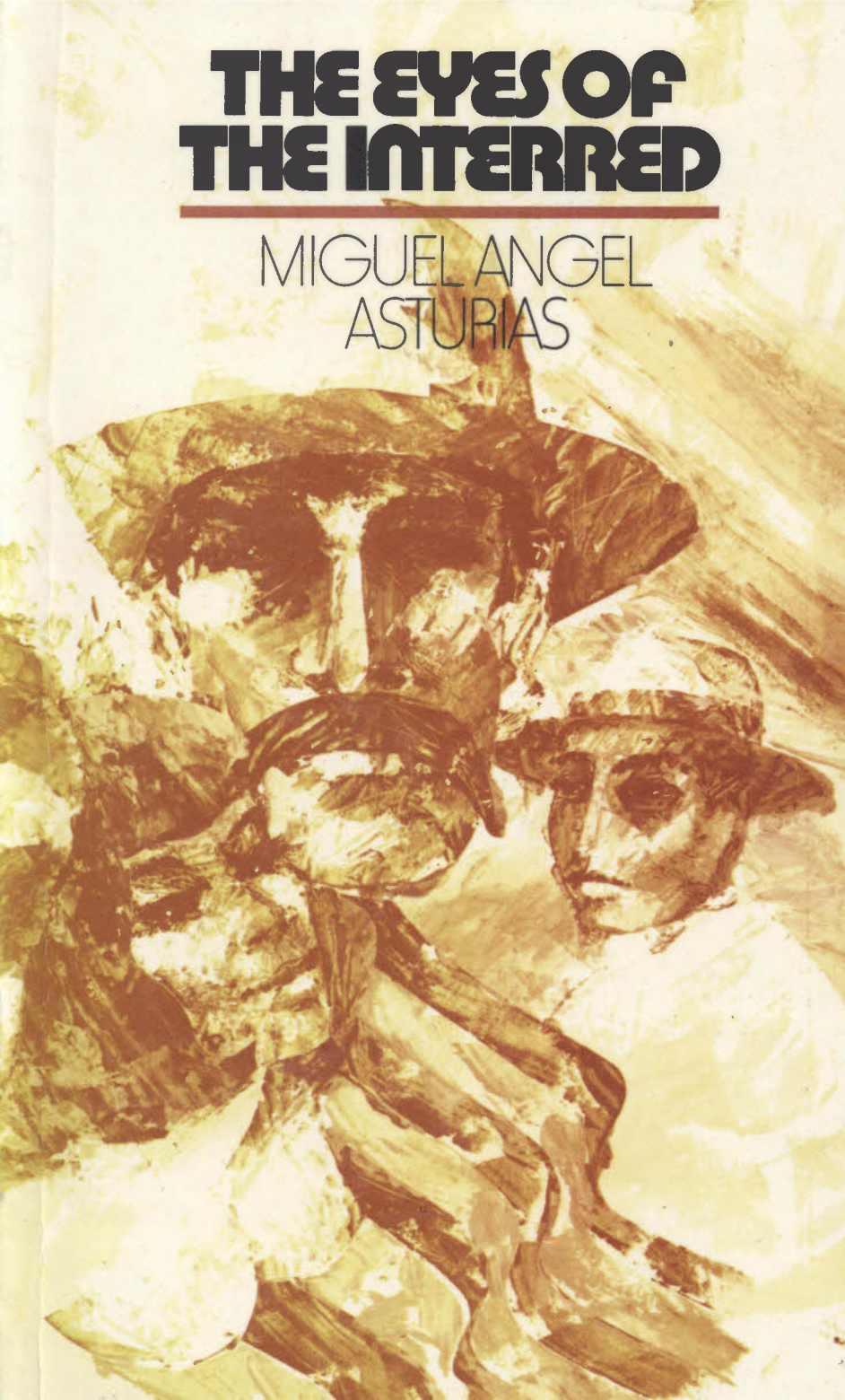
THE EYES OF THE INTERRED

MIGUEL ANGEL ASTURIAS



The Eyes of the Interred

Miguel Angel Asturias

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY
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by the same author

PRESIDENT
THE CYCLONE
THE MULATTA AND MR FLY
THE GREEN POPE
BOLIVIA (with F. D. De Medina)

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PART ONE

1

"The gringos are swilling again!"

Anastasia—Anastasia with no last name, no watch, no drawers, everything out in the open, like the people in the town, name, time, sex—could not hold back, she let it out like the "good morning" she said every day as she stuck her face into the Granada, a dance-hall, bar, and restaurant where they sold ice cream that tasted like a barbershop, chocolate candy wrapped in tinfoil, sandwiches of three decks or more, soft drinks with multi-colored foam, and foreign drinks.

"The gringos are swilling again!"

The door opened into a wide, spacious room filled with leather easy chairs, angular, heavy, just right for lazy people or staggering drunken sessions, and round tables, full of people and low, with the top part made of porous wood that instead of gleaming was scrubbed every day so that it would always be clean and new as if it had just been planed.

And everything gleamed like the tables, clean and fresh, except for the shoeshine boys, miserable children, dirty and ragged, who looked like old men with infantile voices:

"Shine! . . . Shine! . . . Shine, mister? . . . Just a brush! . . ."

Everything gleamed like new at ten o'clock in the morning. Ten o'clock in the morning? It was going on eleven! . . .

The cement floor that gleamed like a caramel carpet was new, the large windows were new, the little windows were new, the mirrors through which one could follow the reflections of the cars that flaunted their shiny bodies along Sixth Avenue were new; new were the early-morning pedestrians making their way along the sidewalks, pushing each other, bumping each other, with remarks and looks back and forth, greetings and embraces, the tipping of hats and waving of hand; the walls decorated with tropical motifs were new, new the marble-colored ceiling and the indirect lighting, crystal worms that folded out their fluorescent butterfly wings at night; new was the time on the round clock, new the waiters with their black trousers and white torero jackets, new were the huge blond drunkards, contemplating with blue eyes preserved in alcohol the ant hill that was the halfbreed city, and Anastasia's voice was new:

"The gringos are swilling again!"

Officers and soldiers in greenish uniforms had been en-camped in the Granada since early in the morning, to drink whiskey and soda, chew gum, and smoke cigarettes made out of sweet tobacco —a few of them were smoking pipes—all alien to what was going on around them in that country, completely alien, isolated in the extraterritorial atmosphere of their powerful America.

The morning clientele occupied the neighboring tables. Traveling salesmen with no other company but their sample cases were having lunch for breakfast as they devoured with their eyes the food in some magazine, served up on porcelain pages. Not by bread alone . . . the businessman lives from advertising. Native drinkers were entering and leaving after their morning shot. They would toss it down and then go straight out to spit in the street. They did not like the presence of the foreign soldiers. They were allies but it felt like a kick in the pants. Others, less sweaty with sovereignty because they had been educated in the Yunite Estait

or had worked in the Yunite, did not mind standing at the bar or sitting at the tables next to the Americans, and they not only spoke, they belched English, an ability that they demonstrated with fanfare, not to mention those who, in order to pass as well-traveled, without speaking or understanding the language, kept on exclaiming: "Okay—okay—America! . . ."

The soldiers were lounging comfortably, one leg stretched out under the table and the other hung over the arm of the chair. Some of them, after doggedly drinking their glasses of whiskey and soda, hitting them on the table when they were empty, would speak without interruption for a long time. They would fall silent and then continue talking. They would talk and then fall silent. As if they were sending each other cablegrams. Others, taking their cigarettes or pipes out of their mouths, would let out sharp exclamations which their companions greeted with great bursts of laughter. Those who were at the bar, with their backs to the people at the tables, would turn on their swivel stools, holding onto their drinks, blond hair, blue eyes, white hands, to find out who had said the things that their comrades were celebrating and applaud him. Like imperial troops they wore rings on their fingers and thick wristbands with gold watches.

"The gringos are swilling again!"

"Watch out, Aunty, they'll hear you! . . ." a thin boy who trailed her everywhere said to the mulatto woman.

"Let 'em . . . you make me laugh . . . you think they can understand Spanish?"

The bartender was getting the orders from the storeroom with grunts and a scratching of his head.

"It's not that it's late," he said to himself, "it's just that these people from the military base have been here since God gave us dawn."

Chinese eyes, the slit of a mouth under his drooping mustache: a real shark in the shadows.

From the cases and baskets he was pulling the bottles out like swords, unsheathing them from their straw. Then he lined them

up in battle order, transformed into soldiers, the whiskies in the front line, the shock troops, followed by bottles of imported rum and native rum, candy-colored and purgative, bottles of gin, transparent bricks filled with white fire, decorated cognacs, bottles of noble wine wrapped in gold foil, bottles of liqueur with something of mermaids about them because of their nets.

And while the bartender was lining up the bottles, his helper who was taking care of the customers said to him:

"My nails are purple from serving so much absinthe, Señor Mincho, and the worst of it is that I keep getting dizzy . . ."

The paregoric smell of the absinthe, which was not absinthe but pernod, was making him nauseous, and his nails were purple from holding the glasses full of ice cubes under the jet from the faucet which stirred up that semen-colored drink.

"I told you I'm going in, Aunty," insisted the urchin, tired of waiting by the door without doing anything, one foot leaning on the other.

"Go on in . . ." the mulatto woman pushed the thin filthy boy, with a mange almost like scales from his ears to his neck, the sparse clothing he wore ragged, his feet bare and naily.

The boy, half-limping, his mouth twisted and one shoulder lower in order to inspire more pity, went in with his hat in his hand, begging. From the door he ran to the tables occupied by the blond giants. Next to them he looked even darker. (Lord help us, Anastasia sighed from the doorway, how dark my little boy looks among those people!) The soldiers, still moving their ruminant jaws and even their ears as they chewed and chewed their gum, threw some coins into his hat. Some offered him whiskey, others drove him off with the lighted end of their cigarettes. The waiters shooed him away like a fly with a neat whisk of their napkins.

A gray-haired sergeant with red skin, addressing the man behind the cash register at the counter for cigarettes, sweets, chocolates, and candies, shouted:

"No chase away, kill right out . . . bug, kill . . . kill . . . all español bugs!"

And he laughed at his joke as the boy reached the door on the run, frightened by the waiters' snapping napkins.

"That all you got? . . ." Anastasia said to her nephew as she took the money in one hand and weighed it.

The boy left her with the hat and ran to ask for one of the sheets of paper with letters and lions' faces, horses and people, that they were handing out at the door of the movie theater. That was what he wanted to be when his aunt would let him: an usher. Then he could get into the movies free.

"To be shut up in the dark, my Lord, why would I pay for that?" Anastasia would cut him off every time he asked her to take him to the movies. "Poor people don't need to pay for such things; since we have no electric lights, our movies start as soon as night falls. No, son, life costs too much to squander . . . your eyes in the dark!"

"Español bugs? . . ." a young customer who was sitting at a table with some friends asked in English, picking up the sergeant's comment. "Perhaps so, but you need us! . . ."

"Mexico is bug with sharp bite," the other one stammered in Spanish, raising his voice, "Central America little bugs, crazy . . . West Indies not bugs, worms, and South America cockroaches think they something better!"

"But you need us!"

"No need you in Minnesota, friend! Minnesota not Washington or Wall Street!"

The voice of a third person from another table broke in with a ring:

"Tell him to go screw himself!"

Horns blowing on late-model cars rolling along Sixth Avenue amidst the coming and going of pedestrians. Noon. Heat. The Granada filled to bursting. All the tables taken. The bartender and the miracle of the multiplication of the drinks. He was picking out the bottles by touch, without looking and flipping them

through the air from one hand to the other, all set, tipped over and ready to be poured. The waiters could not keep up with him. The cash register was one continuous ring. The telephone. The newspapers. The jukebox. Anastasia . . .

"The gringos are swilling again!"

On the streets loudspeakers hawking films and theaters. "*The Great Dictator*, with Charlie Chaplin! . . . *The Great Dictator*! . . . *The Great Dictator*!," more throat than megaphone; drivers offering their taxis, more lip than throat; lottery vendors, fortune and poverty arm in arm, and the mulatto woman's nephew sped from table to table, taking advantage of the fact that the waiters were too busy serving the customers to bother with his small person.

But by noon he had not collected too much. Many aristocratic gentlemen and many ladies with gloves, plumes, powder, paint, perfume, permanents, and all he was able to get were two or three coins. Some acted deaf, others distracted, and even though the boy dared touch them, urged on by necessity, with his poor dirty hands, they kept on chatting without paying any attention to him or else turned on him, threatening him with the police or asking him in a sour and nasty way if he had no parents to take care of him. The boy did not know what to answer, his eyes and his nose fixed on the tasty things the waiters were distributing about the tables among the drinks, the ashtrays, and the delicacies that those *proper* people were eating with their fingers between sips of their drinks.

"But you must have parents . . ." someone scolded him.

"I might have a papa . . ." the boy whispered.

"And your mother?"

"No. I don't have no mother . . ."

"She died . . ."

"No . . ."

"Did you know her?"

"I just don't have no mother . . ."

"How can that be? Everybody has a mother . . ."

"But I don't . . . My papa made me in an aunt of mine . . ."

In the midst of laughter and remarks, jokes and words that rang in his ears but had no meaning for him because he could not understand them: imbecile . . . tramp . . . homunculus . . . the mulatto woman's ragged nephew, holding his hat in his hand and on his lips the sad voice of one who asks for money with a mouth that is watering from the smell of ham and cheese served between toasted rolls, popcorn, potato chips with hot touches of pepper, and olives the color of edible jewels.

From that day on they would all call him over and they all gave him coins, making him repeat in the midst of laughter and guffaws: "My papa made me in an aunt of mine . . ."

The room was empty after one-thirty around two in the afternoon. Sixth Avenue was almost deserted. Canvas awnings over the sidewalks protected the commercial siesta, where the bartender and the blond giants kept at it: whiskey and soda, absinthe, beer, gin, cocktails, and "submarines" made of rum and beer or beer and rum mixed in the same glass. The order of the ingredients did not change the drunkenness.

"The gringos are swilling again!"

A hunchback, dwarfed, bent over, with very long arms, came in with paper napkins for sale. When he spoke the corners of his mouth frothed, as if the samples that he took out of his black leather bag were being advertised by those shreds of saliva coming out of his mouth. He made his sale, paying no attention when the buyer rubbed some lottery tickets across his hump.

"Three in the afternoon and I haven't tasted a mouthful of food, God damn it!" he said as he left with his hump, his pouch, his saliva, and his napkins.

And once out in the street:

"And God damn those bastards in there who use me as their good-luck charm!"

At the door the manager was attacked by an advertising salesman with less luck than the hunchback.

"If I'm all filled up with gringos why should I spend money on advertising? . . ."

"So the local people will come . . ."

"It's better if they don't come. That's reason enough for not advertising. They only come to start trouble."

At four in the afternoon the first flow of customers disappeared into the movies and more soldiers got out of gleaming taxis at the door of the Granada. They came from the military base located on the outskirts of the city or, as it was officially called, "somewhere in America." And they barely took time to pay the driver. One stayed behind to pay. The rest hurried inside, four, six, eight, as many as would fit in the door, asking for whiskey, beer, gin, cognac, rum, and greeted with friendly pats on the back, boxing clinches, and the acrobatics of those who had been clinging to the bar since early in the morning with some prehensile instinct, and who now got out of their seats, let go of the bar, and stumbled off to make room for their reinforcements.

Not far from the bar young ladies and gentlemen were filling the tables in the dining-room. Five to. Five to five in the afternoon. Young ladies whose elegance consisted in imitating one of the famous artists of the screen, their favorite, and boys who lived out movie scenes with them, romantic or adventurous. A cooperative darkness, Hawaiian music. Among the turtle-doves, a table here and there of newlywed girl friends at the joyous age, anxious not to lose their figures and their maidservants, clay figures who went everywhere with them with a baby in their arms and the diapers and changes of clothing in an embroidered bag. With some story about keeping a little alcoholic spark alive curing the baby's colic, the most addicted ventured to have a spot of anisette with water.

Cigarette butts painted red by lips lay in the tea-cups, like signatures, when they reached the sink where Señor Bruno and his team of dishwashers made the silverware gleam like mirrors as they commented:

"The ones who came for tea have gone, people are coming in and leaving and the soldiers from the base are still at the bar. They know how to drown their troubles! There's one with a face

like a beet who gets drunk with his eyes open, as if he was anchored sitting down, and another one who just stares and stares as if he was getting farther and farther away with every drink, and one who's some kind of aviator, great big fellow, grabbing everybody around him."

"But the tea-drinkers . . . I mean, they're the ones who dirty the most dishes. They eat their fill . . . I'll stop there so I don't say filthy!"

"And they don't even leave so much as a drop of water. The cups are safe because they can't be eaten," the oldest one said.

"What do you expect, grandpa? You think they're going to leave you their coconut cakes, their pats of butter, their cookies greasy with lipstick, the kind they smear on their snouts."

"Don't be so common; you sound like you were in the Cinco Calles, talking like that! You're in the Granada, loudmouth!"

Señor Bruno intervened:

"Can't you even be quiet when you work. That's the worst thing about you people. Damn you, what does it matter to you whether or not the ladies don't eat the cups because they can't be eaten and whether or not they dirty more dishes than they have to, what the hell! . . . That's what soap and water and hands are for. Work is steady here and the pay is good. Why fuss about something that's not a poor person's business?"

"It's that you, Don Bruno Salcedo, are living in the old days, when a poor person was treated like an ox. People who think that a rich man, because he's got dough, is better than the next one . . ."

"Better than two . . . better than three! . . . You do all right here, old man, because where a rich man bites a poor one gets what's left."

The remains of chicken corpses that arrived in the scullery on greasy plates announced dinner time.

"The gringos only eat this . . ." a boy with green eyes announced, lifting a scarcely chewed chicken leg to sink his pointed Indian teeth into it and with his mouth dirty from the meat that

had clung to the bone he added: ". . . and for *pollo* they say *chiquen* . . ."

"That's all right, boy," another one said, "I used to work for a Spaniard near the Chispas Bridge and he didn't say *pollo* either, he said *pol-yo*."

"Well, that's all the people from the base ever eat, and only with their hands, no knife or fork. Who knows, maybe in their own country they're down-and-outers like us and here they pass themselves off as Misters . . ."

"No one's a prophet in his own country, but you, dark as you are, you'd never be a Mister even if you went to China!"

"Mister . . . ious, no, but I'll be a Don no matter where I am!"

"Where in Christ's name would you be a Don?"

"Don? My foot. You're an Indian, my friend," a third interrupted.

The water was bathing the dark hands which held the white china plates, the flowered cups, the crystal glasses, glasses of all shapes and sizes, the silverware, breaking up the clouds of soap that momentarily fogged the polished surfaces.

"Score one!" they shouted in a chorus whenever a plate smashed on the floor.

And the one assigned to picking the best leftovers off the plates, before they went into the scullery, came with a broom to clean up the "chinees," or pieces of porcelain. Juan Nepomuceno Rojas was his name.

He swept and grumbled. They break and break and break as if it all belonged to them! It didn't used to be like that. You took better care of what wasn't yours than you did of what was. It was shameful, really shameful. The young now are just shameless, nothing else . . .

And while he was grumbling he was sweeping off with his broom the pieces of china which he, Nepomuceno Rojas was the first to pay for, outside of the boss, because many times he would cut his fingers on broken pieces of glasses when he picked up the garbage, because unless they were broken in full view of

everyone, the people responsible took care to hide the pieces without saying anything. Screwing the one who had to gather up the garbage. There was good reason for his getting the best of the leftovers. Juan Nepomuceno, as they called him, although because of the use and abuse of his digestive tube, like any good Christian, and since *ceno* means "I dine," they might have baptized him Juan Nepomu-dine-eat-breakfast-lunch-snack Rojas.

Anastasia was coming back from La Concordia, a park as sad as purgatory around ten o'clock at night. Before leaving the park, between a tree and a statue, she answered the call of nature. Her nephew watched in case the police came or any people passed by, whistling under the stars, whistling and playing with his bare feet in the sand that was wet with dew.

"Stop that foot business! Quiet down and keep an eye out the way you're supposed to! All I have to do is squat for you to start up with your dancing. Whistle if you see someone coming, not just because you feel like it."

"I'm doing it so I won't hear the noise you're making, Aunty . . ."

"Fresh, that's all you're good for, to act fresh!"

Aunt and nephew came back from La Concordia to the corner of the Granada. Lively in the daytime, at night mere rinds, weary and slow, they inspected with eyes popping out of their lids the shop windows with rolls stuffed with black beans sprinkled with hard cheese, bread with pickles and strips of lettuce, bread with sausages, stuffed chiles, and banana tarts bathed in powdered sugar . . .

Anastasia closed her eyes and taking her nephew by the hand she crossed the street in order to get away as quickly as possible from those shops with their lighted showcases across from the solemn darkness of the church of San Francisco. She was fleeing from temptation, her nephew's cold hand in her old woman's hand, the sound of the boy's small feet on the paving stones wet with dew, and her skirts billowing wide, and she did not stop until she was in front of Santa Clara, a small church near the

large Franciscan one where she crossed herself and crossed her nephew and offered mysterious and threatening words against the rich, calling as her witness Our Lord of Santa Clara, a painting of Jesus with the cross on his back, inside the church, which would now be illuminated with oil lamps.

They could already hear the music from the Granada, and soon they were there. The haste of intestines. Hairy Don Nepo might give them something to eat. Arriving, peeping in the doorway, and loosening her tongue were all one step for Anastasia. She said it, she said it, she said it, she could not help herself.

"The gringos are swilling again!"

"Quiet, Aunty, they'll arrest you!"

"Not likely, with the music and the dancing and the load they've got on. Anyway, I've seen this all before, and not just here. In Bananera a while back I always used to see them drunk . . . But I better not think about the days when I was young because I start to wonder if I ever was, and that's the saddest part of being old, wondering if you were ever young."

"I'll go in if you want, Aunty . . ."

"As I was saying, child . . ."

The boy slipped in, small, shabby, swarthy, and succeeded in spending a long time among the tables. The place was crowded and the waiters acted as if they did not notice, so that people like him could also share in the festivities, the ones who came in to ask for money, cigarettes, or food.

The blond giants, drunker and drunker, were buying newspapers in Spanish just to run their noses over a language they could not understand, lottery tickets, magazines in English, and bunches of violets, jasmines, camelias, magnolias, flowers offered for sale in a basket covered with green moss by a medium-sized woman who must have been pretty when she was young. She was pinching the soldiers. "Maybe they'll buy from me that way," she said, but it was just a pretext. She sank her nails into them to see what they were made of, those celluloid dolls, and so that one of them would show some enthusiasm for her or one of the girls selling things.

"I've got a little virgin . . . do you like the bouquet? . . . I've got a married one . . . do you like the violets? . . . Come on, Don Mister, all you have to do is come to a room near here, right in back, around the corner, in the alley, I've got the girl there! . . ."

Anastasia looked after Niña Gúmer's basket when one of the giants, bestialized by his mixture of drinks went out with her to buy the nearby merchandise.

"Because this Mister doesn't want to go any farther, there's a hiding place around Twentieth Street . . ." the flower woman explained to the free-lance interpreter who went along with them, a gringoized compatriot who would do anything for some mild tobacco to smoke and free whiskey.

"No, no, *my good*, the gentleman is in a big hurry," the interpreter translated.

"Why shouldn't men pay to be fooled for a little while like that since they pay to be fooled all their lives? . . ." the mulatto woman said with the flower basket at her feet at the place where the streets crossed like dreams. "The worst is that the chippies, out of need . . . that's a whory kind of need! . . . Ha, when a woman has to put up with a man who doesn't love her or who she doesn't like . . . the devil take me! Me, I don't want to boast, but I only gave my body to men I loved! Without having to go too far, the boy's father. I made him call me aunt since he was born and he's used to it. No mama business. Aunt, that's all. But the evil doesn't come just from them, it comes from that little sweety of a flower-seller who you think wouldn't hurt a fly . . . Bouquets! Bouquets! . . . and all she is is a pimp . . . and I'm her accomplice . . . since I'm watching her basket!"

With the tip of her foot, wearing a slipper, she kicked the basket of gardenias, jasmines, violets into the middle of the street. Dew was dripping from the electric wires. Myriad twinkling stars.

A young man, a bit round-shouldered, stopped to see what was going on. Tall and thin, with a bottle-shaped body.

"Poor woman! Did you drop your flowers? Let me help you pick them up . . ."

"They're not mine. That's not my basket . . ." the mulatto woman hastened to answer and she was about to add, "Sir, when you saw me just then, looking like a hustler . . ."

But he went on gathering the flowers, putting them in place:

"Oh, they belong to Gúmer! . . . I thought I recognized the basket . . ." and while he was helping pick up the bunches of violets and jasmines, with a mouth flavored with Sen-Sen he let slip into her ear, "Do you know whether Gúmer was bringing any 'marine iguana?' . . ."

"She didn't say anything. She left the basket and I stayed here to look after it, and for some reason I dropped the flowers, and thank you for helping me pick them up."

"But she didn't have any carnations either. If she comes back tell her that she didn't bring me my carnation or my 'marine iguana.' "

The mulatto woman, without understanding what that unhappy addict was asking, cut him off:

"I'll tell her when she comes back . . ."

"Did she go far?"

"I don't know . . ."

"Or, if not, tell her to look for me there in the Granada. I'll be at the bar or in the hallway to the toilet."

Anastasia made herself comfortable on the curb to pass the time away.

"Deliver us from still waters, Lord! . . ." she said to herself, speaking to the bouquets of jasmines that reminded her of weddings, first communions, and deaths. The violets did not remind her of anything. A smell . . . the smell of the perfume of a dark fellow of hers who stank like a buzzard. "Still waters . . . this Gumersindita who looks like a society lady, not only is a pimp but pushes 'marine iguana.' They must call it that because it's green, or maybe because iguanas look like they're smoking marijuana when they breathe, all covered with sparks, drivel, and fruit. Wretched woman! Imagine her selling 'marine iguana' when what she gets from the flowers gives her enough to live on,

from the flowers and the women! The proof is in the sale she made the other night. One of the top men, the one with the most stripes, decided to eat some flowers to get rid of his drunken breath. He ate twenty-three bunches, one after the other. He was in such a state that he couldn't stand, he was so drunk and he was eating flowers so that his girl friend wouldn't be able to tell by his breath, which wasn't breath but a knife, that he'd drunk more than he should have. 'Forget about your sweetheart, I've got a good girl for you! . . .' little Gúmer whispered in his ear, bringing the basket as close as she could so he'd keep on feeding himself carnations, jasmines, and violets. But the man fell asleep without hearing the offer, after his banquet of flowers. One of his buddies, the one with carrot-colored hair, applauded the flower glutton by laughing out loud, clapping his hands, kicking and pounding on the table, and he paid her the cost of all those perfumed vitamins that his chief gave back in a vomit of petals."

The mulatto woman scratched her head. Thinking eats a person up inside. And she got up, brushing off her rear with two hands to get rid of the cold and the dust of the sidewalk. While coming back to herself, watching the basket, and looking in the doorway to see what was going on with her nephew she had time for a stretch and a yawn that made her say in a thin voice:

"The gringos are swilling again!"

She was startled. In the silence of the early morning it sounded so loud. She looked all around again. No one. The street deserted. The drivers sleeping in their cars like dead Indians in glass tombs. The policemen going along like sleepwalkers. Yellow capes on and scarves around their necks.

Niña Gúmer came back, picked up the basket, and disappeared into the night without saying good-by. Ungrateful wretch. Maybe she didn't see her. But it was better that way. She could have been arrested for watching a basket which might have had some "marine iguana" in with all those smelly flowers. The worst is that she left without giving her what she promised. That was

most likely why she pretended she didn't see her. A few pills of valerian of quinine for her chills and fever. Her malaria was coming back because of the heavy rain that had fallen a few days before. Rain? A deluge. She had made her way home with her nephew as if they'd been swimming underwater.

In the bar the obsequious tumult went on, friends who offered drinks and more drinks to people they knew went on, and ended up drinking other people's drinks when they were not looking. And farther inside, in the dance hall, the tireless jukebox. Intestinal music coming out of the illuminated belly of the large machine with gaudy colors, resonant excrement, and all manner of shrieks accompanied the swaying of the couples dancing cheek to cheek. The gringos would not let any woman remain seated, an immeasurable advantage for the not so good-looking ones who did not always find someone to ask them to dance in other more exclusive parties and gatherings. Here everyone danced: old, young, pretty, ugly, and they kept on dancing, even if people called them "gringo-bait."

Those less skillful at the boogie-woogie ended up shattered. After every frantic dance they would slip away. A lot of liquid goes down when you drink whiskey and water and the bladder moves beautifully too with those modern dances. The bladder and everything around it. That's why, maybe and maybe not, the boogie is so del . . . more del . . . than the blues, for example . . . although the blues are del . . . too. Yes, yes . . . (all this could be heard in the ladies' room), the blues are more del . . . than the boogie, because they're more del . . . icate, on that we agree, but the boogie is more del . . . than the blues, you can't deny that either, because it's more del . . . ightful . . .

"Look how much you picked up, nephew, look how much! . . ." Anastasia exclaimed when the boy came out with his hand in the hat full of coins. "You did better than our relative that night when the Mister decided to eat the flowers . . ."

"Relative? Is she a relative of ours, Aunty?"

"Not really, but since she's poor she belongs to the family."

Saturdays and Sundays the jukebox was put aside. A jazz band

and a marimba electrified the hours on those more popular nights. The marimba on the ground floor, like a snake with legs, and the jazz band up above in a sort of choir-loft, a height from which, with a finger like a baton, a plump-cheeked seraph with phosphorous-colored hair was acting as leader of that new geological upsurge, strings, woodwinds, and brasses that deafened the atmosphere with all the sounds and silences of the beginning of the world, from the percussion of stones to the roar of waves that paused before breaking. Amidst the cacaphony of sonorous islands born and sacrificed, the muteness of the Silurian depths which jazz reproduces, shatters into fragments, sets to rhythm, whips into a frenzy, a death-rattle, tempest, stridency, suddenly cut off, suddenly replaced by pits of such deep silence that new and more brutal and more furious clashes of molecules are needed, burning metal, trembling woods, animal skins calcinated by vibration in order to attain a full sound, the maximum clamor of joyful and grieving materials, except that once attained, everything would suddenly be silenced, everything . . . as the tempo of rhythm from the abyss throttled the jazz tempest in new and furious combinations.

Two o'clock in the morning. More tables were needed. More tables. More chairs were needed. More chairs. More tables. More chairs. The dance floor became smaller. More tables. More chairs. More chairs. Less and less dance floor. More and more couples. They were not dancing. They spun around in one spot, tight together, incrusted, in a drowsy haze of drink and cigarettes, kissing, talking, licking each other like primitive creatures caught in the conflagration of the origins of the world, of which jazz was the image. They were not dancing. They were not moving. They were not speaking. Only the breath of tender beings, a vulnerable human nebula in the midst of the furious outpouring of igneous matter from the saxophones, the clash of lunar cymbals, the booming of the bass drum, the buzzing of the strings, the stomach rumble of the piano, the rattle of the telegraphic breasts of the maracas, all previous to the silence that is also jazz.

Applause, shouts, voices, laughter . . . More whiskey! More

soda! More gin! Cognac! Rum! More beer! Champagne! . . .

The room in a half-light. Blues or tango? Tango . . . The accordions open up the size of the pampa . . . the Argentine pampa . . . a pampa that fits between the arms . . . And after the tango a bolero.

The people sang along when they knew the *turds*, as a local poet called the words of the boleros.

And after the orchestra, when the bolero was finished, the marimba sounded forth. Three long, slow bass notes:

Pong! . . . Pong! . . . Pong! . . .

When he heard these, Don Nepo Rojas, as they called him at home, at work, everywhere, shortening that Juan Nepomuceno Rojas Contreras with which he had been baptized, when he heard those three solemn tremulos rise out of the depths of the surface of the sonorous wooden structure, he blessed three o'clock in the morning. A beautiful waltz. The end of his work.

In his domain everything was all ready for him to turn out the light and leave: the garbage was in the barrels lined up along the fence made of boards from shipping crates. Those crates had been branded the way animals are branded, with mysterious names (Calcutta, Liverpool, Amsterdam, Hong Kong, Shanghai, San Francisco . . .) under his coat, on a bench in the small attic through which the employees went out, was the bag with leftovers, the best ones for his house, the rest for Anastasia. The mulatto woman had a liking for sausages, chicken, chicken bones and rice, the remains of barbecued hamburgers, fried potatoes, and mayonnaise. There was everything, even some half-eaten pastry for her snot-nosed nephew.

When the waltz began, after the first three notes, with all the keys of the marimba vibrating, the people sang along:

"It's three o'clock in the morning! . . ."

And Anastasia repeated:

"The gringos are swilling again!"

No one heard her, not even she herself with the hunger buzzing like a honeycomb in her ears, or her nephew asleep in the next doorway, his head on the small arm that he used as a

pillow, flesh and rags, his face covered by the hat he used to collect alms, his fruit-peel feet with the soles dirty from going barefoot.

Without losing any time when he heard the waltz, John got up to dance with a quiet little native girl with more films in her head than in the Metro Theater, and they were soon lost among the couples singing: "It's three o'clock in the morning . . ." every time that it coincided with the music.

John was dancing mechanically, the soft sound of an airplane propeller buzzing in his nose. He danced just for the sake of dancing and the girl danced to make a conquest, not because she lacked boy friends, she had them by the dozen, by the hundreds, but because of the novelty and because he looked like her favorite dreams.

At times John could feel the little girl squeezing as tightly as she could against his phlegmatic body while she, in turn, unmindful of the physical being she had opposite her, rolled her eyes and fluttered her lashes in enchantment, feeling herself in the arms of her own John, the one on the screen. Her black hair, parted in two jet-black cascades, followed the rhythm of the waltz like a pendulum that was also marking three o'clock in the morning over her thin shoulders. She was leaning over as far as she could, rubbing the gentle curve of her stomach against the buckle of John's military belt. The buckle with an aviator's gold star. In the last movie her John had played the role of a soldier wounded on the battlefield. He was so wonderful! . . .

"Such a wonderful war! . . ." she said, and her companion, the flesh-and-blood John, without waiting for the now interminable waltz to end, stopped by his table and emptied his glass of whiskey.

"John! . . . John!" the girl tried to stop him, because after emptying his own glass of whiskey he drank the whiskies from the other tables.

The war . . . the war . . . on the other side of that night of tropical eyelashes, the war.

A buzz on . . .

"A buzz on, because I come from here . . . if I were a foreigner I'd be drunk!" a man in his fifties said as he left. He had his hat down to his ears so as not to lose it and a bottle in his hand so that he would not lose what he was carrying . . . the bottle? . . . no, what he was carrying inside of himself, not in the bottle . . .

"It must have been two o'clock . . . it must have been three o'clock . . . four, five, six o'clock in the morning! . . ." he was singing. "It must have been two o'clock . . . it must have been three o'clock . . . four five! . . ."

He lost his voice. A woman was on the point of beating a boy to death.

"In who? . . . who did your father make you in? . . . In who . . . in who . . . are you going to tell me in who? . . . Me! Me! Me, you're going to say! Leper! Dirty-mouth! Low-life! . . ."

The nephew was pulled out of his sleep by Anastasia, who held him by one ear and was lifting him up into the air. Without really knowing what was going on, he shouted, his lips trembling, his eyes wet with teary sleep, while she, insane with rage, saw in this unfortunate child, only an ungrateful secret enemy, who had given her away.

The drunkard went over and tried to say:

"Don't be a brute, the way you're beating that child! . . ."

But it all came out in drivel and belches.

"He told me all about it, Señor Nepo told me all about it," Anastasia went on, "how you had fun running down your aunt to get something out of those dirty swine . . . yes, yes . . . swine, because they're not fine people, they're swine people! . . . Letting yourself be used for a few pennies so they can laugh at us! . . . But you're going to tell me here and now that your father made you in an aunt of yours! . . . I'm ready to listen, I'm waiting . . . say it . . . say it . . . say it in front of me . . . to my face . . . not behind my back . . . you devil!"

The boy managed to get away from the claws of the mulatto woman who was swinging him by the ear, but leaving a fistful of

hair behind which she had torn out by the roots, blind with rage, shouting, while the intoxicated man, after tipping up the bottle so as not to lose what was in it, went on down the street singing:

"It must have been two o'clock . . . it must have been three o'clock . . . four o'clock . . . five o'clock . . . six o'clock . . ."

The people playing the marimba, their backs curved with fatigue, their hands gloved in sweat, their hair hanging down over their foreheads, kept on playing—they repeated the waltz three times—as Anastasia appeared in the doorway:

"Ha! Ha! Ha! . . . the waltz . . . Ha! Ha! Ha! . . . three o'clock in the morning . . . Ha! Ha! Ha! . . . he made me in an aunt of mine . . . Ha! Ha! . . . the gringos are swilling again! . . ."

2

Half of the year Señor Juan Nepo Rojas came home from work on his bicycle the way he did today, between the starry night and the hot dawn, and during the other half, he rode covered by a coat that barely protected him from the cloudbursts, his face bathed by huge drops of weeping sweet water and the front wheel raising crystal fans as it cut through streets turned into navigable rivers. In summer and even in winter the bicycle would roll along effortlessly through the part that led from the upper section of the city, the main square and the business center, down to the deep valley, the tree country, with its dampness of bleating and of people with their chores and their work, and whether or not it could be explained physically or miraculously, the feeling of being moved by inertia, the most silent of motors, was still a mystery for Señor Nepo, an enigma which was repeated every day at dawn and which was like the reward for his daily struggle during the last hours of the afternoon when he would climb from where he lived to the Granada, pushing on the pedals until he reached a point where he no longer had breath, heart, saliva, or

legs. But he would leave his house, go out fresh, and, as he would say: there was joy in his suffering. What would have been terrible would have been pedaling uphill after work, after hours and hours of being on his feet, dying from fatigue and sleepiness. That was where Señor Nepo saw the clear hand of God. Riding home after his strenuous nighttime duties on the bicycle that slid down like a toboggan, his feet on the pedals, not moving them except to push them backward to slow down the advance of the wheels, he was tempted into that other mysterious world of speed, and sometimes, instead of braking the bicycle, he would dare to pedal, giving it a greater impulse, in the grip of some unknown intoxication, some delight that spread all through him, as though the earthly gliding of his body were wearing out his soul.

Wakeful dogs, pale lights, human shapes . . .

The pedal that always got away from him got away, the right one, and the other one right after it, but the right one was worn out, he would have to replace it, and the only thing to do was steer so that he would not run into anything. He was going down the hill by the church of Santa Rosa, having just left the church behind, blindly steering in the dim light of dawn—his headlight was weak—holding his thumb on the bell as on a trigger, shooting off scandalous rings for people or animals so that they would get out of his way if they happened to be on the streets at that time, all while recovering control of the pedals that were spinning at high speed along with the wheels or else sticking his foot like a brake into the fork until he touched the front tire with the tip of his toe.

He did so and just in time, because a second more and he would have collided with a truck that was moving along rapidly with all its lights on. In the blink of an eye his smallness passed that immense tonnage. But he lost the right pedal again. He threw his body to that side, trying to reach it and to balance himself better, although by the time he went by the Colón Theater the bicycle was no longer a rolling miracle and needed his help.

"Patience . . ." he said to himself, "patience, you dummy, the night is long!" and he pedaled without much effort because from there to his house the street descended gradually becoming steeper again after the church of San José, to such a degree that once more he dozed over his handlebars, huddled over, and went by the Old Parish offering infinite thanks to God for the gift of being transported as if in a dream after his difficult night's work.

And as he reflected upon how practical the bicycle was and how good God was, he gave no thought to his loss of respectability. What did he care what his neighbors said, that it was not proper for a person of his age to go around on a bicycle? Anyway he did not *go around,* which meant taking rides the way young people did on Sundays with their girl friends on the handlebars; he did it, at the risk of losing his baptism and his status of an older person, because there was no other way for him to get home at that early hour.

The stinking pedal got away from him again and he managed to catch it desperately on Avenida Chinautla, across from the Reloj restaurant, as he came upon a convoy of huge trucks which made the houses tremble as they moved along. He sucked the snotty cold from his mustache. The lights blinded him. All the headlights on the bright beam. He shuddered inside as he passed wheels as large as worlds and the great quaking motors. He pedaled, he pedaled furiously. It would be better for him to get quickly off this road built for the transport of material, stone and cement, from the Quarry to the airport, where they were building new landing strips. The last thing he needed: not just the pedal now but also a cramp. He gripped the bicycle as best he could. The trucks were passing one after the other, one after the other. He got up onto the sidewalk, a sidewalk with houses that were trembling as if in their death throes, shaken from foundations to roofs by the rolling passage of that herd of steel mastodons. A knot, a blind knot in his calf. He let go of the handlebars. The bicycle fell to the ground. With both hands Señor Nepo clutched his leg. An alarm clock rang in some house.

The street lights were going out. Dawn. A cool, colorless whiteness. The colors would begin when he got close to his house near the North Limepit. A pearly color soaked in pink, in pinkish yellow, in orange gold, in a gentle lily with and without mist, against the intensity of the fresh blue.

Nepo Rojas reached his domains when it was already daylight, half-awake and half-asleep, returning the greetings of the carters who were giving him their "good mornings" with shouts from their corrals where sleepy people were putting the yokes on their oxen and the earlier risers were hitching the yokes to the wagons and the really early risers were already on their way to the quarries for a load, followed by dogs and the crowing of roosters.

"That rooster belongs to Señora Pola," Don Nepo could tell. "And that other one who took notice and answered him is the hoarse rooster that belongs to the Spaniard. Somebody said that Pola and the Spaniard have something going on and they tell each other about their troubles through the crowing of their roosters in the morning. And that little rooster . . . what an ugly sound . . . just like a train whistle . . . that one belongs to my grandson . . . I told him already that it was no good . . . it's got good feathers but the spurs are growing too fast, and he should trade him for one that would be strong in cockfights or else we should eat him, make a meal of him on the day of St. Damian, his patron saint."

The grandson would be waiting for him unless he had to leave with his cart very early in the morning for a delivery a long way off. The boy, skin and bones but sturdy, liked to see his grandfather, with all the years he said he was carrying, cutting through the dawn on his bicycle as if he were a youngster. The old man would get off by using a pedal or with a jump, to make it even better, turning his eyes, crystallized by age and lack of sleep, onto the soft look of his grandson as the latter came over to take the bicycle by the horns, which were what the hot ends of the handlebars looked like, and after he put it away he would

come back to serve him a mug of the thick and hot black coffee that gave him satisfaction.

Señor Nepo liked dunking his bread in the coffee and eating it with his fingers, which he would suck, mustache and all.

"The things a person likes . . . right, Damiancito? Not like where I work, where everybody, including the busboys, uses silverware. They can have it. They don't know how much time is lost with all those knives, forks, and spoons . . . With the tips of your fingers you can begin to get the taste of what you're eating!"

And while he ate breakfast, two pieces of bread, three pieces, plain bread, sweet bread, whatever he could get, he thought of what God should be thanked for most: coffee and bread in the morning with no enemy in the house, no wife, that is, in peace, with no woman's war, which is the worst kind of war. In his house, since the demise of his wife and his daughter, Damiancito's mother, no skirts had entered. While he was having breakfast he would let his tongue blossom forth, for at work he did not speak to anyone except out of politeness or in regard to work, and during the day he would have had to have spoken in his sleep.

"Dogs wag their tails for pleasure, we humans move our tongues, which are the tails like the one on a mutt's behind that we have in the back of our throats . . ."

"Is the pedal still bothering you?" the grandson asked.

"Yes, Damiancito, and I wanted to talk to you about it, so it's good you brought it up. It's all worn out and it ought to be changed."

"As soon as I get back from my delivery. It's good that I have to drop a couple hundred pounds of lime close by. I'll take it in to be replaced."

"If I happen to be asleep when you get back, remember that it's the right pedal."

"I'll have them look at both of them because it's getting more dangerous every day with that bunch of trucks that don't rest

day or night. More men than you can count and they're cluttering up the streets. And now get to bed and have a good morning . . ." and as he said that Damiancito took off his hat, crossed his arms, and made a furtive bow.

"It's more like 'good night' for me, boy, because at the time you go off to work I'm laying my body down. That's God's will."

"But get undressed, take your clothes off, a person can't get any rest unless he takes his clothes off, and it's not right to sleep with them on. Only for dead people or drunkards."

And on the next day, on his way back from work, all that Don Nepo did was try out the pedals which, thanks to Damiancito, were like new. He let the bicycle go, let it pick up speed. He coasted down by the Central Market and then he gradually braked, happy to be obeyed by those mysterious gears which were like teeth, teeth that bit on the inside to stop the speed from building up. On one such moment he braked suddenly and almost landed on his face. He rose up from the seat and the handlebars hit him in the chest.

It was not yet dawning. The anguished feeling that night will linger on. The stars grew brighter and brighter, instead of fading, in the deep sky. The electric lights obscured more than they illuminated. He passed between groups of merchants and loaded animals which were walking or trotting up toward the market and by sweepers who were moving from the cloud of dust to the mist and from the mist to reality, and farther on he began to pass trucks of the U.S. Army. The light of their headlights, weak in the distance, suddenly took on the color of quince jelly, immediately opening up into circular flashes of amber. Every truck was a deadly danger, and in barely a blink of an eye the rolling mass passed his cycling insignificance, protected only by the reflex of the pedals in putting on the brakes and by the playful handlebars which seemed to mock the approach of the demolishing giants. That braiding of muscles in his calf was so sharp that he had to let go of the bicycle and stretch out on the ground. He almost fell when he stood up. And he felt safe only afterward

when he was heading home along the road to the North Quarries, leaving behind on his right, among flat places, trees, and houses, the concrete highway that was used to transport material to enlarge the airport, a highway which lay parallel to a railway line over which cars loaded with petroleum and explosives rolled. The air favored him. The south wind was blowing. It was so strong that he could feel it pushing him. Practically the whole trip without pedaling. It was not dawning. The fear that night would stay on. Who can guarantee day? Who could say whether the everlasting darkness would not start one night? Down below in the distance, along the highway the lights of the huge military trucks were sweeping away the shadows, broom-sweeps used by the dim new day in order to impose its fragrant mist upon the silence of the earth. Trucks and trains moved as on the field of battle and the unrest of the neighborhood was increased by the incessant explosions of dynamite charges. More trucks. More trains. Stone hills flying into pieces. Soon he would be in his small house with Damiancito, his grandson, protected from that *mare magnum*, a word that he used because he had heard it used by the Spaniard with the foreign cows.

He was in a hurry to get home and see his grandson, have a cup of coffee, and lay his body down somewhere. To sleep was wishful thinking with so much outside noise, alien to the vegetable life of this place where the majestic silence that came down from the mountains covered with live-oak groves or laid bare by erosion and resembling the bruises of a slaughtered beast suffered deathly tremors brought on by the deep throbbing of the motors along the highway, the whistling of the trains, the coupling and uncoupling of the empty or loaded freight cars, the dry and brutal blows of mechanical hammers, and the endless waterfall-sound of crushed stone falling from the cable cars into the mouths of huge funnels.

The canyon became deep, twinkling with butterflies, and the road made a sharp turn onto a bridge left over from the time of the Spaniards, an imperial bridge according to the stone coat

of arms it bore. It was awakening from its centuries-old dream in the midst of that wartime and apocalyptic bustle, automobiles with caterpillar wheels and ghost men, gloves, goggles, coveralls, who were stringing out high-tension wires on silvery towers equipped with green caterpillar eyes: the glass insulators on which the cables were fastened off into the distance.

On the other side of the bridge a dog came out barking and ran at the front wheel. Don Nepo went by without paying attention to him. "Let him bark," he said to himself, "let him do his duty." But he had to use the pedals and the handlebars with great skill in order to fit his body and the bicycle between the stone wall and a broken-down cart drawn by a woebegone horse. It could not have been accidental. He was being borne down upon intentionally by the Spaniard with the foreign cows, a man who had grown old in the service of an aristocratic family and now, since he had a small farm, had the airs of a freedman. Sixto Pascual y Estribo, although his second surname was used as a nickname since it fit him so well, because it meant stirrup and people said everywhere and every place that all he was good for was to stir up trouble.

And not only did he almost run him down, he scarcely returned his greeting. In a sense it was better that way. On other occasions the Spaniard would stop to chat as he lined up a worm of shredded tobacco along the small gutter formed by a tiny piece of rice paper from the thumb to the forefinger of his left hand, then rolled it, licking the edge with the tip of his tongue, and when the cigarette was finished, lifted it to his thin lips, made bluish by his shaven mustache, lighting it with a flint lighter, and pouring out smoke, smoke and words, paying no attention to Don Nepo's yawns, hollow shouts of sleepiness, fatigue, more howls than yawns. No use. The Spaniard kept on hawking and talking, gargling the high titles of his lord and master and his petty squabbles over questions of money.

Señor Nepo Rojas would argue back, but not in the morning along the road, for he scarcely had the strength to reach home

and he only got off his bicycle to listen to him out of politeness. He would contradict him on Sundays and holidays in the tavern that belonged to the Consunsino woman, the Marcos Consunsino woman, where they would get together after mass to drink beer and eat bread and pickles. On Sundays and holy days of obligation they would get together around eleven o'clock; the wrinkled Spaniard, unwrinkling his skin, would stretch and stretch his face, stretch his neck, and Nepomuceno, unwrinkling the suit that looked all chewed up from being put away in a chest. The pleasure, the enjoyment, the Sunday feast of the Castilian was to unwrinkle himself, and he spent all Sunday unwrinkling. During the week he did not have time and he had to be in full use of both his furious wrinkles, in order to impose respect on the peasants, and his friendly wrinkles, a web with which he trapped the good will of his employers.

To Don Nepo's greeting he invariably replied:

"Unwrinkling, friend, unwrinkling . . . this foreskin that God gave me on my face!"

But today he did not stop to chat on the road. His hello was a grunt as he pulled the cart toward the wall. Don Nepo pedaled as fast as he could so as not to be plastered on the rock like a decalcomania, and only later, when the fright had passed, did he realize that the Spaniard was getting his revenge for having come out second best in their last argument, an argument that did not degenerate into a scuffle only because the Consunsino woman had intervened in time, the Marcos Consunsino woman.

Kings were not of divine origin, nor were bullfighters heroes, nor were his employers, noble as they might have been, saints!

It was this statement of Don Nepo's that almost made him explode and he was getting his revenge for it. He was in a fever over a daughter of one of his employers, nobles from Spain, married to a rich banana planter full of airs who had started as a poor employee of the great company. A son of those people who received an inheritance on the south coast, the fortune of the famous Cosi.

What was it that infuriated the Spaniard? That one of the grandchildren of his illustrious and terribly aristocratic employers should be named Lester Cojubul (not Keijebul) Sotomayor, of the Sotomayors from near Rodondela in the province of Pontevedra, and of the Cojubuls, from right around here, where he now fattened and milked his little foreign cows?

"Sotomayor of the ducal Sotomayors, not the marquises," Don Sixto explained, unwrinkling himself. "Just imagine, from the Dukes of Sotomayor, the ones awarded the title by Philip V along with the status of grandees of the first order, and not the ones that Charles II made nobles seventy-odd years later."

"Um-hum!" Nepo Rojas accepted and laughed.

"I don't like that laugh!"

"It's the only one I've got, Don Sixto!"

"Then go ahead and laugh! The Pope said in his famous bull that you people in the New World were not animals because you could laugh . . ."

"And from that bull they got the name Cojubul, in case you didn't know . . ."

"That's a strange bit of heraldry . . ."

"Cojubul with bull and balls . . . you see, bulls and balls . . . native families who rubbed the bulls with their balls . . ."

They did not come to blows because the Consunsino woman intervened, the Marcos Consunsino woman.

Señor Nepo had known the Cojubuls for years, since the time they had left for the coast, poor, poor, with just the clothes they had on, that was all they had, at the urging of a tubercular man who had come back from that forge-hot region talking about how easy it was to make money there. Bastiancito and Gaudelia. He could see them now. They were recommended to a man named Lucero. And right behind them, almost treading on their heels, the Ayuc Gaitáns, Gaudelia's brothers. Whom God rewards St. Peter blesses. With their small holdings they could not have done anything, no one ever changed from a buzzard into a hawk that way, but they inherited the fortune of one of the richest stock-

holders in the banana company, a certain Lester Mead, although his real name was Lester Stoner, who was killed along with his wife, Leland Foster, in the first strong wind that hit the south.

Pascual y Estribo knew all that by heart: the earthy origins of the Cojubul family, the fabulous inheritance of shares in the big company, the move of the Cojubul and Ayuc Gaitán heirs to the United States with their wives and children, and the loss of their fortune when they sold their shares in Tropical Banana, Inc., to George Maker Thompson, a pirate known by the name of the "Green Pope," thinking that the decision in the matter of frontiers would be in favor of the Honeyfruit Company, a piece of bad luck from which they only half recovered by being able to place their sons as high officials of the company.

The thing that for the second and last time made the wrinkled Don Sixto Pascual grind his teeth until they almost gave forth sparks, because the only thing peaceful and "paschal" about him was his name, and turn from fiery glances to spitting thin streams of saliva, and from spitting to insulting, and from insulting to pounding on the table and in the air was the name of the mulatto woman, Anastasia, whom Don Nepo, a man who liked to keep things in their proper place, would cite as a witness to the barbarities committed on the Atlantic in order to steal the land from the peasants and build up those large plantations. They drove them out of their shacks at bayonet point, whipping them when they realized that gold had no power of corruption over the wills of those who did not wish to lose what they owned, land irrigated by the sweat of their fathers and the only thing they had to leave their children. Deaf ears were turned to the protests of the municipalities, the despoilment was legalized by unconstitutional decrees and the sons of the soil were decimated, drowned in the Motagua River or in military service if they threatened to become dangerous rivals in the production of fruit.

"*Noblesse oblige*!" Don Nepo's voice whined like wind in a gulley. "All those marquises and all those counts, the whole family and even their servant ending up on their knees before the Banana Company! . . ."

"I won't take that, Rojas!"

"With a grandson who's a Protestant and a quadroon!" Don Nepo concluded with hairy laughter.

For the second time the Consunsino woman intervened, the Marcos Consunsino woman, because they were about to attack each other with the pieces of furniture nearest at hand, the Spaniard infuriated and Don Nepo on the defensive, the former with a chair and the latter with a three-legged stool.

Since that day they had not seen each other again until they met on the road.

An angry grunt jumped out from all the wrinkles on his pleated face and from his frenum, the innermost wrinkle under his tongue, and his intention of running him down with the cart was obvious as he narrowed the space in order to press him between the stone wall and the rear wheel, so obvious that Don Nepo Rojas barely had time to slip away.

On the last rise, just before he reached the house, the bicycle was transformed into such a heavy piece of junk that it seemed a different vehicle, not the same one that had rolled along the downtown streets with him a moment earlier as though issuing from a dream.

After the rise, the small courtyard behind the gate. His grandson was evidently not home. He steered to the left to leave the "horse with wheels" in a shed where there were harnesses, bridles, yoking gear, yokes, gourds, sacks, sheepskins, and an old plow. He got off at the doorway of the shed, his cramped legs stiff, panting, sweaty, and gave a push to the bicycle, which continued rolling by itself until it stopped in its corner. His grandson usually took it for him, but when he was not there the "bike" had enough understanding to go to the place where it belonged . . . Understanding and a good heart, he said to himself as he untied the kerchief from about his neck to wipe the sweat from his forehead. . . . Understanding and a good heart . . . The good heart not to leave him on foot early in the morning and the understanding to identify itself, like second nature, with his instinct for self-preservation as it picked its way through the wake of the

trucks traveling in that hour of dawn with all their lights on, like stars changing location, and avoided the danger of running into a post or knocking down a pedestrian when he was on his way home from his nighttime work, a bit stupefied from fatigue and blinded by a lack of sleep, with his lashes pouring down over his eyelids like the branches of a weeping willow. Those were the conditions under which he emerged, his body battered, nauseous, aching in his joints, with no help but a bicycle to face a world in which light was still shadow and shadow was beginning to be light, the whiteness of an egg white, a world in which houses and trees wandered about, the whole city wandered about, no longer fastened to reality, shifting about in the dream zone at ground level, like an emanation of itself, a stinking emanation, the stench of cowhide staked out by the crowing of roosters.

He rubbed the handkerchief behind his ears, over his neck, still feeling toward his bicycle, the tender gratitude a rider feels for his horse, and with even more reason now: it had saved him from God knows how many bumps and bruises by rescuing him from Don Sixto, whose evil intent had been to grind him to a pulp, a powder, to leave him stretched out back there. Nevertheless he gave vent to a bit of his repertory and shouted: "Savage! . . . Beast! . . . Animal! . . ."

He stood beside his bed. An army cot with a mattress, pillow, sheets, and blankets. Under the door which he opened wide when he came in furiously, and through the cracks in the roof, the morning light was pouring in, white, a burning, that light which is converted into quicklime in the kilns of quarries. He did not lie down. A drink. That was it. With a glass of . . . anything, as long as it was strong, the fright and upset would go away. He looked in a small half-cupboard, behind the chests, like a monkey in the half-light because he was getting undressed at the same time, and all his skin was gleaming in the open. None. Bottles of sweet wine, tasty liqueurs, beer, all empty, with the bad smell of cork on their once-tempting round mouths which Don Nepo now brought up to his eye, not his lips, in his urgent

desire to have a drink, looking for contents. The bad smell of rotten cork and the worse smell of drunken dust that had fallen inside, becoming a useless eternity. And among the bottles and the trash a champagne cork . . . (the one from the bottle which his grandson used to store honey because it was stylish-looking), ha, ha, ha . . . He was just ready for champagne . . . for anything except laughing, because it was not a matter for laughing but for fighting tooth and nail . . . Let him laugh, let the one who was only good for stirring things up laugh, there was good reason for his name being Estribo, a stirrup, evil old man, hothead, damn him . . . Let him laugh with his false teeth sounding like the four hooves of a horse because they were such a bad fit . . . A champagne cork . . . A drink would have set very well with him . . . But not champagne . . . That's for parties . . . straight cane liquor, pure rotgut, something that would scratch his gullet like sandpaper, yes, yes, scratch him all over inside until it made him forget he had a chest and intestines.

Burning, he needed burning more than a drink. A burning in his gullet and stomach. Fool! His bicycle was there. What was he waiting for. Get dressed and pedal down to the Consunsino woman's place. Impossible. He had sworn to her that he would never set foot in her establishment again. Promised? . . . When a person has a need for liquor there's no promise worth its salt. And a need to tell . . . that's it, that's it, the burning of a strong drink, not to forget, the way most mortals say, that things like that are drivel, but to burn himself up, rage, wrath, dislike, contrariness, everything he felt; and to put his tongue into motion, because only when people talk about things do the things that offended them go away, the things that pain them; and maybe he would run into his grandson on the way, and he would unpeel what had happened for him too.

He put his pants on standing up. It was proof that he was not that old. One leg, the other, he stuck them in or he stunk them in. Shirt, jacket, shoes, no socks, bare feet, what the hell, he was only going to get a drink; he found his hat, took out the bicycle,

he almost leaped when he got on it and . . . the damned cart stopped him. Right beside the Consunsino place, by the tavern door. How nice, were they celebrating? The whole tavern must have been laughing at what the old devil was telling them, as if it were just a bad joke, because, since he had not done what he wanted to do, which was to kill him, he would say that he had only done it to frighten him and make him stop saying nasty things about the Cojubuls and the Banana, Inc., which only brought benefits to the country.

He was not a coward, but he did not go in because he did not want to see the merry faces and have to fight again. It was not worth the trouble. Let them keep on celebrating. He went back. The sun blinded him. Only a few clouds. A lot of sun. The trucks were roaring in the distance, the locomotives were grazing on their coal with tongues of flame, and the earth shook with every explosion of dynamite. Perhaps it was the end of the world and it would be better if it caught him in his cot.

3

"Rojas y Contreras has been reborn! . . ." Don Sixto said as he entered the Marcos Consunsino woman's tavern.

"Who's that?" the proprietress asked, not paying much attention to the Spaniard as she busied herself with her glasses. She was drying them with her apron and when they were of fine crystal she would rub them until they wept.

"What do you mean, 'who?' Your neighbor Rojas."

"Don Nepo?"

"Himself, woman, himself. It's the same thing as when you people come out with the Pascual y Estribo about me."

"Not really the same, because we use that Estribo business to get you all upset, Don Sixtos."

"You can all go to hell! Making a nickname out of my mother's noble surname, may she rest in peace, and a plural out of my first name . . ."

"A nickname?"

"Yes, a fun name, and I don't see the humor in your keeping so quiet about it—as if you were having breakfast."

"Oh, all right. But why should it bother you? Just don't pay any attention, that's all."

"Estribo, a stirrup . . . You call me Estribo because I'm only good for stirring things up, right? . . . As if I were to call you all anal sphincters, because you're only good for opening up and letting out the excrement of your stinking lives."

"What makes you think, Don Sixtos . . ."

"What makes me stink is that it's my evil luck to be forced to live among a bunch of Kaffirs . . ."

"Oh, but you're wrong. There isn't much tuberculosis in the capital!"

"Mother of God! Spare me! Not coughers, Kaffirs! Kaffir doesn't mean a person who coughs!"

"Well, in order for me to understand you, Don Sixtos, I need the Bible."

"The one who needs the Bible is Rojas. I scared the life out of him when I squeezed him between the wheels of my wagon and the wall as he went by waving at me, fresh as you please, as if nothing had happened between us, all cheery. And I didn't kill him because his time hadn't come."

"The only thing I know is that he and you, no, I'm sorry . . . you and he, first the Spaniard then the Indian, swore that you'd never set foot in the Consunsino place again . . ."

"Well, I went back on my word and I'll do it again, because I like your smell . . ."

"It can't be worth very much!"

"I don't understand and I don't like wisecracks!"

"That business about the oath can't be worth very much and the fact that you like my smell!" And, changing her tone, "Wisecracks? . . . As if a woman could stand your dirty words, because by the great St. Papoose, Don Sixtos, you come out with some that not even the worst carter would use."

"When they pinch me they'll find me, because I'm like a scorpion. But I came by to tell you something . . ."

"First tell me what you're going to have . . ."

"It's too early . . ."

"Well, to get rid of the bad taste . . ."

"Just so long as it's the bad taste I had in my mouth when I ran across that so-and-so neighbor of yours . . ."

"A cup of hot coffee would be good . . ."

"I had one at home . . ."

"A second one won't hurt, so buy something from me . . . Some people come to look at my face, others to tell me their troubles, others to smell me. I'd do better shutting down the business and setting myself up as a confessor or someone people can look at and smell . . ."

She let out a noisy laugh and had to go back to the half-kitchen with the cup of coffee for Don Sixto because part of the liquid had spilled on the counter.

"You're in a good mood . . ."

"And everything you see here I owe to someone. I put my business, along with myself and my liquor, all under the care of that St. Dominic Guzmán that you see there," and she pointed to a shelf next to the door, "who always has his flowers and his candle."

"A Spanish saint . . ."

"Saints belong to heaven, they don't come from any one place. And what happened to the coffee? . . . Drink it and tell me what you were going to say. I roasted that coffee myself so it wouldn't be too burned or too green. Brown is the color of well-roasted coffee, roasted just right, brownish, browny. I grind it myself, not too fine, like drugstore powder, or too coarse, and I make it myself, with just a few drops of cold water and then the hot water, hot, not boiling, so that all the richness drips out little by little."

"Then it's not boiled coffee . . ."

"Am I some kind of Indian to drink boiled coffee? I'd rather go to jail."

The Spaniard took his hand away from his flabby face in search of unwrinkled skin.

"Don't go looking for something that's not there . . ." The Consunsino woman drew back.

"Well, what I wanted to tell you . . ."

"Tell me, but from a distance. The best way to watch bulls is from a distance . . ."

"I was going to tell you that . . ."

"What were you going to tell me? Did you lose your tongue?"

"You'll find out. I was going to tell you that I almost killed that devil of a neighbor of yours."

"When was that, this morning?"

"Just now when I was on my way here . . ."

"And it's his fault, because who told him to get other people all worked up. At first I thought it was just for argument's sake, just to take the other side."

The Spaniard put his tobacco-stained mouth to the coffee cup and took the first sip.

"Watch out, it's still pretty hot for you. And getting back to Señor Nepo, I get bothered thinking that we come from the same country. Old flannelmouth! . . . And he did the worst thing he could do to you, Don Sixtos, talking about those people who changed their name to sound like foreigners. Keijebul for a person born to some fat-assed Indian woman! I don't know him, but Señor Nepo says that he has the face of a wild Indian, and that no matter how much he gringoizes his name he couldn't pass as a gringo because up in their country they don't have people with green rear ends."

"What does that fool know! The Indians up there are called redskins . . ."

"Then they've got wild Indians up there too? . . ."

"Yes, they do, the redskins, foreign Indians, the ones you see in the movies, not like the Indians here, poor devils."

"And you, Don, can you speak English?"

"God forbid! I may have been born under an evil star, but not so evil that I have the bad luck to speak English!"

"God forbid and may the dogs eat us, that's nice!"

"You don't have a language of your own, you speak ours, a language we loaned you, so what does it matter, then, if you

speak the language of your masters? You speak bad Spanish, so why worry about speaking bad English?"

The Consunsino woman was silent and withdrew the empty cup. Don Sixto, after lining up the small tobacco worm on the sheet of rice paper, rolled it, licked the edge, closed it, twisted the ends with his fingernails, hung it from his lips, lighted it with his flint, and sucked in the smoke, taking out his money to pay what he owed.

"That's too much," she leaped up. "How can I charge for a cup of black coffee if it was drunk without a nip in it. You don't like to mix things up, you don't like revolutions. Your coffee on one side and your cognac on the other."

"I'll have my cognac when I come back this afternoon."

"On one condition, that you don't get into another fight with the neighbor."

"As long as he doesn't start one. What he vomited out against foreigners still burns me up, and I'll never let him get away with it."

"There's some truth in what he said if you look at it right. Not all foreigners are like you, a person who's forgotten about his own country because of all the time he's lived here."

Pascual y Estribo tried to speak but the Consunsino woman raised her voice:

"You're going to give me a mouthful about that Mister . . . the one on the South Coast who left a pile of money to people in this country! But you don't see things like that every day and since it's like water, the river carried it off. What's come of all that money? . . . A bunch of kids who talk English, who dress like gringos, who live like gringos, some married to gringo women, people who don't feel that they come from here even though they were born here . . . Can you think of anything worse, not coming from where you were born? It's worse than being a foreigner, it's a disgrace. Let me finish what I have to say and then you can talk, because there's no tax on talk! Not a single one of those people who stuffed their mouths with the foreigner's

money, listen to me, not a single one of them, not even the ones who inherited it, understand or ever will understand what a great thing he did. There are things that are worth more than money, a lot more. Listen, don't close your ears up. When you don't want to listen you pretend you can't hear. The foreigner showed what can be done against the banana company that started out by grabbing land away from its owners . . ."

"I don't deny, woman, that on the surface . . ."

"Underneath it all, not on the surface. That's cute. When things are true, people talk about the surface. Of course, the ones who inherited it didn't lose any time after they got the money in running off with their broods to where they were ashamed later on to have someone talk to them about their own country."

"As I see it, you can't blame any parent for wanting to give his children the best education possible, the way the Keijebuls did. They had every right to."

"It's a mixed-up kind of right, and say 'Cojubul.' Why all the money and fancy talk when they're just dark Indians?"

"People should use any name they want to, just as long as they're born well, damn it, as long as they're well brought up."

"Well, you can take me for the worst brought up person alive, but I'll never say 'Keijebul,' never. Where, oh where are we going to end up? As far as their having a perfect right is concerned, I tell you that the moral obligation was there first, because the inheritance wasn't just money but for them to keep on fighting the banana company."

"Your neighbor's given you a good lesson!"

"Don't you go blaming Señor Nepo. Everybody says what I'm saying. What do you think, that that Anastasia the neighbor talks about doesn't exist . . . that people don't tell everything they know and what they don't know they invent . . . that the Banana Company benefits us, benefits us the way cattle get their benefits? All right, the mule said to the bridle, but it's worse when they muzzle us . . ."

"Well, since it's a matter of opinion, I think they did the right

thing to take their inheritance and educate their children abroad."

"Exactly what Judas would have done, no different, if instead of hanging himself to a tree he'd been hung to a wife and had children."

The old man cleared his throat as he unfolded his handkerchief, which stank like a turtle shell from being carried in his back pocket for so long.

"What I need," the Consunsino woman sighed, "is to find my own mister . . . ious man like that one on the south coast. Even his death was a mystery, in the middle of the Strong Wind."

"He was crazy . . ." the pleated old man cackled.

"Yes, because what he was doing was making tracks on the water . . ."

"I'm leaving . . ."

"Just because I mentioned water . . . that's why you're mad!"

"Damned fools. You know I don't take baths because I just don't feel like it. No and no again. I just don't feel like it!"

His hat down over his eyes, his pants bagging over his boots, the bottom of his jacket bouncing on his buttocks, as the Spaniard was leaving the Marcos Consunsino place he came face to face with Nepomuceno's grandson. "The son of his daughter, his grandson he is," he said to himself, "of his daughter and some Calabrian lumberman, since his eyes show blue patches from Italy on the face of a dark Indian, as dark as his grandfather and the whore that gave him birth . . . What a nasty tongue you've got, Sixto Pascual, what a nasty tongue! . . ."

Damiancito was goading the oxen from up on his cart loaded with lime, with a whistle that he left behind in the lively morning air along with the flow of white powder that fell from the sacks as the wheels turned and painted the road like a wavy transcription of the boy's whistling. Nostalgia, adolescence, sleepwalking was all in his whistling. He half-raised his hat from a head with a rain of black hair, his hand white with lime dust, to greet the gentleman. Don Sixto did not respond. A sprinkling of silence along with all the wrinkles on his face which he kept motionless

so that the wretch would realize that he did not see fit to answer him because he was of Nepomuceno's blood. He should answer in full measure, not proportionately, but the same as his grandfather for his opinions and conduct.

The carter, without being offended, picked up the musical thread that was coming from his lips again, singing with a fair amount of clarity: "stir . . . rup!, stir . . . rup!, stir . . . rup!, hoooooo . . . t owl!, hoooooo . . . t owl," while the furious tight-lipped man bit his mouth in displeasure and put his foot onto the stirrup of the wagon (stir . . . rup!, stirrup!), in order to get in, changing the buggy into a building, which as it fell, found its center of gravity as soon as he planted his rear on the seat to the right of the milk drawn that morning, still warm, the warmth of the cow and the hunger of the calf, and on the side of his heart, on the left, the bales of hay that were tinted green, like hope.

That idea of the wagon coming down upon his head, wobbling and not falling, was a practical confirmation of his theory that in order to resist earthquakes buildings should be built that way by the Honorable Municipal Government. Houses and buildings in that Godforsaken country which would fall down even without an earthquake, should be built on foundations made of springs, and then they would only sway, the way a wagon sways as it goes rolling along.

The Consunsino woman came out the door of her establishment with a basin full of water following Don Sixto. One might have thought she was going to throw it over him and give him a bath by mistake, but no, she poured it out in front of the tavern, as the sun was starting to climb up from the ground to the wall. It was a secret. The ground liked its liquor, not the kind kept in bottles, but one that has already been tasted by the lips of a man, and that is why one must give it water to drink, water from glasses with a trace of alcohol and drunkard's drool before the strength of the sun becomes binding. If one does that every day, the land, which is human, will give it back with thanks, for it is like "sowing a crop of drinkers," who will multiply as customers,

as if they had grown out of the ground, or clung to the walls because they can no longer stand up, staying there like vines.

She threw out part of the water, swirling the basin so that it would fan out as it fell and as she heard the sound of an extinguished ember made by the thirsty ground, the proprietress said aloud:

"Let those who get strength when they begin to drink liquor, the alcoholics, the addicts not pass by! . . ." She fastened her eyes on the damp ground by the door. "Let them come in, let them recognize this establishment as their lair and not be satisfied with drinking alone or with friends until they have left me their last peso, their watches, their wallets, their tie-clasps, their watch-fobs, their cuff-links, everything of value they have on them, and let them go away happy and shouting . . . Let them not urinate here, or vomit, or have any accidents, or fight. Let them go do all of that somewhere else, because nothing stinks so much as the piss, the vomit, and the sh . . . ucks of a rummy." She exposed her rear end, the two ceiba disks of her buttocks, as she leaned over and greeted the sun, and, fearful that someone would see her, she disguised the greeting with a gesture of picking up something that had fallen to the ground with her right hand while she held the basin with her left, the one near her heart, ready now for the second sacramental sprinkling.

"Let a person who likes a little nip and has a craving for a chance to guzzle, a party or a wake, not pass this place by . . ." She fastened her eyes on the wet ground and she wetted it a second time in front of the door. "Let the worm wake up, get the urge, follow its desire, and when he feels it, if he still has feeling, let him be at the bar finishing off a bottle of fine liqueur, a glass of barbed wire, or a quart of beer!"

She made the third bow to the sun and finished, after pouring out the last bit of water:

"Let him who is a virgin in his lips, who has never touched a glass of alcohol not pass this place by today. Let him come in to celebrate some pleasure or to get rid of some pain, let him

come in out of curiosity, feeling himself a man, to find out what cane liquor tastes like, to try it for the first time. Let him like it and let him come back with an urge to keep on guzzling, because someone who has never bent his elbow will bend it if you wish it so, earth, if you wish it so, sun, father and mother of the sugar cane from which the Almighty Lord comes!"

And before going inside she whispered:

"Papa-Booze, with you we're never sad, we're never bad, we never lose."

The trembling of the small, low houses as the trucks went by carrying material for the landing strips, monsters on wheels and springs, larger than the houses, some like rolling churches (the Spaniard had full confirmation of his theory of cities on springs for countries exposed to earthquakes and he should patent his invention); the tooting of the locomotives asking for the right of way like cows who have lost their calves, coming and going with a coupling and uncoupling of flatcars and empty or loaded freight cars among tall cypress groves and grazing land, where small ponds would form during the rainy season; the discharges of those who went duck-hunting with their shotguns; the squealing echoes of machines and steel cables used in the extraction of stone, drills, shovels, men; carried on tiny trains, mouse-trains as compared to the full-size ones, and the tooth-breaking sound as the stone was drilled, ground, pulverized; that whole universe without waste, without time to lose, without any Sundays to observe; cauldrons, condensers, pistons, men, foreigners, forges, nothing but an oil stain among the clouds, altars of infinite blue where the angels of the morning were saying their mass.

Señor Nepo Rojas dropped onto his cot with his clothes on. He had returned home for the second time that morning and for the second time he had lain down. He tossed his hat to one side. An animal who sleeps by day prowls by night. He did not even take off his shoes. The damnable urge for a drink was working up in him again and he would have to get up once more, take out his

bicycle, and go out looking for one somewhere, since he could no longer go to the Consunsino place. But he would even go a long way off for a drink. For a dozen or more perhaps. Damiancito was not home. He must have been somewhere in the North Quarry, having forgotten about his grandfather . . . So much the better! . . . Better to leave him with his ingratitude, talking that way about a grandson who helped him think! . . . But, what the devil, he hadn't said it out of meanness but because it didn't suit him to run into the one who was the kiss of God in his mornings. It all came out because, with Damiancito not there, he was able to flop down on the cot with his clothes and all on, his jacket, even his shoes, with nobody's protesting or raising a row, saying that he looked dead or passed-out.

Dead or passed-out? . . . Even if he had been careless that morning he had not become what he looked like because God is great, his time had not come, and thanks to his presence of mind, his pedals, and his handlebars, he had not lost his skin. He pedaled hard and steered like a bullfighter through the opening. But the wagon did not do its damage as it rolled along, it did it while parked in front of the Consunsino place. That was why he did not collapse. He lost his drive and the urge to drink liquor until his mind and heart collapsed, until he could no longer think or feel, and it made him go home with a dry mouth and heavy breathing, as if he had used up his wind, fulfilling, very much to his chagrin, the promise never to set foot in La Circasiana again. But the promise would have been no obstacle if the wagon had not been there. It was more than worth it, not just the mission he was on: to drink cane liquor, but to have someone on whom he could unload what had happened and what was happening to him. Not even Damiancito. The boy stood out in his absence. If he met him on the road he would go with him to deliver the lime. Put the bicycle on the cart and then talk. The relief one feels, the kind that comes with words, and he had to get his anger out, his rage, his fright, his displeasure, everything all together, because if his insides were all mixed up be-

cause of Don Sixto's treacherous attack, worse still was the attack by the motionless wagon parked in front of the Consunsino place, and more bitter, since he could not get his vengeance without committing a crime. Paying him back in his own coin. Undermining a wall, cutting it off from its foundation, leaving it standing and almost floating along one of the many walled streets along which Pascual y Estribo was in the habit of passing in his wagon, and when he passed, letting it fall on top of him, burying him in the rubble, and then buying the newspapers with the accounts of his death and the comments that he had fallen victim of science while he was experimenting with his invention of an antiseismic house built on wagon springs.

He had not even drunk his coffee, he realized, or eaten his bread. It was so hard . . . He could barely break it with his hands, sticky with sweat and smelling of hot rubber. Biting it would have been like raising one of the handlebar grips to his mouth. People no longer even made good bread. Everything bothered him and would keep on bothering him until he got his revenge. The sunlight slipped in through the tiles in the roof that looked like trimmed eyelids and under the door, alive, white, burning. They needed a ceiling. Some pine or cedar planks. They needed a lot of things. But, old, without money, and without desire . . . Let the one who comes after do the driving. He should get up and bolt the door . . . It would be wise to secure it. After that business with the wagon Don Sixto was capable of anything and at that hour he knew that he could catch him in his sleep. Locked and barred. A man forewarned is worth two! But his body was so tired . . . His wakefulness was going away. His eyes were closing. He wanted to open the lids. He could not. They were slipping down out of control. The bar . . . the bolt . . . it would be wise . . . But he did not move . . . Even the desire to defend his life was disappearing with the years, the fatigue of his days, the displeasures, the deceptions, the disappointments, the daily routine, injustice . . . If they were going to kill him they should leave him dead . . . Something should be

left to God . . . The door . . . the bar . . . the bolt . . . things were becoming words . . . a little effort . . . what did it hurt him to make a little effort . . . The danger that they would kill him, defenseless, oh Lord, like a cur! . . .

