

FRIDAY

THE NEUTERED MAN

The Astrologer watched Erdosain, waiting for him to turn the corner, and entered the grounds of his estate, muttering:

"Yes . . . but Lenin knew where he was going."*

Involuntarily he paused in front of the green spotted lime tree that was in bloom. White triangular clouds cut across the perpendicular blue of the sky. A maelstrom of black insects was merging with a vine-covered arbor.

The Astrologer scratched at the ground pensively with the point of his roughed-up work boot. He kept his hands submerged in his gray carpenter's shirt, and the brow of his forehead was bulging with the arduous work of rumination.

Expressionlessly, he lifted his gaze up to the clouds. He muttered again:

"That devil knew where he was going. Lenin was a wise man . . ."

A cowbell attached to an elastic pull that served as a doorbell rang out. The Astrologer turned towards the entrance. He was able to make out the silhouette of a red-haired woman outlined on the planks of the door. She was wearing a tan coat. The Astrologer recalled what Erdosain had told him sometime in the past, in reference to a lame woman, and with grim expression he advanced towards her.

Pausing at the entrance Hipólita examined him with a smile. 'Still, her eyes don't smile,' the Astrologer thought, at the same time unlocking the padlock, while she, against the oak planks of the doorway, exclaimed:

"Good afternoon. Are you the Astrologer?"

'Erdosain has been careless,' he thought. Then he tilted his head so as to listen closely to the woman, who, without waiting for a reply continued:

"Couldn't they put numbers on these diabolical streets? I'm all worn out from so much walking and asking for directions. Really, my shoes are a mess, although the mud is already drying on them . . . But what a pretty house you have. You must have a nice life here."

The Astrologer, without expressing the least surprise, look at her tranquilly. In the meantime, he said to himself, 'She wants to overwhelm me with her cynicism and self-confidence.'

Hipólita went on:

"Very nice . . . very nice . . . and you're surprised by my coming to see you, am I right?"

The Astrologer, hands still inside his shirt, completely ignored her.

Hipólita, put off by his attitude, took in at a glance the squat house, the wheel of the mill, a wobbly shovel, and the blue and red glass panes of the outer door. She concluded by exclaiming:

"How remarkable! Who bent back the tail of that weathercock? It couldn't have been the wind." She lowered her voice, asking: "Erdosain?"

'I wasn't wrong,' thought the Astrologer. 'It's the Lame Whore.'

"So you're Erdosain's girlfriend? Ergueta's wife? Erdosain is not here. He left ten minutes ago. It's really a miracle you didn't run into him?"

"What made you want to come and live in this neighborhood? I like your house. There's no way that I can say that I don't. Are there any women here?"

The Astrologer's hands remained in the pockets of his shirt. He listened to Hipólita contemptuously scrutinizing her with a grimace that left his eyelids half closed, so as to filter through his eyes the possible intentions of his visitor.

"So you're Erdosain's girlfriend?"

"That's the third time you've asked me that. Yes, I'm Erdosain's girlfriend . . . but my god, how thoughtless you are! I've been here three hours, talking, and you still haven't said to me: 'Come in, this is your house, have a chair, would you like a drop of cognac, can I take your hat.'"

*Commentator's note: At the end of The Seven Madmen Erdosain tells the Astrologer, "Do you know you're like Lenin?"

The Astrologer closed an eyelid, the other remaining open mockingly on his rhomboidal face. Hipólita's strange volubility did not irritate him. He understood that she wanted to control the situation. Besides, he'd have sworn that the cylindrical bulge in the pocket of her coat, something like a spool of thread, was really the drum of a revolver. He replied sourly:

"And why the hell have you come to my house? Who are you? Furthermore, my cognac is reserved for friends, not strangers."

Hipólita's hand began to lift in her coat pocket. 'There's the revolver,' the Astrologer thought. And he insisted:

"If you were my girlfriend . . . or someone that interested me . . ."

"Like Barsut, for instance?"

"Exactly. If you were someone I knew, like Barsut, and stopped by, I'd not only offer you cognac, but something else besides . . . In any case, it's ridiculous that you're speaking to me with a revolver in your hand. There aren't any directors or cinema stars around here . . ."

"Do you know that you're a cynic? . . ."

