

The Tall Woman

By Pedro Antonio De Alarcón

I.

“How little we really know, my friends; how little we really know.”

The speaker was Gabriel, a distinguished civil engineer of the mountain corps. He was seated under a pine-tree, near a spring, on the crest of the Guadarrama. It was only about a league and a half distant from the palace of the Escorial, on the boundary line of the provinces of Madrid and Segovia. I know the place, spring, pine-tree and all, but I have forgotten its name.

“Let us sit down,” went on Gabriel, “as that is the correct thing to do, and as our programme calls for a rest here—here in this pleasant and classic spot, famous for the digestive properties of that spring, and for the many lambs here devoured by our noted teachers, Don Miguel Bosch, Don Máximo Laguna, Don Augustin Pascual, and other illustrious naturalists. Sit down, and I will tell you a strange and wonderful story in proof of my thesis, which is, though you call me an obscurantist for it, that supernatural events still occur on this terraqueous globe. I mean events which you cannot get into terms of reason, or science, or philosophy—as those ‘words, words, words,’ in Hamlet’s phrase, are understood (or are not understood) to-day.”

Gabriel was addressing his animated remarks to five persons of different ages. None of them was young, though only one was well along in years. Three of them were, like Gabriel, engineers; the fourth was a painter, and the fifth was a *littérateur* in a small way. In company with the speaker, who was the youngest, we had all ridden up on hired mules from the Real Sitio de San Lorenzo to spend the day botanizing among the beautiful pine groves of Pequercnos, chasing butterflies with gauze nets, catching rare beetles under the bark of the decayed pines, and eating a cold lunch out of a hamper which we had paid for on shares.

This took place in 1875. It was the height of the summer. I do not remember whether it was Saint James’s day or Saint Louis’s; I am inclined to think it was Saint Louis’s. Whichever it was, we enjoyed a delicious coolness at that height, and the heart and brain, as well as the stomach, were there in much better working order than usual.

When the six friends were seated, Gabriel continued as follows:

“I do not think you will accuse me of being a visionary. Luckily or unluckily, I am, if you will allow me to say so, a man of the modern world. I have no superstition about me, and am as much of a Positivist as the best of them, although I include among the positive data of nature all the mysterious faculties and feelings of the soul. Well, then, apropos of supernatural, or extra-natural, phenomena, listen to what I have seen and heard, although I was not the real hero of the very strange story I am going to relate, and then tell me what explanation of an earthly, physical, or natural sort, however you may name it, can be given of so wonderful an occurrence.

“The case was as follows. But wait! Pour me out a drop, for the skin-bottle must have got cooled off by this time in that bubbling, crystalline spring, located by Providence on this piny crest for the express purpose of cooling a botanist’s wine.”

II.

“Well, gentlemen, I do not know whether you ever heard of an engineer of the roads corps named Telesforo X—; he died in 1860.”

“No; I haven’t.”

“But I have.”

“So have I. He was a young fellow from Andalusia, with a black mustache; he was to have married the Marquis of Moreda’s daughter, but he died of jaundice.”

“The very one,” said Gabriel. “Well, then, my friend Telesforo, six months before his death, was still a most promising young man, as they say nowadays. He was good-looking, well built, energetic, and had the glory of being the first one in his class to be promoted. He had already gained distinction in the practice of his profession through some fine pieces of work. Several different companies were competing for his services, and many marriageable women were also competing for him. But Telesforo, as you said, was faithful to poor Joaquina Moreda.

“As you know, it turned out that she died suddenly at the baths of Santa Águeda, at the end of the summer of 1859. I was in Pau when I received the sad news of her death, which affected me very much on account of my close friendship with Telesforo. With her I had spoken only once, in the house of her aunt, the wife of General Lopez, and I certainly thought her bluish pallor a symptom of bad health. But, however that may be, she had a distinguished manner and a great deal of grace, and was, besides, the only daughter of a title, and a title that carried some comfortable thousands with it; so I felt sure my good mathematician would be inconsolable. Consequently, as soon as I was back in Madrid, fifteen or twenty days after his loss, I went to see him very early one morning. He lived in elegant bachelor quarters in Lobo Street—I do not remember the number, but it was near the Carrera de San Jerónimo.

