beatriz's heart, and the death throes of her agony were the festivities that greeted his arrival. This was to be the outcome of so many efforts, and his desolate thoughts revolved around this fact while, seated at the foot of his daughter's bed, he waited in tears for her to take her last breath.

The young woman's rest was neither long nor calm, but it was enough to dispel the clouds that obscured her reason, and this made her last moments all the more painful. But at the same time, to have her reason restored cast a divine brilliance upon the fall of that star, in whose charitable rays so many unhappy people had found relief and consolation. When she opened her eyes, the pale light of dawn began to enter through the half-open window, along with that slight breeze that seems to awaken the slumbering plants before sunrise. In the garden of the country house, cheerful goldfinches, larks, and countless little birds warbled, and the flowers, opening their chalices, filled the air with perfume. Doña Beatriz's bed faced east, where the ever-changing clouds took on colour and painted with indescribable pomp and splendour almost the entire lake, whose transparent surface, reflecting the features of the sky, looked like liquid gold and incandescent purple. The wild ducks and moorhens fluttered tumultuously over the water's surface, sometimes taking flight with cheerful but harsh cackling and then darting with a resounding splash among the reeds and bulrushes. In short, the day dawned so blithe and joyous that no

one could believe that amid its radiance, such a perfect and beautiful work of creation as Doña Beatriz could be eclipsed.

This was the spectacle that Doña Beatriz's eyes encountered when they opened and avidly observed the beautiful dawn. There was a slightly bluish circle around them, which enhanced their gleam even more. The lady's countenance, although somewhat worn, showed the same purity of lines and angelic harmony as it had in better times.

"A beautiful day!" she exclaimed, in a melancholy voice, though quite strong.

At once, she surveyed the room, and finding them all dismayed, and many tearful from fatigue and the painful scenes of the previous night, looking at her with concern, tears filled her eyes. However, she suppressed them with an effort of which only a spirit as noble as hers was capable, and beckoning them to gather around the bed, she took her father's hand and said in a calm voice:

"This death that so suddenly takes me in the spring of my life grieves me more for you, my father, for this noble and generous Don Álvaro and for all these good friends who have put their love in me, than for my own life. The truth is that for more than a year a secret voice has been predicting this end to me. And although I defied it impatiently yesterday, wanting to turn my anger against Heaven, today the mists have cleared from my reason and I humbly prostrate myself before the Supreme will. You see, sir, how transient is the light of our ambitions and greatness. How could my mother have imagined that I should follow her so soon to the grave? Why, then, do you have to grieve in this way, when you too will soon walk in my footsteps to the place where I, with my brothers and my mother, will come to meet you, never to part again?"

"Oh, daughter of my sorrow!" cried the old man, "you were my last hope on earth, but it is not your early end that will shorten my few remaining days, but the venomous memory of my guilt. Ah, holy monk," he went on, turning to the abbot, "see how your prophecy is fulfilled! May Heaven forgive me!"

"Do you doubt it, my father?" continued Doña Beatriz, "when I have not only forgiven you but have forgotten everything, and when this young man, much more unfortunate than I, respects and venerates you as I myself do. Is it not true, noble Don Álvaro? Come closer, my husband in death, come and tell my father yourself so that the agony of remorse will not torment the few remaining days

he has left to live. Is it not true that you forgive him?"

"Yes, I forgive him," said the distraught young man. "And may God forgive me the despair that your death will bring to my soul!"

"Despair!" she said, as if in loving astonishment, "why so? Our marriage bed is a sepulchre, but that is why our love will last for all eternity. Oh, Don Álvaro, how could you hope to have a better godfather for our wedding than the God who is to receive me into his bosom? How could we have a sweeter accompaniment than the angels' harps, a wedding train more splendid than the seraphic choir that awaits me, or a church more sumptuous than the celestial abode? If your eyes were illuminated like mine by a ray of the divine light, surely the tears would dry in them or those that you shed would be tears of gratitude."

Here Doña Beatriz paused for a moment, her eyes fixed on those of her lover with a singular expression, and at length she continued:

"I read what is in your noble heart as if it were an open book. Is it not true that you want to remain in this world with the name of husband? Your soul has followed me along my path of thorns and pains, and even in death does not abandon me. Ah! Thank you! Thank you! Father," she added, addressing the Lord of Arganza, "and you, reverend abbot, you must know that I too wish to appear before the throne of the Eternal adorned with such a fine title. Unite us, then, before the flame of my life is extinguished."