"And you're a phony. May I ask you what it is you want?"

Underneath the visor of her green hat the features of Hipólita's face, bathed in sweat from having been in the intense sun, seemed finer and more energetic than a copper engraving. Her eyes ironically examined the rhomboidal face of the Astrologer, even as she felt he now had the upper hand. To begin with this man wasn't 'as easy' as she supposed. And looking hard at her with his harsh, mocking motionless eyes . . . she found herself indifferently revising her intentions. The Astrologer, now sitting near the edge of a flowerbed, said:

"If you'd like to join me . . ."

Finding a dry stalk of grass, Hipólita sat down next to him. The Astrologer continued:

"I was going to say that possibly, I may be wrong . . . you've come to blackmail me, am I right? You are Ergueta's wife. You need some money and thought that I, as before you thought that Erdosain, and later on you'll think that the devil. Very well . . ."

Hipólita felt a little embarrassed, as if she had been caught out. The Astrologer plucked a wild daisy and slowly began to strip it of its petals, all the while saying:

"Yes, no, yes, no, yes, no, yes, no, yes, no, yes, no . . . do you see, I have made the daisy say no . . .," and without removing his gaze from the yellow pistil he continued: "That is how life goes."

Hipólita looked incuriously at that rhomboidal, olive tinted face, the Astrologer in the meantime thinking, 'Without a doubt some women have very nice legs.'

Really, it was strange the contrast: her calves enwrapped in gray stockings, the black earth, the green border of the pasture. Hipólita suddenly felt deep inside her a sympathy for the Astrologer. She said to herself: 'This one in spite of his ideas isn't a jerk,' and with her fingernails she pulled a blackish strip of bark like some kind of cracked cork off a tree trunk.

"Actually," the Astrologer continued, "we're going to be friends. Isn't it remarkable that's all settled? So that I don't do all the talking, let's take turns like in the chorus of a Greek tragedy; but like I was going to say . . . Let's be friends. Correct me if I'm wrong, but before your marriage you were a prostitute, and I think of myself as an antisocial man. For myself, these realities are very pleasing . . . the association with thieves, pimps, murderers, madmen, and prostitutes. I'm not going to say that all of these people have a real feeling for life . . . no, no . . . that's very far from the truth, but I'm enchanted by those whose initial wild impulses launch them into adventures."

Hipólita listened to him amazed, not knowing what to say. Her attention was drawn by the unusual spectacle of the vegetation all about the house. An uncountable number of tree trunks seemed to be enveloped in a green mass, their flanks facing to the west, gold plated by the sun. Huge motionless clouds hung over them like marble coves. Masses of pines bending, with jagged points like Javanese daggers piercing the calm sea blue sky. Beyond them, some trees whose slate gray trunks obscured an impenetrable jungle of unseen and malevolent branches.

The Astrologer continued:

"We are sitting here in the middle of these fields, and at the same time in all of the world's factories they're making cannons and shells, they're arming dreadnaughts, shunting millions of locomotives on rails that go all around the planet, there's not a prison in which they don't work, and millions of women in existence who right this minute are cooking a stew in the kitchen, millions of men who are laying gasping on a hospital bed, millions of youngsters writing their lessons in notebooks. And don't you think this phenomenon is curious? So many jobs: making cannons, directing railroads, purging the prisons, preparing food, groaning in a hospital, plotting letters with difficulty, all these jobs being done without any hope, any illusions, any great end. What do you think, dear Hipólita? Think about the hundreds of men moving right now as we speak, around the chains that hold a red hot cannon in its place . . . and doing it with such indifference as if it were a piece of armor plating for a subterranean fortress instead of being a cannon . . . Line up all those men with their hammers, those women with their casseroles, the convicts with their tools, the sick with their beds, the children with their notebooks, and you can make a line that would go a number of times around the world, imagine everything involved, examine it all, and finally when you come to the end of the line ask yourself does life make any sense at all?"

"Why are you telling me this? What's it got to do with my visit?"

The Astrologer snatched a handful of grass from the spot where his hand was laying, and showing it to Hipólita, said:

"What I'm saying is it's kind of like this grass. Another kind would be like a weed to it. We carry weeds inside ourselves . . . We must root them out so as to feed them to the beasts who are creeping closer to us and want to poison our lives. People search indirectly for the truth. Why don't they surrender themselves to it? Tell me, Hipólita, have you travelled?"