“The young engineer was very melancholy, although calm and apparently master of his grief. He was already at work, even at that hour, laboring with his assistants over some railroad plans or other. He was dressed in deep mourning.

“He greeted me with a long and close embrace, without so much as sighing. Then he gave some directions to his assistants about the work in hand, and afterwards led me to his private office at the farther end of the house. As we were on our way there he said, in a sorrowful tone and without glancing at me:

I am very glad you have come. Several times I have found myself wishing you were here. A very strange thing has happened to me. Only a friend such as you are can hear of it without thinking me either a fool or crazy. I want to get an opinion about it as calm and cool as science itself.

“ ‘Sit down,’ he went on when we had reached his office, ‘and do not imagine that I am going to afflict you with a description of the sorrow I am suffering—a sorrow which will last as long as I live. Why should I? You can easily picture it to yourself, little as you know of trouble. And as for being comforted, I do not wish to be, either now, or later, or ever! What I am going to speak to you about, with the requisite deliberation, going back to the very beginning of the thing, is a horrible and mysterious occurrence, which was an infernal omen of my calamity, and which has distressed me in a frightful manner.’

“ ‘Go on,’ I replied, sitting down. The fact was, I almost repented having entered the house, as I saw the expression of abject fear on my friend’s face.

“ ‘Listen, then,’ said he, wiping the perspiration from his forehead.”

III.

“ ‘ I do not know whether it is due to some inborn fatality of imagination, or to having heard some story or other of the kind with which children are so rashly allowed to be frightened, but the fact is, that since my earliest years, nothing has caused me so much horror and alarm as a woman alone, in the street, at a late hour of the night. The effect is the same whether I actually encounter her, or simply have an image of her in my mind.

“ ‘You can testify that I was never a coward. I fought a duel once, when I had to, like any other man. Just after I had left the School of Engineers, my workmen in Despeñaperros revolted, and I fought them with stick and pistol until I made them submit. All my life long, in Jaen, in Madrid, and elsewhere, I have walked the streets at all hours, alone and unarmed, and if I have chanced to run upon suspicious-looking persons, thieves, or mere sneaking beggars, they have had to get out of my way or take to their heels. But if the person turned out to be a solitary woman, standing still or walking, and I was also alone, with no one in sight in any direction—then (laugh if you want to, but believe me) I would be all covered over with goose-flesh; vague fears would assail me; I would think about beings of the other world, about imaginary existences, and about all the superstitious stories which would make me laugh under other circumstances. I would quicken my pace, or else turn back, and would not get over my fright in the least until safe in my own house.

“ ‘Once there I would fall a-laughing, and would be ashamed of my crazy fears. The only comfort I had was that nobody knew anything about it. Then I would dispassionately remind myself that I did not believe in goblins, witches, or ghosts, and that I had no reason whatever to be afraid of that wretched woman driven from her home at such an hour by poverty, or some crime, or accident, to whom I might better have offered help, if she needed it, or given alms. Nevertheless, the pitiable scene would be gone over again as often as a similar thing occurred—and remember that I was twenty-four years old, that I had experienced a great many adventures by night, and yet that I had never had the slightest difficulty of any sort with such solitary women in the streets after midnight! But nothing of what I have so far told you ever came to have any importance, since that irrational fear always left me as soon as I reached home, or saw any one else in the street, and I would scarcely recall it a few minutes afterwards, any more than one would recall a stupid mistake which had no result of any consequence.

“ ‘Things were going on so, when, nearly three years ago (unhappily, I have good reason for knowing the date, it was the night of November 15-16, 1857), I was coming home at three in the morning. As you remember, I was living then in that little house in Jardines Street, near Montera Street. I had just come, at that late hour, a bitter, cold wind blowing at the time, out of a sort of a gambling-house—I tell you this, although I know it will surprise you. You know that I am not a gambler. I went into the place, deceived by an alleged friend. But the fact was, that as people began to drop in about midnight, coming from receptions or the theatre, the play began to be very heavy, and one saw the gleam of gold in plenty. Then came bank-bills, and notes of hand. Little by little I was carried away by the feverish and seductive passion, and lost all the money I had. I even went away owing a round sum, for which I had left my note behind me. In short, I ruined myself completely; and but for the legacy that came to me afterwards, together with the good jobs I have had, my situation would have been extremely critical and painful.

