

Weird Tales

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

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I had never heard of anyone suddenly finding
himself face to face with his own grave!

A TOMB IN MALACOR

Felix Marti-Ibanez

Heading by W. H. Silvey

THE town of Malacor is small and ugly, a cluster of hovels at the foot of high mountains. A short distance from the town there is an expanse where airplanes plying between Managua and Guatemala City occasionally land due to bad weather or some difficulty with the motor or to land men attached to the nearby silver mines. In my case, a storm brewing on the other side of the mountains forced us to land in Malacor, which immediately loomed in my mind like a curse of God burned into the granite forehead of the country.

It was five in the afternoon when our plane came down. A rickety station-wagon was waiting for us. Two or three men, their faces even more weather-beaten than their clothes, stood alongside the wagon. The landing of the plane, the only break in the monotony of their lives, excited no more interest among the personnel of the improvised airport than that implicit in their inquiries about letters or packages.

We climbed into the station-wagon and sat among bales of merchandise and luggage. The sky was a pale blue, but the clouds over the mountains were dyed crimson, as if the sun had been wounded by the sharp peaks and was bleeding. The hot breeze smelled of parched earth. The only humidity in the air

was the acrid sweat exuded by the men around me. The whirr of the motor pestered me like a swarm of invisible bees. There was no conversation. A dense cloud of dust kept us company the entire way. In the distance, under the last rays of the sun, the plane looked like a silver arrow that had fallen to earth suddenly drained of its impetus. Mosquitoes started to annoy us. Frightened by the noise of the car, huge lizards scattered in all directions, reverberating under the sun like living emeralds.

The auto stopped right at the entrance to the town. Viewed from above, Malacor was a blackish triangle at the bottom of immense peaks, but from the ground and only a few feet away from it, it looked like some diabolic game of blocks of wood and stone scattered in the mud simply to show how sordid and wretched a human habitat can be.

THE men dispersed without good-byes or even a wave of the hand, as if the sun had dried up their very souls. Carrying my valise, I entered a house with windows of a color that was only a dim reminder of the original green. The cool dark interior smelled of bean stew.

A woman, whose flaccid obesity had withstood the burning suns and whose eyes shone like

metallic flies behind glasses blurred by perspiration, pointed to a greasy book.

"Alfonso de Castilloblanco, engineer," she read aloud over my shoulder as I registered. "Only until tomorrow, when the weather on the other side of the mountains improves?" she asked.

"That's what the pilot said," I answered. "We should be leaving early tomorrow morning. Have someone call me. And I would like something to eat tonight at about eight."

"Have you ever been to Malacor before?" the woman asked as we went up the stairs to my room.

"Many years ago," I answered. "Many years. Ten, as a matter of fact. Planes were not yet landing here. I only spent one night. I was on my way to the silver mines, where I had to make some reports. But it has not changed much."

We entered the room. Like the hall downstairs, it contained only the furniture strictly necessary for the most meager hospitality: an iron bed with an orange-colored spread, a chair, a hat-rack and a washstand with an empty jug alongside of it. The walls were a dirty gray and naked, except for a single nail, long and rusty, to which every guest must have turned with a look of fear and a sinister thought. There was a window

looking out upon the back of the house. Beyond it one could see the end of the only street in town tracing an absurd semi-circle, and then the naked plain. Further away there surged hills of a dark green sheltered by the shadows of the mountains, and on them floated a sheaf of sun filtrating through the tortuous peaks like a fiery sword of an avenging archangel. The town was connected to the hills by a serpentine path covered by lime dust.

"No, nothing has changed," the woman repeated, smoothing the bed cover. "I came here eight years ago with my poor husband, who died of dysentery. The town will never grow because the mines haven't grown. Nobody wants to stay any longer than they have to, either the length of their contracts or a few days between planes. As soon as the miners have enough money, they leave by mule or plane to look for work on the other side of the mountains. This town has been cursed by God."

A FLY, fat and lustrous, alighted on one of the dusty window panes and sparkled in the sun like a ruby. The woman crushed it indifferently with her dustcloth and then passed the cloth over the scarlet stain.

"A town cursed by God," she repeated softly.

"What can I do until supper time?" I asked her, horrified by the idea of remaining shut up in this room.

She shrugged her shoulders. "It depends on how tired you feel. If you want to wait a while, the little cafe at the end of the street will open and you can have something to drink there—if you don't mind the noise of the men who play cards. Otherwise, I can rent you a horse and you can take a ride to the hills and then come back in time for supper. There is grass there, and trees."

"I prefer the horse. Doesn't anyone live in the hills?"

"Live? No, nobody. But there's a cemetery there."

Half an hour later, after washing up a bit, I was jogging along on a horse as enormous as a small elephant and as pensive as a German philosopher. The horse knew the way and I didn't use the reins. With my eyes half-shut to protect myself against the sun which still burned though about to set, I gave myself over to my thoughts.