"I lived in the country for a while...with a lover..."

"No . . . I'm asking if you've been to Europe."

"No . . ."

"Well I have. I've travelled in luxurious coaches made with sheets of blue enameled steel. On ocean liners like palaces --he peeked at the woman out of the corner of his eye-- more and more luxuriously constructed. More and more fantastic boats. Faster and faster planes. You see, by pushing a button with your finger you can simultaneously hear the music of distant lands or you can see underneath the water, and inside the earth's crust, but just by being on top of everything won't make us any happier than we are today...do you understand that?"

Hipólita nodded, controlling her uneasiness. All that was undeniable, but what was his purpose telling her these truths? It wasn't very much fun being in a burning desert. The Astrologer shrugged his shoulders.

"Hmm! . . . I know this isn't very pleasant. You feel a chill going down your spine, am I right? . . . Oh! I've been saying this for many years now. I close my eyes and let my spirit go wherever it wants to take me. Sometimes I get the newspapers. Take a look at the paper today --He took a page from out of his pocket and read-- On the Thames two boats have sunk. In Belo Horizonte, a gun battle between two political factions. They've executed every single one of Sacha Bakao's partisans. They carried out the executions by tying the prisoners to the mouths of cannons in a fortress in Kabul. Near Mons Belgium they had a firedamp explosion in a mine. Off the coast of Lebu, Chile, a whaling boat went down. In Frankfurt, Kentucky, a crowd has filed a lawsuit against some dogs that bit them. In Dakota a bridge collapsed. There were thirty victims. Al Capone and George Moran, gangsters from Chicago, have made an alliance. What am I telling you? . . . Every day is the same. Our hearts don't beat without a reason. When a newspaper comes out without sensational catastrophes, we shrug our shoulders, and we throw it away. What am I telling you? That this is what we've become in 1929."

Hipólita closed her eyes, thinking: 'Really, what can I possibly say to this man? He's right, but maybe besides having cold feet I feel guilty?'

"What's wrong? Why are you so quiet? Did you understand what I asked you?"

"Yes, I understood and I was thinking that everyone in his own way comes to know a lot of sadness in their lives. It's remarkable though that all these sadnesses are distinct from one another,

because each of them also relates to a happiness that we cannot have. While you were telling me about present day catastrophes, I was remembering how I've suffered in the past; and I had this feeling that I had been laid out on an anvil and my soul was being torn out with pliers and I was being pounded by lots and lots of hammers until I was left completely flattened."

The Astrologer smiled imperceptibly and replied:

"And the soul stays low to the ground as if it were trying to escape from an invisible bombardment."

Hipólita pressed her eyelids. For some reason she remembered the time she lived with her lover in a village in the boondocks. This village consisted of one single street running right through its center. It didn't take her the least bit of effort to reconstruct the facades of the general branch store, the hotel, or the inn. The store was run by a Turk, and there was a carpenter's, and beyond that a repair shop, enclosed corrals, a view of a countryside flecked by adobe and brick, immense sheds, chickens pecking dirt in front of a tavern, an automobile parked next to a broken down gas station, a woman, her head covered by a towel, as she disappears behind a fence. That was the country. The daughter of the estate appraised the women. The men carrying the luggage of travelers entering the hotel would speak to each other about the price of wheat and play billiards. The starving Creoles would never go inside the hotel; but they would fasten their skinny horses to the twisted posts, like those at the seashore, in front of the inn.

The Astrologer studied her silently. He saw that Hipólita had been captured by some previous memory, trapped by ancient bonds of suffering. Hipólita, recovering quickly, had a new vision: from somewhere deep inside herself she imagined the railroad station, the siding with a buffer on a green knoll, lines of zinc sheets resuscitated before her eyes, and she abandoned herself to this evocation and the sweet sounding voice bubbling inside her as if it were narrating her memory, 'The hairdresser's sign swaying in the wind, and the sun reflecting off the slopes of the roofs as it beats down on the planks of each and every door; and every reddish colored door serving as cover for a hallway made of mottled stone with mosaics in three colors. In each one of these houses, of mottled wallpaper too, is a room with a piano and very carefully covered furniture.'