“ ‘So I was going home, I say, at so late an hour that night, numb with the cold, hungry, ashamed, and disgusted as you can imagine, thinking about my sick old father more than about myself. I should have to write to him for money, and this would astonish as much as it would grieve him, since he thought me in very easy circumstances. Just before reaching my street,

where it crosses Peligros Street, as I was walking in front of a newly built house, I perceived something in its door-way. It was a tall, large woman, standing stiff and motionless, as if made of wood. She seemed to be about sixty years old. Her bold and malignant eyes, unshaded by eye-lashes, were fixed on mine like two daggers. Her toothless mouth made a horrible grimace at me, meant to be a smile.

“The very terror or delirium of fear which instantly overcame me gave me somehow a most acute perception, so that I could distinguish at a glance, in the two seconds it took me to pass by that repugnant vision, the slightest details of her face and dress. Let me see if I can put together my impressions in the way and form in which I received them, as they were engraved inefaceably on my brain in the light of the street-lamp which shone luridly over that ghastly scene. But I am exciting myself too much, though there is reason enough for it, as you will see further on. Don't be concerned, however, for the state of my mind. I am not yet crazy!

“The first thing which struck me in that *woman*, as I will call her, was her extreme height and the breadth of her bony shoulders. Then, the roundness and fixity of her dry, owl-eyes, the enormous size of her protruding nose, and the great dark cavern of her mouth. Finally, her dress, like that of a young woman of Avapiés—the new little cotton handkerchief which she wore on her head, tied under her chin, and a diminutive fan which she carried opened in her hand, and with which, in affected modesty, she was covering the middle of her waist.

“Nothing could be at the same time more ridiculous and more awful, more laughable and more taunting, than that little fan in those huge hands. It seemed like a make-believe sceptre in the hands of such an old, hideous, and bony giantess! A like effect was produced by the showy percale handkerchief adorning her face by the side of that cut-water nose, hooked and masculine; for a moment I was led to believe (or I was very glad to) that it was a man in disguise.

“But her cynical glance and harsh smile were those of a hag, of a witch, an enchantress, a Fate, a—I know not what! There was something about her to justify fully the aversion and fright which I had been caused all my life long by women walking alone in the streets at night. One would have said that I had had a presentiment of that encounter from my cradle. One would have said that I was frightened by it instinctively, as every living being fears and divines, and scents and recognizes, its natural enemy before ever being injured by it, before ever having seen it, and solely on hearing its tread.

“I did not dash away in a run when I saw my life's sphinx. I restrained my impulse to do so, less out of shame and manly pride than out of fear lest my very fright should reveal to her who I was, or should give her wings to follow me, to overtake me—I do not know what. Panic like that dreams of dangers which have neither form nor name.

“My house was at the opposite end of the long and narrow street, in which I was alone, entirely alone with that mysterious phantom whom I thought able to annihilate me with a word. How should I ever get home? Oh, how anxiously I looked towards that distant Montera Street, broad and well lighted, where there are policemen to be found at all hours! I decided, finally, to get the better of my weakness; to dissemble and hide that wretched fear; not to hasten my pace, but to keep on advancing slowly, even at the cost of years of health or life, and in this way, little by little, to go on getting nearer to my house, exerting myself to the utmost not to fall fainting on the ground before I reached it.

“I was walking along in this way—I must have taken about twenty steps after leaving behind me the door-way where the woman with the fan was hidden, when suddenly a horrible idea came to me—horrible, yet very natural nevertheless—the idea that I would look back to see if my enemy was following me. One thing or the other I thought, with the rapidity of a flash of

lightning: either my alarm has some foundation or it is madness; if it has any foundation, this woman will have started after me, will be overtaking me, and there is no hope for me on earth. But if it is madness, a mere supposition, a panic fright like any other, I will convince myself of it in the present instance, and for every case that may occur hereafter, by seeing that that poor old woman has stayed in that door-way to protect herself from the cold, or to wait till the door is opened; and thereupon I can go on to my house in perfect tranquillity, and I shall have cured myself of a fancy that causes me great mortification.