A little effort . . . as he turned over on the blankets so as not to get up all at once and he remained as if deprived of something, his head off the pillow, his legs open, one arm grasping the edge of the cot, face down, showing his back to the possible murderer, who might be Don Sixto himself in person, although it was hard for him to imagine that, unless he came in disguise, because the most likely thing would be for him to pay someone else to kill him.

Dressed, perspiring, he did not seem to be sleeping but working. That was why they paid double wages for night work. That was the reason. It was an advance for the work spent sleeping in the daytime, a worm's work, fatigue turning into sleep, the sunlight into shadows, the bustle of the world into rest, if a person ever managed to close his eyes in sleep, because many times fatigue became an ache in the bones, the shadows became a small flow of blood between the eyelids and the eyes, and one could only attain chunks of motionless silence in the torrent of sounds.

He waved the hand that hung over the edge of the bed in the emptiness without touching the ground, reality, everything that was left behind when a person fell into sleep, ventilating himself, sigh after sigh, the grief that he felt when he went into what was most like death, just as life outside was beginning for everyone. And he was no longer sighing, he was moaning . . . He knew it well, he took care of the fans at the Granada, dirty with old wind that had become dust on the sadness of cold metal. First they would start up with a long sigh. Then they would whine as they began to turn. Under his care he also had the maintenance and cleaning of a half-dozen cages of birds that had delighted the customers with their trills during the romantic period of that elegant drinking-place. But times had changed. They got rid of the birds—if they had been there now they would have shrieked—

and they brought in jukeboxes which howled like bitches with colored insides and had a hunger for coins.

He turned on his side suddenly, as if he were throwing off the weight which had been suffocating him when he was on his stomach and he pulled his legs up and joined them together with the gentleness of a newborn baby seeking to return to its mother's womb, so similar to sleep, and after a long period of not moving, he was bothered by his ear, the old pain in his ear, and he brought his finger to the opening where there was more hair emerging than from the openings in his nostrils. There was some reason for their calling him Bushy, a nickname which did not displease him.

He changed position again. He was speaking as if there were no roof to his mouth, from a snort to a snore and from a snore to breathing that spoke, the language of a boiling soup that was making a stew out of an old man condemned to die under the wheels of a wagon for being disrespectful to the Banana, Inc., Cojubuls, Sotomayors, Popes, Bulls, and other sacred things. And the sentence would be carried out at any moment, he already had the carriage over him, the nonexistent nag, and the wrinkled executioner unfolding in the wind like a cluster of veins in a tobacco leaf. He tightened his eyelids to cry out under the wheels, but the capital punishment was not executed, he was not run over, he was not broken to pieces, it passed over him flying, just like a hoot owl, and it appeared a few paces ahead, no longer a hoot owl, a ghostly carriage again, halted like a bird of ill-omen at the door of the Consunsino place.

("Hoooooo . . . t owl! . . . Hoooooo . . . t owl!" his grandson's whistle . . . Did he hear it or was he dreaming it? . . . "Hoooooo . . . t owl! Hoooooo . . . t owl! Stirrrrrrrrrrr . . . rup! Stirrrrrrrrrrr . . . rup! . . .")

He shaped his lips as if he were whistling in his sleep. Indicating to the carriage that had taken shape a few steps ahead by spelling out its owner's nickname in the whistle, that it was not because he had found it there, that he went home, because

what importance could it have for a man like him, a man who challenged death every day as with his bicycle he faced the immense trucks and their tonnage driven by blond Titans and moved by hundreds and hundreds of invisible horses on wheels that looked like part of a cathedral. It was true that when he saw them coming he would put on the face of a man before a firing squad, as he had confessed to some woman he knew who, now that she was old and ugly, could pass as one of his comrades, and who replied immediately: "I was about to tell you, Ponemo! . . ." (A loving and secret diminutive that she, alas, had used in the good old days.) "I was about to tell you! . . . Why shouldn't you look like a man facing a firing squad since you go out to face death early in the morning? . . . A person who dies for his own pleasure, even though they bury him in an open field as fertilizer or for the sad decoration of a cemetery . . . Everyone according to his measure, except that suicides like you who have so much to choose from should be given a first-class death, which is not the one you chose, Ponemo. You even have bad taste in that, like when you left me for that female Caiaphas. Dying on a bicycle, whoever heard of such a thing, even if you were young and good-looking, but twisted up the way you are; do me a favor . . . they'll have to bury you in a matchbox, yes, God save us, you'll have a collision and be all laid out because this riding around on a bicycle reminds me of when our ancestors went around on all fours, except it's on two wheels . . . or they'll pick you up with a spoon or a blotter if you should get run over by one of those toys that can carry a whole hill from the ground up in one trip, all ready to put new shoes on the aereo . . . scareo . . . aircourt . . . I don't know how to pronounce those new words, right, Ponemo? . . ." And he laid her down on the bed. Things went along good and bad like that. But not even a sign of her now. And life was so bad that when he dreamed about her she did not come out the way she used to be, so damned pretty, but the way she was now, skinny and in ruins. Just a mattress of washed skin. Her breasts had fallen, a small bulge on her blouse

which did not shake now, and she had lost her teeth from some charlatan who had emptied her mouth, with the excuse that rheumatism would make her hair fall out, and it did in fact become thin. Reductions which did not compensate for a nose that was more like an appendage, rings under her eyes like two rotten lettuce leaves, and over her left eye, which popped out at times, a lid that hung down like an awning. Now she was his old friend. Where there had been fire, only a trace remained . . .

The wagon pursued him, motionless and rolling along. Motionless to his eyes, a waiting bird of prey, a bird of ill-omen, a hoot owl with four round talons by the door of the Consunsino place, and the woman who was salty from selling so much liquor. It turned away from there and it rolled in his ears on audible circles imprisoned in metal rims, drawn by galloping echoes that beat their hooves and horseshoes on the stones amidst whistles, whip-lashes, curses, blasphemies, spitting, and a desnotting of the nose with the back of the hand, one so thin and avaricious that the leather of the reins it held was thick and edible, Pascual y Estribo's sinister right hand, clasped so many times in a friendly greeting and now not content with almost having run him down, driving the wagon with loose reins and lashing like the wind, aiming to do away with him once and for all . . .

He gave a shout . . . He almost woke up . . . The noisy chassis that rolled through his ears had just joined the image, motionless until then, and rolling along now, the wagon that was falling apart in an attempt to catch him, flying on wheels that were not wheels, paralyzed, static from spinning so fast, drawn by a horse that had the sparks of a tempest or a forge hidden in its shoes, the top weaving back and forth, the harnesses ready to snap, the springs opening and closing as in the worst of earthquakes . . .

He felt defeated. All he had was his bicycle. Not even a flood of feet onto hundreds, onto thousands of pedals would save him from being crushed to death. All he had was his bicycle, now careening madly, judging from the creaking of the cot, the pil-

low on the floor, and the cover about to fall off. He tried to get off the road, but it was too late. It was not too late. It was too late. Hemmed in by rocks he would be done in by Pascual y Estribo. What if he abandoned his bicycle and took refuge in a ravine where the wagon could not follow him? There was that possibility, but now that he thought of it, it meant losing his bicycle. For the moment, keep pedaling, keep on . . . He moved his feet, his knees, his waist, his shoulders, even his head in time to the wheels that uncoiled like an endless serpent. Pedals that were falling asleep turning like the extinguished girandoles of little powder bulls, the chain that ran next to his ankles an unending tinkle. He braked suddenly and had the feeling of being thrown forward and falling backward into his own arms. He quickly brought his arms to his chest. Demand, demand of whomever it was who was snoring to snore more softly—he had taken his hands off the handlebars—passing suddenly from hiccups to jazz, from difficult breathing to the buzzing of electric beaters, from a grinding of teeth to the clatter of aluminum and pewter in the wash basin, from boogie to waltz . . . "It's three o'clock in the morning . . ." The handlebars! . . . The handlebars! . . . he shouted, with no place to grasp unless he grabbed the howling fans, which would destroy his hands . . . The handlebars! . . . The handlebars! . . . he snored with the speed of an echo, his eyes like soap bubbles sticking to his fuzzy face, his chest filled with wind and noise, paying no attention to that other him who at the end of his legs, moving his feet in the cot, was coming along at full pedal, full pedal, full pedal in order to avoid being chopped up by the wagon on a bicycle with the wires of a trap, circular traps filled with mice that gave off mechanical squeals, no less real than those heard under the squeaking bed where the one who had left them his breakfast almost intact was struggling between snoring and pedaling, between helping the lagging adipose snorer with the pedals or rolling over at full snore, full snore, full snore, the one who was pedaling so far behind and risking being caught, not only by that scaly and damp coach,

shadow, soot, and mourning, which was no longer on its wheels and could not keep up with the horse, but a cart the size of a theater, golden in the light of a fire, being pulled along by chargers of smoke, rolling on disks of flame and carrying men and women out of a storm who were carrying flags, plows, and rifles in their hands . . .

The distance lessened between him and that burning cloud which left behind the carriage where, along with the Spanish coachmen, wrinkled and cursing, the Cojubuls disguised as Keijebuls rode, Indians dressed up as golfers, and the president of the Banana, Inc., holding in his green-gloved hand a banana stalk with no fruit on it which made the horse extend and retract his member, fearful that it had been cut off, for that part of his equine potency looked so much like the banana scepter.

It was catching him . . . The carriage was catching him . . . It was visibly eating up the distance that separated them . . . It was catching him . . . It was catching him . . . and the one who ran the greatest risk . . . as he pedaled he left the one who was snoring behind . . . and the one who ran the greatest risk . . . as he snored he left the one who was pedaling behind . . . and the one who ran the greatest risk woke up and he was in the air, outside of himself, outside of his dream, and he could still see the shape of the carriage and among the faces of the occupants was that of a smooth-faced, Chinese-looking man of middle age who was shouting: "Up the people! . . . Up the people! . . ."

It passed him at the moment he opened his eyes, but when he closed them and went back to sleep, he found himself with his feet on the pedals and pursued by the carriage again. Blinking, getting the water out of his lashes, tears and wind, as he fled at full pedal, full pedal, full pedal . . . smoothing the hair that was agitated by the wind . . . turning his head at full snore . . . he would do nothing if he did not want that coal-black silent phantom to run him down . . . no wheels? . . . yes, it had even lost its wheels and it could not even go where . . . it could go . . . where could Don Sixto have gone . . . Fled! Hiding in one

of his cities built on carriage springs where, when the earth made the houses tremble, instead of falling down, they were like carriages rolling over cobblestones, or he was probably where the carriage had taken shape again, telling the Marcos Consunsino woman what had happened, not spending a peso, unwrinkling himself, as if his wrinkles were strings and he were strumming along a sermon that was scaly with Spanish lisps.

Someone opened and closed the door that was neither barred nor bolted. The slam of a door. Almost. He stopped the door in motion and once inside he leaned his back against the planks that separated him from the street, unable to see anything, dazzled from the bright outside. But he lost no time. By touch, holding out his hands so as not to stumble, tapping his feet along the floor, he went toward the place where the somewhat angry breathing of Señor Nepo could be heard. His eyes soon became accustomed to the darkness and in the shadows he could see the body of a man who was sleeping deeply lying on a cot. He contemplated him. He still had his clothes on. He had no doubt come in and flopped onto the cot. Even his shoes. He was not old. Nor was he young. A face of yellowish clay with abundant eyebrows, lashes, mustache and hair. His hands were thick, small and worn. On the floor, the blanket and the pillow. Fall on him. The risk was that he might cry out. Knock him out with a blow. When he thought of that he already had his hand on one of the man's shoulders trying to awaken him in a nice way. He would not wake up. He turned over, wrathfully. The other one insisted. Impossible. He was defending his sleep, thrashing his hands about like a puppet. The stranger shook him harder . . . "What is it? . . . Who is it? . . ." Don Nepo grunted. "Who is it? . . ." A leftover from the festival in his dream where there had only been room for him? . . . Get away! . . . Busybody! . . . Leftover! . . . Where had he seen him? . . . Get out! . . . Get out! . . . Get out of his dream! . . . And he gave a last push, on the edge of the bed now, to a shape that instead of retreating came closer, came on top of him, and could be touched, touched . . . No, it

couldn't be . . . It couldn't be that the intruder whom he had thrown out of the depths of his dream could have changed into that man . . . No, no, no . . . That man was already there and was coming to kill him, to sink a knife into him, to empty a revolver into him, to wrap a sheet around his neck and strangle him . . . But how could he explain his efforts, then, his insistence on waking him? . . . He tightened his eyelids and pretended to be asleep . . . As long as he had his eyes closed the man could not take his life because of that business about a person who kills a sleeping man can never flee the scene of the crime . . . Only a person under a curse can kill that way . . . And that was why he was shaking and shaking him, anxious, desperate, speaking to him with short, nervous words, hired to kill him by Don Sixto, no doubt, and in such secrecy that he would never understand what it was all about . . . Yes, yes, he should wake up, he should open his eyes . . .

Jump out of bed, the hunting shotgun that belonged to Damiancito, his grandson, and the machete were always behind the chest, and risk everything. He thought about it, but could he find them with his eyes closed? Imagining a spray of bullets as he went to the chest, he became rigid and mortally cold, with such a great fright brought on by the anxiety that he began to shake and the other one thought he was next to someone with a cataleptic fit.

And maybe it was only a nightmare, Don Nepo consoled himself, maybe when he woke up the man he had drawn out of his dream would be nothing but that, a dream . . . But how could he tell without opening his eyes and how could he open his eyes without that man, who might not be a dream, killing him? . . . Through the edges of his eyelids, two thin half-moons, and without the presumptive assassin's knowing it, he strained him in through his eyelashes, clothes and all. Where did he know that face from . . . the Granada? The Portal del Comercio? Eleven o'clock mass at San Francisco church? Where? And it had not been long since he had seen him . . . in a parade? He searched through his memory. Yes, yes, he had just seen him in a parade . . .

But it had been a long time since he had been to any parade . . .

"Please! . . . Please! . . ." he heard him speaking.

The idea that the man was only a wandering drinker who, when he felt the torment of his hangover and found the door unlocked, had slipped in to ask for some money to get a drink passed through Don Nepo's head, and confident with that idea he opened his eyes, only to close them again. He closed his lids more tightly than before. He must have still been dreaming. The man who was asking him please to help him was the one in the carriage, the one who had been going along shouting: "Up the people! . . . Up the people! . . ." But the other one . . . what other one? . . . The one who had come to kill him . . . But nobody had come to kill him because the only one there was the one from the carriage . . . The one from the carriage? . . . It couldn't be . . . it couldn't be or he was still dreaming wide awake . . . And the other one? . . . What other one? . . . The one who had come to kill him . . . But nobody had come to kill him . . .

Overcome with fear, if he closed his eyes he would transfer reality to his dream; if he opened them he would tumble his nightmare among real things; he opened his lids wide with the round eyes of a madman.

"What's the matter, friend?" he asked in a sharp voice.

And the other one? . . . What other one? . . . The one who had come to kill him . . . But no one had come to kill him . . . because there was no one else there but the man from the carriage asking him to hide him.

"Besides this room," Don Nepo heard himself talking, really talking, what a horrible nightmare, one he could not erase, "there's only a shed."

"I don't know if they're after me," the voice of that fellow with a face framed by firm and visible bones laid bare by the pale skin that had been burned by the sun, with thin and almost sticky hair, thin, cruel lips, prominent, flying ears, as if they were separated from him. That man's voice was so human that Don Nepo began to feel in his right senses, outside of his dream.

But what about the other one? . . . What other one? . . . The

one who had come to kill him . . . But nobody had come to kill him . . . because he was there only asking him to hide him because they were after him, the one from the carriage who had shouted: "Up the people! . . . Up the people! . . ."

"I jumped off the train" ("the carriage," Don Nepo said to himself), "and I ran and I ran until I found this door . . ."

"I never lock up because of the earthquakes . . ." Such a rich pleasure, that of a human voice talking about things that are real, that exist, that can be touched. Don Nepo would have liked him to have repeated it.

"I'm glad you don't . . ."

"Were you in custody?"

"I was being trailed . . ."

"Do you think you were followed?"

"I wasn't sure, so I ducked into your house . . . I'm sorry. You were tired. You were sleeping so hard that I had trouble waking you up."

"I've got a real dirty job," Don Nepo yawned, "and that's why I sleep during the daytime. It's awful, it bothers me to be in bed when everyone else is working. And a person doesn't even know how to go to bed: if he gets undressed it's like being a patient in a hospital, and if he leaves his clothes on, what you must have thought of me, that I was soused . . . 'He's dropped anchor,' you must have thought, and what an anchor: a gut full of booze and a bottle under the bed, and I thought you might have come to ask for a drink."

"That wouldn't be bad . . ."

"That's what I was thinking because a while back I was thinking the same thing. I needed a little booze and damned if I could find any in the house. And where did you say you came from, friend?"

"From the coast . . ."

"That took nerve, what you did, jumping off the train."

"They slow down near here, it's that curve . . ."

"Not here, you mean by the Puente de las Vacas . . ."

"Yes, and from there I cut through some streets and vacant lots."

"You lost them, then . . ."

"I think so . . ."

"And you've come from the coast . . ."

"That's right . . ."

"And how are things going down there?"

"Rough. The worst possible. The workers are very discontented."

"That's good."

"What do you mean good?"

"The good that can come of it. My grandfather used to say that something good would come when things were bad."

And they were about to laugh at the idea, but they remained in suspense, as if hanging on the thread of their breath, consulting each other with their eyes . . . A noise . . . Someone was sneaking around outside.

"It's nothing," Señor Nepo said, but he had to catch his breath. "It's a woodcock my grandson has. She must be getting too much sun in her cage and she's making a noise to come inside. I'll go bring her in. Excuse me. We have to put up with nonsense like this, friend. If old-timers like us, carved out of pure oak, didn't put up with saving birds and flowers, everything here would turn into reinforced concrete and iron. I don't know what's going to become of the world . . ."

He went out, half closed the door, and went over to the cage:

"Come on, come on. The lady of the house. Come on before you make us deaf!"

The bird with a shiny beak, long and sharp, pure ebony, black eyes, and all that elegant mourning standing out against a plumage of golden fire, as if gold were burning in its plumage, jumped and fluttered over to the door of her cage.

"When my grandson is here," Don Nepo explained to the traveler as he came in, "he takes her out of her cage and turns her loose so she can walk on the cool floor. I don't. Too much trouble

watching out for the cats. We're out here all by ourselves, but there are cats."

And changing the tone of his voice to talk to the woodcock:

"Little lady, a cat would like to eat you and that's why it's best for you to stay in your cage. It's sad to be in jail, but it's sadder to be dead. You can get out of jail but not out of the cemetery. And that's why little ladies are little ladies, to be kept under lock and key."

And changing his voice again from the artificial tone he used with the woodcock, in his normal voice he asked the fugitive about what was going on down on the Atlantic coast. There were a lot of rumors, but no one knew for certain.

In the hot shadows—the sun was bearing down—the woodcock could be heard jumping from one side of the cage to the other while the two men talked.

"A lot of people have been killed down there. They broke the dock strike with machine-guns. A lot of dead and wounded . . ."

"You escaped just in time . . ."

"I didn't escape. I came because . . ." he repented what he was going to say and he would not have known how to explain if Señor Nepo had not interrupted him:

"To get away."

"Yes, yes . . ." The one from the carriage rubbed his hands. For Nepomuceno he was still the one from the carriage, and for a moment it seemed that he had not awakened, that he was dreaming.

"And avoiding something isn't cowardly . . . If I told you what had happened to me early this morning . . . Incredible . . . I avoided something so that things wouldn't be worse . . ."

"Well, the truth is that I came here not so much to avoid something in the sense of escaping. A prudent man has his touch of the coward, but to see how they can be helped. They're peasants, after all, and they're such patient, brave, and heroic people . . ."

"So it seems . . ."

"But excuse me, I cut you off, you were saying something . . ."

"Not part of your world . . ." Don Nepo hastened to say, thinking that the "your world" meant having a chat with a being who had come out of his dream and whom he had seen for the first time in a carriage among men and women out of a storm who were carrying flags and rifles raised in their arms. "Not part of your world, some trouble with a Spanish type who lives around here and takes care of a few cows, a dairy, and a small pasture for some other Spaniards. He says that it all belongs to him, but I think it belongs to his employers and that they're ashamed at having so little because they're Spanish nobility, but just now by putting on airs and titles they married off their oldest daughter to a Cojubul, the son of those Cojubuls, Indian friends of mine, who inherited a big fortune from an American who died with his wife a long time back when the strong wind hit the Pacific coast. Well, what do you think those Cojubuls did? . . . Nothing less than changing their name! . . . Now they call themselves Keijebul, they play golf, they speak only English, and they don't recognize their fellow-countrymen. One word and another, arguing with the Spaniard about that nonsense of Keijebul and Cojubul, drinking beer, I got the bug in me and I told him a few simple truths . . . All that pride and all that nobility to end up marrying an employee of the Banana, Inc., because now they're not stockholders any more, a company that began its 'operations' by stealing land from the legitimate owners! But what got him most aroused was that business about stealing the land . . . Calling a company that should be called a benefactor of the nation a thief? . . . I could prove it, I told him, from the testimony of a mulatto woman, an acquaintance of mine, the daughter of one of the families they dispossessed and threw out down there, Anastasia is her name, and if one witness isn't enough, there's what her brother Juambo says. He saw how the great company got its start too, stealing their land, burning their houses, knocking down their fences, uprooting their crops, killing the few animals they had . . . And to make a long story short . . . Do you want a cigarette? . . ."

"I've got some here . . ."

"I'll take one. What are they, Camels? . . ."

"Camelot, my friend, a regular Camelot! . . . They're native cigarettes in a Camel pack . . . I can't even stand their cigarettes, but I carry them like this so that no one will get suspicious . . ."

"Well, so I won't wear you out with such a long story, during those arguments the Spaniard got annoyed with me and decided to get rid of me, just as I say, to wipe me off the face of the earth this morning when I was coming home from work—I always go back and forth by bicycle—he tried to run me down with his wagon, and only through God's greatness I didn't leave my brains splattered on a rock . . ."

"Well, if that's how it is, my story's different. I came from the Atlantic coast because we need help from the people on the plantations in the South . . ."

"The one in the carriage . . ." Nepomuceno said to himself, "the one in the carriage! . . ." and aroused by that idea he said from his heart: "If I can help you with anything, I'm at your service . . ."

"Yes, I'd like to talk to that mulatto you know, to see what things are like . . ."

"I'll see if I can fix it up. In the meantime you can hide here . . ."

"In cases like this things have to be done secretly . . ." said the traveler and lit another cigarette.

"And what I didn't tell you is that when I woke up and saw you I wasn't surprised. I was afraid when I saw your shape. For some reason I went to bed with the idea that the Spaniard was going to have someone kill me. I was about to get out of bed and close the door with the bar and the bolt, but then I said to myself, God's will be done, and I fell asleep. That's why I was afraid when I saw your shape. I thought that you were waking me up so that you wouldn't have to kill me in my sleep. But when I opened my eyes I found myself face to face with someone I had dreamed about . . . or better yet, someone I was dreaming about right at that moment."

"That's what they call premonition . . ."

"Is that what it is? . . . And you'll be very pleased to know how I dreamed about you: riding in a carriage that was like a theater with seats on it, a theater rolling along on wheels of fire, drawn by chargers formed out of smoke, filled with men and women who were carrying flags, plows, and rifles in their hands . . ."

"And I was riding in it?"

"Yes, yes, you were riding in it shouting 'Up the people! . . . Up the people!' "

"Well, my friend, even if the explanation of your dream is easy, that I woke you up at the time you were dreaming of the carriage and you associated your person with me, I want to believe that it wasn't like that and that I really was riding along like that . . ."

"You were riding . . . in the carriage of victory . . ."

"Well, my friend . . ." the other one got up emotionally and embraced Don Nepo, "if it was the carriage of victory I hope your mouth is telling the truth . . ." and before the other could reply, he added, half-withdrawing his body, "Don't embrace me, the victory hasn't been won yet . . . Pinch me, because I want to be sure that right now I'm not the one who is dreaming! . . ."

4

. . . It's . . . it's . . . it's . . . three o'clock in the morning . . .

"The gringos are swilling again, the grinnnn . . ."

Anastasia was left with the "grinnnn . . ." on her open mouth as it surrounded a shapeless emptiness that was not part of her socket, "grinnnn . . ." in the bones of her nose as they thundered inside of her like small rockets, "grinnnn . . ." in her beaten lip which was split open like a transom . . . "Grinnnn . . . grinnnn . . ." she scratched at the wall, the door, she did not know what she scratched at, "grinnnn . . ." until she stood up, found her tongue, and spat out the first drivel of thick blood; then it was thinner blood, mixed with saliva, but still sticky and warm.

The first squad of American police got out of a military truck and went in through the side door where the mulatto woman was looking inside. They took the part of the Granada where the bar was by assault. Some of them jumped out before the vehicle came to a stop in order to get into action more rapidly. Heels, boots, belts, whistles, all dancing about among blows from rubber trucheons, kicks, blows with left and right hands, low blows, and at the door, trying to rise, the mulatto woman.

They did not trample her or kill her, but because they had to get in they gave her a great push on the back and she managed to put out her hands and move her mouth and grab onto the edge of the door where she had been watching the enraged drunkards who wanted to lynch the bartender because he had refused to serve them any more drinks.

The squad of military police prevented the lynching, freed the bartender, more pale than yellow, and began to deal with the Titans, whom they hauled out with their enormous feet dragging, carried by their muscular arms, their big blond heads hanging like kettles of honey. The most intoxicated were lifted off the ground from where they had fallen in the fight, unable to rise again, and were hauled through the air to the trucks which night after night, just like the city garbage trucks, picked up their drunkards from bars, lounges, clubs, taverns, and brothels.

It was one of a great many "lightning operations." There was a moment of relief at the bar, but another kettleful of people who had been dancing in the other room, when the three o'clock in the morning waltz was over, occupied the empty stools with their carousing partners and began to demand whiskey, beer, rum, cognac, and insisting that the one who took the bartender's place serve them without measuring.

Anastasia touched her split lip with the tip of her tongue, and after spitting so as not to swallow any blood, she mumbled to herself:

"They're swilling again, those sons of . . ."

Her nephew who, when the military police came in, had to run and hide in the nearest doorway, came back when the danger was over and interrupted her:

"Aunty, you really got it this time! . . ."

"A fat lot of good for you, you devil! . . . If I got it I would've been dead. Didn't you see that I wasn't hit head on, that I only bit into the wall . . . Oh, but I know who I'm going to complain to . . ."

"The police?" her nephew interrupted her again.

"The police? . . . Do you think I'm that stupid? . . . Don't be foolish . . . Complain or report to these police? Ha! Ha! Ha! . . . I can laugh better with blood . . . I split my lip, see? . . . Even my teeth got loose when I hit . . . I'm going to complain to our Lord of Santa Clara . . . it's good he's close by . . ."

"But the church is closed now . . ."

"I'll tell him through the door. Don't you think he's God just so he can hear me? I'll tell him in a nice way that people shouldn't be treated like that. We buy candles for him every Friday and he should look after us . . . What's it all about, leaving us unprotected and abandoned? Especially us, people who have no place to go, like the Wandering Jew, and not because we never had one, shit on them!, or because we're the worst kind, the worst sons of bitches, but because of those damned gringos who threw us off our land on the coast where the Banana, Inc., is all over today."

The presence of Don Nepo Rojas, who was leaving work wheeling his bicycle by the handlebars, made her turn away from the boy.

"I was telling my nephew," she said to Don Nepo, "how damned well we lived when we had our own land, our houses, everything that belonged to us. Oh, you don't know what it cost me, the mixup they had in the bar!"

"A fine mixup!" Nepomuceno exclaimed. "They almost lynched the bartender and there was a hullabaloo inside too. The workers got ready to defend Señor Mincho: the cooks with their knives, the dishwashers with their pots of boiling water, others with axes, steel bars, poles . . . and others were getting bottles of gasoline ready, everybody . . . and it's not over yet, they intend to draw up a petition and not come back to work if there's no protection . . ."

"Well, when they called in the M.P.'s . . ." the mulatto woman began to say.

"It was lucky . . ." Don Nepo cut her off, while she moaned in complaint over her split lip and her bruised teeth . . . "It was lucky they came or else there would have been a Jesus-God of it,

and in the mixup I forgot the package of food I set aside for you."

"Well, when the M.P.'s came along," Anastasia went on as she spat blood, "I was at the side doorway and in order to get by they gave me a big shove and if I hadn't had my hands and mug against the wall they would have killed me . . . And you can see I was able to use my hands . . . and arms, even though I put my snout in danger so I wouldn't whack my head on the edge of the door, because then you would have had to come and see me on a cold slab, because I don't think you're one of those who forget people they know . . . Oh, oh," she sighed, "oh Lord of Santa Clara, still having to put up with those people! . . ."

"Yes, it's true they put you off your property on the coast, but that was a long time ago."

"It seems like yesterday!" the mulatto woman snorted.

"What I don't remember," Don Nepo said, distractedly but with intent, "is whether or not they paid you."

"They made us, nothing about paid! A beating is what they gave us, and . . . this damned lip hurts . . . we should be grateful they didn't kill us . . . Maybe it would have been better if they had killed us . . ." she sobbed, "instead of leaving us without anything that belonged to us!"

"They didn't pay you, then . . ."

"Not then or ever! Don't go on like that! You're not convinced that they beat us, beat us, beat . . . And who were they? . . . Maybe I should give you a mulatto answer: . . . *chos, chos, moyón, con*! Do you know what that means? . . . They're beating us . . . foreign hands are beating us! . . ."

Don Juan Nepo walked along half-leaning on the handlebars of his bicycle beside the buttocky mulatto woman who was dragging by the hand the nephew who was more asleep than awake. Shadows in the shadows of the middle of the street. It was dangerous to walk on the sidewalk at that hour. There were evil people who hid in doorways. It was safer to take advantage of the broad street, forgotten at that hour by vehicles and pedestrians.

What they were saying could not be heard. The mulatto

woman was thrusting out her negroid cartilage, congealed like the ear of a dead man, toward the trembling lips of the cyclist, whose large graying mustache looked like a patch of mist and shadow stuck to his nose waiting to be breathed in.

The man who can breathe in his mustache like that along with a cigarette after his work is a happy person, and even though the occasion was scarcely one for happiness, Señor Nepo, happy with the direction his conversation with Anastasia was taking, was breathing contentedly.

"Juambo, my brother?"

The name of the mulatto as Anastasia pronounced it with her mouth still paining from the blow made her soul pain from the memories of past glories, land that had been theirs, and it sounded as if it were hitting the wall.

"Yes, Juampo!"

"Ju . . . am . . . bo . . ." the mulatto woman corrected him, "not Juampo. I'm not talking to him."

"Things like that between a brother and sister!"

"He's a devil. He abandoned my parents. He pretended that he didn't know me . . ."

"But didn't you people abandon him?"

"He was the one who had the obligation, he was the man."

"He was the youngest, Anastasia, and you yourself told me that they were going to leave him for the jaguars and it was only by a miracle that Thompson picked him up where your father had left him in the woods. He grew up with a resentment against you people . . ."

"I invented that jaguar business . . ." the mulatto woman spat out bloody saliva as she said it, with the voice of one who has just made a very intimate confession.

"All the more reason to go find him . . ."

"I think he lives over there with Thompson and I'd have to see him somewhere else. I won't set foot in that monster's house . . ."

"Talk to him on the phone . . ."

"I'm not one of those . . ."

"But Anastasia, you have to find him for me . . . that's what friendship is for . . ."

"For you maybe I'll say yes. I owe you so many favors."

"Good, I have your word. Juambo should come see me at my place today or tomorrow. Tomorrow at the latest. My house is near the North Quarries, or if it's better for him, he should come see me during working hours, from seven at night on. The place where you know how people suffer with that electric music . . . Because their music is like that chair they seat people in to kill them instead of shooting them. I'd rather have them shoot me a thousand times over."

They went on in silence. It was not the silence of the street. A silence with an aura of light that miraculously emerges. It was a silence that clung closer to their bones, more a part of them, clinging to their teeth, their hair, their nails, to the silence of the earth that surrounds the dead.

The Cerro del Carmen rose up with the color of a dream, a dream rising up to the stars, to the last ones, high up, and on the summit, in the mist as if in the foam of a surging sea, one could make out the figurehead on the prow of a ship, which was the front of a hermitage.

The mulatto woman and the cyclist, as if dreaming as they walked, saw themselves in an unknown city, among people of a different age. From Santiago de los Caballeros people were arriving on horseback dressed in the most absurd carnival costumes. Some ladies. A bishop. Monks. Troops. Servants. Indians. A whole retinue. Gathering at the foot of the hill they were going up to the hermitage, the most vigorous in front, young men from the University of San Carlos, the ladies with armed captains wearing plumes on their hats along with the woman who had organized that pilgrimage to the gold and silver image of the Virgin of Carmel, the one who had accompanied Don Pelayo when he was placed in a basket like Moses.

Juan Corz, the founder of the hermitage, turned aside and came

to meet the noble and lordly inhabitants of the capital of the country, and he went toward Anastasia, the cyclist, and the nephew. They were near, prepared for the encounter, to fight hand to hand if he came a step closer, but he did not stop and the three were not run down. The hermit went through them, passing among them and they passed by the hermit, who was fleeing in terror.

"What's wrong, brother?" they asked him.

"The Inquisition! . . . The Inquisition! . . ." and he added vehemently: "Don't stop me! Let me through!"

"Pass, brother, pass!"

"Your bodies are stopping me, you're walking where I walked three, four centuries ago doing the great and charitable work of defending the Indians against the Spaniards, and that's why I'm being persecuted by the Holy Office!"

"Brother Juan . . ."

"Don't call me brother or they'll burn you along with me. They accuse me of being a foreigner and a preacher of miracles!"

And after a pause that throbbed like the leaves of a palm tree planted by the hermit, the same voice, but now Juan Corz could be seen, and he told them:

"Go, go, continue with your struggle, I bless you, but do not leave without looking at this scene!"

"It's Hell!" Anastasia shouted immediately, drawn back into what she was from the horror.

"And here they shall be. That blind and evil demon over there will see to their eternal torture: an archbishop, an ambassador, and a lieutenant colonel whose names the centuries will curse."

A strange anguish, a violent flight of trees in the shadows above the pink velvet that was rising in the east loosened that moment of conjuration enveloping the cyclist, the mulatto woman, and the boy, as Anastasia seemed only to be carrying his little arm from dragging him so much, only his little arm, because his little body stayed behind, worn out by sleepiness, fatigue, hunger, and weariness.

The mulatto woman picked up the boy and held him to her bosom under her shawl.

"Just because it's you I'll stick my big face into where that brother of mine is. He's got me so upset that my insides get all knotted up whenever I see him. But to do you a favor because you've been so good to us . . . I know that I'm letting myself in for having them tell me to go fry some fleas."

Señor Nepo could no longer hear her. Climbing onto his bicycle, he had slipped off through the narrow streets of El Martinico. Corrals, lowing, horses, barking, roosters, and bells. They were not streets but paths covered with damp sand, mud on the bottom along with small paving stones. Houses and courtyards, buildings and vacant lots. Vegetable gardens, flower gardens, stables, windmills spinning on towers and drawing water out of wells from the force of the wind. And the banditry of the sanate birds, who from their song might have been thought to have been fed on buzzing locusts. From orange tree to alligator pear, from alligator pear to Spanish plum they went in flocks. A sprinkling of dew, just like rain, wet Señor Nepo's back as he went under the trees from which the sanates were rising. His arrival and passage on the bicycle were so sudden that the birds scarcely had time to take to flight. Finally El Martinico. The cistern for washing clothes. Only the busts of the women could be seen hanging over the wash basins. A few. Others were arriving with jugs to carry water. Out from among the rough rocks came lines of goats followed by the whip of their owner. Flies, mosquitoes, the carrion of dead animals, horns, jawbones, and buzzards, heavy to look at but light when they leaped. And they leaped out of the way of the bicycle in a tumble, but once in the deep gullies, guarded by fences of fierce barbed wire, facing the blue mountains and the nearby woods, among cornfields and hay fields, they dominated the highway where the swift military trucks were traveling at full speed with their piercing headlights and their well-wrapped drivers who had only their eyes visible, mist and a sleepiness with lashes.

Anastasia, when she left Don Juan Nepo, seemed to be going toward Potrero de Corona with the boy in her arms, the point of her shawl thrown back, half-dragging, and the other end over her eyes, toward the hermit. The image of Juan Côrz had not disappeared. She passed right through his body but on her forehead, on the least filthy part, there remained something like the flame of a beard agitated by the wind and small eyes that glowed like embers. The bell of the hermitage began to ring for five o'clock mass, and it made no difference whether it was a morning in the year of Our Lord 1615 or any other unfortunate morning . . .

Beyond the half-fallen gate through which the mulatto woman entered the workers were moving about: cows, calves, halters, milk-pails.

Mooooooo . . . Mooooooo . . . Mooooooo . . .

A warm moo . . . ooo that smelled of raw milk, froth, butter, cheese, hay, urine, dung, that smelled of the greenness of the fields and the exhalations of the damp earth, a rotting hoof, and yellow flowers that were like fragrant eyes in the middle of the morning.

"Marcial!" Anastasia shouted to one of the farmhands, and when she drew closer to a thin, smooth-faced peasant with Chinese eyes, she added with a presentiment: "You're not going to do something bad like leaving me without milk for the boy, are you? . . ."

"Only if you pay me what you owe. The boss found out that I was giving you your glasses of milk with the cover-up that it was on credit and he bawled me out, almost hit me. 'You can give that nigger bitch poison if you want,' he finally told me, 'but not a drop of milk.' "

"All because I haven't been able to pay him the room rent I owe for three sad months. The hell with the glass of mingle business. Dirty rich people, they're all made out of the same shi . . . ngle!"

"It's only because I feel sorry for the kid, because my orders were that even if you paid I wasn't to sell you any."

"I wouldn't have thought that of 'Wiggy!' "

"The boss has a name, why do you call him 'Wiggy?' "

"Hurry up with my milk, I want a glass and a half."

"A glass and a half is it now?"

"Because I forgot to stop and buy some rolls. I was talking to his godfather . . ."

"Whose godfather?"

"The boy's. He's a Christian and he has to be confirmed. We have to take him for confirmation . . ."

"A fraud!"

"What do you mean, fraud?"

"A fraud. The sacraments are nothing but a fraud. Baptism a fraud with a gown, a little water, and some bells; confirmation a fraud with a slap on the cheek by the bishop; marriage a . . . a . . . a double fraud; and extreme unction a death fraud . . ."

"They did a good job of teaching you religion!"

"I was taught with a few whacks by a vegetarian woman who used to come by during my father's time to drink milk and hot dung . . ."

"A fraud!"

"That's what I was going to say . . ."

"A excrement fraud instead of a sacrament fraud!"

"From a cow, of course . . ."

"Of course, and in a glass of fine milk, not like that spittle you're giving me. I said a glass and a half, not half a glass."

"You're pretty sharp. She keeps me talking to give the foam time to go down . . ."

"You're the sharp one. In order to save 'Wiggy' some money you want to pass off a half a glass on me as a glass and a half . . ."

And while the farmhand was filling the glasses again, milking indolently and with one hand, Anastasia took out the knotted handkerchief in which she kept her money from where her heart and teats were.

The dark nephew was already sleeping with his face bathed in the shower of light that slipped in through the half-tiled

roof, a mustache of dry froth from the milk on his lips, a mustache which, between breathing and moaning, he would lick and relick, savoring the memory of a past happiness or the infinite happiness of dreaming that he was a calf. Yes, that seemed to be what he was dreaming about. A calf. A small calf, the son of a pinto cow. He would go with her everywhere, nervous in his legs and tail, leaping and licking her udders for her to give him something to suck, or butting her with his head when she hid her milk from him. Butting and butting as she, his mother, complained about her son's bad treatment of her with a long, moist, melancholy moo. He would get colic and they would give him a purgative of cane juice and fat. The flies were eating him alive, crusted with dung, and he was hairier than a caterpillar, and he ran his tongue over the mustache of dried milk.

The mulatto woman would lie down beside her son on the same cot after putting the leftovers that Señor Nepo had given her into her stomach with white repugnance and black appetite. But that time, with the bitterness in her mouth of having to look for the face of her worthless brother, she did not even have a taste. She put the food back from near her nose. It was better to lie down without eating anything, even if it went bad. It was a sin that the food was repugnant to her. She lay down with her clothes on, that is to say, without her skirt and blouse, with her underclothes on. Fleas and filth. But where was she going to bathe? In the Río de las Vacas? Full of drunkards. Drunkards and plunkards, because that was where the city sewer emptied. In the Cabildo Baths? Too expensive. In the Administrador Baths? God save her, there were snakes there. And in the South Baths the least thing a person caught was ringworm.

She sighed. Her eyes were coming out through her lids which were dark like her thoughts. No place to bathe, no place to live, no place to die. That was too much, poor people having no place to die and having to go to the hospital to do it. Hospitals exist so poor people can have a place to die, and even there they don't want them to die. They put them out when they're hopeless cases.

They die on roads, in doorways, as they used to die, as the ones who were thrown off their land by the then handsome George Maker Thompson died and continued to die, by Thompson in cahoots with Doña Florona so that they could set up those huge banana plantations that a body can't cover on foot.

They threw them out. Her parents and her with just what they had on their backs. Her mother clutched her black braid of hair while the house was burning, dribbling out tears, the spittle of weeping. The law, Mayarí, Chipo Chipó . . . Nothing did any good. The names of Mayarí and Chipo Chipó remained in the form of flowers that grow on the coast. The Mayarí flower is a rain of golden spangles. That of Chipo Chipó is a male orchid in the shape of a half-open mouth. Nothing did any good. They threw them off their land. Doña Florona, when it was all over, got involved with the gringo in her cinnamon-hot old age, because she was twice as old as he was, and since there's nothing more ready to give in than a hot old woman she got fat with a certain Aurelia, but like a chip off the old block that one had a son with no father who carries his grandfather's name and they call him Bobby. It must mean booby, a booby bird. She stayed behind to raise hob in the United States.

Twelve noon and her nephew sound asleep. She ought to get that son business out of her head too. Nephew, nephew, because two or three times already she had called him son in front of people. She put on her skirt and blouse, ran a comb through her kinky hair and went to get a friend to look after her . . . nephew while she went to find her brother, in order to keep her promise to Señor Juan Nepo, to whom she owed so many favors. The residence of George Maker Thompson, now President of the Company, which was why he had been living in Chicago for some time, was a shell of walls and grill-work, grill-work and the walls of a garden with more weeds than flowers. The mulatto woman felt with the dark tips of her fingers until she touched the small white button. A moment later she saw her dear brother coming along and playing with a shaggy dog . . . Dear . . . dear

was too much! . . . Her brother, pure and simple; what was she thinking, just because he lived in the Green Pope's house was he something special now?

When he saw who it was, closer to the door, Juambo quickened his step and opened up immediately.

"Juan . . ."

"Ta . . ."

". . . bo!"

". . . cha!"

They sucked in their lips as they laughed, a flow of tears they could not stem in the corners of their eyes came down toward their cheekbones, their hard cheekbones. Juan Tabocha. When she was a girl and he a child they would make up that mysterious figure by alternating the syllables of their names. Juan Tabocha. From Juan . . . bo and Ta . . . cha, the diminutive of Anastasia.

And after they embraced, almost at the same time as they asked each other, not about their father, dead now, father buried on south coast, or about their mother, surviving and blind, or their sister Toba, but about Juan Tabocha, whom they imagined right away as one of those crucified figures set up in cornfields to chase away the birds, like the St. Joachim in the little village church, or the Protestant preacher smelling of tobacco who came up carrying a Bible to convince their parents to leave their lands in Thompson's hands.

"Don't stand there in the doorway, sister. Come in . . . I was out back! . . . I never expected you . . . Come on in . . ."

The woman was watching every movement of the dog, who was jumping and merrily noising about.

"Don't be afraid of him, he doesn't bite. He's just big and playful . . ."

"Wha . . . wha . . . what's his name?"

"You're so scared you're even stuttering. What's the matter, haven't you ever seen a mutt before?"

"But he's so big and hairy . . ."

"His name is Juper . . . it's really Jupiter, but we call him Juper . . ."

"When he heard his name, the huge animal, the size of a sheep and with the legs of a greyhound, broke out into a celebration.

"Come on in, Tacha, come in, come, come, this way, I'll go ahead and show you . . ."

"Just don't leave me alone back here, God save us, he's so big, even the mutts are oversize in these houses . . ."

"Don't be afraid, he's a fine dog, a very fine dog, except at night when he gets fierce. Nothing like him to guard the house, don't you think? Come on, come on, this way. Let's celebrate your visit. You decided to look me up and I'm glad. Who could love you any more than your brother, woman? And I didn't tell you: I was on the coast with mother, father died . . . It was during that time when they read the will of the millionaire who left his money to some people from here . . . Toba took me to talk to mother. It was hard, but we talked."

They were standing beside that immense four-footed creature at the door of a room that was not very large and where on the walls one could see shelves of bottles, others with canned goods, hams, and bags of walnuts, hazelnuts, chocolates. Juambo brought a small stool over to a table with a dark red covering, but he regretted it when he saw the size of his sister's backside. A small stool for someone who deserves so much! . . . And he brought over a leather chair, right for a fat friar or a great lord out of history.

"Beer is what you like . . . At least you used to like it . . ." and out of a white cabinet he took two small bottles of beer that were perspiring from the cold. "The brakemen, the firemen, the engineers always used to give you dark and light beer mixed so you could drink your own blood, because they used to call you Claranegra. You used to take me with you because a boy along, no matter how small, always brought respect . . ."

"Kiss, kiss my finger!" the woman was saying between the liquid and the foam as she drank the beer, putting the little finger of her left hand up to her brother's mouth.

"No, Tacha, I'm not being a child. Let me speak and remember and say things that I can only tell you because you're the only

one who can understand. You used to take me along to get respect, but they would give me a dollar, two dollars to go whistling off . . . I'd pretend to leave but I'd stay there keeping an eye out. Curiosity is a good telescope . . . They used to nuzzle you . . . put their hands down your neck . . . They wanted to lift up your dress but you never let them do that without something first. You'd hold your knees tight together, tight, keeping your shins together, tight, while they smothered you with their nuzzling and felt about your breasts."

Tacha, who up until then had been playing the role of a flattered and disinterested person, joined her eyes together like two embers of hate and fastened them on her brother's face, obliging him to be silent. Wasn't he the nice one, airing her dirty laundry under the pretext of reminiscing! The mulatto woman let the silence grow thick intentionally. The best thing to shut mouths up. For a thickhead, something even thicker. The breathing of the dog could be heard, the buzzing of the flies. The foam was slipping down the glass to blend with the liquid.

No matter how much he turned it around in her head in time to the glass she was turning around in her hand, Anastasia could not find a way to tell her brother why she had come, disgorge Señor Nepo's message. More bottles of beer, dark and light for the clear-dark mixture. Suddenly something that was her salvation occurred to her. She went over to Juambo's ear and said to him:

"Chos, chos, moyón, con!"

She said nothing else. She did not have to say anything else. Those sounds explained everything. A freezing and hot shudder ran over Sambito's skin. Something became jumbled in his throat.

Chos, chos, moyón, con!

Where those sounds were heard the ground was wet with tears, sweat, blood . . .

Chos, chos, moyón, con . . . they're beating us . . . they're beating us . . . foreign hands are beating us!

They were simple sounds and they weighed like a chain with the rumble of a wild and flooded river.

His eyes became anesthetized, he cleaned his mouth with the back of his hand, and he went over to Tacha, his heart like a slip knot.

"What's new?"

"There's . . ."

" 'There's' meaning there's something, or 'theirs' meaning what belongs to them?"

"Both things, Juambo. A friend of mine who lives near the North Quarries wants you to go see him at his place, there's news that down there where we were . . ."

They were silent. "Down there where we were . . ." Very well put because it still belonged to them. Their parents had not sold the land. It had been snatched away. It had been taken away just like that. And if it was true that now they were amazed in disbelief when they saw the gigantic installations of Tropical Banana, Inc., the immense plantations as vast as the moon as they glowed, the river broken up into reservoirs for irrigation, the pastures as peaceful as the cattle on them, the branching of the rails, just as if a metal tree had been planted and had sprouted, Juambo and Anastasia still considered all of it as belonging to them . . .

"Down there where we were . . ." Juambo repeated with the sad voice of a robot who did not believe what he was saying, but he was sure of a part of it, substituting his desires for a reality that said he was wrong. "Down there where we were . . ."

"You have to ask for a Señor Juan Nepomuceno Rojas. To one side of the North Quarries. You go over a bridge. An old bridge that's there, half-buried. And as soon as you cross, past a wall of pink rocks, you'll see the house on the right-hand side. It would be best if you went today."

"Since you're leaving maybe we can go together, don't you think? You sure like your beer, Claranegra. Take a few bottles along and some condensed milk and some of the powdered kind

and strawberry jam and olive oil, it's the best there is, and some of these crackers you like."

"God bless you for your favors, Sambito. You've got a good heart. They say that mulattoes like us have got what's best of the black and what's best of the white, and that's why we're better than either blacks or whites . . ." she stammered as she went on. She had stood up, a big woman with sloping shoulders and broad hips. ". . . we're better and I'd like to prove it by confessing to you what a bad heart I had when I did something to you, more for my own hurt than for yours, you'll see, because my conscience has bothered me ever since and I haven't been able to have any peace."

Sambito made a gesture of erasing what he was hearing from the air, but Tacha persisted:

"I was the one who made up that story that papa wanted to leave you for a jaguar to eat and I know how that hurt you a lot and made you hate the old folks . . ."

"Why accuse yourself, sister, because mother, in front of Toba, didn't say you . . ."

"Forgive me!"

"They gave me to Thompson and he invented the jaguar story so I wouldn't want to see them or go back to them."

"Worse still, Sambito, much worse . . . My story used by the one who left us out in the street. What we do against ourselves and don't know it!"

"That's the way it goes, whether we know it or not, we're always working for them. They're powerful, powerful powerful, so damned powerful powerful . . ."

"Then they won't be able . . ."

"What can I tell you . . ."

They had crossed the garden where the breeze was blowing and making the few flowers and abundant weeds wave with the weight of a hand that might have been feeling about for the softest spot to lie down in.

"Now that you know the way I hope you'll come and see me more. You stayed alone like me. Are you still alone?"

"I took in a child."

"So I heard."

"There's no secrets between heaven and earth, right? Well, one of these days I'll bring him by so you can meet him."

"What color is he?"

"Like the two beers, light and dark."

"You bring him over one of these days . . ."

"Isn't there any danger that Thompson will come back? I don't ever want to see that damned gringo again . . ."

"Didn't you ever run into him on the street?"

"When I saw him coming I'd always cross over."

"I don't think he'll be back for a few years. He's President of the Company now. He's the famous Green Pope. His daughter Aurelia comes once in awhile."

"There's another fine one!"

"The caretaker and I have the whole house to ourselves. They leave us alone. Even young Bobby is spending some time on the coast."

"He's right at home because the whole coast belongs to them."

"Where the Luceros are. They've become good friends since the old man saved their stock and they're very much on the side of the Company."

"That's what I heard. I'm on my way. I'll see you . . . we'll see when. Take care. Don't forget to go to the Quarries today or tomorrow at the latest. I'll drop dead if that mutt comes after me. Call him . . . The size of him. He looks like the Cadejo monster! Wouldn't he be able to knock me down! Call him!"

"Here, Juper! . . . Here, Juper! . . ." the voice of the mulatto was heard. The dog came immediately, three, four bounds. He held him by the collar and watched his sister go off, thinking about Juan Tabocha. The mysterious Juan Tabocha had brought them together again.

5

His eyes reddened by the live dust of the lime, an ulcerated tomato, the face of a dough mouse, and his hair white, who would recognize under that disguise of a worker helping Damiancito with the loading and delivery of lime the person who some days before had arrived in flight from the bloody events provoked by the authorities to put an end to the dock strike by military means. No one. He was a different person. Not even Nepomuceno recognized him.

"Your grandson's got a helper," the Consunsino woman commented, the Marcos Consunsino woman. " 'This one noses into everything,' you're probably saying, 'as if it was any of her business,' but that's how it goes: a person doesn't nose into something that is her business, but into something that's neither here nor there as far as she's concerned."

"Maybe it ought to concern you . . ."

"Don't be simple, Don Nepo, have some respect and answer what's being said to you."

"Yes, my grandson couldn't do it alone. There were too many orders, so he took on a helper by the day."

"By the day or by the job?"

"To tell the truth I don't know."

"Don Sixto, who noses into everything, said that you people would begin with a helper . . ."

"With a helper?"

"Yes, with a helper, and that in a little while you'd be buying a truck . . . You have to begin somewhere . . ."

"With human flesh, that's right, because that's what's cheapest. If human flesh was expensive there wouldn't be so many wars. Whole bunches of men are killing each other at this very moment, right now, while we're talking, thousands and thousands of soldiers are falling, never to get up again."

"Don't go so far away. What happens out there is no concern of ours. They're killing a lot of people right here over in Bananera. I get goose pimples when I hear of the awful things they're doing to the poor."

"Well, tell Don Sixto that we have the helper now . . ."

"Tell him yourself!"

"No, I'm not speaking to him since he tried to kill me. He almost made mincemeat out of me under the wheels of his wagon. He pushed me right up against the rocks, and if I hadn't been quick enough . . . just because my time wasn't up. Tell Don Sixto that we have a helper now and that if he, like a good Estribo, would like to be good for something more than stirring things up, he could give us the money to buy the truck and we'd pay him back by hauling wood for him. Him or his employers, because I found out they've been cutting trees out near La Periquera."

"Well, they're probably hauling it out on human backs. What do you mean, by truck? Spaniards know that a hundred Indian backs can haul better than one truck, and it doesn't cost them anything."

"I've been talking so much I haven't ordered anything. Give me an anisette. I've got a small pain at the mouth of my stomach, on this side. I figure it must be gas."

"Do you want it straight? A lot of people take it with water."

"That's a nicety . . ."

"No, they call anisette with ice and water a 'Pigeon.' "

"Yes, I know, woman, I'm not that ignorant, and I know something else, that the 'Pigeon' is the fashionable drink among ladies . . ." He said no more. He almost strangled as the drink went down the wrong way.

"God punished you for saying what you shouldn't have. If fine ladies like anisette with ice and water that's their business." The Consunsino woman, the Marcos Consunsino woman, lightened her solid eyes in the liquor of a smile that made her look prettier, pupils of black ink almost filling her eyes, a curved mouth, thin and open lips, upturned nose, broad shoulders, broad breasts. The only thing that made her ugly, without her being able to disguise it by always wearing her hair loose was the hollow where a nerve center had been removed under her jawbone, near her ear, surrounded by reddish scars, and the two enormous dancing ceiba wheels.

"Another anisette, but I'll take this one with water . . ."

"Then don't say that only women like 'Pigeons,' because you, Don Nepo, have a bird at home, that woodcock that blats about all day long."

"The woodcock belongs to my grandson . . ."

"Well, you ought to open the cage and let it go, before it turns into a hard-boiled egg on you."

"Because it's yellow, you mean . . ."

"Because it's yellow and one fine day you're going to find it all stiff . . ."

Her teeth shone between her loose hair, her tongue between her teeth, all of her shaking with laughter.

"Well, if Damiancito is the owner of the pigeon . . . the bird, I mean, give him my message . . ."

"When he gets back, because he went a long way off. He had a delivery beyond the Campo de Marte. They're doing a lot of building over there."

"The army . . . The other day I heard Don Sixto say that it doesn't look like the earth any more but the planet Mars and that some fine day the priest is going to find soldiers in his chalice."

"I don't like anisette with water like that . . ."

"Aren't you going to drink it? Don't you like it because I mentioned Don Sixto, the chalice, and the Army?"

"No, I didn't like the smell of the anisette, and what I feel like is a piece of dried beef, a pork chop, something that you can chew and that tastes like meat, along with your hot sauce and some tortillas . . ."

"I'm glad you've got a good appetite. Sausage is what I have, sausages with guacamole, a guacamole made with alligator pears from the Mexican's, which are pure butter, as he says. I like that man, you know. He's bright and clean. People here have a conformity all over them that's more like dirt, the dirt that churchgoers get when they grow tame . . ."

The conversation went off with her and in the silence that surrounded Don Nepo one could hear the clock, the sputtering of the candle in front of St. Dominic Guzmán, the religious flight of the flies, which was like the residue of the humming of the motors in the distance, the anger of some strayed wasp. The devil's stinger went in and out after he had bumped into the bottles. Don Nepo, with his thought, with his eyes, followed the mystery of how things happen, the rolling of the cart in which the helper was talking with Anastasia's brother. No safer place than a cart that was rolling along. The grandson intent on the oxen, the helper pretending to sleep on the empty sacks after the delivery, his hat over his face, and next to him the mulatto, sitting down, just like a friend who had been given a lift.

The one time that Juambo came to Señor Nepo's house—visits were risky—the latter introduced him to the man who was now passing as his grandson's helper. He was a tall skeletal man, his eyes very close to his nose and sunken deep into his face, into

his somewhat triangular face, slack-jawed, with cold, naked teeth that he always displayed like a grinning skull.

"Chos, chos, moyón, con . . ." he nibbled out the sounds, while the mulatto, his tongue tied into a knot, loosened the other knot, the one on his tie, so that he would not choke.

Where those sounds were spoken the ground was soaked with tears, with sweat, with blood, with blood in movement, as if it were perpetually flowing from the wounds.

It was better for them to meet in the cart. No place could be safer. They had deliveries in the Campo de Marte and they could talk for a long time, rolling along on the way back, or taking a ride while the grandson got out to collect some bills, looked for new loads, or made some purchases.

"Octavio Sansur," the purported helper repeated his name so that it would stick with the mulatto, at the same time as he sank his goad into the brown and white ox who was not pulling hard enough, and he added, showing his cold, sharp, and grainy teeth: "Octavio Sansur, or simply Tabío San . . . Can you remember? . . ."

"But your name is also . . ."

"Yes, my name is also Juan Pablo Mondragón. That's my real name."

Sitting on the front part of the cart, next to each other, they smoked homemade cigars that stank so much that they had the fragrance of the air that the flatulent brown and white ox was giving off.

"You dirty ox, you! . . ." Sansur punished him with the goad, making him run as fast as he could along with his peaceful companion, and the wheels of the cart turned faster.

"How many do we have left? Very few . . ." Sansur went on to say. "So many good people were sacrificed during the first moment!"

"Yes, there aren't many of us left," Juambo answered. "Everybody knows that on the coast people don't last long, and even less the people who were dispossessed. My father died, the Marín s and the Salcedos died."

"Yes, they even have that advantage over us. Our people disappear. The victims and witnesses of their cruel methods are easy food for death, and since there's no memory between fathers and sons here, they can wipe out a whole generation and then with the same impunity they wipe out another and another."

"My poor father. He ended up as a 'fruit hauler,' which is how I should end up if I want to be forgiven for the way I acted toward him."

"You can do him justice without having to 'haul fruit' . . ."

"I don't like that word, Donnn . . . because what I want is revenge for them, yes, so that someday they'll pay us for everything they've done to us: stealing our land, changing people who had a good living into a bunch of beggars, and, no power!, what hurts most is no power, not being able to do anything against them . . . Only someone like me, who's been through it with his own flesh knows what it's like!"

A squad of cavalry officers passed by the cart at an English trot. Horses, hooves, officers' backsides in the dust.

"And even tough people. It got so bad that one night, if some gringo hadn't fallen down a gulch at the Vuelta del Mico, Mr. Thompson would have been brought down by the Esquivels, the Lezamas, and some others who were waiting for him at a bridge. He was saved from the bridge, but that same night they planned to slice him up in bed with machetes. At the bridge it would have been with pistols and shotguns, but in his bed with machetes, and that's why people keep their knives sharp. And I wasn't going to sleep, I laid down by his door and I was supposed to howl like a hound dog when he sees death coming, and death would have been coming there . . . But damn it, he didn't close his eyes. He was bothered because he'd done in a countryman. He sent him over the cliff so that he wouldn't inform on him up there about the bad things he was doing, or he was worrying about his daughter, who was pregnant by a fellow who said he was an archeologist, so well-equipped that I thought he'd got her pregnant with a garden hose, because I saw everything. What was for sure was that he was still awake in the morning,

smoking and drinking whiskey. He hadn't even taken off his shoulder holster with all the bullets . . . Did he sense something? . . . And the boys outside, waiting for me to howl, spitting on the blades of their machetes."

"But now I think that if things work out you'll collect for all that. You won't get your land back, but at least they'll have to recognize the value and pay you for it."

"Maybe you've heard of the Lucero brothers. They promised us something too, because since they're stockholders in the Company they intended to speak for us and get us something . . . Something is something, don't you think? But then they didn't do anything."

"I know who the Luceros are: rich idealists who aren't good for anything except to offer the sky. With us, comrade, you only have to count on us, on our own strength. The peasants are the ones who know what to bring up and demand . . ."

"The peasants and the *draggers*, the ones being dragged along," the mulatto said roguishly. We call the ones who fawn over the government *draggers*, the servants of the one whose turn it is to be dictator."

"*Draggers*?" Sansur inquired with bewilderment.

"Yes, and you can count on us because we're plotting with the *draggers* . . ."

The *toloc toc* . . . *toloc toc* . . . *toloc toc* . . . of the cart over the stones made the use of that sad word more obvious in a different way, because without belonging to the group they were being dragged along.

Sansur spoke seriously again:

"On the south coast we lack organization. We have to go there and plant our seed, the voice of organization. For some people it will be a vague trust, for others a precise, immediate, and instinctive feeling in the face of danger . . ."

Toloc toc . . . *toloc toc* . . . *toloc toc* . . . the cart went on behind the steps of the oxen, who were barely lifting their feet off the ground.

"They say that there was a lot of killing in Bananera. In Bananera, in Barrios, all over down there . . ."

"Unfortunately, yes," Sansur answered the words of the mulatto. "A lot of comrades fell under the bullets of the troops that were mobilized to defend the interests of Banana, Inc., but there you are, the strike is still going on, which means that if there's organization, sacrifices aren't in vain the way they were with you people when they threw you off your land in order to set up the plantations. A lot of people were sacrificed individually and nothing came of it . . ." The voice of the leader could scarcely be heard as the cart went over a paved stretch. "Nothing came of it . . ."

"The *chos, chos, moyón, con*! . . ." Juambo objected at the omission of the respect that the war cry aroused in every man with the heart of a male who knew what it meant.

"That's true. Those sounds were there looking toward the future like a demand . . ."

Octavio Sansur bared his teeth between his lips, pale and thin like sutures in a wound, while he fastened his eyes on Juambo's.

The mulatto turned his eyes away to spit in the air. The saliva, as it left the cart, became rain, and when it fell on the cluttered, glassy road gleaming in the afternoon sun, it sank in among the small volcanoes. The name Chipo Chipó came to his mind. He had met him in his house when patrols were searching for him dead or alive. But Chipó, even though distant in his youthful memories, was the figure of a man who had existed, a real one, and this Tabío San, whom he was looking at, listening to, touching, feeling in that long conversation being held on a rolling cart, so that no one would suspect or be able to hear what they were saying, did not go beyond being a phantom of lime who had come out of a cemetery of living people, a man of bone, skin and bone, lidless eyes cornered against his nose, thin teeth, bloodless lips. Chipo Chipó spoke of not letting the lands be stolen, Sansur of not letting men be stolen. Chipó was lost in the Motagua River, and the whole struggle was halted. Like a shadow, Tabío

San could disappear himself with nothing being lost because others would take his place. He remembered Chipo Chipó as a weariness, a weariness burned by the desperation with which his parents looked at him, a bit incredulous at his preaching. He found Sansur numerical, tireless, exact, destructive, without the silence of enigma and water with which Chipó would remain silent, a total silence, a silence of the abyss, felt by the ear the way the nose feels tobacco smoke.

Sansur would not let himself be interrupted by the *toloc toc, toloc toc, toloc toc* of the cart.

"Yes, sir, we're going to need you. The time to break the encirclement has come. To give meaning again to *chos, chos, moyón, con* . . . not with useless sacrifice that works alone, but knowing that a person holds the winning cards in his hand because he's fighting in an organized way."

They fell silent in order to give breadth to the feeling that overflowed their chests, feeling their insides shaken by something that cannot be described with words, with gestures, something that needs silence to be expressed in its entirety.

Juambo sighed:

"I come ahead of you in life, if we use the order in which we're born, because there are befores and afters in life. What's certain in the end is that I'm older and I remember that on the coast, down in Bananera, when they took away what we owned, they used to repeat a prophecy of the famous Chipo Chipó Chipopó. He said that everything that's happening now would be seen by 'the eyes of the interred, more numerous than the stars' . . . Getting back the land! . . ." The cart ran over some stones, exchanging its parsimonious *toloc toc, toloc toc* for a *taca toco lon tlac, toco lon tlac, toco lon tlac* that was almost deafening. "Getting back the land! . . ." Juambo raised his voice.

Bats and flies. Those sticky flies of dusk. Norfolk pines, eucalyptus trees, clouds, the sound of wind.

"The time will come," Sansur said, "the time to get back the land or its value. Right now we have to save men, we have to

organize in order to be able to fight them because they're very powerful. We're going to need you. One question I wanted to ask you, can you go to the south coast? It would have to be one of these days."

"When, more or less?"

"You can decide that, but we can't let the wounds of our dead on the north coast grow cold."

"I could make the excuse that my mother is very old and that since they took Toba off she doesn't have anyone. Toba's my younger sister. The Doswell brothers took her away to be educated in the United States. The lawyers who handled Cosi's will . . ."

"Yes, yes, I know . . ."

"With that excuse I could go to the coast and better still if I cabled the boss for permission."

"Is the Green Pope still in Chicago?"

"They said that with the trouble in Bananera he was going to come back, but his daughter spoke to the caretaker from New Orleans by phone and told him that her father wasn't coming, so not to paint the house."

"There you are. What I get out of it is a fine piece of news for us. The old bandit isn't coming and that's just the news we need. You can go to the coast and take care of your dear mother without any cable or notification for Thompson, with only the caretaker's permission."

"He won't give me permission without the boss's word. He's a stickler and is beyond sentimentality."

"A sick mother is eloquent enough to melt stone."

The merry barking of a dog made Juambo lift his head from the cart where he was lying down and when he saw who it was he shouted with a strange feeling of pleasure in his voice, because all that they had been saying had been so hard for him, something like food that one likes the looks of but is afraid to try. What pleasure in his voice, human now, rediscovered, tasted, as he spoke to Juper!

"Settle down, you animal! All big and playful! Quiet! Quiet! Quiet down! How did you find me? How'd you find me is what I'd like to know . . ."

Juper was barking, a leap here, a leap there, placing his barks between the spokes of the wheels, spaces which, as they rolled rapidly along, gave him a cinematographic view of lights and shadows in nocturnal flight.

"I'm sorry to take you through these ashpits, but I want to stay in hiding. I grew up here and I know this section like the back of my hand."

Sansur's voice had also become human. The presence of the huge dog, looking just like the Cadejo, who had tired of barking at the wheels that paid him no attention and was giving out whimpers, yawns, howls.

"Curruchiche, ox . . . hey! . . . obey me, you blasted ox!"

One of the wheels stopped and spun at the spot where, with a prod, Curruchiche made the cart turn to the right in order to go along a flat stretch with grass and soft earth until it came to the mouth of a toothless alley with only a house here and there.

"We're going to the ashpits? . . ." Juambo's voice was alarmed in the twinkling darkness of the starry night.

"It's dangerous to play with fire, even more with a fire that's gone out!" Sansur's voice floated, porous with nostalgia. "I grew up around these ashpits and over there, on the other side, higher up, I'm going to stay and wait for the train to the south to go by."

Out of the valleys of ash there appeared some sooty, whitened creatures who were speaking, laughing, lighting cigarettes, and who disappeared where there were houses perhaps. A street light, the only one for many blocks around, hanging from a post on what passed for a corner, illuminated those whitish creatures from head to toe. How different was the whiteness of ash from the whiteness of those who worked in the lime quarries. Lime dust was a living powder; the dust of these pseudophantoms was a tomblike residue of burned charcoal.

Farther ahead a row of cats eaten by the ash, almost leprous,

with their hair falling out in clumps, yowling with eyes of hunger-blue ooze.

Sansur spat, cursing:

"By the great god . . . iva, it's just the same! I grew up in these ashpits. Years later, many years later I came back to hide from the police, who were looking for me like a needle in a haystack the time they shot . . . I can't remember who . . . they shot several of them this time . . . It's sad . . . they die like heroes and we can't even remember their names any more . . . and now that I've come back nothing has changed, everything, everything is just the same . . ."

"If you're going to stay here, who's going to take the cart back?" Juambo inquired. "Because I don't know anything about this sort of thing. In my day, in Bananera, but what's the good of all that, I was pretty good with a motorcar on the railroad."

"Don't worry. Señor Nepo's son is going to meet us and you can go back together . . ."

"Son? . . . You mean grandson . . ."

"That's right, grandson. The old man looks so young that I have trouble thinking of him as a grandfather. Have you known him for a long time? . . ."

"No, the one he's close to is my sister Anastasia."

"We won't tell your sister anything."

"We'll have to tell her something . . ."

"Yes, we'll tell her that there's hope for getting the land back, but not a word about the rest. She's senile and has a loose tongue."

"I'd thought so, but I'm glad, very glad that you say so."

With a leap Juper had jumped into the cart and was barking at the bats and the shapes of the ash-carriers, who, bent under tons of ash, could be seen passing, white and silent. A bark here, a bark there, panting, nervous, furious, at the designs traced by the bats who would appear and disappear in flight and at the shadows that came down from the city with their cold and heavy double-sacks of ashes—nothing weighs more than dead dust—

disillusioned with carrying that final residue of the beauty of trunks and branches, of whole forests turned into charcoal and firewood, and then into ash, alas!, used in the lye of soap factories that spread the stench of a dead dog about there, not far from the slaughterhouse where blood began to flow, or far from the Penitentiary where the jailers began to wake up.

Those shadows of a great river blinking with electric lights and the headlights of cars up above, which crowned the darkness of the ravine where the ash was piling up between houses and nettle patches. Some were barefoot, others wore sandals or old shoes. The thick carpet of dust swallowed their steps. And they emptied their double jute sacks after untying the cords with which they carried them on their backs or with a head pack. The ash fell into the ashpit without the slightest echo, like the light of the moon which had just appeared on the horizon. When they were through they shook the sacks, with sneezing, coughing, and choking, their eyes burning, their throats dry, their noses burning, and leaping back, scattering the buzzards that were watching for some death agony, the promise of a future banquet, they lost themselves in their shacks, which had been built with pieces of board, tin cans, and cardboard in what was now a sea of silver, for that was the appearance of the vast plain of death on which the moon was pouring out the white dust of night, charcoal that had been burned in the stars.

6

"And you say you grew up around these ashpits . . ."

"Yes. I was an orphan and I was taken in by a lady who acted as my mother and who lived near here in Bellaluz. A woman who had many men when she was young, because she'd been married and widowed several times, and with a whole string of names and surnames that she took off and put on like clothes. Magdelena Ángela Cenobia Cañiz, widow of Vivanco, the name of her last husband. You'd lose your wind if you tried to say it without taking a breath. She took on the name of Juana Darkness. She took it on or it was given to her, I don't know for sure. All I know is that everybody called her Juana Darkness."

In petticoats, with huge buttocks showing through, held up by two filthy legs marked with thick veins was the way Tabío San remembered her in the astringent atmosphere of the ashpits as the cart rolled along, and in the cart with him were Juambo and Juper, amazed at the look of that white, last world, as frozen as bones.

When he came under the control of Juana Darkness, little

Octavio was a feeble, innocent creature with glassy eyes, and he remembered that he was about to be taken to the orphanage by neighbors from the room where his parents had died of smallpox, or, rather, measles. They removed chairs, clothing, mattresses, from the room where he had lived with his parents, and set them all afire in the courtyard, and they were taking him to the asylum when he was rescued out of pity by a man named Tránsito, a friend or who knows what of the Darkness woman, and he was entrusted to her.

"You've been put under my care, don't you like that? . . ." the woman with the mounds of flesh under her petticoats and legs like long, heavy sticks asked him.

Tabío tried to hide his eyes, but since he had somewhat short eyelids, he was barely able to blot out the image of the hag who was talking to him, running a thin comb through her hair over and over again to get out the lice, tiny little dots that popped on the comb under the pressure of her fingernails.

"We women have long hair because that's what our troubles are like. We let our troubles grow long like our hair . . ."

That took place in the back part of Bellaluz in a poorly paved courtyard with a dry vine climbing up a hidden wall. When Doña Juana heard people walking in the neighboring courtyard, she raised her voice so that they could hear her say:

"If that damned cat keeps coming over here to piss, he's going to pay for it."

"A cat's better than an owl!" came the answer from the other side of the wall.

"Owls don't piss!" the Darkness woman shouted, blind with rage. "I don't like people who can stand the stink of cat piss . . ."

"They don't piss?" the answer was late in coming. "But they stink from fear, they don't think, they stink."

From that dialogue between courtyards, little Octavio learned that there was an owl in the house, and that same afternoon, after lunch, he discovered it. It was hard to tell whether it was awake or asleep. Motionless. Panegírica was what its owner called

it, and it would only awaken to her voice, if it could be called waking, as it ruffled its feathers with its eyes closed.

"Panegírica, we have a little boy someone gave us, you hear? He's not very pretty, but he's not ugly either. Don't you scold me later for not telling you before. He's a boy named Octavio. His parents were from Sansur."

And from then on he was not known by any other name but Octavio Sansur, as Juana Darkness had baptized him that afternoon before the owl.

Hooked beak, ruffled feathers on its forehead, the ears of a mouse.

Octavio Sansur would never forget the presence of Panegírica, who presided over the Friday sessions when his foster mother would deal the cards to discover the future for people who came to visit her, anxious to find out what was going to happen.

Ladies and gentlemen came to Bellaluz in the ashpit district on Fridays—they also came on other days, but the principal day, when most came, was Friday—to discover their fortunes under the supervision of Panegírica, as the woman's prophetic eyes read from a deck of cards that had the stench of a navel about it.

"You'll be better off here with me than in the orphanage," she told him as they went in, sure of what she was saying, "because in the orphanage they teach people to be humble, and for me humble people are the most worthless kind there are. Humble and praying people, another way of saying lazy people. And they keep them hungry. None of that here with me. You'll eat good. Juana Darkness is my name, not Juana Hungry Goulash. Meat pies during Holy Week, with milk, meat, and greens; chiles stuffed with white rice for Corpus Christi; Indian stew for the fifteenth of August; cold meats on saints' days, and buns and batter for Christmas Eve. On my own saint's day a marimba, cane liquor, and tamales.

Some ladies from the country, dressed in clothes as stiff as peanut shells, preferred for her to read from the "Oracle."

Beneath Panegírcia, under a hair shirt made of woven wire that

gleamed at the edges, the seven dragon claws sunken in lead, a hair chair that was the delight of Fray Servando de la Porciúncula, between leather eyelids, the *Book of the Seven Letters*, as Juana Darkness called it, dozed and she picked it up ceremoniously in the name of the Prophet and kissed it seven times before consulting it.

From the pages of the book of destinies, after running through its columns in which Babylonia had left a complete accounting of the future of the world, she straightened the middle finger with which she had touched the symbols and traced cabalistic signs and Arabic letters in the air, then sticking the tip of that same finger into the ear of the lady who was consulting her so that she could hear what the *Book of the Seven Letters* was saying, she would drop her eyes onto the woman's bodice to see what kind of underwear she was wearing, silk or cotton, so that she could charge her accordingly.

If the Prophet with lyre- and lute-playing hands came forth, the charge was higher (it was called the pink-nipple fee), and it was cheaper if it was the Prophet of the yataghan, the black-nipple fee.

After some time had passed, his protectress turned him over to the owner of one of the three best barbershops in the city, where Sansur began by sweeping up the customers' hair with the aid of a broom and a bronze dustpan during the time he was not polishing, cleaning, or buffing the shoes of some customer. Two or three times a day he cleaned the spitoons that stank of disinfectant and the butts of cigarettes or Havana cigars—a very important detail, for a barbershop is judged by the waste matter of its clientele—and changed the flypaper where the flies were stuck, trapped by honey and glue, and which, when they were black with insects, brought on not repugnance but envy in the bald-headed people who were having a manicure, a shave, or a vibrator massage.

The youngest barber, a Costa Rican from Puerto Limón with the voice of a tribune and eyes of golden mustard, would show

him the letters of newspaper headlines so that he could recognize them, and later on in a reader that the shiniest customer of the barbershop, who had a shine two or three times a day until they were no longer shoes but mirrors, had given him. Zope, or little buzzard, was the Costa Rican's nickname because of his walk, his jet-black hair, and his mustard-colored eyes. Daniel Mondragón was his name.

If it had not been for that citizen, he would have gone without learning how to read. His foster mother, with the supernatural power she held over the wives of chiefs of police, would never have been obliged to send him to public school.

"My boy is for private school, not public school, and since I'm not rich enough to send him, he'll go without an education. That's all we need, to have one of those long-nosed teachers we've got so many of keep throwing up the fact that he's poor in his face. Night school? That's like being in jail . . ."

When Juana Darkness found out that Sansur could read, she said to him:

"I'm not sorry I sent you to Don Pepeque López. I don't regret it at all. They taught you how to read and you've picked up all the good manners of the people you rub elbows with there, all of them fine people. I could have sent you out as apprentice to a shoemaker, but, God save us, a shoemaker never gets beyond his knife and his wax; or to a baker, but they all get consumption from not sleeping at night, except for the ones who eat the eggs that are supposed to go into the bread, the way a lot of them do, but that's not honest and that's why they say 'honest bread from a baker who's dead' . . . !"