"Are you still thinking?"

Hipólita, having lost herself in one of these rapid visions, said immediately:

"I don't know why. When you were talking about those far away cities I was remembering the country where I used to live, sad and alone. Why can't I avoid certain memories? I was seeing it all again like in a photograph . . ."

"Did you suffer a lot there?"

"Yes, the lives of everyone there made me suffer."

"Why?"

"It was a terrible life for those people. You see . . . out in the country I remember daybreak, the first hours of the afternoon and nightfall. They were the three worst times in our village, which had a railroad track going across it, unemployed men in baggy trousers standing in front of a red bricked store, and Ford automobiles all in a line in front of a cooperative."

The Astrologer nodded in agreement, smiling at the precision with which the red-haired girl evoked the easy life of greedy men.

"You're right . . . everywhere in every house all they talk about is money. The countryside is just a tiny part of the province of Buenos Aires, but...how important it is! There the men and women, the children of Italians, Germans, Spaniards, Russians and Turks; all they'll talk about is money. It seems to me that these discussions about money are the only thing they're accustomed to talk about. To judge these men and their passions, all of their feelings are completely controlled by a thirst for money. You will never hear them say a thing and not associate it with money. They judge their marriages and relationships by the number of acres that they gain from them, by the measures of wheat which will double from their matrimones, and I, I felt lost among them, I felt like I might die prematurely, it's worse than living in the city in these uncertain times. Oh! It's useless to even try to escape from the inevitability of money."

From somewhere close by an invisible bird cheeped in the underbrush. A black ant crawled past Hipólita's shoe. The Astrologer smiled without taking his eyes from Hipólita's face and reflected:

"Money and politics are the only truth for the people of our country."

"But it's incredible. At the table, at tea time, lunch and later on at dinner, before going to bed, the word money comes to separate them from their souls. They talk about money every hour, every minute; money is what connects the most insignificant acts of everyday life; mothers are always thinking about money, their sons in the meantime hope that their mothers will die so that they can inherit; and girls before becoming engaged are thinking about money; a man before courting a woman will investigate her dowry, and in that horrible town, with its one long street, I lived for a time as if hypnotized by anguish . . ."

"Go on . . . it's interesting . . ."

"Men and women would look at me like I was a stranger, they would feel sorry for my future husband, why couldn't he marry a rich girl, or the daughter of the paymaster of X and Co., instead of hooking up with a delicate woman who was poor, who had no money."

The Astrologer lit a cigarette and incuriously observed Hipólita as the flame of the cigarette glowed between his fingers.

"It's amazing . . . have you ever told anyone else what you're telling me now?"

"No, why?"

"I have the feeling that you're dumping some old anguish of yours on me."

The Astrologer rose.

"Look, it's better that we get up . . . if not we're going to get cold."

"Yes . . . my feet are freezing."

They walked in the twilight between tumultuous gangs of shadows. At times they could hear flocks of birds stirring among the intersecting branches. Towards the northwest, the olive colored sky gleamed like an immense metallic sheet of copper.

Hipólita placed a hand on the arm of the Astrologer and said:

"Can you believe it? It's been a long time since I've seen the sky at twilight."

The Astrologer cast a cursory glance toward the horizon and replied:

"Men have lost the custom of looking at the stars. In fact, if you were to examine their lives you'd come to the conclusion that they live in one of two ways: some falsify the intelligibility that's to be gained from the truth and the others flatten it. The first group is composed of artists, intellectuals. The group that flattens the truth are made up of salesmen, industrialists, military men and politicians. What is the truth?, I ask you. The truth is Man. Man and his body. Intellectuals despise the body, they say: let's find the truth and they feel called to speculate upon abstractions. They write books on every kind of subject, even on the psychology of what makes a mosquito fly, if that's not a joke."

Hipólita was looking with curiosity at the trunks of the eucalyptus trees that were dotted like leopard's skin, and others which had strips hanging loose like a lion's fur. Tiny solitary palm trees with their palms like webbed feet, their green cones half open. Tobacco colored branches that almost seemed to raise their arms naturally into the air like boas springing to the attack. They projected their interwoven shadows onto the ground so that she stepped around them very carefully. Their leaves fluttered in the breeze as they fell to the ground.