“ This reasoning gone through with, I made an extraordinary effort and turned my head. Ab, Gabriel!—Gabriel! how fearful it was! The tall woman had followed me with silent tread, was right over me, almost touching me with her fan, almost leaning her head on my shoulder.

“ ‘Why was she doing it?—why, my Gabriel? Was she a thief? Was she really a man in disguise? Was she some malicious old hag who had seen that I was afraid of her? Was she a spectre conjured up by my very cowardice? Was she a mocking phantasm of human self-deception?

“ ‘ I could never tell you all I thought in a single moment. If the truth must be told, I gave a scream and flew away like a child of four years who thinks he sees the Black Man. I did not stop running until I got out into Montera Street. Once there, my fear left me like magic. This in spite of the fact that that street also was deserted. Then I turned my head to look back to Jardines Street. I could see down its whole length. It was lighted well enough for me to see the tall woman, if she had drawn back in any direction, and, by Heaven! I could not see her, standing still, walking, or in any way! However, I was very careful not to go back into that street again. The wretch, I said to myself, has slunk into some other door-way. But she can’t move without my seeing her.

“ ‘Just then I saw a policeman coming up Caballero de Gracia Street, and I shouted to him without stirring from my place. I told him that there was a man dressed as a woman in Jardines Street. I directed him to go round by the way of Peligros and Aduana streets, while I would remain where I was, and in that way the fellow, who was probably a thief or murderer, could not escape us. The policeman did as I said. He went through Aduana Street, and as soon as I saw his lantern coming along Jardines Street I also went up it resolutely.

“ ‘We soon met at about the middle of the block, without either of us having encountered a soul, although we had examined door after door.

“ ‘ ‘He has got into some house,” said the policeman.

“ ‘That must be so, I replied, opening my door with the fixed purpose of moving to some other street the next day.

“ ‘A few moments later I was in my room; I always carried my latch-key, so as not to have to disturb my good José. Nevertheless, he was waiting for me that night. My misfortunes of the 15th and 16th of November were not yet ended.

“ ‘What has happened? I asked him, in surprise.

“ ‘ ‘Major Falcon was here,” he replied, with evident agitation, “waiting for you from eleven till half-past two, and he told me that, if you came home to sleep, you had better not undress, as he would be back at daybreak.”

“ ‘Those words left me trembling with grief and alarm, as if they had predicted my own death to me. I knew that my beloved father, at his home in Jaen, had been suffering frequent and dangerous attacks of his chronic disease. I had written to my brothers that, if there should be a sudden and fatal termination of the sickness, they were to telegraph Major Falcon, who would inform me in some suitable way. I had not the slightest doubt, therefore, that my father had died.

I sat down in an arm-chair to wait for the morning and my friend, and, with them, the news of my great misfortune. God only knows what I suffered in those two cruel hours of waiting. All the while, three distinct ideas were inseparably joined in my mind; though they seemed unlike, they took pains, as it were, to keep in a dreadful group. They were: my losses at play, my meeting with the tall woman, and the death of my revered father.

“ ‘Precisely at six Major Falcon came into my room, and looked at me in silence. I threw myself into his arms, weeping bitterly, and he exclaimed, caressing me:

“ ‘ “Yes, my dear fellow, weep, weep.”

IV.

“My friend Telesforo,” Gabriel went on, after having drained another glass of wine, “also rested a moment when he reached this point, and then he proceeded as follows:

“ ‘If my story ended here, perhaps you would not find anything extraordinary or supernatural in it. You would say to me the same thing that men of good judgment said to me at that time: that every one who has a lively imagination is subject to some impulse of fear or other; that mine came from belated, solitary women, and that the old creature of Jardines Street was only some homeless waif who was going to beg of me when I screamed and ran.

“ ‘For my part, I tried to believe that it was so. I even came to believe it at the end of several months. Still, I would have given years of my life to be sure that I was not again to encounter the tall woman. But, to-day, I would give every drop of my blood to be able to meet her again.’

“What for?

“ ‘To kill her on the spot.’”

“I do not understand you.

“ ‘You will understand me when I tell you that I did meet her again, three weeks ago, a few hours before I had the fatal news of my poor Joaquina’s death.’”

“Tell me about it, tell me about it!