Panegírica was listening to her and was reflecting so as not to lose one bit of the truth.

"He can learn to be a carpenter, I thought, but then I said to myself that the days when carpenters were like our lord St. Joseph are over: now they do everything by machine, saws to cut the big pieces, sanders, planers, and he'd run the risk of losing a hand. What I never did consider was making a blacksmith

out of you. You'd be in among the hooves of the mules and a bad kick in the wrong place when you least expected it, who needs it, or working the bellows next to the fire, which makes your blood boil."

The first book he read, *The Credos of Freedom*, made a deep impression on him. It had been left behind in the barbershop one Saturday. He did not put it down until Monday. "Books are to be read, not memorized," Master Pepeque told him when he heard him reciting from memory what he had read in *The Credos of Freedom*, by Bergua, happy to hear on his own lips a different language from the one in daily use and being able to join with the *comuneros*, who, driven by the words of the book, had undertaken the struggle for rights in Spain.

And from a *comunero* he went on to identify himself with the people of the French Revolution. Aroused to the marrow of his bones by the figure of Marat, he bathed in his words. Other people took other showers. He took his shower in Marat, "the Friend of the People." "The Revolution is all in the gospels. Nowhere is the cause of the people so well-defended; nowhere are there more curses against the rich and the powerful of this world . . ."

His first article, published in *El Mutualista* under the title "Marat and the Modern Proletariat," brought together in a vague and sentimental way the pain he felt as a disinherited person, personifying himself in that creature who goes through the streets of the city from door to door asking: "Any ashes . . . ?" and who, after scraping out the ovens in bourgeois homes, returns with his sack full of tragic residue to the district of ashpits and soap works, as much a slave as real slaves and poorer than they.

In another piece of writing, "Freedom without Bread," he followed Marat's thought more closely by maintaining that "freedom cannot exist for those who have nothing." He published it in *Renovación Obrera*, and he said: "Newspaper owners get rich, hurrah for freedom! The sons of the rich work at poetry and prose, hurrah for freedom! Businessmen increase their sales with publicity, hurrah for freedom! Only the people cannot repeat

that shout because they are hungry, degraded by their rags, and muted by the habit of silently tolerating their torturers."

It was a bad year when he read 93, by Victor Hugo. He contracted an illness that would be his banner of manhood among his peers and Juana Darkness died of "Hindustanic palpitations." She had diagnosed it herself but was unable to prepare the medicine that would have saved her, white sugar and ground pearls, and one day when, just as if they had sprung out of the earth, countless relatives that Sansur had never seen in his life until then appeared, she was laid out on her box-bed as cold-looking as Panegírica, an item that none of the members of that tribe, men and women dressed in black, wanted to take while everything was being carried off, and the owl fell, along with a shelf of forbidden books (magic, palmistry, and astrology), to the young barber, who around that time, during one of Don Pepeque López's expansive moments had been given a bullfighter's initiation by the dean of barbers, with white cape, razor, and shears in the place of the sword, and with the admonition never to cut off any ears.

Juana Darkness's bed was also left behind, and in a cart drawn by a human beast (Marat was coming out), he carried off the bed in which for a whole night Doña Magdalena Ángela Cenobia de Vivanco, previously de Calcaluis, and before that de Partegas (the order of husbands did not alter the product), had been laid out; a mahogany table, the bookcase, the books, a yellow-painted pine chest, and the owl, an ugly bird that made the human draft animal that was pulling the cart spit thinly, for it seemed to him that the trip was a very bad omen.

He woke up Thursday morning in a room on the Avenida de los Árboles and very early he went to the door because he wanted to see the street, that infinite pleasure of looking at the street; breathing in the coolness outside the limits of the circle represented by his room, which had only four walls, a floor, and a ceiling, and which was rented as a complete habitation; and searching about for a place to have breakfast. He brought his eyes out into the

natural light. He had spent almost the whole night reading *Conventional Lies*, by Max Nordau. The bells were ringing for early mass. It would have been better if he had not opened the door. Other doors were opening and, as his bad luck would have it, those of a strange store with the look of a scaffold.

Better known in the jungle than red pine because he was the one who paid the best prices to those who came to the city to sell him birds with gaudy plumage or prodigious throats, and because he could speak the dialects of the hunters and dealers in captured animals, Señor Roncoy Domínguez opened his business as on every day.

His complaint was that he did not earn much from that sale of songbirds, but he managed to put away a few pesos because he dressed in rough cloth, one set of grimy clothing for all of his activities, and he ate the same things as his feathery merchandise: sliced alligator pears, bananas, crumbled tortillas, and bread crumbs, drinking only water so that the sticky food would go down his narrow gullet. His only important expense was shoes, high shoes with elastic tops which never wore out because he only put them on to go downtown. The rest of the day he spent in sandals, annoyed at having to bear on the tops of his naked, sockless feet the charms of the birds, who sprinkled him with whitish droppings, white and warm as it fell, and which would cool off, stiff and toasted, like the shell of hard pockmarks. He could not read, he counted on his fingers, but in keeping accounts with kernels of corn so as not to be cheated by the people who bought his singing creatures he was a master. He did not let himself be cheated by them nor did he cheat the Coban Indians who brought him the birds from the jungle.

Such was his life within the four walls of a broad room with a floor lower than street level, and from the walls, on nails and hooks, were hung cages and more cages, lining the walls, in addition to those that hung from the ceiling and several others that he made room for in the doorway when the sun was out, as the

best advertisement for his bird business, and so that the prisoners would be merry, for they refused to sing unless they could see the sky.

The cleaning of the cages, the changing of the water in the cups, the distribution of rations of sliced alligator pears, red plantains, bread crumbs for some and wet tortillas for others, was done behind closed doors, almost by touch, in the drowsiness of the light that slipped in through cracks in the door. With a brisk broom he swept the brick floor of the room and the pavement outside, sprinkling water first so as not to raise much dust. He was absent from his business, which he attended to at all hours, only for the short time he took to go to the nearby bakery to buy batter for his parrots, an expense that pained him because he was nurturing hopes that were never realized, for one of them was mute and the other one could only say in a hoarse voice: "There you go! . . . There you go! . . ." And because of the competition of the "phonygraphs," as he called them, who was going to buy a parrot, a fowl that eats and cannot be eaten, since people now had wind-up parrots? . . .

"Domínguez, stop fucking them up like that!" a drunkard shouted early in the morning as he passed, the oldest son of a drunken family which, early in the morning, as people were on their way to work, would leave their big house with shouts, hiccuping, vomiting, and fear, almost in a stampede, carrying in their hands books, pieces of furniture, holy images, and pictures with the noble purpose of exchanging them in some liquor store, to satisfy their need for a drink.

Domínguez would not answer.

"A cow flop should hit you in the face," the drunkard went on in a menacing tone, "to blind you with shit. So many poor birds put in jail because of you . . ."

Domínguez did not answer.

"You just wait a minute, I'm going to get my family . . ."

The drunkard went off step by step, staggering, but when he reached his house his three brothers were no longer in any mood

for uprisings, lying on their cots, the oldest of them on the floor with his eyes crystallized under his lids and a suppuration of drivel on his lips.

The least drunk raised his head to say:

"If you're going to kill that guy I'll keep the parrot and sell it for a drink!"

"You don't know what's going on, Beetlebrow. I've already promised the parrot to the liquor store around the corner. They'll give me six throat-ticklers."

"Keep the parrot, then . . . All right, but don't count on your brother to beat up that damned old man . . . I withdraw from your holy crusade to turn the birds loose, if that's what you want . . . The parrot or nothing . . ."

"Then I'll do it alone . . ."

"You better lay down and stop fucking around . . ."

Roncoy Domínguez, the bird man, sure of being able to repel any attack with his door beam and his "lady of agony," a double-edged dagger, paid little attention to the threats of that family of human rags, who gave off fumes of liquor, hairy, bearded, with their shoes untied. What they most probably wanted was for him to give them some money to buy drinks with, but their eyes would never see that day, least of all with insults and blackmail based on the threat of reporting him to the Society for the Protection of Animals.

Luckily for Domínguez, this dreadful family was forced to abandon the house of their forebears, put out because a usurious and free-thinking lawyer who held a mortgage on it foreclosed on them. Roncoy Domínguez almost applauded when he saw his staggering neighbors leave with their belongings and trash in a cart. They did not have much left. Cupboards, dressers, tables, and other furniture that they had not been able to take out and sell because it was too heavy. But he could not stand there watching for long, because at that moment the Cobans arrived, Indians dressed in white whose flying cargo had been set down by his door.

The oldest of the Cobans, a face of dried beef dropped in

ashes, hair that was not hair but the bark of a century-old tree, dealt with Domínguez for the sale of the load without raising his voice, and Roncoy answered him softly in Quekchí, as was proper in a relationship between people like them.

People stopped to stare at the cages tied on top of one another, cages made of bamboo, gleaming as if made of greenish ivory, and inside the cages the fire- and blood-colored woodcocks, the mourning of ebony in their bills, feet, and eyes; the cliff sentries with eyes as soft as mirrors; the water-whistles, jumping about and with the violins in their throats giving off chains of drops, trills of bubbling water; the zenzontles with brown feathers and four hundred sounds in their bills.

Domínguez talked and talked and the Coban answered him, the chief of the Cobans, and the deal was being closed, the accounting done in corn: two and four, six and nine, seven and fifteen, that was all that could be heard in Spanish. When the deal was closed the Coban called to his companions and asked them if it was all right to leave it at that. And they left it that way.

Roncoy, when the Cobans had left—one behind the other, followed by their sons and their dogs—, began to accommodate the newly arrived prisoners, speaking to them with the hypocritical sweetness of a jailer who knows that those unfortunates would spend the rest of their lives in prison, and observing them, blowing on their feathers to see which ones were the best and would break out first with their songs of shadow and water.

It would have been better if the young barber had not looked out the door that morning, observing the neighborhood a bit, trying to see if there were some place nearby where he could have breakfast. It would have been better if Octavio Sansur had not laid eyes on that strange store with the look of a scaffold.

Domínguez had just opened up his business for the sale of birds and the latter were greeting the bustle of the day with their morning songs, a tremulous orchestra that flowed out into the newly swept everyday street.

Sansur's features hardened; he crossed the street, and with a

leap—the floor of the business was lower than the street—he stood in the middle of the room and passed his eyes over the cages like a man possessed by a storm all thunder and lightning.

A blow of his fist knocked Domínguez to the ground. It took the latter so much by surprise that he could not reach for his dagger, although he tried to drag himself across the floor to the door in order to get the beam. A kick in the arm at shoulder level which reached part of his jawbone, ear, and head left him unconscious, although it looked more as if he had remained like that voluntarily, motionless, in order to give the impression of being dead so that the madman would not finish him off, the madman who did not have enough hands, hands, hands to open the cages from which the birds escaped and, after fluttering about in the darkness of the room, found the door and were lost in the luminous splendor of the blue day.

Sansur went back to his room and gathered together a few things: clothes, books, the most necessary, shears, razors, combs, and ran away to the South Coast in search of work. He was afraid that he had killed the bird dealer. The only thing he could remember about those moments was his ringing voice, blood made into breath, singing the *Marseillaise* as he opened the cages, repeating "sacred liberty . . . sacred liberty . . ."

Panegírica and the carter made it easy for the police to clear up the facts in that terrible violation of the law. Once it was proven who the perpetrator was, they were able to establish that robbery had not been the motive. When Domínguez was questioned about the possibility of an enemy or vengeance, he answered with the philosophy of a peasant: "I never did no favors so I wouldn't have no enemies. The man was crazy." "Yes," the carter corroborated before the justice of the peace who was taking the statements, "he had me carry a few pieces of junk that he called furniture and an owl. Mad as a March hare, he seemed to me. I haven't had a single load since I carried that cursed ugly bird."

"He had to be crazy, because when he was beating and stomp-

ing me, leaving me for dead on the floor, he was singing that the day of glory had come, and he was opening the cages hollering at the birds: 'sacred liberty, sacred liberty.' "

An order was given for the arrest of Octavio Sansur, but he had been swallowed up by the sea. He was hiding in the salt marshes of Puerto de San José, working as a laborer, until he got a job as barber on a ship coming from Salina Cruz on its way to Panama. He stayed in Panama and stuffed himself with dollars working in the barbershop of the best hotel. Friendships formed under the edge of his razor got him a Panamanian passport under the name of Juan Pablo Mondragón. The Juan Pablo for Marat, his idol, and the Mondragón in memory of the Costa Rican who had first taught him to read. It said in his passport: birthplace Taboga (an island where he would have liked to have been born), parents unknown, religion Catholic, barber, twenty-three years old. He worked and he read. The money he earned was just about enough to buy books and learn English, a language he came to handle perfectly. Leave the New World? . . . Many times he was on the dock next to ships ready to leave for Europe, and there he would stand, his bags packed and carrying his working papers. A kind of elephantiasis which began with an ant-tingling on the soles of his feet immobilized him and he never took the decisive step. He would close his eyes and raise his hands to his ears, trembling, as if his body were all a piece of the ship's whistle as it blew.

Roncoy Domínguez was walking about the store with empty cages green with anger, with bile flowing into his blood, frothing, desperation painted on his clenched hands. "Good becomes evil when it comes alone," he repeated, "but bad luck always brings something good! . . . I'll pay whatever it is, even if I'm left without pants, just so long as the judge doesn't turn Panegírica over to me! . . ."

He needed a lawyer, a good lawyer, someone who could defend him from what was no longer just a threat, because they were looking for him from the court to notify him and turn the

bird over to him, with the subsequent transfer of the creature from the room of the near-madman who had turned the birds loose, to his uninhabited store.

There was no need for a lawyer. The owl had been stoned to death and lay on the floor with her heart broken under her soft feathers. The carter had taken it upon himself to put her out of her misery so that he would not die of starvation. Ever since he had carried her in the cart things had taken a bad turn. No one called him. He did not kill her. He put her out of her misery. Those beasties are souls in misery. He went back to his cart and said to it, putting his lips close to a wheel, as if it were a great ear with triangular openings. "Cheer up, cart, because now we're going to have work. With the owl dead we're going to have work!"

It was late at night to be wandering around in a cart, but they had talked about everything. The "conspiracy of the draggers," Juambo would go down to the coast with a message and there Tabío San's second-in-command would give him instructions. Señor Nepo's grandson was waiting for them now near the place where the railroad passed through those ashpits.

There was Damiancito. They had to say good-by. Juambo shook Octavio Sansur's hand, which was dirty with lime and perspiration, as he pronounced with emphasis what was still his battle cry:

"*Chos, chos, moyón, con*! . . ."

Damiancito prodded the oxen before it got late, and the cart, white from hauling lime, was lost like a ghostly bed on wheels of ash between the silent plains and the volcanoes, under a full moon, with a stench of leaching water where the moon was more dampness than gold. Juper showed his magnificent teeth but he did not bark, inhibited by the immense slumber of the night and the silence of the ashpits.

PART TWO

7

The train loses speed as it goes into a curve. Each wheel is a wound made of rims that shriek along the edge of the rails and each window is a slow flicker between mountain ranges of stone and sky and flood-prone fields that are a single sheet of sun-water at that time, two-thirty in the afternoon. The stridency, the howling, the creaking of the cars on the roadbed shake up a young woman passenger who is traveling like someone far away under an Italian straw hat, the body of a child sunk into a tailored suit the color of dark sand which gives her the look of a grownup, the fragments of her feet in shoes with exaggerated high heels, and her weepy eyelids under the protection of dark glasses. She is shaken so much by that shriek of endless grinding that she feels the noise burning in her ears, her hair, the roots of her uneven teeth, and she cannot close the sound out of her ears, which are under the palms of her hands, as she presses them, maddened, on the verge of a nervous attack, as it sometimes happened to her with the jangle of her alarm clock. She gathers her luggage and prepares to get off.

Rails, ties, embankments reinforced with stone, posts, signals, drains, bridges, all of that is dragged behind the large iron snake and its flames and steam as it reduces its speed, breaks apart, and does not wish to stop because it knows there is no station there and that if there is one it is just an annoyance. Trains know the great terminals and the way-stations and they enter them or pass them by happily whistling to the rhythm of the bell, the huffing of the boilers, and the sneezing of the brakes, and even though the engineer did not drive them and even though no one had to get off or on, they would stop mysteriously, not as at that moment, against the white-hot will of the locomotive, in the open, in the middle of the countryside, for the benefit of a lady passenger with a ticket to Mile 177 . . .

"This, my friend, is like stopping a river to let a mermaid get off!" was gallantly said by the only passenger who had exchanged a few words with the young lady in dark glasses who was going to the door of the coach, but whether she heard him or did not hear him, and even though he tried to help her with her luggage, she scarcely noticed him. A passenger to whom she told her name and that she was going to be the head teacher at the combined school in Cerropóm.

"Is there sand in the engine?" an old man shouts, adding as a forewarning, "I'm not saying so, I'm just asking!"

"Some dead animal on the tracks and until they get it off we can't go on! . . ." another shouts to a third who cuts him off immediately:

"He's the animal and he only talks because he's got a mouth! For your information, it's a landslide, and we're all fu . . . mbled up because we're going to have to change trains. We're going to have to go ahead on foot, get off this train, cross over the landslide, and on up the other side and take the train that will be sent to pick us up God knows when . . ."

"Enough of your gloomy predictions!" a fat old maid complained, traveling half-naked, sticking her head out of the window so that the gold on her ears flowed down and her breasts came half out of her low-cut dress.

But everything spoken turns cold on them, the spoken and the broken, with only a blare on the Doomsday trumpet by the mouth and fingers of a spiritualist who announces that a mad train is approaching and is going to collide with them at any moment.

"We'll only be spared if it breaks down on the way! . . ." the spiritualist shouts, but no one pays any attention to him. "Every man for himself . . . it's a mad train . . . it's coming at full steam without any engineer! . . ."

But something makes the passengers grouped at the windows, all eyes and ears to find out what was going on, become silent. From one of the first-class coaches, the last or the next to the last, the involuntary cause of so much alarm and uproar emerges, the mermaid for whom that human river had stopped in open country.

"That's why . . . that's why this stinking train stopped," a half-breed with a shiny, caramel-colored face was shouting. "It's all right, gentlemen! . . . It was to let off that chippy who looks like an owl!"

"You've arrived . . . take off those glasses . . . they're calling you an owl . . . can't you hear? . . ." the passenger says to herself as she steps down from the coach and takes the first steps that are uncertain because of the high heels and the weight of the suitcases. "You've arrived, thank God, you've arrived, you've arrived, and now that you have your feet on the ground, act as if you were yourself, not the faraway passenger who occupied your seat, the one for Mile 177. Because it doesn't seem true, it's as if it wasn't you who took the train from the Central Station. Someone else traveled in your place, with your name, your baggage, your body, your clothes, not knowing what to do or what to say, and that's why you're moving with a slowness that makes one think of someone else's movements, gestures that you have to imitate, and you're talking to yourself as with a person who isn't there and they talk to you without really knowing when you're you and when you're the other person, the one who got on and took your seat, the one they put on the train, and thinking that you helped her get on, you didn't have any strength, but

you pushed her, you made her obey her destiny, not to stay behind, not to miss the train . . . You've arrived . . . but who has arrived, the other one; you stayed behind with the relatives and friends who made the sacrifice of getting up early and coming to see you off with their hair half-combed, their faces smelling of soap, and their eyes sleepy; you stayed behind in those arms that hugged you at the end, in those eyes that kissed you with their look at the end . . . But, then who was the one who waved her handkerchief moist with tears by the window as she said good-by to the one who was growing smaller on the platform in time with the speed with which he was growing larger in your heart? . . . Ah! . . . that was you too . . . the one with a cascade of frothy dream-hair falling over sleeping skin, an infantile mouth with lips full of love and afflicted toward the corners, tall-shouldered and under the clothing breasts with no brassiere, hard, loose, tingling . . ."

Heads, necks, faces, hands, hats, mouths with gold teeth, ears with earrings, belts with revolvers or machetes at the windows and doors of the coaches waiting for the train to start . . .

"Take off those glasses . . . they're calling you an owl! . . . Can't you hear? . . . Mermaid . . . Chippy . . . Owl . . . Let them! . . . Look at something and don't pay any attention to them! . . . Look at that red flag stuck into the ground not far from the ties, not very close either . . . how its glow of an ember enlivens the yellowish sand of the embankment along which the ironed tracks flee, and how it moves the colors, the greens of the fields, the pastures, the trees, the canefields, the mountains, the ochers, the blues that in a unanimous silence jump about and mingle in a new life under the spell of its flapping beat . . .

"The only one getting off is you . . . A flag stop . . . Mile, stop 177 . . . Just enough time for you to get off and for a Negro couple to get on a second-class coach, people the color of tarred canvas, the woman with her hair in a turban made out of an orange-colored stocking and the man with a large red tie like the flag waving in the wind . . . Nothing afterward . . . A whistle

. . . pieces of the train in the smoke . . . The peace of the whistle . . . pieces of the train in the echo . . . Peace . . . pieces of the train . . ."

The feeling of the decapitated countryside . . .

"You'll have to leave your shoes on or take them off . . ." you tell yourself, heading with your bags toward a large tree that dominates everything like the green cupola of a church. "Your shoes? . . . You wrinkle your brow . . . Your glasses move . . . You have to take them off or leave them on, you can't keep on like that . . . But . . . But if you leave them on you'll get stuck in the sand where you go wobbling along through the small islands of it and jumping so as not to fall down the embankment which on that side separates the tracks from the big amatle tree where the carriage should be waiting for you . . . Your shoes and your hat . . . Your hat? . . . Yes, take it off or tie it on . . . you can't hold it on against the wind by just moving your head . . ."

Neither a station nor anyone to ask about the fine carriage. Neither a building nor a name. Flag-stops don't have names. They're like aimless Souls. They're nameless.

"But somebody will come . . ." you think when you reach the amatle, your arms feeling torn off from your shoulders from the weight of the suitcases. The person who takes care of the flag will have to come. It's the only thing alive because of its color of blood and its motion of a bullfighter's cape on the surface of those quiet fields, those blind plains of evaporated water, and you'll ask him about the carriage."

It's not a man. It's a woman who comes and picks up the flag. Her head wrapped in a cloth, her clothing ragged, barefoot. A yellow image of the sickness of quiet waters and inherited miseries. She pulls it up and has trouble furling it. The wind pulls it out of her hands. It struggles, turns about as if it were a kite without a tail. Finally she rolls it up, puts it under her arm, and leaves. The wind agitates her clothing, touches her, pushes her along, blows her up, looking all the while for where she has hid-

den the flag. The wind never gives up. For moments it seems to hold her back, stops her from going forward. She must have her hut nearby and that's where she's dragging herself, raising dust.

"Go ahead! Go on! Catch up with her! Find out about the carriage! Don't you want to find anything out? Are you upset about the bouquet of camellias you left on the train? . . ."

And in that misfortune of a station, because there was no station, it was wilderness, no telephone, no telegraph, no means of telling them at the next place the train stopped that on one of the seats in the first-class coach you had forgotten the most precious part of your luggage, his red camellias . . . his or yours . . . ?

Forgotten? . . . Doubts? . . . It would be horrible! . . . No, no, it would be horrible if they had fallen behind the seat when you got up to get your bags, the bouquet of crimson camellias that you were wearing on your breast, pinned to your dress—"like a heart on the outside," the man who was flirting with you had said, the one who gave you his card—or if you had dropped them in the aisle as you hurried out!

Take the handkerchief away from your eyes. Your tears look like fat little chicks, but they don't run.

What about the carriage? . . . What about the woman wrapped in the flames of the wind, the one who took the flag away? . . . What about your dark glasses? . . .

In the expanse around her on one side the land went down to the sea and on the other up to the sky. In the background, fields of very bright green clinging to the skirts of the mountains, brighter now under the glowing sun, and from there to the embankment over which the train traveled, at a half-turn, plains and more plains of a deep green, almost blue. Yet, the amatle in whose shade you are sitting on a sort of bench has nothing to envy in so many and such jewel-like greens. During winter and summer it keeps its hairless leaves shiny and bright like a goldsmith's embossed work, sketched, standing out against its trunk and its large branches, a dark-skinned, knotty giant. The others

are temporary. The green of the fields withers, the emerald of the plains rots, the leaves fall from the live-oak trees, the coffee trees are covered with purple drops, the jacarandas darken, the tamarinds become naked. Only the amatle is changeless, outside of time . . .

Why that shout? . . . A lizard? . . . Just a lizard made you shout? . . . Did you think it was a snake? . . . And why so much flapping about, moving your hands, arms, head, your broad-brimmed hat? . . . Because of a wasp . . . It's a horsefly and a fly who comes alone is welcome, because there are several enormous gadflies that jump out of the air and stick to your skin like sucking-glasses made of electric wire and wings of hot smoke.

Three thirty-five on the small wristwatch that your parents gave you on graduation day and the damnable carriage still not there. It was two o'clock when you sat down under the amatle.

Walk. Walk a little. The worst thing about waiting is the stiffness.

"We teachers are waiting-room cripples, so therefore, young lady, allow me not to congratulate you! . . ." you had been told by one of your professors when the champagne was beginning to work on your head on graduation day. "Waiting-room cripples . . . don't forget that, eh?, and be ready for it!"

A few steps this way, a few steps the other way, like a sentry, your hands clasped behind your back, your fingers stiff, folded, locked, small and hard like the mouthpiece of a bridle, and your head down over your chest, your neck ready for the knife so that you would not have to go on waiting for the carriage that was not coming—it was useless to look at the horizon, no matter how high you stood, and you did not have to stand very high because your heels kept you on tiptoes, your neck craned and shading your eyes with your hand—it wasn't coming, wasn't coming, wasn't coming . . .

4:07 . . .

4:09 . . .

4:13 . . .

A bad omen: 13! Say 14! . . . 4:14 . . . and it wasn't coming, wasn't coming . . .

What can you do? . . . Go look for the woman who took out the flag and took off with it and ask her? . . . But . . . how could she leave the suitcases . . . all alone? . . . And forget about carrying them . . . the weight and the puddles of water where birds of all colors and sizes were gathering in an imitation of a feather border.

4:15 . . .

4:16 . . .

From now until 4:30

don't look at your watch again . . . all right? . . . unless the carriage comes before then, because they won't wait for night to fall before they get you nor will the brutes expect you to throw your bags on your back and start out through those unknown hills to Cerropóm . . .

4:20 . . .

But wasn't it to be 4:30 when you would look at your watch? . . . Yes, but you had to do something before you collapsed on that bench made of logs and branches, and even though some people like rustic furniture, it's the negation of all comfort . . .

4:30 . . .!

At last, 4:30! . . .

Cripples, no . . . We teachers are people with a cramp, in every waiting-room and with every hopeless hope!

4:59 . . .

Yesterday at this time . . . No, not at this time . . . One minute later . . . It was already five o'clock when he came to pick you up at the dressmaker's, at the door, that is, the future Galen, your future husband, and he invited you to take a drive in his car.

The farewell ride. In a loving flash of lightning, where didn't he take you, he wanted to cover the places, all the places in the outskirts of the capital where he had been happy with . . . With whom? . . . With whom could it have been? . . . with you . . . with the absent one, the one who took the train, not the one who

stayed behind in his arms at the moment of departure and who was also you . . . although . . . how can you be sure that it was not someone else in his arms who wasn't that other one who is you . . . bunk . . . you flunk . . . That other one, no! . . . That other one, no! . . . Not even that other other one! . . . Not even that other you! . . . You're even jealous of yourself and what a cross you will have to bear until he gets his medical degree and you can get married or until you can manage a transfer to a school in the capital . . .

Now, yes . . . five o'clock . . .

The pilgrimage began at that time. Where didn't they go for you to say good-by and for them to see you, he said, for the landscape to see you with him . . . The landscape . . . the quiet spots . . . the roads . . . the shadows of the trees . . . the water . . . the mysterious crags . . . They didn't leave a single place unvisited . . . places where they would arrive and, after a kiss, keep on driving, the car going fast . . . fast, faster, blood . . . fast, faster, time . . . From five in the afternoon until the first stars came out, miles and miles, erasing distances, erasing time, converting everything into a message of pressing perfume, into sleeping wood . . .

First they were bouncing along in the car as it jumped along the broken pavement of the road that went by the ravines behind the North Racetrack to the edge of those immense abysses of birds and fireflies, fatigued, weepy from being in his arms, you whispered to him: "The songs from the nests are driving me crazy! . . ."

And from there at a speed of mile-versus-watch to a small town of invisible Indians, potters, and charcoal burners who lived in hiding in huts built among crags and foliage with as many leaves as the kisses on his burning mouth . . . He was kissing you . . . kissing you . . . until he turned you into charcoal . . . clay and dreams . . . sleepy movements . . . and the bluish worm of smoke that was rising out of buried bonfires . . .

And from that village of lost smoke, a deep and twilight mist,

deep ravines, they rolled along dirt roads that unrolled like a cord around the hills shaped like tops until they came out high up on the mountains from where so many times before they had seen the lights of the city go on as it was being shaken in the bottom of the valley at that time by the Angelus bells. Thousands and thousands of electric lights opened their eyes at the same time and the rite was to be there and kiss each other at that moment . . .

The neighing of a horse that sprinkled the silence with sounds. Surprised? You were so absent that it was a return to your broken self, palpitating, a recovery of your hands toward your breast and your senses, happy, immensely happy to be able to say: "There's the carriage! . . ." What you'd been daydreaming and what had drawn you back to yesterday afternoon was very beautiful, but it vanished, it was erased in the presence of the broken-down vehicle drawn by two dark horses from which a man got down who said his name was Cayetano Duende, a peasant with a half-square head, narrow forehead, large ears, bulging eyes, and with many, many manners.

He took the suitcases, one after another, and he invited you to get into the carriage, a buggy in which, very much the lady, you occupied the rear seat.

"The carriage is bad and the road's worse; if you don't want to get there all bruised-up you'd better ride up front with me . . ." Cayetano Duende warned her.

"I'm fine here . . ." you answered dryly, nervous, annoyed, wanting him to start as soon as possible so that you could feel yourself on your way to your destination. In a hurry to arrive? . . . In a hurry to get out of there? . . . In a hurry for everything. It was like dying to be leaving your love far behind, and a person who feels that he is dying is in a hurry for everything, he doesn't know what it is, but he's in a hurry.

"Grown-ups give their names and a body listens to them," the coachman complained, reins in hand, ready to start, "and since you haven't told me I'm asking you, not just for the sake of asking but to know what your name might be."

"Malena Tabay, at your service . . ."

"That's all we'd need! The one at your service is me, Cayetano Duende. Is this the first time you've come here to teach?"

"This is my first teaching assignment . . ."

"First teaching assignment . . . Giddap, there . . ." he said to the horses and they started out. "Let's see what you think of the school . . . Well, it's not exactly a school. It's a big room where they hold classes. Maybe you'll think it's all right, maybe you'll like it. They had Zonicario Barillas paint it. An easy paint job. Whitewash and a brush. The hard part was the roof. Zonicario would replace the tiles during the day and the Sisimite would break them at night . . . He had to talk to the priest to bless the sky on the roof side of the house so that it would rain holy water. And it rained holy water and Sisimite kept on tearing out the tiles with his fire-cat claws. The devil doesn't like leaks to be fixed because they make a Christian curse and grumble the most. They also spoke to Chanta Vega, the woman who never runs away when there's a chance to please important people, about food and lodging. You'll stay there, eat there, you'll be fine there, I know what I'm saying, because next to the hotel in Santa Lucrecia, beyond Cerropóm, the best place around is Chanta Vega's."

Malena was barely listening to the information Cayetano Duende was giving out, clinging to the progress of the carriage, with her eyes bright, her pulse ticklish, the wind of the chilly afternoon in her nostrils, not because they were going fast, as yesterday in the car of her absent loved one—the cart was going so slowly that a person could have kept up with it on foot—but because of the precipices that they were leaving behind. The alternating dangers of that route as it unwound above bottomless ravines, stone and sand, sand and stone, permitted her to give the shape of a shout to the feeling of terror that went with her between the folds of the mountains, a naked world, deserted, and with stony stretches where the land, vegetable, burned by erosion, took refuge on the highest peaks.

The road, relieved of the first slopes, the steepest, perhaps,

slipped along through flat terrain sown with pines, dried cornfields, fields of straw, and abandoned huts, the kind that are occupied only during planting and harvest time. Furtively, as she felt evening coming on, Malena began to follow the hands of her watch. She wanted to say to herself something that she had already said: "Yesterday at this time all the lights of the city were going on at the same time and my love was with me! . . ." But, damn it . . . squandering their time like madmen, running back and forth during that last afternoon, not staying together in the car, closer, closer, without moving, silent, the silence and the quiet of a love that touches the depths of life, or kissing, hugging, drawing so tight together that they couldn't breathe, not knowing how to get back from the depths, between the tortures of desire and caresses that could go only so far . . . But no, what a man!, that was the only plausible explanation she gave for him, and on he went, covering distances, burning up in speed what he felt by saying good-by to her, going everywhere at the same time, seeing the lights of the city go on, kissing and going back down to see the moon come out over the waters of a lake from the lookout point near the airport, where the dry corn plants, shaken by the wind, sounded like airplane propellers.

It had grown dark, but the afternoon was still there, mineral, glowing, the porous brilliance of stone as it is cut. Malena tried to uncover her ears, beating the palms of her hands against their frozen shape. The altitude had deafened her and from far off she could hear the voice of Cayetano Duende.

"Yes, child . . ." she could make him out and in the darkness he had grown like all the hills around.

"Yes, child, I'm a talking hill," he had guessed her thoughts, "and that's why now that it's dark I'm the only one who's doing the talking."

Malena felt that he was disappearing on his seat, irremediably, moving his fingers like bunches of cold keys.

"Everything can be opened with these keys, child," the coachman guessed her feeling, "if you remember Cayetano Duende."

How remote his voice sounded as it came out of his hilltop head! "His fingers are the keys to those holes out there . . ." and he pointed at the stars.

The horses, covered with dust from their hooves to their manes, seemed to be made of stone, and stone was the noise made by the carriage wheels.

Malena inquired whether they were near Cerropóm yet.

"You'll see a pretty glow in just a minute," Cayetano Duende answered.

Half-asleep, Malena heard the voice from the hill.

"The lights of Cerropóm?" she asked.

"No, child, not the lights or the lighting of Cerropóm yet. The glow you can just make out comes from Gleaming Hill. Put your eyes over there and see what you think of all that glow. Cerropóm has a sweet smell like perfume about it, but that Gleaming Hill gives off the glow of a black star. And there's nothing there to shine, I wish I could tell you what's hid there . . . They have a story about Gleaming Hill, about the man who spent a year without any head. I'll tell you about it: Gleaming Hill opens and closes every New Year's Eve. There's a lot of riches there. And two friends lived there. I knew them. One of them got rich overnight. He found buried treasure, some people whispered. He'd been making liquor in a big hidden still, others said, and there were plenty who said that he was a smuggler, although the most likely was that he'd sold his soul to the devil. And what do you think it was all about? He'd managed to slip into Gleaming Hill and he came out of there with a treasure in gold coins that weighed so much, so very much, that it took him two and a half days to haul it to his house. 'It's yellow corn,' was all he would say to people who asked him about it at his house, but what kind of yellow corn, gold corn. He was very rich, and since both money and love glow, they can't be hidden, and he began to buy good clothes for himself, his wife, and his children, to buy land and livestock, and to give parties. He spent on a large scale. His friend Jutiperto Arteaga asked him how he'd done it. Finally he

told him. 'You've got to take me along,' Arteaga begged him, 'because it's not right for one friend to be rich and the other one poor.' 'Sure, I'll take you,' was the answer. 'I'll take you on the last day of the year, at twelve midnight on the dot, so you can wake up rich the next day, maybe richer than me.' And that's what he did. The two friends left their wives and went to the entrance of Gleaming Hill. 'Friend,' the one who was rich said, 'there's one condition. Don't lose your head.' 'What do you mean?' the poor friend asked. 'What should I do? Tell me.' 'Yes, I'll tell you. Don't look to one side or the other. They'll call your name and you won't answer. They'll play a nice *son* for you and you won't dance. They'll scare you with a big lizard that shoots water out of his eyes and you won't get scared, you won't pay any attention. You'll go straight in and after you pick up your treasure you'll come straight out.' And, knowing just what to do, at twelve o'clock sharp, when the doorway to Gleaming Hill opened, the poor friend went in and the rich friend waited with a cigar in his mouth, calculating that his friend should be coming out when the cigar was smoked. But the cigar was all smoked, it was all ash and smoke, and the poor friend hadn't come out. The door closed again with a sound like thunder and his friend was still inside. 'Oh, my dear,' the rich friend went back with the bad news, 'your husband stayed inside, he didn't come out. God knows what happened to him' . . . The wife was sad and went groping around Gleaming Hill, crying and asking it to give her back her husband, the father of her children. But Gleaming Hill is deaf because it is a very rich mountain. And the first thing a person has to do to become rich is to become deaf. A person in need can't be heard. A friend who asks for a loan can't be heard. A person who wants to do something at his expense can't be heard . . . 'What can we do? I can't make a novena for his soul because he might be alive, and I can't leave him there just like that because if he's dead he'll haunt me, claiming that I didn't look after his memory.' 'Well, old friend,' the rich man said, 'after a year, when the door opens again, we'll go together and

maybe we'll find out what happened to him.' The months were long and endless until finally the day to go to Gleaming Hill came. From very early in the evening they were there waiting for the door to open. They'd brought supplies so that they wouldn't be hungry or need anything. The moon came out with the big rabbit on its face that spread little rabbits out over the hills, funny little rabbits with spiral ears that other rabbits leaped out of. Finally twelve o'clock . . . 'I'm warning you!' the rich friend whispered when he heard the door open, and they went in and looked, and from his clothing they recognized the poor friend, and then his wife went up to look at her husband closer, except that when she recognized him she could have fallen over backward if she hadn't been held up by her starched petticoats and the warning the rich friend had given her. Her husband was holding his head in his hands. Without losing any time the rich friend grabbed it and put it back in its place. And the other one, after moving a little, as if his collar was too tight or as if he had a stiff neck, went back with them until they came out into the open. 'What's going on?' was the first thing he said and then he added, 'A while back I went in and I lost my head.' 'A while back?' his wife cried. 'It was a year ago, a year ago, Jutiperto!' And what had happened was that when he saw he was rich and heard a *son* being played, he felt so happy that he began to dance, and in a second he lost his head, and during what seemed like a while to him a year had gone by . . ."

They had gone over the summit and the descent did not seem to take much time. Cerropóm was the highest window on that side of the range over the Pacific Ocean, the waters of which could be made out on very clear days.

Along a narrow street of flagstones and rocks that was still a road, even though street lights hung over fence corners and shacks, they entered Cerropóm shortly after seven at night, more or less. What did she mean, more or less, because she had her wristwatch. Seven thirty-eight, to be exact, the exact moment when Malena Tabay got out of the carriage at the door of the

boardinghouse where she would be the main guest, surrounded by the authorities who were greeting her, the people from the town who were smiling, and children who offered her flowers. She brushed her clothes as she got out. She was literally wearing a mask of dust.

Cayetano Duende jumped down to hold the horses by the bridle, calming the cinnamon one, who had almost been a stallion, and when the noises of the people died down he brought in the bags and took leave of Señorita Tabay. More advice than good-by.

"Don't forget Cayetano Duende, the coachman who brought you in the carriage, the one who made things up so that the trip wouldn't be so long. I know that because *duende* means goblin you're going to say that Cayetano Duende is a goblin and you're going to hear people say that Cayetano Duende is a goblin, but you're not going to know whether or not he is because things like that are never known . . . and one day I'm going to come take you to the steam baths at the Big Cut and to the Dove Hills, where the echo of the wind twists around through some caves and sounds like the cooing of a dove. At your service, ma'am, at your service . . ."

When the coachman left a messenger gave her a telegram.

It seemed to be sealed with glue instead of paste as she had a great deal of trouble opening it. "My love," she thought, "my sweet love . . ." And she read:

"Without meaning to you left me something of you. Thank you. Mondragón."

They had given her some flirting note. That message wasn't for her. She didn't know any Mondragón and she didn't know what it was all about. Yet, her name, Malena Tabay, and her address, National School, Cerropóm, were correct. And she was about to follow the messenger out and give it back to him when she remembered the man on the train. Maybe it was his name. She had his card in her purse. It was: Juan Pablo Mondragón.

"Double Urgent Message . . . Puerto de San José . . . Without meaning to you left me something of you. Thank you. Mondragón . . ."

The red camellias she had pinned to her breast . . .

"Like a heart on the outside," he had told her.

Her right hand on her hip and the left one using her whole arm to clutch an infant who was crying and kicking, Chanta Vega stopped to await the newcomer under the bulb that lighted up the place where the entrance and the hallway met. Her figure could be seen from far off.

"Hushy, you young waddler, let a person talk! Devil! Hooter! . . ." Chanta Vega said to quiet the child, and then with the friendliness of her unhealthy and sad misery, after she put up her loose hair she added: "This way, miss, this way, I'll show you your room."

Malena Tabay took her bags and followed her along a hallway that opened into a rather large room, huge for the miserable bulb that lit it. A low bed, a small table beside the bed, a low dresser under a mirror, the wash-stand, consisting of a basin and a pitcher of water on a trivet, a mat in the middle of the room, and a coat rack.

Malena furtively lifted the bedspread with large yellow flowers on a sky-blue field, trying to see the sheets and the mattress.

"Everything's new . . ." Chanta interrupted her, closing the door on the child, who was trying to crawl in and who began to bellow when he was left outside. "Brand new, the sheets, the mattress, the pillow cases, but you can fix something better if you want, and if you're hungry I can give you something to eat: I've got soup and stew, chilaquilas, and bananas in syrup."

When she was alone Malena Tabay collapsed onto the bed. She covered her face with her hands and stayed like that for a long time. What was she complaining about, hadn't she chosen this way? Not her. Life. Her parents had no money and it was a big family. She had to find the shortest apprenticeship possible and one that would produce the soonest: *schoolteacher.* Voca-

tion? . . . For sometime that word, in its theoretical form, has been the theme of lectures, one hears it mentioned at mass and the "lack of priestly vocations," it is an obligatory motif in the editorials in the *Teacher's Review*, an important publication of educational groups, because, in a practical way, it is all mixed up with need. A vocation calls for an inclination, a need calls for a demand. A person who has economic means can choose, he is permitted the luxury of a vocation. A person who lacks money and belongings and has to get by with a certain decorum accepts, bows down, kisses the inhuman yoke imposed on him.

She took her hands away from her eyes and stayed there looking at the floor for a long time. There was so little light and so much shadow in her heart . . .

She shook her head, stood up, and went over to the wash basin which she filled with water, the trivet also looked new. She washed her hands, looked at herself in the mirror and saw herself like a specter, and before she went to the dining-room she picked up the Italian straw hat from the bed—she had sat on it—and she hung it on the hatrack, a little atilt, with her hand showing no feeling, as if asleep.

"Sit on this three-legged stool. It's the strongest and it brings good luck. I can only tell you that Major Tirso Lobos, big man that he was, sat on it when he got the news of his promotion. Sit down and eat awhile . . . I fix things up because I can see you don't like everything. I put the flowers in water over there, the ones they welcomed you with."

"No, I don't mind. I just miss the comforts of home."

"And you're right. Such fine people like you brought here to teach these hairy animals. It's God's will! That's why teachers don't last long. The last one that came frowned when she arrived and she left with a frown on her face. 'I wasn't brought up for this!' she would say. And you could say the same thing and be perfectly right."

"No. I think that my . . . (she was going to say need) vocation will make me stay . . ."

"Are your parents alive?"

"Yes . . ."

"Then how could they let you go off and teach in such a far-away place? They probably offered it to all the teachers, but none of them would come and when they did come they would leave looking like a fright. You're young, I can see that. How old might you be . . . nineteen . . . ?"

"That's behind me . . ."

"You don't look it . . ."

"The nineteenth year is behind me too . . ."

"No, no, I said nineteen because I didn't want to say twenty . . . And do you have any brothers and sisters? . . ."

"Seven, all younger than me. And your little one," Malena went on in order to change the subject and not continue with her confessions, "what's his name?"

"Tell us your name there . . . Poor thing, he's too small to talk! His name is Poncio, not for Pontius Pilate, God save us, but for Poncio Suasnavar, the one who made him, but in the 'civile' register he doesn't appear as his maker, his father does, Paulino Panzos . . . Not much truth in anything, m'boy, made from four eggs, as they say!"

"What name does he have in the civil register?"

"The 'civile' register has him down by the name of Panzos."

The child came crawling over, dragging one little leg. Chanta picked him up by the hands and took him off to clean his backside.

"You little pig, when will you learn to sit down! People don't do it like that! I'm going to wash him and put him to bed! You poor boy, who's to save you from life! . . ." and turning to the teacher she said, "have some more soup and stew while I get your chilaquilas . . ."

Malena stayed alone with her eyes on the bulb that had been speckled by flies who had not learned *to sit down* either, the fingers of her right hand drumming on the table and in her ears

the music from *La donna è mobile,* with the following words:

. . . Don Automovilé,
cual pluma al viento . . .

That night after eating she would write to *Don Automovilé cual pluma al viento,* telling him about her impressions of her first day of absence, far away from him, about the loss of her camellias and the annoyance of the telegram which she had opened thinking that it was from him and how her arms had dropped when she saw it was from some Mondragón, someone she had seen on the train and could not remember what he was like. Juan Pablo Mondragón . . . No, she couldn't remember him . . . Far off there . . . an angular, Chinese-like face with very thin lips.

Chanta brought her the chilaquilas swimming in tomato sauce like little paper boats. Tortillas folded over with cottage cheese inside, covered with an egg and fried. And after the chilaquilas the fried bananas, fresh off the fire, shining with pork fat and calling for the syrup that was in a bowl with a cracked ladle.

"I'm going to tell you what I think," she stated when she came in, "help yourself and go ahead and eat . . . As sure as my name is Chanta Vega Solís—maybe that's why they call me 'Solicited'—that if you're brave enough to stay here, young lady, you'll never leave . . ." The edges of her beautiful white teeth were shining behind her fleshy lips, "and I can tell you from my own experience and from what I've seen. A person who doesn't feel like leaving as soon as she arrives will stay in these hills one day after another, and before she knows it, it's been one year after another, one year after another . . . I don't know if you smoke or not . . . I'm going to light up this home-made cigar of mine . . . Come into the kitchen with me . . . A person lives and goes along outside of time in these hills . . ." Chanta Vega went on as she went into the kitchen and put the tip of her half-chewed cigar against a hot coal. "And that Cayetano Duende who brought you in the carriage, not because his name is Duende, he's a bumpkin, as you

can see, can explain better than anyone what I'm telling you, what a person is here: a person outside of time . . ."

"Something like the rapture of a saint," Malena said.

"Something like being off in space, as Cayetano Duende explains it. Me, would you believe it, old as I am, I get scared at what he says, scared like a child, and I'd like to leave these hills, this place that time has passed by, because like the human beings we are, we want there to be time . . . Señor Cayetano gets me all upset! . . . I'd like to go crazy! . . . Those eyes of his, like a man who's been hung! . . . His big head, all full of fluids! . . . No, no, young lady, don't stay here, leave tomorrow at the latest, like all the schoolteachers who've been saved without knowing what was waiting for them because they didn't wait for any reason, they just left! . . . What was ahead of them . . . living sunk in the light of these hills, not feeling anything, sitting under the sun like carob trees!"

"Calm down . . . We'll talk tomorrow. I told you that I'm staying because I have a sense of profession . . ."

"And because Cayetano Duende brought you in his carriage and that's where the curse began. He brought me too, way back over all these years they say have gone by outside, not in these hills . . . Not even the Chinaman, being a Chinaman and all, was able to get away from here. There he is, old and skinny, talk to him and you'll see that I'm not lying."

"Excuse me, but did you tell all this to the other schoolteachers?"

"I didn't have to. As soon as they saw that they were going to be buried in these mountains with no past, present, or future, they ran off, they didn't even walk. But you say you're going to stay here. That's why I took the trouble to talk to you and discourage you. I wanted to warn you, and if you're sorry tomorrow, don't forget that Chanta Vega tried to make you see things the way they are."

8

"And this has been going on for eleven years . . ." She tapped the pencil nervously on the desk. It could have been said that she was adding that beat to the solemn tick-tock of the office clock, as if she were pecking out the minutes with the tip of the pencil.

"Eleven years . . ." she repeated.

"Are you sorry? . . ."

She sighed, not knowing what to answer, then she stood up to her full height and gave her hand to the Chief of Highways for the Entrecerros Zone, whom she had met by chance on the train that had brought her there . . . eleven years ago.

"I'm sorry I took so much of your time," he said, picking up the helmet that he had put down on one of the chairs, "but I'm so happy, it was such a pleasant surprise . . ."

He started toward the door and went on:

"Such a pleasant surprise, really pleasant. I hope that sometime you'll do us the honor of visiting our camp. It's not far from Cerropóm and there's not much to look at but we can look at you. And I'd better be leaving before you ask me about your camellias!"

"They must have withered after eleven years . . ." Malena said. Her impassive face of clay did not betray the wave of momentary desperation that the memory had caused in her. "But no one should be surprised at that . . ." She regretted having cut the visit short. "If you have the time I'd like to show you my school."

"It's a fine building . . ."

"Don't tell me you like it! It was built at my initiative and with a few of my ideas. That's why I called it 'my' school. When I came to Cerropóm there wasn't any school. Classes were held in one big room. The government and the people put up the money. I got together with the parish priest of Calvary Church (Calvary is the only church here, isn't that symbolic? In these mountains everything is uphill), and we held bazaars and from what we made after expenses he took half to rebuild his church and I took half to build this school."

"It must have taken you both a long time . . ."

"I don't know. Time doesn't count here, it doesn't exist. That's why when a person gets old she only knows it because other people say so . . ."

"No, I didn't mean to say you were old, but a building like this and with what you saved up from bazaars . . ."

"You gave me enough proof of your gallantry the day I met you on the train. Let me tell you more about that idea of time. As a newcomer you'll be interested to know that time doesn't exist here . . . Do you want an explanation? . . . There isn't any. When I got here, the same day I arrived I was warned by a woman in whose house they put me up, her name was, or is, because she's still alive, Chanta Vega. It must be Chenta, the diminutive of Vicenta, but here they say Chanta. According to her, the coachman who brought me to the village, Cayetano Duende, was the one who knew most about infinite time, the time that doesn't exist, the time in which a person is submerged, the same as in a dream."

Malena fell silent, as if surprised at her words, with that inner silence of the hills, while he, looking into her eyes, somewhere

between belief and incredulity, waited for an explanation of her words.

"Yes, it seems as if no time had passed . . ."

"Not just seems," she corrected him vehemently, "no time has passed . . ."

"All right, it hasn't passed, that's why they say eternity means not finding yourself the way you used to be, but I see you the way I saw you for the first time on the train, under a large, broad-brimmed hat, a smoke-colored tailored suit, and on your breast . . ."

"My heart on the outside . . ."

"You remember quite well! I said that about the camellias, they were such a bright red . . ."

"You really took a good look at me!"

"I learned you by heart . . . The worst thing was that the train stopped at Mile 177 . . ."

"Like stopping a river so a mermaid could get off . . ."

"You really do remember . . . you've recorded my exact words!"

"I have a memory too, but let's get back to what I was saying about how time doesn't move in these hills. Let me tell you how a person comes to exist by not existing. A personal experience. At first you feel a great restlessness, frightful, a real agony. According to Cayetano Duende, what's happening is that the creature who lived day by day and died day by day in a person has died and its place is taken by a creature who neither lives nor dies, the one who is and is and is . . ."

"Something similar to what yogis in India attain . . ."

"Something else. Theirs are individual exercises. There are people here too who eat sun-orange mushrooms, mushrooms which stop the blood at the point where life begins, according to them, and the test is heroic because most of them die or go mad, and those who eat the black cactus from the center of the earth that comes from far away and which they take so that they won't roll down the hills when they plant, cultivate, and harvest their crops. But those are individual cases and what I'm talking about

is the collective physical emptiness that's all around because there's no mechanism to make them live in our time. And that's why, as you can see, I'm trying to mechanize time to the utmost in the school. You'll see clocks everywhere, in the classrooms, in the office, in the study hall, in the courtyard, at the entrance, because I think the first thing we have to do here is mechanize time for these people. The first . . . and the last thing I have to tell you because it's going on one and I have to have lunch. The girls come back at two in the afternoon . . ."

"One question before I go. Do you remember my name? . . ."

"Mondragón . . . I remember it from the telegram you sent me . . ."

"My last name. What about my first name . . ."

"I know your name but I can't remember . . ."

"Juan Pablo, like Marat . . ."

"A Jacobin!"

"Better than a Girondist!"

"Who told you that? . . ." she cut in. "I'm more of a Jacobin than you are! . . ."

But Juan Pablo Mondragón had started up the jeep and did not hear her.

The violent shaking of that work vehicle in which the person or persons occupying it became rigid, did not shake a single thought out of his head that was full of uneven, contradictory things, and he looked upon her as both educated and simple, practical and dreamy, pretentious and humble, disenchanted and ready for new enchantments, ideas that broke into pieces as they became clear on her face, which was an ordinary face where skin and features grew taut from the pounding of the blood and the wind from the mountains of stone, her listening eyes, hearing, not made simply to see with, and her thick-lipped mouth that had a grimace of sad control. And in the midst of that bubbling up of thoughts and fragmentation of ideas, quickly making plans so that she would not get away . . . No, there would be no more Mile 177's . . . life would not stop to let her

off like the train! They were traveling in the same coach through the hills, outside of time . . . He had dragged himself through a great deal of existence already without being spent, like the rivers traveled by mermaids and sand and everything that everyone throws into their currents, and love was at his side wounding him, blind like Longinus . . . Why was that pretty girl, that fashion model who traveled on the train eleven years ago buried there like those virgins that the Indians bury on high peaks to be covered with snow? . . . That was where the enigma began . . .

But he was already approaching the camp which was swarming with roadworkers, foremen, aides, mechanics, just as he would return so many times in days to come on the "front"—isn't love a battle?—lost in the noise of his thoughts after having been with her, sometimes in the close quarters of her small library, where they slowly passed invisible rows of poetry, novels, essays, anthologies hidden by the avalanche of practical manuals, treatises on animal husbandry, botany, veterinary science, first aid, obstetrics. Sometimes on an inside porch where she had improvised a small children's dining-room with thirty places, fifteen by fifteen on one single table, to serve coffee and milk and tortillas or bread, when there was any, to the pupils who came to school without having had anything to eat. And sometimes outside the school, visiting a workshop, also improvised, where an Indian, a very skilled carver and modeler, was teaching, not those arts, that would have been too much to ask, but something more useful and simple, the making of clay utensils, to all who wanted to learn, and there were many of them, so many that in a short time there was not enough room in that improvised structure . . .

"And I first met that sculptor," she was saying, "oh, if I could only tell you, if I could tell you how I met him! That afternoon I stayed late on Tall Hill looking at the sea . . . so far away. I don't know why, but what makes me sad is the sight of the sea from high up like that and just as far away as the money needed to travel there. That evaporation of blue fire that comes up from

the clean, vast, metallic surface of the sea stretched out into space and all that immensity seems close from Tall Hill, and the big oaks and pines look like crowns of vine leaves on the flat heads of the other hills as they come out of the clouds like tunics of froth . . ."

"And you met him there?" Mondragón asked, slightly pale, with a voice that betrayed his feelings. Who could that man be, that sculptor, that artist worthy of such a panorama?

Malena withdrew the arm that Mondragón was squeezing as he waited for her answer, half-friendly and half-dreaming.

"No, I met 'my' sculptor that day but not there," the "my" pricked him like a thorn as it gave free rein to her instinct of a cat playing with a mouse, "but I brought up the sight of the sea from Tall Hill—I never saw it more beautiful—because it was what made that day so unforgettable for me."

Mondragón lit a cigarette and began to smoke, smoke, smoke so as not to end up right there kicking and smashing the objects of fresh clay, the pots, the kiln, the benches, the way he had done that time with Roncoy Domínguez' cages in order to free the birds.

"I met him in a cart yard," she went on, "on my way back from Tall Hill I took a roundabout way and as I passed by the place my attention was drawn to a figure moving among the trash and the dung. I thought it was an animal. 'It's Popoluca . . .' a frog-faced woman nearby told me. 'And what is Popoluca?' I asked her . . . 'Popoluca!' she answered me. I went over to the shape and it was an old man with a beard and hair as long as a woman's, dressed in filthy rags, barefoot, sleeping in the garbage. 'Popoluca never moves,' the woman added. 'There he is and there he stays, and no one can get him out. Flies cover him, beetles, blue, green, red, black, walk all over him, and Popoluca doesn't move. Rivers of ants go over him, get into his beard, even carry off pieces of his beard that come off when he scratches, thinking it's grass, and Popoluca doesn't move. Zompopo ants, bolder, get into his mouth and pick pieces of food from between his teeth

and gums, and Popoluca doesn't move. Horseflies clean their wings on his eyeglasses, and once a cricket got up his nose and spent the longest time chirping there, and no move by Popoluca . . . He doesn't move, he doesn't move and he doesn't show any sign of life until the carts come limping back empty. Carts only run smoothly when they're full, when they come back empty they limp. Then, when he hears the carts coming in, Popoluca gets up, makes a leap you wouldn't believe for someone his age, beats his hands on his thighs, raises him arms to stretch, spins around in the air like a corkscrew made of trash, opens his eyes wide and not just the flies, the ants, the zompopos, the crickets, the lice, the fleas, and the nits are frightened off, but also the hens, the chicks, the pigeons, the sheep, and the dogs sleeping in the heat of the sun. He takes a good yawn and then he goes tippy-toeing off to ask the carters if the pass to Idol Hill is open. There used to be a road but it fell into the gulch, and that's where he says they hid the statues they stole from him, the ones he could only see in his dreams, stretched out on the very *worst* things, maybe sleeping, maybe not, but not moving.' And that was how I discovered my sculptor Popoluca."

Mondragón could have gobbled her up with pleasure. He put his arms around her as he said:

"You must have had to cure him. The man was crazy . . ."

"No, mister roadman, there was no reason to cure him and he wasn't crazy," and when she saw herself encircled by Mondragón's arms, she withdrew softly before adding: "He was given the means to work at his trade and there he is. This is his workshop now. He teaches little potters I call 'Popoluquitas.' "

"I don't know. Some people, Malena, can make a person wonder whether he loves them or admires them. That's the way I feel about you. Do I love you or do I admire you? . . ."

"Love me as a friend and don't admire me for anything. Anyone could have done what I have. But keep your hands to yourself." She removed the hands that he had rested on her shoulders

with the weight of a caress, put them together, and, making sure with one of her hands that they would not fly back onto her shoulders again, she told him, "I'm going to tell you the secret of my success. If you can keep a secret . . ."

"Like a tomb . . ."

"Doing things! Not even doing them, starting them. Look, I took two pupils from among the oldest girls to set up a children's library. The girls had never seen a children's library and I only had vague ideas. Well, we managed to get the books and there it is in operation. Later on, to make it work perfectly, I studied the business of cataloguing with them, classification . . ."

"Doing things, but with a plan . . ."

"Of course, " Malena answered. "And I plan to prepare a new generation of mountain Indians here, in spite of all the trouble entailed working with human material that's impoverished physically and materially, people who only eat one meal a day. The work it took me to get the girls to eat breakfast. 'I don't eat any,' some of them would say, 'because I'm not used to it.' The boys and girls used to be together, but I think they separated them and set up the school for boys because my pupils came out all worked up and they couldn't take them off like sheep to work in other places. They demanded contracts, security, and a lot of them ended up in jail as rebels."

"If we only had a hundred teachers like you!"

"What for? To change this whole thing into a jail or a cemetery? If we educate men that way they'll have to build more jails and enlarge the cemeteries."

She let Mondragón kiss her hands.

"Yes, Monsieur Jean Paul, I'm more of a Jacobin than you. You build roads with teams of peasants who don't get any wages and have to pay for their own food . . ."

"It wouldn't be that way if they could pay off their work service . . ."

"You know very well that's a lie. Even if they paid, they'd still have to put in forty days of work on the roads."

"One of the reasons for the great unrest," Mondragón said, and moved his head about slightly, shrugging his shoulders.

"Don't worry, an insignificant little school like this, lost in these hills, is the safest place there is for plotting . . ."

Mondragón could sense the real intent of her phrase from the tone in which she spoke, reproaching him for his cowardice in looking all around as she put forth that mild objection to government policy. Still, his heart was pounding and he was tense all over. Two things worried him: that she, the one he adored most now, should be mixed up in a plot, or that he had given himself away by some expression, some word. He felt more frightened for her, unable to react. On the other hand, he could see that he was giving himself away like a stupid fool.

"What's the matter?" Malena laid her warm hand on his cold hands while for the first time her pupils seemed like two huge pieces of love, two huge pieces of anxiety, two huge eyes.

"Malen," that was what he called her when he talked to himself, and from then on he would always call her that, "don't use that word again . . ."

"Is it that serious?"

"There are spies everywhere and there are a lot of people in jail because of the slightest thing."

"That wasn't why you looked like that. You changed color, your voice broke, and you went into a cold sweat."

"That's right . . ."

"Tell Malen, then . . . Juan Pablo, don't hide it from me. Tell me that there's hope! You know something, you're mixed up in something and you don't want to talk."

"Nothing like what you're imagining . . ."

"I'm not imagining anything, but I want you to tell me . . . We're so beaten down that just listening to people talk is enough to make a person feel she is getting back into the stream of life . . ."

"I was trembling because of you, Malen . . ."

"Because of me?"

"The word you used and the way you're talking makes it obvious that you're mixed up in something political."

She was silent. She wanted to say something but the words stayed on her lips and her evasive expression ended up by making Mondragón concerned.

"After the word 'plot,' which you said in such an unexpected way, I was afraid . . ."

"That I was going to involve you . . ."

In the distance the noise of the street could be heard. Malena took his hands as if to seal a pact, whispering to him:

"We can do something among the roadworkers in your camp . . . There must be some there who are right . . ."

"I can involve myself, Malen, but I can't involve my comrades."

"They won't refuse . . ."

"Of course they won't refuse! . . . But who'll talk to them? . . ."

"I will . . ."

"You? . . ." He freed his hands from Malena's and took her by both arms, shaking her, looking into her eyes as he told her: "They'll turn you in, and the ones who are married, have children will refuse . . . Or do you think, Malen, that everybody starts out on a trip with only two goals: power or death? . . ."

"What the devil are you talking about! . . ."

"The same thing you were! . . ."

"I was telling you that you could help me with a plot in your camp . . ."

"That's what you said . . ."

"To open a night school for the adult workers . . ."

"Malen," Mondragón felt disarmed, "you gave me a bad turn! . . ." And as he tried to press his head against her breast she got up, still holding onto that head of curly hair as she went off, and from the door she said to him: "Monsieur Jean Paul, I'll play Charlotte if you want." And she came toward him, pretending that she was Charlotte Corday, with a letter-opener in her hand.

He came and went from the camp lost in the commotion of his thoughts of love and passion for Malena, who had already let herself be encircled by his arms, who allowed him to lose his hands in her hair as in the music of dream-threads, and he was getting ready to receive her in his tent, deciding how he should arrange the few pieces of furniture he had. Yes, yes, he would have to send to the capital for some red camellias! Wine? . . . Whiskey? . . . A bottle of each. Some sandwiches or tortillas and cheese . . . He could get that around here. But all this concentration of his thoughts to forge that pleasant image of Malena's visit to the camp was lost, the bustle of love in his head stopped, and he began to ponder about something he had not thought about since he had met, or remet, Malena, his girl friend from the train, as he had called her to himself, his little nineteen-year-old girl friend—she was thirty now—the plot. She was the one—who knows whether guessing or because thoughts can be transferred?—who came out with that "here in this little school lost in the hills a person can plot," that was what she said, more or less, even though later on she turned it all into an innocent night school for adults in the road camp there, just as dangerous in the eyes of the authorities as any other plot. But he was getting there. The last turns in the road cut through living rock and he reached the esplanade from where he could see the campfires the workers had lit, the brims of their whitish hats and the shadows of men crouching and toasting tortillas on the coals, the boiling of coffee in the pots, and the smell of some leg of venison, wild boar, armadillo, chicken, something edible, chewable.

Hey! . . .

He had to grip the wheel firmly because the sight of something he passed had made him lose control, and he put on the brake, thinking that it might be a good piece of game. He jumped out, holding his pistol.

He could make out two luminous eyes and the zigzagging shadow that slipped into a thick weed patch. He ran after it, jumping, trying not to fall, without losing the trail that the

animal's movement was leaving in the woods. But the leaves had stopped moving, the surface became quiet, and all signs of life had disappeared. He too remained motionless, supposing that the animal was crouching there. But there was nothing. And he was ready to go back to the jeep when he heard something like a resonance from out of the foliage. He lifted his finger and noticed that there was not much wind. Why were the branches and grass still shaking then? Cautiously, pushing the branches aside, leaning over before he took a step so he could see where to put his foot in the faint evening light, he began to see the mouth of something like a cave. What should he do? He did not have a lantern or anything to light his way. Large bats were going in and coming out. It would be best to leave and come back in the daytime. He stopped in order to study closely the place where he was in relation to the workers' camp, the place where he had left the jeep, and he went back and forth counting his steps until he was sure that he would not miss that unknown doorway which, when the moment came, might be his salvation. Impossible. He had already thought about it night after night without finding sleep in the turns that he gave as he tried to reconcile his oaths to the people involved in the struggle for freedom and justice with the love that confronted him like a highwayman, asking for his heart and his life. To whom did his heart belong? To whom his life? . . . To them, to his comrades in the struggle . . . "Malen! Malen! . . ." he tossed in bed, "I have nothing to give you, it's all a fraud, I'm inventing a heart and a life for myself . . ."

He shook his head as if to get rid of his hair, as if the fire of his thoughts were burning him within his hair. He was carrying his helmet under his arm, and before he got into the jeep he thought about taking a few shots at the rocks in order to leave some mark. But he did not, it would be dangerous, the marks could also be useful to his pursuers in case he had to hide in the cave. It was best to leave it as is. He would not lose his way, he had figured the location very well.

9

"Mechanizing . . . mechanizing time . . . mechanizing time for these people . . . Permit me to say that I can't agree! . . ." Professor Bouquet began the discussion.

The wicker chairs in the office had been arranged in a way to catch the breeze from the small porch of the School for Girls as it came from a courtyard that had imposing urns and humble pots of flourishing geraniums, carnations, hydrangeas, azaleas, and roses. Joining in the Sunday get-together were the priest and Professor Constantino Piedrafiel, the head of the School for Boys, better known among his colleagues by the nickname of Professor Bouquet.

"It was clear when I woke up," the priest exclaimed. He was warm, dark, small, like a native pony, as he himself used to say, taking pride in that proverb about short in step but long in stamina. "It was clear when I woke up, then it clouded over, and now it looks as if it's trying to clear up again."

"What right do we have . . ." Professor Bouquet went on. The little priest's rambling was not going to get him off the track of

his theme. "What right do we have to pull these people out of their present state of semiconsciousness as to what's going on in the world, in life? What right do we have, I repeat, and for what purpose? . . ."

"If it doesn't clear up," the priest insisted, "I won't be able to go with those people who invited me to go to Tall Hill and look at the wide Pacific . . ."

"For what purpose?" Malena answered emphatically, having been addressed directly by Professor Bouquet. "To give them a productive occupation and bring them into civilization."

"Occupation . . . occupation . . . civilization . . ." Piedrafiel repeated doubtfully.

"I don't think," the priest said to Mondragón, who was also a member of the group and was silent up until then, "that I'll be able to go to Tall Hill. It's a pity, a real pity, because there probably would have been a good moon . . ."

"To give them an occupation? . . ." Piedrafiel reflected before saying, a little to himself, but so that the others would hear. "As far as I can see, there's no problem of being unoccupied here."

"In appearance . . ." Mondragón put in, for he had only seemed to be listening to the priest, more intent on the argument between the teachers, "because unemployment here is a matter of social class, and since people have no stimulation they're not interested in working, they only work to eat. Except that now that they're learning not to eat . . ."

"It's getting cloudier all the time. I don't think it's going to clear. That's too bad. I would have enjoyed the outing."

"Yes, Professor Piedrafiel is partly right," Malena said. "From the point of view that he has chosen. But as Mondragón has said, unemployment among us takes on the character of a real national problem."

"And it gets worse with time," Mondragón added, "with the complete disappearance of old industries, the handicrafts, with cultivation limited to useless things like tobacco . . ."

"The problem is very complex . . ." the priest stated so as not to be left out of the discussion.

"What we don't know is whether Father Santo . . ."

"Father Santos. Stop making me the Holy Father!" he corrected Piedrafiel energetically.

"What we don't know, my dear Father Santos, is whether your reverence is talking about the time that we're talking about or about meteorological time, since you're such a great weatherman."

"Let's not get off the subject," Malena asked. "We were saying that if we give these people a real sense of time, time would turn into wealth for them. The backward state of these villages is due, among other things, to the fact that most of the inhabitants had their own time calendars taken away and no effort was made to incorporate them into ours, and that's how they've stayed, without a calendar and outside of time."

"It wouldn't be so bad," Mondragón gave his support, "not to know that time is wealth, but what is bad is their lack of any custom of making productive use of time."

"Time is money!" Father Santos said in English.

"Or the old Moorish proverb, which is even more apt, Father." Professor Bouquet raised his voice as if he were going to declaim: ". . . time is gold dust, an elephant tusk, the feather of an ostrich . . ." and dropping the tone that had won him great applause as a student when at term's end he would recite *The Golden Beast*, he returned to the discussion. "Well, we already have Professor Tabay and Señor Mondragón and time being mechanized, watchi . . . watchi . . . watchi . . . fied . . ."

"That almost sounds like a dirty word," the priest commented, laughing noisily.

"Don't interrupt me, Father Santos. We already have them mechanized. Is that going to make them any happier?"

"This world is a vale of tears and we are only passing through," the priest said. "There is happiness only in heaven," and, chant-

ing and humming, he added, "I will go to heaven and from there I will bless thee! . . ."

"We're not discussing the problem of happiness, Father," Mondragón intervened, and, turning to Malena, "Don't you agree?" he asked, using the familiar form.

She scolded him with her eyes. Neither of those people knew that they addressed each other that way.

"And besides," Mondragón added, "you're talking about a passive happiness, passively tolerating misery and everything else they tolerate. The first thing that every boob says when he visits the interior of the country is 'They're poor but happy!' Is that the kind of happiness you don't want us to take away from them, professor?"

"What we're discussing," Malena hastened to tell Piedrafiel, who was getting ready to answer and adjusting his necktie, drawing his arms into his sleeves and touching his cuffs with the tips of his fingers, "what we're discussing, if you'll allow me to put things in order, is whether or not we should adapt these people to our time. Otherwise, professor, it would be as if we were arguing at the bedside of a person who is seriously ill, one foot in the grave, gasping for breath, as to whether he should go on agonizing because we think that agonizing is happiness, or whether we should put some life into him so that he can live the way he should. Should we or shouldn't we, then, mechanize time?"

"There's no doubt about that, of course," Piedrafiel agreed. "The weight of dead time that we drag along because of them reduces all of our possibilities of progress to zero. But without using the word happiness, let's ask ourselves whether it will be good or bad for them."

"Good, don't you think? . . ." Malena asked Mondragón, not realizing that without thinking she too was using the familiar form and that with this familiarity she was exposing herself to the bad opinion of Professor Bouquet.

"For their good?" the professor asked himself before turning

to them to exclaim, "And does anyone know what good is, perhaps? . . ."

"I do . . ." Father Santos faced him. "I know what's good and what's bad . . . I have my theology . . . My theology!"

"Nobody's going to take it away from you," Piedrafiel interrupted. And after fixing the knot on his tie, pulling his arms into the sleeves of his jacket and touching the stiff cuffs of his shirt with the tips of his fingers, he went on. "Nobody's taking your theology away from you! But I think that if we were all talking here, Father without his cassock, this gentleman without his uniform, and Señorita Tabay and I without our teachers' robes . . ."

"Naked? . . ." Father Santos shouted, crossing himself quickly as Malena and Mondragón laughed.

"Father Santo . . ."

"Father Santos, for the love of heaven! Father San . . . tos!"

"Don't pay any attention to him," Malena put in, "he's doing it to tease you, and since he comes from Nicaragua he always drops his s's."

"But let me speak. What I was proposing was a discussion without the ideas imposed on us by cassock, uniform, and robe, a discussion between creatures belonging to a certain stage of development . . ."

"Stop right there, that's Darwin!" the priest shouted.

"Well, we're off . . ." Mondragón exclaimed. "Before the good Father nourishes our lesser vices, I've run out of cigarettes . . ."

"With pleasure, Mondragón, with pleasure," Father Santos said and offered him his leather cigarette case, made in Mexico, with the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe on one side and the Mexican coat of arms on the other. "And as for not defrauding you of the minor vices that I nourish in you, it's God's will that a person who is charitable be exposed to slander, infamy, and calumnies," the priest said finally as he looked out of the corner of his eye at Professor Bouquet. "I have a bottle of sweet wine here, I hope you'll like it, and some toasted nuts, salted and . . . foreign . . . They come in those cans 'made in . . .' you know where."

Malena interrupted:

"I don't know what you gentlemen prefer. Shall I serve you something before coffee, it's all ready, or shall I bring some glasses for the wine? . . ." and turning to Father Santos, "You're always so charming . . ."

"Wine! Wine!" Profesor Bouquet shouted, standing up with the bottle in one hand and in the other the key-ring where he kept his corkscrew and can opener.

"I'll go get the glasses!" Malena got up.

"And I'm going to my jeep, because I brought something along too," Mondragón said and headed toward the door.

"Father," Piedrafiel took advantage of their absence, "it looks as if things aren't going too well."

"That's what they keep saying over and over, Professor, but nothing concrete is known."

"There's talk about a plot. You must have heard . . ."

"Well!" Mondragón's voice was heard. "Now we can believe in miracles: the professor at confession!"

"I was telling Father here what's been going around. That they're on the track of a plot that has connections all over the country. Since you're kind of a military man, like all people doing road work, maybe you haven't heard, but Father knows and he won't tell . . ."

Mondragón laid a knotted napkin on the table. The priest sniffed it with his eyes of a happy child, rubbed his hands, and his mouth filled with saliva:

"Cracklings . . . how delightful!" he exclaimed.

On banana leaves that were green, smooth, and lardy lay the cracklings of hog fat that excited the priest and Malena, who passed the tray of glasses she was carrying to the closest person at hand, Mondragón, and began to eat with both hands.

"Don't you feel like any, professor?" Malena asked.

"I love them, I'm one of those people," he said, pointing to the priest, "whose mouths water just at the thought of cracklings, just seeing a hog, but they're bad for my liver."

Father Santos normally kept his arms close to his body, to his

cassock, so close that he looked as if both arms were missing, with his turned-up nose pointing to his forehead, far from his chin and ending in a tip, which gave him the look of a person who did not like the smell of things. But now, with his sleeves rolled back and his nose smelling the toasted fat, he was in the midst of a fight with the cracklings.

"They're very good, Juan Pablo. Where did you get them?"

"Near the camp," Mondragón answered, and turning to Malena, "I didn't know that you liked them so much, Malen . . ."

"What I didn't know," Piedrafiel said, "is that you were such good friends after so many years. That's life for you, meeting each other again here. What I can testify to as an eyewitness is the change that's comes over Professor Tabay lately."

"Change? . . ." Malena put in, quite alarmed at what Piedrafiel was saying. "You're imagining things, Professor . . ."

"The way you've changed! You've become more mistress of yourself, friendlier, more communicative . . ."

"And more aggressive," Mondragón added, to everybody's laughter.

"You talk about setting up a big night school for adults," Professor Bouquet said.

"Friendship has to age like wine in order to give off its maximum sweetness," Father Santos said as he turned around looking for someone to take his handkerchief out his cassock pocket so he could clean his greasy hands and mouth.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot the napkins! . . ." Malena apologized.

"I know where they are," Mondragón stepped ahead of her and disappeared after the napkins.

"Señorita Tabay, I couldn't tell you in front of him," the other teacher said, "but ever since that friend of yours from the old days arrived you've had a party face on . . ."

"Which seems the most natural thing in the world to me," the good Father offered. "They knew each other years ago and they've met again and they feel merry, happy . . . Those are things that show on a person's face. They can't be hidden . . ."

"Your cigarette case, Father," Mondragón said, "and the napkins . . . If I don't give it back to you I might keep it . . ."

"I wouldn't want that to happen because I keep it as a precious memento of my visit . . ."

"And I wouldn't take it because it belongs to a holy hand . . ."

"Even if you don't believe me, I do have a very good hand. A plant I set out grows and a marriage I consecrate is insoluble. But I keep this case as a souvenir of my visit to the Virgin of Tepeyac. And since we were talking about native industries, this is proof of Mexican handicraft, and you won't believe me, but it's hard for a person to choose, they have so many things in the markets there."

"We have industries like that here too," Professor Bouquet interposed.

"But they're on the way out," Malena said, "because there's no support. They're letting them die off, getting all involved with things from outside, which is nothing but another form of death."

"You should have been a cabinet minister . . ."

"I will be, professor, I will be a minister . . ."

A flash of memory. She raised her arm nervously and sank her open hand into the darkness of her hair. Cerropóm . . . the carriage . . . Cayetano Duende . . . his words . . . "Do you see those holes? (the stars). You're going to put your fingers into them."

Coffee, sandwiches (Piedrafiel called them *emparedados*, "bread-walls," jokes, gossip, and when Mondragón went out to get in the jeep with the priest and the schoolteacher the moon was at its height.

"The queen star! . . ." Professor Bouquet scandalized the silence of the street, and jumping from monarchy to republic, "The first lady of the sky! . . ." and from republic to an anticlerical attack, "Father Santo, you're not infallible!"

The latter, wrapped in his cape, a gray woolen scarf around his neck covering him up to his ears, did not hear and all he did was laugh when he heard Malena and Mondragón do so.