The Astrologer continued:

"For their part, salesmen, military men, industrialists and politicians flatten the truth . . . that is, the Body. In complicity with engineers and doctors they say: a man sleeps eight hours. He needs so many cubic meters of air to breathe. For him and ourselves not to rot it's very important, indispensable, that they build their cities. Meanwhile, the body suffers. I don't know if you realize what a body is. You have a tooth in your mouth but that tooth doesn't exist in reality to you. You know you have it, not by looking at it; you don't need to see it to know that it is there and to know it exists. You know that tooth exists in your mouth because it can cause you pain. Good: intellectuals avoid this pain that comes from a nerve in the body that civilization has laid bare. An artist will say: this nerve is not life: life is a lovely face, a beautiful sunset, an ingenious phrase. But in no way does it concern pain."

"For their part, the engineers and the politicians say: for that nerve not to hurt precisely so many square meters of sun are needed, and so many grams of poetic lies, of social lies, of mind altering narcotics, of fictional lies, of achievements to come before the end of the century . . . and the Body, Man, and the Truth suffer . . . we suffer, because through all this tedium we still have the feeling that we exist like the rotten tooth exists to our own sensibility when cold air touches the nerve.

"To not suffer we must forget the body; but man forgets his body only when his spirit lives intensely, when his sensibility, working intensely, makes him see in his body a lesser truth which can serve a greater truth.

"This might seem to be in contradiction to what I said before, but it's not. Our society characterizes itself in making of the body the end instead of the means, and in as much as it has accomplished this the more man thinks of his body and its pain as something boring. The remedy which the intellectuals offer, knowledge, is stupid. Even if you knew all the secrets of mechanics and engineering and chemistry, it wouldn't make you any happier than you are now. Because those sciences are not the truths of our body. Our body has its own truth. It is in itself a truth. And the truth, the truth is the river that flows, the stone that falls . . . Newton's postulate is a lie. Even if it were true. Let's suppose Newton's postulate is true. The postulate is not the stone. That difference between the object and its definition makes the truths or lies of science useless for our lives. Do you understand me?"

"Yes . . . I understand you perfectly. What you want is to start a revolution. In your roundabout way you're asking me: Do you want to help me start a revolution?...but to avoid letting everything out at once you're subdividing your theme."

The Astrologer burst out laughing.

"You are right. You are a wonderful woman."

Hipólita lifted her hand to his cheek and said:

"All of a sudden I feel attracted to you. Would you like me to be yours?" (The Astrologer stepped back.) "I would very happily be unfaithful to my husband."

Smiling coldly and measuring her with a glance he answered:

"It's amazing what ideas you've gotten from my reflections."

"Right now desire is my truth. I've understood perfectly everything that you've said, and my enthusiasm shows for you in my desire. You have spoken the truth. My body is my truth. Why don't you indulge it?"

A terrible crease appeared on the Astrologer's forehead. For a moment Hipólita had the feeling that he was going to strangle her. Then, moving his head he looked away, far off into a distance in which the horizontal clarity of his pupils must have seen into infinity, he said dryly:

"Yes . . . your body right at this moment is your truth. But I don't desire you. Besides, I'm incapable of possessing a woman. I'm impotent."

At this the words that she had said to Erdosain that night once again burst out of her mouth:

"What! You too? How horrible. Then we are equal . . . I never feel anything either, whatever man I'm with . . . and you . . . the only man. What a life!"

Quiet now, they contemplated thoughtfully the highest branches fanning out from the eucalyptus trees. The gold-plated diamond-like cones were opening up on the sagging crests of the lowest vegetation, darkened by the shadows, gloomier than an undersea cavern.

The Astrologer tucked his head low like a bull preparing to charge. Then, looking up to the tops of the trees he scratched his head and said:

"Really, I, he, you, all of us, are on the other side of life. Thieves, madmen, assholes, prostitutes. All of us are equals. I, Erdosain, the Gold Seeker, the Melancholy Ruffian, Barsut, all of us are equals. We know the same truths, it's a law that through suffering men come to know identical truths. They even seem to use almost the same words, like people suffering from the same illness, whether they know how to read or write or not, will use to a degree similar words when describing it."