“ ‘There is little more to tell. It was five o’clock in the morning. It was not yet fully light, though the dawn was visible from the streets looking towards the east. The street-lamps had just been put out, and the policemen had withdrawn. As I was going through Prado Street, so as to get to the other end of Lobo Street, the dreadful woman crossed in front of me. She did not look at me, and I thought she had not seen me.

“ ‘She wore the same dress and carried the same fan as three years before. My trepidation and alarm were greater than ever. I ran rapidly across Prado Street as soon as she had passed, although I did not take my eyes off her, so as to make sure that she did not look back, and, when I had reached the other end of Lobo Street, I panted as if I had just swum an impetuous stream. Then I pressed on with fresh speed towards home, filled now with gladness rather than fear, for I thought that the hateful witch had been conquered and shorn of her power, from the very fact that I had been so near her and yet that she had not seen me.

“ ‘But soon, and when I had almost reached this house, a rush of fear swept over me, in the thought that the crafty old hag had seen and recognized me, that she had made a pretence of not knowing me so as to let me get into Lobo Street, where it was still rather dark, and where she might set upon me in safety, that she would follow me, that she was already over me.

“ ‘Upon this, I looked around—and there she was! There at my shoulder, almost touching me with her clothes, gazing at me with her horrible little eyes, displaying the gloomy cavern of her mouth, fanning herself in a mocking manner, as if to make fun of my childish alarm.

I passed from dread to the most furious anger, to savage and desperate rage. I dashed at the heavy old creature. I flung her against the wall. I put my hand to her throat. I felt of her face, her breast, the straggling locks of her gray hair, until I was thoroughly convinced that she was a human being—a woman.

“ ‘Meanwhile she had uttered a howl which was hoarse and piercing at the same time. It seemed false and feigned to me, like the hypocritical expression of a fear which she did not really feel. Immediately afterwards she exclaimed, making believe cry, though she was not crying, but looking at me with her hyena eyes:

“ ‘ “Why have you picked a quarrel with me?”

“ ‘ “This remark increased my fright and weakened my wrath.

“ ‘ “Then you remember, I cried, that you have seen me somewhere else.

“ ‘ “I should say so, my dear,” she replied, mockingly. “Saint Eugene’s night, in Jardines Street, three years ago.”

“ ‘ “My very marrow was chilled.

“ ‘ “But who are you? I asked, without letting go of her. Why do you follow me? What business have you with me?

“ ‘ “I am a poor weak woman,” she answered, with a devilish leer. “You hate me, and you are afraid of me without any reason. If not, tell me, good sir, why you were so frightened the first time you saw me.”

“ ‘ “Because I have loathed you ever since I was born. Because you are the evil spirit of my life.

It seems, then, that you have known me for a long time. Well, look, my son, so have I known you.”

“ ‘ “You have known me? How long?

“ ‘ “Since before you were born! And when I saw you pass by me, three years ago, I said to myself, *that’s the one.*”

“ ‘ “But what am I to you? What are you to me?

“ ‘ “The devil!” replied the hag, spitting full in my face, freeing herself from my grasp, and running away with amazing swiftness. She held her skirts higher than her knees, and her feet did not make the slightest noise as they touched the ground.

“ ‘ “It was madness to try to catch her. Besides, people were already passing through the Carrera de San Jeronimo, and in Prado Street, too. It was broad daylight. The tall woman kept on running, or flying, as far as Huertas Street, which was now lighted up by the sun. There she stopped to look back at me. She waved her closed fan at me once or twice, threateningly, and then disappeared around a corner.

“ ‘ “Wait a little longer, Gabriel. Do not yet pronounce judgment in this case, where my life and soul are concerned. Listen to me two minutes longer.

“ ‘ “When I entered my house I met Colonel Falcón, who had just come to tell me that my Joaquina, my betrothed, all my hope and happiness and joy on earth, had died the day before in Santa Águeda. The unfortunate father had telegraphed Falcón to tell me—me, who should have divined it an hour before, when I met the evil spirit of my life! Don’t you understand, now, that I must kill that born enemy of my happiness, that vile old hag, who is the living mockery of my destiny?