The abbot, though deeply disturbed, approached the lady, and as if to temper her ardent exaltation somewhat, told her how convenient it was for a confession of both bride and groom to precede such an august ceremony.

"You are right," she replied, "but here is mine, which may well be spoken aloud. I have loved and I have suffered. Whatever riches I had, I have given away. I have dried the tears of others. If I have ever hated, be a witness that I repent and beg forgiveness."

"I can say the same for myself," added Don Álvaro, "our feelings and our lives have been as one. Please God that death should make us equal in the same way!"

Don Alonso then made a sign to the abbot to hurry in performing the ceremony that could serve in some way as a relief to both. The old monk joined together the powerful hand of Don Álvaro with the frail and almost transparent one of Doña Beatriz. Then with a voice full of emotion, the abbot pronounced the words of the sacrament, after which they were married before the God

who was to judge one of them in a few hours. The recommendations he made to them were very different from those which would normally follow a wedding. Instead of telling them about the love that could sweeten the bitterness of their life and make all difficulties more bearable on the way to the grave, he only put before them the hopes of another, better world, the vanity of worldly joys and the ineffable rewards of resignation and virtue.

After the sacred ceremony, and as if it had been a balm for her wounded heart, Doña Beatriz became very calm and serene. But this deceptive truce in her illness did not mislead any of those present, even less the weeping Martina who, well understanding her mistress's imminent danger, did not take her eyes off her for one moment. The sick woman noticed her grief and concern and, taking her by the hand, wiped away the tears that the distraught maiden could not contain, and said:

"Dear Martina, you were always livelier and more cheerful than the little kid goat that grazes on the mountains! A whole year you have passed full of anguish and sorrows, and you have never once strayed from your love and fidelity. Your happiness has often concerned me, and right now I want to assure you of it in full."

The weeping and sobbing of the poor girl were then redoubled, and she could not utter a single word of gratitude.

"My father", Doña Beatriz said to Don Alonso, "I entrust Martina to your generosity and care. You know that I have found in her all the obedience of a servant and the affection of a sister. And you, Don Álvaro, sweet husband of mine, take her and her future husband under your protection, for their loyalty and tenderness towards you have been equally great, and since the world has not hindered their simple inclination, let them enjoy in peace a life that perhaps we would have enjoyed if we had been born of more humble stock. And you, my friends," she added, turning to the rest of the household servants, who had all gathered for that mournful scene and watched it as if their hearts were breaking, "loyal Nuño, honest Mendo, I thank you all for the love that you have shown me, and I commend you all equally to the generosity of my father and my husband."

Those poor people, and especially the women, broke into such wailing and laments that they had to be sent from the room so that they would not disturb the lady in her last moments.

As the sun rose, the light clouds that had been floating across the sky dispersed, and finally the sky was so blue and clear that, as

in Lord Byron's poem, *The Dream*, "God alone was to be seen in Heaven." The lake was smooth and calm as a mirror, and its shores were silent and deserted. The birds in the garden were silent too, but the flowers, with their petals open to the hot rays of the sun, filled the air with a fragrance that reached Doña Beatriz's bed.

"How many times," she said to Don Álvaro, "have you compared my cheeks to the roses, my lips to the wallflower, and my waist to the lilies that grow in that garden? Who would have thought then that the flower of my beauty and youth would wither before they do? How proud and haughty are the thoughts of the human mind! We believe that man is the lord of nature, and yet he alone does not come back to life, nor does he bloom again with the breath of spring."

As the heiress of Arganza was the mother of all the needy and the consoling angel of families, both when she was among her vassals or far from them, the news of her peril filled with desolation the towns of Lago, Villarrando and Carucedo, and countless people flocked to the country house.

They all gathered together in a kind of small square in front of the main door. Even though the villagers were asked to be silent, their anxiety was so great that they could not hush a dull rumble above which there rose from time to time a cry from someone newly arrived, unaware of the request, or another that could not repress his emotions.