"But you believe in something, some God."

"I don't know . . . a moment ago I felt the sweetness of Christ was within me. When you offered yourself to me I had the urge to say I'm coming Jesus!"

He burst into laughter. Hipólita felt afraid, but he calmly put his hand on her shoulder, saying: "Erdosain is right when he says men will kill each other off until they're too exhausted, unless Jesus will save us again."

"Huh! . . . and you, you who are so intelligent believe in Erdosain?"

"And I also respect him a lot. I believe in Erdosain's sensibility. I believe that Erdosain has many men's lives inside of him at any given time. Why don't you give yourself to him?"

Hipólita burst into laughter.

"No, I made him feel like some poor slob I could treat in any way that I like . . ."

"You were completely wrong. Erdosain is a poor devil who enjoys being humiliated. He still hasn't reached the bottom, but he is capable of anything . . ."

"Did you know him as a child some place? . . ."

And she halted, fearing she had been indiscreet. They were almost back at the house. Beyond the wire fencing could be seen hollow spaces between the restless aluminum colored mists. On an isolated mound a tree appeared out of the mist whose ink blue cupola was mottled with quivering green leaves.

The Astrologer, scratching his ear, said:

"I know everything. There are saints who have probably committed more serious sins than Erdosain has. When a man is possessed by the devil he tries to find God by committing terrible sins, so his remorse will be more intense and frightening . . . but speaking of something else . . . your husband . . . he is in the hospital?"

"Yes . . ."

"And you came to blackmail me, right?"

"Yes . . ."

"And now what are you going to do?"

"Nothing. I'm going."

She spoke these words very sadly. Her will had been broken. All of a sudden the sky darkened a degree, swifter than an airplane hitting an air pocket. The light blue sky had turned gray, overcast. Red clouds seemed to darken even more the bare profile of the poplar in the bend of the road. A submarine clarity was washing over everything. Hipólita's feet were frozen and even though she felt very close to that man the mysterious matter of his impotence had interposed itself between them. It was as if they could have met each other walking on the curved surface of the South Pole and in passing those hopeless latitudes the only simple gesture left to them would be to wave at each other.

Guessing at her thoughts, the Astrologer confessed reflectively:

"I stepped on a skylight and crashed through the glass landing on the bannister of a staircase (Horried, Hipólita covered her ears with her hands) and my testicles exploded like a grenade . . ."

He scratched his throat nervously, puffing on a cigarette, and said:

"My dear, it isn't that serious. In Venezuela they hang communists by the testicles. They tie them off with a rope and raise them to the ceiling. They call it the turtledove there. Occasionally here in our prisons, interrogations are conducted on the basis of blows to the testicles. To have almost died...is to know what it is to be at death's door. In the same way you should not be ashamed at having offered me happiness. Barsut felt sorry for me when he realized my misfortune. That saved him. Would you like to see him?"

"What! You mean you didn't kill him?"

"No. Would you like to see him in person?"

"No, I believe you...I swear I believe..."

"I know. You also know that love will save mankind, but not these men of ours. Now we must preach hatred and extermination, dissolution and violence. He who spoke of love can come afterwards. We know the secret, but we must go on as if we didn't. And He will contemplate our work, and He will say that those of us who preached were monsters...but He doesn't know that our wish is to be condemned by Him as monsters...so we can explode his evangelical truths."

"How admirable you are!...Tell me...Do you believe in astrology?"

"No, it's all lies. Ah! Just think as I was talking to you this idea occurred to me: to offer you 5000 pesos for your silence, you sign an agreement in receipt of which you, Hipolita, recognize having received this sum for not denouncing my crimes, then we present that inoffensive for me but very very dangerous document for you to Barsut so that with his help I could have you incarcerated at any time, making you into my slave. But you've given me the feeling that we're going to be friends...tell me, would you like to help me?"

Gazing down about the field as she walked, Hipolita lifted her head:

"And you trust me?"

"I only have trust in those who believe they have nothing to lose."

They arrived at a path bordered by palm trees.

"Would you like to come in?"