Bundling up, they got into the jeep and settled down. The

priest to his Calvary, Piedrafiel to the big building that housed the School for Boys, and the driver to his camp.

In Cerropóm and afterward on the road he stopped to see if he was being followed. The moon, the moon that came along behind him among the clouds.

The professor, when he heard the jeep drive off, went to the corner and, restless, he set out to take a walk around the School for Girls. The heavy brown overcoat down to his heels, his heavy curly head holding up a very heavy-brimmed beaver hat, the heavy watch hitting his imposing stomach, the heavy mustache, heavy with something like shoe polish, the heavy eyebrows, heavy with the same tint of polish, all became light when it suited his purposes and it always suited them when it was a question of a skirt.

Mondragón stopped the jeep mathematically at the place where fate in the form of an animal had marked his halt days before, and after looking about to see if anyone was following his tracks, he disappeared into the brush. It was not difficult to find his way to the cave that he had discovered on that fine evening. The entrance, lighted by the moon, looked like the doorway of a Gothic church. Vampires and smaller bats, motionless, sleeping with their wings open, were bathing in the moonlight. The beam of his flashlight made them stir. Some shook off that strange light, others, stupefied, embarked toward the full moon. After a few steps the cave presented a kind of chute on the side that led into a huge chamber. He went down through it, hugging the wall, slipping, half-sitting down. It was like a room of lost echoes from which several passageways went out.

He was satisfied when he returned. The camp was mechanically fast asleep. In the light of the moon the immense wheel of the steamroller looked like a cascade in which the falls had become motionless, waiting for the drill to make small pieces out of the moon that was fleeing along the water from the spigots on the huts until it fell into tanks where the jets wove immense cobwebs of concentric circles that touched, separated, came to-

gether, and separated again, following different paths. Which was his? . . . Which was Malena's? . . .

"It's not wise," she complained a couple of days later, visibly annoyed. "It's nighttime and they'll see the jeep by the door of the school . . ."

"I came on foot. How could I stand going a week without seeing you! Waiting till next Sunday. Impossible. I left the jeep and my uniform behind. It's better to come in civilian clothes."

"But today's only Monday, good heavens! It's only been one day . . ."

"A whole century! . . . Now I can understand everything these people say about centuries that last a minute and minutes that last centuries . . . and you're the goblin . . ."

"Juan Pablo! . . ."

"Your hands and the taste of your silence are all I need!"

"You're hurting me . . ." she tried to withdraw the hands that he was pressing tightly, but Mondragón clutched them and then he wrapped her in his arms.

"It's out of the question," she stammered.

"All loves are out of the question . . ."

"But ours is even more out of the question . . ."

"Your voice sounds strange. It sounds as if someone else were talking to me . . . Malen! . . . Malen! . . ."

He kissed her. He held her back with an arousing kiss.

"You're smothering me!"

Their voices were panting, their hands leaping, interlocking, touching each other like the individual flames of a fire.

Such voracity, that of hands in love!

"Juan Pablo, it's impossible . . ."

"But that's what love is, the art of the impossible, and since you turned yourself over to the arms of life . . ."

"I didn't turn myself over," Malena murmured, putting her index finger on his lips to make him silent, to keep him from kissing her. "I let myself be bewitched."

"Without love no bewitchment is possible . . ."

"Love . . ." she said with her eyes full of tears, "I don't know . . ." and after a brief pause her weeping fell in great drops and ran down her cheeks. She shook her head with a fierce expression and added, "Real love is a visionary state that I've never reached . . ."

"You said it, Malena! Real love takes part in the future conquest of the world as it goes beyond what's personal and becomes the machine that pushes us on to fight for that visionary state to become reality, and . . . what else is our love, Malen, what else is ours? . . ."

She took her mouth away from Mondragón's burning lips. Such difficulty, such pain to leave that kiss which, like kisses that are not given, would still be searching for her for the rest of her life!

"I haven't reached a visionary state! . . ." as if she were confessing, and, reproaching herself, making her voice sad until it seemed that her words were tearing her apart, she added, "I've kept myself to a limited little love! . . ."

"Malen!"

"I've never gotten over it . . . I never will! . . ."

She got up as if blind, sobbing, went to the bookcase and took out two heavy volumes bound in red with the title *Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Science*, and from behind them she withdrew a small case from which she took out a notebook that she handed to Juan Pablo.

Not a word. She went back to the bookcase and put her back against the books, beautiful, straight, sad, her shoulders high and eloquent, her bust firm, her hips slim, her arms well-shaped, her neck turned by a potter's wheel.

Mondragón leafed through the notebook, reading by leaps—it was her diary—then he began to read with more attention:

> SATURDAY, December 3, 192 . . . Received a letter from Luis Fernando in which he says that all that stands between him and his

being a doctor is the general examination. I'm so happy! This news is the triumph of my love and our marriage is drawing near.

FRIDAY, February 15, 192 . . . Went to the Chinese store to look for a piece of cloth in order to make some pants for Poncio. His first pair. I didn't do it. I shut myself in and cried. Luis Fernando sent me a good-by letter in which he said briefly that the fiancée of a student is not the wife of the professional man, that he has to set up a practice and marry a rich woman.

MONDAY, July 4, 192 . . . The officer of the garrison, after many promises, tried to make me his girl friend. He got drunk and told me so outright. I cut him short. It was during the dance given by the Municipal Government for the anniversary of American independence. He took out his revolver and threatened me. If I took another step he'd shoot me in the back. "I'd rather be dead," I shouted at him and left as he put his pistol away.

TUESDAY, August 17, 192 . . . Yes, yes, I think that the time has come. I was happy with J.E. on his ranch. He's a cattleman. He wanted to put an engagement ring on my finger, but I asked him to wait for the wedding ring in church on our wedding day, because it's bad luck to anticipate. And I did well. That afternoon he had one of the peasants whipped over a question of wages. The man was brutally beaten by the person who was to be my husband, was taken off with his arms tied to the military command post and accused of being a horse thief. When J.E. returned he said, "With that little note they'll shoot the rebel. The last time I accused a couple of rebels like this one who wanted a raise they didn't even shoot him, they buried them alive, because His Excellency the President, when asked what to do with people who rise up demanding better pay, answered, 'Bury them, dead or alive.'" I never saw him again and when I think about him my hair stands on end, as if I were going to be very sick.

NOVEMBER 9, 193 . . . I went to the capital on vacation and I met L.C. at a dance at the military club, but with all the happiness of that night, my wild joy—I danced, drank champagne, went out on the terrace with him to count the stars, let him kiss my hair, use the familiar form of address—it ended with the fact that he was younger than I, and . . .

Before Mondragón had time to say anything to her, Malena, who still had her back to the bookshelf, said to him:

"Now I want you to leave. Next week I'll visit you at the camp and we'll talk again. I have to be alone . . ."

And she remained that way as he left, her back against the books, her head held high, her arms down, like the figurehead on a ship's prow, weeping without wiping away the tears that were bathing her face of dried leaf dust.

10

When that little teacher who was newly arrived in Cerropóm had looked at her face in the mirror in Chanta Vega's boarding-house four thousand fifteen days ago—eleven years, a day more, a day less, it doesn't matter—she had had the look of a specter, the one looking at you now: yellowed complexion, sunken eyes, disheveled earth-colored hair, the moisture of tears!

But then it had been for other reasons and, younger, more complete, less defeated, you did not guillotine your image, you did not end up with your cheek against the mirror that was as cold as your flesh so that you would not see yourself weep . . .

Eleven years ago you resisted the attack of your tears by raising your eyes. But now so much salt water has passed beneath the dreams that hang from your lashes that it doesn't matter and you don't know whether you're the one who is crying or whether the ice of the mirror is melting in your handkerchief . . .

Make up your mind! Go see him under the pretext of organizing a bazaar and ask your little question: "Father Santos, have you heard anything about Mondragón? He was supposed to

come get us one day this week to go to Tall Hill and he hasn't been seen since . . ."

Wretch! . . .

Insult him. Relieve yourself . . .

Snob! . . . Boor! . . . Clown! . . . Fool! . . . acting like a child . . . Hypocrite! . . . reacting like a puritan.

But what could have wounded him, bothered him, scandalized him about your diary except its insignificance . . .

How was a person as vain as he going to be interested in the headmistress of the School for Girls in Cerropóm?

Don't cry! . . . Don't cry! . . . He only came to upset your life . . . If you had only known . . . if you had only known! . . .

But he's not to blame, you are. Why did you let him read your diary? . . . What impelled you to put your poor amorous ledger into his hands? Showing with that vulgar and small-town proof what you meant when you said that you had not been called by that visionary love that is always mentioned by those who, like you, have still not had an affair *nel mezzo del cammin*? Showing him a proof of confidence which startled him, a confirmed bachelor, instead of his taking it as the delivery of your intimacy to a man who, because of his ideas, you took to be more advanced. Opening up to him the universe of your loneliness so that he could enter it and take pity on your heart . . .

No, you don't really know why you did it. You didn't think about what you had thought so many times. How little attraction there must be in the world of a woman who, as the years run away, grows old alone or peopled with beings, dreams, and affections that the poor thing desperately tries to make her own, to appropriate, steal, and who only succeeds in retaining brief moments, hours, days . . . Perhaps when a person is a schoolteacher by vocation, but you were one because of need, and then you shut yourself up in those hills the way a woman does who renounces the world and enters a cloister, nothing more or less, lashed forever by the disenchantment of that first love . . . He's going about back there . . . he married the rich woman who set

him up in practice and who was much older than he . . . he was widowed and married again . . . he has a horde of children . . . you haven't seen him again . . . they say he's completely bald . . . A teacher because of need, dealing with boys and girls made you maternal during the first years, but then you began to harden and the stepmother appeared when you realized that they were not yours, that they went smiling by and left you alone, isolated, taking no part in your existence except for their time in school . . . Little enemies . . . little enemies who, after pecking the first crumbs of knowledge from your hands, would fly off into life leaving you more and more lonely, with your hand held out in space like a beggar . . . and that was how Juan Pablo found you, with your hand outstretched, convulsed, waiting for your great love, and he didn't come back . . .

All day Tuesday, all day Wednesday, all day Thursday, all day Friday, all day Saturday until those afternoon hours . . .

But four days and a few hours is no reason to say: "Heee didn't cooome baaack! . . ."

What you're afraid of is that he won't come back. Eternity could begin with a moment of absence.

Your eyes were lamps beneath his kisses. Now they are a darkness that weeps. Don't close them. Look through the mist of tears at the classrooms where you heard his steps resound as he left, who could have said it was forever, as you imagine. Don't close them so that you will not be accompanied by the ghost of the one who should have accompanied you alive! Don't recall his flesh! Don't recall his face! Put him outside of yourself if he doesn't return, because you don't want him in your memory!

But, how can you ask the stone to shake off the stardust that makes its grow, how can you ask yourself to renounce what makes your heart grow larger! . . .

Not renounce him! . . . Much less evict him! . . . Wait for him . . . wait for him with mineral patience! . . .

All day Tuesday . . . all day Wednesday . . . all day Thursday . . . all day Friday . . . all day Saturday, until the time in the

afternoon when you don't know whether on the next day, Sunday, he'll come to the get-together or not.

The most likely thing is that he won't miss it. He can come to the gathering without any danger to his comfortable position as a bachelor. He'll arrive a little late, calculating that Father Santos and Professor Bouquet will already be chatting. He'll discuss the things that come up, and he'll leave with the others, acting as if he were unaware of what had gone on with you.

No, no, if that's the way it is, he shouldn't come, he should stay at his camp, the earth should swallow him up!

It would be horrible to have to stay submerged, alert so that neither words, nor expressions, nor silence would give away your anguish.

"How are you, Malen?" he would say to you very cheerfully, and you would have to answer him in the same tone: "Very well . . . working . . . very hap . . ."

Bite the sob that cut off on your lips what you could not say: "Happy! . . ."

You don't have to say it. It will be enough to say: "Very well" . . . and in that way he too will find you changed, natural, indifferent, friendly . . .

But would it be wise to be distant? . . .

Oh, if you could only play the role of a light-hearted woman who considered a love soaked with so many unreal things a pastime!

How nice he looked without his white uniform of a road official, dressed as a civilian in that dark suit of combed wool, the red tie, the color of the flag that waved at Mile 177, where you heard him say, as the train stopped eleven years ago, that it was like stopping a river to let a mermaid off . . .

How will he come tomorrow, in uniform or out of uniform? And you, what attractive dress do you have that isn't one of those thick gray suits that give you look of the director of an orphanage?

Go ahead, go through your clothes, get out your jewelry! Look at the fragile neck of the vial of perfume that holds a flame in-

side without taking out the stopper! Wait! You can't be dressed up, with jewels and perfume as if you were going to a party when it's almost a family gathering! It would be better if you thought about things to talk about . . . anything . . . the important thing now for you is he, not things to talk about, it's important that he come because perhaps he'll notice on your face, in spite of your indifference, in your words, in spite of the loquacity with which you join in the discussion, the interminable suffering of your days and nights. If it had not been for the the school work which occupied you for a few hours you would have gone mad. "Ever since Mondragón came to Cerropóm, Professor Tabay has looked different," Professor Bouquet said last Sunday. "She has a party face." But four and a half days have been enough to turn the party into a wake and for your face to be bathed in tears.

You lower your head and go forward through the empty classrooms. Oh, how full they seemed to you last Saturday and the one before! The students weren't there but they didn't seem empty to you. Your waiting presence filled them to the brim.

Don't deceive yourself, the one who set the trap was you. That's what happens in love. A person sets a trap, falls into it herself, and then she laments and weeps. Where did you get the idea that the man wasn't doing it all just to pass the time? Make love to you, visit you, hang about you . . .

Wave your handkerchief in another station in life, at a flag-stop, anonymous, and say good-by to another ghost!

The afternoon has a startling brightness about it. It could be said that it's resisting death or that it's accumulating its wealth of light to sink with it into the great splendor of the sunset. A piano and a chorus of voices unnerves you. Dry your eyes. Fix your hair. Don't make any more resistance to the attraction of that world that was always yours: the light, the classroom, the girls.

"Good afternoon, headmistress! . . . Good afternoon . . . Good afternoon, headmistress! . . ." they come over to greet you and take your hands while Professor Ana María Cantalá, in charge

of rehearsing the school chorus on Saturday afternoons, gets up from the piano and comes over to greet you.

"You look ill, headmistress . . ." Ana María Cantalá says halfway between a question and a statement.

"A slight headache . . ." you lie, and you raise your hand to your head when you should have raised it to your heart.

"I hope you'll feel better, headmistress . . ." the voices of the pupils can be heard, "feel better . . . feel better . . ."

Go back to your rooms! . . . What do you mean by showing yourself in the school, wandering about absentmindedly and ill? . . .

It's unheard of. But worse yet seeing you near the servants' quarters poking around with an excited expression in the darkness of the corners now that everyone has gone, among cats that move like dreams and dogs that receive you festively.

"Missss . . . missss . . . missss . . . missss . . ." the parrot wakes up with that interminable nasal string of sounds. "Missss . . . missss . . . missss . . . missss . . ."

You jump with surprise. You, who came with a mouselike fear.

"Missss . . . missss . . . missss . . . missss . . ." the parrot goes on as its voice buzzes between its tongue and its beak . . . "Missss . . . missss . . . missss! . . ."

Finally you find what you're looking for. An empty jar. And you rap it with the knuckle of your forefinger to see how much resonance it has. What have you come to! You take it down with the most terrible anxiety, as if it were not the school but someone else's house, and you run off to your rooms with it on tiptoes, trying to hide it in your shadow, just as if you had stolen it. The longest night in the world is about to begin for you. An old night. A most ancient night. The longest night . . .

But it's not possible. The headmistress of the School for Girls with her lips stuck to the mouth of an empty jar shouting for a man?

Your flesh creeps, you perspire, you've left the logical orbit of things and you're one step away from a miracle, from making the impossible possible . . .

"Juan Pablo! . . . Juan Pablo! . . ." you shout with a desperate voice, and the sound, still a sound and not an echo, is maddening within the round horizons of the clay jar that fire has deafened.

"Juan Pablo! . . . Juan Pablo! . . ."

The jar, the clay are no longer enough for your plaintive call and you go out to call to the immense night. But the coolness of the breeze calms you down. The stars illuminate your thought. You reflect. You reflect. He probably hasn't come because he's ill. Who knows whether or not something has happened to him, whether he had an accident. Yes, it was possible, but in that case he would have sent a messenger. He has so many helpers, or a workman, to let you know. A letter, a note. And what if he got an urgent call from the other end in the capital? Then a telegram, a simple telegram. That's how life goes! Reading "Mondragón" at the bottom of the briefest of messages would make you happy now, happy, and eleven years ago that same name at the bottom of a double urgent telegram that said "Without meaning to you left me something of you" had left you indifferent.

"Juan Pablo! . . . Juan Pablo! . . ." your voice keeps echoing in the hollow of the jar and a kind of certainty that he can hear you alleviates your anxiety, your desperation, while you shout his name with your dry lips at the mouth of the clay receptacle that has the thin ears of an animal, the rear end of an idol, and a lunar roundness.

It is a rudimentary, primitive telephone in which not only the voice but the echo, which is the heart of the voice, seems to resound in the emptiness. A telephone whose calls always go through. You assure yourself that he can hear you and that he won't miss the get-together tomorrow, except that he is annoyed considering that you, as a woman, were even permitted the petty loves inscribed in your diary, because you should have waited for him, Him, Him, the one you scarcely noticed on a train . . . How vain men are! . . .

And women no less so . . .

Didn't you think, weren't you sure, that Mondragón would come back the following day to ask you for an explanation of what had happened and with that pretext ask you to keep your promise to visit the camp?

Confess that it was so and that's why it hurts you more that he didn't come back. Not for his having you in his arms alone in his tent, exposed to everything in his arms . . .

"Juan Pablo! . . . Juan Pablo! . . ."

But don't just call him, tell him to come tomorrow, talk to him, ask him not to miss the gathering tomorrow . . . remind him that it's Sunday . . . you're not communicating with him for nothing . . . His ears are probably burning and he's probably thinking about you as his name echoes in the chamber of the clay receptacle.

"Vessel! . . . Vessel! . . ." Say the words of the psalm: "By the earth of which thou art made, by the fire which has burned thee, by the water which has filled thee, by the air of my voice which fills thee now with the name of the man I want to return, give him not peace until he returneth, let him not resist the call of earth, fire, water, air . . ."

"Juan Pablo! . . . Juan Pablo! . . ."

But it's no longer you, it's the night breeze that's calling him and calling him and calling him at the mouth of the moon, that great empty jar.

You awaken not knowing whether you have slept or have been walking along stretches of a river that came to a halt, your senses in your motionless body, without knowing what time it is, whether the maid has brought your breakfast and whether there's time to get up for mass. You stretch, you yawn, you feel the cruelty of returning to the silent desperation of daily life.

"It must be quite late," you say and you jump barefoot out of bed, run to the bathroom, take off your nightgown, put on an oil-cloth cap, and into the shower of mountain water, bluish, cold, and crystalline.

"That empty jar in your room, what should I do with it, ma'am? . . ."

The sound of the water deafens you and only in the distance can you hear the servant's voice . . . Are you laughing? . . . It was comical, calling to him in the jar, but what else could you do . . .

"What shall I do with it, ma'am?" the maid insists.

Don't answer, there'll be time to explain when you get out of the bathroom that you'd set it aside for a *piñata.*

And while you soap yourself another servant asks if you want the chairs taken from the office to the porch as on every Sunday.

Answer yes and when you do ask her what time it is.

"Two in the afternoon, ma'am . . ."

And when she hears you leaving the bathroom hurriedly, the towel being snatched from the rack, the opening and closing of the closet doors, she will no doubt ask immediately if you feel like anything special for breakfast, if you had a good night, whether you're ill, whether you feel well, not without adding officiously that she did not wake you up for eight o'clock mass because you were sleeping soundly and because you had been looking tired for several days now.

Breakfast is the least of your worries—coffee, toast, and butter —what's important is to prepare quickly the snack for the guests, sandwiches, cakes . . .

The time necessary to comb your hair, get dressed, and go into the small dining-room off your bedroom.

A bouquet? . . . Don't ask who sent it . . . A bunch of camellias . . . Red camellias! . . .

Don't ask who sent them . . .

Eleven years ago you forgot them on the train and there they and, there in your small dining-room . . .

Go over, it's not a dream . . . Look at them . . . What are you doing? . . . You're going to knock the petals off . . . The trembling of your hands, the trembling of your lips when you kiss them . . . your hot eyes with the dampness of happiness . . . Oh, you want

to pin them on your breast, wear them to the get-together as if you were wearing your heart on the outside, but perhaps you shouldn't wear them, it would be unexpected and you would expose yourself to Professor Bouquet's snipping shears.

The voice of Father Santos draws you out of that world of inner voices in which, absorbed, pleased—it was not in vain that you had called to him in the jar—you had sat down in the chair where yesterday you had sat down and got up again a thousand times, desperate, tormented, crazed, and where now you were peaceful, reduced in size, minimal, motionless, and not knowing what to do under the weight of the immense happiness that had left you when those flowers had been left behind and which life was now returning to you intact.

It was not difficult to imagine why Father Santos was coming. He was coming early to scold her in private, before the others came, for missing mass.

"Hello, Malena . . ." He comes forward with a rustle of his cassock, his face out of shape, his breathing rapid, looking all about, and without giving Malena time to reply, he added: "I took the liberty of coming ahead of time and I came all the way in until I found you because very serious things have happened to our roadman . . . Can we talk here? . . . Would it be better somewhere else? . . ."

"Let's go to the office . . ." Malena said, her lips almost without saliva, dry with anguish, imagining the worst: a landslide on the road, the jeep at the bottom of a gulley, the mistiming of a dynamite charge.

Dead? . . . Injured? . . . What could it be? . . .

"Come, child, come . . ." the priest quickly followed her to the door of the office where he paused for a moment and asked her to lock it.

Malena hesitated.

"Lock it . . ." the priest insisted, and when he heard the squeak of the small steel tongue, he opened some buttons at the top of his cassock, over his chest, and took out a newspaper.

"Look! . . ." He opened it up before Malena's eyes, but he could barely hold it in his hands as they were shaken by a nervous wind.

Malena snatched it, overcome with anguish, anxious to know what it was all about, even though she no longer thought that it was an accident. Where could he be? Was he dead? Was he injured? When did it happen? Could it have been yesterday? Could it be today? . . .

"EXTRA! . . ." Her eyes hesitated at the large letters of the headline . . . "PLOT AGAINST LIFE OF PRESIDENT DISCOVERED . . . TERRORIST SCHEME!!—THOSE INVOLVED . . ." And there were the names and pictures. "Some have been captured," the newspaper added, "and others are in flight, but they are being tracked down and will soon be in the hands of the police."

Malena's eyes went straight to the picture of Juan Pablo Mondragón, not only larger than the rest, but enclosed in a frame where it said that the authorities were offering a five-thousand-dollar reward for him, dead or alive.

Malena supported herself on the desk where she put the newspaper down for a moment, feeling that she had no strength, and she would have collapsed if the priest had not quickly brought over a chair, then tried to give her some air with his straw hat, which was the closest thing at hand, and then a few sips of water which he poured into a glass from a pitcher.

"I understand, child, I understand what you're going through. I've been trembling ever since I read the news, thinking that by being friends of Mondragón they'll try to involve us in this delicate matter and . . . remember that he must be the one most involved because they've put a price on his head: five thousand dollars reward, dead or alive. But don't get upset. Let's pray that they don't catch him, even if you are half a heretic. I didn't see you in church today, you missed mass."

"And that's what I thought you came about, to scold me for not going to mass."

"No, no, I took the liberty of coming early because Professor

Bouquet mustn't know anything about this. At least he shouldn't hear it from our lips. The newspaper came last night and he had someone ask me this morning if I'd received it, but I said no, without lying, because I didn't receive it, my maid did."

Malena picked up the newspaper and went on reading aloud:

"Juan Pablo Mondragón, an individual with an extremely dangerous record, at the moment of the discovery of the conspiracy occupied the position of Chief of the Entrecerros Highway Zone, and is accused of having supplied from the highway warehouse the explosives that were used to make the bombs to be employed in the assassination attempt and of being assigned to drive the truck which would cross the path of the presidential limousine, obliging it to slow down, at which moment the Chief Executive would be the target of the infernal machines that were discovered in the possession of several of the involved . . ."

"That little word! That little word is the one that does something to me . . . involved!"

"Mondragón," Malena continued reading, "has a criminal record in Panama, where he is said to come from, as an arms smuggler, a drug pusher, and a white-slaver, and he is still at large in spite of the police brigade that was sent to the Entrecerros road camp on Monday of this week late in the afternoon. Dressed in civilian clothes and without the vehicle assigned to him, he had disappeared. The police have found documents and correspondence which establish that Mondragón fled to Panama more than ten years ago after an armed assault on the bird shop run by Señor Roncoy Domínguez with the intention of robbery, when, not finding the amount of money he was looking for, he opened the cages, pretending to be the birds' protector . . ."

"Involved . . ." Father Santos repeated. "It makes me nervous. That little word makes me nervous . . ."

"The only advantage I always found in Cerropóm," Malena said, "is that it's so isolated that people forget it exists. I don't think it's on the map . . ."

"Go on reading . . ."

"That's all it says," Malena put the paper down. "That's all it says about Mondragón . . ."

"It says . . ." the priest insisted.

"What we already know, Father, that they're offering a five-thousand-dollar reward, dead or alive," and, picking up the paper again to read it from a distance, "that the police have interrogated almost all of the personnel at the road camp and that they have tightened their vigilance on roads, ports, frontiers, and railroad stations so that he will not escape . . ."

"Maybe he's hiding right here in Cerropóm. I already searched my church . . ."

"What are you insinuating? . . ." Malena asked, frowning as she fixed her startled eyes on Father Santos.

"Nothing . . . Oh, yes, yes, or what you're imagining, what anyone might imagine, that he could be hiding here in the School . . ."

"That's nonsense . . ."

"No, child, no. Not so much nonsense, no! And we should get together on what we're going to say, because they're going to question us. You can be sure that we'll have to make statements . . ."

"We have nothing to hide," Malena sighed. The blow had left her almost without strength.

"The last time we saw him was last Sunday . . . We talked . . . what did we talk about? . . ."

"Everything, about time and the weather . . ."

"Yes, yes, the weather. I was talking about Tall Hill, remember? That the weather was changing and that it was threatening to cloud over," and, after a brief pause, "he brought some cracklings, he dropped us off in the jeep, first me, then Piedrafiel . . . That's very important. He let me out first and then Professor Bouquet. It means that I couldn't tell if they talked between themselves about the plot, even though I don't believe it, because the roadman was very reserved. What I can say is that all he talked about in front of me was the weather."

Malena took great care to be silent about what she had seen on Monday—that Monday—in civilian clothes and without the jeep. She was surprised at the coolness of the man who neither on that day nor on any previous ones had shown by word or expression the terrible activity he was mixed up in, because the only time he had been at the point of slipping was when she, without knowing why, had said that her little school hidden in the hills would be a safe place for a conspiracy, although afterward, getting back his poise, he stated in an imperturbable way that he had been worried, afraid that she was involved in some subversive plan.

And as for that Monday, at no time did he show that he had left without his uniform and the vehicle with the knowledge that at the end of the day they would be coming to arrest him. The most probable thing was that it was a desire to see her, which he painted as something very urgent, and seeing her at that time, without compromising her, which made him come on foot and dressed in civilian clothes and had served him as a means of escape. No one knew how he escaped, but, in any case, Malena told herself, "My love saved him . . ."

"You're right . . ." Father Santos went over his arguments, but Malena's heart gave a turn as she thought that the priest was referring to what she was thinking, synthesized now in the brief phrase: "My love saved my love." "You're right . . ." he repeated, "if they ask us for a statement there's no reason to hide anything . . . he was a friend like any other . . ."

"Not like any other, no! . . . Not like any other! . . ."

The weeping did not seem to be coming from her eyes but from very far off, piercing her with its daggers. At first everything was erased and begun again in the tempest of each tear, but little by little, as the grief locked up in her flesh suddenly lost its depth and began to be the surface of an unattainable life, the cutting complaint, rebellious and aggressive, gave way to a more submissive sorrow, a silent weeping . . .

"It can't be . . . it can't be . . ." she repeated over and over,

twisting her hands. "Father! . . . Father! . . ." she tried to take refuge in the arms of the priest who came over to console her and said:

"Speak, child, speak . . . You've got nothing to hide from me . . . I've guessed your feelings for a long time . . ."

"For him, Father, for him! . . . I don't care what happens to me."

What can I do, what can I do for him? . . . (*My love saved my love, but what can I do for him now? . . .*)

"The first and most important thing is to calm down. You have to find the solution by first getting control of yourself. Calm down and once you've done that we'll think about what can and should be done, which can't be much, because a man with a price on his head . . ."

"I read in some book that in olden days people wanted for political crimes would take refuge in a church, a holy place . . ." (*My love saved my love, he might have taken refuge in the church . . .*)

"In olden days . . ." and the priest moved his Adam's apple in the tightness of his reversed celluloid collar. "In olden days, child, back then, but in the age of 'Barbarian Nations,' because that's where we are today, they carry off the person looking for sanctuary, the priest, the priest's mother, and they destroy the church . . . And that's why, being what I am, I searched the church so that he wouldn't be hiding there and getting me involved . . ."

"But . . . what kind of a priest are you? . . ." Malena drew back, pushing Father Santos away as he tried to hold her in the protection of his arms.

"One made of flesh and blood, my child, flesh and blood . . ."

"Well, I just want you to know that if he came here to take refuge in the Sch . . ."

"Don't say what you shouldn't say!" the priest lifted his arms in horror. "And luckily," he went on as if gasping for breath, "you said it to me . . ." and, calmer, "Watch that tongue of yours if you don't want to make things worse. Just think about him

hiding somewhere, poor fellow, with a price on his head, worried about you, what could happen to you . . . And what would he do, tell me, think about it a little, what would that man do if he found out they had arrested you because of him? . . . He'd come out of hiding and give himself up . . ."

Malena's eyes alighted on those of the priest, loving, thinking *My love saved my love and how could I destroy him through some act of imprudence . . .*

"And," the priest went on, "we can't eliminate the possibility that he'll take refuge in an embassy . . ."

"You're right . . ." Malena leaned over, trying to hide large, new drops of tears, the damp handkerchief in her cold hands, her feet heavy, her body asleep.

"I have to go because it's going on four o'clock, time for catechism," the priest said. Malena got up to look at the clock (*my love saved my love and may every hour pass without his being caught . . .*). "I'll be back, but if Professor Bouquet gets here first . . ."

"I don't want him to come! . . ." Malena's voice sounded like a roar, then softer, painful, "Go, Father, go tell him I'm in bed, that we're not going to get together, that I have a fever . . ."

"Yes, yes, I'll go, it's on my way, don't worry, child. I'll tell him you're ill . . . although, as I think about it, it might be better to find some other pretext, because if he knows about the plot and knows that our roadman is one of the involved . . . What a word, good Lord, what a word! . . . I think that maybe the best thing is to tell him the truth . . ."

Malena raised her head, which seemed to be cut off as it rested so heavily on her breast, and she fixed her anxious eyes on the face of Father Santos, on his scrubbed white paleness, his rock-colored hair, his curled-up nose that had so little to do with the ground.

"What you're going to do will be the truth," he continued. "Get a few pupils together and, taking advantage of the fact that it's a beautiful day, take a hike to Tall Hill . . ."

"Who . . . me?" She almost stepped back as she laid her hand on her breast to be more eloquent.

"Yes, and we'll tell Piedrafiel the truth. That you decided to take a walk."

"What I want to do is shut myself up and not see anybody . . . anybody . . . and if I went to Tall Hill I'd go alone . . ."

"No, child! . . . no. What kind of ideas are those? . . . It's bad business shutting yourself up and worse than worse to go out alone into these hills. Think if you ran into one of the patrols that are looking for him. And locking yourself up, don't even think about it . . ."

"You mean I can't even get sick . . ."

"Not in this case . . . It would be suspicious. Oh, Lord!" The priest raised the arms that he always kept glued to his cassock and joined his hands together. "Women always find a way to make something that can't be worse worse . . ."

"Going out . . . seeing people . . . it's too much for me . . ."

"Well, you've got to do it for yourself and for him . . . In the newspaper, I forgot to tell you, they talk about the headmistress of a school in the capital who hid the bombs, and when the police came she threw them down a well . . . I don't know what crown of thorns you'll wear if you hide yourself, if you don't go out . . . you know very well that in cases like this the slightest suspicion is all they need . . ."

"Can I keep the newspaper?"

"That's why I brought it. But keep it where you can get rid of it at a moment's notice."

The priest went toward the door and she did not have the spirit to unglue herself from the chair, as if from that moment on every one of her steps would be a decision, as if she were going toward love if he was saved and toward death if he was taken, with the same step, the same feet . . .

"And that's why you have to figure out a pattern of behavior," the priest was saying while Malena unlocked the door. "You, who've always had control over your behavior, have to prove

that you still do. At night, all by yourself, give free rein to your deepest feelings. Within these four walls that you built for the greater glory of knowledge no one will surprise your deep truth, your grief without witnesses, but during the day . . . Careful! . . . eh? . . . during the day you have to be the headmistress, the one who holds the rudder of the ship, the one who in the midst of this shipwreck of what you love most can't weep and abandon the vessel to its fate among the waves of the sea, but who must go forward with her ship, with her school, with her love, and bring it into port . . ."

His voice remained in his throat, lighting him up inside. He could have said many things, but he was in a hurry, the time for catechism was passing by, it was neither the place nor the occasion to make fine speeches and with no audience except for that poor woman who until a moment before had stood so erect that it was hard to imagine.

As the shadow of the priest disappeared the Sunday silence became more acute, the wicker chairs arranged for the gathering looked more lonely, and Malena, as if moved by a spring, locked the newspaper up in her desk again. She also locked the door to the office and went into the small dining-room, so agitated that she thought she would not reach it.

Oh, if the camellias had only been a vision, a dream! Oh, if they weren't there! . . .

Her heart leaping about on her lips, her eyes under the lids that were swollen from weeping, her breathing heavy, she kissed her beloved flowers again and again, even more beloved now . . . They came from the hands of a man sentenced to death. They could be his last message, for if they captured him alive they would shoot him, and, in any case, they would kill him if they found him and he resisted . . .

But who had brought them? . . . such imprudence in a man . . . with a price on his head . . . dead or alive . . . five thousand dollars reward, dead or alive . . . and through the flowers . . . through the red camellias, if she found out who had brought them, she could get to his hiding place and save him . . .

Ring the bell? There was no time to lose. When she came to she was in the servants' quarters, asking how those flowers had got to the school.

"A little Indian brought them . . ." a servant told her.

"Didn't he say who sent them?" she asked anxiously.

"No . . ."

"And what was the Indian like?" Malena cut in with a desperate voice.

The servant, taken by surprise, babbled:

"Well, just the way he was . . . He was like that; barefoot, dirty, no hat . . ."

"But, girl, how can you take something without asking where it comes from, who sent it? . . . We have to send thanks for these flowers, and the person . . ." her voice grew heavy.

"Whenever they bring something I always ask, Miss Headmistress, but this time it was a bumpkin and he didn't give me time. 'Here's this . . .' he said and ran off . . ."

"And don't you remember what he looked like? You didn't see his face? He isn't someone you know?"

"No . . ."

"Whenever anybody brings anything, ask him, for the love of heaven, don't forget, ask him," and she added as she turned, not knowing what to do, quite annoyed, "Can't I get help from anyone? . . ."

"Oh, missy! . . . Missy! . . ." the maid went after her with the happy voice of one who has just received an award from that terrible lottery of memory. "You know who brought them? One of those boys who are learning how to make clay things with Popoluca . . ."

"Are you sure?"

"Almost sure . . ."

No fire can be lighted so brightly or as rapidly as hope. She had to go, no time to lose, to Popoluca's. If one of his apprentices had brought the bunch of camellias to the school, it would be easy to find out where Mondragón was hiding. She went through her room putting on some touches of powder, some lipstick, she

fixed her hair quickly and as soon as she got to the office she rang, one, two, three times . . . Professor Cantalá . . . Yes, she was already there . . .

"Tell me, did you have an appointment today with the girls in the chorus?"

"Some of them are coming and I think they're arriving now, Headmistress," she answered with an obsequious tone. "What a pity. If I'd known that you'd wanted to hear the chorus . . . I called in the ones who are most off-key in order to work with them separately and not waste time at rehearsals."

Malena let a moment pass that was interminable for the always timid Professor Cantalá. The mere silence of the headmistress seemed like a reprimand. And that was why her joy was even greater when she heard her say:

"Well, the ones who are here can go with us. We'll take a walk around the neighborhood. The afternoon is so beautiful . . ."

Doubt cut off her voice and a tickling, walking remorse for what she had said. There was nothing beautiful about that spectral afternoon, better for closing one's eyes and never again seeing a world that had turned strange and hostile in a few moments. But adjectives are enough, words are enough . . . anything can be said . . . How horrible! . . .

"Isn't it true that the afternoon is *beautiful*? . . . " she insisted, shaking from head to foot but without letting anything that was happening to her show.

Ana María Cantalá agreed with a light "yes" at the idea of going out with the headmistress, whom she planned to ask for permission on the way to "keep her hand in" on the school piano after class or on Sundays.

"Go to the pantry," the headmistress told her, "because we have to bring some fruit along to give to the girls . . ."

Malena, while Professor Cantalá ran inside, went back to the small dining-room near her bedroom. When she moved she was able to recover, get out of her depression. She knew where she was going, even if she thought she was hesitant, not sure.

"Oh, if she could only find her absent love," she thought as she pinned the bunch of camellias to her breast, she would give her life to hear him say, "You're wearing your heart on the outside! . . ."

Ana María Cantalá, tall, chubby, small head and large eyes, was waiting in the hallway which led to the street door, standing in front of the girls of the chorus, who, when they greeted the headmistress, corroborated what the teacher had said, that they were the most off-key.

And it was time to leave, the group of girls, barefoot, poorly dressed, in the timid disorder of a flock, Professor Cantalá, with the bag of fruit on her arm, trying to keep order, was bringing on more disorder with her officious warnings, and the headmistress, aware that those poor steps of hers, taken with such effort, because if she had her way she would have been shut up in the dark, seeing no one, were taking her to Popoluca's in search of news, for if the camellias had been sent from there, the old sculptor would know where Juan Pablo was.

"If we have time we'll be able to go all the way to Tall Hill," Malena said to the girls, "but first I have to stop by Popoluca's workshop and we'll give out the fruit."

"Thank you very much! . . . Say 'Thank you very much, headmistress! . . .'" Professor Cantalá ordered, and through the stone-spined streets of Cerropóm the echo of the childish voices spread out as they repeated in a chorus: "Thank you very much! . . . Thank you very much, headmistress! . . ."

"Come, line up, line up . . . What's all this disorder?" the teacher put in, almost brandishing the bag of fruit at the noisiest girls, and when she saw Professor Piedrafiel coming toward the group, she added, "How ugly for the headmaster of the School for Boys to see you in such disorder! Get up on the sidewalk and pair off!"

And while the girls fell into twos and went that way along the sidewalk, small, minute, with their skin of unbaked clay, their

naked feet, and the bright colors of the ribbons in their hair, Malena stopped to chat with Professor Bouquet.

"So they arrived. They look good! . . ." Piedrafiel said as he drew closer.

What was he referring to? . . . The flowers? . . . The red camellias that she had on her breast? . . . And how did Piedrafiel know that they were coming? . . .

A man of many words and more gestures, he soon revealed what he meant:

"Last Sunday, after the gathering, when we left the Big Chief Priest of the Indians off at Calvary (that was what he called Father Santos behind his back), Mondragón took me to the school and took advantage of our being alone to ask me to receive a bouquet of red camellias in his name—they were going to send them to him from the capital—so that I could have them sent to you. All of which was accomplished. But since I didn't see him again and since we're not getting together . . ."

"Father . . ."

"Yes, yes, Professor Tabay, Father Santos saw me and told me that there wouldn't be any get-together because you had to go out with your pupils on a hike to the country . . ." He shrugged his shoulders, withdrew his arms into his sleeves, touched the starched cuffs with the tips of his fingers, and went on. "Well, as I was saying, I didn't see Mondragón again, and if you do, please tell him that I got them, that I fulfilled his request to the letter. He didn't want them to wither . . . Taking them out of the box . . . putting them in the hands of one of the pupils at the school . . . and then to the ten lilies of your charming fingers, and in contact with them, far from withering, they've revived . . . Ah, woman! She is the nourishment of flowers . . . Although you don't have to tell him anything because as soon as he sees your 'heart on the outside' he'll know that I took care of his request . . . Yes, yes . . ." he added loquaciously, "Mondragón told me that when he met you on the train you were wearing a corsage like that on your clothing and he, without knowing you, said that to

you . . . And don't be surprised, don't be surprised that he opened up to me, because you know that in love, the same as someone who's unlucky, someone who's happy will tell everything to his friends, and that nice young roadman has become so close to me that I might venture to say that we were friends even before we knew each other. A fine fellow, loyal, a keen mind, well-traveled, young, and he has a brilliant future!"

"We'll talk about it another time, professor . . ." Malena cut him short with her brow bathed in a cold sweat, and, as if daubed by the words of that man who seemed electrified when he spoke, a tic here, a tic there, super-blink-blinking blink-blink-blinking, jumps of his shoulders, elbowing in the air. He evidently did not know what the newspapers had said about the plot and Juan Pablo. If he had, he would not have stopped to greet her, much less have praised Mondragón, and even less have told her that he had sent the red camellias that had been ordered from the capital by the one who was now wanted by the authorities, dead or alive.

"We'll talk another time, professor . . ." Malena repeated, "unless you want to come with us . . ." It did not matter much to her now whether Piedrafiel went along or not, for she no longer had anything to do or ask at Popoluca's. "We're taking a walk and we may go as far as Tall Hill since it's such a nice afternoon . . ."

"A jewel of an afternoon . . . a gem!," Malena muttered, holding back her tears with a blinking of her eyes as she said good-by to the professor and quickened her pace to catch up with the pupils. She should go back and shut herself in, stay in the darkness until she found out about the person who might be fleeing through those mountains without having closed his eyes, without having tasted a mouthful of food, dying of thirst like an animal, like an evil beast who was being hunted down . . . and she going for a walk . . . a walk, yes, a walk, because now why should she go to Popoluca's since she knew that the red camellias had been sent by Professor Piedrafiel, Headmaster of the School for

Boys . . . and what if they had taken him alive and were torturing him . . . from torture to the execution wall, and from the wall to an unmarked grave, buried anonymously, like a dog . . . and she going for a walk, with a hat, gloves, a parasol, and the corsage of camellias on her breast . . .

She was stumbling, as if her feet refused to go on, because where was there to go? Where was there to go since what she had heard from the lips of Piedrafiel came the disappearance of her hopes of finding Juan Pablo's trail at the workshop of the old potter, more beard than face. What could Popoluca tell her about the man who overnight had changed into a social menace, into a man who, like a malignant beast, was being hunted by the authorities, dead or alive? . . . It turned her upside down . . . Yesterday had been nothing like that, why was it so now? . . . now when they could have all been together, arguing, chatting about all kinds of things, talking . . .

As soon as they left the village the movement of the hills began, some higher, some lower, some like intermediaries, peering out between the clouds and the other hills, and others taller than those they had just seen, lords of height and distance, and another one, and others more erect, and others, and others . . . and there the figure of Señorita Cantalá, who, at the head of the march, without stopping, with the help of the livelier pupils was trying to find out what those cyclopean masses of naked stone looked like.

"A warrior hill! . . . A wizard hill! . . . A lion hill! . . ." the shouts could be heard amidst outcries and dust, and the group stopped for a moment in its dizzy descent to look at the authentic profile of a warrior in the gigantic mass to which the teacher's finger was pointing, or the head of the wizard that a girl was indicating with her forefinger, or the shape of a reclining shaggy lion that they had just discovered in the distance, an immense emptiness of living gold.

"But what kind of disorder is this? . . ." the teacher raised

her voice. "You're raising so much dust . . . hey . . . hey . . . pick up your feet or we'll go back and there won't be any hike!"

Oh, how Malena would have liked to have gone back! . . . Why was she going to Popoluca's since she already knew that the red camellias had been sent by Professor Bouquet?

"Look! . . . Look over there! . . . Look at that hill, girls," the teacher pointed. "It looks like a jar . . . a woman drinking from a jar! . . ."

Malena, indifferent to that game of look-alike, raised her eyes when she heard them speak of a woman and a jar and she shuddered. It was precisely the figure of a stone woman, not in a position of drinking water, but of shouting, of shouting into a jar as she had shouted the name of Juan Pablo so many times last night . . .

"Juan Pablo! . . . Juan Pablo! . . ."

She looked all around again, but she had not said it. It had echoed in her head . . .

Dead or alive . . . dead or alive . . .

The teacher came over to tell her:

"We're getting to Popoluca's, Headmistress . . ."

"Yes, yes . . ." Malena managed to say. "I'm going in for a moment. Have the girls wait outside here. I'll talk to Popoluca and then we'll go on to Tall Hill . . . Let them play a while, distribute the fruit . . ."

But what was she going to talk to Popoluca about? She knocked on the door with her small fingers, raps that sounded like pecking on a gigantic tree. And the door was not long in opening, Popoluca himself, more beard than face, his small eyes lost like two drops of water, appeared for a moment, asking who else beside the headmistress had arrived. He greeted Professor Cantalá, winked at the girls, who were frightened at the appearance of the old man, and he closed the door made of one tall, broad plank and which swung on hinges made of wooden plugs.

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"God sent you to me! God told you to come! God tells us things sometimes in ways we don't know about and we follow them without knowing why! . . ." With that downpour of words and unexpected exclamations, his hat in one hand and in the other a handkerchief with which he was wiping his sweaty forehead, Popoluca received the headmistress and would not let her speak. He put on his hat, took her by the arm, and brought her, brought her, brought her through the workshop into his house, running more than walking, and once he had her in the back room he told her to wait, but he said it almost with signs, left the room, went spying around everywhere, and, certain that there was no one there, he came back as if on tiptoe and whispered in her ear: "He was here . . ." and at the stupor of Malena, who was more pale than alive, he lowered his voice completely. "On Tuesday . . . Tuesday of this week, four days ago, he was here . . . He came just when day was breaking and he left at nightfall . . ." A long sigh of relief and a quick look around, a precaution that he kept taking at every moment.

Malena was nailed to the floor, not knowing what to do or what to say. But while Popoluca was coming back she had time to find her hands, which were hanging down from her face bathed in a glacial sweat, and with her trembling fingers she searched for her lips, her mouth . . . she wanted to speak. She had time to swallow the sobs, to calm down, to build up that superior being that she had in her, the headmistress, and to demand, with authority, why she had not been notified.

"The first thing that went through my head, naturally," he remembered then that he had his hat on and took it off, "was to run to where you were and tell you about it. It was my responsibility, but he was against it . . ."

"He was against it? . . . How strange! . . ." Malena managed to say.

" 'You won't even look out the door while I'm here!' is what he told me . . ." (Malena put on the expression of a person who has just understood.) " 'I'm only staying for today. After I've gone off, you can go out. If you want to, you can go out, you can come in, you can do whatever you want to, but not before and you won't tell anyone you saw me, only Señorita Tabay, and alone, when she's alone, you can tell her everything.' "

"He needed company. He must have felt terribly alone . . ."

"He needed company," Popoluca repeated, "or he didn't trust me the least bit, because he wouldn't let me get too far away from him. Let's say he needed company. But I don't think he trusted me the least bit." Popoluca shook his head and his gray hair mingled with his beard, which had the dirty color of trash.

"Why shouldn't he trust you?"

"Why? . . . I'll tell you why . . ." and he went out to take a frightened look around to see that no one was listening.

His steps were inaudible when he came back. He was putting his beard in order. A smile like licorice was dripping from between his teeth, a smile that was vegetable.

"Do you know why, ma'am? . . . Well, because he'd become an outlaw and he didn't even trust the snap on his cap, like any

man hunted by the authorities with orders to take him dead or alive."

"Did he know that?"

"He's the one who told me. He said those very words right here where we're standing, that was what he said and he knew it first-hand. I can tell you that he heard it from the leader of the patrol that was searching for him in Cerropóm, and that's telling it all . . ."

"And that was Monday night?"

"Monday, right . . ."

"And what was he doing in Cerropóm at that time?"

"Doing . . ."

He sneaked out to take a look, to see that no one had slipped around and was hiding there listening to what they were saying, and he returned with the word in his mouth:

"Doing what he was doing, but the strange thing isn't just that, that he heard the leader of the patrol say that they were looking for him dead or alive, that's the least of it. What I'm going to tell you is what sticks in a person's head just by hearing it . . . But excuse me, let me find a place for you to sit down . . ."

"I don't know whether I can sit down or not. All this news is making me so nervous . . ."

"He says he was in the camp, that road camp in Entrecerros, ready to go to bed, he'd even taken off his uniform, when he felt like going out for a nip. 'Wait a minute,' he says he told himself, 'it's late, you're tired, you'd better go to bed, go to sleep, tomorrow's another day.' That's what he said to himself, but he got more and more restless, wanting more to go out than to go to bed. 'But look here,' he says he said to himself in a stronger way, 'it's Monday, the beginning of the week, wait till another day.' He couldn't, not one bit. He got dressed in civilian clothes, he didn't want to wrinkle the uniform he'd put under the mattress so it would be pressed in the morning, and he went out as if he was pulled by some far-off magnet, something that drew him out of there and took him somewhere else. If it wasn't for that they

would have caught him. When a person gets an urge it isn't just like that, it's for some reason, because it was only a while later that the patrol got to his tent with orders to take him dead or alive. But everyone knows what happens with orders like that: they would have killed him right there saying that he'd resisted."

Malena put her tense hand on the back of the chair so as not to look as if she were collapsing as she sat down. Then in an attempt to hide her feelings with a trivial phrase she said:

"Luck saved him! . . ."

"Luck and love! . . ." Popoluca put in, his eyes shining playfully in the midst of the beard that almost came up to his eyes and his feathery brows. "Some woman of his must have been calling him in a jar . . ."

Malena turned livid. Someone else, not only she, was calling him in a jar! . . . This old man knows everything, she thought, and she was ashamed, although she said to herself then, "Why should I be ashamed? . . . Don't civilized women use the telephone to call the ones they love . . . and now there's radio, which is the thing most like shouting into a jar, and the words are transmitted without any need for wires to the heart of the receiver? . . ." But someone else had called him on Monday, the one who saved him, because she did it on Saturday when she begged him not to miss the get-together . . . Someone else? . . . But on Monday he was there with her until close to eleven o'clock, until she, stupid, told him to leave, not knowing that out on the street he was exposed to the bullets of twenty ruffians who would send him to his death while she stayed behind weeping over trifles because she had let him read her diary . . .

"Where could he have hidden in Cerropóm that night? . . ." she inquired, following the thread of what Popoluca was telling, although her lips were trembling, afraid that when she asked the question that Juan Pablo had had some other refuge in town and that Popoluca would tell her about it.

"Where he hid? . . . First he wandered around the streets, he didn't have any reason to hide, he didn't know anything, he

even went through the middle of the patrol that was scattered on the corner resting . . . No, that man was tempting fate that night . . . First he was wandering around the streets, later on . . ."

With a signal he told her to wait. He went out to take a look around the workshop, went to the main door that opened onto the street, where he heard the chatter of the girls who were playing, and he came back hazy, as if he had gone out to gather more shadow.

"He hid behind the big willow tree over by Calvary, that hairy willow that puts its branches over the wall of the cemetery. And that's how it all happened, because from there he could hear what he heard. He was dozing off, huddled up on the stone bench that goes along the whole front of the parish house, waiting for the first road truck to go back to the camp when he heard the patrol coming. First he heard a lot of steps, then not just steps but voices, yawns, curses, and spitting that cut the cold of after-midnight. Step by step, their sandals shuffling on the ground, one after another, but the column stopped there. The leader halted right in front of where he was. The leader scratched his head as if he was trying to get rid of what was bothering him and when some of the soldiers got close he bellowed out, 'We've got to take that Mondragón dead or alive . . . well, he won't get away from us, but he's giving us a hard time! . . .' And he still is, because I don't think they'll catch him now. He's a man who made fate shake three times. First when he was on the point of being caught in his tent if he hadn't gone out for a walk; second when he passed right through the patrol and they didn't recognize him because he was in civilian clothes and they were looking for him in the white uniform of a roadman; and third when he heard the leader say that they were looking for him dead or alive. And that's all I've got to say. I don't think they'll ever catch him . . ."

"And didn't he leave any word as to where he was going?" Malena inquired, as if she had recovered her voice.

"He didn't tell me. He took off after it was dark, quite dark . . .

I saw him leave. The darkness closed in around his back and that was the last I saw of him."

"Why didn't he stay here? That's what I don't understand . . ."

"It was dangerous . . ."

"It'll be more dangerous if they find him, recognize him, and . . ." her tongue shrank, "they must know now that he's not wearing his uniform."

"Not so easy, ma'am . . . He left dressed like . . . the way we dress, like a farm worker, with sandals, a straw hat, and a mustache . . . he had a wicker pack I gave him, plenty of tortillas, salt, a gourd with some water. But he forgot his cigarettes and matches . . ."

"How can I ever pay you, Popoluca!"

"Why should you?"

"Well, yes, you're right!" she said quickly, hastening to add, "And what happened to the clothes he was wearing?"

"In the kiln . . ."

"Hidden?"

"Turned to ashes . . . Clothes, shoes, everything was burned . . . and the other things he had, his wallet, his pen, his key-ring, handkerchiefs, he took along . . . and now that I've said pen, if I remember right, he told me that if you came by or if I went to the school, I should give you a little piece of paper . . ."

"Popoluca! . . ."

The word stayed on her lips. Popoluca had disappeared. Doubtlessly to get the letter, because she thought it was a long farewell letter, but evidently he had only gone out to see if someone had come in, because when he came back he untied a knot on the kerchief where he kept some coins to throw people off the track, and he took out a tiny roll of paper.

The anxiety to know what he said in writing made her accept that minimal message in place of the imagined letter without disappointment. Not accept, she snatched it out of Popoluca's hands, unrolled it, and read: *"À bientôt, Chérie! Jean Paul."*

"You have to destroy it . . . That's what he said. As soon as you've read it . . ."

"Yes, yes . . ." and while she clutched it in her fist until her nails dug in, she straightened up as if trying to keep her head. "No, I'm not looking for anything, Popoluca! . . . I'm feeling . . . thinking . . . breathing . . . living . . . here where he was on Tuesday! . . ."

"All day, until late into the night . . ."

"And nothing further has been heard?"

"Nothing. The patrols come and go . . ."

"Have they come here?"

"Looking for water, to watch the students work . . . They don't suspect me of anything . . ."

Outside, the noise of the girls could be heard as they jumped, ran, chased each other, pulled hair, hit each other, rolled around in the sand to the scolding and warnings of Professor Cantalá.

Malena read again: "*À bientôt, Chérie! Jean Paul,*" and then she lifted the piece of paper to her lips as if she were going to eat it and she tore it up with kisses as she repeated:

"*À bientôt . . . à bientôt . . . à bientôt, Chérie . . .*"

And feeling herself caught by the small eyes of the old man as they glowed in a friendly and understanding way through the thick trash pile of his beard, she turned to him, deciding to tell him everything.

"Popoluca . . ."

"There's no need to tell me anything," he cut her off. "I saw you once with Señor Mondragón on Tall Hill . . ."

"We'd gone to look at the ocean . . ."

. . . Now I want you to leave . . . I have to be alone . . . now I want you to leave . . . I have to be alone . . . the streets of Cerropóm passed under his feet . . . now I want you to leave . . . now I want you to leave . . . passed under his feet . . . passed under his feet . . . silent rivers of white stones . . . the streets . . . the square . . . the square he had passed several times and

now once more . . . and this street once more, and that one, and they all kept on passing under his motionless feet, fixed on the words with which Malena had said good-by . . . now I want you to leave . . . next week I'll visit you at the camp and we'll talk again . . . I have to be alone . . .

He pulled his hat to one side without stopping. The feeling that the streets were passing under his feet had disappeared. He was the one who was going along as the sound of his steps disturbed the silence of a town that ended in steep precipices on all sides. There were no more streets, no more squares on that island of stone surrounded by the emptiness of the peaks. If only he could grow wings . . . have wings . . . leave behind the feet which were treading on that now I want you to leave . . . now I want you to leave . . . and leap into the silence of the immensity . . .

Another silence passed through without his even suspecting it, a greater immensity as he passed through the patrol that was looking for him dead or alive. The silence of his disappearance, the infinite, the unfathomable silence that would have followed his steps if those men, avid for liquor, had not been joined in the battle of glasses, at the half-open door of a tavern, while the leader, thirstier than his men, the thirst of responsibility and gold braid, was throwing his head back at the risk of losing his military cap, tipping up a quart of beer, without breathing, without taking his lips away from the mouth of the bottle, his sword tight under his armpit and his Sam Browne belt ready to burst on his stomach. Had they noticed Mondragón? . . . Did they see him pass? . . . Yes, but they were not going to waste any time on a civilian and they needed more hands to grab more glasses as that mule-killer was being passed out. They were after a roadman, a road officer dressed in white.

But the worm woke up in Mondragón, the urge to have a drink, and he was about to go back when he thought of waking up Father Santos and asking him for one. "I'll rap on his window, the one to his bedroom," he said to himself as he went toward

Calvary, "and he'll open up right away thinking that it's somebody sick who needs confession or Professor Bouquet who's come to tell him something or other . . ."

Ever since he had found Malena in Cerropóm, Juan Pablo avoided thinking about the only thing that could separate him from her forever, his failure. He was not consoled by the fact that when he found her he could no longer undo his frightening plans and that was why, in flight from abysmal thoughts, he came to rest in the blindness of a love that was being born and he forgot that the clock was bringing the decisive moment of his life closer. He quickened his pace toward Calvary without knowing, without even imagining that at that moment everything had been discovered and that at that moment, on those very streets, the patrol he had just passed was searching for him dead or alive, accused of having been the one who supplied the explosives with which the home-made bombs were made and of being the one who would drive the truck that would cut off the presidential car at the moment of the attack.

Calvary at last, standing not on any Golgotha but at the end of a flat stretch. Cobwebby trees, more branches than leaves, sheltered the broad, flat space that opened up in front of the church. To one side, in the rear, stood the parish house. Mondragón quickened his pace, having decided to rap on Father Santos's window and ask him for a drink, but he did not dare, and after walking back and forth at the priest's window like a lover, decided and undecided, his hand up and down, ready to rap on the window panes, he let himself down on the bench built along the side of the parish house, a long adobe outcropping that extended its stone step until it was lost in the shadows of a willow at the corner where the cemetery began. That willow planted among the dead leaped over the wall and spread its network of frothy lashes among the living. He had dropped down away from the tree, but the cold made him slide without completely rising along the smooth stone of the bench until he was under the cloak of its branches. He had his hands in his

pants pockets and he stretched out his legs, one foot over the other, desperate, not knowing what to do after what had happened with Malena. How could it be explained? She goes to the bookcase, he sees her get up, leave his arms, his kisses, his friendly warmth, take out some big books bound in red, put them back again, and come back with a notebook she gives him to read. Until he had it in his hands, he did not know that it was her diary. He reads. Unexpectedly, Malena asks him to leave. She is bathed in tears and is sobbing as if she is sorry to have revealed her secrets to him. He picks up his hat and leaves without daring to say anything . . .

What happened? . . . Why did she give him her diary to read? . . . To give him a proof of her trust? . . . For the very same reason he should not have opened it, he should not even have opened it . . . But she gave it to him opened . . . But as soon as he realized that it dealt with her intimate life, he should have closed it and given it back to her like a gentleman . . . Put it in her hands intact and kiss her hair, showing her or telling her: "My lips in the nighttime of your hair seal off your past, which I do not wish to know . . ."

The poor woman had reason to be so bitter . . . Using the saddest kind of mistrust, the amorous presentation of her life . . . Submitting herself to the torture of being present, standing, with no way out, her back to the bookcase, just like a criminal, watching the reading of letters and pages that he devoured with his heart on his lips, trembling, fearful that Malena had used that stratagem to let him know that she was compromised, that she could not respond to him, that she had taken some oath, that a religious vow had risen up between them . . .

But he should have said so, explained it to her, not gone off half at a run and embarrassed, his hat in his hand, repeating her last words . . . now I want you to leave . . . next week I'll visit you at the camp and we'll talk again . . . I have to be alone . . .

He put a cigarette in his mouth, lit it, and with the smoke came the disappearance of the figure of Malena in her torture,

harsh and tall like the figurehead on a ship's prow, and the teacher made of pale stone appeared, with listening eyes, made not just simply for looking, and the full-lipped mouth that had an inbred twitch of sad self-domination.

He counted the cigarettes he had left and looked at his watch. He would have to ration them if he wanted one when he got up in the morning. The first road truck would not pass until half-past four.

He spread his feet out with the last puff of smoke, tired of holding them one on top of the other, drew in his legs, crossed them, and, as if hiding himself from the cold, he turned up his jacket collar, huddling up and sinking his face down onto his chest in order to let his hot breath come over him. The foliage of the willow tree covered him. A green mosquito netting behind which Mondragón contemplated the myriads of golden flies that were flying in the sky, and the silence was such that he could hear the sparkling buzz of the stars and the flow of his thought in the freedom of the night.

He recalled Malena's expressions, her words about the most insignificant things for the pleasure of remembering her attitudes, her opinions, the sound of her voice, and now the heat of her offer to go to his tent at the camp, imagining her as his wife in future intimate pleasures, naked in his arms, looking at her over and over again, the pleasure of visual possession accompanied by the breaking-up of words in her mouth and the sobbing of saliva with every kiss. Even a certain laziness in the aged child that he had once surprised in her teacher's blush made him feel warm.

His eyes closed on him, but he opened them at once, fear, the remorse of losing instants of that night with an awakened sky and the sleeping presence of Malena, who was giving herself with the weight of darkness on her hair and her flesh illuminated from within, atmospheric and warm. He opened and closed his eyes. Feeling with her the immense curve of the stars in the celestial fragrance. He opened and closed his eyes, blinking,

cigarette embers that his thought hung from his lashes damp with dew like the branches of the willow soaked with soft weeping and lit by the morning stars. What made him remember that mysterious "and" which in Malena's diary cut off and . . . did not cut off her adventure with the young officer she had met at the dance at the Military Club? His eyes became fixed between the quiet lids as if the torrent of his life had suddenly crystallized and the wind that moved the mill blades of his eyes had ceased. Word by word he reconstructed the last part, the last sentence: "it ended with the fact that he was younger than I, and . . ."

And, and, and . . . What did that enigmatic, intentional cut mean, that unknown "and," the three dots? . . . Did it mean that something had happened between them that she did not dare confide to the paper? . . . Or . . . did it mean that it was not over, that it existed, that the unconfessable love had survived? . . .

And, and, and . . . It went on, something that she did not have the courage to write down went on, or she did not have the courage to cut it off and it was like the continuation of a great chord which in her diary was echoed by those three dots . . .

And, and, and . . .

He was twisting about like a fish who has taken the hook and was fighting to get off that "and" he had swallowed which was pulling on him to get him out of his drowsiness, the immobility that came from being in the same position. But for all of his efforts . . . and, and, and . . . was being repeated between flesh and dream . . . for all of his efforts: tightening his hands in his pants pockets, letting the shadows of his eyelids fall down to his feet at the same time as he let his head fall back against the wall, he could not free himself from the doubt driven into his brain like a mental hiccup . . . and . . . and . . . and . . . three dots, the first sand that he rested his feet on, staggering, hiccuping . . . and, and, and . . . understanding that solitude and desertion were beginning for him again . . . and, and, and . . . like shadows, his dreams of happiness came down over the scaffolding of his restless breathing as he thought about the cynical adventure between

a young officer and a village schoolteacher who was not prepared to waste her vacation and wanted to take advantage of her days and nights in the capital, where people see each other, look for each other, love each other, find each other, she, trying to compete in the surrender, loving, and arts of the young girls whom she doubtless had as rivals, and the uniformed boy, presumptuous and eager, winning his first spurs in that maternal love of willing surrender, that clucking charm, caresses that made up for lost time, and . . . and . . . and . . . everything that because of decorum, shame, convenience, for whatever reason, she did not dare mark down in her diary, but which was there, there . . . in that conjunction, with its mysterious form of a seed, a link, a copulative conjunction. No, it could not be left at that, it was impossible, he should go back and demand the explanation of what it meant, what she was saying with that "and" followed by three dots in space . . . And . . . and . . . and . . . a hiccuping belch of doubt that beat in him . . . and . . . and . . . and . . . strangled him . . . and . . . and . . . and . . . which he heard multiplied by a toad, by a thousand toads, by millions of toads . . . ank . . . and . . . and . . . ank . . . and . . . and . . . and . . . ank . . . and . . . and . . . and . . .

He shook as if he were being lashed inside and out. From hiccup to hiccup that and . . . and . . . and . . . was mutilating his soul piece by piece, while buried in his flesh the flowing whip-lashes of the dry croaking of the toads . . . ank . . . and . . . and . . . ank . . . and . . . and . . and . . .

What should he do? His breath sounded like a thick brush in his nostrils. Until then he had not realized that the corner stank of evaporated, sun-baked urine. He cast his eyes rapidly from one side to another, searching among the toads and the hiccups, and opening only where he could get his eyes out, naked, crystallized by what he had just glimpsed. He imagined so many things and until then he could not find the motive that had induced Malena to get up unexpectedly, as if moved by a spring, go to the bookcase, take out her diary, and give it to him. He

stopped his eyes and he saw clearly. The explanation was in that "and . . ." She gave him her diary to read so that he would learn of her adventure with that little officer and . . . and . . . and . . . (hiccup, the belch of doubt multiplied outside by the toads) . . . and . . . and . . . and . . . so that he would leave her or take advantage of her . . .

The saliva sounded like a laugh on his lips. No, no, it wasn't possible! In the pockets of his pants his hot hands rolled around amidst the weight of his virility. Yes, yes, so that he would leave her or take advantage of her after the little officer and . . . who knows how many others! . . . That explained her doubts of a woman who was offering herself, her held-in sobs, her great tears streaming down her face, her arms behind her, her whole body lengthened into a forward direction, toward him, who did not understand, stupid, romantic, who did not go to her and take her in his arms, laying her down on any piece of furniture to possess her. But there was still time . . . No, no, the storm of surrender lasts only for a flash! . . . He would wait, he would wait for her visit to the camp the following week and then, yes, knowing what that "and" meant he would take advantage of her. Because it came to that . . . When she saw that he had not understood what was meant by her giving him her diary to read, she offered him the unexpected: going to the camp, to his tent.

He turned toward the blue night, hard and translucent, which had so much of a naked woman about it, dressed in jewels, mysterious, deep, unreachable with the arms and easy to clasp with the eyes.

Everything would be different. Starting with Malena's visit to the camp they would be . . . he undid the word mentally, waking up in the darkness, following a chain of planets, tickling, distant, planets, planets . . . ready to get up off that stone seat and run to the school, beat on the doors and windows until Malena woke up, came out, and told him whether that "and . . ." was the sound of the bells which, in order to ring while asleep, attracted the wind to the belfries of the church . . . an . . . emometer . . .

an . . . tenna receiving the night, the dust of the stars and loving bodies, the dust of dreams . . . annnn . . . tennnn . . . aaa . . . annnn . . . tennnn . . . aaa . . . Yes, yes, he should run run to the school and ask Malena if "and . . ." meant antenna . . . annnn . . . tennnn . . . aaa . . . annnn . . . tennnn . . . aaa . . . like the sound of the wind on the bells, like the kiss of soft iron as the clapper is magnetized and received by the rim . . . annnn . . . tennnn . . . aaa . . . annnn . . . tennnn . . . aaa . . .

But he made no move, he could not get up, immobilized by the heavy breath of bats who spun about his body, the feeling of bonds that were sinking into his flesh like tattoo marks, and how could he get out of that endless chain of blind chiropterans, how could he break that web of diabolical wings, how could he untie what were not bonds but tattoo marks . . .

He struggled to lift up his head and get his body out of that flying strait-jacket. He should run, go to Malena and hear from her lips of a magnetized bell, from her lips of sleeping metal, curved by the growth of her receptive power, what the two of them were in the midst of that night of diamonds.

He vaguely remembered, as he followed the bats which tied him up, not with material bonds but with the velvety breath of air that intoxicated him with tattoo marks, his youthful barber-shop theories when he would argue with some customer to the rhythm of the shears, which also have music, about love and earthly magnetism, a period in which he spoke seriously of ideal lines or axes of amorous induction and of bodies which, magnetized by love, went on to be lovers.

The sound of the bells was followed by a hailstorm, as if all around the silence of the night had broken into pieces. A rain of almonds with dark corneas and clear pupils that bathed it in looks. And another, another wave of hail, as if suddenly billions of tears had solidified over the nearby graveyard, beat him with its seed of naked eyes, watery, congealed. He was frightened. He managed to extract his arms from the tattooing of the bats which bound him, covered him, intoxicated him, and take a few

steps, defending his face against that rain of human eyes, without lashes, without lids, out of their sockets, separated from dreams and visions. (Who's there? . . . I! . . . The echo repeated the monosyllable at each grave . . . I! . . . I! . . . I! . . . Am I all of the dead? . . . The echo repeated! . . . All of the dead! . . . Am I all of the dead? . . . he asked again . . . And the echo repeated . . . All of the dead! . . .) Haaa! Ha! Haaaa! . . . The laugh leaped from the cavity of his mouth and materialized into a great train of teeth and molars that instead of laughing spat out fried corn in a saliva of doubt while the hail of human eyes grew stronger, large pupils which with their absent look, far from filling, emptied space. He was wrapped in a trembling sweat, with feathers of coldness, feathers of dreams. Eyes with the look of a woman, a man, old, young, a child, an idiot, a saint, a wise man, ran into each other without bumping, coming together and breaking apart, as if passing over him and next to him, and under his feet there was a bodiless multitude, nothing but eyes, eyes, eyes . . . light . . . dark . . . blue . . . clear . . . a multitude without sleep, hail-pupils, always wide-open awake . . .

He raised his head, disoriented . . . The sound of the wind in the bells? . . . The flight of the bats?

Pressing on his forehead was one of the human eyes that he managed to hold in his fingers, so strongly, so violently that he broke it, flattened it against the palpitation of his temples at the same time as an endless horror ran through him, for he had realized that what he held between his fingers and his brow, what he had trapped, was not a human eye but a leaf from the willow tree . . .

He remained seated in the same place. Who was it, then, shouting at the entrance to the cemetery? . . .

He touched himself, he touched the stone bench, looking to see where so many human eyes had fallen, what had happened to the carpet of hailstones that could see, that were spinning their limpid pupils about in the snow-white corneas . . .

Everything was lying extinguished, the eyes were leaves, the

leaves of the willow tree, disguised in a vegetable appearance, the hundreds, the thousands of human eyes hanging from its weeping branches. Planted in the cemetery, its roots had penetrated into the dry skulls, into the empty sockets of the bone faces and had extracted the sight from those who no longer could see in a human way but in a vegetable way, of those who no longer had eyes but leaves . . .

He was terrified. The knees of the mountains. The land on its knees. The morning star! . . . Unhooked, loose in an atmosphere of eternity, that hour which is neither day nor night but eternity.

He had the feeling that Malena was with him at that moment, not separated, but a part of his ribs, looking at the beacon of fire through the pureness of the transparent air in the feltlike dome, and that feeling of a woman born out of his dreams made him get up, tiny in himself and limitless in the vision of the star, his jealousy extinguished, his instincts, his doubts, understanding that love climbs up across the high and feverish summits where the voice is burned, eyes are closed, touch is lost, submerged in another skin, in another touch, and the navigation of the soul goes from breast to breast, from mouth to mouth, from look to look, from word to word . . .

He smothered his inner talk and drew into the thickness of the shadow of the willow. The patrol which he met in front of the tavern as he left Malena's was coming back step by step. It stopped in front of Calvary while the leader lighted a home-made cigar. Mondragón saw the face of the officer grow as the match which the wind blew out drew near. Another match. This time the flickering little flame was imprisoned in fingers, a luminous hollow that drew close to his mouth, as if he were drinking fire.

And then he discovered that the patrol was looking for a certain Mondragón, dead or alive. He had slipped through their fingers because they had come to take him just after he had left his tent. Then they searched the whole camp and now they were going through the town to see if he was around. The night was dark but it wouldn't do him no good, the leader said, smoking at

full smoke, because he had on his roadman's uniform, and that means that when we see a white shape it's him and it's like target shooting if he isn't taken alive because the orders were to catch him alive and make him say who was in it with him.

The main body of the wool-jacketed people making up the patrol passed the parish house with their sandals clattering, an endless procession, and the person hidden among the branches of the willow could barely stand up, two, three times he felt that he was going to fall, that he was getting light-headed, that his knees ached, turned into a coward by the danger he was in and by the surprise of hearing just like that, all of a sudden, that they were looking for him, dead or alive, for having "put up," in the words of the leader of the patrol, the explosives for the bombs of the terrorist attack and having "offered himself" as driver of the truck that would cut off the President's car at the moment of his being "finished off."

In front of the parish house they wondered whether they should go on to the cemetery, but the leader was against it. When they disappeared he already had his plan. He had recovered his breath, his saliva, his blood. Fleeing through the cemetery was not easy, among the naked stones that had the look of giant skulls, and taking refuge in Popoluca's workshop, where he arrived just as dawn was painting out its first blue colors.

"And all this that seems so long ago was on Tuesday," Popoluca recapitulated, "last Tuesday, five days ago . . ." His hand stuck into his beard, giving himself taps with his grainy fingers which were like the tongues of calves as they fought over milk from an empty udder . . .

He debated between going on or remaining silent. He kept on talking.

"It's hard for us to tell where he's hiding unless something bad happens . . . It isn't even good to talk about it . . . Oh, but if I should get any word, I'll come see you right away! You can be

sure of that . . . Now one small thing, if you want my advice, but who am I to be giving advice to someone as smart as you, ma'am: don't talk to anyone about this business and don't go anywhere."

Malena left Popoluca's pulled along like a ship that a storm has driven out of the harbor. Night was beginning to fall. On the height they could see the lights of Cerropóm. The girls. Professor Cantalá. The toads and their dry, sandy croaking. Everything seemed to be at a standstill. Only she was moving along. Only she was moving along . . .

12

Professor Bouquet was not a freemason, simply a predictable liberal of the kind who would say "Guanacos, sanates, and priests ought to be killed like dangerous beasts," but he was close to the anti-Christ for Tancredo, the sexton of Calvary, who curled his fingers and crossed himself several times when he saw him appear in the nave of the church, ready to penetrate into holy territory, even up to the chancel, in search of Father Santos as he gestured at the altar.

"I believe in the credo of God the Father so much that my name is Tancredo, but the devil in church is more than I've ever seen, and just as soon as he gets to me I'll show him!" the sexton muttered and disappeared behind the panelling to reappear in the sacristy.

There he would wait for Father, who was on the last prayers of the mass, and shout at him, "Have a care, all's not well!" In the meantime he locked the closets, cupboards, bureaus, and quickly began to pray: "Holy God! Almighty God! Immortal God! Deliver us, oh Lord, from this liberal! . . ." He would have

liked to have known how to say it in Latin. Father knew how and knew more than that. During the prayers at the end of the mass when he invoked the aid of the Archangel Michael against the evil spirits loose in the world, he would substitute "evil liberals," for the former, evil as they were, were only spirits, while these other enemies worked in flesh and blood.

But everything changed, and instead of the headmaster of the School for Boys, Professor Constantino Piedrafiel, a group of soldiers appeared in the sacristy, looking tiny beside the tremendous rifles they carried muzzle down. Father Santos, when he heard the sound of arms and sabers, hurried through the end of the mass, and when he got to the sacristy he found Tancredo up against the wall, threatened with death because he would not hand over a bunch of keys, the largest of which he had tied to his belt.

"Hand them over, Credo . . ." the priest ordered laconically and went to put the chalice away in one of the cupboards after taking off his sacred vestments, and, in his cossack again, taking his black clerical cap from a hatrack.

"I'm under your orders in any way I can help," he said to the officer in charge of the soldiers, a man who answered him as if he were speaking through a worm-eaten, boneless nose:

"Permission to search . . ."

"You have a written order, of course," the priest ventured to ask.

"Verbal . . ." snorted the man with his nose eaten by some evil worm.

"Credo, hand over the keys and go along with the gentlemen."

"That's not necessary," the leader said, "as long as he comes with us and opens what we tell him to."

"Go ahead, my son . . ." the priest nodded.

Tancredo managed to say with a sob:

"Tell the people . . . ring the bells!"

But the priest clasped his hands together and soothed himself with the words of Jesus:

"*Regnum meum non est de hoc mundo* . . . correct, profes-

sor? . . ." as out of the corner of his eye he caught Piedrafiel, who had appeared in the door of the sacristy.

"Father! . . . Father! . . ." the teacher interrupted, "Where can we speak? It's something very urgent and delicate . . ."

"The confessional is a safe place . . ." he muttered and went out, followed by Piedrafiel, who tiptoed after with more fear than shame.

"You have to kneel down . . ." Piedrafiel hesitated. "They're coming!" the priest told him, and when the teacher heard the soldiers approaching he lost the power of his legs and he not only kneeled but went inside the confessional, up against the priest, so that they would not recognize him. He was the headmaster of the National School for Boys, and if they discovered him at confession the cure would be worse than the illness.

But the soldiers and their leader, guided by the sexton, went off to the small door to the spiral staircase which led to the bell-tower, and they began to go up, one after the other. Piedrafiel breathed easily. He would have time to tell the priest about the red camellias.

"What red camellias?" the priest asked, intrigued.

"It's in the newspaper, didn't you read it?"

"No, I haven't read it . . ."