It was not long before Doña Beatriz, in whose heart all pure emotions found an echo, became aware of their presence, and she could not help feeling moved by the simple and true love they demonstrated.

"Poor souls!" she said, touched by their devotion, "and how generously they repay the love I have shown them! It is true that they will miss me more than once, but this is one of the greatest consolations I could receive at this time."

Then she explained to her father and the abbot in greater detail the bequests and gifts that were to be made in her name. And Doña Beatriz manifested to the prelate with fervent expressions her gratitude for his unswerving fatherly love, and also to the old doctor, who in her long illness had shown a zeal that only charity could light up in a heart grown colder with age. She also asked most insistently to be buried in the chapel of the country house, on the shores of that secluded and tranquil lake so full of memories in her

heart.

It seemed as if the existence of one loved by so many, depended on a single luminous sunray, because she declined towards her twilight in harmony with the sun's descent. At last, the sun set behind the mountains, and then Doña Beatriz, raising her languid gaze to her husband, said:

"Do you remember the day you first took leave of me at my home in Arganza? Who was to know that the same sun that illuminated our first separation was so soon to light our last hours together? However, fortune is more benign to me now. Because then, I departed from you and was left to my loneliness, but now, from the arms of my husband, I fly to the arms of God."

When she had spoken these words, Doña Beatriz leaned her head gently on Don Álvaro's shoulder, without making any sign or movement, as she often did in the swoons she frequently suffered. But after a while, as he did not feel her breathing, Don Álvaro moved her away in alarm. The young woman's body then fell on the bed lifeless and with her eyes closed, because on his shoulder she had just exhaled her last breath.

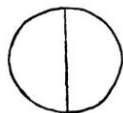
That same evening, the abbot dispatched letters to Carracedo and to the Benedictine monastery of San Pedro de Montes. The following morning, many monks arrived from both, and the burial of the ill-fated girl was performed with all the magnificence that befitted her rank. Don Álvaro, who since his wife's death was locked in a stubborn silence, insisted on accompanying Doña Beatriz's corpse to the chapel. During the service he was calm, though occasionally casting errant looks at the coffin and the assembly. But when the time came to deposit the lifeless remains in the grave, Don Álvaro gave a great shout and rushed forward to throw himself in. Those attending the funeral came at once and prevented him, by force.