I was starting my longed-for vacation. A month of freedom to take inventory of my life and try to reorganize it. I am forty-five years old, I said to myself. I hold a good job with an oil company and I have a house and

two servants. This month is mine to do with whatever I wish. And what I wish, what I have always wished, is to write. This frustrated desire has strangled me night and day. I haven't written a single line in my life aside from my professional reports, but I have always felt I had a great many things to say. If one can call oneself a musician simply because of a melody in one's heart, I can call myself the author of a thousand unwritten novels which, confused and inchoate, bubble inside of me like a brew fermented by witches.

IF I COULD live my life again, I would give up my arid work, the boring routine of professional duties, and live the unlived lives which at night assail me. For every night I am teased by the countless paths which my feet would have trod had they not followed the well marked-out line of my career. I am a writer who wrote his stories only in his dreams. Instead of collecting stars and clouds, flowers and tresses, silks and plumes with which to weave romantic tales, I have spent my life squaring the world with bridges and roads and setting the earth bristling with metallic wells. Instead of building with stories a path of dreams to heaven, I have connected heaven and

earth through oil wells, forcing the earth to spit its dirt into the blue of the sky.

As my horse slowed down at the foot of a hill, my thoughts came to a halt too. The path crawled like a reptile behind me. The limit of the sun's spread marked the beginning of the spot of green. The slope of the hill curved up to a moderate height; covered by low trees, it was an islet of damp greenness in the surrounding aridity.

I tied my horse to a tree and started to climb up a path carpeted by pale grass. It was a blessing to smell the wet earth and the grass, to touch soft stems and smooth tree trunks. When I got to the top, I stopped at the foot of some trees clustered together like assembled guards. Before me lay the cemetery.

It was a modest cemetery surrounded by a crude fence of stones; more than a cemetery it looked like a deserted little orchard divided up into small parcels. I counted six parcels—six graves, to judge by the wooden crosses which struck me as large crows in grotesque positions. The large sprawling stone on each grave looked like bodies fallen on the field of battle. At the far end of these little lots, separated by sort of ploughed furrows, there was one grave meticulously cared for. The earth was clean of weeds and

pebbles. The wooden cross was painted white, its simplicity softened by a garland of withered yellow flowers, and it struck me as a dove poised for flight.

I drew nearer, picking my way through the graves on tip-toe. Next to the white cross was a smooth stone half-buried in the earth. The light of the setting sun suffused it all like a miracle. I kneeled before the stone to read the name. There was a birth-date which struck me as familiar, and another semi-effaced date, that of the death, which I could not quite make out. Over both dates was the name of the deceased: Alfonso de Castillo blanco. My name!

I don't think I felt any surprise or fear. I had never heard of anyone's finding himself suddenly face to face with his own grave. I began to rub the dust from the stone to make sure I had not been mistaken. But no! There it was. My name, my birthday, and the date of my death. I peered closer. The day was left blank, the month and year were specified. It was *this* month and *this* year.

I remember that I got up slowly, feeling that I was living through a nightmare. But the buzzing of the mosquitoes, the neighing of my horse at the foot of the hill, the sweat that rolled down my forehead into my eyes,

were my anchors to reality, a reality that had been ripped open by a grave in a forgotten country cemetery. The cemetery of Malacor, the town cursed by God.

I brushed the sweat off my forehead with my sleeve and sat down on a large stone facing the grave where my body lay at rest. Many minutes passed by. My brain seemed to have stopped functioning. It refused to provide any logical explanation for this strange event. But when darkness, advancing with bovine slowness over the blue of the sky, began to spread its ink-colored scarves over me, I rose, my heart contracted by something very much like fear, and then fell on my knees before the grave and began digging. A pointed stone, a penknife, a tree branch, all served as shovels. The earth was dry and hard. Several times it was spotted by little drops of blood from my hands, but I continued digging, deeper and deeper, until I should come face to face with what was buried there.

NIGHT fell over my shoulders like a thickly-tufted blanket. The birds stopped singing as if an invisible hand had shut off the switch of their trills. The air was turning cooler. In the distance, the lights of Malacor started to twinkle.

Blindly, I continued digging. The ditch was already about three feet deep. I could not even see my hands, it was so dark, but I could not stop digging. When, I wondered, would the stone I was using hit against something? When would I be forced to light a match and face the nameless terror?

At that moment, a hand was placed on my shoulder.

I had no time for fright. In the light of a silvery prong hanging from the moon which had just appeared in the sky, I could see the outline of a woman with loose long hair.

"Don't look any further," she said softly. "It's not necessary. You're here and that's all that matters. I have been waiting for you a long time. I thought you wouldn't arrive in time. Get up and come with me. You are burning."