"At the request of our Sunday-afternoon friend, understand? . . ." The priest sprinkled a yes, yes with his head, "I sent Professor Tabay a bunch of red camellias that were sent to me from the capital in a box, and this morning I read in the newspaper, in the news about the plot, that the conspirators' password was 'red camellias' . . . Oh, Father, you've got to help me, you've got to go to the School for Girls right now and get the bouquet that the girl must be taking care of like the apple of her eyes!"

"Where's that newspaper?"

"I've got it here in my pocket . . ."

"Let me have it and if I get there on time I'll get rid of that bunch of flowers whose name we will have no reason to recall."

"God bless you!" Piedrafiel exclaimed.

"Our roles have been reversed . . ." Father Santos said, dusting

off the skirts of his cassock as he arose from the confessional as he always did in order to get rid of the sins that had blown into his ear and which he felt on his body like fleas and lice, insects that were not always imaginary.

"They're going to search the whole village, house by house, according to what they say . . ." Piedrafiel followed the priest, who was going back to the parish house.

"And as you can see, professor, they started with the House of God. Such a sacrilege! And they'll go on to the parish house . . ."

"And the schools!" the other cut in. "The School for Girls, and what I'm afraid of, Father, is that you'll be too late if you don't go right now, now . . . You can see that because of those flowers they might pick up the thread and we'll all be involved . . ."

"Now you're using that dirty word that shouldn't even be in the dictionary . . ."

"What about the newspaper? . . . You're forgetting the newspaper . . . Take it, it's yesterday's . . ." and from Bouquet's hands something passed to the priest's cassock, now like a pillow of paper from being so folded, so sweaty, and so concealed. "Show it to Professor Tabay and make her get rid of those flowers before the soldiers get there."

"The ones here are going to take a while," Father Santos said, "because they must be looking the town over from up above."

"But what's wrong with you, Father. There's a whole battalion going through town, patrols all over. Was there any meat this morning? Not a piece to be had. As soon as dawn broke they pounced on the youngest of the Roldáns, who'd done some slaughtering, and made him contribute something and the poor fellow had to turn over the whole cow. And there wasn't any bread because the two bakeries in town didn't have ovens enough. No bread, no meat, I don't know what the poor people are going to eat . . ."

"Greens . . ."

"There isn't even that in these naked hills and they won't let the people who come up to sell vegetables and fruit through

because there are roadblocks and martial law has been declared . . . But go ahead, Father, don't lose any time, because if it won't be any others I can hear the ones here coming down from the tower, the ones who might find those flowers."

And in Cerropóm that short week, as Professor Bouquet explained it, was a Monday with no Monday, a Tuesday with no Tuesday, a de-Wednesdayed Wednesday, and a thirsty Thursday, because the restrictions were not lifted until Friday noon, when the troops broke camp, the mounted police left, and there was an end to that menacing coming and going of armed men through the streets and the surrounding countryside.

Malena decided not to close her eyes that night when she got back from Popoluca's, a little hopeful, but sobbing, and she arose with eyes as red as tomatoes from so much weeping and keeping them open, lit up. How could she close them with impunity, how could she extinguish the only beacons that lit up her darkness? It was better to see things outside than to lose oneself in the darkness. And therefore, when she heard that someone had arrived—on Monday and so early—she put her dark glasses on and, seated behind her desk, her dugout as she called it, she glanced around the office to see that everything was in order. It could have been some delegate from the ministry, some inspector. Next to her, beside the desk set and the inkwell, in a small vase, the bunch of red camellias. But when she found out that the visitor was Father Santos, her eyes filled with tears and under her rigorous mourning lenses clear streams with the weight of distilled water escaped down her cheeks. Without saying a word, the priest spread open the newspaper in front of her. Heading the front page, in large letters, was:

RED CAMELLIAS

Malena did not know whether to grab the newspaper or the flowers. The newspaper. She took the newspaper. The paper flamed in her convulsive fingers. She needed eyes. Father Santos

already had the flowers in his hands. Red Camellias! The password of the conspirators.

"This bouquet . . ." the priest said in a tone of exorcism, "never arrived here, no one sent it, no one received it, no one has seen it! This bouquet does not exist and never has!"

There was haggling. Women always do! Lucifer had coaxed her to bargain. If not the whole bunch, one flower . . . if not one of the camellias, a petal . . . that was all she asked . . . a petal . . . or half a petal . . .

"It's dangerous, child, it's dangerous . . . What do you want it for? . . ."

"To eat! . . ." The words came out from deep inside Malena and, satanically, trying to wound and scandalize the priest for having seized the flowers, she added, "To receive communion with it . . ."

"I'll give it to you, child . . . I'll give you communion . . ." he agreed, thinking "What else can I do for a soul who's so afflicted, because I already made a sham of confessing a silly liberal who didn't confess!"

Malena received the red petal on her lips, red as a drop of blood, and she lowered her head weeping as the priest went out with the bouquet in the pocket of his cassock. When she opened her eyes all she found in front of her were the empty vase and the huge black letters of the newspaper: "CAMELIAS ROJAS . . ." She counted them . . . There were thirteen . . . There were thirteen letters . . . The conspirators hadn't thought of that . . . Or perhaps they did and that was why they chose it . . . Ominous! . . . Thirteen letters . . .

After a while she put her hair in order, stopped to clean her glasses, and left the office to ring the bell, as one would ring an alarm, and it was only the signal for recess. The presence of a military formation larger than the one that had gone into the church ended recess. The bell was heard, followed by the uproar of the girls as they ran out of the classrooms with a great commotion and, suddenly, silence. Father Santos had taken the red

camellias away just in time. In an atmosphere of extinguished play the militia men proceeded to search the school. They had come from the National School for Boys. The classrooms, the office, the rooms of the headmistress, the inner courtyards, the servants' quarters, the kitchen, the woodshed, and the corners where odd items lay.

The youngest of the officers, tall, bony, his boots impeccable—they had been mobilized in the capital—exclaimed as he came out:

"Those teachers have got some goodies and I know who'd like to get a hold of them!"

"Shut up or I'll shoot you!" another officer threatened him, pulling out his pistol.

"What's eating this guy? . . . I wasn't talking to you . . . You just go look at the town, look at the people, look at the country around, that mutt over there, you look . . . and that way you won't hear what your betters are talking about, your daddies, men who've got every right to notice a good body . . ."

"You shut up . . . or . . . I swear I'll kill you!" the other said aggressively, ready to fill him with bullets.

"Well, just to make you happy and so you won't wear yourself out with threats, you sound like an Indian, I'll say just the opposite: these little teachers aren't pretty, they've got bad bodies, bad breasts, bad legs, bad everything . . ."

"Shut up! . . . the other one begged, having lowered his guard, stammering. "Just thinking about it makes my hair stand up and I've got my deal in such a shape that I can't even walk!"

"You've got the gout . . ."

"Military gout, maybe, but no . . . It's something new . . . It just broke out and that's all there is to it." He twisted in pain, all ashen. From his teeth there came an "I feel like blowing my brains out! . . ."

"Don't be foolish, there's a cure!" the other one intervened, afraid that his comrade might shoot himself, and he ordered them to take his pistol away. "And if you can't cure it, bear up

under it, because that's why a man gets into a man's affairs . . ."

"And who are you to talk like that?"

"Thirty-third degree . . . I've had it thirty-three times . . . and the first is the one that wasn't cured . . . all the rest were . . ."

He did not want to give up his pistol, but finally he left it in the hands of a sergeant who gave him a canteen of can liquor in exchange.

"A drink will ease the pain, lieutenant . . ."

"Thank you, sergeant . . ." and before tipping up the canteen he shouted, "God damn all whores and the whore that gave them birth!"

And after a sip he drank down the whole canteen, took an angry breath, and tried to take a few steps, bending from the waist and with his legs apart.

Carts, men on horseback, people going by, trees, wind, dust clouds . . .

The headmistress had gone back to her dugout, as she called her desk, and instead of writing she was tapping nervously with the point of her pencil on a sheet of paper to the rhythm of the clock, tickety-tick . . . tickety-tick . . . between her blood and the time . . . a tickety-tick-tock which left on the paper, made of dots and flying lines, the image of the rain that she heard falling interminably in her ears. From time to time, without stopping the tapping of the pencil or the sound of the rain that always accompanied it, she asked herself whether the red camellias she had forgotten on the train so many years ago and the ones that Father Santos took away were the same ones. She shook her head negatively, thinking yes, because . . . it was hard for her to find the explanation, but she found it . . . because the ones she forgot on the train, the last flames of a first love, had burned the hands of an unknown traveler who caused them to be reborn years later in a bouquet, no longer just a flame but a fire of passion . . . the password of conspirators . . .

She arose as part of the clock which had just struck eleven-thirty in the morning and she went to ring the bell. The girls

came out of their classes in formation and went to the street door, where her vigilant eyes took leave of them, behind the teachers, each one to her house, and once more she was alone in the school.

She went back to her rooms. The footsteps of the servants. Her steps. Lunch. She distracted her eyes by looking at her hands. Before going to the small dining-room where a plate of steaming soup was waiting for her, she went to one of the pillows, picked it up and put it back on the bed, giving it a few loving taps. It was her favorite and she squeezed it. The one that heard her thoughts, which was a continuous rain throughout the night, whether she slept or not, after a day in which she did everything like a robot, mechanically, under a cloudburst of sorrow.

The burial with marimba music for a little goatherd who had fallen off a cliff near Gleaming Hill brought many people together in the Cerropóm cemetery. He was the brother of a pupil at the National School for Boys and important people came to the burial: Father Santos and the heads and teachers of the schools.

When the response and benediction were over, the parish priest went over to walk between Malena and Piedrafiel, waiting for all the people who were finishing the digging of the small grave.

"We can talk here . . . Is there any news? . . ."

"As far as we know, nothing . . ." Piedrafiel answered Father Santos.

"Then they haven't caught him. I hope there was an escape . . ."

Malena was pained by the impersonal form in which the priest sometimes spoke. ("I hope there was an escape . . ."). Although it was pleasing to hear him say it, to know that he had got away from them, the phrase lacked a certain consideration.

"Father says it as if he had taken a bet that he was not going to be caught," was Malena's reaction.

"Good heavens, child!" the priest joined his hands. "That's not a nice thing to think . . ."

"It's lucky we were on time with the flowers!" Professor Bou-

quet put in, drawing back into the sleeves of his jacket until he touched the edges of the cuffs of his shirt with the tips of his fingers. And he added, "The sad part was that officer who committed suicide . . ."

"Who was he?" Malena asked.

"One of the ones who came to Cerropóm with the troop. When he got back to his regiment he shot himself through the mouth."

"He must have been all mixed up, poor man," the priest decided.

"Or being shot by a firing squad," Piedrafiel went on, "it's all the same . . ."

"No, professor, someone shot like that has the presence of a chaplain!"

"Some consolation . . . a man dressed like a vulture!"

The nearby and deafening explosion of two rockets that climbed in a straight line, a sure signal that the small body which at that moment was being lowered into the small hole opened in the ground was ascending to heaven, stopped the priest, who had put his hands on his hips, from protesting with words against Piedrafiel's bad manners, contenting himself with making gestures to show that a cassock was better than having the ears of a jackass or the horns of a devil on one's head.

All that was left to the burial was tamping down the dirt and raising the cross that had already been prepared over a small pile of stones and, what was more difficult, leaving, tearing oneself away from there and pulling up the mother who had taken root beside the remains of her small one. Nothing takes root more quickly or more deeply than tears. It was necessary to pull her away by force, almost carry her. And not even then. She was unwilling, she did not want to turn her back, leave in solitude the cross on whose arms a name could be read: VENANCITO . . .

Tancredo, the sexton, came over to greet Malena at the door of the parish house. The professor had taken his leave after the cemetery and only she came along with the priest. The sexton came with his happy face cut by his big, thick lips, more shoes

than feet, more pants than legs, more head than body, more hair than head, and he told her with slow chewing:

"Cayetano Duende was around looking for you . . ."

"For whom, for me?"

"Yes, ma'am . . ."

"Did he say what he wanted? . . ."

"No, he didn't . . ."

"Didn't he know that I was over there at the burial?"

"When I told him he shook his head and left . . ."

A flight of bugler birds. The blue birds flew up to the church towers.

Malena asked, "And that willow, whom does it belong to?"

Tancredo stood looking at her mistrustfully, not knowing whether she was pulling his leg or whether she had lost her reason. Asking someone who a tree belonged to . . .

"Who else can it belong to, ma'am, to itself . . . The way you belong to yourself, the tree belongs to itself . . ."

"I didn't put it well, I wanted to know whether that willow belonged to the cemetery or the parish house."

"It's planted in the cemetery but it leans this way . . ."

"It's very beautiful!"

"Only God is beautiful!"

"And his works, Tancredo!"

"That's enough, ma'am, that's enough!"

"And Father hasn't come back . . ."

"Was he going to bring you something?"

"He told me to wait for him."

"I'll go tell him that you're waiting for him, because he may have forgotten all of a sudden . . . and . . ." he went off muttering through the doors of the parish house. "She must be crazy asking who trees belong to . . . To God, who else! . . . And this here priest is just as crazy as she is: everybody who reads a lot ends up by not knowing very much . . ."

Malena, visibly agitated as she drew close to the willow, became calmer under its leaves, which were as tremulous as her

quivering flesh, and she looked at it without closing her lips, speaking to it mutely, with her breath, with her eyes, with the pulsations of her fearful being. She was speaking to it, thanking it for the shelter it had given her man on the night the patrol had passed close by and he had heard his sentence. "He was here, here under these branches," she said to herself and her insides grew twisted as she thought of how she had driven him out of her house that night, and how that willow there, planted among the dead, had given him shelter . . . "Oh, but if I hadn't driven him out, if I hadn't told him, 'Now I want you to leave,' they would have caught him, because I wasn't like you, tree and shadow! . . ."

She hid her turmoil. Only Popoluca and she knew about the willow tree, and she went on with Father Santos toward the school.

"I received some newspapers, but I didn't want to alarm you," the priest said on the way.

Malena tripped over her own feet before she was able to say: "They caught him? . . ."

"No, child, no. And it's not good even talking about it. There's news that they've redoubled their watch on the borders and that all of those involved have been sentenced and will be executed tomorrow."

"I'm afraid that if they catch him they'll kill him, the 'law' of shot while trying to escape, and they won't say anything, nothing will ever be known . . ."

"Never that, get that idea out of your head. It would look bad for the government!"

"Look bad for the government?"

"Let's understand each other, child. This government, like all of those that rule by force, thinks that prestige and the spreading of terror are the same thing, and nothing terrifies them more, makes them more cowardly than death. On the contrary," he took out his handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his face and neck, stopped to rub the back of his neck, "on the contrary, what

I'm afraid of is that one of these days they'll do away with somebody else, anybody, on some highway and say that it was he . . ."

"Twenty-seven days exactly," Malena sighed. "Twenty-seven days counting today! I haven't gone mad because it must be hard to go mad . . ."

"God is great, you have to ask his mercy!"

"And you're so good, so holy!"

"Careful not to blaspheme! . . . Only the Lord is holy! Do you want the newspapers? Shall I leave them with you?"

"Not if they don't have any news about Juan Pablo. Take them to Professor Bouquet, he's always thirsting after news . . ."

"Our accomplice! . . ." the priest laughed. "Hee, hee, hee, blasted liberal, he got himself trapped with the flowers, and don't think he isn't jumping out of his skin. Every time he catches sight of me his mouth goes dry, afraid I've got some piece of bad news for him."

Afternoon had come on imperceptibly. In the distance one could smell the rain that was falling on the coast, far away, as if in her ears, and when she took leave of the priest and was alone it seemed strange to her to see the school all closed up. Until then she had not realized that it was Saturday.

"You have a visitor, headmistress," one of the cleaning women came out to tell her. On Saturdays there was a thorough cleaning. To get the cobwebs down, the walls were swept with tall brooms like the neck of a palm tree. The courtyards were thoroughly swabbed. The columns were scrubbed and on days in the not so distant past the place for the gathering was prepared, taking care that everything there glowed like a paten, because Father was coming, and the scrubwomen thought about him with shame as they did that side and as they tallied every sin they had to confess.

Malena stopped, rather annoyed. She did not receive visitors outside of hours. Most of all not on Saturdays. That day the school was empty and the door was not opened except to people who worked there.

"And who is it that's looking for me?" she asked with annoyance.

"A man has been looking for you . . ."

"A man? . . ."

"Yes, a man. He went in there . . ."

"Your servant . . ." a deep voice spoke up behind her back, a familiar voice, but one which she had not heard for a long time.

Cayetano Duende. He came forward to greet her, bringing the hand that held his hat from back to front.

"What do you mean by coming to see her without giving any notice!"

"It's all right, Cayetano, I'm very glad you took the liberty. It's been so long since I've seen you. Come in."

"I wanted to get to Cerropóm at dawn, but I got behind in everything, starting with the dream that kept me asleep and wouldn't let me start out with the coolness of the dawn, and after that I was late. I'm glad to see you in good health, thank God!"

"Come sit down. You're the one who looks as if a day hadn't passed. Come in. This is the office. Sit down, put your hat over there."

"No, child, I always keep my hat with me. So how are things going? . . . It seems only yesterday that I brung you to Cerropóm in my carriage . . . You were so young and tender . . . a flower without any thorns, right? . . . There wasn't any school, remember? . . . One room that Zonicario Barillas did a quick whitewash job on . . . And you stayed with Chanta Vega. She's dead now. She didn't die here, she went away and died somewhere else. She was survived by the boy you remember, Poncio Suasnavar, who was really the son of a certain Panzós, and three other children she gave birth to in order to pay for her troubles. There are women who punish themselves by giving birth. There are some like that. And there was that Cayetano Duende, remember him? . . . And I say 'that' because I'm someone else now, I'm the same one but I'm someone else, that's something we Duendes

have, we can be different and still be the same one, except on All Saints' Day, because that's the day of all *duendes* too, all goblins. Since every Goblin has a Saint who chases him and every Saint has a Goblin who defends him, if all the Saints get together on that day, all the Goblins do too. (Malena felt herself getting nauseous.) Chanta Vega, Cayetano Duende, the Chinaman, there wasn't any station down below, it was a flag-stop, a telegram that came for you . . . ah! . . . you remember . . . just as you were getting out of the carriage the telegram came, you opened it up and you thought it wasn't for you, but it was, but, oh, not from the person you'd hoped it would be from. We should welcome everything that's been forgotten and seems new to us on another day, the way everything looks to a person who's eaten some mushrooms!"

Malena saw everything again. She was not sitting behind her desk but in the back of the carriage, and Cayetano Duende was in front, his back a hill, his head a hill, his hat the clouds around a hill, telling her tall tales . . .

"Remember how I told you that time how the stars were golden holes and your fingers were going to go into those holes? . . . It hasn't happened, but it's going to happen, and if you come out with me onto the flat you'll see that the hills are waving like flags set up in the wind from the sea . . ."

Malena jumped out of her chair (until then she had forgotten what she had intended to do eleven years ago when that man was taking her from a flag-stop to the heights of Cerropóm, which was jump out of the carriage, not go on . . .) and, leaning her hands on the desk, holding back the desk, which she felt rolling along like the carriage through precipices and shadows, she offered him a cup of coffee, she had to have something too suddenly, some of that drink of reality they call air . . .

In the distance she heard the voices of the chorus. She went off in that direction almost on the run, afraid that Cayetano Duende would follow her.

"Señorita," she called to Professor Cantalá, "in the office

there's . . ." (she was going to say goblin) "a man. Have them bring him a cup of coffee and tell him that I had to leave suddenly. Only God knows how tired a person can get on Saturday without having to put up with people from the street."

"Gladly, ma'am . . ."

"And I'm sorry I interrupted you, but I'm desperate. These people are like a memory that can't be erased, the memory of everything that's happened to a person."

"I'll go get the coffee . . ."

"Or ask the girl to bring it to him . . ."

The conversation broke off between the teacher and the headmistress, who was reaching her rooms, more exactly, her bed, from which she arose when she felt that it was not her bed but the carriage that had brought her to Cerropóm, except that now it was not bringing her upright but carrying her laid out, Duende on the driver's seat, with his unbearable laugh of a green cypress, yes, yes, a cypress coming out of his mouth, and his look of a green cypress, yes, yes, a cypress coming out of his eyes, and a cypress grove trimmed with shears on his head of green hair. Not dead, no! . . . she shouted and jumped up from the bed . . . The mirror would tell her and she went over to it, but neither the mirror nor her image, the empty glass, her hand looking for herself, wanting to penetrate, cross over, go through the thin plate, go to what is behind the mirrors of life . . . Her breath . . . the proof of her breath would tell her . . . would tell her whether she was dead or not . . . She shook with joy at her image as it appeared, foggy at first, but then clearer and clearer, sketched out more sharply with the breath from her mouth . . . Oh, if only she could reach herself, put her arms through the mirror and embrace herself and know herself!

"Headmistress . . ."

The voice of the teacher drew her away from the mirror. She stopped to put on her glasses. The circles under her eyes were like two links of a chain eaten by salt.

She was at the door with the cup in her hand.

"Did you tell me in the office? There wasn't anybody in the office . . ."

"But I left him there. Unless he went away."

"But how could he get out? The street door's locked."

"Let's take a look . . ."

And followed by Professor Cantalá, she left, went into the office, and Cayetano Duende had obviously disappeared.

"It's no good if he's a stranger and even worse if he's tricky . . ."

"No, I'm not worried about that. He's a very good man. In all confidence, he's the coachman who brought me to Cerropóm back . . . back many years ago . . . The trouble is that he makes me older than I am with his stories . . ."

"But you're not old, ma'am . . ."

"I was your age, Ana María, nineteen, when I came here as the head teacher of the Mixed School. Eleven years ago, count them. But I'm taking up your time. Go back to your pupils and keep on practising. My visitor must have gone to have his coffee in the kitchen."

"No, headmistress, I can't let you carry the cup!"

"Come on, now, give me the cup. Give it to me and I'll take care of him if I find him back there talking to the girls. He'll think I was looking for him with the coffee. After all, it wasn't very nice to leave him alone while he was still speaking."

"If that's what you want, ma'am," the teacher handed over the cup, "but I'll carry it if you want."

Something was going on in the servants' quarters. At first there was no explanation. The absence of the parrot. He was a hellion at all hours, but on Saturdays he was a regular storm. Doubtlessly because of the silence and the absence of childish voices at recess.

When she did not find Cayetano Duende she asked if they had seen him.

"Yes, he came through here," one of the servants answered.

"Which one are you, Goya?"

"No, Señora Gregoria is the one washing pots at the sink. I'm Nicolasa Turcios. Just a while back that fellow, a kind of old

man, was here. He said that he had seen you, that you were all right, and that he was leaving. He talked to Señora Goya . . ."

The other servant came back drying her hands on her apron, her hands and her arms, which were wet up to the elbows.

"That's what he said, what Culacha was saying. That he seen you were all right and he left. 'Some one of these days,' I said to say good-by to him. 'One of these days,' he answered me and closed the door behind him."

"Well, I was looking for him to give him this cup of coffee . . ."

"Culacha, look alive, take the cup from the lady, don't stand there like a piece of wood!" Goya ordered, and in a lower voice added, "I'll bet she drinks it, because when it comes to eating and drinking there's none like her kind, that's what they're best at! Leave the cup in the sink with the dirty dishes and start drying the ones that are already washed and must have drained by now. Dry them one by one and lay them face down."

"If she's going to throw it out it's better for her to drink it," Malena said. "It hasn't been touched . . ."

"And even if it had been, right, Culacha? When a person's hungry there's no such thing as bad leftovers, and people like her, young ones, are always hungry because they have to depend a lot on nature. Take what you find, behind, the saddle says to the riding kind!"

"God bless you, ma'am, I'll drink it while it's still hot!" Nicolasa thanked her and went to the sink talking with the edge of her teeth. "That old Goya, the way she guesses things, she's a witch. The way she knew I wanted to drink this coffee. The nights when she makes incense out of a prickly-pear concoction. Other nights she does things with a white knucklebone on a black cloth in the moonlight and she talks with the parrot as if the bird was a person . . . and . . . and now all this, what happened to the parrot, I don't hear him, he probably flew away and that's fine, he does so much damage . . ."

"Ma'am," Goya exclaimed when she was alone with Malena, "that man was the one they call Cayetano Duende!"

"Do you know him?"

"I do. He doesn't know me, but I know him for lots of reasons. And I don't know whether you know, but things have to be said straight out, he earns his living making the road shorter for people who are going a long way when they want to get there in a hurry, or for smugglers, or for people the law is after, because like nobody else he knows underground trails that go right to the coast. And . . . what's this, I . . . I was talking so much about Cayetano Duende that I didn't even say good afternoon to you . . ."

"I'm sure we said hello to each other . . ."

"If he comes back, don't let him know that you know what I've been telling you. Get him to tell you about the underground trails and you'll be surprised at what you hear. He'll never stop talking. He's the only one who knows where the lava went under these hills billions of years ago, centuries ago, and those are trails he knows, trails of caved-in lava, lightning-bug trails they call them because he says that in the light of the landslides that act as air holes those trails look like rivers of sparks."

"But nothing is known about that in Cerropóm or they don't talk about it. It's the first time I've heard about it and I've been here many years," Malena complained as she tied and untied thoughts in her head with the speed of blood aflame . . . trails . . . underground trails . . . underground trails that go to the coast . . . police . . . patrols . . . men on horseback . . . dead or alive . . . dead or alive . . . Cayetano Duende . . . where was that man . . . she had to talk to him . . . she had to talk to him right away . . . Cayetano Duende . . . Cayetano Duende . . . underground trails . . . underground trails that go to the coast . . . dead or alive . . . she had to talk to him . . . Cayetano Duende . . . Cayetano Duende . . .

"Well, they do know. Everything is known in Cerropóm, but it's kept hidden, ma'am, it's a secret. My tongue ran away on me and that's why I told you, but you won't go telling anyone, I'm sorry I told you, let's keep it between us two. And I found out

because I was widowed when I was very young and being a widow I married Celestino Montes, another man, just as much a man as the first one, so much a man that because of a horse that was lost and which they said had an owner he did in a mounted policeman who had asked him for the bill of sale and it was Cayetano Duende, after God, who got him out through the underground trail, or they would have caught him and shot him. The way they looked for him. Like a needle in a haystack. They burned our house down. I had to roll down the hill into some brambles. I was almost killed. I lost the child I was carrying."

"But they didn't catch him . . ."

"I still sweat about it, ma'am, when I remember how he got away from them under the ground. The mounted patrol on the road, gunpowder and lead in their thirty-thirties, and Celestino Montes where only the dead can see."

"He was born again . . ."

"I'll bet he was born again and with another name and in the next country and maybe with another woman, but that's the way with these tricky men, changing legitimate wives whenever they can. And now that I see that there's nothing wrong, I wonder what happened to the parrot? . . . Ulacha!" she shouted to the girl who was drying the dishes, "look for Tarquino and find out what happened to him, where he flew off to, we can't lose someone like him!"

The girl went to the back door and came back with her words burning in the white heat of laughter:

"The old man who was here took him away, but there he is coming back with him, there he comes with the parrot!"

"The things men think about," Goya exclaimed, going to meet Cayetano Duende, "taking his friend for a walk instead of taking us out walking!"

"Goya, Goya! . . ." Malena drew her back, "tell Cayetano Duende that I'm waiting for him in the office . . ."

"But without the parrot, ma'am, without Tarquino . . . Who could stand the two of them . . . a parrot and a gabber!"

Malena did not stop. Columns, walls, doors, courtyards. Other steps followed hers. The steps of Cayetano Duende. He didn't come. He didn't come. He didn't come. But she heard his steps. She heard them. She heard them. She heard them walking across her heart. The electric light. The pendulum of the clock. The tip of the pencil beating on the desk. Yes, yes, she would ask him, she would ask him, the price didn't matter, she would get together any amount of money in order to save him by means of one of those underground trails . . . The steps . . . They didn't reach the door. They didn't come. They didn't come. But maybe it was an illusion in her ears . . . The door filled with an image that came walking through the darkness and into the light, somewhat illuminated, real, touchable, the feet sounding on the floor, on the desk itself, next to the tapping of her pencil, more and more rapid, following the coming and going of the pendulum, slower and slower for the haste with which she had to ask, to beg Cayetano Duende to save him . . . Dead or alive . . . the pendulum was coming and going . . . dead or alive . . . alive . . . alive . . . alive. But the steps could also be heard among the books, in the bookcase, on the light bulb, in the pitcher of clear water, and on the roof which was opening up, breaking in two, falling on top of her . . . She felt . . . no . . . it was not the mouth of Cayetano Duende that was opening up but the roof, the roof that had just fallen on her head, beating her with the words:

"Red camellias! . . ."

The password of the conspirators in the mouth of Cayetano Duende, what did it mean? Everything grew silent again except her heart, the pendulum, her pencil, and Cayetano Duende, who had dropped into a chair and who, under the soles of his boots, was grinding pieces of sand from one of those underground trails.

13

Malena went into action. The orders were to take advantage of Saturday and go with Cayetano Duende that very night. She would be back Sunday afternoon. She needed a suitcase. A suitcase or a bag. There would be more room in the bag. She had a canvas one. She found the suitcase first. It would not close. They would tie it with a rope. But there the bag was under a pile of papers. The bag then. She went in and out of the office. She went in and out of her rooms. Holding the keys. The keys in her hands, opening here, closing there. Money. She took out what she had in the office. She rummaged through the bookcase looking for some books. She went to change her shoes, her coat, handkerchiefs, and a large kerchief for her head, and she came back to write a few lines for Professor Cantalá. Pen, inkwell, paper, rapidly, rapidly, the essential words and her signature. In the pantry she would provide herself with canned goods, bottles, crackers, a little of everything there was.

Cayetano Duende came forward and when he appeared in the kitchen with his protruding, reddish, staring eyes, like coals

glowing outside of the ashes, he frightened Señora Goya, who thought it was the fire speaking to her, telling her he was leaving with the headmistress.

"That's the reason I came," Cayetano Duende plumbed the kitchen with his voice, feeling about so that they would hear him, "to fetch the headmistress. Popoluca is flat on his back. He's got water in his lungs."

Goya did not awaken completely, her mouth sticky, her eyes sticky, her fleas sticky, fat with blood. She did not awaken completely. The great empty egg of her yawn became air.

"Water in the lungs? . . ." she pondered. "Mother of God, that's what brought on the death of . . ." the name was erased in her sleep, and after giving a tremendous shake to her head in the air, "yes, yes, that's what brought on his death . . ."

And she no longer heard Duende come forward to unbar the back door, a small zinc door that squeaked as if it were being burned, making it necessary to close it quietly so as not to wake up the neighbors and the parrot, asleep on his perch, as Malena came out and they moved away from the school.

"There aren't any distances in the dark and that's why, even though it's a piece away, we'll get there soon," Cayetano Duende repeated every time he came close to Malena, that is, every time that he shortened his steps, feet walking, because he was in front, feet walking, and she was behind, feet walking, feet walking . . .

Feet walking, Cayetano Duende added:

"The great black lava made these hidden trails, but lightning bolts and snakes of water have the trails they made too, their paths. Which one are we going to follow? Right here there's only the trail that lightning opened underneath the ground and the trail of the water snake. There aren't any others here. The ones from the great black lava, the ones that come out on the other side of the mountains on the coast, we're not going to follow those, only along the Lightning Trail and the Water-Snake Trail.

We'll go and go until we get to the Living Cave, which is where he's waiting for us . . ."

Feet walking, Malena looked all around again, fearful that they were being followed, that they would be stopped. Oh, if she did not get to the meeting place, feet walking, feet walking, yes, yes, feet walking, feet walking . . . scattered horses . . . scattered voices . . . scattered slams of doors . . . scattered steps . . . scattered clouds . . . and feet walking and feet walking without stopping and without hearing what was being said by the person who decided that he would go ahead at a fair distance through the streets of Cerropóm, pretending he was not with her. "Don't lose his shape or lose the direction," Malena repeated to herself, but when she turned a corner she became disoriented and she did not have enough eyes, she did not know whether she was looking or swallowing what she was seeing, feet walking, feet walking, not enough eyes, she could not find herself, walking, walking, walking behind Cayetano Duende toward the Grotto of Sparks, feet walking, feet walking through a town as clear and cloudy as the Milky Way. They were heading south. She fleetingly thought of Father Santos as she made out Calvary. He would not see her at eight o'clock mass tomorrow. He would become worried. He would not have *dominus vobiscum*'s enough to turn around frequently to see if she were there. He would stop by the school. He would ask questions. They would say that she was probably at Popoluca's. But they were already leaving Calvary behind, the wind in the bells buzzing like a rain of sleeping metal. The parish house with the adobe bench and the seat like an immense stone dagger. The large waving curtain of the willow tree where Juan Pablo spent the night and learned from the mouth of the leader of the patrol that they were searching for him dead or alive. And when they reached the corner they went into the cemetery, which in a sudden way began to move its crosses in rows that were single, double, triple, fanned out and round in order to cut off their path. Forward, backward, behind them, near and far away, the crosses were spinning under a sky of lighted coals.

And not just the crosses, the bulbs of the street lights, solitary on one side, and the last white houses, and the last bridge, and the dark shacks, and the branches of the trees, and the twinkling silence, all spun madly over Malena's head, while her long legs of smoke became detached from her feet with steps that went along over the vegetable coating, damp, warm, noisy with roots, insects, earthworms, slopes, to the kingdom of stone where lightning left an open trail.

Malena, in spite of those strange feelings, legs of smoke, detached feet, tried to maintain her awareness and realized that the entrance to the dark tunnel which they were entering was not far from a dry and stony sand pit that ended in shacks and seepage, covered by the branches and trunks of fallen trees. The Grotto of Sparks.

One of Cayetano Duende's fingers was giving off fire, sparks, and smoke.

"Don't believe what you see, ma'am, that my thumb's on fire. That's what it looks like, but it's not my thumb, it's my first finger of ocote pine of the fifty fingers I've brought for the trail. They'll be enough to last. There'll be more than enough of them. Five and five. Five hands in each pocket of my coat. And I didn't want to light up outside before our backs were covered. I'm sorry you had to come in without knowing where to put your feet, but . . ."

"No, no, I think it was a wise precaution, someone could have seen the light and followed us . . ."

"But not just for that reason, because you can't light a fire where this hidden trail begins. Not even a rosiny wood like ocote. The lightning sees it and the spark falls."

They went ahead through a chamber that turned and went straight, turned and went straight, zigzagging, as if made by a lightning bolt through glassy rock, low temperature, a biting smell of sulfur, menaced by enormous splotches that appeared above them. Malena touched them on the roof above, over their heads, and realized that they were not moving, that she and he were the ones who were changing position as if skating through

the light which opened up into concave surfaces as the flame grew.

"Ocote burning underground releases the pure light of the moon," Duende said, "a yellow light, because it's the moon that gives pines that rosiny juice that burns with a golden flame . . . The best ocote is always taken from moonstruck pines, drunk with turpentine . . . Soapy light, slippery light, light that glows so that we won't bump into the lightning bolt . . ."

The splotches continued advancing toward them, over their heads, not in the shape of clouds now, but that of enormous green toads, gigantic copper spiders, iron fish in the imitation waters of sandy lace, hidden decorations of minerals and fulgurite that Malena examined without being lost in fantasies, almost naming the salts and substances which formed them, using that elementary pseudoscience to preserve her lucidity and her confidence in herself.

But she was so full of anguish, she had left it all back at the school in some way or other, that she did not need her poor applied science in order to keep awake in the reality of things, and it became unbearable for her to go along saying that those caverns had been formed—they were entering a chain of narrow, white passageways—by atmospheric action perhaps, some fluid, some gas, or lightning itself. But her greatest anguish was not because of the school, abandoned as it was, the first time that she had done that, nor because of her personal risks, but because she was afraid of not arriving on time, of not meeting him, that they would miss each other in those dark labyrinths where all that was needed was for the flame to eat its tongue and everything would be lost, except that they could seek each other with shouts, calling each other, using each other's name, but where and in what direction, for everything was darkness and in the silence the mocking echoes would be multiplied into false voices. That was why she was as dependent on the flame as on her own life. She did not take her eyes off the pine torch and she was about to complain to the guide about his lack of foresight. Fifty

pieces of that inflammable wood being consumed with the speed of turpentine. Why didn't he say so and why didn't she ask . . . But she . . . she . . . perhaps mistress meant prophetess . . . if she had known she would have brought her flashlight . . . she had not thought about it . . . or one of the lanterns used in the windows of the school on vesper nights or national holidays, or the humble kitchen candle . . . oh, if they missed their rendezvous . . . if they got lost in the darkness . . . if they only got halfway there . . . But how could she speak with lips sealed by the glue of sorrow . . .

"We're nice and inside now! . . ." Cayetano Duenda rasied his voice, stopping his panting, and with his loud voice he raised his hand and with his hand the lighted torch.

His shout was turned into a clay ball by the echo and the flames smoked closer to the dome of the white catacombs where they went along past skeletons of animals that looked more like part of the calcareous earth. From time to time Duende's boot could be heard against the bones, ribs, jawbones, horns . . . He was not tripping over them, he was kicking them . . . It was necessary to get rid of those fossils which were nothing but the ambush of death . . .

The darkness that they found and left behind, comparable only to the silence that was also complete, the movement of their bodies and their shadows where they passed along with the lighted torch, the incessant march, incessant and not arriving not arriving not arriving soon, and she realized that the trail had turned into not arriving not arriving not arriving ever, making Malena lose control of her nerves at times and she grew weak, her temples bathed in shivering sweat, putting aside the hard and real sorrow that she was bringing with her, the sorrow that was waiting for her somewhere in that underground world. She was going to see him. And in order to hear it said she asked Duende, in whose hand the ocote was still burning, piece after piece, with the swiftness of a vegetable meteor. She was going to see him, she was going to see him. She called on God, she called on the

Virgin, she called on all the saints, because of the intensity of what was happening to her, her weariness, the paleness of her face under the dry tears.

"The thing here," Duende chatted on, "is that everybody has to carry their persons and their shadows by dancing, throwing their shadows onto their backs, and if it's quiet, go ahead, but dancing . . . It's a strange thing and you've got to do it, because since a person can't go along at night or along a trail of the dead without a light, as soon as the flame starts up the shadow begins to dance and it's lucky if it doesn't weigh as much as it looks and that's why it's like the sorrows that can wear a person down without weighing anything, but only in that and in its blackness, because in everything else it's all like a dance. Maybe a person goes along light-hearted and it dances . . . maybe he goes along serious and it dances . . . maybe he goes along worrying like we are now and it goes dancing along in front and won't let us by, or dancing along behind so that we have to drag it so it'll keep on dancing, or dancing along beside us so that we have to keep up with it and dance with it in order to pull it along dancing, which is where the worst part begins, because we have to go the way we're going now, walking and dancing, walking and dancing, walking and dancing . . ."

And that was how they went, their feet walking and their shadows dancing to the rhythm of the barking flames that crackled in clusters of fire teeth . . . their feet walking and their shadows dancing in the gentle rhythm of the flames with the breath of sleeping pumas . . . feet and shadows against shadows and feet . . . shadows that rose up with the speed of black lightning and wet the concave screens and domes to fall down in a rain of eyelashes that formed snakes with luminous rattles on the ground . . . feet and shadows against shadows and feet . . . shadows that leaped with the spring of a grasshopper to alight on their shoulders . . . shadows that flew over their heads like birds with plumage of mourning . . . that was how they went along . . . that was how they went along . . . that was how they

advanced against fright and nausea . . . their bodies divided into pieces and the pieces dancing . . . arms and legs fleeing in the air . . . mixed . . . mingled . . . he with her head . . . she with his hands . . . his body without a head . . . with two heads on her body . . . he with four legs . . . she with four arms . . . she with just her head . . . no trunk . . . no legs . . . no arms . . . just her head . . . to reappear intact . . . the same . . . as if they had not been dancing . . . that was how they went along . . . that was how they went along . . . that was how they advanced against fright and nausea . . . shadow cannibals that were eating each other with teeth of flame . . . that was how they went along . . . that was how they advanced . . .

The pathfinder stopped to light another piece of ocote and announced that four hands had been used up, twenty slivers of that red wood. They had thirty left. They had to step up their pace.

Step up their pace? . . .

Stumbling, in pain, frozen from walking under the earth, Malena began to make progress with anguished strides, no longer knowing where she was placing her feet, leaning against the walls with her hands, her elbows, her arms, her neck broken with pain, and her waist half-cracked from so much crouching so as not to hit her head, her lips with a taste of dampness and ocote smoke in such agitation that she herself did not know whether she was shivering, praying, or wanting to ask whether that bend was the exit, not daring to because she guessed that it wasn't, wasn't, wasn't . . . that the bend went into another passageway, and that passageway to another bend, and that bend to another passageway in that chain of calcareous formations that had no end . . . bear up . . . gather strength . . . now, maybe here . . . there . . . always farther on . . . and the shadows dancing . . . yes . . . yes . . . Cayetano Duende was right . . . they in sorrow and the shadows dancing . . .

A breath of fresh air carried off the flame and left a tuft of white smoke on the tip of the torch. They came out onto a small

field of grass covered with dew where they saw the stars, such a crackling of lights in the sky, they smelled the night and felt the arms of the wind, but the respite was brief and brief was the time they stayed on the surface with their feet walking, feet walking along with them, because they went around a hill, their feet walking without them, and they took another turn, their feet walking without them, and another turn, their feet walking without them, three times they went around it with their glowing tracks until they made it spin, spin, spin with the howling of a coyote top, disappear, and in its place there opened up a large mouth of water mist through which their feet walking without them were lost under the ground.

"This underground trail isn't the one the lightning made any more," Cayetano Duende explained at the time he lighted up the sparklers of his ocote fingers in a passageway of scaly mirrors that multiplied the flames into thousands of small raindrops, "and how can I tell that it's not a lightning trail . . . ? Because the stone isn't broken and doesn't follow the direction of the bending . . . This one is the gentle trail of a snake of water . . . It put its head in and its body followed and left us a passage through this opening of sleeping scales . . . A few more ocote fingers and we'll come out right in the Living Cave, although first we have to go through a very dangerous place where we'll light the nine largest splinters and say, 'May the Beautiful Torch preserve us . . .'"

And everything happened as Cayetano Duende had predicted. Before getting to the Living Cave they lighted the fingers of the Beautiful Torch, going along with difficult steps through rocks covered with wobbling bats, alive perhaps, perhaps dead, with bodies of mold and crystallized wings, and vampire bats which detached themselves with the weight of resounding drivel from the horns of the water serpent, today the solid cornices on the very edge of abysmal precipices.

"The most dangerous part of these underground crossings," the pathfinder went on, "is to be without a light. It's easy to save

the ocote from a gust of wind . . . You screen it with your hand or with a hat and that's enough. The hard thing is to protect it underground from the darkness of water, which eats and sucks at the flame as if it was a sweet. That's hard. It calls for hard thinking. Thinking and thinking for it not to be eaten and that's the only way you can stop it from being eaten. And it's very dangerous too if the shadows of the people going through go out. Even worse if there's a hidden precipice the way there is here. On the edge of the precipices there's more danger of the shadows falling off than the people, that's a well-known fact . . . and it's well known too that a person whose shadow falls off a precipice loses the balance of his luck . . ."

Malena kept close to the old man, more afraid of his words than of the crevices that opened up at her feet, black, reddish openings, broad and deep, like the roots of precipice trees of shadow growing in the depths of underground night. What would happen to her if her shadow fell off the cliff, if that man did not look after her dancing shadow, if she lost the balance of her luck, if she did not reach the appointed place because that unstable real and unreal person of hers depended on the flashes of raucous flame?

"If you feel stones that move, don't be frightened," he advised her, the light at the level of the enormous black die of his square head. "If you feel stones falling down that want to carry off your foot, don't be afraid either and don't shout and you won't be frightened if you can't hear where they fall . . . and you won't look down and you won't look up and you won't look behind, only straight ahead, the way you're going, that's where you'll look during this bad stretch that's left for us to get to the Living Cave, where we have the start of a great . . ."

"But we're only going as far as the Living Cave," Malena interrupted as she felt herself doubting her strength in that endless labyrinth.

"Yes, yes . . ." the pathfinder hastened to confirm, "but what I was trying to say is that's where the great underground trail

begins, the one carved out by the lava snake, where he left his skin of black stone when he went to quench his thirst in the sea. That's why it comes out on the other side of these hills, right on the coast, and we'd already be in the Living Cave if it wasn't because the lay of the land on this side makes it hard to reach that big dome that hangs over an empty chamber that's so big you almost can't see the 'Gunwale of the Prickly Pears,' a throne in the center carved in green stone with room for nine kings and . . ."

He could not shout to Malena to quicken her pace. Voice, speech, tongue, breath, everything went inside of him with the danger that encircled them. Running was the only thing left for them to do and he was already doing it and his heels were now clicking hard, as if he were on stilts, walking on echoes; smoke, wisps of shadow and flames on his broken face, his eyes out of their sockets, and behind his ears like hammers with teeth, intent on Malena's strides as she followed him, falling to pieces, afraid that they had been discovered and were being pursued, an idea that was immediately rejected because if that were the case Cayetano Duende would have put out the light at once, would not have protected it as he was doing. A nip of animal fear. A thin sweat broke out on her body. Her face became wrinkled. The gesticulations of a madwoman. An avalanche? . . . An underground avalanche? . . . Mud . . . Lava . . . Sand. Would they be buried? . . . Oh, if she could only ask Cayetano . . . Would they be buried there at any moment? . . . Oh, if she could only ask him . . . But who could catch up with him? . . . What did he see? . . . What did he hear? . . . What made him sense the catastrophe? . . .

He had not seen or heard anything, nothing, but he was going as fast as his feet could rain down because of something as fearsome as death itself. The avalanche of darkness was coming upon them. They would be blind. The last slivers of ocote were burning in his hands. Not a single one left in his pockets. And the worst to come. They were approaching a rocky ledge two blocks

long and a yard wide, where even with light it took boldness to pass. Precipice and abyss. Their salvation lay in getting past there before the ocote burned out. His fingers began to retreat, pursued by the hot turpentine of the weeping wood, then by the flames, the fire. Where could he hold the slivers as they grew shorter and shorter? Faster and faster. He would hold the torch up as long as he could. Perhaps they could manage to get across the pass. Faster and faster. It was no longer a light but a small pile of hot coals that he was carrying in his burned fingernails. The dust of fire. They got to the pass, only so that Malena would become more horrified when she saw with the last glimmer of the flames that what was waiting for them was a bridge of air, so much in that air, that she stopped with a shout, it was stronger than the warning not to make any noise, stronger than she was . . .

She shouted, shouted, shouted . . .

"This way! . . . This way! . . ." the pathfinder repeated. He had taken her hand and was leading her, erased in the darkness, his feet walking without him.

"This way . . . this way . . ."

Duende knew the pass with the memory of a blindman, but now he was going along with stuttering steps. The responsibility of preventing this helpless, stiff, eyeless creature that he was dragging along by the hand from slipping. The whole idea was to go along the way they were, bodies clinging to the rocks, clinging tightly to the rocks, for the danger lay in falling off or slipping. Going along against the rocks, their bodies against the rocks, always against the rocks and advancing with small steps, they would soon be safe in the Living Cave. The imprudence was having brought such a short supply of ocote.

"I can see, I can see . . ." Cayetano Duende kept repeating, pulling her firmly as she clung to his hand, and he made her believe, in order to give her confidence, that from so much going about underground he could see in the dark and hear in the dark, but he could not see or hear anything, unless it was the sound of their backs scraping the rocks in their painful advance, the more

those stones bit them, the more certain they were of getting there, and the rain of sand and stones in back of their blind steps was lost in the darkness, his feet walking without him, her feet walking without her.

She did not complain. Malena did not complain. Her body complained. She would not let her feet walking without her drag her back. Her confident bones, intimates of that white soliloquy, the last, the white soliloquy, the last, the soliloquy of lime and sleep without awakening. Scrapes and scratches of fatigue. There were complaints from her rattling joints, her muscles of wornout cobwebs, fluctuating. And for what reason, because with a simple faint everything would be over with a simple halt, with a simple release of Cayetano Duende's hand, nothing more, nothing more, no more going on, for it was useless now, she wouldn't get there, it was useless, if there was far to go she wouldn't get there . . .

"We've come a block and a half . . ." she heard the voice of the pathfinder, but so far away, so much in the echo, "we . . . 're . . . a . . . block . . . and . . . a . . . half . . . a . . . way," that it did not seem to be coming from the man who was pulling her along strongly by the hand. "I can see . . . I can see . . ." he repeated. "This way . . . this way . . ."

She wouldn't get there . . . she wouldn't get there . . .

"I can see . . . I can see . . ."

Complete silence. Complete darkness. One could not see or hear anything except the ssscraaa . . . ssscraaa . . . ssscraaa . . . tching rasp of shoulders and backs against the rocks and the slow advance of their feet walking without them.

She wouldn't get there . . . she wouldn't get there . . . her ankles bent over under her . . .

"This way . . . this way . . ."

On her knees for as long as she could stand it and then . . .

"I can see . . . I can see . . . this way . . . this way . . ."

Then he dragged her along like an inert object. She would tell him . . . She would ask him with her last strength to drag her

along as he was now leading her by the hand, even if she were dead, just so that she would not miss the rendezvous . . .

"This way . . . this w . . ."

The voice of the guide was swallowed up at the same time as he let go of her hand, and Malena would have fallen if two hands had not grasped her, trembling, rigid, glacial, fuzzy, like the wings of a vampire bat, and two words had not floated into her ears:

"Re . . . d ca . . . mel . . . lias! . . ."

The voice of Juan Pablo.

Malena answered mechanically, without breath, without articulation, and she closed the eyes that she had kept open, burning, afraid that everything was a dream and that those manly arms which were smothering her would stop pressing her body with the violent happiness of the meeting, silent, trembling, encircling her to say the inexpressible in the mute and blind hug of the embrace, and when that moment of mad joy was past he would cease to squeeze her with the gnawing tenderness of the one who was caring for her, the only thing left for her in the darkness.

But such an urge to speak, they were two people come to life, come to life and meeting, alive under the earth, such an urge to communicate everything, to join their small breathing together, the clusters of their childish tears, their moans, their movements, echoes of their invisible persons.

14

More pain than shoulders, more pain than feet, more pain than legs, more pain than back, hair and clothing mussed, Malena reached the Living Cave where Juan Pablo was waiting for her with open arms and the password of his abortive conspiracy, which for her was a cry of resurrection, and after the excitement of the meeting, guided by the one she could not see but whom she heard, sensed, they went slipping down through the deep darkness to the "Gunwale of the Prickly Pears," a throne for kings atop prickly pears, and there they sat to await the dawn, to await their eyes so that they could be something more than two shapes lost in the sticky emptiness of the shadows.

"Oh! . . ." Malena turned around with a cry, unable to free herself from the arms that held her back. "What about Cayetano Duende? . . ."

She suddenly remembered him and such was her concern at having forgotten him that she wanted to turn back to find him, the only thing she could have done was to call him, but Juan Pablo explained to her that the great expert on those caverns was

safe and sound and that if he had released her hand at the end of the passage, leaving her to her fate, it was because he realized that the other one was there waiting for her.

He releases her hand and jumps into the cave, jumps into the cave and runs, does not stop, runs up to stand guard above at the entrance near the road camp, the same one that Mondragón had discovered that time when some animal had made him stop and park the jeep. Pistol in hand he went chasing it through the brush and if he did not find his prey he did find the mouth of the cave, which from then on, in case the plot failed, would be a possible hiding place for him.

And Cayetano Duende went up there to stand guard, for only on that side was there direct access to the Living Cave. In order to reach the other entrances it was necessary to go through endless underground passageways, in complete darkness, and the warning of lights, voices, and footsteps would give them time to hide. It was through one of those passageways of darkness and danger that the pathfinder had led her. He could have taken her right to the side by the camp without as much difficulty, but it was risky doing it all directly. That was why he chose the longer and more difficult way, the one less exposed. They disappeared on the outskirts of Cerropóm as if the earth had swallowed them up and they followed the path of the lightning bolt, narrow, angular, zigzagging, until they suddenly came out on a hilltop, rested, breathed, and immediately sank down into the middle of where the hills had burst open into the cave of the water serpent. The bad part was that they ran out of ocote, and the last stretch, between rock and abyss in complete darkness, was frightful.

"Did you know I was coming?"

"I heard your shouts . . ."

"It wasn't wise, but I was horrified when we were left in the dark . . ."

"And my first impulse was to run and help you, but I couldn't leave the spot where I'd agreed to meet Cayetano Duende and I

was afraid of losing my way. It's easy to get lost in these labyrinths . . ."

"We were late . . ."

"Yes, there was no sign of you. I didn't have eyes enough to look everywhere for the light of the ocote, not knowing that it had gone out on you."

"We ran out . . ."

"And I didn't have ears enough to navigate through the silence of these blessed dens listening for your footsteps. But here you are . . ."

He kissed her, hugged her, ran the tips of his feverish fingers over her face trying to reconstruct her features, her thin nose, her eyes like hot, damp seeds, her lips with wrinkles of affliction, her vaselike neck, her shoulders of an Indian goddess, and he smelled her hair to find out what aroma her thoughts had, what perfume there was in the rain of that fine thread.

"I knew I couldn't miss our rendezvous. I heard Cayetano Duende say 'Red camellias' and I followed him as if I were hypnotized . . ."

"I want to see you. The sun's taking its time. A very faint light comes in here at dawn. It's something like the glow that comes out of stones."

"You were lucky to find this hiding place. You can't imagine how they searched for you all through Cerropóm, house by house, and in the outskirts, and who knows where else, military patrols, the mounted police, the regular police, day and night, at all hours. They searched the school, mine, and the Boys' School, to the great fright of Professor Bouquet . . ."

"Did he send you the camellias?"

"Oh, yes, yes, I'll tell you about the red camellias in a moment! They searched the church too, and the parish house . . . what didn't they search . . . Popoluca's? Where Popoluca came and went at all hours under different pretexts . . . ? No, not because they might not have suspected he had you hidden there, no, but rather because it's a rundown house and because of the

workshop. If they only knew, God save us! They would have carried you off and tortured you. The best thing is that nobody has seen you here . . ."

"Only Cayetano Duende, but now tell me, tell me, tell me . . ."

"What do you want me to tell you?"

"You know . . ."

"If this is it, yes, yes, yes . . ." and she kissed him. "Yes, yes . . ." she kissed him as the stones gave off a light of sad flesh.

"Popoluca," she went on, "gave me the slip of paper that you left with him for me. '*À bientôt, chérie!*,' but I must confess to you that in my anguish I forgot about that word that we would see each other soon, it seemed so difficult to me, impossible, even though at night I would get up and walk around the school, peeping into the street through the cracks in the windows and if I heard footsteps I would run to the street door, thinking that it might be you and that you were going to knock looking for asylum. But the steps would go away, dissolve into the silence of the night, and I would realize that they were the footsteps of the people looking for you . . ."

"Dead or alive . . ." Juan Pablo held her tight against his heart.

"I know, my love, I know . . ."

And after a long pause:

"It was luck that they didn't find me in my tent, because I'd gone to see you . . ."

"Love, oh, my love!"

"And that I hadn't taken the jeep and, in order to avoid gossip, I didn't wear my white uniform, which is so easy to see, going out in civilian clothes."

"You passed right through the soldiers from the patrol that was looking for you, Popoluca told me . . ."

"Yes, yes, and I was on the point of going back and asking the leader for a drink, I had such an urge when I saw him pull out the cork and tip up the bottle, but since I never liked to drink like that, I thought it would be better to stop by Father Santos's and ask him for a drink . . ."

"Popoluca told me all of that down to the last detail. What I don't know is how you got here, how you knew about the existence of these caves, which, according to Cayetano, only very few people know about."

"That was luck too. I was going back to the camp, I think from your place, yes, from there, and all of a sudden some kind of animal ran across the road and I hit it. It must have been fairly big because it stopped my front wheels and I lost control of the jeep completely. And I stopped and jumped out to follow it, I thought it might have been a young jaguar, I could almost see the spots. It had time to run away through the brush that was getting so thick that suddenly I couldn't even see myself and I would have gone back, but a trembling of the wind moved the bushes and there wasn't any wind. 'Hey!' I said to myself, 'he's around here somewhere,' and following the motion of the leaves and bushes that were waving, I came across the entrance to the cave, the one where Cayetano Duende is standing guard right now."

And while the light was decanted into the interior of the earth through the high-placed mouth it modeled flying buttresses that looked like columns, arches, like the shadowy naves of a profoundly Gothic architecture, needles and cavities that looked like undecorated cupolas or ones covered with bats. Malena did not know where to rest her eyes, terrified, shuddering. How could that man emerging from the darkness be Juan Pablo Mondragón? Impossible! Skin of dirty lion color, infantile, feline pupils completely filling the eye openings beside his nose, the lips and ears of a pachyderm . . .

At Malena's surprise Juan Pablo attempted a sad smile with his thin chalk teeth and tried to draw back. She would not let him. She held onto him in fear. "It's him! It's him! . . ." she repeated to herself, trying to forget the vision of that poor beast. They remained in silence, lost in the desolate light from the other end of the cave.

"Don't you recognize me? . . ." and when he heard that she

was not answering, he made his complaint stronger. "Malen! . . . Don't you recognize me? . . ."

She shook her head before opening her lips.

"No! No! I really don't!"

"But don't get alarmed. It's not an illness. It's a temporary deformation of the face brought on by a cactus chewed at night. Dressed as a poor peasant and with this face, who's going to say it's me?"

"Nobody! . . ." Malena hammered out. "Not even I can swear it's you . . ."

"I deserve congratulations! . . ."

"But . . . mightn't it be dangerous? . . . It would be horrible if you stayed like that! . . . Horrible! . . ." and she brought her hands up to her face to cover her eyes that were hardened like the stones of an uncovered crystal at the sight of that indelible vision of fright and catacombs.

Then she said more calmly:

"Have you seen what you look like?"

"Cayetano promised to bring me a mirror, but he must have forgotten."

"Wait, I must have one in my bag," she searched quickly. "Here, it's a bit small, but you'll be able to get a good look at yourself."

Juan Pablo held up the mirror after blowing away some pink specks on the edges and after looking at himself carefully, he exclaimed:

"Perfect!"

"Perfect for a character out of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*," Malena cut him off, startled, afflicted.

"You think so? . . . Well, I don't. The simple face of an old worker from the coast, made into a beast on the banana plantations."

And still looking at himself in the mirror, savoring the deformation of his features, he added with satisfaction:

"There's no reason to worry. This swelling lasts as long as I

chew the pieces of cactus that Duende brought me. But it was Popoluca who advised me to use the cactus to deform my face to help me escape. It was hard to find and before he gave it to me to chew there was a regular ceremony. I had to kneel down and ask forgiveness of the earth for what I was going to do: change my looks, my face, become someone else . . ."

"Except for your voice," Malena ventured.

"I won't say much and I'll talk through my nose."

"You can keep the mirror if you want . . ."

"Just a loan, not a gift," he interrupted. "Except that I've got some money and I'll buy it from you."

"Anything you say . . ."

"Take this copper ten-cent piece so there won't be any bad luck . . ."

"And don't break it, eh? . . ."

"Break it? . . . It's already stood up under my face!"

They laughed and at her request, as she felt Mondragón's arms become multiplied in circles and circles around her body, Juan Pablo told her everything that had happened since he left Popoluca's workshop on that Tuesday night. Straining his eyes, with no compass except his instinct, he went looking for the entrance to the cave. He gambled everything, passing so close to the camp, but there was no other way out. The important thing now was not to make a mistake, because what would he do if he couldn't find the mouth of the cave? Go back to Popoluca's? . . . Keep on leaping through the underbrush until they killed or captured him? . . . He thought of where he had left the jeep that time and he slipped through the thick bushes where the bats jealously half-defended the opening. He stopped to hear if he was being followed. Nobody. His breath in surges, palpitating. But as soon as he crossed the threshold he felt that he was being followed. The wind. Like a hurricane, muscular, naked, it roared like a beast at the opening of the cave. Then the great silence of the air inside and the fearful darkness. He did not go beyond the entrance. It was dangerous. He stayed at the limits of the starlight, the falling of distant gold. He waited for dawn

to break in order to go down into the bottom of the cavern where he was now telling a Malena surrounded by his arms, docile, loving, breathable, about his days and nights in those catacombs where light is a reflection and voices are dampened by the mineral silence without penetrating it, echoes that go off where the wind takes them.

Malena drew back to look at him. Incredible. The more she looked at him the more incredible it seemed to her. He was not the passenger on the train. He was not the officer in the white uniform of a roadman. He was not the peasant that Popoluca described. He was . . . a strange person . . . a fabulous being . . . an inhabitant of the depths of the earth . . .

She closed her eyes, taking refuge in his arms again, and asked him what he did when he got to the cave.

"I slept . . ." Juan Pablo answered her. "I was dying from lack of sleep, I hadn't shut my eyes for many hours, all those I spent awake in Cerropóm on the night that a certain little person threw me out of her house: 'Now I want you to leave' . . ."

Malena closed his mouth with her hand, softly but not without a certain apprehension, the same with which she kissed him as the light began to flow down, fearful of the contagion of those thick, monstrous, hot lips, like a fever, scolding him for remembering such insignificant things in such a dangerous situation.

"Not so . . ." he would not let her speak, "insignificant. If you hadn't thrown me out of your house they would have caught me!"

"You're right about that, but don't say I threw you out, I asked you to leave . . ."

"It sounds better but it's the same thing . . ."

"Nasty!"

"Monster, you mean!"

"Why monster, since you explained to me that it's the normal face of a worker on the coast?"

"Exactly, and that's what I'm going to be: a worker on the banana plantations, starting at the bottom like those half-beasts that malaria devours with its yellow . . ."

"But let's get back to the cave . . ."

"We're already there . . ."

"Stop teasing! . . ." Malena said, taking his hands with loving annoyance. "You know very well that I want you to tell me what you did to get along here for so many days, almost a month now, and how you met Cayetano Duende."

The light of dawn was pouring into the underground shadows like a white smoke. Juan Pablo raised her from the "Gunwale of the Prickly Pears." In spite of the fact that Cayetano Duende was guarding the entrance up above, it was not wise to stay there, better to go inside, disappear from the great cavity, go along a descending passageway in search of his refuge, which at that hour was receiving a dusty light from the opening behind two thousand tons of lava in a single stone. He did not need to tell her what he had done to get along. She could see it. From there, without moving, through an angle, it was easy for him to observe a little over a hundred yards above the mouth that opened into the underbrush, which was where they could take him by surprise, because only those who knew the place well would come along the trail of the water snake. That was why he chose that place which at first he thought was his temporary residence under the earth. But that was not how it was. When he examined the provisions that he brought—over fifty tortillas, sixty-four, to be exact, twelve corncakes with cheese, a small package of salt, a quarter of a pound of sweets, a few strips of dried beef, a yard, to be exact, and a gourd of water—he realized that he had forgotten the matches, the candles, the ocote, and his cigarettes, he even had cigars in the pouch that he had left at Popoluca's, and he did not miss it so much because of the cigarettes and cigars—even though for a fugitive smoke is better food than something to eat—as because of the candles, the matches, the ocote, for how was he going to be able to continue on without something to light his way through those underground depths where nothing could be seen. Dismayed, his possibility of escape reduced to zero by such carelessness, an escape through caves that doubtless went a long way, he began

to put in order the things that he had brought, provisions and blankets, here in this place where, because of a lack of light to keep going on, he would no longer have, as he had thought, his temporary residence, but something more like his place of exile as a person buried alive. But a worse blow was awaiting him. When he lifted the gourd he almost let it drop. He didn't have water for many days and even less with the food that he had brought, dried beef and salted meat, tortillas and corn flour not meant to be eaten dry, unless he could find near there under the ground the beginning of some stream or subterranean river. He lifted up a small stone and put it in a place where he could see it. In that way he would not lose track of the days. That dark pebble of his new calendar was for Wednesday, because he had left the camp on Monday, when he had been at Malena's and had spent the rest of the night in Cerropóm. Tuesday found him at Popoluca's and there he spent the day, fleeing to the cave at night and seeing it dawn inside on Wednesday . . . but what use was it . . . Wednnnnnesday . . . it was . . . Wednesday, but he couldn't remember the date! . . .

Not a single day of those marked with the first ten stones was out of gear: a strict rationing of tortillas and drief beef, setting-up exercises, hours of prolonged sleep, and long explorations through the tunnels of lava, the tunnels of stone, the passage-ways of sandy earth, by touch, by touch, feeling the walls, in search of water, of the flow of a torrent, of the dripping of a spring. He lost his hearing in the silence, dried and toasted like his lips. He put his thirsting ear to the stones, like a tongue that tried to hear the beat of that distant drop falling somewhere. He let his footsteps slip into hollows and he would return quickly for fear of getting completely lost, and he redoubled his vigilance over his person as the liquid in the gourd grew less, snatching it out of his own hands lest he consume what was left in one sitting, for at the beginning he had taken five drinks a day, then three, then two, and then . . . the sound of the empty container . . . Oh, that day . . . that night . . . just knowing what

it was like! . . . He did not smash the gourd, a vegetable shell, a basin in the form of an eight, quickly rubbing his Adam's apple, where he felt the weight of his own gourd full of thirst, and if he found water and had broken it, what would he carry the water in? Get it out of his sight. Hide it. That was enough. Gain a few days. No eating. Completely immobilized. But why gain days if the problem was not going to be the same but worse every day . . . And what was the good of not eating if it was no longer just the thirst that the dried beef held hidden in every fiber soaked with sour orange and salt, dried in the sun, or the sticky thirst of the tortillas and corncakes with cheese, but that other one, indefinable, the thirst that passed before his closed eyes, beneath his tongue of a small child, ice shavings covered with syrup, red, yellow, milky, or the ice cream that he devoured with a sexual delight as a young man in Panama, or the soursop drinks that he could still taste on the roof of his mouth like drops of green perfume, or the juice of sweet pineapples, or the chocolate drink that painted a mustache of blood on his lips . . .

It was stupid to stay motionless as the thirst did not go away. He went about putting the shadows of his den into the hollows of his hands in order to put them into his mouth, to put them in, just the way it sounds, to put them in with his fingers, like something materially drinkable, like the melting of the gigantic lava dew that floated motionlessly by in front of his open eyes during the moments when there was a bit of light.

He made a decision. He would not die of thirst. The water was there, there, there, up above, just by going out into the bushes, and worst yet if he didn't find it, he would chew grass, thorns if he had to . . .

But he stopped . . . where could he go in the daytime . . . to give himself up . . . to fall into the hands of the people looking for him dead or alive . . . Or . . . Or . . . Or . . . and the area of his throat was opening up into circles of water . . . Or . . . Or . . . Or . . . go into the passageways, get lost, not find any river or stream and die of thirst in the trap . . .

No! No! No! . . . Not into the labyrinth! . . . He would wait for night and go out into the underbrush . . . oh, if it would only rain . . . he would lie on his back and drink in the whole cloudburst . . .

He was shivering . . . such an instability of expression . . . such a trembling of his hands . . . he was shivering waiting for the night . . . waiting for the squadrons of bats to leave . . . waiting for some lost fireflies to fly into the cave, blinking on and off like the pieces of a starry sky that had been broken apart like a *piñata* . . .

Suddenly, with the grasp of a madman, out of their hiding place he took his revolver, his papers, his poor possessions, and he took long strides upward . . . Let them capture him . . . ! Let them kill him . . . ! But let them give him something to drink first . . . ! Dead or alive . . . dead or alive . . . it didn't matter as long as they gave him something to drink . . . to drink . . . !

A flash of conscience made him retreat and face the other exit . . . which exit? . . . the lava passageways? . . . the stone tunnels? . . . the excavations? . . . snare . . . air . . . labyrinth . . . air . . . snare . . . no . . . no . . . no . . . how could he fall into the trap? . . . How could he go into the caves and die there without the consolation of having found water? . . . Better outside . . . better outside . . . dead or alive . . . dead or alive . . . better outside! . . .

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"And I was already on my way out, ready for anything," Mondragón continued, "ready to give myself up, let them kill me, ready for anything, just so long as I didn't die of thirst, when I met Cayetano Duende . . ."

They both raised their grateful eyes toward the entrance to the cave where he was now acting as a sentry, sitting down or walking back and forth like the clapper of a bell.

"But . . ." Juan Pablo returned to the subject at hand, "it would be better for us to get out of here. We can hide in my den comfortably . . ." He stressed the last word with an expression that tried to be a smile. "There's no reason to expose ourselves . . ."

The unrecognizable Mondragón. The more she looked at him, the less Malena believed that the mask of smoked meat there, thick lips, large, barklike ears, as docile and sad as a bleeding animal was the Juan Pablo with his narrow face, thin lips, and close-set eyes that she knew. The only thing that was left of his former face, all bone and will, was the strip of chalk teeth that he showed when he spoke.

Malena mentioned it and he spoke of having them pulled out . . .

"Promise me you won't! . . ." She jumped, held him by the arm as they went to his den, demanding that he look at her face to face with his small, purplish eyes.

He looked at her in silence and after smiling and kissing her, he explained that it was a joke. He was so anxious for light to take a good look at himself, and Malena closed her eyes instinctively, shaking from head to toe every time she kissed that monstrous creature.

"I was alarmed," she said, oh . . . if she could only talk to him the way she kissed him, with her eyes closed, "because you're capable of doing anything in order to save your skin, the way you've disfigured your face . . ."

"Not my skin, no! . . ." Juan Pablo interrupted her. "This thing . . . this thing they call skin . . ." and with his fingers he angrily pulled up a small flap on the back of his left hand, "not this thing they call skin, but my ideas, and in order to save my ideas, not just my teeth, I'd let my eyes go dry!"

They had reached the den, which was fortunately darker, carrying the bag of provisions that Malena had taken from her pantry and which Duende had carried on his back. They would call him later and offer him a bite, but now he should remain on watch, and they made themselves comfortable beside the huge mass of lava which protected the entrance to the small chamber with its shadow. Malena, more on top of him than on top of the stones, happy because she was almost unable to see him, with the diligence of an ant, brought out bread, slices of cheese, soda crackers, a bottle of beer, a can of pressed meat, sardines, and small metal cups so that she would have everything close by, more within reach, while he caressed her, felt her, took control of her body with the movements he was making and during which he let the weight of her round breasts fall into his hand as she came close to pass him a date with her mouth, the sparkle of her thighs on his fingertips as she drew close to drink out of the same cup as he, or the vibrant muscles of her waist as she

turned to one side to see what Juan Pablo was showing her: his calendar of stones, twenty-odd pebbles until, maddened by thirst, he stopped counting the days; the places where he strolled for hours on end talking aloud, because sometimes he had the fear of going mute; talking to himself and listening to himself in order to know too that he was not becoming deaf in the midst of a total lack of sound all around him; and the place, not far from there, where he spotted Cayetano Duende for the first time . . .

"I couldn't see who it was, whether it was a living creature or a man of stone who had come out of a spell, and I approached with the fear that it would be a vision created before my eyes by thirst, that it was delirium that made me see the figure of an old man coming toward me with a gourd hanging from his shoulder. I went up to him, snatched the gourd, pulled out the stopper with my teeth, and emptied the contents into my mouth without taking a breath. Only when the horrible dry membrane of death was extinguished in my throat did my spirit get back the fear that goes with a person being chased and the happiness of a sated animal licking himself evaporated from my lips."

Malena filled his cup again and he immediately took a few sips of beer. Then he went on with the story of his meeting with that almost unreal creature whose hands he had wanted to kiss.

"Finally the one I thought was a phantom spoke to me and I realized that he was flesh and blood like me. He'd been looking for me for several days, sent by Popoluca. 'But how did Popoluca know I was around here,' I asked him nervously. 'For one simple reason,' he answered me. 'Because you had him get a lot of candles, ocote slivers, and boxes of matches, some bunches of store-bought cigarettes, and some cigars, and you forgot everything back there with him. He didn't realize it until the next day and then he sent for me and told me, *I suspect a man is lost under the ground and I can't sleep . . . go get him out, old friend, because you know those black seas of darkness. God will repay you, and I know that's the way it is because he left behind this pouch with his things for lighting up and smoking . . . Your sus-*

picions are a command for me, friend, I answered him, *and I'll go look for him. I hope to God he hasn't got lost and killed himself because I couldn't sleep either knowing that a man was lost under the earth, and because I'm always of a mind to do something good . . .'"*

"And as luck had it he found you," Malena hastened to say, sitting up joyously, taking her head away from the shoulder of the one who was still thirsty and was drinking noisily, as if to make it taste better, the last beer left in the cup. She lifted the bottle solicitously to serve him a little more, and she added, "Popoluca knew about us. The day he gave me your note he tried to explain everything, more to give me someone to unbend with than for anything else, but he brought me up short. He'd seen us together on Tall Hill. The only time we went there he saw us . . ."

She had to pause as she felt her professorial voice breaking and felt coming out from within another voice, one better suited to bring back the moments they had spent submerged in the silence of the sky, so different from that silence under the earth, facing the solitude of the Pacific Ocean which was stretched out in the background like a distant dream.

"I can still hear you on Tall Hill . . . Were you reciting from memory? . . . Were you improvising? . . . Do you remember? . . .

A terrible urge to flee
to the sea!
An urge never to come back! . . .

A terrible urge to close my eyes
and hear them say, 'he's dead . . .'
and open them nary a crack!

A terrible urge to flee,
with wide-open doors as my track!"

"The words of somebody being chased, don't you think? . . . I wanted to flee from myself, from reality . . ."

"Or from what you couldn't escape anymore once you'd given

your word," Malena cut in, angry with events, not with him. "What a mixup that plot was. You'd think it had been hatched by people who wanted to lose!"

"A lot of things are done out of desperation . . ."

"That's the only way to explain it . . ."

"I didn't have you . . ."

"You were the one most deeply involved . . ."

"And not because I agreed with the assassination attempt," Mondragón interrupted, mobilizing his minimal little eyes around his ideas, "but because I was working with people who didn't understand that instead of getting rid of the *Beast* it would be better to rouse up the people, to change everything from the bottom up. But I didn't put it right, it wasn't that they didn't understand, they understood only too well, and they didn't hide the fact that a popular uprising would put them in danger too, especially as to what concerned their own interests . . ."

"Why did you get so deeply involved, then? . . . I'm sorry, but when something can't be changed, it's stupid, but there's nothing else to do but ask questions, the same questions . . . Why did you get so deeply involved? . . ."

"Whyyy? . . ." He drew the *yyy* out into a desolate question before shaking his head from side to side. "I really don't know why . . ."

"You even promised to drive the truck that would cut off the President's car at the moment of the attack! . . ." she reproached him with sadness and tenderness.

"What the hell! . . . I was single and all the others had children, brothers and sisters, family, someone to leave behind . . . I was single and, besides, remember this, I wanted to be sure that things would be done with split-second timing, that nothing would go wrong and . . ." he spoke confidentially, "I'm a good shot and I would have my weapons in the truck so I could finish him off if he came out of the attack unharmed . . . Right there . . ." He squeezed her hands and with a playful smile on his lips he said to her, "If you only knew how I got started on that adventure . . ."

"I can imagine . . ."

"Like someone accepting an invitation to go hunting, that was all, with my rifle, my cartridges, all set to hunt down the *Beast* . . ."

"You're crazy!"

"Say aloud: O! . . . the letter 'o' . . ."

"O! . . ."

"O . . . o . . . o . . . o . . . !"

"O . . . o . . . o . . . o . . . !" Malena repeated as the echo filled the underground cavities and everywhere the sounds of the round and penultimate vowel rolled about. "ooooOOOOO! . . . ooooOOOOO! . . ."

"Imagine, Malena, that all those echoes are automobile wheels and that all those wheels, all those cars are going along a long avenue, a very long avenue which becomes a tree-lined boulevard that leads to a zoo, and imagine that among those wheels, on that street, there was a poor devil, me, at the moment in which, passing at five in the afternoon in his armored limousine was the 'All-Powerful,' the 'All-Just,' the 'All-Wise,' the 'All-Honorable,' sitting back in the rear seat with a chihuahua dog on his lap, a ruby flashing on his pinky, and in his mouth a long amber holder with a lighted cigarette. On the corners, in the stores, in movie theaters, and in doorways an unexpected phenomenon is seen. What's going on? Why did that shoemaker drop his work half-finished, those marimba players put down their mallets, the owner of a furniture store desert the customers he was waiting on, and the bartender at the club with barely enough time to put on his hat and the sexton to close his church, and the notary time to add the 'tail-end' to his document, and the doctor to get dressed and go out, and off-duty officers and policemen, and a few schoolteachers, and some road workers . . . What are they doing? . . . Isn't it unusual for people of such different backgrounds to be gathered together at the same time on the same street? . . ."

"Yes, it really is . . ." she interrupted, puzzled, "but I don't know where it's all leading . . ."

"It's leading to the fact that among all those people I felt ashamed, reduced, infuriated. It's leading to the fact that for a moment, passing through there, I was part of the legions who, because of salaries or rewards, must be present on the broad avenue to watch over the life of that superior being. I was nauseated and in order to cleanse myself inside, I went into the nearest tavern and ordered a bottle of cane liquor that I finished by the glassful until I felt drunk. I don't know whether I fell asleep on the table and whether I was awake or asleep when I heard someone tell what had just happened in the city, it doesn't matter, because I was drunk and what I was listening to came from the mouths of other drinkers who were arriving with that great piece of news, and that made me think that I saw it in a dream or at the movies.