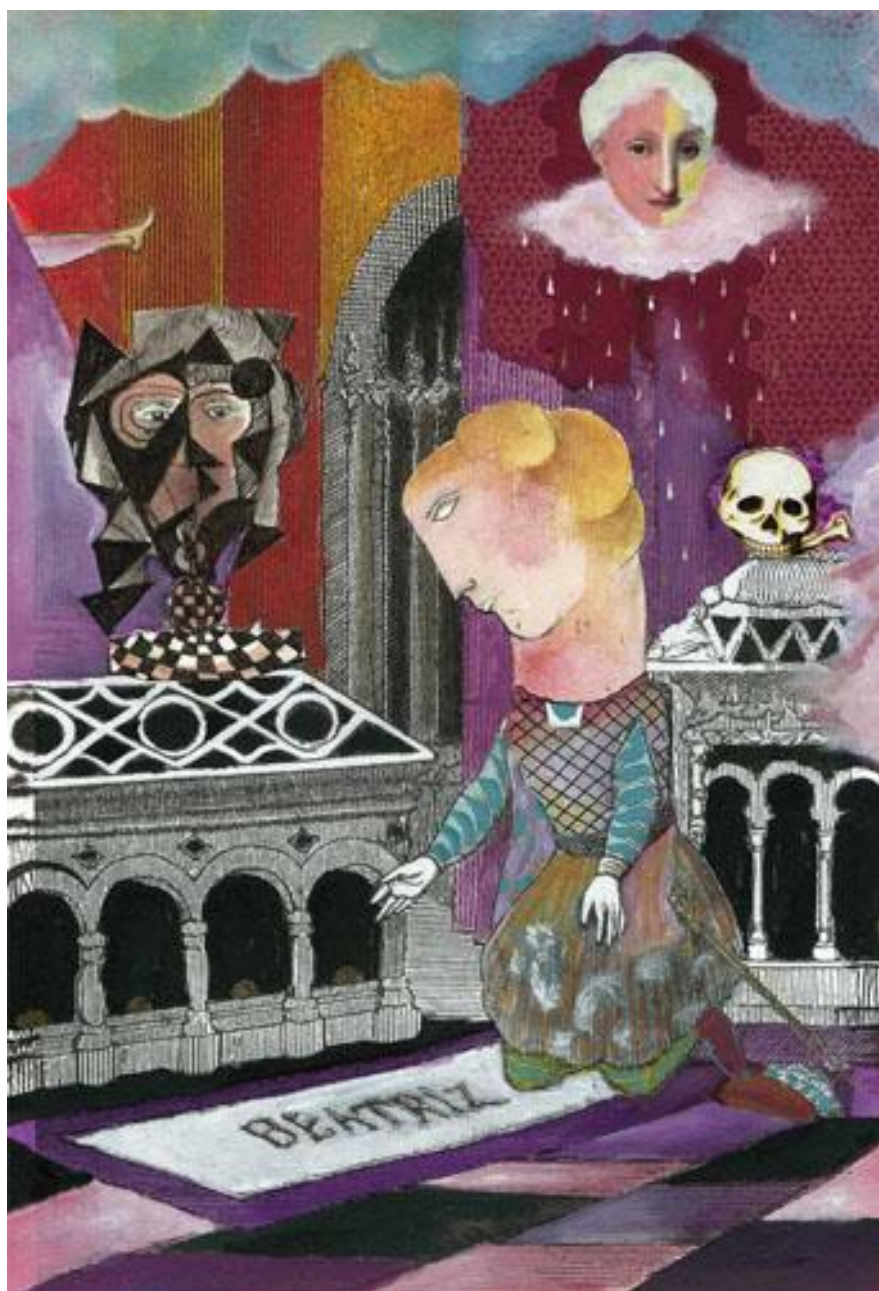
Seeing that his attempt was hindered, Don Álvaro disentangled himself from the men's arms and, shouting incessantly and with all the appearance of a madman, he swiftly ran to hide in the deepest forest around Las Médulas. His reason had suffered a fierce blow, and after a few days, the faithful Millán found him in one of the galleries of the old mines with his hair in disarray and his clothes torn asunder. With great skill, Millán brought his master back to the country house, where, applying many remedies, he soon restored Don Álvaro to his senses after a few days. As soon as the knight was himself again, he begged to be allowed down into the

chapel, but they all strongly opposed this, fearing that the sight of that sepulchre, so recently closed, would again unleash the vein of his madness. Nevertheless, the reasons he gave were so many and so sound, that in the end they had to let him fulfil that sad request. He knelt at his wife's tomb and spent more than an hour in fervent prayer. Finally, he kissed the slab, and rising immediately, without uttering a word or showing any extremity of grief, he went out and, riding on his proud horse, he departed from the country house without saying farewell to Don Alonso. He was accompanied by Millán and two or three older servants, who had quickly come to the house on hearing about his illness and insanity.

As soon as he arrived at Bemibre, Don Álvaro relinquished all the properties he held in fief and, considerably improving his squire's inheritance, he divided the rest among his servants and poorer vassals. Having done this, one morning the servants searched the entire castle for their lord, but Don Álvaro could not be found. The only thing the knight had taken with him was the pilgrim's staff and sackcloth of one of his ancestors who had gone to the Holy Land in that habit, which had been kept as a memento in one of the castle's chambers. From this, some assumed that Don Álvaro might also have gone to Palestine, and others concluded that he had not gone there but to Santiago in Galicia with the intention of retiring to some remote monastery of that land. And finally, there were some who said that madness had once again seized him.

Don Alonso, the Lord of Arganza, for his part, survived the passing of his beloved and unhappy daughter only for a short time, as might be expected from his age and his deep affliction. With his death, that illustrious house was extinguished, and its property passed to very distant relatives. His story became a vivid and painful example of the vanity, the ambition and the perils that accompany the violation of the sweetest laws of nature.





