

A Moonbeam

By Unknown

I cannot tell whether this is a history which resembles a tale, or a tale which resembles a history. What I know is that it is based on a fact—a very sad fact, yet one which I should be amongst the very last to make good use of, on account of the particular bent of my imagination.

Others with such a suggestive subject as this might have written a volume of sentimental philosophy; I have made it matter for a story, and should the reader not derive instruction, I at least hope he will receive some entertainment from it.

I

Of noble birth, he had been educated amid the din of arms. Yet even the harsh note of the bugle itself would fail to divert his eyes from the ancient parchment over which he bent, reading the lay of the troubadour.

If one desired to see him, it was not in the spacious courtyard of his castle that one would find him, where the grooms were breaking in the colts, the pages taming the falcons, and the soldiers sharpening their lances in their idle moments.

‘Where is your master Manrique?’ asked his mother, sometimes.

‘We do not know,’ replied the servants, ‘perhaps he is in the cloisters of the monastery of La Peña, seated on the edge of a tomb, trying with strained neck to overhear the dead talking, or on the bridge watching the water flow under the arches, or lying in the crevice of a rock counting the stars in the heavens, following the clouds or watching the *ignis fatuus* flitting over the surface of the lagunes. You will find him anywhere except where all others are.’

Manrique, indeed, loved solitude, and loved it so much that he sometimes wished he had no shadow, that it might not follow him.

He loved solitude, for in it he gave rein to his imagination, and created for himself a world of phantasy peopled by strange beings, the creatures of his fancy and his poetic dreams. Manrique was a poet—a poet so much that he was never satisfied with the forms in which he clothed his thoughts, and never could he bring himself to put them into writing.

He believed that amid the ruddy flames rising from the hearth there dwelt fire spirits of variegated colour, running hither and thither over the blazing logs like golden insects, or dancing in a fiery round of sparks on the summits of the flames; and he spent very many hours, seated on a footstool beside the high Gothic fireplace, motionless and with his eyes fixed on the gleams.

He loved to think that beneath the ripples of the waves of the river, between the moss sprays of the spring, and in the mists that rose from the lake, there lived mysterious maidens, fairies, or sirens, who uttered sighs and wails, and sang and laughed with the monotonous rippling of the water, and he tried to understand their tongue.

In the clouds, in the air, in the forest, in the crevices of the rocks, he thought he saw shadows or heard mysterious sounds, shades of supernatural beings, clear sounds of words that he could not understand.

Love! He was born to dream of love, not to feel it. He was constantly falling in love with every woman he saw. With one because she had golden hair, with another because her lips were ruddy, with another because of her graceful carriage.

At times, when in a state of ecstasy, he would spend the whole night gazing at the moon floating in the sky amidst the silvery clouds, or at the stars twinkling from afar like diamonds in their ever changing hues. During these long nights of poetic sleeplessness he would exclaim!

‘If it be true, as the prior De la Peña has said, that these specks of light are worlds; if it be true that that globe of mother-of-pearl which revolves above the clouds, be inhabited by men; that the women are so fair who dwell in those regions of light; and that I may not see them, may not love them; of what nature is their beauty? of what nature their love?’

Manrique was not yet sufficiently mad to be followed in the streets by the little boys, but mad enough to talk and gesticulate to himself; which is the first step in the direction of madness.

II

Over the Duero, which bathes the dark and mouldering stones of the walls of Soria, there is a bridge which leads to the city of the ancient monastery of the Templars, whose lands stretch along the bank of the river, and extend to the opposite side of it.

At the time of which we speak the knights of the order had already abandoned their historic fortress, but the ruins of the old towers still stood. The massive arches of the cloister were then to be seen, as part of them may be now, covered with ivy and white bell-flowers; and the wind, whistling through the tall surrounding trees, sighed through the long galleries of its courtyard.

In the garden, the pathways of which had not been trodden by the monks for many years, the vegetation grew in luxuriant wildness unchecked by the desecrating hand of man. The climbing plants entwined themselves around the old trunks of the trees. The deep shadowed paths beneath the poplars, the branches of which met and became interlaced one with another, were covered with grass. Nettles and thistles grew on the sandy paths. On the ruins of the ancient walls, ready to crumble to pieces, the horse-radish leaves fluttered like the plumes of a helmet in the wind, and the blue and white bell-flowers drooped from their long, graceful stalks. All proclaimed the triumph of ruin and desolation.

It was night—a summer’s night, balmy, full of perfumes and sweet sounds. The moon, serene and white, hung high up in the sky—a sky of bright, transparent, azure depths.

Manrique, his mind reeling under poetic imagination, came to the bridge, from which he contemplated for a moment the dark silhouette of the town against the light fleecy clouds formed on the horizon, and then going on, he plunged amidst the deserted ruins of the monastery of the Templars.

The hour of midnight sounded. The moon rising slowly had reached its highest point in the heavens, when he came to the entrance of a dark avenue, which led from the ruined

cloister to the banks of the Duero. Manrique uttered a cry—a cry, sudden, half suppressed, a singular mixture of surprise, fear, and joy.