"The car, the one that at five o'clock in the afternoon we all watch over, which I watch over on that hateful day, comes to a halt in its silent progress at the zoo, and amidst the chauffeur who opens the door, some aide running in his gold braid, the chief of police struggling to get there on time, and the public, who turn their heads in suspense and awe, the 'All-Chief' gets out. Dribbling from his lower lip, deformed by the cigarette-holder in the corner and which he chews on, is a smile, a sign of good humor. Without stopping he advances, pompous and chubby, walking like a parrot, with his toes turned in, toward the tiger's cage, where a group of officers and cadets are amusing themselves with the endless pacing of the caged beast. Realizing who has arrived and assuming a military stiffness is a single act. At attention, stiff, chests out, eyes looking into the distance, hands raised with three fingers gently touching their caps at the level of their right temples. They stay like that until the 'All-Generous' nears and gives them the command of ready, front. With a single motion, like the hammers of a piano, the white-gloved hands drop to the red trousers. The tiger, meanwhile, continues his afternoon stroll, yawns, licks himself, attempts a kind of roar of complaint. 'Keeper!' The voice of the

'All-Powerful' is heard. 'Open the cage and let the bravest cadet go in and pet the tiger . . .' The noise of keys and locks and a wrinkling movement among the boys, pale and trembling. The tiger, as if he had understood the command, stops and is motionless, making him all the more dangerous. 'Isn't there one volunteer among the cadets? . . . Isn't there one brave man? . . . Isn't there one man? . . . Isn't there one male? . . .' the one who is all of those things in the highest degree asks. 'Well, then, let one of the officers go in! . . . You, colonel! . . . You, captain! . . . The cage is open, what are you waiting for? . . .' The colonel is only a long, damp nose, a drainpipe of cold sweat above the chattering of his teeth, and the captain is a pair of gigantic shoulders keeping afloat a small head that sinks as his legs buckle in a tremor that is more like an earthquake. 'Ha . . . ha . . . ha! . . .' The laugh of infinite disdain is heard from the 'All-Great' directed at the all-small, and in the eyes of the keeper, in whose hands of a jailer of beast the keys are jangling, all of that has shaken him out of his panic and the now gigantic figure of the Omnipotent advances fearlessly toward the cage, goes in, and as the others stand trembling with fear, he pets the tiger without changing his expression, the amber holder in his mouth and the lighted cigarette not losing an ash . . ."

"What did the tiger do?" Malena asked . . .

"He was trembling too!" Juan Pablo hastened to answer, smiling like a boy because he had made her fall into the trap of his spoof.

She accepted her defeat without celebrating the joke, not out of wounded pride, but because what he had told so vividly was basically so bitter as he took possession of the characters that way, describing the situation so minutely that there was cause to wonder whether or not it really was an explanation of the desperate act of using high-explosive bombs in an attempt to do away with the *Beast* who had made the beasts of the zoo tremble.

They were silent, kissing, caressing, but time was passing, there

wasn't much of it left for them, they would have to part, they had to talk.

Not about the past, no, even though he tried to with the sad mask that gave him the look of a large mushroom with eyes humanized by jealousy, about something as trivial as the "and" with which she had ended her diary, talking about the little officer she had met at the dance at the Military Club.

" 'It ended with the fact that he was younger than I . . .' " The male voice tickled in her ear. "And . . . and . . . and . . . what happened afterwards?"

"Nothing!"

"L. C. . . . the young man L. C.! . . ."

"I didn't see him again. His name was, or is, León Cárcamo . . ."

"Any letters?"

"He wrote me a few and I answered him as a friend. And speaking of my famous diary," she smiled, flattered to hear that he was jealous, "I brought you some books."

"Oh, my love . . . books . . . they used to be my passion. But I'll have to leave them behind . . . In my status as a peasant and my new human condition I'm more of an illiterate!"

"Write me when . . . when you learn how to write . . ." They laughed and kissed. "Or have someone do it for you." She tried to free her lips, suffocated, out of breath. "Have someone write the letters for you . . ."

"Yes! Yes! . . . and you have someone read them to you, because I'll tell the person who writes them for me that you're a poor peasant girl who never went to school," and after a pause he added, "Seriously, in case I do write to you with someone else's hand, it will have to be to a different name, one like those they have around here so that no one will get suspicious . . ."

"Rosa . . ." she said without much thought. "Rosa Gavidia, how does that sound?"

"If the name Gavidia is common around here . . ."

"It seems to be. There are several girls with that name in school."

"Well, then, Rosa Gavidia, although . . ." He was going to say something, but he contented himself with looking at her out of the corner of his eye, afraid that she had used that name before because she came up with it so quickly. "And as for me," he went on, "dead and buried in the police files lies Juan Pablo Mondragón, in honor of Marat, my hero, and the Costa Rican who taught me how to read in the barbershop, and I'll take on my original name again: Octavio Sansur, even better when it's shortened to Tabío San . . ."

"It sounds fine . . ."

"Or just San . . ."

"Did you settle with Duende on how much he's going to charge to take you to the coast? I brought some money along . . ."

"We haven't talked about it . . ."

"But according to what he told me the trip will be tomorrow. I'll leave it with you to pay him, because that's what he lives off, shortening distances, which," she sighed very deeply, "are separations . . ."

"A loan repayable with interest . . ."

"Silly . . . my silly . . ." he had reached her with his arms and was squeezing her. "My silly silly!"

"Mine!"

"Yours!"

"Malen!"

"Only yours!"

"Now? . . ."

"Always!"

"Now? . . ." he insisted, desperate . . .

She did not answer. To think? . . . To speak? . . . Impossible, because she was only something malleable, a breathing . . . "Now!" would have meant an answer to him, but what meaning did words have in that doing and undoing of consent and that scaffolding of bodies made of flesh and kisses under threads of tears that came from their eyes which were closed for moments, open for moments, without focusing on anything . . . "Now, love,

now! . . ." he seemed to be imploring, looking for acceptance in her eyes . . . "Let's wait! . . ." she beseeched with a soft look, not opposing anything, feeling that she was abandoning herself to the precise demands of the one who had laid her down on cushions soaked in the dreams of the almost perpetual darkness and was lying by her side with all of his substance inhabited by a single impulse, by a single image of fruits, moon lichen, the scaffolding of ocote castles, which was what her hair smelled like, the rain of her hair, pine resin, the soot on a cooking pot, the smoke of a peasant kitchen . . . "We should wait! . . ." she insisted with a voice of clinging wool, damp with saliva, her breasts wandering outside of her brassiere, her eyes closed, her heart loose, more and more joined to him in that universe which belonged to just the two of them . . .

Cayetano Duende was smoking at the mouth of the grotto, sitting down, standing up, or walking back and forth like a sentry while the gentleman and lady were making their arrangements. A cigarette left over from the ones that Mondragón had not smoked again since he forgot his tobacco at Popoluca's the day he came to hide in those depths. He did it to punish himself and it had results. So much the better, that was why they were being smoked by him, an old man accustomed to home-made smokes made of fiber, strong, biting, and smelly, not little cigarettes made by many fingers and well-wrapped in their casings, which were like the eyelids of a dead person. But smoking isn't just anything. A person has to think deeply as he swallows the smoke and has to speak as he lets it out, speak alone as he was speaking then, a scratch or two of the head, scrape, scrape, the shape of one boot against the other. He was nodding. Sometimes he would nod as if to shake out what was going through his head: clouds, birds, squirrels . . . And when he opened his eyes, his neck half-broken, he did not know whether clouds, birds, squirrels, butterflies had actually come out of his head or not . . . "Another cigarette?" he asked himself. And since there's no better

help than that of the interested party, it was just a matter of putting it in his mouth and lighting it.

He passed the time with the smoke and his thoughts, time outside of time, between the blind moon that was so new and the sun that was falling, wrapped up like a worm of fire, over the summits of the hills as if the light of a mirror were sliding down over them from above.

The cigarette was pulsating like any other instrument of smoke, the way braziers where incense is being burned pulsate, and that is why it has its time in the mouth and it has its time in the fingers, the index finger tensed for a fly's wing tap with which the ash is knocked off from time to time.

The first star came out. They had to get back. It wasn't good to wait until nighttime. Cerropóm was far away. He arose as if commanded from where he had been buttocking earth and ground and after listening all about the countryside, his eyes suspended in his old man's breathing, a little thick now, to find out whether or not anyone was coming, and shooing away a horsefly with his hand, he wound down through the entrance cave, thick with bats, into the cave of spongy darkness with the smell of stagnant drivel. Soon, with the silence stained by his footsteps, he was submerged in a dust cloud of greenish light, halfway between bile and an ice pile of petrified serpents, in the "Gunwale of the Prickly Pears," the navel of the Living Cave.

He was not hungry, but it would be better if he hurried. Perhaps they would give him a bite to eat and a drink of something. With just that he could get rid of the thorn that he had in his stomach. He dug his heels into the stone in order to hear himself walk, afraid of having turned into a bat among the bats that were coming out of the frozen world, spinning about in the space of the cave, and evaporating, changed into bits of murky sky or echoes, not of his feet walking but of spectral steps, as if the steps of all people moving on the earth were resounding there below.

He turned to look up at the great lamp of light in the shape

of a fallen animal, afraid that someone was following him, and he plunged into the passageway between dark and pitch-black that led to the den of the fugitive, "fugee-tive," he said, orchestrating, so that they would hear him coming, a concrete wall to keep their saintliness and all, coughs, sneezes, yawns, and sighs like a municipal band concert, from which he had been saved when he was young, because he was good with the reins. They did not put him to blowing and making sounds on one of those horns that stank of saliva from a spitoon because he was destined to be a coachman. For years and years he carried and carried important people in the municipal carriage until . . . until the mayor's oldest son grew up. He took the liquid reins and the solid reins one night at the door of the religious fellowship where they were celebrating the eve of St. Peter and St. Paul and along with carriage and horses he ended up at the bottom of a ravine. He was saved by a miracle requested at that instant by his mother, who had dreamed that her son was in danger of death and would die without confession. "Virgin of Sorrows, don't permit it! . . ." the mother cried in the sleep and the miracle came to pass, and in Calvary Church, next to the main altar on the side where the Virgin is at the foot of the cross, people admire, immortalized in a painted tablet, the moment in which the carriage was rolling into the deep ravine, the spokes of the wheels standing on end like the hair on the head of the mayor's son, who is falling head down. Above, on a medallion among the clouds, is the miraculous figure, below, at her feet, the afflicted mother in prayer, and farther down, written in longhand, the place, hour, and date of the miracle, the names of the people so favored, thanks to Our Lady, and evidence that the painter had forgotten about the horses.

What was certain was that there had been a miracle, but not for the horses, who perished without figuring in that miraculous tablet—the falling carriage is "acephalic"—nor for him, who lost his job as municipal coachman. And how he had liked to go being pulled along, endlessly pulled along. He already had the hair and sweat of an animal and the breath of a wheel, and per-

haps for that very reason God had punished him, left him afoot, for without wishing it, he had been on his way to becoming half-animal, half-carriage. And what was also certain was that the last person he had carried from the station to town was a little schoolteacher who said her name was Malena Tabay. That was some years ago. There was no station except for a flag-stop in the midst of the marshes where the travelers waiting to continue their trip took refuge in the shade of an amatle tree with open branches like an immense green umbrella. Now there was a building, a telegraph, and one could read the name Cerropóm painted, in dead colors, one might say, with black letters on a brown background. And there was a school which had not existed at that time. It was built by the new headmistress, the one he had found so young and tender, a dove, and who gave everything she had in spite of the warnings of Chanta Vega, may God keep her if circumstances didn't put her in Purgatory. She made a lot of mistakes along the way. And that was one case in which Chantísima made a big mistake along the way. Calming her liquid eye and half-closing her solid eye, which died on her from time to time, she stated that except for keeping her seat warm a teaching woman who read poetry aloud like a lunatic wasn't good for anything, one who cried for hours on end, who was in the teaching profession out of necessity and not because of a vocation, and who had buried herself in that unhappiness of a town because of a simple disappointment in love . . .

The old pathfinder softened his footsteps as he drew close to the den, so close that it seemed to him that the voices of Malena and Juan Pablo were coming out from under his feet with the moan of dry leaves. He was walking on sleeping leaves, on words changed into shadow dust, walking and not walking, arriving and not arriving, appearing and not appearing, drawing out and not drawing out those two lives into the evidence that they had to part.

Steps. Malena got up quickly, her hair in disarray, her clothing twisted by the devil. By feel she took her comb out of her pocket and looked for her hairpins. Everything so quickly. A

hairpin between her lips, another ready to put in, and looking for the next one. Meanwhile Juan Pablo got up and went to meet the old man, who had taken a long time in arriving, as if he had stayed nearby marking time. Her hair ready, now for her clothing. Her right sleeve would not come down. She had a hard time straightening it out. With great difficulty. With a creaking of the joints. She even had a pain in her shoulder from it. In back, near her shoulder blades. Stupid rags. The collar of her blouse. Her stockings. A garter had broken. She found it and tied it up with a knot and a half turn extra. All those empty buttonholes. Her earrings half off. Juan Pablo stopped and turned. A kiss. He could not leave her without a kiss. He took her by the chin like a child, lifting her face, and he leaned over to kiss her with a sucking sound. Trembling, she lowered her eyelids. When she opened them he had left the den, but she did not feel alone. Somebody or something was with her. Her loneliness would not be so terrible. That was the first thing she thought of. No matter how far away he went she would feel him nearby. Loneliness without him, without anyone, that would be terrible. But now she was accompanied by . . . the thought of him, which was like an internal voice escaped from her throat in rings of shudders that shook her . . . Who would accompany her if they captured Mondragón when he left that labyrinth of lava, shadows, and stone? . . . A dead man? . . .

She gave a cry. Juan Pablo had just taken her arm with his icy hand. It was time. Mouth to mouth he enclosed her in his arms. A short way along the trail together. Up to the "Gunwale of the Prickly Pears." Cayetano Duende in front. Swarms of bats were going out into the night. Impossible to part. He would leave her farther on, near the exit. Duende was going outside and he would warn them of any danger. Hard as lava stone, they felt themselves isolated in their grief. For moments they would use a kiss to break that painful lack of communication. Soon the cold heat of the stars was evident. They had to part. At that point, at that point strange bodies for the bats! Who were they

for those small creatures who brushed them, almost running into them, with squeaks and a flapping of wings? They stopped. No one spoke. They were face to face in the darkness, looking for the night to bathe their faces so that they could take a last look at each other before separating perhaps forever. He looked at her as if he were stealing her face to hide in the depths of his eyes, which were almost closed by the swelling of his features. He made a vain effort to picture her as merry and smiling, as in their happy days, and not with that parchment mask within which one could hear the rolling chant of her round and inexpressive tears . . . Oh, when frustration and the impossible are weighed in tears! . . . And while he looked at her steadily, Malena said, with a sticky, wet voice, half-pronouncing the words as she ran her fingers over Juan Pablo's deformed face, that this was how she wanted to keep him in her memory in order to sustain herself during the wait and the struggle, because that dehumanized face, a small pile of mushrooms, hid the will of this man who was prepared to return to the animal level of a worker on the coast in order to start all over again. Her fingers, less rigid, tenderness softens bones, kept passing their dream pincers over the features of the beast who seemed to be wounded...

She turned herself loose from his arms and took a few strides forward. When she turned he was no longer there. He had stayed behind in the depths. She still waved her hand to say a blind good-by. Juan Pablo saw her outline disappear against the beams of nocturnal clarity that fell from above. Rapidly he climbed up after her, the rest of the way, and looked out the mouth of the grotto, and from there he followed, followed her until she was lost from his sight, from the eyes of a poor weeping creature, leaning on his naked hands. When he raised his head again there was just a trace: Cayetano Duende in front and Malena behind. Then not even the trace of their shadows in the immense night, blind with the salt of the evening stars.

PART THREE

16

"Again, Aunty, again! . . ."

The nephew was serving as acolyte at Anastasia's midnight mass by the door of the Granada.

"The gringos are swilling again!"

"Again, Aunty, again! . . ."

The boy responded at the same time as he turned his black vegetable-sponge head which had been trimmed by the shears of charity and he fastened his bulging white-rimmed eyes on a man who had just got off a bicycle. He made no sound. He was hunched over like a hard-shelled insect in the midst of the cymbal sounds of the jazz that could be heard in the street as if all the windows were making noise at the same time. He was calling him. The man on the bicycle was calling him. First with his hand, signaling him to come over, then with his hat, which he took off and with which he was fanning himself in the middle of the cold night. He spat. A glob. It was heard, not seen. Nothing was seen. There was no saliva left in his mouth. *Ting-a-ling, ting-a-ling* . . . Without his being aware of it he hit the bell with his

elbow as he leaned on his bicycle, standing, fanning all the more with his hat, trying to get his breath.

The boy finally realized that the man was calling him or calling them, except that his aunt had not seen him, intent as she was on what was going on inside and repeating over and over: "The gringos are swilling again!"

A bike! . . . A bi . . . a bi . . . a bi . . . ke . . . the boy went beating with his bare feet along the asphalt that was damp with dew and only when he got close to the man calling him did he recognize him . . .

Aaaa-bi . . . aaa-bi . . . aaa-bi he wanted . . . a bi . . . a bi . . . a bike . . . he returned like someone pedaling on the ground after talking to the cyclist, back to where his aunt was yawning with more and more mouth, and at times her whole face was nothing but mouth, but it was hard to tell whether from hunger or lack of sleep or both, for her stomach was weary, her eyes were weary, everything was weary except her tongue:

"The gringos are swilling again!"

"Aunty," the nephew tugged at her arm. "There goes Señor Nepo and he says for us to catch up to him!"

"Señor Nepo? . . . I hope it's not a false alarm! . . ." The mulatto woman withdrew from the door and followed the cyclist without lending an ear to the woman selling violets, forget-me-nots, jasmines, carnations, marine iguana, virgins and married women, who wanted to tell her something. Some nonsense, of course, just as on that Christmas Eve when she appeared on the street half-drunk repeating: "Gúmer's come down from heaven, don't faint away, away . . . Those blond giants are so damned good-looking that it's like seeing a movie made of flesh and blood film instead of celluloid! . . ." "The fever's making you see what isn't there . . . angels, yet, those big white men with faces like uniformed behinds! . . ." Anastasia had had time to answer then, but now she went off without hearing what Gúmer was coming to tell her.

"Two wheels beside two feet and one true man . . . who would

have guessed? . . . and I figured you were working . . ." the mulatto woman greeted Señor Nepo, who halted the rolling bicycle with a pull. He was on foot, heading down toward the Postal Arch, and he was wheeling it along easily, holding onto one handlebar.

"I asked to be excused from work . . ."

"And since work is a crime," Anastasia cut him off, "and the criminal always returns to the scene of his crime, you had to come and kill some time around here!"

"I was passing by, just passing by, but I stopped when I saw you at the door . . ."

"The gringos are swilling again!"

"What a piece of news!"

"That's not news, that's the truth!"

The nephew was following them with a quick step on his bare feet, content to walk along beside the rear wheel of the bicycle, which was turning, turning, turning next to him now that Don Nepo, like a poor man, was pedaling the ground, which is what people who go on foot do. That's what his aunt had told him when he spoke to her about getting a bike someday. "Pedal the ground, boy, that's the poor people's bicycle."

"And you're on your way home now? . . ." the mulatto woman quickened her step and asked him. The man was going so quickly that it was necessary to "pedal" fast.

"That's what I've been doing lately, coming and going, stopping by my house all the time looking for my grandson. He left very early and hasn't come back. The trouble is that he went off with the cart and an accident can happen to anyone. I went to ask about him at the works where he usually delivers lime. All the way to Guarda Viejo, Lazareto, I went all around there and nothing doing. By the Campo de Marte, Santa Clara, the Villa de Guadalupe, and where the Salesian fathers are building . . ."

"If I were in your place I'd go right to the police . . ."

"Why right to the police? . . ." His heart had a chill as he thought about the helper they had taken on, a subversive, a fugi-

tive, even though what the woman said was reasonable. The police could tell him right away whether or not something had happened to Damiancito, but because of the helper ,he didn't even dare ask over the telephone.

"Right to the police," Anastasia insisted, "because they have all the reports there and they know if he's all peachy, hurt, in the hospital, or dead meat in the market . . ."

"Shut your mouth!"

"It was just a joke! . . . How's he going to be dead? . . . People would know . . . news flies, even more now with the radio jabbering all the time!"

"The radio's not for me! Radio? . . ." Don Nepo twisted his mouth, mustache and all, in an expression of disgust mixed with the look of affliction that he had, and he went into a rage. "Radio? . . . I've got enough listening to the whore that gave birth to the radio, the phonograph! Just hearing the word makes me sick to my stomach! . . ."

"What you like, you old devil, is the pong . . . pong . . . pong . . . of the marimba at three o'clock in the morning. You're a waltz man, an old-fashioned man . . ."

"Neeews of the Air! . . ." the nephew let out as he ran ahead with one foot on the sidewalk and the other in the street, as if he were lame.

"Look how that brat of mine has even heard the 'News of the Air' . . ."

"Or, Aunty, where they say . . ." the boy came back, "that 'Rifafafa . . . rifafafaree . . . fafafa . . .' of a bicycle . . ."

"The thing that gets me mad is when they say: 'Doctor, I can't walk . . . what should I take? . . . Take a Blue Taxi! . . .'"

"That's the ad for Blue Taxis . . ." Don Nepo put in.

"I don't care . . ."

Duplicated by the echo, the tolling of a belfry could be heard.

"What I hope," Nepomuceno went on, "is that when I get home now he'll be there. Damiancito never came home after dark. That's what worries me most."

"Ask the police . . ."

"That's what I'll do tomorrow . . ."

"But how can you go to bed without knowing . . . Ask right now. When you go by La Selecta, Don Chaco's place, ask him to let you use the phone."

"No, I'm not going home to bed. I'll keep on looking for him, what else can I do. And the police . . . yes, yes, the police . . . But the police are a trap and just by asking questions a lot of people get into a mess."

"You're right about that," and a few steps ahead, with yawns and half-yawns, the mulatto woman decided: "Then don't ask about your grandson, about Damiancito. Why give his name. Ask about an ox-cart . . ."

"It's the same thing . . ."

"Well, what you don't want to do is ask right out, so don't ask . . ."

"Let's have a tamal over there by the Colón," the cyclist said, speeding up the rolling bicycle and speeding himself up, still dismounted, speeding up everybody.

"Fine, fine," Anastasia accepted, "because if you have food, even trouble is a bubble . . ."

"Or over in Santa Rosa, at black Raw's . . ."

"No, boss, it's expensive there and remember that there's a jukebox. It's better by the Colón, in the open air, more friendly, and then if you feel like something else there's a Chinaman who sells meat strips on the other side of the square . . ."

"No, a tamal for me, with bread and coffee . . ."

"That's what I like, boss, and eating it with my fingers, pinch style."

The woman selling tamales gave them three bricks of cooked cornmeal wrapped in banana leaves which burned Anastasia as she took them, blowing on her fingers as she moved hers from hand to hand while carrying it to the bench on the square where, sitting side by side, they opened them and ate them without bread or coffee because there wasn't any, strictly with their fingers.

Two heads turned at the same time. Señor Nepo's and the

mulatto woman's. In the distance they heard the creaking of a cart. They waited with their mouths hanging open. It might be Damiancito . . . Señor Nepo abandoned his tamal and stood up . . . It was Damiancito . . . He was alone, without the helper . . . He went over to meet him . . . The grandson jumped off the cart and ran ahead to stop the oxen . . . Anastasia also got up, storming after her nephew, who had just picked up the bicycle and jumped on it, making the pedals turn.

"Stop, you devil, or I'll kill you! . . ." the woman was shouting as she ran after the boy. "Stop! . . . Stop! . . ."

Damiancito greeted his grandfather and then, as his voice grew livelier with the contents of his mouth, which was watering at the smell of the tamales, he added:

"It was God's will that I had to eat a little old tamal! When I went through the Square I saw a row of women selling tamales and I felt like one, but I didn't want to stop with the cart anymore because the oxen were tired."

"And where did you leave that helper of yours?"

"That helper of mine . . ." in the distance the shouts of Anastasia were lost as she tried to catch up with the boy: "Stop! . . . Stop! . . ." "The helper I left in El Rastro, where the ashpits begin and never end. He was hiding out there waiting for a train to pass."

"Did he talk to Juambo?"

"They must have talked, I think, because I left them alone together . . ."

"Your tamal's getting cold . . . And that woman's acting like a lunatic chasing her boy like the devil himself because he took the bicycle!"

As fast as his fingers could work, Damiancito transferred the tamal to his mouth, savoring it as if he had never eaten such food.

His grandfather lowered his voice.

"I had some bad moments seeing that you weren't coming and weren't coming. I didn't even go to work. I asked to be let off. I

couldn't have stood being cooped up there. I was worried that you'd been arrested for driving the cart without any lights . . ."

"I was already stopped by the police for that and they wanted to give me a summons . . ."

"Didn't you stop to think . . ."

"But I was alone by then . . ."

"That was lucky. How did you get them to let you go?"

"I was coming back from a delivery of lime that I made to the palace the Chief of Police is building, I told them, over there in Santa Clara, and that got me off."

"Well, that's what I was afraid of, that you'd been arrested for some kind of thing like that and at the police station they'd find out who your helper was. I wouldn't even want my worst enemy to spend the hours I spent thinking that they were beating you, hanging you up, and . . . only the bicycle gave me some relief, but there were times when I was so upset that I didn't feel I was up on a pair of wheels pedaling but on top of a long stream of piss. And you can imagine how a person gets into things like that without knowing why or how. Maybe that's what fate is. That's what I think it is. With a person up to his ears overnight in something he least expected. And that fellow, we didn't even know his name. He said it was Tabío San, but that sounds more like a nickname. Tabío San, how can a person know . . ."

He half rose from the bench he was sitting on beside his nephew, who was all fingernails as he ate a red tamal. With three fingers and his thumb he was lifting the mouthful of cornmeal and putting it well into his mouth, not only tasting the mouthful but sucking on the wrapping that came out clean as he drew another mouthful out of the tamal or ran into a small bone in the meat. And as the grandfather got up from the bench where he was sitting, he craned his neck and looked all around. He was looking for Anastasia and her nephew. Not a trace of them. Only the statue of Columbus up on a column across from a fountain with frogs and alligators in greenish water.

"They disappeared," Don Nepo said, for he could not catch sight of the mulatto woman as she gathered stones to throw at the boy who was fleeing like mad past the Mesón del Teatro. "I've never seen a more quarrelsome and ugly woman. It's the boy I feel sorry for. Are you watching the birds, boy? . . ." He turned to Damiancito, who seemed absent.

"I was thinking about what you were saying . . . about that ugly woman."

"Finish your tamal and let's go. Do you want another one? Eating looks good when young people do it!"

"Thanks, grandpa, but I've had enough. One's enough to fill a stomach," the grandson answered as he went over to the fallen bicycle. "If you want, grandfather, we'll toss your *horse* in the cart and that way you can take a rest."

"Whatever you say, boy." He went over to give him a pat. "Having you close by without anything having happened, that's what makes me happy!"

The oxen began to walk, heavy, gentle, docile, the wagon began to roll and rolling too were the thoughts of the grandfather and the grandson. Both were asking questions without speaking. Had the train that the helper was waiting for passed by already? Had he been able to jump on and go away with it? Probably, because the trains don't go very fast by there. And what if somehow he reappeared at the house? Only the grandfather was thinking about that. A walking, urgent worry came over him. If by chance he reappears at the house I'll tell him that he can't stay, that he's in too much trouble, too much trouble. He'll recognize the fact. The first time was all right. I didn't know who he was and he came to me through the doorway of a dream. Yes, I was asleep and when I woke up who was in front of me? . . . The person I was dreaming about, that leader I'd just seen in my dream, up on a fiery carriage with men and women out of a storm who were carrying flags, plows and rifles in their hands, and shouting: "Up the people! . . . Up the people!"

But that had been a dream from which he awoke when that

man of flesh and blood was already beside him. He got out of the fiery carriage and was pushing and pushing Don Nepo until he got him out from inside of himself and felt him alive, real, obvious, at the side of his bed.

Now it was different. He was awake, as after a great nightmare. Awake and trembling about what could have happened to his grandson and him . . . but to him, what difference did it make, he was already old and even if he lost his life.

He cut off his thoughts, his mind made up not to let him into the house if he came back, that was that, and he asked:

"And what did Juambo do, where did he take off to?"

"Home," Damiancito answered. "We left the helper waiting for his train and he came back with me into the city. The funny thing is that his dog found him and we brought him back with us. A beautiful animal!"

"Did the helper and Juambo have a talk?"

"They must have . . ."

"You didn't hear, then . . ."

"No, because I left them. I went off to collect some money and take a walk. Then I met them again where the helper said to, on the corner of Las Araucarias."

"What about you, boy, did he talk to you about anything? . . . What a nosy old man, but if we old men weren't nosy, what the devil, no one would ever tell us anything and it would be like being dead while we're alive!"

"Yes, about a big to-do that he's organizing. It seems that it's something new, never seen before. All of us who work are going to stop at the zero hour on a day we haven't been told yet, and we won't go back to work unless they raise our pay, unless the work hours are shortened, and I don't know what else . . ."

"And he plans to bring down the federal government with that?" the grandfather asked in a vague way, pretending that he did not know. Tabío San had talked to him about his plans too and even if he had not, because of his dream, because of the fiery carriage, he knew that he was the leader. But, with the

pretext of what the helper told him, he had to find out from the grandson whether he planned to take part in an active way, whether he was involved in something, all of which would be nothing but a simple bumble and blunder, because trying to overthrow the government without weapons, ha! Who ever heard of such a thing?

The Army trucks that were coming from the Quarry loaded with material for the landing strips bathed them frequently in the glow of their headlights and the deafening roar of the motors. Only occasionally did they enjoy the silence of the night full of mysterious sounds, the pecking of the stars and the moonlight . . .

"With all that, grandfather," Damiancito answered, slow, like his oxen, "with that strike business they want to overthrow the government and maybe the Fruit Company, the Electric Company, and the Railroad . . ."

"It's lucky he left and God help him out there. It was a big risk for us to have him in our house, because, I don't know whether you noticed it or not, those weren't looks but jabs that the Consunsino woman was giving the cart, asking every time you passed who that helper was who looked more like a boss."

At the corner of Las Araucarias, where there was a grade crossing, Tabío San the helper waited in the position of a person waiting for the first train in order to leap aboard and go along with it. The moon cast his shadow onto the iron rails, which looked like a linear clock without hours and without numbers, where each tie was a minute of eternity. He seemed to be lying in wait not for the train but for time, for that zero hour when everything would stop, the train, the moon, the cart that was now going off noiselessly through the ashpits that were like the powdered milk of death.

He pulled his hat down over his forehead and did not stop, toothless ditches, garbage piles, shadows of horses, stray dogs, until he came to what must have been a house beside a tree white with ash and where he knocked on a door that was the color of an old scab.

"Who is it? . . ." after a time a coughlike voice asked.

"Chos . . . chos . . . moyón . . . con . . ."

The door gave way sleepily, one of those doors that do not know who is passing through them, and it opened into a yard of dry, paralytic plants, geraniums and rose bushes, more leaves than flowers, more stems than leaves, covered with the deathly dust of the ashes. He went directly to a room that was served by a door that must have been a window sometime before, surprised by the growl of an ashén old dog with a petrified look, a map of bald spots on his back, one of those dogs who no longer know how to romp and bark with joy. He half-lifted his head and moved his tail as the man approached to pet him. The room was below ground level and he went down the steps without looking. He had not lived there long, but those three steps were familiar to him. A lamp lit the objects: a mirror, a dresser, a table, chairs, all recently dusted from the look of them. Soon, following his steps, the old dog came along with his fallen ears, shook his head at the door as if he were shaking off sleep and drowsiness, and Judasita appeared behind him. She had remained at the street door with her ear glued to the boards, listening to hear if anyone had been following. She greeted him without managing either to weep or to laugh, short of breath, looking at him and taking her eyes off him, her lips in motion but without words. She was so glad to have him home safe and sound that . . .

"But what's this all about, you look like a clown! . . ." was all that she could say.

"A clown from the circus of the great untamed *Beast*! . . ." he managed to say as a joke before she went on complaining at seeing him dressed in that poor clothing, shirt and pants, with an old straw hat that was falling apart, wearing sandals instead of shoes, and all bathed in a white powder, which was more alive, however, than the gray-haired dust that ashes leave.

"I managed to get here as a helper on a cart that delivers lime."

"I don't know, but your face is different too. It didn't used to be like that. You're fatter, swollen up."

"All those years, Judasita, and work on the coast."

"But with all this talk I'm forgetting . . ."

She went to a room that served as a bedroom and came back with a basin hidden under her apron, and decisively, riding roughshod over all decency, half-obliged and half-ashamed, unhesitatingly, she set it on top of the table. It was a chamber pot of porcelained pewter, made in Germany, large in size and with a false bottom, and the instruction for its use were always reviewed whenever he returned:

"If you hear anyone at the door, before you go out to open up, use it . . ."

"Don't keep getting me depressed with your filthy ideas!"

"Use it!"

"And what if they don't knock, what if I just get the urge . . ."

"Use it! Your need is your . . . in . . . terest in the lady . . ."

"Well, actually, if I think it's the police coming I will use it . . . And the liquid continent shall cover the solid continent . . . Ha, ha, ha . . ." he laughed and hugged her. "How've you been, Judasita . . . I didn't even give you your hug! . . ."

"Watch out, you're cracking my ribs! You're the one who should be asked how you've been, and as far as this lady friend of yours is concerned," and she pointed to the chamber pot that was presiding over things on the table, "it's best to keep it full when there are any letters, even if it's dog piddle, if Basco can fill it, because he's so old now that he's not even any good for that . . ."

"With devil piss . . . Judasita, just so they don't find my letters!"

"That's what I've been doing, so while you take the letters out I'm going to give it a good cleaning with boiling water, cinders, and creoline, because the stink is too much already . . ."

"I should say not . . . it's not a common chamber pot!"

"It even comes out in verse! . . . But if you don't let me scrub it and wash it with paxte plant and sand the house'll smell like the mattress of a lunatic."

"So much the better. Less danger . . ."

"You're going too far . . ."

"I always go too far in things like that, you know very well."

"Maybe you're right. If my son had been more careful maybe they wouldn't have caught him. It's been six years since they shot him. The *Beast* shot six people that day. Oh, but how his blood is crying for revenge . . . as God is my witness, there's got to be revenge! . . ."

"Take the lady away. I've already got the letters out!"

Judasita, the widow of her husband, as Tabío San called her in jest, took away the mysterious chamber pot which had a false bottom in the lower part to hide documents in and a mechanism that made it possible for that strongbox to be opened and closed.

"Those envelopes," Judasita explained, "all came in the sacks of ashes carried by that man whose face I was never able to see. That's why they're so dirty. The man who comes around sundown, which is nighttime around here. Where poor people live the sun comes up and goes down earlier than it does in rich neighborhoods. I don't know whether I ever told you. He comes up like a soul from the other world, the soul of some ashman he's carrying in his sack of dead man's ashes, and he doesn't say much, just the password, so I wouldn't even recognize his voice. All he said the last time he came was, 'Ma'am, you'd better sift the ashes of those two sacks I put aside and save what's in there . . .' "

"And did you?"

"Of course I did. I don't even want to tell you the trouble it was to get a sifter. I tried to have one made. They wanted a lot. I was finally able to find one somewhere and borrow it. Like fleas, all that was left in the sieve were some small pieces of metal that turned out to be letters. It was a lot of work. I had to sift almost two sacks of ashes. And I don't know whether they'll bring any more or not."

"That's the first thing I wanted to know, because now we've already got part of the printing press."

"There it is. But read your letters now."

Sansur's hand did not hesitate. It went directly to the envelope that he imagined was from Malena and he was right.

One, two, three pages that he read rapidly. The report was complete. This time, if things came out as he foresaw, he would argue with her personally about the conclusions, which were optimistic and risky. The teachers' union was the most docile, tied to the national budget by their stomachs and with starvation salaries. But in addition, and perhaps because of that, they were the most restless. Malena was right in that. The thing now was to delve in and find out how far the discontent reached, to see whether it was only because of lost promotions or the postponement of merit raises, which were never more than wordy affairs.

The woman who took care of the house, the one who had gone out with the *lady friend*, came back to offer him what little she had to eat, and she was already spreading the tablecloth and laying out the plates, an operation that she accompanied, jovial all of a sudden, with something like the clucking of a setting hen. Oh, how that pantomime used to amuse her son!

"If that's what you're doing, I'm going to wash up a bit . . ." he said, somewhat distant, with the news from Rosa Gavidia, who was none other than Malena, his hands aching, scratched, and white with lime dust.

"I think you should just brush yourself off, because if what you've got on your hair and face is quicklime dust, the water can make it burn you."

"Yes, you're right . . ."

"Yes, because you've got enough trouble as it is. I can't offer you much. A few eggs scrambled with tomatoes and onions and a little rice and milk with cinnamon, the way you like it. If I'd known you were coming I would have fixed a piece of meat for you."

"I'll go into the kitchen with you . . ."

"You'll get into things you don't know anything about and you'll make me burn things. You'd better stay here with your papers."

He ate hungrily. He sopped up the eggs left over in the sauce with a piece of bread. And he ate the rice down to the last grain and the cinnamon to the last stick. Coffee, a cigarette, and a match as a toothpick.

"And your bed's all ready in case you want to stretch out . . ." she said, seized by a passing coughing attack, and she managed to add, "How come you read some letters and not others? And you always know which one interests you the most . . . I can't tell why. You must know them by the color, the smell . . ."

"If you were a fortune-teller you'd know . . ."

"Even if I'm not . . . the hand of the heart never makes a mistake . . ."

"What you're saying could be dangerous. In this fight of ours there can't be any love or preference . . ."

"But since the heart goes where it wants to and not where it's led . . ."

"It would be crazy . . ."

"Go ahead, read your little letter . . ."

"It's a report . . ."

"What does it say between the lines . . ."

"I'm going to read these other reports."

"I'll leave you alone. Have a good night."

"You too."

"Oh, but I'm forgetting . . . Bring the lamp and come take a peek at the type for the press. See how I've set it up . . ."

He got up from the chair, feeling bruised, took the lamp from the table, and followed Judasita to a second small courtyard where there was a drain for winter rain and an old oven. There, in a section of the oven, five small piles of type were lined up and glowed dimly in the light of the lamp.

"Very good. Those little lead volcanoes are going to do more damage than a machine-gun."

"How do you like the way I've arranged them?"

"Very good. Your idea of piling them up makes me think of the shield of the Federation. If the five little volcanoes were the

type for a printing-press and erupted at the same time, what a shower . . . But you shouldn't have them so exposed, you should hide them, because the police have got lodestone noses for bullets and type."

"I'll do it tomorrow. I'm going to bed now. Have a good night. You take the lamp. I have a candle in my room. See you tomorrow."

She left. She disappeared into that same small courtyard with her paleness of damp ash, her ash-string hair, and her clothing of old ash. He went back to his room with his hair, face, clothes, hands whitened by lime. They were like two ghosts going their own ways. An unwound clock struck a nonexistent hour.

From one envelope after another he took out the pages and read them, sitting on the edge of the bed, his body leaning toward the light of the lamp on the night table, his shoes already off, his shirt sleeves pulled up, unbuttoned over his elbows, his pants open too, the ones he wore with the legs rolled up like those of a carter, ready now to take off his clothes, dirty with lime, a living whiteness, which tomorrow would be buried by the fatal whiteness of the ashes, and get into bed. He slept naked in payment for all the times that he had to sleep with his clothes on when he was away from home.

Reports from the capital. The union of chauffeurs or automobile drivers. They show signs of active solidarity when it is a matter of getting driver's licenses renewed, vehicles registered, and getting out of a traffic summons. It includes those who drive cars that have been bought on time from import houses that sell them at usurious prices through monthly installments. They work with what they think is their property, meeting the monthly payments, gasoline always going up, repairs, increasing the profits of automobile importers. It also includes the drivers of fleet taxis, exploited in that branch of transportation, workers who think they are salaried employees because they get a daily wage . . .

He yawned. Outside, in the nocturnal silence, the sound of

can openers could be heard, that of the bats maddened by the moon, who was dressed as an ash bride, a romantic image from his days as a barber's apprentice when he lived in the meat-packing district, and he even thought he could hear Panegírica whistling as she decided fortunes and the guttural voice of Juana Darkness, a member of the race of owls. He was sunken once more, as if floating in the ashpits where he grew up, but Bellaluz no longer existed and many people from those days were also ashes. The dog dragged himself over to his feet, blind, covered with ashes and fleas. There are dogs who are so old that they become people. He petted him, drawing his hand over his rough side, between the ears, on his snout.

The other news and reports about mutual aid societies, organizations, and fraternal groups that gave celebrations on National Day or when they had an anniversary were of the same tone. The only visible and effective solidarity was that of the visits when there was a death, to pay for the funeral expenses of the deceased member and to help his heirs.

Mutual aid . . . Posthumous aid . . . He put out the lamp . . . Malena was right . . . Fighting under those conditions was like trying to kindle a fire from ashes . . . But he would kindle it! . . .

Days later, at dusk, he went out to seek the bashful friendship of the Indians who bought ashes in the city and sold them to the soap factories.

"How many of you are there? . . ." he asked one of those silent people who sat on a corner with their backs to the wall handling the coins in their pockets as they stuck to their bodies, like people who fondle grains because of the pleasant tickle they get.

"There aren't many of us and there are a lot of us . . ." the Indian answered after thinking about it for a long time. His mouth stayed open, his tongue in saliva water, and his teeth in a naked row, as if ready to bite or laugh.

"There aren't many of you and there are a lot of you . . ." Tabío San said as if asking for an explanation.

"Yes, that's how it is . . ." the Indian confirmed distantly.

"I'd like to go with you tomorrow, if you'll let me. I'm poor and I'd like to make a little money. I have a room over there, but, comrade, I haven't got anything to buy my beans or tortillas with."

The Indian was completely silent.

Tabío San did not give up and added:

"Will you let me go with you to buy ashes in the city?"

"Yes, it's all right with me, but not tomorrow. The day after tomorrow is when we go."

"God will reward you!"

"Have you got a sack to carry the ashes in?"

"I've got one . . ."

"Have you got the strength to carry it?"

"I've got the will of a man in need."

"What about some change? Have you got enough to do your buying?"

"How much do I need?"

"Not much, just a little . . ."

"Like how much?"

"Just have some on you . . ." the Indian cut him off with ill humor. "If you've got change, you can go to the city with me day after tomorrow to buy ashes and you'll bring them back here to sell at a better price, at what I tell you. You can't sell it too cheap. Never cheaper than the rest of us. If you do that the whole business is lost. But I forgot one thing. Your bag, your sack to carry the ashes in. It has to have a fine weave, the kind that won't let the finest powder go through."

"Yes, the kind they carry flour in . . ."

"That's the kind," the Indian was happier, isolated and still distant, "they're hard to come by and that's why I asked you and you gave me an answer."

"God bless you, you're very kind, you're not selfish, and I won't forget your goodness!"

"I'll show you how the first few times. You can come with me if you want, then you can go by yourself, on your own. Where

do you come from? . . ." the Indian ventured, his copper face immobile under his mangy crust of ash.

"Where was I born, you mean?" Tabío San took time to think about what he would answer. "I'm from Chuacús, do you know it? . . . I was born there . . . Are you from here? . . ." San asked in turn, trying to make friends with the Indian, which was like trying to make friends with a stone.

"What an idea!" The Indian gave out a thin strip of spittle, like a whip, as he turned his head. "That would be a real screw-up, coming from here! I'm a pure Sololatecan, right from Sololá!"

"And you've been here or lived here . . ."

"Four years I've been here, but I'm always thinking about going back home."

"And where exactly do you want to meet day after tomorrow?"

"I'll meet you right here on the corner at six on the dot. My name's Cecilio Yancor for people who don't know me. Those who do call me Chilo."

When Mondragón told Judasita about his idea of walking through the streets of the city as if he didn't have a price on his head, she shuddered.

"You've never been foolish! Why do you have to start now? . . ." She was drumming with her fingers, pinching the edge of her small apron, and at the silent reply of the leader she threatened him. "If you really intend going into the city, tell me right now and I'll pack up my things and go where I won't have to be the one who has to go and wet the stones of the Penitentiary, because I cried enough already when they shot my son."

"I know that, Judasita, I know it might be taking a chance!"

"Might be! . . ." she stressed, as if doubting what she heard.

"Leave out the 'might be.' It is taking a chance, but I have to make contact as soon as possible with people who are potent . . . and prudent, ones that only I know, people who were deeply involved in the plot two years ago, and I have to ask them for help in the new movement."

"And you're such a child that you believe . . ."

"I believe . . . in God the Father . . ."

"You were about to make me say something foolish! I was going to say you believe wrong! You're such a child that you think they're going to receive you. Not at the door. They'll probably faint when they find out that the person looking for them is the famous Juan Pablo Mondragón, because you're still Juan Pablo Mondragón for them. For them and for the secret police."

There was a knock at the door. Two, three times. But with such little assurance that it seemed that no one was knocking there. It became more insistent, strong and decisive. Judasita, nervous as she was with the news she got from him and having pronounced the fateful name of the secret police at the moment the knock on the door was heard, did not know what to do, and while San slipped out she ran to fill the chamber pot, not simply following instructions but because she was urinating out of fear.

"Who is iiiit . . . ?" Judasita stretched out her voice and followed it with a dry coughing as she got to the door.

"Me . . ."

"Who's me? . . ."

"Cecilio Yancor, Chilo . . ."

"There's no Chilo here," Judasita cut him off energetically when she realized there was no danger.

"No, I'm the one who's Chilo Yancor . . ."

"What do you want?"

"I want to know if a fellow who's going to get together with me day after tomorrow to go get ashes lives here."

"Ask somewhere else, he's not here . . ."

"Where's he live then?"

"I don't know and stop bothering me . . ."

"Beg pardon, ma'am . . ." the voice of the Indian could be heard as he went away.

San came out to see what it was about and Judasita explained to him.

"It was a crazy Indian who was asking if a friend of his who

was going to get ashes with him day after tomorrow lived here."

"That's me!"

"You?"

"Disguised as an ashman I can go through the city in peace and get into my friends' houses . . ."

"You'll be recognized . . ."

"Was I recognized when I was going around as a helper on a cart that loaded up in the North Quarry and unloaded at the four points of the compass in the city? . . . The same white mask . . . except that it's going to be like an ass . . ."

"Don't be dirty!"

"I mean ash, instead of calcium oxide!"

"You're always fooling around with words!"

"No fooling, instead of a mask of lime I'll go through the city with a mask of ashes!"

"And what for, I'd like to know!"

"To get revenge for your son . . ."

"You can convince me with that, but what about the people who don't have sons who were shot, how will you convince them? . . ."

"They're hungering for freedom, Judasita, and there are others hungry because they haven't got anything to eat, and others are hungry for some land!"

"You're giving a little bit of honey to each one of them."

"There was a reason, Judasita, for you to ask me when I got here what circus I was with, with my face all white like a clown. From the circus of the great beast caged up in the main tent, and since the performance is still going on, the clown trades his lime for ashes. It's tragic, quick lime for dead dust, the kind that's left when everything's been burned, and he comes out with his tambourine looking for contributions, because the type for the press is here but we need a place to set it up in. We need a hand press and we have to get paper and ink, and we have to pay our people to travel so they can move around and carry out missions, and we have to buy off police, yes, police, because the

police, like the military, can be bought when the dollars we give them are the same as the collars they give them . . ."

"Why don't those fine gentlemen come here? . . ." Judasita frowned as she fixed her eyes on those of the leader. "Why do you have to go, is what I wonder. And something else, that Indian's going to take you to the houses of the people he buys from, worse yet if he's an old Indian, and not to where your friends are . . ."

"You're right about that . . ."

"And something else," she said, fearful, desperate, "if you go with that Indian, what's his name . . . Yancor?"

"Chilo Yancor . . ."

"I've heard the name. He's one of the richest of the ashmen. If you go with him you can't let him meet the people you want to help you because I'm sure you didn't tell that Indian who you were . . ."

"Of course not . . ." he exclaimed with an air of annoyance as he felt himself hemmed in by Judasita.

"Then you're just putting yourself in danger without getting anything out of it."

She seemed more relaxed, more lovingly relaxed, because she thought she had convinced him.

"You're right, Judasita, but day after tomorrow I'm going to start my humble apprenticeship as an ashman . . ."

"Apprenticeship?"

"Just what you heard . . ."

"But it doesn't have to do with learning anything . . ."

"And when I've learned all about it, I'll go by myself, without Yancor anymore, just me, to my friends' houses. What I need and what I have to find is a city directory with their addresses. I had one among my papers . . ."

"Well, what if you knock on the doors of the houses where your friends live and there aren't any ashes? . . ."

"I'll let a few days go by and call again until there are some ashes . . ."

"What if they've moved? . . ."

"I'll keep asking where they live until I find them . . ."

"Some of them might even have died. Two years have gone by . . ."

"Then I'll bring back their ashes . . ."

"Good Lord, you're worse than a witchdoctor!"

17

It was a job like any other, after all, a job in the city, with nothing debasing about it, and one in which a person could become famous, like Cecilio Yancor, an artist who could empty the pits of seven ovens without soiling the floor with the smallest particle of that sticky dust. But along with the fame of a clean man which passed from the tongue of one cook to another in the neighborhoods, Yancor had the tact to arrive at homes at an early hour when the presence of the ashman would not interrupt any chores, and he was precise in the price that he offered for pure ashes, coal-dust was no good, so that he avoided bargaining, and his hands were honest, for never had a kitchen utensil or any food disappeared, even though he would be left alone as he scraped out the cages—which were what the ash receptacles looked like under the grills—breaking up pieces of lace, needles, towers, bridges, castles, and other fantasies among the accumulated ashes.

And Tabío San made Chilo Yancor his archetype of an ashman. He learned to arrive at the houses at the opportune hour, extract

the product without dirtying the floor, pay the proper price, say good morning with a half-bow without completely removing his hat and leaving it on. The ashman who knows his trade does not take off his hat even in someone else's house so as not to give the look of a visit, and he leaves in good time.

But unlike other ashmen, Tabío San preferred the hours when the cook was out to market with the lady of the house and the maid was cleaning the rooms. Then, without danger, he could exchange impressions in the rear of the house, where the kitchen always was, with some of those who, since they had been with him in the plot that failed, could not refuse to listen to him. He had been, no less, the man who had supplied the explosives for the bombs and had volunteered to drive the truck that was to cut off the presidential car at the moment of the attack.

"Why, it's Mondragón! . . ." the owners of the houses would say with great shock when he identified himself. "Mondragón!" They swallowed the name, terrified at having said it aloud. Some had even thought that he was dead and buried . . .

"I used to be Mondragón. Now I'm Tabío San and . . . I was resurrected from among the ashes . . ."

They would calm down. With a different name and with that disguise of an ashman he would not compromise them by coming to their houses unless there was some betrayal, and, furthermore, they were pleased with his visits and the fact that they took place in the kitchen, because the way things were going it was the most appropriate place to talk about affairs of state. The plan that he brought did not please them and almost all of them rejected it as unworkable, but since it was less dangerous than an assassination attempt, a *coup de main*, or a revolution, in which they would lose their lives if they failed, they ended up by accepting it. A strike will be declared and whether effective or not, there will be many taking part and the responsibility will be diluted among the mass of the common people.

"Th-th-this th-th-thing w-w-won't h-h-have an-n-ny eff-ff-ffect," maintained a jesuitical lawyer who was a stammerer from birth

and not from fear, "b-b-but if-f-f you, M-m-mondragón think it will, you c-c-can c-c-count on m-m-me . . ."

"This strike doesn't strike me as too good," another said. "It has too much smell of workers about it . . . How can we doctors declare ourselves on strike since the Hippocratic Oath prohibits us from denying our services to any patient who comes to us? . . . I'll have to talk to my colleagues . . ."

"As far as I'm concerned it's fine, I accept, Juan Pablo," he was answered by a businessman friend without much thought.

"No more Juan Pablo. Octavio or Tabío . . ."

"I accept the strike as long as all businesses shut down so that we won't have the sharper ones opening up their stores and shops while we, the patriots, get screwed because we're closed."

"I'll go along with the attempt at a strike . . ." another one said.

Then it was the purported ashman who jumped:

"No, no, you don't attempt a strike. A strike is declared and it's observed!"

"All right, let it be declared and we'll support it!"

"The only thing I don't like about your strike," he was told by a rancher with the mind of a child who was trying to be witty, "is that it has a military rank, it's a 'general' one, because we're so tired of gold braid. Except that if you can use one nail to draw another, if the strike is general, maybe it will get rid of the General."

And there were the ones who could not be broken down:

"It would be the beginning of anarchy in the country . . . Everybody will want to have a hand in it . . . They're all going to feel they have the right to command . . . This strike business is socialism . . . The situation in the country isn't ready for any banners . . . With a movement like that you know where it begins but not where it ends . . . Who'll take over the government? . . ."

And the wild-haired crowd, including Don Anselmo Santomé, who happened to be bald, unable to rumple any strands on his head because he had none, after his annoyance put his head under the guillotine:

"I accept, I accept, everything in the name of freedom . . . Let's mobilize the masses . . . a lot of us will fall under the great leveler called a general strike, but just so long as the *Beast* falls and we get our freedom back! Oh, but don't let anyone say tomorrow that Anselmo Santomé didn't see the social problems clearly, the conflict between capital and labor that's already arisen among us the same as it has everywhere in the world. Fine! Fine! . . ." Don Anselmo rubbed his hands. "Any sacrifice for freedom . . . I'll talk to my tailor, my shoemaker, the people in the garage where I get my car serviced, and they'd better watch out if any of them refuse to back the strike . . . and my barber . . . my barber, I was forgetting him and he's the best one, because like all barbers he's a regular parrot."

San mentally refuted that concept of members of his trade, recalling at the time his Costa Rican teacher from whom he took the name Mondragón, the one who had first taught him how to read and had put the first books into his hands.

"What about priests? . . ." Don Anselmo went on. "Can priests go on strike? Can they stop saying mass? Or, let them say it, they can say it, but with the church closed, just the sextons . . . What they can do is stop all baptisms, that's possible, not hear confessions, not marry anyone, not give the last rites, nothing, keep their arms folded . . . Oh, but it's a general strike, not a folded-arm strike . . . you see, Mondragón, I mean San, how Anselmo Santomé is up to date on everything that's going on in the world . . ."

He paused, rubbed his hands again, doing it with the delight of a person who sees things all settled, and he put his lips and Boulanger mustache to the ear of the ashman:

"Red camellias!"

They both fell silent. Santomé raised his hand to his chest and crushed his mourning necktie against his heart. Then he took out his handkerchief and silently blew his nose. A distant perfume, the color of his tobacco eyes.

"Red camellias!"

"How distant, how romantic that all was," the ashman said to

himself when he heard the password of the conspirators of two years ago, and which for him was projected sentimentally toward a moving train that halted at a flag-stop, a forgotten bouquet, a telegram, and years later the same bouquet, yes, because it was the same one, with different flowers, the bouquet that he was giving back to her, except with a different meaning, not foreseeing that it would all be discovered, that it had already been discovered, the conspiracy, and that those red flowers were more dangerous than dynamite.

The proletarian ash-ball grew like an aristocratic snowball. Soon the "ashman of freedom" no longer entered houses for the humble dust of calcinated firewood but to bring and receive news of the preparations for the strike. The spark was missing. Only the spark. The comical picture of that man dressed like an ashman: an old straw hat pulled down to his ears, the half-raised collar of his rough jacket torn at the elbows, the faded shirt which gave him the look of a trashman or as if he had picked it out of a fire, and his baggy pants which rained down over his legs and were patched at the knees. The rope over his shoulder, the double sack of jute on his arm, his hands gloved with ash dust, and the short steps of an Indian who has stopped trotting and still throws out words like stones when he asks at the doors of the houses, "Got 'ny ash?" to the person who opened the door, generally the maid, who would answer the way she felt, unsure, in an indecisive way, which would oblige him to insist, to knock at the door again and repeat the classic question: "Got 'ny ash?" and stay on the threshold until she came back with an affirmative answer or slammed the door in his face. If they let him into the entrance way, telling him grudgingly that there was, the second classic question of the ashman, "Any mutts?" because he had to look out for his safety, and so many times in those peaceful houses there were such wild beasts on the loose that it was best to be forewarned so he could start running before the dog caught him or some part of his torn clothing. The maid would clarify it with, "Yes, but he's tied up."

"Yes, but he's friendly." "Yes, but stay with me, because he won't do anything to you if I'm along." The protection of the maid was the best. Let her feel like a protectress as she led him through courtyards, porches, and passageways to the kitchen, where the tactic used with the cook was not to look at her too much so as not to give her the excuse to come out with a "What's that shitty Indian looking at me for, have I got clowns on my face?" and insult him. Not to look at her very much and to tell her with a humble tone, "The lady wants me to get the ashes out, and if'n you'll let me . . ." The cook would sometimes deign to answer, at other times she would turn her back as an answer and the ashman could take his meaning from that. One thing: the work had to be impeccable, like that of Cecilio Yancor, because with the slightest slip, with a stain of ashes on the floor, she would come out with: "These wild Indians get everything dirty . . . I'm going to get you a broom to sweep it up before you leave so you won't leave it looking like your face . . ."

Don Anselmo's only daughter, married now, lived elsewhere, but she maintained a strict vigilance over her widowed father and therefore she found out about the frequent meetings and conversations her father had with the ashman. It was necessary to explain to her that it was a question of a buried treasure and that that fellow, in addition to being an ashman, was a well-digger, a job in which while digging a hundred and eighty foot well he had discovered some buried pots full of gold coins.

"In any of our houses?" the daughter asked eagerly.

"No, child, in someone else's house. If it had been on our property there wouldn't be any problem."

"And how are you going to handle it?"

"That's the question . . ."

"Well, you have to do it in a way so you can keep everything for yourself . . ."

"A good share, at least, because you can't expect the person who mentioned it to me to be happy just with the pots so he can donate them to the Archeological Museum as Mayan finds . . ."

When his daughter left, Don Anselmo began to walk back and forth in his carpeted parlor after closing one of the six, seven, eight windows . . . what idiocy to have so many windows . . . His cigarette had gone out . . . That business of six, seven, eight windows had always made him indignant. But that was the way he had inherited the house from his parents, with the six, seven . . . because of a resistance to the family idiocy he had never counted how many windows he had. And they were never opened. He, at least, had never seen them all opened. They would open one, two, up to four when the viaticum went by. Who was going to move those frames as tall as two men, and the latches, and the locks, and the chains . . .

But if all that, casements and walls that were really bastions, had been built that way as a protection against Indian uprisings and pirates, what good were they today, what protection, what security, what help could they offer if the wind slipped in through their openings with that disintegrating fluid of socialism, communism, bolshevism? . . .

He tasted the cigarette and it was out. He went to get another one from the open cigarette case on a sideboard. The white marble and the mirror the size of the windows. Six sideboards, seven sideboards, eight sideboards. He had not counted them either. Not a cigarette. His daughter had taken them. The box had been full. But she had taken them. He shrugged his shoulders. Why did he want to understand any further since a person who is grown-up already had understanding, he said to himself, and he ran to her bedroom to steal one of her cigarettes from her box.

He had to smoke, to let out some smoke so he could get rid of his understanding. There are people who can only think when they smoke and he was one of them.

How did he visualize that thing called a general strike?

Walking about, with the lighted cigarette in his mouth, he stood by one of the six, six?, seven, seven?, eight mirrors, his back to one of the six, seven, eight windows, and he saw himself

as an adolescent dressed as a worker, his golden hair in a thousand directions, his face, his arms, and his French pants all dirty with soot, carrying a wooden sledge-hammer in his hand, reciting to entertain his parents, relatives, and friends "The Blacksmiths' Strike." And he looked at his father and mother, his uncles and aunts, and family friends as they applauded a striker. His godmother was weeping. From her eyelids fallen with the weight of her years and from the taps she gave herself along with the comments she used when she permitted herself to fix her eyes on one of the human beings pulsating around her, large teardrops fell, as large and shiny as the pearls that glistened on her ears, her breast, her fingers and forearms.

It was the first time he had heard the word "strike," something that with the passage of years, old now, he tried to picture as something more than a disintegration . . . as an integrating disintegration . . . But integrating what? . . . What was dissolving and what was taking shape? . . . But the action was twofold: undoing things, not doing anything, simply not doing, and then redoing what was badly done . . .

When he got back from the city, Tabío San would drop onto his bed with all of his weight and all of his fatigue after draining a few glasses of water, that horrible well water that also had the taste of ashes. Noontime. Everything seemed to be cooking in the slow fire of the ashpits. From out of his hair came the chattering of his thoughts. He needed a house where he could set up a small printing-press and he had knocked on all the doors in vain.

"With great pleasure," he was answered by a hunchback with the face of a watchdog and dressed in an impeccable London suit, "but only if we can put your name on it: Mondragón . . ."

"San, that's all . . ."

"To me, my friend, you're Mondragón, the survivor of the great conspiracy, not of little strikes, and I tell you we should go to a notary and put your name to any piece of property I own, the one that suits you best to install your press."

There was good reason for his name being Juan Canalloto, which sounds like the word for a swine. He knew that it was impossible and that was why he was offering it.

A house . . . Tabío San repeated to himself lying on the bed, a house . . . what was he saying, house, a roof and four walls where he could set up the small press . . . He had spoken to a trusted typesetter, Cigarrat was his nickname because he had the face of a rat and he liked cigars, always with a cigar bigger than himself in his mouth, and he would appear when least expected, as sticky as his everlasting brown jacket, frayed at the collar and cuffs, a half-sweaty green shirt, a black piece of ribbon as a tie, and it would be necessary to repeat to him that the press was there but that they needed a place to set it up.

Cigarrat, besides being an old typesetter, quick, tireless, with fingers like the beak of a rooster hungering to peck at the type in the box as if it were corn, knew how to run the press and was prepared to compose and print all by himself everything there was: flyers, newspapers, pamphlets, citations, if he did not manage to get the help of Mejuque Salinas, the ace of printers. But what they knew well was that they had to obtain not just any place but a safe place to install the press, especially if they got a fairly large press, because the police are quite familiar with the sound of the heavy ocean wave produced by that machine as it operates, and they would prick up their ears at once, knowing that gunpowder was being produced in the form of letters. The ideal thing would be to find one of those excavations on the outskirts of the city that had been used in olden days to hide the treasures of the Cathedral whenever there was danger of pirates on the coast and which later on, in our time, were used to lodge clandestine alcohol distilleries. And if there was no underground installation, Cigarrat would be satisfied with a pair of rooms and a small courtyard next door to a marimba group, which, in order to be up to date, would have to practice every day and at all hours with the new songs that were being added to its repertory. Four, six, eight madmen beating on keys of

different notes before putting the parts together into a musical piece, enough to madden a person, and once they were all in place, so much the better, because the echo of the press would be lost in the mingled sounds of the wooden marimba and the accompaniment of bass, cymbals, and drums . . .

He half lay down, asphyxiated by his thoughts and the dryness of air, which burned like the ashes at noontime. There was no news from Bananera, where the fight was continuing, or from Tiquisate, where it was about to begin. Several times he went over to examine the chamber-pot mailbox and except for its normal contents, no longer the languid piss of an old woman but his own urine, there was nothing. Juambo had to leave for Tiquisate as soon as possible. That was the play. To move the mulatto like a chessman carved of ebony and ivory because of his dark skin and his gray hair on the great checkered board of the Pacific plantations, where the Company would be checkmated by the strike.

That was the play, to move Juambo, but . . .

With his legs stretched out to the limits of the bed he began to dig a hole in the mattress with the movement of his back, as if he were retreating lying down, the deeper the better, until he was comfortable . . .

That was the play, but . . .

Between frowns the mulatto had conceived the idea of working as a "fruit hauler." He wanted to pay, he wanted to punish himself to the limit for the abandonment in which he had left his parents. His father had died hauling fruit. Dying like that, a man who had had his wherewithal, his land inherited from his parents and grandparents on the Atlantic coast . . . dying in a vomit of blood under the crushing weight of a bunch of bananas, drained like a useless beast, malarial, old, drained, never able to rise again, the immense, mute wound of his mouth rolling in his own blood. He had to pay, Juambo had to pay. He could not go down to the plantations to work at anything else except hauling fruit . . .

And he hit himself on the face with his open hands as if calling for the blows, the bedevilled anger of a mulatto, or with his fists clenched so as not to put his eyes out with the daggers of his fingers, daggers with nails that pulled hairs out by the roots, and he tried to tear his clothing and stamp on the tips of his toes with his heels, foot against foot like a fighting-cock at work, as remorse poured through his brain, remorse at having let his old man die without help, laid out in a vomit of blood. God is the witness as to why. Because of what they had invented: his father carrying him off to lose him in the woods so that a jaguar would eat him and his boss rescuing him from the claws of the beast. As a child they had told him everything in such detail, the jaguar, the woods, the night, the wind, the falling leaves that sounded like broken glass under the feline steps, the eyes of staring fire and the leap of a cataract of printed hide, and even as a grown man his only nightmare was a dream in which the claws of the beast were being withdrawn, although when he awoke the thing digging into his flesh was the badly adjusted spring of his carnivorous mattress.

A pious lie. Anastasia did not want her little brother to feel that he had been given away to Thompson and that was why she had invented it. "He'll hate papa and love boss," the mulatto woman would say, and that was how it was, except that on the rebound the old legend was about to come to an end with the plan to move Juambo to the South plantations, not so that he could haul fruit but as a contact man and spy if he could get into the manager's office or into any other office with some secondary duty: watchman, servant, janitor . . .

Tabío San sank his head into the pillow, soft before and now as hard as a pile of ashes, listening back through the distance to his voice and Juambo's during the attempts he made to convince him as the wagon rolled along . . .

"Sure, place for me, manager's office and in office of manager good worker, good watchman, good broom, all good, and easy for me to get in. Everybody know me. Trusted servant George

Maker Thompson since boy. Yes, yes, everything easy if other language don't grab me and I get to be fruit hauler." "What language is that, Juambo? . . ." "Other language . . ." "But a fruit hauler won't help the cause, Juambo, it won't be any help . . ." "Maybe will. First set things straight with father, but I mixed-up and everything mixed-up, cause, you people, everything . . ." "But, Juambo, your father will forgive you what you want to pay for by hauling fruit when he finds out that his son has put his back into the great strike . . ." "I find that out from mother on coast. Father dead, but mother alive. Find out without talking about big strike. Just find out from mother on coast. And to get into office, boy Bobby take me and tell everybody: 'This Juambo!' And everybody answer: 'This Juambo.' And I answer inside: '*Chos, chos, moyón, con,* foreign hands are beating us . . . ,' not the Juambo they think, the boss's Sambito, but the Juambo brought into the big strike! . . ." "Very good, very good, that's the Juambo we want, the one in the big strike, not the fruit hauler . . ." "As long as other language don't grab me, one I didn't talk to father, one I'll talk to mother, which is something like but only something like one I talk to you!" "But, Juambo! . . ." "If other language don't grab me, yes! . . ." "Juambo (Tabío San was getting exasperated to the point of having to hold back his hands so as not to shake him violently by the shoulders as he was urged to do, like a sack of lime dust, empty now, and he would have done so at the risk of losing everything if he had not kept in mind the pair of strong and gentle oxen), Juambo, there's no such language and because of foolishness like that you're going to ruin everything we can expect from your working in the manager's office, because who else could go in there without their getting suspicious? . . . You've got to do it for your dear father, for him . . ." "Father dead with eyes open! . . ." "For all the dead buried with their eyes open, Juambo! . . . For all of them, Juambo, all of them, as long as injustice rules the world, and that's why you have to help the big strike, so there can be justice and peace and they can close their eyes! . . ." "But

first I pay, get back father's love with my pain . . . the same pain father have until he die, pain of son until big strike . . ." "There won't be any big strike unless there's someone to help, not if everyone follows his own way, because the big strike is what comes when everybody's will comes together in one single will . . ." "Yes, there will be big strike, why say there won't be big strike. I work management after pay father hauling bunches of bananas. Heaps, piles, boss have dollars in pocket, in desk, in strongbox, and I keep tell myself: grab it, Sambito, what you need, and me, we don't need nothing, but father needs everything . . . Boss in house too have pantry full of food and drink, taste good, comfortable, and closet full men's clothes, bed clothes, shoes, socks, hats, and boss tell me all time: go ahead, Sambito, take, don't ask, what you need, and me, in boss's house don't need anything, have everything, while father starving, naked . . ." "And do you think, Juambo, that your father would ever have accepted dollars, clothes, and food from the bandit who took his land away from him? . . ." "Yes, yes, but if Juambo want really help him, be quiet, swallow where gifts come from . . ." "That would have been worse, you would have had more remorse now, that would have been deceiving him . . . and in addition, Juambo, you're old now and you won't be able to take it . . . hauling fruit is terrible . . ." "Father was old and took it . . . and it's at my age got to pay . . . you hear other language? . . . You hear language of things come together? . . . If was young would be easy and pay would be trap . . . old like I am things come out equal! . . ."

Tabío San barely had time to sit up and come out of his thoughts. He opened his eyes as if he had had a pot boiling in his head, a pot covered by the damp leaves of his eyelids. Someone was coming in. The street door opened and closed. He was reassured by the voice of Judasita and the sound of her shoes beating with a flat sound like that of the boards used to sift ashes. But how strange that she had her shoes on. She always went around in slippers except when she went downtown or took

flowers to her son's grave. And how strange that she hadn't said anything. As the steps grew closer, as they fell down from the small courtyard into the dining-room, he realized that another person was with her and that they were speaking in low voices, thinking that he was asleep.

And hearing the voice of wind, mountain, tree, of everything that came down along with it from Cerropóm to the ashpits, an image without an image of a world consumed by war. And jumping out of bed, moved by the flip of his heart as if by a spring. And hurling himself with the joy of an invalid who has suddenly recovered his movements—at the door of the bedroom he almost bowled over Judasita, who was coming to tell him that she was there, that she had gone to meet her so that she wouldn't get lost where the ashpits started. And blending with Malena in an embrace. And . . . and . . . and . . .

18

"Together! . . . Together! . . ."

It seemed impossible that they were together . . .

"Malen! . . ."

"Juan Pablo! . . ."

Their old names . . .

They had said good-by in the Living Cave two years earlier with a taste of nothingness on their lips, a taste of misfortune, downfall, defeat, uncertainty, he threatened with death and she crazed with sorrow, and now, after more than seven hundred days of struggle, they found in each other's arms and on each other's lips a taste of everything they had hoped for . . . That was why he squeezed her against his chest and kissed her without respite, not letting her catch her breath, because kissing her lips, sucking in her breath, her respiration, her life, was the same as devouring the possibility of the tomorrow of their dreams, and she responded with equal intensity to that endless, endless kiss, intoxicated with tears, intoxicated with great tears of joy.

"Juan Pablo! . . ."

"Malen! . . ."

"Two years! . . ."

"Two years? . . . More . . . thirteen years . . . a girl on a train . . . a flag-stop . . . a bouquet of camellias . . ."

"And a meddlesome and unpleasant passenger! . . ." she cut him off.

"Who stopped a river so that a mermaid could get off! . . ."

"A mermaid who didn't stay on the train and . . . did stay . . ." Malena laughed. "How? . . . I don't know . . . But I stayed with you without knowing it and without knowing you while I went to Cerropóm in a carriage driven by Cayetano Duende . . ." And after a pause and many kisses from Juan Pablo sprinkled over her face, her hair, her shoulders, she added, "I stayed with you for eleven years without knowing you, and you stayed with me for eleven years without knowing me until we came together unexpectedly in that visit you made to the school, do you remember? In the uniform of a highway officer . . . I had the clear impression that I was still on the train, that I was still . . . that we were still taking the same trip, on the same coach, except that in your presence I and everything else had changed, that reality had a reverse side that was a dream and that dreams had a reverse side that was reality . . ."

"Malen! . . ."

"Juan Pablo! . . ."

They stayed in the embrace as they thought . . . Cerropóm . . . Father Santos . . . the gatherings . . . Professor Bouquet . . . her diary . . . "Now I want you to leave . . ." the newspapers with the news about the plot that had been discovered . . . the name of Juan Pablo Mondragón among those most involved . . . the order to take him dead or alive . . . the patrols . . . the mounted police . . . the firing squads . . . the bouquet of camellias . . . the red camellias again, but now not only as the burning language of a love but as the password of freedom . . .

"You know . . ." she murmured, "that in spite of the blackness that surrounded me, sometimes the pain brought on by my fear

of what might happen to you was so great that I couldn't breathe, I would lose my breath, drowning on dry land, and I had to walk back and forth in order to get it back . . . Well, as I was telling you, dead, downcast as I was, I smiled and grew happy when I received a bouquet which for me was the same one that I had left on the train when we saw each other the first time and which you were giving back to me after all those years, fresh, fragrant, bright. The last thing in my mind was that those poor flowers that Father Santos took out of the school hidden in his cassock so that he could get rid of them marked the fateful hour of a new and more terrible separation for us . . ."

They wrapped their arms about each other, hurriedly, as if they were sheltering each other, until through their clothing they could feel the body of one blending with the other, getting under the skin like a tattoo made with some invisible substance.

"Except that it was no longer the farewell of a person who leaves a friendly stranger behind at a station where a flag indicated the probable existence of living creatures in the midst of plains which were like Purgatories of water, but under the earth, where the muteness of the silence is infinite and the shadows are blind from birth. Fate is a lot like a riddle. The coachman who took me away from you, the one who took me from the station where you left me to Cerropóm, also took me to where you were hiding in the Living Cave so that I could say good-by to you, God be with you, as the Christians in the catacombs used to say to each other . . ."

He held her against his side, feeling her, he feeling her and she feeling him. They had to be sure that it was really they. They had lived apart so many years that absence had habituated them to dreaming of each other and now it might be that it was not they, that they were dreaming . . .

"You haven't changed . . ." Malena ventured. "I was so afraid . . ."

"You were afraid you'd find me deformed . . ."

"I was afraid I'd find you changed . . . not changed like that,

but . . . changed . . . During one vacation I tried the deforming mushrooms and I got to be even more horrible than I am, I looked like a harpy . . . I wanted to be sure that you wouldn't stay that way."

"Finding me changed . . ." he insisted with his eyes fixed on Malena's dark pupils, "changed like . . ."

"Love letters without love!" she complained.

"Without words of love, which isn't the same thing . . ." he corrected, "because they weren't letters written just to you . . ." She made a violent effort to get out of his arms. "Malen, stop and think a little . . . they weren't just for you . . ." And she would have got out of his hands if Juan Pablo had not held her back and whispered in her ear. "They were for Rosa Gavidia too . . ."

That broke her resistance . . .

"And . . . Rosa Gavidia," he went on, "didn't have the same opinions you do. I can remember that she told me in one of her answers, 'Little by little your letters are making me become lucid, lovingly lucid about everything that is drawing me out of my emptiness, out of my daily death into the birth of this new era . . .'"

He rocked her as if they were dancing before he added:

"Or that other one in which you told me . . . Oh, but that's right, it wasn't you, it was Rosa Gavidia! '. . . love, which is nothing but an image of a world that doesn't exist, should be left behind . . . let's not run the risk of turning into figments of imagination and mirrors . . .'"

"Teaser! . . . Teaser! . . ."

"I'm not teasing or anything like it! Remember what I answered you. Do you remember? . . . 'Love, which is the image of a world that is ending, should be left behind us . . . let's not run the risk of turning into figments of injustice, decomposition, and bitterness.'"

"For my part, I don't know what you want to tell me. The best of your letters for me was the one where you explained

about the strike to me, in answer to one of mine where I asked you whether it was something like a new plot. I remember it. 'It has nothing to do with a plot, street fighting, or a military coup,' you told me. 'It's something else completely. A plot, street fighting, a coup made by military men, even if it's directed against the dictatorship, is like a part of it, in a certain way it falls within the sphere of the military and the police. Not a strike. A revolutionary strike like the one we're planning has nothing to do with cops and sword-swingers, who, no matter how much they look like rebels, underneath it all are still what they've always been, the clear representatives of oppression of the people. A strike is just the opposite. It's not a part of the state machinery and its breaks with the established order . . .' and you went on from there . . . the last paragraph . . . wait . . . let me take a minute to remember . . . just a minute ago . . . good heavens! . . . What did that last paragraph say? . . . Ah . . . here it is . . . in an ironic way you said, 'The strike is the answer of the anonymous stockholders, the workers are the real anonymous stockholders, to their colleagues,'" she emphasized with a broad smile, "'it is involved in social and political matters and has the characteristics of an atmospheric phenomenon . . .'"

"What a marvelous memory! . . ." Juan Pablo celebrated and was letting her go without letting her go, he was letting go of her waist, her arms until he was left with her small hands, which he raised to his lips to kiss with tiny touches on the tips of her fingers and with the fullness of his manly mouth on the palms of fleshy softness and the backs with small bird-wing bones.

"I used to have a good memory, but I lost it when I tried the deforming mushrooms. I got so frightful physically that I had to hide at Popoluca's and tell them in Cerropóm that I was on vacation in the capital. What do I mean, vacation . . . it was an inflation . . . from weeping I passed into a kind of melancholy madness, and all from the same mushrooms! . . . Cayetano brought me your letters, but they didn't make me happy, they interested me, that they did, they interested me, I already knew that they were letters without . . ."

"Words of love . . ." he hastened to finish the sentence.

"The only thing that made me happy was when the old man told me how you were, how you were living, about your plans, and, most important, if there were any suspicions about who you were, and . . . how foolish a person gets from . . ." she laughed, "mushrooms . . ." She was going to say "love," "and I made Duende tell me how many times you had asked about me and that wasn't because of the mushrooms . . ."

"Of course not! . . ."

"More than seventy times you didn't ask him! Exactly fifty-nine, the pathfinder had counted them, and that's why I told you that not even when I took the mushrooms could I make the thermometer of your interest for me go up! Only fifty-nine times! Asking about a person like me only fifty-nine times! Joking aside, 'Cayeta, did you tell him that I'd taken the deforming mushrooms?' I asked the old man once. 'Yes, ma'am, I told him,' the old man answered me. 'And what did he do when he found out?' I inquired anxiously. You were silent according to Cayetano. You were silent and only after a long time of not knowing what to say or do did you exclaim in a defeated way, 'What if I'd taken poison? . . . It was foolishness for them to have given her those mushrooms to try. She might stay deformed . . .' "

"Of course I got alarmed!" Juan Pablo interjected.

"What about you . . . did you stay deformed?" she raised her voice, all eyes as she looked at his face.

"I didn't know whether I was going to get back the face I had even when I took the mushrooms, and in any case, it was different with me, a man can be ugly, horrible, and, besides, I wasn't doing it for . . ."

"For . . . love . . . I know it!"