I got up and followed her. Paradoxically, all my fear had left me. It was as if the woman had the power to dispel all my horror. We advanced towards a clearing made by the moon. The stillness of the night was even greater than the calm of heaven. I saw the stippling of the fireflies around the trees. Gently she turned to me and taking my hot hands made me sit down at her side on a large flat stone. I could then see her deeply set black eyes. There was a moon-like

brilliance in them as she took out a little handkerchief and wiped the sweat off my forehead.

"Who are you?" I asked her.

"*You* ask me that, Alfonso? Have I changed so much in the last ten years?"

"Who are you?" I insisted.

"You couldn't have forgotten me or you would have found my grave next to yours."

I leapt up.

"Who are you?" I cried. "What does this mean? Why is my grave here? Who is buried in this grave?"

She got up too and taking me gently but firmly by the shoulders made me sit down again.

"Alfonso, look at me like you used to. Speak to me like you used to. I am Armandina."

I jumped up again. A memory flashed in my conscience, surging from some subconscious nook like the herald of an approaching storm.

"Armandina?"

"Don't you remember me?"

"Armandina?"

"You used to repeat my name three times before kissing me. Remember?"

She moved closer and I received the kiss like a sip of cool water. For a few minutes we were in each other's arms, the silence cut only by her sighs.

Armandina! I remembered her now, just as she had been

ten years before, the only other time I had passed through Malacor.

QUICKLY I recalled the chief engineer of the silver mines, an elderly man in whose house I stopped for the night—only one night. I remembered a large white wooden house full of porcelain and china, lace curtains and silk cushions, all so incongruous in this desert. I recalled his wife, almost a child, as pale as a ghost, who struck me more as a submissive granddaughter than a loving mate. I remembered the long conversation about the mines with the engineer after dinner. And then he had gone to bed early because he suffered from rheumatic pains, and after a few commonplace words with his wife, who had been silent throughout the entire evening, I bade her good night and retired to my room. In my bedroom I had felt a great sadness, a great nostalgia for things I didn't dare name. Early next morning I left the house without seeing her, and never saw her again until now.

"Armandina," I said, "where is your house and your . . ."

"Where it used to be, higher up, on the other hill." My husband died two years ago. Now I'm alone with the old Indian woman who has always taken care of me like a mother. Every-

thing is the same, everything you liked so much that unforgettable night. The china on the wall, the ivory fans, the satin chairs, even the little music boxes and the piano where you made me sit so I could play a love sonata—you said—by letting the moon strike the keys instead of my fingers."

"Armandina, what have you done all these years?"

She looked at me, her eyes simple and serene.

"I thought of you," she answered, "and waited for you to return."

"How did you know I was here tonight?"

"I didn't know. I come every night to see the little piece of ground that holds so many memories for both of us. 'When I die,' you said, 'I want to be buried here with you.' And we died a little that night. I bring flowers here and I pray, and here I have waited for you all these years."

"But this stone? Who is buried here?"

A soft finger sealed my lips.

"Don't ask so many questions. I cannot answer you. Let it suffice that I was waiting for you. Your memory has given me strength all this time."

"Armandina, I hardly spoke to you that night. I said practically nothing."

"Alfonso, you did speak that

night. Let me remind you. In our great lonely house, my husband and I lived like the wardens of an abandoned museum, not as husband and wife, but as grandfather and granddaughter. I loved him out of gratitude, but my life was a constant expectation. When you arrived that afternoon with the setting sun lighting up your red hair, adventure, love and happiness entered the house. I remember your resonant laughter putting to flight the sad shadows lurking in the corners. Dinner, which had always been sad and silent like a meal in a monastery refectory, became a merry banquet. You carved the meat as if you were carving some prize game which you yourself had just hunted down, and you drank the wine—'as red and warm as a hunter's blood,' you said.

"The dinner stirred what you called your pirate's blood. You talked, talked, talked! You traced tales of adventure in never-never lands where you had been. We relived with you flights through pathless forests, carpeted by the ermine of snows, visits to ruined towers where armed men watched coffers overflowing with jewels, canoe-rides through silent rivers where every wrinkle was smoothed by the silver iron of the moon. You spoke of dark houses on deserted beaches where you had played

at a magnificent hide-and-seek; swords were wielded in audacious combat and life itself was at stake. You spoke and it was a voice out of a picture-book discovered by children at the bottom of some forgotten trunk in a dusty garret. In the living room you took it into your head—an idea I have cherished ever since—to lift the tops of all the music boxes strewn about the room, and we were enveloped in a wave of sound that was meant to be heard only by angels, you said.

“**T**HEN we went out for a stroll and when you held me by the waist, you said that it was like the stem of a rose, and that my breath was sweeter than the fragrance of imperial violets, and you kissed me on the lips under the moon which you said was as pink as the pink silver you sometimes found in your mines. As my hand passed over your leg and felt the scar which runs from your knee right down to the foot, you explained that you had a platinum bone in place of the one you had lost in an accident, and you said that even anatomy had its poetry, for the magic metal within your body was your nexus with the mysteries hidden in the entrails of the earth.”