At the end of this avenue he saw a fluttering figure in white, which flitted by for an instant and disappeared in the darkness. It was the train of a woman's dress—of a woman who had crossed the orchard and bidden herself in the foliage at the moment when the demented Manrique, dreamer of chimeras and impossibilities, had entered the garden.

'An unknown woman! In this place and at this hour. This is the woman I am seeking,' exclaimed Manrique, and he flew after her with the swiftness of an arrow.

III

He reached the place where the mysterious woman had disappeared into the copse. She had vanished! To which side? There in the distance farther still, amidst the interlaced trunks of the trees, he thought he observed something light—a white form moving.

‘It is she, it is she who has wings to her feet and flies like a shadow,’ he said, rushing after her, tearing down with his hand the network of ivy which stretched from one poplar to another.

He went on, forcing his way through the ivy till he reached a little open space flooded with the heavenly light. Nobody!

‘Ah! this way she went, this way,’ he exclaimed, ‘I hear the crackling of the dry leaves under her feet, and the noise of her robe rustling against the bushes,’ and he ran hither and thither like one demented. He could not see her.

‘But I hear her gentle footsteps, he continued; I think I hear her speak, yes, she speaks. The wind groaning in the branches, the leaves which seem to pray in low tones, prevented me from hearing what she said, but without doubt, as she passed here, she spoke—but in what tongue I know not, but it is a foreign tongue.’

And he continued the pursuit, now thinking to see her or to hear her, watching the moving of the branches in the midst of which she had disappeared, now thinking to see her footprints in the mould, and anon convinced that the fragrant odours he breathed came from the lips of this beautiful woman. So he continued the chase, exultingly, through the entangled labyrinth.

But in vain.

He had been running about for some hours, exhausted and almost beside himself, stealing stealthily over the dew-besprinkled grass, and abandoning himself to his mad career.

On reaching the grounds which skirted the banks of the river, he came to the foot of the rock on which rises the hermitage of San Saturio.

‘Perchance from this height I shall be able to track her footsteps through the entangled brushwood,’ he exclaimed, clambering over the rocks with the aid of his dagger.

At length he reached the summit, from whence he could see in the distance the town and part of the Duero at his feet, its impetuous current rushing along the tortuous mountain gorge.

Manrique looked around him as far as his eyes could reach, when suddenly he stopped, with difficulty repressing an imprecation.

The moonlight shimmered in the wake of a little boat making swiftly for the opposite bank.

In this bark he thought he saw a figure in white, tall and graceful, a woman, and without doubt the woman whom he had seen in the garden of the Templars, the woman of his dreams. The object of his most desperate hopes. He flung himself from the rock as nimbly as a fallow deer, cast away his cap, the long plume of which impeded him in his flight, and throwing aside his ample velvet cloak, he made for the bridge swift as a lightning flash, hoping to reach the town before her bark came to the opposite shore.

Vain hope.

When Manrique came to the place, panting and breathless, the occupants of the bark had already entered Soria by one of the city gates, which stood on the banks of the river, in the waters of which were reflected its sombre turrets.

IV

Although Manrique had abandoned all hope of coming up to the party which had entered by the postern gate of San Saturio, yet he did not despair of discovering their place of abode. Possessed with this idea he entered the town, and made for the quarter of St. Juan, roaming at haphazard through the silent streets. The streets of Soria in those days, as now, were narrow and winding. Stillness reigned around, a stillness broken only by the barking of a dog, the slamming of a gate, or the neighing of a horse, pawing and trying to free itself from the crib to which it was tied in its subterranean stable.

Listening attentively to these noises of the night, Manrique thought he heard the sound of footsteps proceeding from a deserted alley, and a confused sound of voices coming nearer and nearer.

So he spent several hours, wandering from place to place.

At last he stopped before a large house, the walls of which were black with age, and his eyes gleamed with an indescribable expression of joy. In one of the lofty windows of the edifice, which might be called a palace, a ray of light pierced through the light curtains of rose-coloured silk and rested on the old walls of the opposite building.

‘No more doubt. It is here she dwells,’ exclaimed Manrique in low tones, gazing on the Gothic window, ‘she lives here. She entered by the wicket of San Saturio. It is by the wicket that one reaches this quarter, and in this quarter there is a house where some one keeps watch after midnight. Who can it be? Who but she, returning from her nocturnal rambles at this late hour of the night? There can be no doubt she lives here!’

Fully convinced it was she, and giving rein to the most fantastic turns of his imagination, he awaited the dawn of day before the Gothic window, the light from which continued burning all the time, and which he never lost sight of for a moment.

At the first streaks of day the massive gates of the mansion, above which was displayed the emblazoned coat-of-arms of its proprietor, slowly turned on their hinges with a grating noise. A servant, carrying a bunch of keys, appeared at the wicket, and, rubbing his eyes and yawning, displayed a superb set of teeth such as might have excited the envy of a crocodile.

To see him and to approach him was with Manrique the work of an instant.