Chapter XXXIX – The hermit of Mount Aquiana

The manuscript from which we have drawn this lamentable history contains very little news about what happened to some of the other characters, in whose fate perhaps some benevolent readers may be interested. Unfortunately, many of them were old when we met them. And so, the manuscript previously cited only tells us that after the final extinction of the Temple was decreed by Pope Clement V at the Council of Vienne, not by a formal verdict, but on the grounds of the general welfare of the Church, most of the Templar Knights were sent to monasteries of different orders. Among them was the old Master of Castile, Don Rodrigo Yáñez, who spent his remaining days in the monastery of Carracedo. It was said, and not without reason, that his nephew's misfortune, added to the infinite sorrows that the sad end of his Order had brought him, shortened the thread of his life. The good Abbot of Carracedo soon followed him, amid the blessings of all his vassals whom he regarded as his children.

As for Commander Saldaña, faithful to his purpose, he abandoned degenerate and cowardly Europe, as he always called it, and went to Syria, where he ended his days leading a revolt of the oppressed Christians. In short, the manuscript seems to be nothing more than a compendium of deaths, because, according to this source, even the groom Mendo succumbed to a sudden apoplexy brought on by his growing obesity.

Of the later events of the Lord of Bembibre's life and of the pretty Martina, of Millán and Nuño, the manuscript contained nothing more than what we already know. But last year, in 1842, visiting the southern mountains of El Bierzo in the company of a friend, in the archives of the monastery of San Pedro de Montes we made a priceless discovery that clarified all our doubts in this regard. It was a kind of old codex written in Latin by one of the monks of that house, but since the events there recounted require a certain knowledge of the places, we beg our readers to forgive us, while we inform them of what is most essential. Having had the patience to follow us this far, they may well say in accordance with the popular proverb, "where the sea goes, may the sands follow."

The monastery of San Pedro de Montes is very ancient, since its origin goes back to Saint Fructuoso and Saint Valerio, both of the Gothic period, and its restoration after the Saracen invasion was

carried out by Saint Genadio, Bishop of Astorga, who built the church that is still preserved and has the appearance of great antiquity. Its position, amidst the very rugged mountain ranges that gird El Bierzo on its southern side, is good proof of the terrible asceticism of its founders, because it surmounts a precipice that runs down to the stream called the Oza and is surrounded on all sides by very high mountains, inaccessible cliffs and dark woods. The murmur of that stream, trapped in its very deep and rocky channel, has a somewhat doleful sound, and the birds that are commonly seen thereabouts are the eagles and vultures that inhabit the rocks. The peak of Mount Aquiana, covered in snow for seven or eight months every year and the highest of all in El Bierzo, overlooks the monastery with an almost bird's eye view, and lies very near to it. But such are the cliffs that surround the monastery on that side that the path leading there has to wind up the hillside for more than a league and take large detours. The mountain is very barren, but it is covered with medicinal plants and on its peak is a hermitage half buried because of the snows and winds, in which the image of Our Lady of Aquiana, whose feast was celebrated on the 15th of August, was worshiped. This was a place of pilgrimage until the extinction of the monastery.

The view from that highest peak is immense, as it dominates the wide basin of El Bierzo, full of features that are most picturesque and beautiful, and from there one can look across to the wide plains of Castile to the east, and to the west the valley of Monterrey, partly within Galicia. La Cabrera, very high and bound by mountains, lies behind. This is, in short, one of the most magnificent views to be seen in Spain, although the lake of Carucedo and the ravines and reddish peaks of Las Médulas, which are among the most unique and precious treasures of El Bierzo, are hidden behind the neighbouring rocks of Ferradillo. This, however, is only a small drawback, because they are only a short distance from the hermitage and, taking a short walk, one can enjoy the perspective of both landmarks.

After giving these explanations, which we have deemed were necessary, let us return to the Latin codex, whose words we are now going to translate faithfully, but first we will take leave of our readers with a deep bow, for after this we can add nothing more. The codex continues:

"Around the year 1320, eight years after the Holy Father Clement V, blessed be his memory, dissolved the

Order of the Knights of the Temple, it happened that a pilgrim returning from a visit to the tomb of the Saviour, lost on account of the sins of the faithful, appeared at the door of this holy house and, having asked to be taken to the abbot's chamber, was brought there.

For a long time he remained in conversation with his reverence the abbot. This resulted in the stranger, who nobody knew, taking the habit of the glorious patriarch Saint Benedict two days later, to the great wonder of all of us. But the abbot, who had heard the pilgrim's confession as he himself told us, disregarded all the customary formalities and requirements to enter a religious order, and imposed silence on us with his authority.