“Armandina, I am not the man you are speaking of. I

scarcely spoke to you that night. I am only a commonplace engineer who can only speak about machines and knows only the smell of grease and oil and has listened only to the creak of cranes and pulleys and the bore of drills.”

“Be still, Alfonso! Could I have lived all these years if it had not been for the memory of that night, and if I had not known you were coming back? On this very spot, where I found you tonight, I gave you my love ten years ago. I knew that not even the earth could hold you, that you would return to me.”

“Armandina, I am confused. You must help me to find out what there is in that grave, and who put a date there . . .”

From the hill which loomed behind us like the shadow of a huge castle, a ringing call pierced the air. Armandina rose.

“That is Concha, my Indian nurse. She came here with me many times to bring flowers. I must explain to her before she sees you, so she won’t be frightened. You’ll wait for me here, won’t you?”

“Armandina, I shall return to the hotel, pick up my things and then return to your house. I must clear all this up.”

“Do what you like, my love. This path in front of us will lead you to my house. I’ll be waiting for you.”

I felt her lips on mine; then I saw her walk away and disappear along the path alive with fireflies.

THE slow trot of my horse returning to the lights of Malacor restored some sense of reality. I was as alive as the horse that was carrying me back to town. What had happened had been a nightmare without any possible explanation. A grave with my name and date of the present month and year, a spectral woman who said she remembered me—not the engineer who had been in her house for a few hours to talk business with her husband, but rather a bold adventurer, gay and romantic, who had carried away in his knapsack an unprecedented night of love, and who had left behind him such sentimental seed that ten years later he was still being expected with a carpet of memories rolled out for his coming. I would have liked it to have happened, but it had *not* happened, unfortunately. That woman, the lovely Armandina, was either confused or mad. The discovery of the grave in which some stranger lay no doubt, was certainly madness. I resolved to return and complete the task which she had interrupted, so I could find out who it was that was occupying my grave.

The luminous points in the

distance changed into little moons, little frames of yellow light, and finally into windows. My horse, already smelling his feed, instinctively hastened his trot and the dark houses seemed to be coming towards us. With the lights came the noise of voices and gramophone music from the cafe. When I got to the back door of the inn, I left my horse in the hands of an Indian boy and, feeling no desire to go up to my room, and certainly no inclination to face a talkative innkeeper, I walked toward the town bar.

It was already ten o'clock and the main street was in darkness, cut at times by a chink of light from a half-open door. The few people in the street walked slowly as if the heaviness of the air, clinging to their clothes, forbade any speed. From the houses came the aroma of beans and meat stew. The odor of cheap wine warned me that I was approaching the tavern.

It was a sort of cave lighted by candles. Customers were standing at a zinc counter or sitting at wooden tables, surrounded by a fog of smoke only less dense than the music which spread out thickly from a loud-speaker. There was the noise of dominoes, the smell of spiced sausage and alcohol, and grotesque shadows dancing on the walls.

I SAT down at the table nearest the door so I would not choke in that atmosphere, and ordered bread, sausage, and wine from the hirsute, moon-faced mestizo who approached me. The odor of human flesh, bitter-sweet perspiration, sticky clothes, was sickening. But I was among real human beings and I needed them to dispel the sense of unreality which oppressed me. In this atmosphere the events of a couple of hours earlier made no sense. The sausage bit my tongue, the bitter bread and strong, thick wine afforded me the warmth so necessary to my spirit befogged by thoughts of graves and ghosts.

I tried to think of nothing, to blend into the atmosphere, to become part of the noise, the odors and the sharp flavors. A hoarse but respectful voice broke into my meditations.

"Would the gentleman like to buy us a drink?"

The breath of my interlocutor was as unbearable as hot furious fumes escaping from a barrel of whiskey too long corked. With him were two half-breeds who, from their boots and belts, were obviously muleteers; their clothes were mended but relatively clean, and they wore a profusion of silver ornaments so dear to the half-breed. The fellow who had spoken to me had small brilliant eyes like mustard seeds.

The other one was a very young Indian so emaciated that his skeleton seemed to be trying to break through the skin of his face. The third was a half-breed with a silvery shock of hair under which was a great impassive face as if fashioned from basalt. His lips were invisible and his eyes held the bland softness of the hardened drinker.

They were leaning on one another and were so stupendously drunk that it was a miracle they could even stand. Well acquainted with the customs of these places and wishing to avoid a scene, I nodded my head in acquiescence. The tavern-keeper, who seemed to be waiting for a signal, immediately placed on my table a bottle of brandy and three glasses, which they filled to the brim without spilling a drop and gulped down to my health in a couple of swigs. Then they made themselves comfortable at my table. I decided to finish my meal and leave the place.