"I would have been all deformed, just the way I was, but you!"

"Neither deformed nor dead unless I could have the same thing, and that's why from then on I began pestering the old men, Duende and Popoluca, with the refrain: 'Swear to me, swear that if Juan Pablo asks you to get him some poison you'll tell me first and leave a little for me!' Night after night I couldn't

sleep thinking that you would poison yourself if you were discovered, and in that case, what else could I do, because if they found out who you were it would be the only way out, and I even thought about going to see you, but the old men dissuaded me, because that would have meant revealing your identity. That was when, as if you'd guessed the state I was in, you wrote that letter so full of hope for the future. Wallowing in the rotten slime of the swamps, sunk in salt water like one of the roots of that great human mangrove tree that's made up of the Banana Company workers, you felt happy because you'd touched bottom, and in that infinite web of human suffering on the banana plantation you'd found the deepest roots of the dictatorship. A dictatorship that for you was obviously inseparable from the Fruit Company, one part of each other's being. Overthrowing the military man of the moment and leaving the Fruit Company intact would be self-deception, and attacking the Company with the dictatorship still on top was impossible. They both had to be done away with at the same time . . .

" 'A man who writes like that,' I said to myself, 'would have suicide as the farthest thing from his mind.' I tidied up my ideas. Duende started to bring letters that weren't just for . . ." she hesitated intentionally, "Rosa Gavidia . . ."

"No, my love, for Malena Tabay too!"

"What do you mean, too?"

"Well, for Rosa Tobay . . . I mean Malena Tabay!"

"Don't say anything, love, because Rosa and Malena belong to you in one single person, and since the illusion is offered, you can give yourself the feeling that you have two loves. But let me go on with what I was saying. The resumption of classes came and those were tragic days for me: first, the news that the *Beast* planned to visit Cerropóm in his presidential excursion through the Republic, and then a brief piece of news that you had disappeared. Duende went back and forth from Cerropóm to Tiquisate, from Tiquisate to Cerropóm . . . I was suffocating . . . Imprisoned or dead . . . what a horrible synthesis . . . what a

horrible sense of feeling myself closed in and without any escape, between those two words, imprisoned or dead . . . imprisoned or dead . . . And I even came to see myself facing the *Beast* in his tiger uniform, long, thin, golden stripes on his coat, repeating to him, dying with fear, with a worm-eaten voice, imprisoned or dead . . . imprisoned or dead . . .

"But the newspapers said nothing, people said nothing, the radio said nothing about your having been captured or put to the law of 'shot while trying to escape,' and that lack of news, which depressed me at first, in the end became a kind of breathing spell for me, a breathing spell which allowed me to live, painting and rubbing out the best and the worst of suppositions . . ."

"Vigilance was tightened in Cerropóm," Juan Pablo said, "when they announced the possibility of a visit by the *Beast*, who doesn't go dressed as a tiger on those outings, the tiger uniform is for great ceremonies, but he dresses as a wolf, and it held up the arrival of the person who was going to bring you the news that I had managed to get on a fruit train for Bananera, from where I planned to go to the northern coast of Honduras. The plan at that moment was to disappear for a time, to work from there on a peasant uprising (I still hadn't thought of the strike), and then return when things were ripe . . ."

"And, we can mention his name, Florindo was to tell you about the state he found me in. His arrival with news about you was lucky, because if he hadn't come that morning I don't know what would have become of me. Real pain was added to that of a dream I'd had the night before, a horrible nightmare which I couldn't get rid of. My tears welled up and poured out of my eyes as if in the end my crying, because it was crying, was also running out of the eyes of everyone who suffers. Everything was so clear in my dream that I still shake. They'd captured us together in your underground den in the Living Cave. A military court, a court martial, had sentenced us to death, to be hanged in Cerropóm. They would hang us together, but I, already hung up, still had a chance to save you, to stop you from dying. A

whim of the *Beast*, who had arrived at the place of execution on a motorcycle and with a movie camera, ready to film what would also be a scene for the movies. 'How,' I said to myself meanwhile tied up hand and foot next to you, 'can I save him if they're going to hang me too? . . .' They set up the gallows so close to each other that our bodies would touch. Hands of shadows, maddened by the movement of strange lights, lifted you up, and they did not waste any time in putting the noose around your neck without tightening it, because one of the executioners was still holding you by the feet while the others threw me violently onto the ground, tied not my neck but my feet with the rope that was meant for me, and they raised me up head down with my arms free, at the level of your feet. The executioner who was holding me said to me, 'I'm going to release you and whether this man lives or dies is in your hands. If you can hold him by the feet he won't be hanged, if not, he'll be a corpse straight away! . . .' Before the slip knot could do you any harm I threw myself at your feet, trying to hold you up, and I succeeded at first by bending upward. But I began to lose my strength, the blood was pounding in my head, the rope tied to my feet was cutting into my ankles, my mouth became full of yellow vomit and I heard your death rattle . . . your feet were swinging in space, far from my hands . . ."

She took refuge on Juan Pablo's chest as if she were still pursued by the images of that nightmare, stopping herself from telling him that in the end, in the shudder, when she could no longer hold his feet, he had sprinkled her with semen during his death rattle.

"Together . . ." he whispered into her ear and she shuddered as if that word were also part of that living substance, that liquid with a sleeping glow, "together, not in death but in our struggle!"

Outside in the sandpits the sun, implacable light, roosters making the silence even deeper with their inopportune crowing, strayed dogs who had lost the smell of their masters in the ashes, and buzzards that vomited up the carrion that swelled their crops.

Later in the afternoon, as it grew dark, sticky shapes would begin to appear as they came back from the city with their congealed merchandise of white dust to pass their time at the doors of the nearby soap factories as they handed it in and received their pay, a set price by weight for what they carried in a bag crusty with white dust and with the numbers almost gone. They yawned, they scratched themselves, they tried to get the dryness out of their mouths by clearing their throats, nauseous at times from the stench of the boiling, steaming lye vats, others caught by the scorpions that clung to the kindling wood brought for the ovens, and others slipping until they fell on the shoe-polish husks of smelly coffee beans that were also being burned.

"Florindo," he said after kissing her softly, "didn't tell me anything about that dream . . ."

"What difference does it make. He probably didn't pay any attention to it. But his visit cured me of dreams and nightmares. With your going off to the northern coast of Honduras, the organization of the peasant movement needed my help and I put myself in the forefront with the old men, Cayetano Duende and Popoluca, to whom we owe everything, much more than to me."

"The organization was perfect . . ."

"Perfect, you're right. In one place on the coast, in Tiquisate, they received your pages of instructions, directives, and other things, and from there, along the trail that the lava serpent had opened under the hills, Cayetano Duende brought them to Popoluca's. I have to tell you about it. As soon as a note arrived Popoluca would put it into a small metal box and without waiting a minute would start the clay sculpture of some idol, a priest or a warrior, seeing to it that the box was inside. In that way the police would have gone out of their minds before they came across your messages. When I got there to pick up the message, he would take apart the head that he had kept all ready under damp rags."

"And the instructions kept coming . . ."

"Yes, yes, from a place on the coast, along the underground

trail, and from the head of an idol into my hands, and from my hands to other centers in the network. Some people didn't want to go along with the changes made at the last minute. They were more in favor of the organization of a peasant movement than a general strike."

A laugh and the voice of Judasita from the kitchen:

"Don't be scared. I dropped the grinder I was using for the beans . . ."

"Rosa Malena . . . that's what I called you in my dreams."

"And I called you Juan Pablo. I can't get used to Tabío San . . ."

"You're still a romantic . . ."

"I'm still a romantic. But it's not that. I have to consult with you about some questions that are pending."

"First we have to talk about us . . ."

"Us?"

"Yes, us," Juan Pablo affirmed with the voice of a person challenging the infinite from his heart.

"There's a very urgent communication," she chattered on, "about the investigation being made through certain friendly people about the question raised by the railroad workers, the position of the forces garrisoned in the American bases ceded by our country as an allied nation in the face of a revolutionary general strike."

"We'll deal with that later . . ."

"And there are requests for funds, and they want literature, and in Tiquisate they say they're setting up a small work-stoppage by the fruit haulers to test the situation."

"Later . . ."

"They want to know in Tiquisate about the arrival of the person with easy access to the agent's office . . ."

"Later . . ." he repeated, almost without moving his ascetic lips.

"And speaking about *us*," she emphasized, "are we going to postpone things . . . ?"

"Don't get upset. Just for a while, even with so many things burning in our hands and waiting for a solution. But we're

anxious too . . . just as anxious as they are, and we've got to know, I've got to know, without putting the fight aside, what's going to become of us . . ."

"Us? . . ." her voice fluctuated, tinged with wonder.

"We fight every day for them, we're on the same battle line as those men and women of the masses, and we're fighting for something more than this strike, to save life, life is what is in danger in our country, and this will, Malen, this drive has got to have some end," and with a voice from so deep inside that he could scarcely be heard, "Will you be my comrade? . . ."

"After we win."

"Why put it off when we can go to some Indian village and get married in a civil ceremony?"

"Let's wait for the victory, Juan Pablo . . ." She felt her blood run cold at his expression. "What's the matter, don't you think we'll win? . . ."

"No, no . . . of course we will . . . but, love, I can't gamble what I feel for you for anything that isn't you!"

She became excited:

"What about the others? . . . Don't the others gamble everything, everything . . . their jobs, their work, their employment, food for their children, their well-being, their skins? . . ."

"Yes, yes . . . we all gamble everything, but I don't want to gamble you for victory or defeat!"

"Juan Pablo, maybe I don't know how to explain it . . . listen . . . maybe I don't know how to explain it or you gave it the wrong interpretation! There's nothing being gambled! Don't cloud the issues! Everything that gets into your hands you drain dry, and the sea in your hands would just be a sip of water! . . ."

And Malena went on more calmly while he retreated to one of the chairs.

"There's nothing being gambled! If I said we should put off our own affairs for the day of victory it was because I was sure of it; but in defeat, in flight, in jail, in exile, it'll be the same

and we'll talk about what's ours, about what doesn't need any more words to be ours, ours . . . that's all . . . ours . . ."

"There aren't many things pending . . ." he said after a pause.

"The most urgent matter is to consult with the railroad workers. They're asking about the likely position of the American troops garrisoned in the country when the general strike is declared, and in that respect there's already a report on the soundings that have been made through certain people. They don't go too far, but there's a definite hope that they may stay outside the problem, even if it's a question of the interests of the Fruit Company, because it would be contradictory that while their best men are dying on the battlefronts of Europe, Asia, and Africa for freedom and democracy, in America they should be providing the open aid of their arms to a government that's the opposite of everything they're fighting for."

"That's what we have to tell the railroad workers. I was always opposed to those contacts, because nothing clear ever comes out, and there's the risk of showing who's in favor of the cause being defended. But after all, the railroad workers want everything they can get right in the palm of their hands."

"And urgent too," Malena interrupted, "is the question of the person who will have easy access to the offices of the manager of the Pacific Division."

"Just say he'll be there soon, and we have to give separate instructions to Florindo to see that he doesn't hire on as a fruit hauler. He's a thick-headed mulatto named Juambo."

"And there are also several meetings about the division of the Republic into zones where our people have to offer bread, zones where they have to talk about freedom, and that zone where they don't have to offer anything . . ."

"The Indians, who have to get their land back, but that's a different problem. Right now it's a question of mobilizing people for the strike, and some will join up for bread and others for freedom . . ."

"What a day," Judasita said as she came in. "Will anyone ever

eat in this rat's nest? Isn't that right, miss, that this isn't a house but a rat's nest in the middle of an ashtray? . . ." and still talking to Malena, "You won't turn down a mouthful of something, coffee with bread and some beans I've just cooked. You can have it as a snack, what do you think? . . ."

"We have to invite the lady to lunch every day, because when I'm alone all I get are cold beans and ashes . . ."

"You let them grow cold on the table, so how can they be hot, and as for the ashes, well, that's how it goes, because sometimes the beans turn out so bad. But I was lucky to get some good ones this time. Black, and with lots of flavor. The way I like them. I'll leave you alone and don't come out with that business about two people in love getting along on food enough for one. Make him eat, miss, because this man has got so that nothing tempts him and he runs away from food."

When Judasita left there was a brief struggle between them. Who would serve whom? She had to give in, because in that house, even though it was not a palace, there was only one visitor, and it was up to him to do the honors.

Judasita came back dressed, wearing the shoes that she put on to go into the city and a cloak of black silk that she wore crossed about her neck ever since the death of her son, ready to accompany the young lady so that she wouldn't get lost in the ashpits. She went through the dining-room and over to the street door to peek and make sure that no one was coming while they said good-by, but she had more eyes for the small courtyard than for the street. She kept coming back to look, not out of the corner of her eyes, in order to share in the long and silent kiss they were exchanging—seeing a kiss makes a person kiss a little, and that was why she used to like to take a peek when her son was alive—but now it seemed to her that if she turned her head suddenly she would again see the dog, who had recently died of old age.

"Tabío San! . . ." Malena paused, ready to leave. When she was ready to leave the dining-room he was Tabío San again.

"Rosa Gavidia! . . ." he replied as she was already on her way across the small courtyard, devouring her with his eyes.

"We'll meet later! . . ." she managed to say.

He went out to close the door, but he almost left it open in case the one he was losing like a dream, dressed as a bride, dressed in white, dressed in ashes, might return.

19

"Toba went far away, mother, but Juambo came back. Juambo in trade for Toba. Not Anastasia. Anastasia didn't come."

"And what's Anastasia doing?"

"Begging back there where there are houses and houses and houses . . ."

"Back there where there are houses and houses and houses and that's where you came from, son . . ."

"From back there, mother, Juambo came from back there. Toba far away, men took her . . ."

"Toba far away, I know. Never see her again, my pearl, her, Toba, my daughter. Father buried here."

"Father buried here, mother alive, son come back for both of them, buried one and live one."

The mulatto made an effort to put words together the way his mother did. Speaking like that seemed to him a way of joining in more intimately with the old shell of a being in whom he had been created and with the one whom, because of the boss and his invention of the jaguar story, he had kept out of his memory for so many, so very many years.

"Bad boss finally let you come . . ."

"Boss far away, same place Toba, caretaker gave me permission. I dream mother very sick . . ." And after a short silence in which the century-old mulatto woman could hear herself slowly living, living on crumbs of air, for she no longer breathed well, on crumbs of light, for she could barely see, and on crumbs of sound, for her ears had hardened somewhat, Juambo explained quickly: "Sambito not go back to boss's! Sambito work for him all his life and Sambito poor, poor, while boss get everything from Sambito and nothing from Sambito, because have everything and nothing belong to him!"

"Evil man that one, take our land there, there on other coast, where son born, and Tacha . . ."

"And then say father and mother leave Sambito in woods for jaguar to eat . . . Over twenty years, over twenty-five, over thirty-one years Sambito not want see father and mother . . . But Sambito get revenge, pay back same way, poor Bobby boy, Bobby boy tall, tall, fire-hair, get very sad . . . He listen, I speak, and his hair sad . . . Grandfather kill your father, Bobby boy! . . . Hair sad and mouth quiet, open when hear second time: 'Grandfather kill your father, Bobby boy, at Vuelta del Mico, I was there, Bobby boy, more speed, more speed for car and it flip over into ravine, father on bottom with head split open, your father, Bobby boy . . .' "

"Your father buried here . . ."

"But mother alive . . ." Juambo interrupted her with a happy voice.

"Now I can die," the old mulatto woman went on, "after Sambito come back, die and tell father Juambo back with him, back with him," she sobbed silently, "back with us, we Sambito's parents . . . And father be thankful, be thankful under ground! Father, Sambito, going cry, going cry under ground, happy, pleased, lots happy and lots pleased!"

Juambo held her cold hands, with their long fingers and nails like the seeds of an old fruit.

"Father called Agapito Luisa by name, and have curly hair, black sea foam like Sambito . . . Toba good daughter, Anastasia bad daughter, daughter from there where things bad for us, the bad coast . . . Agapito always say: there's worse things, but bad daughter is the worst of the worst . . . Anastasia not bring grandson to me, I die and not see grandson . . ."

Juambo left his suitcase at his mother's house and went back to the town. His ears were buzzing. The buzzing of the coast when one came down from the highlands. Over and over his finger in his ears, twisting, as if trying to extract that small piece of a watch that was buzzing there inside of him. The town was the same or worse. Villages on the coast, far from getting better, get worse. Unpaved streets, nettle hedges, not just the fire of the sun but the fire of nettles, and scattered houses, Don Higinio Piedrasanta's store and bar, the Equinoxes barbershop, and the partly built church where every morning God was uncased with his beard of cotton and his robe of white linen so as to bring peace to six or seven people gathered there, under the rule of Don Pascualito Díaz, a mayor of such fame that he was all name, and so progressive that when the English garden in the main square across from the town hall was finished, he spoke of building a slaughterhouse for larger kinds of livestock.

Juambo found signs on the few walls of the village, signs that said: "A slaughterhouse will mean a slaughter!" which the mayor interpreted as meaning that if he built the slaughterhouse and made the slaughterers kill their animals there, they would butcher him.

Don Pascualito, an apt diminutive for a man of small stature, knew that the author of those insults was none other than Piedrasanta, his free enemy, because there are enemies that cost something, people for whom a favor was done or to whom money was loaned. And that was why. Piedra, as they called Don Higinio, not thinking of an altar stone or a precious stone, but of a grinding stone or any of the stones used beside a fire, Piedra was hired by Don Pascualito to work on the town accounts and he was well

paid, but one day he said that he was quitting and he quit. How could he go on like that? Piedrasanta explained to his drinking and card-playing friends soon after the incident, "Because every day at the same time, on the same shoulder, Don Pascualito would touch me as he came into the office and tell me with the fine smile of a man who has slept well and intends to keep on sleeping in the office: 'Debits . . . Credits . . . but there's nothing there . . .' and he would point out to me, after I'd been ruining my kidneys working there, where the Debit and Credit columns were."

The schoolteacher, Professor Juventino Rodríguez, would point out with his nasal voice, pasty and sticky from having drunk so much over Toba, drinking and drinking since she went away, would point out the advantages of a slaughterhouse for larger animals, listing them: control over the cattle being killed, because a lot of tubercular animals were being butchered, and fiscal control for the payment of taxes, in addition to the cleanliness of those who handled the meat and the easy access of the product for the retail butchers . . .

The village gleamed with jocote plums. Hundreds, thousands of jocotes on the branches, and everybody ate them and they all spat the seeds out onto the ground, and the seeds, golden and moist, would dry and dry until they were reduced to dust. Such sadness to see the bones of what once had been sweetness. Just like all fruits. Pitch mangoes, monkey mangoes. But there were seeds that did not go through such anguish. Those of the soursop, black and shiny, hard and sharp, which sank into the earth like beads lost from a rosary, not to mention those of the paterna plant, more green than black, which also resist time and weather, and those of very hard dark red metal, the seeds of the guapinol . . .

Where was Juambo going?

Where was he going? He had to head for Semírames according to instructions. In case they asked him what he was doing around there he was to answer that he was going to see young Bobby, who was spending some time with the Luceros.

He could make out the sumptuous residence of the millionaire Luceros. If Adelaido, the grandfather, were alive and saw that palace he would have died again from amazement. Where, with his own hands, brick upon brick, on Sundays and holidays, he had built his little house of love, his sons had raised a palace, where he had painted the walls pink and yellow, the colors that Roselia was wearing when he met her, a pink blouse, a yellow skirt, or just the opposite, who knows, that was all forgotten now, his sons brought fine wood and all the comforts of the United States, including everything that the highest officials of the company had in their houses and what they didn't have: flowers, fountains, and cascades that spread the sound of the water as it sprinkled into vases, shells, and basins of Talavera mosaics with colors submerged in the solitude of water that sings, that dreams, that is water, because water that does not dream or sing is not water, it is only a liquid that has many uses in the life of man.

"Poor Bobby boy, tall, tall, fire-hair sad on his head, thinking in head, grandfather kill . . . not be true that grandfather kill . . . but not be true either that mother and father abandon Juambo for jaguar to eat!"

Juambo continued repeating the phrase in his mind as if he were speaking to his aged mother as he drew closer to Semírames along a long drive with flowering trees.

"Sambito mean, but boss mean too!"

He couldn't go any farther. A dog the color of clear cinnamon, with snow-white feet and a black snout that ended in a point came over to him merrily, looking for his hands to lick with small kisses, getting tangled up in his legs, playing, reciting something like verses of sudden friendship with his sonorous, rhymed, inviting barks.

He took him by the pant leg, softly, almost without biting the cloth, and turned him back toward the village.

"From living with Juper so much I must smell like a pooch . . ." he said to himself and the memory of his Juper made the celebration of that handsome, friendly animal sad for him. It was a well-trained animal because when he sensed he was being

obeyed, seeing that Juambo was retracing his steps, he let go of the pant leg and ran a few steps ahead as if leading him.

His Juper . . . He called him Juper from "Juuuup . . . it . . . eeeer."

He missed him very much. He left him in the care of the cook. She took him to market on the morning that he left for the railroad station. He didn't want the dog to hear him leave, for he knew that he was going away forever . . . As far as the caretaker and the cook knew, he would be back when his dear mother had got better or had died. Juper would have smelled the truth, he would have known that he was going away for good from that house where he had spent his whole life.

"You dog!" the boss would shout at him, and from playing the dog so much he might just have had the smell of Juper about him, and that of this other one who was leading him along now, leading him along an unknown trail.

They left the village behind, disappearing into gulches that were buried in a tangle of vines, almost unable to breathe, under the shade of guava trees that had the look of the final discharge of a lightning bolt, flickering, reddish, paralyzed and naked, with their twisted branches and jagged leaves, far from their stalks and harder than cartilage.

Juambo's eyes went to the guavas, but a person loses his agility in old age and it was dangerous, he might slip and fall down into a gulley. He spat, his mouth watering, and he went on after the dog, who was up ahead in the midst of a dry flat stretch where there were animal bones, rib cages and horned skulls, chasing the buzzards and red-necked vultures, making them leap away or take to flight.

Far from town, far from the banana groves, near the Pacific Ocean, visible below, far removed from all and everything except for the sun and the mass of the wind that beat them with wave after wave.

He mopped up his sweat with a handkerchief that was already

soaked, his forehead, the back of his neck, his head, his cheeks, his mouth, his nose, his neck.

A broad stretch of sand was seen up on top of the escarpment that they would never reach. Noontime. The temperature was asphyxiating. Juambo stopped. He could not go on. The collar on his shirt was strangling him, the damp openings of his sleeves were sticking and unsticking to his shoulders, arms, armpits.

"This mutt has screwed me up and I was dumb enough to follow him! But why should I blame the mutt because the whole thing goes so much deeper. The one who screwed me up was Anastasia. Anastasia who got me out of my house, yes, because even though it belongs to the boss it's my house, where I lived, and she made me see that man with the smooth talk, although the blame, the real blame has to be put on *chos, chos, moyón, con* . . . Mother bad beaten, father wounded when he got us out of there . . . Atlantic . . . Bananera . . . The bitter coast . . ."

They started to run at full speed through the sand and at the opposite end they stopped as he came upon someone. And that was how it was. Coming to meet him was a man with a strong build, shirtless, only pants and sandals, his head under a broad-brimmed straw hat, red complexion and abundant teeth, so white that he seemed to have several rows of teeth that bit into his own laughter.

When they came together the stranger asked him:

"Are you going to San Benito, sir?"

"No, I'm going to Sanjón Grande . . ."

"Then you should cross yourself . . ."

They embraced each other. The man embraced him, that is. Sambito was a stranger to great shows of emotion. His arms were stiff, expressionless. It was not his fault, for he had never been embraced.

And since all the requirements of the meeting had been met, that of coming upon a ruddy man who laughed constantly, and the business about San Benito and Sanjón Grande, he went right to the point.

"I was told to give you this . . ." Juambo took a letter out of his shirt pocket, which he had fastened with three safety pins.

The other man took the envelope, opened it, and took out a sheet with writing on both sides . . .

"Excuse me . . ." he said, and, more than reading it, he drank it as it went in through his eyes and came out through his shiny teeth in the form of a great smile of satisfaction.

"My name is Florindo Key, and there's a coincidence that prevents me from ever getting lost, my friend, because right next to my flappy ear," and he lifted the lobe of his left ear with his thumb and index finger, "I have a mole in the shape of a key."

"Pleased to meet you, my name is Juambo el Sambito, my family name is Luisa, but I never used it because I hated my father."

"Did Sansur tell you whether or not he was coming here?"

"No, he didn't . . . He didn't even tell me that he was thinking of coming . . ."

"Maybe he's going down to the other coast . . ."

"He didn't tell me that either . . ."

"Where are you living?"

"At my mother's house, she's a very old lady. What Don Octavio told me to do was to stay on the coast and work."

"And are you going to stay?"

"If I can be of some use."

"Our plan of attack would be slowed down a lot without you," Key came closer to say, his hand on Juambo's shoulder, face to face, "because we need information, we need access to the company offices, and that's only possible through you."

"I've got the advantage of being the oldest servant of the President of the Company."

"Yes, they'd never suspect you. Thompson left you living in his house and if you're here now it's to be with the one who gave you life in her last years, and it's logical that you should be brought in to do something in the offices, even if it's just to guard them."

"But first I want to do some hard work . . ."

"I don't understand . . ."

"The hardest kind of work would seem easy to me . . ."

"That's impossible. Do you know that there are jobs here that can kill a person in half a day, in an hour?"

"I don't want to kill myself, but I need a job that will be like punishment for me, and I've been thinking of signing on as a fruit hauler."

"What if they recognize you?"

"So much the better. What better example of what happens to a worker who spent all of his life in the service of the multimillionaire President of the Company and then leaves his house with one hand in front and the other behind?"

"Working as a hauler, no, it can't be done, you won't be able to take it, and you don't belong to yourself, you're one of us . . ."

"After my punishment, not until then . . ."

The dog remained motionless or would turn around and around trying to catch his tail. Not a sliver of a breeze all across the vastness of the sand.

"After my penance I'll go see young Bobby at Semírames, and he'll open the doors of the offices for me."

Key offered him a cigarette. Juambo thanked him. He didn't smoke. He didn't even have any vices so that he wouldn't bother his boss with smoke and ashes. And his copper-colored skull was all that he had left. It couldn't be seen, but he felt it under his skin and because he cautiously ran his fingers over his poor features, submitting them to a very great sorrow.

"If that's the way it is, we'll have to change our plans," Key muttered in a bad humor, and he almost left without shaking hands. "We were counting on your getting into the Manager's office. In any case, we'll get together soon."

Followed by the dog, he disappeared. Long strings of black birds crossed the horizon. Sambito went back, following the tracks his shoes had left in the sand, although he strayed a little as he walked toward a tree with pink flowers that he saw nearby. Nothing trickier than a person's sight. It was hard work for him

to reach the shade of the beautiful matilisguate tree. Horseflies, butterflies, spiders, ants. He took his shoes off to shake out the sand.

Working as a hauler, yes, adding his pain to that of all the others so that the day would not be far off, the day that those buried are waiting for in order to close their eyes . . . his father's eyes, open under the earth, waiting for that day so he can go to sleep and rest . . .

Oh, on that day of victory over the banana company a rumble will be heard under the earth as eyelids fall over the naked and staring eyes of the interred who are waiting!

Oh, on that day! . . .

The empty town. Streets. Clusters of coconut palms. Someone on horseback driving animals loaded with nets of alligator pears and mangoes. The houses half-open, and, inside, in the rooms in darkness, the sound of hammocks. A gourdful of water, thrown by a woman with her naked breasts showing, evaporated in the air without reaching the ground. The woman had a towel wrapped around her head. Drops ran down her slim nose. Her lashes and eyelids were also pearl-dropped. She pushed back a lock of hair with the back of her hand and said, talking to herself as she touched her forehead: "It's horrible, the water isn't even dry and now even that's sweat! . . ."

When she heard someone coming she grabbed a shawl and covered her breasts.

"What can I do for you, mister?" she asked a little startled, but when she recognized the mulatto she changed her tone. "How long have you been here? We didn't think we were ever going to have you back with us, it's good to see you . . . If you wait a minute I'll take you around to say hello . . . I won't invite you in because the place is a mess . . . With this heat a person doesn't feel like doing anything . . ."

Juambo reviewed all the names possible and couldn't remember who that woman was. He had seen her somewhere.

"I guess you don't remember me . . . I recognized your face . . . I'm Victoreana, do you remember? . . .

Sambito made a vague gesture. The name meant nothing to him. Victoreana . . . Victoreana . . .

"I was the one who tempted your boss and the lawyers, those white twins, on the day they came tc distribute the inheritance. And what are you doing now? Don't tell me that there's another inheritance. That only happens once in a lifetime."

"I'm just taking a walk . . ."

"It's too early, good Lord! Night is when people take walks in the streets of this town . . . It used to be, because there isn't any walking anymore, people hole up when it gets dark and nobody can get them out of their houses. That's why I say that there won't be any celebration this year. There's been a lot of trouble in the North and it bounces off onto this coast. From what people hear there'll be trouble here too, because the strike is going to be general . . ."

"I had you mixed up with Sara Jobalda . . ."

"Lizard! . . . That witch died of cancer of the insides from trying to have children. Even though she didn't have any, her womb got to be like a great big abscess. She died and, good heart that I am, I took charge of her hard-nosed rummy. I inherited trouble from her. With poor people, Don . . . what's your name? . . . the commonest inheritance is trouble . . ."

"They call me Juambo, my name is Juambo el Sambito . . ."

"I inherited trouble, like I was telling you, Señor Juambo, and with such bad luck that he's the worst kind of trouble there is. When he's in his right mind he calls himself Macario Rascón, and when he's drunk he says his name's Braulio. I inherited that man from Sara Jobalda and that's why maybe I look something like her. Taking her place . . . even married to my inheritance, if you please . . . She wasn't married. The man roosted there with her, with her, with her . . . after all, why pass bad judgments when she's already been judged by God . . . do you smoke? . . ."

"No, I don't smoke . . ."

"With your permission I'm going to light up this stogie, I like my tobacco straight. On the coast we all of us smoke. You have to chase away the mosquitoes and the feeling of nothing-to-do."

She savored the smoke holding the cigar out of her mouth and then she let it out of her nose, like a double-barreled shotgun after being fired. Then she said softly, lowering her eyes between sleepy eyelids with a sweet look:

"I married him outright, in the Holy Mother Evangelical Church, hoping that after we stopped just living together God would work me the miracle of making him give up the bottle, but I didn't get it. It's his second nature. He's trouble . . . trouble . . . trouble . . . trouble . . ."

"And look who's calling me that, haw, haw, haw." An alcoholic voice could be heard from inside the house. "Haw . . . haw . . . whore . . . whore . . ."

"Now he's insulting me . . . He only wakes up so he can insult me . . ."

"Who's there?" he shouted. "Who are you telling lies about me to? Even the evangelists want to take me on, there've been so many lies about me."

"Hold your tongue, what the evangelicals wants to do is cure you!"

"Drivel! They already got me married . . . the biggest fuck-up there is, and now they're going around looking for help with that stack of Bibles they lug around."

"Quiet, you heathen! Try to be proper with your voice at least!"

"Who's there? You haven't told me. Ask him if he wants to come in and have a drink . . ."

"No, the gentleman doesn't drink . . ."

"Then tell him to be on his way and have a drink of water at the public trough with the animals . . ."

"Don't pay any attention to him, because drinkers not only drink bad liquor, they drink bad manners too."

"Shit on you! . . ." He appeared at the door with a striped shirt that he was trying to pull down with his trembling hand that had long nails and fingers that looked diarrhetic from nico-

tine. He was trying to pull it down between his legs to cover his sex, but he didn't always succeed.

"Get back inside, damn it. What a man. That's no way to receive visitors!"

"You call this a visit?"

"Don't insult people just because you feel like it! . . . What if the gentleman was from the authorities and had you arrested?"

"But since he's not, right?"

"The gentleman was passing by and he stopped in to say hello. I met him when they divided up the inheritance, he came . . ."

"I came with the boss . . ."

"And who's your boss? . . ." the drunkard came closer to ask, forgetting about his parts and throwing himself on top of him, not only himself but his pestilence of skin toasted in slow corn liquor, his face harnessed with wandering smiles, and his parchmentlike neck with its great idle apple, which he swallowed and didn't swallow as he hiccuped in the midst of an ant hill of several days' growth of beard.

"You know what the Bible teaches . . . but you people don't know anything . . . You're ignoramuses, but I'm going to explain it to you . . . Teaching people who don't know . . ."

"That's from the catechism, not the Bible . . ." Victoreana cut him off.

"Hush up! . . . Listen to what the Bible teaches about the Adam's apple: God said to man: 'Swallow it or spit it out! . . .' And man answered back: 'No siree bob, Lord, I won't swallow it and I won't spit it out! . . .' And the apple was left there where we have it, between heaven and earth, like a reminder of the free will that the Creator gave to man, not to woman, woman swallowed hers, she doesn't have any apple . . ."

Victoreana pushed him inside, afraid that people would pass, some friend or neighbor, and she had had quite a start a moment before: she heard someone coming, but it was a pig, a sow with her shoats. The mayor prohibited hogs on the loose, but that neighborhood was out of God's hands . . .

And thinking about all of that, she gave Rascón a great shove

and sent him back to the hammock from which he had got up with great difficulty.

"Another time, Señor Juambo. You know that we're at your orders here for anything you need."

When he heard the name Juambo, Rascón reacted, got up from the webbing of sleepwalking threads, as a hammock was once called in a song, and if his hefty wife had not held him up he would have fallen.

"If you want to talk to the gentleman, invite him in . . . Come in, my husband wants to tell you something. Please excuse the mess the place is in . . ."

"Juambo! . . ." Rascón shouted at him, effusive, clasping him in an embrace in which the mulatto felt the chill of death against his warm flesh of a living man. "Juambo, Juambo, Toba's brother!"

"Ah, did you know that one? . . . You must be a lot older, because she was still a toddler . . ."

"The trouble with you people when you get married in the Church," Rascón said, "is that all other women become 'that one' for you! . . . And Toba isn't any 'that one' or anything like it. She belongs to God . . . She's in a convent!"

Juambo, who at first tried to avoid the frigid contact with Rascón, frozen by the poison in the midst of the infernal heat of the coast, squeezed him to his chest, face to face, to demand anxiously other details of what he had just heard, to have him repeat it close to his ear (Toba belongs to God . . . she's in a convent . . .) and to tell him how he came to know.

"Toba left her boy friend here, Juventino Rodríguez, a schoolteacher and inhabitant of the planet Earth . . ." he was falling asleep in the air, in Juambo's arms.

"And did her boy friend get the news?" the mulatto shook him to wake him from his stupor, one of those nebulae that from time to time envelop people who have been drinking and take them away from the world, from the devil, and from Carmen, as Rascón would say, to the great displeasure of his wife, who was jealous of that good-for-nothing.

"I had news . . . Or he had news . . . A letter I read . . ."

"Toba . . ." Juambo said slowly.

"That name was never pronounced among men unless it was followed by a drink. Where's my bottle? Where'd you put my bottle? . . ."

"You already look like a Corpus Christi spider, the kind they make out of springs that quiver and quake at the least motion . . . Go ahead . . . drink it all . . ."

Rascón lifted the bottle by the neck and put it to his lips. In the midst of the *gutucluc, gutucluc* of the liquor as it went down his throat, the sobs of Victoreana and the expectant silence of the mulatto while no one spoke, while an Angel passed.

Toba . . .

The Angel that passed was Toba . . .

"I'm going to find Juventino . . . I've got to read that letter . . . Mother knows nothing . . ."

And he left. But where was he going? . . .

"I've come back to bother you, excuse me, but I don't know where Juventino lives . . ."

"Don't ask me where that devil lives, he's the one who got my husband in this state . . ."

"Hush up again . . . Give me another drink and I'll tell you where he lives . . ."

"All right, here's the drink . . ."

He tipped up the bottle, sweating. Victoreana snatched it away from his lips so that he wouldn't finish it.

"He lives just behind the school, across from a railroad siding, on the right-hand side . . ."

"You sure can remember where that fellow lives, but as far as work is concerned . . ."

"I'll start tomorrow . . ."

"I'll fix up my house tomorrow, the buzzard says . . ."

"Speak of the devil and he appears . . ." Rascón was going to say, but he couldn't, a burst of breath from intestines and cane liquor was turned loose through his mouth and nose.

"I thought you meant the devil when you said buzzard, but you meant this wandering beast . . ."

"Toba . . . Toba . . ." Rodríguez said as he appeared.

"There he is," Victoreana indicated to Sambito, fixing her wrathful eyes on Juventino, who, without crossing the threshold, was repeating, "Toba . . . Toba . . . Toba . . ."

Changing her tone, her energy spent, Victoreana murmured, her face rock-strewn with tears:

"I'm going to bury myself as a nun too. If I'd only known what was waiting for me . . ."

"Toba . . . Toba . . ." Juventino repeated, moving his hands about himself as if he were searching for her and the liquor had made him blind.

"Take him away, Señor Juambo, take him away, for the love of God, because just seeing him makes my body get stiff and I might hit him!"

Rascón, covered with drivel and vomit, kicking his legs, huffed and puffed through the cords of the hammock where he had collapsed face down . . . "Oh, oh, oh . . ." he complained, with tears running down his ruddy cheeks . . . "Oh, oh, oh . . . God so big and me so small . . ."

Juambo took Juventino by the arm the way one leads a blind person, a blind man with open eyes, who said nothing except:

"Toba . . . Toba . . . Toba . . ."

He took him to his house, where he searched around after putting him to bed. On a table covered with schoolbooks and a big bird-winged Bible was the letter from his sister. Very brief, a laconic farewell:

"All dead, I heard nothing from mother and it must be that she's dead, nothing left now but for me to die, to die for the world, which is to come to life again in the Lord. Toba."

"Dead! Dead! Buried alive with her eyes open like father!" The thought echoed in Juambo's head. "Father buried dead with eyes open! Sister buried alive with eyes open . . . Toba . . . Toba! . . ."

In the depth of the night that has no eyelids it grows dark, but the night can always see. The stars and the moon cannot see. The night is the one that can see.

"No, son, son not go work for penance' . . ."

"*Chos, chos*, mother, they're beating us, foreign hands are beating us and father buried here with eyes open, can't do anything!"

"He won't close them. He not only one won't close them. The eyes of those buried will all close together on the day of justice or they won't close at all . . ."

"Father beaten, father whipped, and that why son do worst kind work . . . worst kind to pay father what he owes him!"

"Daughter Toba buried alive . . ."

"Yes, mother, buried alive too, a nun, with eyes open! . . ."

20

The workers, blinded by dawn and sleepiness, were butting each other in the banana groves. The low clouds, like altar boys with thin rochets soaked in the latent dampness of the soil, bore off in a procession of green candles the nightmare world that was beginning to find itself and lose itself at dawn. Where? Where did fatigue begin? There are things that a man finds at the place where his fatigue begins. Right there, in that place, in that undetermined location where a muscle contracts, an eye grows sad, and blood withdraws. The small creatures of the ooze slid away through the shadows, golden scorpions, the caddis worm, insect corpse bringing the image of death to the one pricked by its barb, the bats who spread mystery as they fly, and the shadows of the fruit loaders.

The blow could be heard from far away and it landed on the shoulder of the Hindu, as a copper-colored Indian was nicknamed, the color of a copper sun, ankles like fenceposts, agile as a lynx, and with great black seeds in the place of eyes.

The Hindu tripped Juambo as he transmitted his pain and

rage, and the mulatto hit the left-handed man who was close by with the bunch he was carrying and the left-handed man hit one-eyed Benigno, King Benigno they called him.

"A king carrying bananas, they really screwed you up with your names!"

And King Benigno, after making it clear that it was not a name but a nickname, slipped in order to push the stem of his bunch into Pieface's cheek.

The chain of malice was broken when, with the light of day, it was no longer possible to disguise those ill-humored challenges by men whose guts were gnawing at them.

"I wish you knew, Pieface, what it's like to have miles of insides and millions of worms crawling through them . . ."

"Ha! . . . The things this guy complains about . . ." Pieface Porras joked, "and me with one kidney that don't work. Only one of mine works and the nurse told me that I don't filter my piss anymore. I piss without filtering. What if you got thirsty and I wanted to filter some for you?"

The blows in the semidarkness of dawn, the soulless dawn, a dawn of apple-colored light, and the birdy songs of the titmice, organ birds, woodpeckers were changed into insults. They did not spare each other's defects. Partridge Morales, a man carved out of a tree trunk, was teased about his small brain.

"Partridge, you're the biggest animal I ever saw . . ."

"There's no cause to insult animals . . ." another one of the loaders complained, a weakish man who was still sucking on the mango he had eaten, using his teeth to extract the last drop of juice from the seed.

"What there's no cause for is for you, you earthworm, after you've sucked out the mango, to be cleaning your teeth with the seed. Look at the toothbrush this guy uses . . ."

"You animal, you mule, watch where you're going, you almost made me drop my bunch!"

A young man of short stature had his face squashed between the iron edge of the freight car, those bars along which the doors

are rolled closed, and the two-hundred-pound bunch that he was carrying on his back, part of which rose over his head.

"Somebody's been shit on already . . ." someone shouted.

The injured man dropped to the ground. He fell beside the rails. That did not interrupt the rhythm of the loading, however, the shuffling feet, the panting in motion, and the imperturbable stiffness of the timekeeper.

Their backs under the sun no longer burned because the crust of sweat and the ooze that came from the stems of the bunches were making them insensible.

"Have you got any feeling in your back?"

"How'm I going to feel anything? It's asleep right up to my neck. And it hurts me here under my head too."

"And the poor guy who was hurt, he's still bleeding. It looks like they're going to put more people on. There aren't enough of us to get this job over with. Getting this job done is the same damned thing, finishing one loading and starting another. We go through a pile of bunches here that you think hasn't got an end to it and then we have to start on another one that's even bigger."

"And Chulique brought his monkey along . . ."

"He goes everywhere with that taily critter, and since he's half off his rocker, people say he adopted it, that it's his son."

"I'm going to hit him right on his head with this mammee seed and watch him howl, but don't let Chulique know, because he's a wild one and if he thinks it was us it'll be a jesusmaryand-joseph . . ."

"Don't be mean . . ."

"We're not good or bad here . . . We're just dogs . . ."

The immense sea of leaves that kiss and expand, that close and kiss when the wind blows, a roofing through which a light vapor falls, a glow of lemon-green light, liquid in its transparency and light because it is light; the immense sea of the banana trees feeds the markets of the world with rivers of bunches. But how do those rivers of prodigious fruit leave? Where do their waters cross? . . . They run along human stream beds, panting, under-

nourished, with their uncut hair sticking to their foreheads, the back of their necks, their ears. Time is never up. The impassive timekeepers. The one who gets tired drops. No one speaks. A dry, cavelike emptiness isolates them from everything. Except from the load. Their burden keeps them what they are, beasts of burden.

Juambo crushed an ear. That first day of his great payment so that they would not beat his father. The ear beside his decayed molar. But he kept on carrying, without letting himself be squashed by the hostile bunch, beyond the limit of his creaking bones and his bloodshot eyes and, unlike his comrades, without drawing from the greenness of his load the hope of freeing himself someday, their hope of fleeing that hell and going back to their villages.

Yes, his comrades embraced their hope as they lifted up the bunches and threw them onto their backs, their heads down so that the rough blow would land on their shoulder blades, which they covered with horse blankets, and some had baskets which they made into cones to cover their heads.

Juambo was embracing his punishment with the desperation of a person who knows that he has no salvation, with teeth, sweat, tears biting him. He was perspiring, his tears flowed and he bit his lips from the pain in his ear. It got squashed by itself and it would have to heal by itself. It would have to unsquash itself since it had squashed itself. It hurt up to his hairline. Juambo could stand it. Father buried here. Juambo pay. Jaguar not eat him. Life ate him.

The timekeeper looked like a jaguar with cat eyes under his pith helmet and a cat-tail stick that he held when he grew tired of sitting and stood up, with one foot on the chair and resting his elbow on his knee as he leaned forward.

He wasn't a gringo or was he. Maybe he was and maybe he wasn't. But all timekeepers were the same and the question of whether they were Americans or not had nothing to do with their work, people for whom the load was neither hope nor punish-

ment, neither future nor past, but simply load, load, load, load . . .

And among the others, the bestialized ones, the ones who no longer felt what they were, the ones who kept on laughing with a gallows laugh.

"Less laughing and more work! . . ." the foreman protested, seconded by the timekeepers.

"Go work on your mother! . . ." they would mutter at him under their breath so that the mother part would not be heard.

The sun, the sun of a bowlmakers' bowl, a metal sun with nettle fire toasted the leaves of the banana trees simply by taking their sap away. In a matter of a second the sun would already overwhelm the green of their deep substance which had become sap, toasting a piece of a leaf, the tip, the edges, or the part around the trunk. One second and the leaf was all crisp. The bright sheet of green flesh was a worthless bag, a yellow sheet of dry parchment where insects had scribbled their runes.

The sound of the trains, the whistles, the coupling and uncoupling, the gangs of pruners with their rakes, brooms, and devices that had a metal bird on the end of a very long oar, half-pike and half-shears, to cut off the dry leaves, the leaves where the sun had defeated the deep forces of the earth. The sun against the deep green silence where the echoes of all types of sweetness swim, the sweetness of wisdom, the sweetness of the female who gives a blind happiness which is true happiness. The sun versus the deep thickness of the mines of humus where mineral becomes vegetable and vegetable animal, and where the mingled troop of dreams joins those who are going to be born with those who have just died. The sun against the crystallized vapor of the oily covering which life lays out in minute geometries as it gives form to every piece of vegetation and every creature. And over all this the sun conquers as it dries the leaf, changing it into a pitiful yellow arm, a breakable crystal of blind dust, that blind and compact yellow flame that consumes everything there is. The gangs go on cutting the dry leaves, a surgical chop, chop, chop . . .

The timekeeper has sat down again. He stretches out his legs and rests his heels on the ground, his toes in the air. The ground burns and it is better that way, with his toes in the air, resting only on the edge of his heels, it burns for him but not for the others, the barefoot people with soles of naked tamales who come and go, toasting as they load the banana cars.

Another loading. Time doesn't pass. The hours don't pass. The car has a canopy of shadow formed by a hammock of dry leaves. They have to protect the fruit from the rays of the sun. It can ripen it one-two-three. The haulers who have filled one car line up waiting for the one that is coming up, rolling slowly along.

Hold it!

And as soon as it stops they secure it with pieces of wood on the tracks to back up the brakes, swing their arms to grip the bunches, and put them on their backs and trot with them to the car that is being loaded. It never gets filled. It never gets filled. Time doesn't pass. The timekeeper has stood up again.

Luckily, the bunches brought in under a canopy of leaves do not burn, they cool off and even look kissable. The foreman shouts when someone stops to take a swig of water, breaking the chain and, in order not to get out of practice, he strikes his whip on the ground.

The chain, the string of men that goes up and down and which is motionless for a moment, is unable to breathe, with some of the links unable to straighten up, the palms of their hands on their knees, sweat bathing them in cataracts, their lips dry, their eyelashes sticky. Their eyebrows are not sufficient to protect their eyes and cheeks from the hot rivers that pour down over them. Sambito is paying. Sambito without hope. Pays for father buried here. Toba alive buried with eyes open. Father dead, buried with eyes open. Mother needs Juambo . . .

When the loading is finished a new car slips along the rails, rolling slowly, stops in front of them filling up with more bunches and the fruit less protected. Times does not pass. The timekeeper has sat down again, stood up, sat down. He can't find a position

for his body. Nor for his pith helmet. He takes it off and puts it on. He fans himself with it and it smells of hair and sweat. He takes a few steps, but the ground burns. It burns for him, not for those whose naked flesh bricks pad down on the fire of the hot, scorching earth, a sun oven. And it's worse for them when out of carelessness they put their feet on a rail or one of the spikes in the ties. Sambito is paying. With shoes and all he jumps about like a dancing turkey because the earth burns through his soles. He is paying. He is paying so that his father will not have to pay, buried under the earth.

"Motherfucker! That stinking rail is worse than a grill . . ." Pieface Porras complains, picking up his foot and trying to blow on it.

He doesn't have time to grab it or to blow on it, he only has time to go through the motions. He continues on, continues on in the line of loaders. Hurry up, hurry up! Time doesn't pass. The fixed sun. The timekeeper looks at his watch. There's time, time, time, there's always time.

In the shady interior of the railroad cars the work glows. It glows and is appreciated. The light comes in through the cracks and through the open part of the car where those who are loading go in and out, making a curtain of fire that blinds those coming out and sometimes causes them to fall.

Other cars built like cages arrive. Here the picture was different. Over the greenish cobalt of the bunches the shadows from the roof spread out and from the sides they took the form of stripes, and those who were loading inside seemed to be dressed in prison uniforms.

And how the fruit was swallowed up by those cars that were like big cages. Huge. So that in the piling of the bunches many men had to sweat for many hours, and almost always the same ones, because help was scarce. Scarce? That wasn't the case. It was just that with fewer people more work could be got out of those who loaded for the same pay.

The sun is nothing but a breath of fire all along the coast. It

has ceased to be a star up above and, removed from the scorching frying-pan of the sky, has become an enormous incandescent mass that melts everything.

Time doesn't pass. The timekeeper has lifted the tips of his toes again. His shoes on the edges of their heels. The ground burns.

21

The first pesos that Juambo earned by hauling fruit on his bare back (oh, how he would have liked to have slopped starch and vinegar on the taffy-soft flesh that went from his shoulders to his rear end that Sunday!) were used to repair the things that most needed it in his mother's shack and to please her with some new clothing. He bought her a white blouse with black lace trim, as she was still in half-mourning for her dear husband after so many years of total mourning, a wide pink skirt with green flowers and some wide yellow ribbons that she couldn't wear as they were and which she split in two, sad to see that the tangle of hair from her good days had been reduced to a rat tail on her balding head. He also brought her a hen which was so fat that it smelled like soup, and a bottle of Malaga wine thicker than blood.

The old woman tasted it and said:

"That's how Agapito Luisa liked it, red, sweet . . . Agapito Luisa born Atlantic side and buried here . . . Two coasts . . . Two seas . . . Buried on Pacific after haul much fruit, fierce work and no return . . ."

Juambo blinked his quivering eyes in order to erase the picture of his father as a loader, a loader the way he was, and not see him in the midst of the grumbling of the foremen who watched over the coming and going of the human beasts loading fruit, the insulting presence of the timekeepers, and the empty flesh of the loaders and their eyes of cast-off glass at the end of the day.

"Father buried without hope . . ."

His mother's conclusion shook Sambito. She lowered her eyes, more mist than eyes, so that her son wouldn't read on them her reproach to him for having signed on to haul fruit, through the fog of her years and the dripping rain of her old woman's weeping.

"Father will live again if son has hope, will see if son sees, will hear if son hears . . . good reason for saying that sons are the eyes of the interred . . . Mother, I have hope . . ."

"Toba far off, buried alive . . ."

"Yes, yes, far off, buried for the world . . ."

"Father will see and Toba will see . . ."

"Toba will see in God, father will see the resurrection of life in men, not this life we lead, because this is death, but the life led by men who have hopes for tomorrow . . ."

"Father laugh, Agapito say: mulatto talk, talk, talk, not understand what says, but good sign for mulatto because that way mulatto able write his Bible. Father laugh, Agapito say: light terrible. White man not see. Child of sun, white man not see. God say: make self black light so white man see. And white light, divine light disappear for white man. Only mulatto can see it . . ."

The village opened its eyes when the workers came back to their houses from the groves, to their rooms or simply in search of a place in the village where they could lay down the shell of their fatigue because not even their fatigue was whole anymore.

Through people gathered in the square to loaf, to smoke, to look at the stars, to play hand games, to swap objects, to listen to music at liquor stands, with the lights from the doors spread-

ing out onto the streets like spittle, the workers passed like the remnants of a defeated army. Juambo among them, his jacket on his shoulder, his undershirt torn, sleeveless, his sandals dragging as he almost forgot about the foot in the rear and no advance for the one in front, a step made by momentum, his back sore, stiff at the waist, skinned, swollen, aching. He did not even feel the heat because of the fever brought on by his bruises, or when he did feel it he roasted all night in his sweat and blood, his hands cracked, his tooth aching at full strength.

Hauling, hauling fruit, the blow of a hundred-and-thirty-pound bunch landing on his back, the shifting of his waist, his knees bending to resist, his feet apart, well-planted on the ground, and trotting with every load until he couldn't take it any longer and he had to take it, to keep on, stay in the chain of staggering beasts, hiccupping, emaciated, all the worse when the loading was finished and with a bunch in his arms, or working at night in the slippery light of the floodlights.

"Less cursing and more revolution! . . ." Juambo remarked to a big hauler who could carry fruit and carry liquor, blustering and cursing all the time, and who was walking beside him, his body leaning backward because his head weighed so much. His nickname was Sholón.

Sholón and all the others began to talk about the thing that was going to be done by them alone.

"If it's by us alone, leave me out," Sholón said. "And you, Bucul, you can stay out of it with me."

Bucul, a dark man with eyes like jet spots that hemmed in his sharp nose, sank into his silence, which was more eloquent than any words.

"Yes, we've got to organize," Juambo concluded. "Even animals get together in times of danger . . ."

"And you're going to tell the story about the jaguar! . . ."

"Shut up, let him talk!"

"I was saying that animals get together out of the instinct to save themselves when there's a threat of danger, and thinking animals have got more reason to . . ."

"More trouble? No, we're better off the way we are! . . ."

"Have you lost your balls, Pieface?"

"Not unless I lost them down the same hole you did."

"Do you mean my mother?"

"Don't be stupid, the hole you were in that night when I was left alone with my little nighttime mast!"

"Watch what you say!"

"That Sonto is always starting arguments," Sholón protested, moving his great head on his shoulders with a gesture that he could not express with words.

"Look at me . . . look at my case, after working my whole life for the President of the Company . . ."

They were all interested in Juambo's case.

"And his case is a good example . . ." a rowdy man agreed as he spat and elbowed an ugly little man who was walking beside him. "Say something there . . ."

"What I want from you boys is for you to do something this time that really will be something . . ."

"And what do you mean by really something? . . ." Bucul, the silent man, opened his mouth.

"Really something? Very simple. Once the plan is set up it's got to be carried out to the end."

"I agree. In order to get results in things like this it's got to be like a line storm . . . First the clatter of the thunder, showing that it's going to rain . . . and that's where we are today, everything we're talking about is the clatter of the thunder that's telling us about the storm that's on its way, and right after that the whip of the water, lightning, and fireballs . . ."

"That Sacualpia gets the floor and they's nobody can shut him up!"

"You all wanted an opinion, didn't you?"

"Motejute has the floor . . . Speak up, but something of your own, because this here Motejute has read a little and he'll repeat what he's seen in his books . . ."

"If it's a general strike, I say there's no general worth his salt . . ."

Juambo filled the hole in his decayed molar with his tongue, trying to make the pain he felt hidden there burst out. In the daytime it left him alone, but at night it tortured him. As soon as he would lie down on his hot bed the molar would grow, just as if a flower pot had been implanted in his gum, a pot from which there grew a great plant of pain that took root like ivy in his neck, his face, and would flower with a jet of blood in his throbbing eyes.

Why did he have the urge to keep on going right through the village when he heard Motejute say, "If it's a general strike, I say there's no general worth his salt?"

A jab, and another, and another seized his jawbone, making him raise his hand to his chin.

He reached home with his toothache and that "If it's a general strike, I say there's no general worth his salt . . ."

He touched his hard, hot face, squeezed it into the pillow.

Why didn't he have it pulled out?

He didn't have it pulled out because he was a member of some kind of obscure royalty. His mother would put him to sleep with that tale while she treated him with hog intestines or dark grease and aromatic cloves.

"Father royal blood, father come from islands of Roatan, where Turunimbo, great king Turunimbo give father tittle of prince. Top-tittle . . ." the old woman affirmed, putting her finger on her wrinkled brow.

And maybe he did have all that, but with him it was a tooth tittle.

He went back to his corner while the old woman brought the light over along with her eyes to see if he had got any relief.

"If the strike is general, I say there isn't any general worth his salt!"

In a sea of saliva, his tongue buried like a snake against the nerve, in the cavity of the molar that had just been freed from the head of a clove with the same tongue, he was getting relief and he fell asleep, lost in a sea of sleep from which the rich light

of day snatched him, tragically wealthy, for with daylight the nobleman of Roatan was snatched away from the court of King Turunimbo, the king of sweets and frothy things, and changed into a poor hauler of bananas.

. . . On the broad, flat plains of the sea,
the sea,
watch the submarines pass on the lee,
the lee . . . .

Song, sing-song, a simple call. A song for those who were in on things and knew what those words sung to the tune of *La Marina* meant (Japanese, German, Russian submarines endangering the Panama Canal every time there was talk of raising wages on the banana plantations, giving humane treatment to the workers, or sovereign treatment to nations). A sing-song for those who were annoyed at hearing adult people repeating the same jingle like idiots or children. And a simple call for those who compared it to the lowly and animal outburst of the cock's crow, the donkey's bray, the horse's whinny, the bleating of a sheep . . .

. . . On the broad, flat plains of the sea,
the sea,
watch the submarines pass on the lee,
the lee . . . .

Since the time of Polo Camey, the telegrapher who took his own life during the border dispute, accused of being in contact with Japanese submarines, that tragic and mocking ditty had not been heard on the coast.

. . . On the broad, flat plains of the sea,
the sea,
watch the submarines pass on the lee,
the lee . . . .

"We're behind in the make-up and the paper's going to come out late. They'd better take out that picture and put in an ad . . ." the layout man told the head pressman before loosening the

wedges for the first page at the same time as he hummed: "Don't give in and don't give up! . . ."

"You're soft in the head! . . ." the head pressman silenced him with the voice of a nasal girl. "Can't you see that spread across the whole page? It says . . . 'German submarines in Central American waters.' "

"Then don't let the Fakir leave, he's the only linotypist who can make the correction . . ."

"And what do I use for hands, a set of teeth? Loosen it, hurry up, we would have caught hell if we hadn't noticed it in time . . . Watch out, I'll do it myself, what a guy, excuse me . . ." and as he said that, the pressman took the key to loosen the wedges on the side, knocked them out with his hammer, they were in so tight, and as he took them out he leaned over the tray of half-inked metal letters until he found, more with his fingers than with his eyes, the picture caption that had to be corrected.

"Nip . . . pon . . . sub . . . ma . . . rines . . ." he read. "This is where we have to make the correction." He pulled out the lines and put in the pieces of type he had in his hand and read it again: "Ger . . . man . . . sub . . . ma . . . rines . . . threaten Panama Canal."

The layout man, with a stick of wood and a mallet began to beat on the front page and as soon as he had it in shape he made ready to tighten it again, a cigar butt fried in sticky saliva between his teeth, his glasses hanging down over his nose toward his mouth.

He commented in his phlegmatic way:

"If it hadn't been corrected, God knows what would have happened . . ."

"I'd like to let something happen to the proofreaders. Stuck-ups! . . ."

The head pressman put his right hand into his pants pocket to look for a cigarette, in the left he held the corpus delicti, a sheet of damp paper folded four times, and he didn't stop until, in a cubbyhole among rolled papers and old manuscripts, he found the stamp that read CORRECTION.

"If they don't spot it at the press there'll be hell to pay . . ." He threw the proofs onto the readers' table. "Which one of you corrected the front page today?"

"Cholula . . ." one of those he asked replied, and even the man's voice was hairy from the quantity of hair that hung over his eyes: mustache, beard, eyebrows, lashes, sideburns, locks over his forehead, locks over his ears.

"You!" The head pressman faced a small worker who had one fixed eye, as if made of glass, and another one that moved about rapidly in search of the person talking to him. "I'll get the blame, because every minute the paper is behind it costs me five dollars in fines . . ."

"They got the picture from the morgue with the caption and everything," Cholula explained, "and God knows what simpleton gave it to the linotypist without our seeing it. That's why they copied the caption the way it was: 'Nippon submarine threatens Panama Canal.' "

"How dumb can you get! Can't you see that we're at war with Germany? And didn't the headline say 'German submarine,' and didn't you read the editorial?"

"The editorial . . . ! The fact is that nobody can work with that anarchist Bushy. There's no peace or let-up. He's like a monkey in a cage. Every time I tried to tell him he kept on talking, talking about the blasted editorial."

"He wasn't talking, he was explaining, which is something else. He was explaining that the idea of the person who wrote the editorial was wrong. Maintaining that since we're at war the banana workers who've gone on strike have to be treated as enemies. Keeping watch on the Pacific and Caribbean to alert the Allies is crazy. And as for the German submarine, it's the same Japanese submarine except that there's been a change in the caption. If the Banana Company is in danger because of some workers' demand, the Panama Canal is in danger and they drag out that submarine."

"What I wonder," Cholula thought about what he was going to say, trying to find the level of his words with his pupil

bubbling up in its cornea in his movable eye, the watery one, while the other one remained stationary, "what I wonder is whether the Banana Company has a submarine that sticks up its periscope on the coast of Central America every time it's needed."

"I wouldn't be surprised, they're capable of anything . . ."

"Who's got a cigarette, I've run out . . ." the head pressman interrupted Bushy.

"Cholula here must have one. I smoke a pipe."

"This conversation is starting to get interesting, but I've got things to do," the boss said, putting the cigarette that Cholula gave him to his lips. "Thanks, I've got matches." He lighted up and with the smoke in his face, ready to leave, he added, somewhat defeated, "What I advise you people is to be a little more careful, because with all these mistakes, one day they're going to start hollering up in the advertisers' heaven . . ."

"The advertisers? . . ." Cholula's fixed eye lighted up while he put the other one into motion. "Bushy here maintains that advertising is the stinkingest manure in the modern world, and he wouldn't correct an ad for anything, just so I have to breathe in all that propaganda, and that isn't right either."

"It's manure but it fertilizes . . ." the head pressman stopped him. "I've broken the cigarette you gave me, let me have another." He turned to Cholula, and when the light of the match went out, after a good drag, ready to leave, he finished the thought he had left interrupted: "Without manure there aren't any flowers in a garden and without advertising there aren't any literary flowers in a newspaper . . ."

"Stop right there if you're saying it for my benefit," Bushy protested. "I'm not a poet and I'm not a literary man, and in times like these when submarines are threatening the Panama Canal," they all laughed, "they contribute their poetry and prose to back up the Company's big ads and nothing else! The things that poets and literary men publish are advertisements for their beauty products. Poetry, ha, ha . . . they have to put their name

alongside it, their address, the notary's stamp, their fingerprints, their family tree, the picture from *Who's Who.*" All the hairs on his mixed-breed orangutan face were quivering. "Oh, for the days when works of art were anonymous . . . God made the world, but they didn't say which one he was . . . God, that's all . . . being God is a way of being anonymous! . . . Cathedrals, epic poems, monuments, paintings, statues! . . ." He put his hand on his beard, mustache, hair, rubbed them against his face like the foam from some very black soap, and, sticking out his belly, he asked the peaceful Cholula and the head pressman, who had stopped to listen to him, watching him with his green cat eyes, "Would there be so many bad writers, so many poets who roam the night, so much writing of a thousand and one plagiarisms without this vile sense of publicity for the author's little name?"

The rumble of the rolling presses deafened them for a moment, the head pressman's cat eyes disappeared out the door, and, as on every day when work was done, Bushy went to wash up at the basin where the photographer was washing his prints, and Cholula drew his feet out of their shoes, passed his hand several times over the bottom of his sock, which was soaked in old sweat, quickly raising his fingers to his nose several times, the stench of a warm corpse, before Bushy came back.

The first copies of the newspaper. Jerónimo came in whistling and threw them onto the proofreaders' table. Fresh ink. They were handled with the same emotion every day. It was the same every day but different every day.

The front page. Cholula ran his eyes over it rapidly. Over the name of the paper spread out in large boldface was the news of the German submarine. Underneath was the picture of the submarine where the caption had been corrected, "German" instead of "Nippon." Cholula smelled his hand with a faint glow of foot stench, the movable pupil in his watery eye, the dry lashes over his stationary eye. He had let the "Nippon" go through inten-

tionally, but they had caught it. It would have been beautiful if it had come out wrong.

On the third page, the editorial in italics, asking the public authorities to use an iron hand against the agitators who were weakening the Allied effort with a policy of open sabotage in view of the very pressing necessity of resolving certain national problems rapidly.

"Let us imitate Russia . . ." Cholula read the last part of the editorial aloud, "where the cold now has the shiver of a machine-gun, a socialist country which is giving the highest example of bravery and sacrifice, and let us not play totalitarianism's game or allow it to be played over such inconsequential national demands as is happening in the banana-growing regions, where agitators have sown discontent among those who until yesterday were the selfless soldiers of a great victory . . ."

Cholula admired Russia because of Dostoevsky, the little father of underpaid workers, as he called him, but linked to that intellectual solidarity with Fyodor's homeland there was now a feeling that Russia was becoming the flesh of the flesh of the peoples of the world . . .

He turned the editorial page, looking for the movie guide. At the best theater they were still showing that film in which Robert Taylor, playing a young American soldier who had been wounded, falls in love in Russia with a piano student who plays Tchaikovsky's concerto in her last examination. The young soldier recovers and is sent home. His girl friend cannot follow him because she is needed for the reconstruction of her country. But love triumphs and two worlds are united in the happiest of coexistences.

The proofreaders turn their backs as they leave. Each on his own way until tomorrow, like two strangers, along the same sidewalk, as far as the refreshment stand located a few steps away from the corner where the newspaper building was. The icy hatred felt for each other by people tied to the same yoke, when no other bond exists between them except the deforming work-jacket of every day. A strait-jacket, Bushy thought, because

that's what work is, a straight-jacket. And what a jacket for people like him who suffered from a seething laziness. He let Cholula go ahead. The latter, sensing his companion's hostile steps treading on his heels, quickened his pace until he got to the refreshment stand, where he stopped to buy a kite for a boy who was the son of a mulatto woman named Anastasia. Cholula lived in one of the small houses in the Corona pasture, across from the field where the seminarians played soccer, picking up their cassocks in order to kick the ball.

Bushy, while the other one paid for his kite and left, ordered a tamarind drink. Unlike his companions with their airs of a nobody, he was a somebody. This fact was known by the gentleman with an angular face, sunken eyes, and thin lips who was finishing a glass of a rice cooler across from him.

They left together.

"What are you up to, Bushy old man?" the one finishing the rice drink said, none other than Octavio Sansur in person.

"Hello, Tabío San. What else would I be up to except that we just had something together, you the rice and me the tamarind? Did you see the paper?"

"No . . . I came in right behind you and since you had it under your arm, why should I buy one to fatten the pockets of those sell-outs, although I'd better buy one, because you don't pay any attention to things, you don't understand that you should carry it in your hand or put it in your pocket. You have it pressed under your armpit and it has a bad smell."

"It can't have any worse smell than it already has . . . it stinks like a rotten fruit newspaper, Maria Moors Cabot Prize, circulation certified by who knows how many 'insts.' "

"Anything new?"

"Yes, we found a room near the Lottery building . . ."

"That's pretty much downtown . . ."

"The only place where there was a room near a marimba studio. The Ideal Club marimba group rehearses there. We'll work the press while they're practicing . . ."

"And will it cover it up? . . ."

"More than enough, ten times, because when all the marimbas are going it's like a waterfall of sound . . ."

"Yes, but they pause when they rehearse and you can't be stopping the press every few minutes . . ."

"Why not, since it's a foot press? Besides, if they stop and go, during that pause there isn't an ear that can notice that all of a sudden there's a sound that's different from that of the marimbas."

" 'GENERAL STRIKE,' in big letters, will be on the first page. That's what we need most. A call to the workers on the south coast."

"The text is already set up. All we need is the headline, but I've got it here in my pocket. I couldn't set it up on the linotype because they watch too closely, but I stole the letters and we can set them up in wood."

"We have to tell Cigarrat and Skin Salinas. You, Bushy, it's easy for you to see them. Tell them, promise me."

"If I see them I certainly will tell them. As of now I've already set up what they need right away. An anarchist who doesn't know about printing must be anything except an anarchist. Are you still running around?"

"Naturally, with all the urges that your boss gives me."

"Are you back from the coast?"

"Well," Tabío San cut him off, "tell the boys, like I said, and send me the flyers soon, because they're what's most needed."

Juambo took leave of his companions and headed toward the drive that led to Semírames. Shade trees on both sides joined their branches to form an arch, stars and bright spots in the open spaces of the hot foliage that broiled in the locusts' roiling shrill. Night birds with the step of fleeting extinguished stars. As the locusts drowsed, the crickets turned the dew into sound amidst the croaking of toads and frogs.

In the hot shadows he saw a shape approaching accompanied by a dog, and when he was closer he was able to make out who it was.

"Hello, Señor Key."

"There's an urgent need for you to pretend you're saying hello to Bobby Thompson and go to Semírames to find out for us what person, what important person, about to arrive from the United States is expected tonight or tomorrow. He'll come directly here. He's about to land at any minute at the company airfield."

"But dressed the way I am . . ." his shirt in shreds, ragged, dirty, with the green sweat from the banana stalks that he had carried on his arms and backs, an old pair of pants with the legs rolled up to the knees and shoes that were more chewed-up, faded leather than soles.

"Go home and change . . ."

"I'll run away if it's the boss!"

"No, Thompson hasn't moved out of Chicago. We'd know all about that, we'd know from one day to the next if, instead of a fruit hauler, you'd gone into one of the management offices or into the office of the manager himself . . ."

"When I finish laying my debt to father," the mulatto sighed, "debts to the dead are laid to rest, not paid. The management offices, the office of the manager himself . . ." He had so many aches, he was so exhausted from loading fruit that he almost wanted it that way and maybe not lay debt to father. "But would it be so easy . . ." he wondered, no longer sure of his access to those places where people worked with air conditioning, where the only thing needed was for it to spread its perfume around, the light softened by special windows, skylights that seemed to be dreamlights, transporting those surroundings from the fury of the tropics, from torrid coals to springtime paradises.

"With Bobby Maker Thompson as a go-between? You don't know what the name Thompson means in the company! . . . Consider your debt to your father paid and get into the offices. With you inside we'll be kept up to date on how they plan to counteract the strike, what they're plotting against us. And you have to do it for yourself and for your mother, if you love her. It isn't a matter of throwing your life away like that just as if you

didn't have her. I warned you the last time and I repeat it. You'll be dead, you'll go mad or become paralyzed if you don't listen to me. Fruit haulers are always getting hit on the head. Sometimes, as you know, they even get knocked out. But those are the hard blows, and it's a matter of the little blows, the ones that only make you close your eyes, let out a string of dirty words, and bite your lips."

"I'm going home. I'll change and be right back. What do I have to do?"

"Find out from Bobby who they're expecting, what big man, what important person is about to arrive. You can ask him if it's his grandfather who's coming and even seem happy thinking it's old Thompson. The boy will say that it's not . . ."

"If he says it's the boss I'll take off on the run . . ."

"I already told you that that big son of a . . . bench . . . never leaves Chicago. Bobby will tell you that it's not his grandfather. You can be sorry that it's not him, and the boy, without suspecting, will tell who it is that's coming, and at the same time you can talk about a lack of anyone to help you, you can complain that you're working as a fruit hauler and that you'd like to get into the offices. By tomorrow you'll wake up assigned to the manager's, if the boy wants. The power of a Thompson is more than anyone can imagine. In this dirty system even that's inherited. Don't have any doubts about it, Juambo." The latter was already about to leave to change his clothes. "Bobby is all-powerful . . ."

"Who does that field belong to . . . that flat stretch you can see over there?" Bobby Thompson haughtily stopped a worker who was passing, pointing with one of the long arms that moved awkwardly when he walked.

"The question's what I like," the worker answered, almost without stopping. "It's easy to see you don't come from here because you wouldn't ask me if you did . . ."

"Would you mind telling me, please, who it belongs to? . . ."

Bobby repeated with the lock of blond hair between his blue eyes like the twisting zigzag of a lightning bolt.

"To the Company, young fellow! To the Company! . . ."

Bobby kept on walking, accompanied by one of the Luceros, until they came to another, broader field.

"Hey there," they went over to ask a boy pale as a piece of yellow cigarette paper. "Who owns this here . . . the landlord . . . the one who rents it to the owners of those houses . . ."

"The Company . . ." the boy was heard to say timidly, as he started to run off in fear.

"All right!" Bobby said in English. "If that's how it is, we'll get it all set up in a flash . . ."

On a borrowed horse they went to the offices. Their entry was not very triumphal. As they went through the dull, aluminum-colored main gate, Lucero fell off the horse. He was riding on the rump, holding onto Bobby, and somehow he had lost his grip.

Bobby, without stopping the horse and to the surprise and outrage of the inhabitants of the fine homes of the high officials of the company, where no one ever dared walk on the grass and people were only allowed to go along the cement paths, crossed diagonally to where the offices could be seen.

In English he asked a man with a fiery beard, dressed in white and wearing a big-game hunter's hat, moving like a mad puppet around a theodolite, where the manager's office was.

The man with the theodolite, horrified at the abuse of the rules, spat out a piece of the lump of tobacco that filled his mouth and pointed to where it was.

Bobby went ahead in that direction, making the horse prance along as it too seemed surprised at going where it wasn't supposed to. Lucero followed him, running on foot along the concrete walks.

"Come on, climb up!" Bobby shouted at him.

"No, we're already there!"

In front of the offices of the Manager, which opened onto the

fresh artificial rain, the sound of water and the coolness of a breeze at that morning hour when all the typewriters were clicking at incredible speed: in front of the offices of the manager, where people passing did so timidly, that old nag with a boy on top caused the head of the Pacific Division himself to come out and meet him indignantly:

"Who do you think you are?" he asked furiously from the door of the office.

"Bobby Maker Thompson!"

"The Manager's expression changed.

"Fine! Fine! You came in on horseback and that's not permitted!"

"I heard my grandfather say once that for a Thompson, anything's permitted in the Company!"

"Get down and tell me what you want!"

"A piece of land!"

"You want a piece of land?"

Through the Manager's skull, covered with a bald man's fuzz, there passed as in a film the figures of Lester Mead and Leland Foster, and he thought that the land the boy was asking for was to plant bananas outside the control of the Company. And he even mentally drew up the cable he would send to the President of the Company so that he could have his heir brought back before he contracted the mania of helping the workers and setting up cooperatives. It was dangerous. What a Thompson wants, Wall Street wants.

"You want a piece of land?" he repeated without losing his surprise, nervous. One might say that his shirt of impeccable white silk had grown too tight for him.

Bobby turned the horse over to his companion and went into the building. The Manager took him into his private office. He came out a moment later. The man came out with him and as the horse with the two boys went off, he turned and said:

"I'm glad that son of his grandfather wanted that piece of land for a baseball field!"

He interrupted his dictation and called several offices on the telephone himself. He announced to all that the big baseball season was approaching. Since it had just ended in the major leagues, the ones who heard it thought he was joking. But it was all cleared up when he told them that it was a matter of a baseball season down there among them. Old Thompson's grandson had arrived, he explained. "He came in on horseback, right up to my office, and asked me to give him a field that's near the main square so he could lay out a diamond. We agreed that he would organize a team of young people and we'd make one up from the old-timers, drawing on the employees in the offices."

"Hey, Bobby," Lucero complained when they had already left the horse and were on foot, "you haven't told me what you said to the manager when you were in his office . . ."

"Oh, boy!"

"What I do know, gringo, is that when you were looking at him from up on the horse you had something on your face that I never saw before, something like 'I'm boss here and everybody had better obey me.' Yes, gringo, you!"

"Well, for your information, he gave me the field . . ."

"Gave it just to you?"

"No, boy, for everything that has to do with baseball . . ."

And while the two boys covered that domain with long strides under the scorching sun, young Lucero with his hands in his pockets and Bobby with his arms hanging, swaying like bone bell-clappers, they discussed the best place to have home plate, looking at the sun. The Manager was still on the telephone discussing the name they would give the old-timers' team.

They had to clear the land, level it like a billiard table, but the work gangs under the orders of the man with the theodolite were coming and going and the stones and roots they removed were piling up. Finally the roller appeared with its great rolling udder giving the uneven land a flat surface to suckle. A giant with the wooly hair of a black goat, skin the color of ebony, and teeth so

white that they looked like the cornea of a third eye in his mouth, greeted Bobby in English:

"Hello, boy . . ."

He stopped the roller and Bobby went over to ask him how many days it would take him to roll and level the ground.

He was even blacker when seen close-by, with eyes like the sleeve-holes of a vest, a flat nose, fleshy lips, and at the end of the interminable hoses that were his arms hands with short, thick fingers like dark bananas.

"How many days? . . ." the Negro repeated. "To level all this?" He turned his head with the movement of a bird. "My God! Two days if it doesn't rain . . ."

Bobby took refuge in a nearby hut, where, as he entered, he came upon a dirty, spectral child, almost an earthworm, who was crawling on the floor. Neither pity nor disgust. Fear. Fear that he had stepped on him. The child went off howling. He couldn't be seen. He was bellowing in some corner. The Negro came in, water distilling off him. He got his bearings, said something like "Just a minute!" in English and went to the weeper.

"Naw, baby! . . . Naw, baby! . . ." He became a child too and made a cradle with his arms. "Naw, baby, naw, no cry, no cry, naw, baby!"

The little one snuggled until he became calm, but his eyes of a tiny beast remained startled, trying to understand what was going on around him.

"Papa I know," the Negro said with difficulty in Spanish, "Mama I know . . . papa work cut banana, mama go bring dinner, baby alone, but no cry, no cry any more, baby no cry any more . . ."

"Please, wait a minute . . ." Bobby said to the Negro who was rocking the little one in his arms, and he went out into the downpour amidst the thunder and lightning.

At the club of the Christian Brotherhood, like blue doves because of the sky-blue color of their uniforms, waiting for the rain to pass, waiting as they chewed gum or smoked, waiting

until they could continue the free distribution of leaflets printed on Bible paper, were the propagators of the Good News.

Bobby burst in like a wet greyhound, stamping his muddy shoes on the uneven wood floor. Water was dripping down the sleeves of his jacket and the legs of his pants.