The new monk may have been about thirty-two years old, tall, well built, and with handsome features, but penances, no doubt, and perhaps misfortunes seemed to have doubled his age. He was very austere and taciturn, and his bearing at times suggested that in his worldly life he had been a man of some importance. This, however, did not affect the modest and courteous manner in which he treated everyone, although we only enjoyed his company for a very short time.

A few days before his mysterious arrival, the hermit of Mount Aquiana, a holy man much given to penance, passed away. But as the hermitage is covered with snow much of the year and the surroundings are so lonely and exposed, no one felt they possessed the strength for a life so rough and rigorous. The new monk, however, no sooner had he acquired the basic rudiments of his new condition, left with consent of the abbot to dwell in the hermitage, putting our frailty to shame with his courageous resolution. This was at the beginning of autumn, when the first snows fall on that peak and almost continually clouds start to envelop the hermitage like a floating garment. The visitor was not discouraged by this, and he took possession of his new post immediately.

The radiance of his virtue and charity could not be

hidden for long, and thus he soon became a legend in the region. He shared his meagre ration of simple food with the poor shepherds. And when they were numb with cold, he offered them the portion of wine he was given in the convent, which he certainly took only for this purpose, since it never touched his lips. It sometimes happened that a cow or goat was lost at night in those solitudes, and he, in order to spare the owner the sorrow of its loss, would leave the hermitage, treading through the hard snow, and took it to the village, at the risk of being devoured by the wolves, bears and other wild beasts which breed in great numbers in these rugged places.

With these and other good deeds, he so earned the respect and hearts of these simple people that his words were to them as those which Moses heard from the mouth of the Lord on Mount Oreb. He consoled them in their afflictions, mediated in their disputes, gave them expert instructions on how to conduct their hunts, and was, altogether, like a beacon of light in these dark and craggy regions.

The cold of winter and the rigour of his penances destroyed what remained of his already broken health, so the sweet season of spring did not restore him in any way. However, he often left the hermitage and walking, albeit with an effort, reached the rocks of Ferradillo, from where the gullies and peaks of Las Médulas and the placid and tranquil lake of Carucedo can be seen. There he would spend his hours as if in rapture, and he would hardly ever return to his narrow cell until the day was over. The abbot, seeing the stranger's strength diminishing, begged him repeatedly to leave such a painful life and come down to recover in the monastery. But the abbot could never persuade him.

At last, the night before the Ides of August, the fourteenth day of that month, eve of the feast of the Virgin of Mount Aquiana, the hermitage bell was heard ringing with great urgency at an unusual hour, as if calling for help. This disturbed not only our community, but the whole village, and they hurried up to the hermitage, but when they arrived they found him

dead. There were great lamentations at his loss, but although they searched his belongings, they found only a tattered book, with some of its pages loose and out of order. It was full of painful reflections and scattered through with some very sad verses. But it gave no clue as to the name and lineage of the unknown man who carried it on his person.

The next day, as we have said, was the pilgrimage of Our Lady. In order that the prayers of the faithful should descend upon the deceased, and to see if there were any among the pilgrims who knew him, his remains were placed at the entrance of the hermitage, on a litter covered in black cloth, shrouded in his own habit and with the silk-bound book on top.

The people who came that year were very numerous, but among them was a family who attracted attention by their fine clothes. The group, which dismounted from their mares, was formed by an old man who was in his sixties, a young man of about thirty-two and very handsome, a twenty-five-year-old blonde woman with blue eyes and a white complexion, of extraordinary grace and gentleness, who led a young girl of about seven wearing a white linen robe and bearing a large wax candle. The shroud-like robe that covered her, the offering in her hand, and most of all her complexion, which was a little pale but that in no way diminished her angelic beauty, all showed that the girl came with her parents to fulfil a vow made to The Virgin in thanksgiving for having taken her out of the clutches of death in some recent illness. It was a family in whose sight the spirit took involuntarily pleasure, because it was clear that peace of heart and comfortable wealth contributed to make them happy in this vale of tears. The four of them entered the hermitage, and seeing so many people crowding around the dead man, they also approached, both out of curiosity and piety. They had to struggle to break through the throng of villagers around that humble coffin, but as soon as the two young parents approached the corpse, the woman fixed her eyes on the book and her husband on the face of the dead man, and both expressed surprise and terror. The

book was very discoloured, as if many drops of water had fallen on it, and the corpse, as is customary among the monks, had its face covered to the beard with the hood of his habit. Nevertheless, and with the certainty that an inner voice gave them, the man rushed to uncover the face of the dead person, and the woman eagerly seized the book and began to examine it.