VAGUELY I listened to them talk of their horses, the travelers they had guided, the brandy they had drunk. The words came out of their mouths like explosive bubbles of sound, and with them a hot effluvium of burning alcohol. But in a few minutes the man who had approached me and who was proposing one

toast after another in my honor—enthusiastically seconded by his friends—changed his tune.

"To the health," he said, "of the best horse-guide in these mountains. To Simon—" turning to the half-breed with the silver hair—"and damn all the automobiles that wait for the planes to land! May Simon's horses again bear travelers to and from the mines like they did twenty years ago."

For the second time that night a distant bell rang familiarly in my mind. An Indian guide who for twenty years had been taking travelers to the mines. I looked at him attentively. Behind the golden down which years and alcohol had put on his face, I recognized him immediately.

"Simon," I cried, "do you remember me? You took me to the silver mines at Los Pozos one early morning ten years ago. Do you remember?"

The half-breed held his glass suspended half way to his mouth, as if he had just been told he was going to be photographed. His eyes tried unsuccessfully to focus on me. He shook his head slowly.

"I don't remember, señor, I don't remember."

But he had to remember! It was of the utmost importance to me. Because one morning ten years ago, a half-breed by the name of Simon had picked me

up at the chief engineer's house on the hill and had taken me on horseback to the mines. It was the day after we had had, according to Armandina, our night of love. And my only chance of disentangling this mystery was for someone to remember my first stay in Malacor.

The Indian who had first spoken to me took the other young Indian's hand as gently as if it were a lamb.

"The gentleman wants to talk with Simon. Let's leave them alone a while." And bowing ceremoniously, with one hand he took the half-empty bottle of brandy and with the other led the cadaverous boy to another table.

"Simon," I said, signaling the tavern-keeper to bring more liquor, "you must remember me. You have guided many travelers, I know, but you took me to Los Pozos from the great big white house on the hill. We were together for several hours. You spoke to me all during the trip of this place and of the people you knew."

Simon tried unsuccessfully to light a cigarette but ended by picking splinters of tobacco up from the table wet with liquor and chewing them slowly as if they were crumbs of bread and he a hungry bird.

"I do not recall, señor," he insisted. "But I remember an-

other fellow-countryman of yours, an engineer who passed through here and went with me to the mines."

"I'm not interested in anyone else, only myself. Do you remember me and what we said that day?"

"No, señor. You are very serious and these days Simon is like you, but once upon a time Simon was young and gay and that other gentleman was gay, too and sang all during the trip."

He drank another glass of liquor and looked fixedly at me, as if my face were a telescope through which he could see far back into the past.

"That man was the happiest I have ever known. I met him at the house on the hill, where the widow of the chief engineer still lives. They say she's not all there in the head.

"That lady kissed the gentleman good-bye right there, behind her husband's back, and we started out, and the gentleman was as happy as a spring morning. What things he said and what songs he knew! For the first time I enjoyed my work. He took out of his knapsack a bag of red wine and as he poured it, it shone in the sun like rubies. Anyway, that's what he said, and I still remember it. We trotted along for a while and then we started to gallop and he kept on joking and laughing and

waking up the mountains with his songs. He was as dark as rye bread, and told me more stories about these mountains than I ever got from my father. We came across several other travelers on the road, and they all joined us as soon as he spoke to them, and he joked with them and his laughter sounded like the water that falls down from among high rocks. Finally we arrived at the small inn half way to Los Pozos."

"Yes, Simon, I remember that. It was still early in the morning. The woman who owned it came out with her little daughter who must have been about seven or eight, and the little girl set the table."

"I remember that, señor. But the only time I ever stopped at the inn with anyone in the morning was with that other gentleman whom I never saw again."

"Simon, try to remember me. Tell me about the inn."

"**T**HE gentleman began joking with the woman of the inn. At that time La Richola was a handsome merry woman. The gentleman said many things to her, and they laughed a great deal and they became very gay, so much so that I had to take her little girl for a walk in the garden and leave them alone. When I got back, she was preparing a bouquet of roses to put

on the saddle of his horse, and they were both beaming like two polished copper jugs."

"Simon, I was with you, but nothing like that happened. You took the girl out for a walk because her mother, who was pretty but sad, wanted to ask something of me."

"Señor, how can you remember when I am talking about someone else?"

He rose with the supreme caution of a man who is drunk.

"Simon, sit down! Tell me, how does one get to that inn?"

"The same way as always. But it is in ruins and nobody ever stops there now. The woman is ill, but her daughter is very pretty."

"Simon, I want you to take me there tonight. I want you to remember me and tell me why you say I did all those things I did not do."

"I did not say you did them. I am talking about someone else."

"You are talking about me, but you don't remember."

"Señor, with all due respect, I say you do not remember perhaps what you did."