‘Who dwells in this house?’ What is her name? From whence does she come? For what purpose is she in Soria? Is she married? Answer, churl.’

In this manner, and shaking the man violently by the arm, did he accost the servant, who replied half-stunned.

‘This house belongs to the illustrious Señor Don Alonso de Valdecuellos, Master of the Hunt to his Majesty the King, who, having been wounded in the wars against the Moors, is reposing here after the fatigues of the war.’

‘And his daughter?’ interrupted the youth impatiently, ‘or his sister, or his wife, or whoever she may be?’

‘There is no woman in the house.’

‘No woman! Who dwells, then, in the chamber where I have observed the light shining all the night?’

‘That is the chamber of my master, Don Alonso, who, being sick, keeps his lamp burning continually’

A thunderbolt falling at his feet could not have filled Manrique with greater consternation than did the words he had just heard.

V

‘I will find her again. I will find her again and if I do find her, I am almost sure to recognise her.’

‘By what?’

‘I cannot tell, but I shall assuredly recognise her. The echo of her footsteps, the sound of her voice, the fringe of her train will suffice me! Night and day I have seen floating before my eyes the folds of a white and transparent stuff. Night and day I have heard the rustling of her robe and the confused sound of her words. What did she say? Ah! if I but knew. Surely, though, I shall know her again. My heart tells me so, and the heart never deceives. True, I have searched in vain through the streets of Soria; I have spent the nights in ceaseless vigil; I have expended more than twenty golden doblas in opening the mouths of the servants and the duennas; I have offered up holy water in the Church of St. Nicholas. One night after matins in the Collegiate Church I, like an imbecile, followed the archbishop in his litter, thinking that the hem of his hopalanda resembled the robe of my unknown one! But no matter, I will find her again, and the glory of possessing her will certainly outweigh the labour of searching for her.

‘Of what colour are her eyes? They should be blue—blue and like the evening sky. I love blue eyes, they are so expressive, so melancholy, if . . . Assuredly her eyes are blue, and her hair black, very black and long, floating around her.

‘Her voice? Yes, I have heard the sound of her voice, sweet as the murmurs of the breeze through the leaves of the poplars, and her step was as stately and majestic as a musical measure.

‘And this fair one who surpasses the fairest dreams of my youth, who thinks as I think, who loves as I love, who is the complement of my soul, will she not be moved on seeing me? Will she not love me as I shall love her, as I love her already, with all the strength of my life, with all the faculties of my soul?’

‘Away, away to the place where I first saw her, and for only that one time. Who knows but that, capricious as myself, and loving solitude and mystery, like all dreamy souls, she may delight in roaming amidst the ruins during the silent night?’

Two months had elapsed, during which Manrique had been building fresh castles in the air, only destined to disappear at every breath of the wind. Two months passed in the fruitless search after the unknown fair, his infatuation for whom had been now even increased in strength, when, one evening, absorbed in thought, he crossed the bridge leading to the Monastery, and made for the garden, to once more conceal himself amid the thickest foliage.

VI

It was a calm and beautiful night. The moon shone in all her splendour from the highest point in the heavens, and the wind whispered gently between the leaves of the trees.

Manrique reached the cloister and gazed around as far as he could see among the massive pillars of the arches. The place was deserted. He retraced his steps and went in the direction of the dark avenue leading to the Duero, which he had scarcely entered when a cry of joy escaped his lips.

For a moment he caught a glimpse of the white robe, of the white robe of the object of his dreams of her whom he adored to distraction.

He flew after her, reached the place where he had seen her disappear, and stopped, fixing his haggard eyes on the moon, motionless. A light tremor passed over him, a tremor which became convulsive; and at length he burst out into laughter—loud, prolonged, horrible.

This white something, light, floating, had dazzled his vision for an instant, but for an instant only.

It was a moonbeam which pierced through the thick foliage of the trees at intervals when the branches were moved by the wind.

Some years had passed; Manrique was seated on a stool in the corner of the huge Gothic fireplace in his castle, with a vacant and wandering look in his eyes, like that of an idiot, hardly noticing the endearments of his mother or the attentions of his servants.

‘You are young and beautiful,’ his mother said, why do you live alone? Why do you not seek a maiden whom you can love, and who will requite your love?’

‘Love? Love is but a moonbeam,’ replied the youth.

‘Why do you not rouse yourself from your lethargy?’ one of his retainers said. ‘Attire yourself in armour from top to toe, unfurl your standard, and hie you to the wars? It is in the wars that glory is obtained.’

‘Glory! Glory is a moonbeam.’

‘If it please you, I will sing you the last lay of Arnaldo, the troubadour of Provence.’

‘No, no,’ exclaimed Manrique, rising passionately from his seat, ‘I want nothing. I mean I only want—to be left alone. Songs, love, glory, happiness—all lies, vain phantoms created by our imaginations and clothed by our fancy, which carries us away whither, and to what purpose? To find a moonbeam!’

Manrique was mad. At least, all the world thought so. For my part, judging from what he said, I should say he had recovered his reason.