"By the Holy Virgin of the Oak!" said the woman, with a loud cry, "this is the diary of my poor and dear mistress, Doña Beatriz Ossorio!"

"Almighty God," the man shouted, hugging the corpse tightly, "my master, my generous master, Don Álvaro, the Lord of Bembibre!"

"Who do you say it is?" exclaimed the old man, hemmed in by the crowd, "the husband of that angel whom I saw born and dead?"

The three of them, clasping the hands and the habit of the deceased, began to weep with tenderness and pain and many of the bystanders, moved by such an unexpected event, soon joined them.

"Mother," asked the girl with her eyes also full of tears and a little stunned by what she saw, "is this the good gentleman that you talk of so often to my father?"

"Yes, Beatriz, daughter of my soul," exclaimed the mother, lifting her up in her arms, "that is your benefactor. Here, my love, kiss the habit of this saint, because if the Divine Virgin has given you health and saved you, it was no doubt because Don Álvaro begged her to do so."

The pilgrims then declared they were Nuño García, who had been huntsman to Don Alonso, the Lord of Arganza; Martina del Valle, handmaiden to Don Alonso's daughter, Doña Beatriz; and Millán Rodríguez, the squire and arms-bearer to Don Álvaro Yáñez, Lord of Bembibre, who was the one who lay dead there. Then the abbot of this holy house arrived, clothed in his sacred vestments, to accompany the holy image of the Virgin in procession according to custom and, offering words of consolation to the afflicted servants, assured them that what they saw and believed was true.

Don Álvaro, according to what he had told him, had intended to become a friar in a convent in the Holy Land, but the infidels had sacked it before the year of his novitiate was over. Yearning to return to his homeland and drawn to the burial place of his wife, he had come to the monastery of San Pedro de Montes, where he had entrusted all these facts to the abbot under secret of confession, and until his death, no one had revealed his name.

However, the grief that the former servants suffered on finding Don Álvaro was very great, and Millán even asked to be allowed to take the body to Bembibre for burial there. But the abbot did not consent, so as not to go against the express will of the deceased, who wanted to be buried among his brother monks, but also because he believed that his relics would bring good fortune to the monastery. The abbot became host to the pilgrims and treated them with great love, and especially old Nuño, whom he had seen very afflicted on the day of Doña Beatriz's funeral, and since then held him in great esteem for his loyalty to the house of Arganza. The poor huntsman, old and without a family, was completely abandoned when his master's house ceased to be. But since he was rich because of the largesse of his former master, he went to live with Martina and Millán, in whose house he spent the last years of his life, much beloved and esteemed. Two days later they all returned to Bembibre, where they lived well and comfortably, enjoying the plentiful gifts they had received.

Such was this strange event, which I thought it fit to set down here, and which remained for a long time in the memory of these people. Of the afore mentioned servants, I have heard it said by many people that although they lived very happily, surrounded by very beautiful and well-behaved children, and were very rich for their class, yet, even after many years, their eyes were clouded with tears when they remembered the sad end of their good masters, and especially of Don Álvaro Yáñez, the Lord of Bembibre."



Appendix

I - Summary

In the North West of Spain, in the early years of the Fourteenth Century, the last progeny of two great houses have fallen in love, despite the wishes of the lady's father and amid the tumult of war that calls her suitor to battle.

Doña Beatriz Ossorio is the last surviving offspring of Don Alonso Ossorio, the Lord of Arganza, and Doña Blanca de Balboa. And Don Álvaro Yáñez, Lord of Bembibre, is also the last of his line. Although they have pledged their love to each other in the high chivalric manner, the lady's father has promised her hand in marriage to the Count of Lemos, seeking advantage for himself and his family from an alliance with a powerful nobleman and protégé of the Infante Don Juan, uncle of the King of Castile. After failing in an attempt to spirit Doña Beatriz away to a safe place, Don Álvaro goes to Castile to join battle with the royal forces besieging the castle of Tordehumos, but he is wounded and captured.