I made up my mind immediately. I had to solve the mystery that surrounded me. I had to discover the identity of the man who had been living the life I had always wanted to live and had lived only in my dreams.

I REMEMBERED my trip with Simon very well. Hours of riding under a leaden sun, toasting in the furnace of the desert like two overbaked loaves of bread, and the arrival at the inn, a solitary place in the midst of countryside as flayed as the flesh of a martyr. The hut had been surrounded by an unhappy little orchard with underbrush instead of vegetables, and squalid hens scurried about like caricatures of themselves. The roof was of straw and mud. The door was like a somber mouth. There were two small windows, one with a shade, the other without, like a pirate's face with a patch over one eye. Inside, there was the clean poverty of the mountain Indian, with mud pots holding dying cactus, an empty cupboard, a religious picture so faded it looked like a gilt frame holding a piece of yellow paper, matweed stools, and woven fiber mats which lent the only spots of color.

A little girl had clutched at the skirts of a young, loquacious woman with sensuous eyes and a red mouth. I talked with the woman for some time. She wanted to know if I could talk her husband, who was working in the mines, into coming back to her as the house was lonely without a man. I remembered having noticed how fresh and luscious the woman was I remem-

bered chatting with her timidly, when all the while I wanted to tell her that in that desert she was like a fragrant apple. I remembered nothing like what the Indian guide was now telling me. It was once more the strange story of things attributed to me by others, things I knew I had never done.

THE following hours were like a nightmare. I had to pull Simon out of the tavern to saddle two horses for us. Guided by a drunken Indian and a handful of memories as vague as the sails of a distant boat on a foggy morning, I undertook the trip to the inn. At first Simon continued telling me about the things that I—or, according to him, someone else—had done and said that morning ten years ago. When I insisted that I was the man but that I had done none of the things he ascribed to me, he looked at me with turbid eyes and sat up straight on his horse.

"The señor thinks, then, that I am drunk."

From that moment on he shut himself up in that tremendous dignity which only the Indian can adopt.

As the horses trotted under a sky peopled by flocks of stars coming to visit a moon of fine silver, we continued our trip without saying another word. The desert seemed to be dead.

Any noises around us were lost in the echo of the horse's hoofs. From time to time we spurred the horses on and sped among clouds of dust. Occasionally a fire flared up in the distance. Now and then a flash of lightning accentuated the bleakness of the landscape. It was like the wasteland of ash and sand we read about in prayer books. Suddenly we caught sight of the outline of a house in the distance, its center shining with light like the end of a lighted cigar.

"La Richola's inn," announced Simon, breaking his silence.

We dismounted in front of the place. Our horses neighed and dogs howled. Over us the moon was wrapped in clouds spotted by ink, like a pale widow hidden by black veils.

When we knocked, a woman's voice answered. Simon identified us. More dogs were howling—this time, inside the house. A rifle appeared through the window, and then a pale face and white shining teeth. Finally the bolts were unlatched, the door opened and we stepped in. The little trembling flame of a candle illuminated the face of a girl as fresh as an apricot in May. Her wide, humid eyes were blacker than the night which we had left outside, and her skin had that golden sheen which changes

every half-breed woman into an Inca queen.

I explained that we wanted to get to the silver mines of Los Pozos early in the morning and we had to have some refreshment to help us on our journey.

THE girl smiled, showed us to a table, lighted two more candles, and disappeared into the kitchen at the end of the room. Shortly after she came out with bottles of wine, bread, goat's cheese, and dried fruit, which she placed before us silently. Every time she approached me I could smell her skin, fresh and sweet like that of an infant. When we were already eating and drinking, another door opened and there entered a woman clothed in a brilliantly colored poncho.

I recognized her immediately. Ten years had clothed La Richola's face in fat and surrounded her eyes with purple-colored rings, but there was the same black hair, the luscious mouth, the charming gesture of the half-woman half-child.

She greeted us vaguely and sat down in a chair near the stove, facing us, like one of those mud figures in the Christmas mangers that children make. Close behind her stood her daughter.

Time seemed to have stopped in the hut. One could hear even

the noise of a restless mouse on the roof of the house.

"I know you, Richola," I said to her finally. "We met ten years ago right here. I was on my way to the mines. This lovely girl was only a child, and you told me about your husband who was working in the mines."

"He ran away with an Indian girl eight years ago and never came back," she replied somberly.

"I'm so sorry." And after a pause, "But you must remember me."

"Many travelers passed by here. My husband was a traveler, too. That is why I try to remember none of them. You hear? None."

She paused and drew her poncho closer. "My eyes are very bad," she continued. "They have been getting worse all the time, so that even if I wanted to, I could not recognize anyone. And for me voices are only sounds from another world to which I no longer belong. But I do remember one traveler—he was such a fine man and showed me how good it was to be a woman."