“ ‘ “But why do I say kill? Is she a woman? Is she a human being? Why have I had a presentiment of her ever since I was born? Why did she recognize me when she first saw me? Why do I never see her except when some great calamity has befallen me? Is she Satan? Is she Death? Is she Life? Is she Antichrist? Who is she? What is she?””

V.

“I will spare you, my dear friends,” continued Gabriel, “the arguments and remarks which I used to see if I could not calm Telesforo, for they are the same, precisely the same, which you are preparing now to advance to prove that there is nothing supernatural or superhuman in my story. You will even go further; you will say that my friend was half crazy; that he always was so; that, at least, he suffered from that moral disease which some call ‘panic terror,’ and others ‘emotional insanity;’ that, even granting the truth of what I have related about the tall woman, it must all be referred to chance coincidences of dates and events; and, finally, that the poor old creature could also have been crazy, or a thief, or a beggar, or a procuress—as the hero of my story said to himself in a lucid interval.”

“A very proper supposition!” exclaimed Gabriel’s comrades; “that is just what we were going to say.”

“Well, listen a few minutes longer, and you will see that I was mistaken at the time, as you are mistaken now. The one who unfortunately made no mistake was Telesforo. It is much easier to speak the word insanity than to find an explanation for some things that happen on the earth.”

“Speak, speak!”

“I am going to; and this time, as it is the last, I will pick up the thread of my story without first drinking a glass of wine.”

VI.

“A few days after that conversation with Telesforo I was sent to the province of Albacete in my capacity as engineer of the mountain corps. Not many weeks had passed before I learned, from a contractor for public works, that my unhappy friend had been attacked by a dreadful form of jaundice; it had turned him entirely green, and he reclined in an arm-chair without working or wishing to see anybody, weeping night and day in the most inconsolable and bitter grief. The doctors had given up hope of his getting well.

“This made me understand why he had not answered my letters. I had to resort to Colonel Falcón as a source of news of him and all the while the reports kept getting more unfavorable and gloomy.

“After an absence of five months I returned to Madrid the same day that the telegraph brought the news of the battle of Tetuan. I remember it as if it were yesterday. That night I bought the indispensable *Correspondencia de España*, and the first thing I read in it was the notice of Telesforo’s death. His friends were invited to the funeral the following morning.

“You will be sure that I was present. As we arrived at the San Luis cemetery, whither I rode in one of the carriages nearest the hearse, my attention was called to a peasant woman. She was old and very tall. She was laughing sacrilegiously as she saw them taking out the coffin. Then she placed herself in front of the pall-bearers in a triumphant attitude and pointed out to them with a very small fan the passage-way they were to take to reach the open and waiting grave.

“At the first glance I perceived, with amazement and alarm, that she was Telesforo’s implacable enemy. She was just as he had described her to me—with her enormous nose, her devilish eyes, her awful mouth, her percale handkerchief, and that diminutive fan which seemed in her hands the sceptre of indecency and mockery.

“She immediately observed that I was looking at her, and fixed her gaze upon me in a peculiar manner, as if recognizing me, as if letting me know that she recognized me, as if acquainted with the fact that the dead man had told me about the scenes in Jardines Street and Lobo Street, as if defying me, as if declaring me the inheritor of the hate which she had cherished for my unfortunate friend.

“I confess that at the time my fright was greater than my wonder at those new *coincidences* and *accidents*. It seemed evident to me that some supernatural relation, antecedent to earthly life, had existed between the mysterious old woman and Telesforo. But for the time being my sole concern was about my own life, my own soul, my own happiness—all of which would be exposed to the greatest peril if I should really inherit such a curse.

“The tall woman began to laugh. She pointed at me contemptuously with the fan, as if she had read my thoughts and were publicly exposing my cowardice. I had to lean on a friend’s arm to keep myself from falling. Then she made a pitying or disdainful gesture, turned on her heels, and went into the cemetery. Her head was turned towards me. She fanned herself and nodded to me at the same time. She sidled along among the graves with an indescribable, infernal coquetry until at last she disappeared forever in that labyrinth of tombs.

“I say forever, since fifteen years have passed and I have never seen her again. If she was a human being she must have died before this; if she was not, I rest in the conviction that she despised me too much to meddle with me.

“Now, then, bring on your theories! Give me your opinion about these strange events. Do you still regard them as entirely natural?”