Her father's insistence on the arranged marriage affects Doña Beatriz's physical and mental state, and when she receives news that Don Álvaro is taken for dead, the lady agrees to her mother's dying request and consents to marry the Count of Lemos. But Don Álvaro was imprisoned, not dead, and when he is released and learns of Doña Beatriz's marriage, contrary to her promise to him, he joins the Order of the Temple. He takes part in the defence of the Templar stronghold of Cornatel, in which the Count of Lemos is killed. Although Doña Beatriz is now free to marry, Don Álvaro is tied by his vows to the Order, pending a decision to be taken by the Church at the Council of Salamanca, which is judging the matter of the dissolution of the Templars.

The anxiety of their situation causes the lady's health to deteriorate further, so that when a dispensation arrives from the Pope, the distress brings on a crisis and Doña Beatriz, on her deathbed, is married to Don Álvaro. Disconsolate, the Lord of Bembibre settles his affairs and disappears from Spain, only returning near the time of his own death to watch over the burial place of his lady from the heights of Mount Aquiana.

II – Principal characters of the story

- Doña Beatriz, heiress to the house of Arganza
- Martina, Doña Beatriz's resourceful, quick-tempered and cheerful handmaiden
- Don Alonso Ossorio, Lord of Arganza, father to Doña Beatriz
- Doña Blanca de Balboa, mother to Doña Beatriz and long-suffering wife of Don Alonso
- The Abbot of Carracedo, of the Cistercian Order founded by Saint Bernard; confessor to the Arganza family
- Nuño, an old hunter and gamekeeper, faithful servant to Don Alonso's house and to Doña Beatriz
- Mendo, the ill-tempered groom and stable master of Don Alonso, Lord of Arganza
- Don Álvaro Yáñez, Lord of Bembibre, heir to the house of Yáñez
- Millán, the faithful squire, arms-bearer and servant of Don Álvaro, the Lord of Bembibre
- Don Rodrigo Yáñez, provincial Master of the Knights Templar in Castile and uncle to Don Álvaro
- Don Gutierre de Saldaña, Commander of the castle of Cornatel, an old Templar and friend of Don Álvaro
- The Count of Lemos, Don Pedro Fernández de Castro
- Cosme Andrade, a mountain dweller from Cabrera, one of the Cabrerans who fight for the Count of Lemos
- Don Juan Núñez de Lara, the king's steward and lord of the castle of Tordehumos in Castile
- Rabbi Ben Simuel, Don Juan Núñez de Lara's physician
- The Infante Don Juan, uncle to the King of Castile
- King Ferdinand IV of Castile
- King Don Dionís of Portugal
- Pope Clement V, the weak incumbent of the Throne of St. Peter, known for his suppression of the Templars and for moving the Roman Curia from Rome to Avignon, in France
- Aymerico, the Apostolic Inquisitor

III - Places of interest in the novel and map

- The manor house of Arganza
- The castle of Bembibre
- The Templar castle of Ponferrada
- The region of El Bierzo
- The river Boeza
- The river Sil
- The river Cúa
- The monastery of Carracedo
- The castle of Tordehumos, in Castile
- The convent at Villabuena
- Cornatel castle
- The ancient Roman mines in Las Médulas
- Lake Carucedo
- Mount Aquiana in the Aquiana range

IV - Map of El Bierzo



Notas

iii "Now, Lord, you can let your servant go in peace," Luke, II, 29.

iiii "My soul glorifies the Lord," Luke, I, 46.

iii This verse is carved on a slab of stone in the castle of Ponferrada and seemed to serve as a motto. [Author's note]. *"The Lord is my guardian, and I will annihilate my enemies"* Psalm 126.

iv Calderón de la Barca, *The Three Justices in One*.

v "I watch the night awake and am as a sparrow alone upon a roof top." Psalms, 102, 7.

vi Unless the Lord has the city in his safe keeping, he that protects it watches in vain.

vii Exodus, 17, 6.