"Who was he?"

"Alfonso de Castillo Blanco," she answered, and the sound of my name in that house was like a strident ringing of a bell at midnight that awakens echoes of terror in a country house. "A

good-looking man, greatly traveled and very gallant. He was on his way to the silver mines, where he said he had some work to do and a gift to get for the woman of his dreams. But he bestowed his gallantry on this house for a few hours. His presence changed it from a sad place to the inside of a bell. He spoke words to me sweeter than the honey of bees, and his strong hands took mine and placed them on his heart so I could hear how my beauty made the heart of a man beat more strongly. He promised me nothing. He did nothing more than make me feel like a woman, which I had forgotten in my sorrow. He gave me back my confidence in myself.

"Before he left he picked all the flowers we had in the little mud pots and made me a crown and told me that whenever I looked out and saw only the desert land whipped by the wind which winnows the ashes, I should look within myself and I would see only light. Perhaps he foresaw that the light of the outside world would leave me, and he wanted with his words to cut an opening in the dark curtain which overlay my heart."

"Here," said the girl, "mama keeps the gentleman's pipe and what is left of the crown of flowers."

SHE took out of a box an old pipe which I recognized immediately. I had lost it during my trip to Malacor ten years before.

"You must remember me," I said to the girl. "You were here too."

"Señor, I can't remember you, but I know that my mother has always remembered that gentleman. It can't be you, or she would know you."

"Señor," La Richola said, "Alfonso de Castillo blanco spent only a few hours in this house many years ago, but I shall never forget him."

The rest of the trip was uneventful. Simon shut himself up again in silence. As the journey dissipated the effects of the alcohol, he must have begun to suspect that he was in the company of some lunatic. We rode along the dreary plains towards the mines. What I expected to find there I myself didn't know. I was seeking to recover my peace of mind shaken by this journey through time. I was trying to retrace the footsteps of the man I had always wanted to be and never was, except, it appeared, for these people. I had to find someone who had seen me during my first visit to the mines and would recognize me. Clutching the reins of my horse, struggling against the drowsiness which was forcing my eye-

lids together, I endeavored to penetrate the obscurities of the past.

My stay in Malacor ten years before had been for one night only. The next day I had proceeded to the mines. There I had spoken with an engineer about some machinery and then the guide and I had returned on horseback to the village, for I was eager to leave this unattractive country. But I remembered that I had spoken with other people at the mine, and I particularly remembered an old man whom they called the Guardian because he had been at the mines from time immemorial. I remembered his long silver beard and his sun-burned bald head. He was sparing in gesture and word, and as strong as a bull.

I remembered having presented him with a hunting knife for his services during the day and having taken friendly leave of him. Perhaps, because such an oak cannot die, he was still at the mine and would remember me. Maybe then I would solve the mystery of the life I had not lived but that others had lived with me.

AS WE rounded a hill, there spread out before us like a timorous fan the last plain right before the mines. Instead of the row of flaming bonfires which I expected, I only saw the blink-

ing of two or three small ones. We spurred the horses and plunged into the night. As we reached the fires, there rose from the shadows several figures enveloped in ponchos with faces blackened by the night and teeth that shone sinister in the darkness. Men's voices were heard and the barking of dogs. Someone drew near and held the horses by the bridle while we dismounted. The other men returned to the warmth of the fires. The wind carried in waves the noble pungent odor of fresh manure.

The peon holding our horses informed me that work at the mines had been suspended for several days now. There had been a violent disagreement between the owners and the peons, resulting in fights and even bloodshed. Most of the laborers had left the mine to look for work on the other side of the mountains. Only about a dozen remained; they were still hopeful of coming to some agreement with the owners.

I decided to wait for dawn and sat down near one of the fires, while Simon wrapped himself into a poncho and fell asleep immediately. Shortly afterward I must have fallen asleep also, with my coat over half my face and a star blinking through my rumpled hair.

The light of dawn woke me

up. I felt immediately that someone was staring at me and I sat up sharply. A dark red bald pate stood out in the gray light and a long silver beard stirred softly in the early morning breeze. It was Asensio, the old guardian of the mines.

The nearby hills stood out behind him black and angry against the sky of a cold blue. The crow of a cock was nostalgic, but soon yielded to the first yelp of the hungry dogs. I looked at the guardian of the mines, who this morning was the same as he had been ten years earlier and would be ten years from now, his mouth set and cryptic, his eyes full of fire. In the sky, a young blond sun was rising like a page-boy in a fairy-tale.

"Do you remember my visit to these mines ten years ago?" I asked the old man. "I am Alfonso de Castilloblanco. Do you remember me? The engineer with the metal leg-bone."

THE old man had taken out his pipe and was stuffing it with tobacco. When the first cloud of smoke rose to join the youngest cloud in the sky, he looked at me with extraordinarily youthful eyes.