Hipolita climbed up the stairs. When the Astrologer had turned on the light, she remained as she was, observing without curiosity the antique cupboard, the map of the United States with flags stuck into the territories that were dominated by the Ku Klux Klan, the green velvet armchair, the desk covered with compasses, and the cobwebs hanging from the ceiling. The floorboards hadn't been polished for a long time. The Astrologer opened the antique cupboard, taking from a shelf a bottle of rum and two glasses. He served the drinks, saying:

"Baby...it's rum...You don't like rum?...It's what I always drink. I remember a song. I don't know where it comes from...it goes something like this:

Thirteen men on a dead man's chest

Thirteen men oh hurray for the rum

Drink and the devil and be done with the rest

The devil oh oh hurray for the rum"

Hipólita looked at him suspiciously. The Astrologer's face turned serious.

"The song seems a little untimely to you, isn't that so? I learned it listening to a boy who would sing it all the time. We lived in the attic of a house which was divided in half by a party wall. The boy would sing every day, I was convalescing from a terrible accident...One day the boy didn't sing at all...I heard from the man who brought me my food that the boy had killed himself after doing poorly in his examinations. He was a German boy, and his father was a hard man. I had never seen the boy's face, I don't know why I recall every day of that poor soul's life."

Exasperated, Hipólita burst out:

"Yes, nothing but a trip down memory lane . . ."

"What I want is the future. The future is in the country, not in a city of bricks, so that all men will have a field of green earth, so that they can pray joyfully to a God creator of heaven and earth . . ."

Hipólita turned pale, closing her eyes. The Astrologer got up undoing his belt and said to her harshly: "Look!"

He had already unbuttoned his pants. Hipólita shying away from him saw out of the corner of her eye a tremendous red scar on his lower abdomen.

He covered it up carefully, saying:

"I thought about killing myself; there are lots of monsters at work in my brain day and night . . .then the darkness passes and I'm off on the road that has no end."

"It's not right," Hipólita muttered.

"Yes, I know. You have the feeling that you've gone to hell...think about the street for a minute. Look, here we are in the sticks; think about the cities. Kilometers of house fronts, in defiance of which you'll go from here without promising that you'll help me. When a man or a woman understand that they must destine their life to the fulfillment of a new truth it is useless for them to try to resist it. Alone they must have the strength to sacrifice themselves. Or do you think that saints only belong to the past? No . . . no. there are many hiddensaints today. And perhaps greater, more spiritual than the terrible saints from antiquity. They are waiting for a divine being...and they don't even believe in heaven."

"And you?"

"I believe in one single thing: the fight to destroy this implacable society. The capitalist regime in complicity with the atheists have transformed man into a skeptical monster, a bunch of tyrants in pursuit of a pleasurable cigar, a meal or a glass of wine. Cowardly, crafty, small minded, lascivious, skeptical, avaricious and gluttonous. Of the actual man we must hope for nothing. He must be led by women; we can create women's cells with a revolutionary spirit, they can introduce this spirit into their own homes, into the schools and colleges, into offices, into academies and factories. All by themselves women can force all these cowards to revolt."

"So you believe in women?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because she is the beginning and the end of truth. The intellectuals despise her because she is not interested in the ramblings they construct to avoid the Truth . . . and it's logical . . . the truth is the body, and what they trade in has nothing to do with the body which her womb produces."

"Yes, but up until now we haven't done anything else other than have babies."

"And that's not enough? Tomorrow we can make the revolution. We have to wake up first. To become individual beings."

Hipólita arose.

"You are the most interesting man that I have ever run into. I don't know if I'll be back to see you . . ."

"I believe that you will come back. And then you'll say to me: 'Yes, I want to help you . . .'"

"It might happen . . . I don't know . . . I'll think about it tonight . . ."

"Are you going to see Erdosain?"

"No. I want to be alone. I need to think."

Out of the blue, Hipólita burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"I'm laughing because I just touched the revolver that I brought to defend myself against you."

"Really, it's been a good laugh. Good, now go home and think . . . Ah! Do you need any money?"

"Can you lend me 100 pesos?"

"Why not?"

"Good, then it's time to go. Will you accompany me to the door of this diabolical house?"

"Okay."

After she had gone, the Astrologer turned off the light. Hipólita walked away limping slowly. She murmured:

"I'm beat."