"I am too old to remember anything," he answered. "I have seen many people. Today, yesterday, tomorrow? That is not important. In my life, past, present

and future are simply different surfaces of the same reality. The present viewed from yesterday was a tomorrow; today seen from tomorrow will be a yesterday; and yesterday arrived at a time that was a today. Time does not exist; those who live in time don't exist either. We live only when we learn to live not in time or space, but in ourselves."

"All that is very interesting," I interrupted him impatiently. "But I want to find out about myself, about my life. Please try to understand! Do you remember when I came to this camp? About ten years ago I spent half a day here with another engineer. You took care of me and I gave you a knife. You *must* remember!"

Something in my voice broke through his indifference. He looked at me attentively as if trying to decide what to tell me.

"Don Alfonso de Castilloblanco," he said, "you came here with some blueprints in your hands and a sparrow's song in your heart. When you were with the white men who had pistols in their belts and large sheets in their hands, you spoke of things I did not understand, but later you sat down next to me and spoke about things which I have never forgotten. You told me about a pale little girl like a May moon who was waiting for you on top of a hill in a clear-

ing of the woods. You asked me what you should bring her as a souvenir and I told you to bring her a silver pin which I myself had fashioned. A simple pin with two hearts, one for her to wear on her blouse and the other for you to carry in your key-ring. Both hearts together made one complete heart. Separate, they were incomplete.

"You took the pin and you were delighted, but when they called you back to the mine, you dropped one of the hearts—yours. When I found it you had already left. I had to go to Malacor and personally bring her the silver heart which belonged to you so she might return it to you, because I was sure you would turn up to claim it."

"Then you recognize me?"

He shook his head.

"I don't recognize anything but memories. But if you wish to bring her the heart which belongs to her, you should do it before it is too late."

"But I have no heart."

SLOWLY he took my key-chain, on which I had collected little charms for years.

"Here it is," he said.

I seized the small indented heart and it seemed to me that the cold silver was throbbing in my closed fist.

"And yet you keep saying that you don't know me, that I am

not the same Alfonso de Castilloblanco who came here ten years ago?"

"I did not say that, señor. My memory is very bad. I only said that you look like too well-balanced a man to feel such a passionate love, and that the man with whom I spoke ten years ago was a man very much in love. But take the heart and return it to the woman to whom it belongs."

He got up slowly, as if ten thousand years of wisdom bore him down, and walked away towards one of the fires.

The other peons began to get up. Dawn was setting a pink rouge on their unshaven faces still creased by sleep. The remains of the fires were like smudges made on the ground by the foot of a naughty impatient child. The line on the horizon was soaked in crimson and the air began to be streaked by the flight of the first birds, black and swift.

Only then did I see, at a short distance from the camp, an improvised airport where a small plane was beginning to sparkle in the sun.

"Whose is that plane?" I asked a peon.

"It belongs to the engineer in charge," he answered. "He's coming back from the other camp soon."

The engineer arrived an hour

later, a young man with a thick beard as black against the pink of his skin as the feathers of a chicken after singeing. I explained that I had come to the mine in search of a friend, and that I had to return to Malacor where I was to continue by plane.

"That's just the excuse I need," he said, "to get away from this camp for a couple of hours. If you wish I can take you to Malacor and once there I can decide whether I want to return to this hole or not."

A few minutes later the engineer, Simon, and I, got into the plane. It was a magnificent morning. The sun was sliding over a jubilant sky like a yellow balloon that had escaped from a child's hands.

THE plane took off as easily as a butterfly. From my pocket I took the silver heart I was going to return to Armandina. I looked down and caught sight of the guardian of the mine leaning against a rock, looking up. I had not been able to find him before I left. He had probably avoided me.

It was too late now to retrace the steps of my life and solve the mystery. Some understudy must have lived my life for me, doing the things I had dreamed of doing, filling with love, happiness and adventure the places

through which I had passed. Had he died and was he now buried in the grave I had discovered? What was the mystery of the grave, of my grave? I seemed to hear Armandina's voice: "The grave is empty, waiting . . ."

I shivered and turned my collar up, as if by protecting myself from the cold I was denying the grave. I knew that Armandina was waiting for me. In the town cursed by God, in Malacor, I had long had an appointment with love and I was finally going to keep it.

The plane begins circling about in preparation for landing. I can see the wretched hovels of Malacor, and there is the hill crowned by the great big white house, and then a smaller hill with its cemetery. But what is happening? The motor is coughing and panting, snorting and roaring like a wounded beast. The pilot's face is livid. Simon's remains impassive. We make a hundred grotesque pirouettes in the air like the acrobatics of a bad circus performer. Then the motor stops and fire flames up behind us and envelops the plane. The blue whirls around us dizzily as we hurtle down, down towards the hill where Armandina waits beside the grave bearing a stone that announces my death.