Without stopping to catch his breath, like someone thrown overboard in a raging river, he began to shout.

The blue doves were startled. Not knowing who he was, they thought he was the apparition of some prophet disguised as a child.

After some consultation, one of them, the youngest, decided to follow him, wearing a waterproof cape and carrying a broad umbrella, the property of the pastor, who at that moment, taking advantage of the fact that he could not work in the rain, was lecturing them about the eternal life.

When the pastor asked with whom Miss Cherry had gone, she was already lost under the bulge of the umbrella, accompanied by Bobby, and her companions told him with young Thompson, the fearsome grandson of a fearsome grandfather.

"A great honor, to be sure . . ." the pastor exclaimed.

In the hut the mother had returned and was talking to the Negro. She was pregnant, with circles under her eyes, braided hair, her skirt raised in front and dipping behind like a duck's tail, her blouse heavy with rosaries, crosses, and holy medals, and with the child in her arms.

Bobby came in, explaining to Miss Cherry the condition in which he had found the child, alone, completely abandoned, crawling around on the dirt floor, and the mother, without understanding what that small intruder was saying in English, but imagining that he was trying to accuse her and have her punished, explained that she had no one to leave him with while she brought food to her husband, who worked in the groves.

After the tropical downpour the field was receiving the last light of the sun's slanting rays, resplendent in an almost total sunset. In mountainous regions the sun goes down but it doesn't

give that sensation of sinking forever that it does on the coast. Here, one might have thought that it was falling, never to rise again, that this was its last day, that it was abandoning the earth forever.

The father of the child being rocked by his mother entered like a drunkard, drunk with fatigue, and he refused to answer the questions that Bobby asked him. The boy then turned to speak to Miss Cherry. The father went so far as to attack the boy verbally:

"And when you get right down to it, what the hell concern is it of yours, you damned snotnose, if we live this way. And people can't understand what you're talking in English to that gringo bitch you've got with you. The only thing I want is for you not to do us any favors. All I want from your kind is what you don't give us, death, because working under conditions like these . . ."

"Shut up! . . ." Bobby shouted in English.

The Negro stepped in between the two of them and took Bobby away by the arm.

"Let's go," he told him, "roller waiting!"

"But it's dark now," Bobby complained furiously.

"Me no care . . ."

And he started up the roller, loaded with stars, to roll against the shadows, tamping them down, flattening them out, as if the Negro, beside the fearsome grandson, was trying to flatten the curve of the night, starry and deep.

22

"Piedrasanta, horsefly banter! . . ."

"Yes, friend, there's nobody home . . ." Don Higinio answered, kneeling behind the counter of his large store, The Golden Ball, a store and a beer and liquor bar. He was looking for a bottle of vinegar, or, rather, for the cork to put in the bottle, but as he half-raised his forehead, as an eye appeared, and he saw who it was, he got up, not as rapidly as he would have liked to because of his rheumatism, dusting his hands and saying:

"The last thing in my mind was that the Commandant would honor my establishment! He doesn't visit poor people very often! . . ."

"No need to ask about you, always so polite."

"The case of a hog, Colonel, the case of a hog they're fattening up to kill later on, but that's how things go. Business is pretty bad, you see. Opening and closing without having sold anything. Awful. Everybody asking for credit, but I can't give any, they go away and they don't pay. I could own a whole string of houses from what people still owe me in this business.

I hope you'll have something to drink . . . We've got everything here, from chocolate to corn liquor . . ."

The Commandant yawned with the hollow of his hand at his mouth, and, making the sound of a train in the tunnel of his yawn, he ran his eyes over the shelves filled with bottles.

"The bar, as you can see, is the only thing in good supply . . . cane liquor is all I sell, cane liquor and more cane liquor . . ."

"What do you expect people who work like animals all day to do after work, my friend, drink well?"

"But, Colonel, you can't imagine the way they drink! They drink in amounts that only a person in this business can measure. It's desperation. Pure desperation. Without a spark of joy, no pleasure . . ."

"In order to liquidate themselves . . ."

"Exactly, they're in a pitiful state, it's like looking at rag-bags . . ."

"Toba! . . . Toba! . . ."

"Here comes that poor schoolteacher. Two weeks at it and all he says is 'Toba! . . . Toba! . . .' Victoreana must have taken away his drinking companion. He was hanging around with a fellow who nests there, a man called Rascón. What can I give you, Colonel?"

"Give nothing, Piedrasanta. What I'm going to drink is a little beer, the coldest you've got, and I'm paying in advance."

"No fairy tales. Charging the number-one official in town for a beer!"

"No, sir, it's not the number-one official who's going to drink it, don't confuse the issue, it's a private citizen."

The officer went over to the end of the counter, the part opposite a corner door where Piedrasanta dispensed beer and everything alcoholic across six feet of zinc.

"I like a head on it," the Commandant said, letting the liquid pour from high up, "and with some coarse salt . . ."

"Any way you like it, here's the salt . . . I'll join you with my brandy."

"You're very busy . . ."

"Last night some friends came and they kept me working . . . some people from the Company . . . it seems . . . I don't know whether they told you, that things on the north coast are very bad, there's no agreement either for better or for worse, and right here, Colonel, the thing is starting up right here . . ."

"The what? . . ."

"The thing . . ."

"The bottle's empty, let's have another . . ."

"Some others, I'd say, because you have room, Colonel, you've got the space . . ."

"Like a bullring, thank God . . ." he joked, running his hand with a large garnet that gave off sparks of blood over the bulging world that his tunic, more skirt than tunic, disguised quite well. "The thing is starting up," Piedrasanta said, word by word, and he spun his glass of beer, full once more, around on the zinc.

Piedrasanta took out a plate with some slices of cheese and olives without taking his eyes off the drifting weed who had come in asking for Toba and had fallen asleep on a table covered with flies.

"Always lots of news. You ought to walk around every once in a while. But the news today is sensational. They were expecting a senator for several days lately, but it was a high official of the Company who showed up and they say he almost fired the Manager and a whole bunch of people. Well, we'll see how the Manager gets out of it."

"Embezzlement?"

"Embezzlement, huh! They don't even notice embezzlement because they deal in millions. The game . . ."

"How can it be over games because gambling's against the law!"

"No, Colonel, not some kind of illegal game, that game they call baseball, which makes them lose their heads so much that the Manager, without realizing how hot things are, had them get up a team from among the office workers, level off that field

next to the square, and God knows what else. Because things are getting hot. Did you read the flyer? They slipped it under the door of my store here last night . . ."

The Commandant unfolded the printed slip of paper and couldn't read it in a whisper as he had intended because what was there was shouted out in large black letters:

"GENERAL STRIKE . . ." In the depths of his ears he heard that "Everything under control, Colonel!" with which his underlings kept him dozing.

"There's probably nothing certain, but there's a lot of talk. Some more beer? . . ."

"Go ahead . . . more grain for the turkey!"

"I'll go along with you with another brandy . . ." and while he served the beer and the brandy, Piedrasanta insinuated, "What's for certain is that it gives a person a lot to think about . . ."

"Make the next one dark. Light beer gets too sweet for me . . ."

"You like to vary your drinks, Colonel, and you're quite right, because variety is what a person likes in beer and women."

"I'll go along with the women part, the candle can't keep up with the procession, but I drink beer to keep off the brandy, which is my other weakness . . ."

"Whatever you say . . ."

"And this flyer, has it been passed out in town?"

"In town, on the plantations, everywhere, and it seems that the people here . . ."

"Who? Let's be specific. Who are the people here?"

"The workers want to join the ones on the other coast so that the strike will be general. That's what it says on the sheet."

"With a few executions everything will turn out all right . . ."

"That's what we thought, but over there in Bananera, I don't know if you saw it in the papers, they shot a few people and things are just the same, maybe worse. One must realize that they are men ready to die."

"Yes, it's serious, and around here it must be those Luceros who are behind it."

"Just the opposite. They'll be the first victims. They've been accused of betraying their class, of wanting, like normal rich people, for things to be fixed up little by little, by evolution and without violence, which is playing the Company's game."

"Well, Piedrasanta, how much do I owe you? . . ."

"I'll collect, but have some more, except that we'll stop right here and I won't let you leave without me buying you a drink."

"As the boys say, if you insist . . ."

The "insist" disappeared into a yawn that was so big that the word was scarcely heard, but what could be heard was the sound of the great mouth that opened up to the uvula, showing all of the teeth and the tongue lying underneath.

"Here's your change. You gave me five dollars and it comes to . . . Here you are, good accounts make good friends, Colonel."

"Brandy, give me a brandy . . ."

"Double?"

"Who says I'm afraid . . ."

"Beer's fattening, a shot is better."

"But with the heat of the coast, my friend, a shot is like renting a room in hell."

The teacher, who had stretched out on a bench, was sleeping with his face in the sun, the flies on his face, his arms lying loose, his hair disheveled, his pants unbuttoned, his shoes untied, his socks fallen down. From time to time, when some fly bit him, he would wave the hand that hung from his arm, far away, far down, heavy as lead, move his head and whisper:

"Toba . . ."

"I'm going to have them put that fellow in jail for a few days to make him quit drinking . . ."

"You'd be doing him a great favor, Colonel, because if he goes on like this he's going to die. He doesn't eat or sleep anymore. He goes back and forth, it's pitiful, back and forth with that same chant, 'Toba, Toba . . .' "

Juambo came in as if looking for someone and he immediately went over to the bench where the teacher had run aground.

"Juventino . . . Juventino . . ." He jiggled him to wake him up.

"Toba! . . ." the drunkard half-managed to snort.

"I come for you, Juventino . . . Juambo take you away . . . Mother there . . . Mother have cure for you . . . Have cure that last . . . Juventino . . . Juventino . . ."

He unstuck him from the bench and was carrying him off, almost dragging him, with the help of one of the haulers.

"Mother cure him from drink, have mud, nice and rotten. She'll give him some nice, rotten mud to plug up his urge. Mother know. Is shadow of woman who not walk on ground, held up in air, in flowers, in light. Children are roots that go away, father go away, buried here. Mother woman all alone . . ."

They crossed the square almost carrying the teacher on their shoulders.

"Toba! . . . Toba! . . ."

The square was filled with baptismal crying. At the church entrance, sad because no one was crossing it, church entrances are there for many people to cross, to stop there, from the highest Christians to the souls of Purgatory, the first with their golden breeches and the latter, poor things, with their feet of frightened frogs. At the entrance to the church there was a sudden clustering of clouds of women with newborn children in their arms, reeking of milk, of newly ironed linen, of braids and love not spoken but licked into the ear of the little one, reddish and suppurating.

"The priest must have come down," Piedrasanta said, "because they're going to have baptisms."

"What's the name of the priest?"

"Ferrusigfrido Fejú . . ."

"Where's he from with a name like that? . . ."

"From Comitán de las Flores, he's a Mexican . . ."

"A Mexican? . . . A fine recommendation, just before a general strike! . . ."

"Colonel, before you leave I'd like to ask you for something, a small favor. Next Sunday I want to have some dancing here

and would you give your O.K. to the patrol, to the man in charge, so I don't have to ask for the town's permission. I'm on the outs with the mayor and even if I paid him he wouldn't let me. I'm all set up to have a dance and you can help me."

"There's still time before Sunday, we'll see," the Commandant said as if he were speaking through a funnel as he yawned. "I'm on my way . . . If you don't need it I'll take this paper: 'GENERAL STRIKE' . . ."

"Take it, Colonel, you've got more use for it than I do."

The number-one official took leave of Piedrasanta and left, looking for the sidewalk, where the shade was a tiny strip of black, a greeting here, a greeting there, for, even though the people who passed were few, all of them, acquaintances and strangers, tipped their hats to him.

The storekeeper, happy about having asked for the permission said to himself, "If you don't cry you don't suckle," as he listened to the crying of the little ones in the church, the dance would be very good for business, and he went over to the barbershop where the usual hangers-on were dealing cards.

When Piedrasanta went in someone said to him:

"Did you see how the Yawn was saying hello to everybody, Piedra? . . ."

"I didn't notice . . ."

"You're blind then, you took him to the door, fawning all over him, and you stood there."

In the Equinoxes barbershop the group was somewhat trimmed down. Fever had come over the master barber just when they had all arrived and they got there only to see him slump into the chair across from the mirror, over a carpet of hair that people were afraid to step on because of the lice, nits, and other creatures of the "capillary condominium," as the judge said when he came by to leave his razor for the barber to hone.

And they were talking about the judge and they would have gone on scraping at him with a tool as cruel as the machine that almost pulled the skin off the back of a customer's neck like wood

shavings, if the signal of "heads up" had not been given and Piedra appeared. Courtesy, not mistrust. Piedra was a boon friend of the judicial man and if he had become so upset the time they called him an old man, what would he have become now to hear them calling him "Corky" because of his weightless speeches that floated like a cork and because of the frequency with which he let his lower extremities sink down so much that many people felt that his shoes didn't contain feet but lead weights.

Corky and "peacock," for his vanity was the perfume of silliness the essence of which had been distilled at last. Nothing was unknown to him, he knew everything and, therefore, when they asked his opinion about the "general strike" in the Equinoxes barbershop, after a series of explanations in proof of the fact that the word "strike" did not come from the verb "to strike," as some of his untutored colleagues suspected as they defined it as striking a blow for liberty, he exclaimed:

"Sheets of paper being circulated about a general strike in a country of illiterates? . . . Don't make me laugh, and let me tell you: a peasant and a railroad worker, each one with a paper in his hand, looking like attentive readers when someone happened to pass close by them, and when he saw that they were trying to read it upside down he showed them how to do it. 'Unfair!' they protested, 'just because we're poor they didn't give us the kind you can read right-side up! . . .' And that's not all, let me tell you . . . A sprayer, tired of running his eyes over the text without understanding anything, decided to lick the paper after someone told him that the heading in large letters said 'GENERAL STRIKE,' and he ran his tongue over it there until it broke through the paper . . . And that's not all, let me tell you . . . Three fruit haulers, completely illiterate, desperate at not being able to swallow what the sheet of paper said with their eyes, ate it, neatly chewed and swallowed, like food . . . And that's not all, let me tell you . . . Noodlehead, the military doctor, isn't illiterate but he doesn't like to read. He put the sheet under his pillow and said: 'How dull, another general! . . .'"

"Yes, the whole thing is quite bothersome! . . ." was all that the people gathered there answered him, but when he left, as soon as he left and his footsteps were erased from the street, they gave him the boneless zero tongue, blacker with intent than the ink that was left on that of the sprayer, who, because he could not read, had licked the printed sheet.

And at that point Piedrasanta arrived and the signal of "heads up" went out.

"If the chief barber doesn't get that malaria out of his body," Piedra said as he entered the Equinoxes, "I won't guarantee him any profits . . . He's going to have to take a vacation, a change of climate. If he doesn't he'll end up filling a slot in the cemetery . . ."

The barber moved in his chair. The drowsiness of the fever gave him an image of the world similar to the one reproduced by the hazy mirror in his shop. He felt that he too was losing the quicksilver of his eyes. Fever and, along with the fever, a thin, watery chill.

"Some days ago I advised the chief to get some mercury injected into his blood," Piedrasanta insisted, "that's the only way you can get rid of malaria once and for all. I cured myself with two boxes of those intradevilish things that burn as if they'd injected chile into your veins . . ."

"Señor Higinio must have had syphilis . . ." offered someone who Piedra looked at as though he were not of the human race.

"I didn't have it, but the doctor told me that if the malaria got stronger to inject the . . . that thing . . ."

"The doctor?"

"The doctor from the out-service."

"Then malaria is bad, bad, bad . . ."

"And syphilis can be better. Well, not that it's any better, but it's curable, and that's why to attack certain kinds of malaria that hang on, that stick to the bones, the marrow, and the brain, they give you syphilis, a female disease that doesn't leave any trace of the poor malaria, and then, quite simply, when the male sickness is dead, the female one can be cured."

They were silent. The chatter about the barber's illness was not going well. Some took their hats from the rack to leave. They put them on but they didn't leave. They stayed to thumb through outdated newspapers and magazines, yellow from age, or to look out the door into the hot, deserted street, or to follow from a chair the attack and counterattack of two fierce crickets, the flight of the flies, the strolling of the cockroaches.

"Come on, this fellow just opened a newspaper, and newspapers seem to yawn when a person opens them and doesn't really want to, a signal for guests to leave."

"It's an old newspaper. Listen to what it says: 'Nippon submarine endangers Panama Canal . . . Sighted off the coast of Central America . . .' "

"Exactly what today's paper says. I just read it at Lam the Chinaman's. Except that the submarine isn't Japanese anymore, it's German."

"Tricks of those gringos in the Banana Company who can't find anything else to invent, that's what it's all about," the barber mumbled in a foggy voice. "That business about the Japanese submarine cost the life of a poor telegraph operater named Camey, who was involved, accused of transmitting a message to the Japanese submarine. That was during the war between us and the people in the next country. And now, with the news of a general strike, they've brought the submarine out with a swastika on it."

"The barber's got a good memory, he remembers everything!"

The barber raised himself slightly in his chair, having decided to give the gathering something up to date.

"Since the strike's going to extend to both coasts and over there on the Atlantic they've done great things in dead and wounded . . ."

"Great things?"

"The exact words. They're great things when they're done by soldiers on active duty, because if a military man did the same thing on leave or in the reserves they'd call him a criminal."

He rubbed the thin pants over his skinny legs, the consolation of using his cold flat-iron hands to make the cloth of his pants stick to his bones, and he was silent, savoring the dry bitterness on his lips, broken at the waist, cracked in the ankles, neck, and wrists.

"Señor Higinio will probably say . . ." said the one whom Piedrasanta looked at as if he were not of the same species.

"There's a lot of cloth to be cut. To my mind the best thing is to wait and see . . ."

"Like John the Christian squire, right, Señor Higinio? He won't put his hand in the fire . . ."

"A beautiful definition of one of today's Christians!" the barber exclaimed. "Piedra thinks that you have to wait and see. But times have changed. There's no waiting that's worth anything when it's a war of conscience. Up till now a person could stay outside of what was going on, he could stay at home, not take part. In these times that's impossible, the fight's general."

"The strike's general, not the fight . . ."

"And what's more of a fight than a strike, Señor Higinio?"

"I'm talking about those of us who aren't either workers or rich people, those of us who are really going to come out on the losing end."

"I've already swallowed that," the barber said. "And I've also taken my position: you've got to take part . . ."

"On the Company's side in order to be extra safe," Piedrasanta leaped in, "on the side of capital, of those who have something to lose and will defend it . . ."

The barber pushed on.

"I don't agree with Piedra's opinion. How can we take the side of the Company, the rich people, money? . . ."

"They're the ones who keep us going. What would happen to my business, to Lam the Chinaman's business, to the bar owned by those brothers, I don't know their names, to your barbershop here if the Company didn't pay the wages it does? . . ."

"I agree, but since the problem isn't just ours, three or four

little kittens, but everybody's, and it isn't just the present but the future, we've got to sacrifice, we've got to accept that, and it's better to fall alongside of our own, the workers, than on the side of the others, foreigners . . ."

"Let him speak, barber, let Señor Higinio speak!"

"A complicity that I can't accept," Piedrasanta's voice cut in. "Criminal complicity . . ."

"No, let me talk, it's not a question of complicity, I wasn't talking about that. When I said that our place in this fight between the workers meant abandoning our own little situation, which is more or less good economically, with all of the sacrifices and losses that it implies, and playing an unmistakable role among them, among the working classes, I meant that it will give us back the thing we are, men of the people with a better means of life, and it'll stop us from falling into the temptation of enlarging the ranks of the powerful like so many hired extras."

"The middle class . . ."

"I'd call it the accomplice class . . ."

"Accomplice, why? I don't like your way of arguing, barber, you don't let other people talk . . ."

"Accomplice because it waits and sees and then takes the side of the winner, of the rich people who are winning, the poor never win, and up till today the game has come out well, we, the so-called middle class here, always floating with the tide of the big interests and guns, artisans, businessmen, professionals, but this time our advantage as dealers is over."

"Times have changed, barber . . ." a man with eyes that popped out like large almonds put in, eyes that were bulging and shiny, interrupting the shuffling of a deck that he had kept in motion between his hands all the time, the cards having the flexibility given them by perspiration.

Piedrasanta backed him up:

"That's right, times certainly have changed!"

"Toward what I was saying!"

"No, sir, toward what I've been maintaining, or maybe you

don't know that Don Juancho Lucero asked the Military Command for a patrol to guard his house last night."

"Yes, but last night they were going to dynamite his house!" the one who was shuffling said.

"If the barber has a good memory he'll know what it means . . . Don Juancho Lucero! . . ."

"Yes, it seems incredible . . . but it wasn't Don Juancho, it was the one called Lino, and there's that thing about his past, he was the one in love with Mermaids, and they said he was half-crazy, else they would have fined him as a public nuisance."

"Don Lino or Don Juancho, it's all the same, because what I'm trying to prove is that times have changed and the ones like the Luceros, who had the privilege yesterday of shouting into the face of the Commandant that they didn't need his protection because they were on the side of the people, now run to ask him for soldiers to guard their house, which isn't a house anymore but a palace out of the *Arabian Nights*."

"We won't agree, Piedra, but I think that this proves my point: the Luceros, who weren't even middle-class people, but people-people, have forgotten their origins and, what's worse, the ideals of the one who left them his fortune, in order to join up with the ones on top. In the end they're doing the same thing as the Ayuc Gaitáns and the Cojubuls, except that the others lost their fortunes . . ."

"A shrimp who falls asleep is carried off by the current! They were carried off between the legs of the Green Pope, who doesn't have the dove of the Holy Spirit as his symbol, but the Eagle. They say he bought their shares for next to nothing during the panic, when people thought that our fruit lands were going to go to the country next door."

"Ours? Don't fall on your face, because a slip can be harmful and you might break a bone . . ."

That was said by one of those following the argument in silence, a good friend of Piedrasanta's, and he patted him on the

shoulder as he got up, in order to make him feel that he was speaking to him with affection and in jest.

"If you'd leave the deck alone and tell us about that business of how they were going to dynamite the Luceros' house last night . . ." the barber murmured, the perspiration making him and his clothing cling to the seat.

"I don't have any details, but it seems that they got wind of it, and that the plot had something to do with a senator or some important fruiter-looter who was going to pay a good-neighbor visit . . ."

"And he arrived . . ." the one shuffling added.

"Lies! . . ." the barber's teeth sounded like a clatter. They started those lies themselves in order to give the government an excuse to use their weapons before the general strike was declared on the Pacific side here, because on the Atlantic they've already brought them out. The strikers aren't dynamiters. It's a peaceful movement and the proof that there wasn't any sort of plot is that the Manager and the other officials were having a good time playing baseball on that field they half-leveled."

"But there was the call of the fruiter-looter, who put them up to it when he supposedly came here on inspection," the one who was shuffling insisted.

"All I know is that they're worried about the strike and they want to see if the Luceros will intervene to calm people down, since they most likely don't know anything about it."

A lead mule with a hoe-metal bell ringing on its neck, followed by ten, twenty, thirty, forty mules, burst into the square and, instead of walking along the edges, when they reached the carpeting of grass in the English garden that was the mayor's pride, they went right across it, causing the scandal of the century in the town hall. The police on duty used their clubs to chase them away, the employees ran to protest to the offices, and Don Pascualito almost fainted, sick as he was, in his chair.

The river of long-eared, hairy beasts, shining and sparkling, whirled about for a moment, not knowing which direction to

follow amidst the shouting of the police who were chasing them with their clubs and hats, backed by some local people and boys who came out from all sides.

The priest came out quickly. What was happening, what was going on in the square? . . . Wearing his rochet and with the stole still about his neck, he found himself beside Piedrasanta and the other friends from the Equinoxes group who had run out into the street like everyone else to see what was going on.

"Now you can see, Father, what things are like in town . . ." Piedrasanta commented. "The slightest noise scares us. Not just you but all of us came out to see what was going on with a 'Good Lord' on our lips."

"Can it be that we're standing on a volcano, my dear Higinio?"

"Because of the evangelical competition, Father?"

"Get away with that. There's no competition for what prevails and will prevail."

"We heard that they bought a lot back there to build their chapel, and since the ones who have been conquering us here brought along their own God . . ."

"Your name is Piedrasanta, holy stone, and you should know that there's only one God, the rest are all blasphemies!"

"They've been active in your absence, Father. They've been handing out pamphlets and, what's more convincing, soup . . ."

"Well, they'll soon see that the wind blows in San Juan too . . ." he said and went cassock-dragging back to get on with his baptisms.

He had come out thinking . . . and everyone had come out of doors thinking . . . that the thing had started.

23

Amidst the tread of bare feet that were kneading, scraping the pressed-down earth was the hard step of people wearing shoes. Many barefoot, few with shoes. And a great deal of darkness, with stars and heat and very little brightness from the yellow light of kerosene lamps, from the white, blinding light of acetylene lamps as well as lamps with candles that announced things for sale, and other lamps, red in color and triangular, which gave the password for tamales.

The heat made the cloth stick and unstick, not much of it and quite thin over the hot, dark skin of those who were looking around the musical groups with their wives and children. The earthy silence of a river of soil that moves along. More men than women. The children held up on their shoulders. White hats, black braids. More white hats than black braids, visible by the blackness of the hair on blouses or mirror cloth. Braids, loose hair, white hats. Where the hat ended the darkness began.

Two musical groups with different prices, the more expensive one charged twenty-five cents a dance, the cheaper one ten cents,

were set up where the main street came out onto the square, by the English garden of Don Pascualito, the First Citizen as he had himself called, and who was illuminating the municipal building with a railroad lamp of the type that locomotives carry in front and which gave the First Citizen's guests, seated beside the door in wicker chairs, the look of passengers on a dream train, traveling without rails through the middle of town.

Southern Breezes, the musical group that was the best there was, made those who were on the dance floor of uneven and sparsely spaced planks leave their hats at the entrance if the hats were felt, and matchsticks placed in the band kept a record of the number of dances owed for by the owner, who paid when he got back his hat, which had been changed into a kind of crown of matches if he had danced a great deal. At the Southern Breezes the tables had cloths, the waiters treated the customers formally, one could throw cigarette butts on the floor because no one was dancing barefoot there, and there were sanitary services which not everyone used because one had to be a bit of an acrobat and the broad night was better.

The other group, Blue Horizons, had a place like a huge jail, which one entered through a kind of maze. The couples, as they danced, were herded to one end of the dance floor by means of a rope strung out diagonally, where the people paid their pennies without any halt in their dancing. There were no tables, or very few of them. Benches and seats about the entrance and large signs that said: "Do not throw butts on the floor. They burn the ladies' feet."

Three times the number of people inside the dance pavilions were gathered by the entrances to watch the dancing. The spectacle of couples soaked in sweat, silent, occasionally leaping in order to jump into the depth of the rhythm. The Indians danced solemnly, their faces the same as in church, more like walking, walking in leaps with the partner whom they embraced without seeing her, without feeling her. They were dancing out of ex-

treme sociability with people they knew. María Joshtapac, Lucas the Shark, Andrea Zurza, Luis Gertrudiz, Juana Santos . . .

The halfbreeds danced with the postures of people harnessed by the devil, as Father Fejú said. On some Saturdays, not always, the priest would stay over in town to say mass on Sunday, and when he did stay, he would go out to take a stroll around the dance pavilions.

The halfbreed held his partner as tight as possible and spoke in her ear: flirtation, flattery, and tongue. At the Southern Breezes, where the whites danced, one could hear the talking before, during, and after each fox trot, waltz, tango, son, or two-step, not as on the other dance floor, Blue Horizons, where the poor people were dancing. The religious feeling of the dance, ancestral in the Indian, demanded that they be silent as they danced.

Howls of drunkards, shots in the air, rockets, stray cows and horses who wandered through the festival like sleepwalkers.

Piedrasanta was busy lighting up his business for food and drink. He placed the tables in a circle to make room for a dance floor, and he wound up the phonograph. If things went well he would buy a jukebox, and if they got even better he would hire a marimba group, as at the dance pavilions. Right now, with few people and on a small scale, the phonograph was enough. And it was even attractive to listen to music and voices in a foreign language in the midst of the dialect of the marimba bands.

The mayor called the most energetic of his police and told him to ask Piedrasanta by whose authority he was having dancing in his place. The policeman returned, in sandals and with the smell of damp clothing, for he had put on his clothes before they were fully dry, to inform Don Pascualito that Don Higinio said that the Commandant had given his authorization.

"We'll see about that," the Mayor said. "We'll see when the patrol comes by, and from what I hear, it's going to be good-sized and fancy."

And two columns were not long in appearing, man after man,

a regular army. Among the "watchers," as they called the people who enjoyed themselves looking at the dancing from outside the enclosures, the word "every man for himself" went around and before the patrol could begin its work, just as chickens disappear at the sight of a hawk, everybody fled and the only ones left were the big roosters or the ones who had a pact with the devil.

Groups of soldiers broke apart like kernels from an ear of corn, one hand on their cartridge belts, the other on their rifles, chasing the slowest to flee and disappearing no less rapidly into the brush, the gullies, and planted fields.

. . . On the broad, flat plains of the sea,
the sea,
watch the submarines pass on the lee,
the lee . . .

The powder flashes and the dry echo of the shots stood out against the deep marine darkness where the patrol was shooting at those who were singing that forbidden song.

. . . On the broad, flat plains of the sea,
the sea,
watch the submarines pass on the lee,
the lee . . .

"It really was raw, Father! . . ." Piedrasanta said to Father Fejú as he came in while the priest sat hiding in a room behind the counter sipping a cup of hot chocolate.

"It's very good, they cooked it well . . ."

"I'm not talking about the chocolate but about a great big patrol that's shooting . . ."

"But they won't do anything to you, Higinio . . ."

"Oh, Father Ferrusigfredo, the least they can do is haul me off under arrest and wreck my store. I'm going to wake my wife. The poor thing is asleep. She has to get up and supervise the baking of the bread. We do everything here on Saturdays: dancing, drinking, baking bread . . ."

Don Higinio's helper went to find out who was in charge of

the patrol and came back to tell him. He was panting and couldn't get out the name or names. There were two officers, Cárcamo and Salomé. Salomé stayed behind in town with part of the patrol and Cárcamo went into the brush after the ones causing the uproar.

Piedrasanta had a feeling of relief, believing that he was on friendly terms with Captain Salomé, the young officer who had been a second lieutenant when they were about to declare war over the boundaries and came back a captain.

The mayor, leaving the area of his locomotive headlight with the few and chosen people whom he had invited to enjoy things from the doors of the town hall, from the English garden, blinded with light, across from the people who admired them, blinded with darkness, and he went in search of the person in charge of the squad. Well, Don Pascualito didn't really know the difference between a patrol and a squad. Everything that smelled of uniforms was a squad to him because in its charge the National Army had the last sacrament, worse than marriage, worse than holy orders, worse than extreme unction, the sacrament of the firing squad. That measuring of sacraments from worst to best exasperated Father Fejú.

Don Pascualito faced Captain Salomé with all the symbols of the law, his aedile's staff, and the habit of command that gave him by a voice with an authoritarian tone. They chatted, exchanged cigarettes, blinked several times at the headlight by the town hall, and the mayor had his say:

"All right, I'm not opposed to the Commandant's wishes, but one piece of advice: you should warn that rascal to stop playing the two-step *Machaquito*, and another one: he should stop by the treasury and pay the tax due for holding a dance along with the other ones he hasn't paid, for running a bakery, a store, a bar."

The soldiers' footsteps and the sound of their weapons, which rattle even without being touched, like the key-rings of death, echoed tragically in Piedrasanta's establishment. Footsteps, weapons . . . Weapons, footsteps . . .

"St. Bonaventure!" Piedrasanta shouted when he heard them stop in front of his door.

"My friend," Father Fejú calmed him, "let's get it while it's hot, the way they do in Mexico, because cold lead hurts more. What has to come sooner or later is best when it's sooner!"

Captain Salomé put his face in the door by the bar and greeted Piedrasanta with a "Good evening, how are things going?" words that magically put an end to the storekeeper's panic.

Piedra answered and went to the door to greet the captain, anxious to find out what orders he was bringing. The other man, placing his dark hands on the hilt of his sword, told him that he was authorized by the Commandant to let the couples keep on dancing just as long as they didn't play the two-step called *Machaquito*—and to go pay his tax.

Father Ferrusigfrido, twiddling his thumbs, the best exercise, according to monks, for digesting chocolate, waited for the storekeeper to come back. A long while, because Piedrasanta could not tear himself away from the door until Captain Salomé went off after his silent men to check the dance pavilions.

"Luckily, everything happened without anything happening, Father, I can go ahead with all this," and he pretended to be dancing, "just as long as they don't play *Machaquito*!"

"And why might that be, Piedrasanta?"

"You wouldn't believe it. That two-step is sung with words that start: 'Where are you off to, Machaquito, with that high-class strut?' and the boys sing it to the mayor: 'Where are you off to, Pascualito, with that fat-ass slut? . . .' "

"What a tongue, what a tongue!"

"And now that everything has turned out all right you need another cup of chocolate. Chocolate doesn't taste like chocolate when there's trouble around. For it to taste like real cocoa it has to be drunk with pleasure. As for me, I'm going to have a taste of anisette and water."

"There's only one chocolate . . ."

"Like God . . ."

"Piedrasanta, you know that you mustn't touch God with dirty hands in my presence . . ."

"I noticed you were a little worried, Father, and you know I have a good eye. I had my worries, but I could see them in someone else's eyes too. You're carrying a load on your back that won't let you sleep. What's wrong? You know very well that in matters of friendship I'm what you Mexicans calls an ax at the ready."

"My son, the darkest nights are those that we feel inside of ourselves, where the soul leaves things in darkness, and we feel groping with our hands in the dark to see if there is a way out, and we can't find it."

"Father Ferrusigfrido, everything has a cure except death . . ."

"And who needs a cure for what's our salvation . . ."

"And everything has a way out except hell . . ."

"That's why you've said that I've been trembling tonight, as if they were looking for me to whip me, to tear me apart. Hell is a lake with streams we know flowing in, but with no way out . . ."

"But what does it matter to you, you're a priest and you'll go to heaven . . ."

"That's what you think . . ."

"I thought you were worried about the strike."

"That's what it's all about. This is one of the darknest nights of my soul, Piedrasanta, and my hands are groping in the shadows looking for a way out and I can't find it."

"But you don't come from here . . ."

"It doesn't matter that a person's the salt of the earth if that salt of the earth loses its taste and he can't get it back. What will happen if we clerics keep our arms folded with the conflicts that labor problems bring up, and what will happen if we take the side of the bosses?"

He grew silent and loosened the collar of his cassock. His beard gave him a pain that he couldn't get rid of, a black dagger of damp cloth that incorporated the heat of the burning atmosphere, the soupy sound of the phonograph and the restlessness

that it produced until it broke the rhythm of pulsation and revealed the infinite orphanhood of man.

"The general strike is going to put us all in a blind alley," he murmured, almost sobbbing, with the storekeeper far away from what he was saying, following what was going on in his establishment with watchful eyes.

The people taking care of it were all right, but in the owner's eyes they were too eager for profit. They shouldn't serve that Negro any more, for example. He gets abusive when he gets drunk. And that lock-faced person with a key for a nose only comes to see who he can bother. Just the other day the wife of a fireman gave him a whack that made him see stars. The one-eyed man brought a fine female. He keeps on drinking beer because he wants to smell like a German. What he stinks of is pus . . .

"Yes, the general strike is going to put us all in a blind alley," Father Fejú went on, talking more to himself than to Piedrasanta. "The first thing it raises is a serious struggle of the conscience. Just because of the danger for the established order these social movements have in them, should we judge the workers badly? Shouldn't we understand, perhaps, those of us who aren't workers, what it means to give up the product of one's work voluntarily and face being laid off and the possibility of violence? A person who's attended a meeting of men who agree to strike by their own free will, the way I did in Mexico, only sees bodies, faces, erect heads, he hears the words of the speeches, feels the thrust of that seeing mass which seems blind, but he doesn't realize that behind those lives is the daily bread, their wives' and children's daily need to eat, the need for clothing, shoes, medicine . . . I'm not the one who's called upon to tell you this, Piedrasanta, but I do think that there's a touch of heroic Christianity in every strike . . ."

"Keep on talking, Father. That way you'll get it off your chest . . ."

"I'm not the one who should be talking, the curia is, and the

sooner the better. It's letting the idea that the church is against them take root in the workers' minds and that can't be."

"Luckily, they all love you . . ."

"I'm talking about the church, not my humble person, because, after all, there can't be any problems for me. I'm the son of a village craftsman, I grew up among people who were really poor. The Mexican in me is gnawing at me and I miss my Little Mother of Guadalupe so much . . . That's what I came about . . ."

The heat was suffocating, roasting, burning. Chombo, the Panamanian Negro, and a Negro woman with a weepy way of talking were stringing out the lazy motions of a kind of *danzón* that was soaked in silences, not dancing, but getting close to one another, rubbing, rubbing . . . The woman was laughing . . . Sometimes she wasn't dancing with the tips of her toes on the ground but with the tips of her breasts on the Negro's chest. Chombo was gathering white saliva, from coconut milk, to swallow or to spit out.

"Spit, spit it up to the sky and let it fall down onto your fat lips! . . ." the woman poured into his ear.

Chombo, with goose pimples and no body fuzz, only the pores sticking out, showed the whites of his eyes. He could also laugh with his eyes. The Negro woman didn't like him to make that face.

"Chombo, don't dance like a dead man . . ."

From the back room, fixed up like a small parlor with wicker furniture, family pictures in small frames, the exact time on a bronze clock, paper flowers, fans and peacock feathers, where Father Ferrusigfrido was chatting with Piedrasanta, the latter was still intent on what was going on in his establishment at the other end of the counter, because at his end, beyond the bar part, even the flies were asleep.

"I don't remember whether I got around to waking up my wife or not. She has to be at the kneading trough, and there's something else, the baker gave notice a few days back that if the strike is declared here he won't bake any more bread out of solidarity with the workers on the plantations. There's a whole pile of words

that we never heard before and that people hear all the time now . . . So . . . li . . . da . . . ri . . . ty . . ."

"I've got to go, Piedrasanta . . ."

"Are you leaving, Father? You might say that you've already delivered your sermon about the strike to the accompaniment of a fox trot. You did what the evangelists do, pounding it out like a regular melody."

"But I've got my ally against those people and that's why I came by, not to talk about the strike. I want a picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe, regular size, that we can enthrone on the main altar."

"You've found a good ally against the Evangelists, the Protestants, the Pentecostals, and the . . . strikers!"

"Never against the strikers, don't mix the fat with the lard. She's an Indian, barefoot and dark-skinned, and she can't be against people who are just like her."

Chombo the Negro, making his voice sound weepy in imitation of the woman with him, a skull pulled out of a fire and mounted onto the top of a yellow dress, was singing to her:

At a sad little table,
what will they say, say, say,
a green lime with leaves,
I get close and you draw back,
I draw back and you get mad,
hear me, my beauty and love . . .

They say that you love me no more,
what will they say, say, say,
'cause I've got no breeches to wear,
but you've got no skirt on either,
just your underpant things,
hear me, my beauty and love . . .

Father Ferrusigfrido tried to rub his hands, but, soaked with sweat as they were, it was difficult to slide one against the other, and he contented himself with a smile. He left, smelling of cosmetics made rancid by the heat and the sweaty cassock.

The dance pavilions were empty. The few people there had been chased off by the patrol. Don Pascualito dissolved the existence of everything that his brilliant headlight had brought to life on the square, took leave of his friends, and left with his wife on his arm, terribly annoyed at the Commandant.

"There's no such thing as a good freemason," he said to his wife. "Authorizing that rogue to have dancing at the Golden Ball! It was good that the patrol came and there weren't many people! After all, he did follow orders and not play *Machaquito*, most likely because Father was there. No, I shouldn't hold your arm . . . it's just that I can hear it, I can hear . . . I hear the music and the words . . . 'Where are you off to, Don Pascualito, with that whore on your arm? . . .'"

"Oh, is that what they say? You didn't tell me, Pascual! They'll find out who I am. I'll give them something to sing about! I'll make them sing: 'Where are you off to, Don Pascualito, with the mayor's wife on your arm? . . .'"

In the darkness, past the compact clumps of trees, among some houses, some streets with ruts, some bridges over glimmering irrigation ditches, a white-painted building lighted with electricity. On the front one could read the words: "The Good News." Inside, a man was orating from a kind of pulpit and a hundred or so people spread out on benches, chairs, and stools were listening to him.

". . . It's not that a camel could not pass through the eye of a needle," he preached, "but through the Gate of the Needle, which was the narrowest gate in Jerusalem. A camel could pass through the Gate of the Needle before a rich man could pass through the Gate of Heaven . . . Jesus could not exaggerate . . . He was an objective man . . . And we have the Gate of the Needle, through which a camel cannot pass, and we have the Gate of Heaven through which not a single rich man shall pass . . ."

"Oh, woe . . ." Goodie, one of those present, rose up shouting, "oh, woe upon the city of New York, that powerful city! Woe,

your judgment comes at any time! And the merchants of the land will break out in weeping and lamentation: for no one will buy their merchandise anymore. Merchandise of gold and silver, and stones and pearls, and delicate linen, and purple cloth, and silk and scarlet, and scented woods, and all manner of ivory objects, and precious stones, and bronze and iron, and marble, and cinnamon or clove, and perfumes, and fragrant ointments, and incense, and wine, and oil, and flour, and wheat, and beasts of burden, and sheep and horses, and carts, and slaves, and the lives of men or gladiators . . . Oh, woe, New York! . . . The traffickers in those things who grew rich will go far from thee, with fear and moaning, and weeping they will say: 'Alas, alas, the great city that was dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet robes, and covered with gold and precious stones and pearls . . . see how so much wealth was reduced to nothing in an instant . . . how it was deserted in a moment . . . and every pilot and every sailor on the sea will stop from afar, seeing the place that had been New York, the smoke . . ."

A group of listeners arose to help him. Goodie was in a full apocalyptic delirium, while a benchful of old women with the faces of bankers, Bibles in their hands, beat signs of approval on their heads.

"Gudeycito . . . !" they said to him with the tender voices of weak men who know that they are speaking in Spanish, half-naked, skin the color of a green banana, "Gudeycito, Gudeycito, you're a holy gringo, a miserable person like us, with no pillow except your Bible and no bed except the ground . . ."

"My dearly beloved brethren," a powerful voice arose with the reestablishment of the respectful silence which had held them before Goodie's shouts. It was the Reverend Cassey, pastor of the Congregationalist Church of Los Angeles, "my dearly beloved brethren, let us examine tonight the danger of those who disfigure the teachings of Christ for fear of the truth. They repeat eloquently from their thrones, which once were sacred, that Jesus drove the moneylenders from the temple, but they say it

with their eyes closed so as not to see the moneylenders and be forced to drive them out of their own temples and congregations. They are moneylenders, they will tell you, then, excusing themselves, or trying to excuse themselves, but only God can look into the hearts of men, as if moneylenders had hearts and as if the Lord had expected his Holy Father to cast his eyes into the breasts of Carthaginians. He drove them out and it was the only time that he revealed himself to us as angry and wrathful. The moneylender should not be in the temple but outside of it . . ."

Father Fejú had stopped to listen to the evil preaching, holding his rosary, his tonsured head resting on the white edge of his collar and on the darkness of the night, which was like an immense cassock. "Why are we priests not permitted," he asked himself, "to enter into debate with these incarnations of the devil? Because of freedom of worship? A fine freedom! If we could face them . . . I would face him . . . Why not? . . . What would you face him with? . . . Have you thrown the moneylenders out of the temple? . . ." He bit his tongue intentionally. He gave such a bite that it hurt him down to the nerves.

A railroad worker, reddened by the blush brought on by his speaking in public, broke out when it was no longer possible for him to be silent:

"Enough, Reverend Cassey, enough . . . When are the Middle Ages going to end? The word of God is preached as if God wasn't interested in what's going on in the world right now. You people, his representatives, are outside of it because you're blind, deaf, and crippled, but not God, no . . . His stories about the camel and the eye of the needle, about driving out the moneylenders don't mean a thing in this century where not even Samson could tear down the temple that's been built on pillars of dollars . . . What can be done, Reverend Cassey, to throw the banana growers out of their temple, the ones who manipulate fifteen hundred million dollars? . . . Ha, ha, ha, the camel, the moneylenders, fairy tales. You people have turned sacred history into a fairy tale! . . . Why don't churches and congregations take

up the problems of the day: infant mortality, minimum salaries, a living wage, security for old age? . . ."

Father Ferrusigfrido Fejú did not listen to anything else. He plunged into the blackest part of the darkness with his handkerchief in his hand to wipe the sweat that was pouring over him. Everything smelled of flowers and gleaming fruit. The pounding of the sea could be heard, as if a second nature existed to penetrate things. Weeping came over his eyes.

"Away, tears, away!" he said to himself. "The excrement of cowards!"

He bit his handkerchief, tore it with his teeth, and he wiped away his tears with the pieces.

He went along through the streets of the town as if lost, through the few streets of the town. They were calling him. He felt that they were calling him. All of his parishioners were dying. "Confession, confession," they begged him. They were not dying but fighting. Raising the flag with the divine image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Hadn't Father Hidalgo been a simple priest like him? . . . What was he waiting for? What were they waiting for to begin the fight? . . .

In the silence of the night, more padded now, part of the patrol was dragging its sleepiness, heat, and fatigue along toward the military post. Captain Salomé, as he passed by the chapel of those who were preaching the Good News, stopped with his men to listen.

Reverend Cassey was answering the railroad worker:

"I cannot see why this dear brother of ours doubts that commerce can be combined with religion for the benefit of the workers . . ."

"I protest!" The hand was raised as if in class for permission to speak. It was a lady who looked young because of the freshness of her white, pinkish skin in contrast to her gray hair. "Reverend Cassey cannot offer as a valid solution to the problem something that was denounced in *The Witness*, our church publication, and concerned the objective of this pretended understand-

ing between the clergy and business, enslaving the working class, depriving it of the fifth freedom, the freedom of initiative."

"I'm not offering anything," Cassey argued, with the friendliest of voices, "and if my understanding is correct, the protest in *The Witness* was directed more than anything against the invasion of the religious field by great corporations."

"We resist and we'll keep on resisting," the mellow voice of the lady rose and she stood up. "Our churches and congregations have shown that they have great moral strength, but the great corporations seem to be turning their eyes toward the Catholic religion . . ."

"My dear brethren," Cassey cut in, "let us call an end to our meeting by singing the second hymn in the prayer book."

And they all stood up to sing:

God lifted his hands,
which are the hands of men who work,
and he said to them: Build the city!
and it was built . . .

God lifted his hands,
which are the hands of men who work,
and he said to them: Destroy the city!
and it was destroyed . . .

Salomé went on his way at the head of his men. The Sunday peace was beginning in the fields. Corporal Rancún took his arm to hold him back as they passed by a wooded place where the dirt road they were following went up over the railroad tracks, and he pointed to an owl on top of a rubber plant.

The Captain and the patrol detoured so as not to pass close to the bird of ill omen and, just as a snake cut into pieces comes back together, the half of the patrol under the command of Captain Cárcamo joined the column and it went forward as one body.

"It wasn't by chance that you came to my tent yesterday, right, Captain?" Cárcamo said when he caught up with Salomé.

"And you didn't know that the chief told me all about the supplies we have to ask for if the famous strike comes off."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Captain. We have to order lots of ammunition, a good supply of machine-guns and rifles . . ."

"They say they're going to send hand grenades . . ."

"The best thing, don't you think?"

"The worst is that you're wasting a lot of bullets, Captain Cárcamo. Just tonight I must have heard a thousand shots."

"Don't exaggerate, friend, I don't think you've got such a bad ear for rifle fire . . ."

"Did you capture or kill anyone?"

"Those were the orders, but we shot into the air . . ."

"That's good . . ."

"We turned the hounds loose after we ran around three times in one direction and three in the other. I can see that you're someone a person can talk to, Captain Salomé."

"What about?"

"I'll come by to see you in your tent. Who was your bunkmate at school, if you don't mind my asking? . . ."

"Augustín Yáñez . . ."

"I didn't know him . . ."

"That's odd because he was stationed in the capital for a long time . . ."

"Do you write each other?"

"Only birthday cards. He's a lively kind."

"My bunkmate was Timoteo Benavides, but we weren't very close: at a party at the Club he tried to get a girl away from me and Stud Cárcamo won out. The son of a gun called me that ever since."

"I know him quite well," Salomé said. "He was going to be best man for a cousin of mine, but just then they sent him off on a mission and . . ."

"And that's why he knows the Mexican border like the back of his hand. He's got ahead of us, he's a major already."

"No more promotions, right?"

"Right."

24

"She's Indian, Indian, Indian," Father Fejú was saying to himself. "She didn't come from any Sinai, pass through any Bible. She emerged like the rose of dark-skinned America from the rose bushes of Tepeyac."

He watched the morning arrive as the last stars dissolved in the pinkish gold, a roof of twinkling stars with a different fire, from pink to the one of Mary's.

"Mary, morning star!"

He was already on his feet, soaked in the hot soup of the sheets, which he removed by a bath taken with a gourd and water in an improvised tub, and he felt refreshed from head to toe. Soap and water. More soap and water.

He dressed by the light of a candle, even though the celestial light of day made the objects spread out on a table visible, a wooden Christ in the center, an old carving that he had brought from his homeland and which was said to have traveled many miles with Fray Bartolomé de las Casas.

It bothered him not to have an image of the Virgin of Guada-

lupe and he turned around, looking from one side to the other, as if there, where there was nothing but the unplastered walls, there would be a miraculous appearance of the queen who had refused to remain only in heaven for the joy of the angels and had fastened herself in rose petails onto the hairy surface of Juan Diego's poncho.

He rubbed his hands. He didn't have her divine image, but he knew something about painting and drawing. To sketch and color her with the colors of the morning. But where and with what? And why didn't he think of roses? . . . For in order for her to paint herself there was no need of colors or art, simply roses and the faith of the Indian, so that perhaps somewhere around there some of those precious flowers might contain her. He would put pink, white, and yellow petals together and he would see her clearly by just looking at the roses he had put together.

But no, there were no roses. The flowers on the altars were made of paper and those most evident were some gladioli that were already withered and some jasmines oxidized by the heat.

He hurried from the room to the sacristy to get ready for mass, thinking how limited man was when he tried to make use only of material resources. "Because why, Lady of Guadalupe, cannot this humble ordinary priest of yours paint you as you should be, not with roses, or brushes, or colors, but with words? Isn't that easy to understand, my Lady? Why should we be confused, then? . . . As clumsy as my words may be, if you illuminate me, you will live in the atmosphere of the church, along this whole coast, if you illuminate, if you move my tongue with your inspiration, the inspiration of an Indian woman who goes to the fountain to fill her jug, to the market to buy food, who returns home and helps everyone, because there is no trouble that cannot be lessened by you, no pleasure or joy that you do not take part in . . . Indian girl! Indian! Indian! . . ."

And he took such pleasure in calling her Indian there where everything stank of Yankees, that he forgot he was saying mass when he leaned over to recite the *Confiteor Deo.*

The atmosphere calmed down a little. He saw that the church

was full when he turned for the *Dominus vobiscum*. Kind winds were blowing from the sea, sweeping away the drowsy atmosphere of the past few days a little.

And after the Gospel he mounted the pulpit and began, as if speaking to someone who was present there:

"Indian woman, Indian woman of America! . . ."

"That little priest likes fish without bones," the mayor commented in the barbershop. "Nothing less than a Virgin made of roses without thorns."

The master barber, stupefied from malaria, turned his back. He would have liked to have shown Don Pascualito something lower than his back for being such an imbecile. And he answered him:

"That's not it, friend, if you want thorns there's the prickly pear, and people eat it even if they get needles in their hands."

But the beard-scraper was in such bad physical shape that Don Pascualito considered the slap of the answer as the product of the biliousness and impatience brought on when the malaria hit his nerve centers.

"Barber, what you have to do is cure that trouble you've got, you used to be so sociable and now there's no talking to you. Before you used to read the *Oráculo* to us and we'd play cards and dominoes. The Equinoxes was our social club, and now all we do is hear you chewing and savoring the meat of the fever you've got in your mouth."

When the mayor left and he was alone, the barber called Mincha, his third wife, whom he therefore called Third Round, big-bottomed, ugly, and squat, and he asked her to run to the church and get Father Fejú. When the woman heard that she began to weep bitterly. Shriek after shriek. And she would not have calmed down if the poor man had not straightened up in the chair where he had been anchored for days on end to say:

"Don't be stupid, don't be silly, I'm not sending for him because I'm dying but because I want to give him that picture we have in the bedroom."

Mincha, when she heard that, flew to the sacristy to get the

priest. And as her husband had advised her, she clenched her teeth rather than tell him why he was being summoned, because her old man, poor thing, wanted the pleasure of making the gift a surprise.

She swallowed her tongue so as not to tell the priest the motive of the summons and so that he wouldn't think that it had to do with the serious state of the sick man, and she didn't let it out. She came back. They had to dust the holy image a little because it was so covered with dust and cobwebs.

Father Ferrusigfrido didn't ask her why he had been called. A Christian settling accounts with God at the hour of his death, he supposed. And he was not long in showing up at the Equinoxes.

"A holy good morning to you . . ." he said, appearing in the mirror.

The barber, fastened in his chair, saw him in the mirror that was hanging opposite the street door.

"Greetings, Father . . ." Don Yemo answered him.

"How are you feeling? . . . I heard that you were sick . . . Your wife asked me to come and see you and here I am."

"Thank you for coming. I heard that you were talking about the Virgin of Guadalupe this morning in your sermon, that you were sorry you didn't have a picture of her in the church . . . This morning, in the sermon . . ."

Fatigue prevented the barber from speaking. He was silent, his eyes fastened on the floor, his body frozen, his hair crystallized like ice, the cartilage of his ears transparent. His wife came to rub his dry lips with some cocoa butter.

"There . . ." he tried to point with his arm. Mincha stopped, to give him pleasure and to let him point wherever he wanted to, why should she deprive him of his favorite gesture, copied from Napoleon? "There, in that room, we have an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, take it, take it, I want it to be in the church . . ."

Father Fejú, dismissing the painful picture of the sick man, who was staring at the floor, rubbed his hands, applauded and broke out into a great "Glory be! . . ."

And as soon as he crossed the threshold of the room he fell on his knees before the image that the wife had taken down to dust and which was on the floor, leaning against the wall.

He came out hugging it. He didn't see the sick man. The proximity of death was unable to cloud his joy. Let the dead bury the dead. He would enthrone the American Indian woman in his church, he, he, Ferrusigfrido Fejú, and he would teach them all to say:

You were born from the roses,
what doubt can there be,
as oranges come
from the blooms on their tree!

The smoke of the brazier
at your feet did burn,
changed into roses, then
became you in turn!

On Juan Diego's poncho
Freedom was seen,
blood and fire, Hidalgo,
your fight, Lady Cuauhtemocín!

Men of all ages who were lying on the ground with no more clothing than a breech-clout were silent. It was not easy to answer. They remained as silent as Sunday after it was proposed that they do no more work if the pay wasn't better.

It was proposed by a man just back from the plantations who carried the fire of the earth and the fire of the air in his voice, a certain Andrés Medina.

"Is there much fruit cut?" someone asked.

"There's some," the newcomer answered, "and they're still cutting, because there's no Sunday for the cutters."

"There must be a ship in port . . ."

"So much the better . . ."

"No one loads, then, boys, unless they pay more . . ."

"What if they fine us?"

"Why, is it a crime to put a price on your work? We'll tell them before we begin loading that we want so much more pay and see what they say. If they pay us that, we'll work. If they don't pay, we won't."

"Fine! . . . Since they can't let the fruit spoil and since they can't leave the ship waiting for its cargo either, I'm sure that we can get them to raise our pay those few cents more."

"So," another said, "this is the end of the meeting at the Prospector's Sandpit, and as far as I'm concerned they can fire me before I'll lift a bunch if they don't pay us what we've said. I'll take an oath on it! . . ."

"Let's all take an oath. We'll call it the Oath of the Prospectors."

They stood up to swear. The older ones quietly, they were already clods ready for the earth. Those in their forties with dry voices. The younger ones more loudly.

They agreed at once to visit the other camps, to come back and meet again next Sunday at the Prospector's Sandpit at the hour of Christ's death, three o'clock in the afternoon, and not to say a word. The work stoppage, if they didn't raise their pay, should look like something spontaneous. Fate would choose the first one to refuse, the one who would also be called on to speak out and raise the demands for better pay.

They passed the camp of the weeders. They were resting on the flat ground, brutalized by fatigue, without closing their eyes in order to be aware that they were alive, or else closing their lids tightly in order to erase existence. They were there on a Sunday waiting for tomorrow's work. Theirs was not a Sunday but a waiting for work. They were not sleeping. The drowsiness filled the depths of their consciousness.

Opposite a group of those human animals, nothing but a few rags covering their privy parts, a troop of girls dressed in blue stopped, white collars and cuffs, white shoes, and a blue head-covering with a white rim across their foreheads.

"*Watchtower! . . . Watchtower! . . . Watchtower! . . .*" a magazine printed on shiny paper announced.

One of the weeders sat up to listen to the message of the Good News that one of them was reading in the bad Spanish she had learned in high school. Porcelain faces, porcelain eyes, porcelain hands, and the Gospel with porcelain pictures.

The breathing of the men, indifferent to everything, was behind the girls, the nostrils of beasts sniffing at the end of Sunday for what Monday had in store for them. It meant weeding the densest parts, where the thickness of humus in the flow of water continued under the moving earth. First getting out the weeds to let the sunlight in. Then filling it in, leveling it off so that it would dry properly, and finally to plant the new shoots. What the Company had was "gross," but they wanted more of it, and that more could only be sought toward the sea, toward malaria, toward snakes, toward death.

The purveyors of the Good News set out toward the workers' houses.

"Watchtower! . . . Watchtower! . . . Watchtower! . . ."

Some workers were stretched out on hammocks, some had no hammocks. There was no Sunday in the rear of the houses beside the water spigots and cook fires. They savored the girls with greedy eyes, as the latter smiled while they explained the gospel of the day to a circle of women and naked children, little pigeons on the males, poorbox slots on the females. Then they handed out the magazines.

The Prospectors went their separate ways, some to the camps, some to town, some around the yards, some among the unemployed, and they met again later in the night around the cook fires to compare findings.

"Very favorable . . ." said the one who came back from looking at the cutting. "They're cutting a lot and all that they can, and since there's a moon they're going to cut quite late. So there's more of a chance that they'll raise us. They'd rather pay than lose all that fruit."

Less optimistic was the report from the one who had wandered around among the unemployed.

"There are a lot of people looking for a 'Monday shift . . .' If we refuse to work they'll take them all on."

"If they take them on we'll be forced to work . . ."

"Not me. I swore not to work if they don't give me more pay and I won't load a single bunch even if they cut me in half. Besides, who can tell but that those people looking for a 'Monday shift' will refuse to take our places when they see us thrown out of work for asking for better pay . . ."

The one who came back from talking to the fruit haulers in the group, including the Hindu, King Benigno, Partridge, Pieface Porras, Sholón, Bucul, and Motejute said that they were resentful at not being consulted, but they were solidly behind the idea.

A lot of fruit cut and a lot of unemployed men to take on the work if they refused to load, those were the extremes of the matter, and as a remote possibility: that the unemployed would refuse to take their places when they saw that they'd been fired for asking for better wages.

And the one who had drawn that conclusion had not finished speaking when the one who was coming back from town appeared in the midst of a lot of sneezing.

"I've been somewhere you can't imagine . . . I was in church . . . the priest's gone crazy . . . he's shouting that we workers should say to the bunches of fruit: 'Someday you'll be worth for us what you're worth for other people today . . .' And he said that we're not alone on the plantations because we have with us a Virgin who's like us, a full-blooded Indian . . . No foreigners. The Mother of God is an Indian and she's on our side if we ask for her help. An Indian woman, barefoot, with black hair and slanted eyes."

"This one's report doesn't change the conclusion: a lot of fruit cut and a lot of unemployed people waiting to be signed up on Monday morning . . ." the one who headed them repeated, and he stepped aside to read a message that he had just been given by the one who came from the station at Río Bravo.

"Results tomorrow will influence the decision to accelerate general strike. No step backward." Signed with a code name.

He folded the paper two times, four, six, eight, made a pill of it and swallowed it.

"God made us and the strike brings us together," he said to himself. "We're going to be with Octavio Sansur again. I recognized him the other night but I lost sight of him. Friend Key, whose name should be more like "Passe-Partout" because he opens all doors, told me that he'd been through here. What a serious responsibility, this movement, and since it's spread to the Pacific why not to the north coast of Honduras, because there are many companies and one true monopoly? Why don't we set ourselves up as opposition to one single front? . . . And talking about the north coast, Clara María Suay didn't recognize me . . . She's close to one of the officers of the garrison . . . It would be useful talking to her, to remind her of her days in the Happy Memory Tavern . . ."

The footsteps quieted down in the camp. A howl. Perhaps a coyote. The whistle of a train. Later on the patrols. And the voice of some jokester:

"Why don't you arrest the heat?"

Voices, shouts, the blows of rifle butts . . .

"What's going on?"

"Nothing, on your way!"

"I live here . . ."

"Then get inside . . ."

"Cárcamo, is that you? . . . I didn't recognize you . . . It's Andrés Medina! . . ."

"Where did you come from, Andresito?"

"I came to the camp . . ."

"Are you working? . . ."

"I'm cutting fruit. What about you? I can see you're with the garrison. Have you been stationed here long?"

"Four months . . ."

"Are you happy? . . ."

"Not very . . ."

"I'll come see you on one of your days off . . ."

"Come by whenever you want to . . ."

"I'll bring you some Spanish plums. Do you remember when I used to bring you Spanish plums at school? . . ."

"I've got to go, Andresito, because I've got to go pick up another officer and it's a long way. I'll look into the other camps on the way. What can you tell me about the strike?"

"I don't know anything . . . I'll walk along with you . . ."

"And where have you been?"

"On the north coast . . ."

"That's where the woman of that officer I'm going to get comes from. Her last name is Suay."

"Oh, yes!"

They walked in silence. Andrés insinuated:

"So you're not too happy and you have all those advantages: time in service counted double, better pay, no doubt, and the privilege of buying your things at the commissary and taking advantage of your free time to play pool, have a swig, bowl, dance, and everything else the gringos do."

"I detest them . . ."

"Do you speak English?"

"I studied it, but I don't speak it . . ."

"That's funny, I thought that you officers were great pals of theirs . . ."

"Appearances are deceptive, Andresito . . . and changing the subject, I don't even like to talk about them, do you remember Malena Tabay? She's still headmistress of the school in Cerropóm . . ."

"She's been there quite a few years . . . Didn't she get married? . . ."

"No . . ."

"Your first love, Cárcamo . . ."

"That's what the gossips say . . ."

"But let me remind you what we used to call you: Bullass."

"The first part didn't bother me because I was a bull, ready for a fight, but the second part did. I was a real jackass when it came to learning my lessons."

"You're just the same . . . but not the ass part, ha, ha, ha, ha . . ."

"Let's let my friend know that we've arrived . . . Corporal Rancún . . ."

"Yes, sir, Captain . . ." The corporal stood at attention, holding his piece at present arms and saluting it with his hand.

"Put the alarm clock to work . . ."

The corporal withdrew and a moment later the shot was heard . . .

"We're learning how they're going to shoot us," he said with an enigmatic voice, and while Corporal Rancún reported that he had carried out the order, in an opening covered by some branches the figure of Captain Salomé was visible in the light of a lantern.

"Andrés Medina . . ." Cárcamo made the introductions.

"José Domingo Salomé . . ." the officer said as he shook hands with Medina.

"Pleased to meet you . . ." the latter murmured.

"An old friend who's like a brother," Cárcamo explained. "We come from the same town, green bellies, we grew up together . . ."

"I'll leave you captains because you're going back to the barracks and I have to go back to my camp."

They said good-by. Medina grew small behind some large prickly-pear cacti, in the rushes and underbrush. As the footsteps of the patrol were lost, without making the slightest sound, he went over to the back of the house, almost on his hands and knees like a monkey. Through the cracks in the wall of badly placed boards he could see the lighted room and inside, going back and forth naked, Clara María, tall, big-breasted, like a colt. Undecided, she was walking back and forth. Her back was so tight against a crack in the wall that Medina's nose almost caught the smell of her dark and sweaty flesh, and from close by he could see on her waist a mark in the shape of a cross toward the back, and in front the scar of a surgical operation. He was not enjoying her, he was remembering her. The light went out. The wind. She lighted it again. She lifted one breast to examine the

nipple. She scratched a thigh. Toward her knee the bundles of blue veins. The mosquitoes would not leave him alone. He waved his hand about instinctively. She heard the sound. She looked around and with one step she went to the table beside her bed and picked up a revolver.

"Who's there? . . . Speak up or I'll shoot . . ."

No one. The wind. The sound of the wind complaining about the heat. When she went to the door wrapped in a reddish robe she saw a star fall. She quickly made a wish so that it would come true. What did she ask for? She asked for something that her whole being was demanding.

25

It was still night. It was still Sunday night. A piece of moon plunged into water, the dead tongue of the one falling coldly on the hot horizon. It was not dawning. No. Not even a hint of full dawn. Not even a hint. It was not dawning for those who were waiting for the mirror light of day to appear, the one that comes out of the sea on the coast. Why are the roosters crowing? Why is it dawning? But it isn't dawning. Other roosters are crowing. Other sounds sweep the silence that is left once more like Sunday's trash after the cocks' crow and the buried walking of enchained shadows.

A rainy day. Rain is part of Monday now. Rain against the flesh of those who go to work at a trot and almost naked. Sandals, breech-clouts, and hats. They are eighteen years old, twenty, twenty-one. Unless it clears when the sun comes up it will be a watery day. If it comes up, because it isn't dawning. And hauling fruit in the middle of the rain, in the downpour, isn't pleasant. Not pleasant in any case. But worse when it rains. Everything slippery. The bunches of fruit, the ground. The ground is like a

banana peel. It's not dawning. The person who doesn't dig his toenails in falls down, load and all. Other roosters. Other sounds. But it's not dawning. It's raining. The first word muttered by a person who bumps into someone else. Not a challenge. Something stupid. When one passes another the foul word the other said hangs like a threat and the first one hears it; or he said it and the other one heard. Which one said it? Which one heard it? The one who was going? The one who was coming? Because sometimes that happens while Monday dawns among the people going to work at a trot and almost naked. Now it's not dawning and they're trotting in the rain. They are eighteen years old, twenty, twenty-two. They defend themselves with their hats, their heads tilted over so as not to get the hot water of the tropical rain in their faces. Those who go in front stop in front. Those who go in the middle stop in the middle. Those who go in the rear stop in the rear. They surround a man covered with a rubber cape, his pith helmet under the hood, his rubber boots under the cape. He is sucked in by the yellow light of a lantern that moves in his hand. More lanterns. More lanterns begin to appear. The most distant swung so violently that they looked more like wasps stinging the hands of the men in the capes than yellow lights. More lanterns, more. Those who are sloshing in the water around the man only get fatigued. But something else with a sound of loose chains and squealing brakes was brought up, the fruit, accompanied by the foremen and the timekeeper. The car stopped trembling, still in the depths of the night. Piles, volcanos of fruit. The terrain trembled under the weight of the wheels on tracks formed with ties laid like matchsticks. As they drew near the loading place, the lanterns closest to the head strawboss, his foremen, and the timekeeper were swaying. The car stopped trembling and with the brakes still on it dragged along the sanded rails between the double row of loaders. They were hidden by a hot torrential downpour onto a roof of banana leaves where only the stalks showed. Behind them the close, sticky water and in front of them the freight cars waiting to be

filled, zinc walls and ceilings thundering under the downpour.

The lantern of the man with the rubber cape, the cape covering him like some sort of wagon, was slowly raised to the face of a worker, who felt the drippings from his straw hat, his only protection, running down his skin. He raised the lantern, held it in front of the face, only the face. He didn't seem to want to light it up to see who it was, but to burn him without knowing his name, and he took so long deciding as the metal handle swung in the tight grasp of his fist that the other man had time to blink several times. And the gesture of raising the lantern and lowering it was repeated many times with other faces in the two rows of men, half-dressed or half-naked, wearing only a breechclout, not without an exchange of violent words that could scarcely be heard because of the thundering of the water on their hats.

He took his whistle. He clenched it in his teeth. He bit it. He blew. He blew. He blew. From the strident whistling, now a distant echo, a small piece of sound that someone had swallowed was left nearby, a hiccup from one of the workers, from Juambo, to be exact. Every time that the head foreman whistled, calling the people who wanted to be signed on, the hiccup could be heard. The lantern disappeared without being extinguished. It was growing light and the rain was letting up. He put it on the ground. An eye kept in a glass bulb with a god's collar made of a thousand sad threads. And he now went along without the lantern, his skinlike rubber cape flailing against the bodies of the haulers who refused to load the fruit if their pay wasn't increased and who refused to leave their places, a provocation that made the foremen restless as they dragged their shiny whips of raw leather, manatee skin, or the penis of a bull. Why accept the challenge? Without having to beat them, they would shove them out of there. And if they had to tie them up, they would do that too. That was what they were there for. So that the higher-ups wouldn't have to dirty their hands beating that slimy bunch. A disturbance. Indeed, there would be a disturbance. A disturbance

there would be. Unless they gave in and raised their wages. But if that was how things were, all that was left was the whip. That was how things were, because with so much fruit cut maybe it wasn't right to start something. A disturbance like that might begin right there and who could tell where it would end. It always ended up with the military command sending armed troops and taking a few of them off with the blows of rifle butts. But the fruit will suffer from the waiting. What suffers is the fruit. What danger is there from those loafers? None. Paler than cooked lard, a pat or a blow is all the same to them. Sambito's hiccupping made things tighter. He was hiccupping for all of them with a hiccup of hunger.

"Quiet! ! . . . " The head foreman faced him.

But Juambo, out of fear, far from being quiet, gave a longer hiccup while his comrades waited in two rows, their arms hanging down, opposite the load of bananas they were to transfer with their arms and their backs from the flat cars to the freight cars to be carried to the docks where the fruit ships would take them to lands where there was no land, where everything was made of steel, glass, concrete, and even the people were like canned goods. Hands without mystery, scrubbed and disinfected, would lift the tropical fruit to their mouths with teeth that had been brushed with foaming toothpaste, and from the mouths down through throats without tonsils to the stomachs of animals who were almost vegetables.

The whistle aroused the unattached people in the camps. Signing on. No one wanted to be left behind. Signing on. Getting there first. Among the lights of the foremen who showed them the way they appeared in groups with their faces caught by the needles of water that grew strong at times and at times let up.

"A raise in pay when there's a surplus of free hands? . . . That really would be stupid," the head strawboss exclaimed in a conciliatory tone as he saw so many people anxious to work arriving. For his intention, with the amount of fruit to be loaded, the difficulties that had arisen, and the bad weather, was not to

lose any hands, to add the ones who were coming to report to those already signed up.

The light finally whitewashed the sky, a bluish light dissolved in rain and favored by it, as the foremen stopped swinging their lanterns and found themselves facing the eyes of men tanned by the fire of the coast, wild eyes, not halting at the lids, the sea, anywhere, and the eyes of the newcomers, wrapped in the bends of mountain roads.

The first one in the row of those signed on who refused to load, putting himself at the head of them all and on his guard beside the load, raised his voice so that the men without work who had come to sign on and who were already pushing them out of their places could hear what he was going to say.

"We won't load and we won't let fruit be hauled if there's no raise in pay, a raise for everybody, because what they give us isn't much, not enough to live on. Not one single bunch will move from here if there's no raise! Not a single bunch if there's no raise! . . ." he shouted more strongly. "Not a single bunch if there's no raise!" he shouted with all his lung power. "A raise for everybody! . . . Everybody! A raise for everybody!"

The clamor grew general.

"A raise for everybody! Everybody! Everybody!"

The head strawboss fell on the one who was haranguing them, but the man could see better out of the corner of his eye than straight ahead and he dodged the blow.

"Get back! Get back! . . ." the head strawboss shouted. "Make room for other people! The new people into position! . . . Those who don't want to work get back! . . ."

In the group of unemployed men, huddled together in the rain, there was a first impulse, but they didn't take the step that lay between them and the place of the comrades whom the foremen were trying to push and whip away in hand-to-hand fighting.

"No violence! . . . No violence! . . ." the head strawboss was shouting, and, immediately redoubling his shouts, he encouraged the others to occupy the places being left vacant by those who

were falling back and leaving their spots empty, those who were trading blows with the foremen: "Let's load, boys! It's fresh. Get it in. Get it in. Everybody loading, everybody! Let's go! What are you waiting for? The fruit's going to spoil! . . ."

None of the men without work moved. They all took a negative position while the foremen kept on fighting with the rebels.

"You loafers! . . . You swine! . . . You can't let the fruit stay on the flatcar like that! . . ."

The voice of the head man began to plead:

"Will you load or won't you? We're giving you work! Let's get started! Come on! Let's get started! Load! Load! . . ."

"We won't load! We won't load like this, boss! . . ." the tallest in the row exclaimed with a timid but firm voice.

"Don't be afraid to talk! . . ." they shouted at him from behind. "We came to find work but not like this!"

"Let's not argue, the fruit's spoiling!"

"Why don't you pay more, then? . . ."

The foremen calmed down. The head strawboss went to discuss the raise in the offices with glass windows over which the rain was weeping, offices with blond employees in white linen shirts, ironed that morning, and where the atmosphere was refreshed with the aroma of the perfumed insecticide they used, and time was an electric passage on round clocks with indirect lighting.

Brows were knitted, more from moving their hardened skin, the quality of the water with which they washed their faces was terrible, than from any worry, unless it was the bureaucratic worry of telling the typists to move up the figures of the totals and change those of the raises.

The Regional Manager was in the next office but he was on the telephone and was speaking as if it were a long-distance call. A small sketch on the Manager's pad, a cowboy twirling a lasso to catch a buffalo, was all that was there. He drew it while he granted the raise.

The head strawboss came back with the news.

"Raise granted! . . . Raise granted! . . ." he repeated right and

left among those signed on. "And you, you filthy lot," he addressed the others ill-humoredly, because in the end they had been the ones who had let him down, "go on and sign up, sign up, join the gangs, the fruit has to get there on time . . ."

The Prospectors passed each other as they went back and forth from the wagons to the railroad cars with the fruit on their backs, not looking at each other, because before that they had exchanged knowing looks to tell each other: we have to protect two men, we have to protect two men, Andrés Medina, who started the harangue, and the long-shanks who was against the unemployed men's working.

Juambo went from the groves to town, from town to his house and from his house back to town without being able to tell anything. His hiccupping wouldn't let him. Talking like that was like paying a visit after swallowing a baby, and it had been several hours. He was no longer hiccupping but weeping. A whimper. What child had he swallowed? What child was crying in his stomach? A little brother? Mother knows. She put a piece of cloth with hot ashes on his stomach and she was singing to make him sleep . . . not him, no, his little brother, that little brother he had swallowed. And a few sips of anisette water. A few sips of anisette water too. Mother knows what's good and what's bad. Only she knows what's good and what's bad for her little boy and for the little brother her son had swallowed and who's crying, crying, crying. The hiccup is the weeping of his little brother. And why did he go to the barbershop? Aching in his rear, his ribs, his jaws, sagging, his eyes like those of a potato with lashes, he came to have the dead man frighten him. He wasn't frightened. The master barber dead and he wasn't frightened. He kept on hiccupping. People aren't used to death, they say, but they'll stay beside a dead man, when they should leave in a stampede, terrified, howling. He was hiccupping. He annoyed the people at the wake, he was robbing the corpse of its solemnity on its one day of death outside the grave, laid out

on the bed, with family and friends, with four candles around and wreathes of simple bay leaves rolled together and a bouquet of jasmines. What good did it do to make such a solemn face if he was ruining the gathering with his hiccups? Bothering not so much the people as the barber, who would never have another one like it in his house. But it was best not to think in the tone of a question, because his gastric spasm was growing softer.

"Would you please go into the courtyard for a little while, God will reward you, you've seen him now . . ." a woman in mourning came over to tell Juambo in order to get him out of the room where the barber was laid out, the room next to the shop. The mirror and the pictures in the shop were covered with white cloths.

Father Fejú stayed at the wake until almost eleven at night. In the afternoon he had helped him die properly. From the moment in which the barber had donated the picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe to the church he hadn't regained consciousness. That was all the Queen of Heaven had been waiting for before taking him away.

The priest left with Piedrasanta. Juambo followed behind them. He caught up to them in the middle of the square.

"Father priest, father priest, I have to confess to you that what I've got isn't the hiccups. It's a revolver of wind!"

He was hiccupping . . . hiccupping . . .

"I swallowed it to shoot all of my hate out at the head strawboss! . . . in the disturbance . . . they wouldn't give us the raise . . . we refused to work . . . and I asked God to let me kill him with my shots, to shoot him full of lead with hiccup after hiccup . . ."

"Don't get so upset, my son. You're forgiven . . . Were there disturbances? . . ."

"Yes, father . . ."

"Serious ones?"

"It didn't go too far but . . . We have to protect Andrés Medina and a tall fellow, the head of the ones who are looking for work . . ."

"Don't pay any attention to him," Piedrasanta cut in. "He says whatever comes into his head, like all mulattoes. What disturbances? . . . You should see the arms they're stockpiling at the barracks . . ."

"God be with you . . ." Father Fejú put his hand on the shoulder of Juambo el Sambito, pursed his lips as if he were going to whistle, and he made the sign of the cross on his face with his breath.

Piedrasanta's wife was crumbling some rue leaves in the hollow of her left hand at the moment the priest and her husband returned from the wake. She made the hollow deeper and with the fingers of her right hand she immediately ground them up. Then she applied that green substance to her nostrils and inhaled the sleeping aroma of the rue. She already had two rough paper hoops on her forehead and she had drunk an infusion of asparagus and manzanilla wine with a touch of bicarbonate. Something pained her at the opening of her stomach. And now she could speak without having a nervous attack after the fright she had had in the barbershop.

She had gone to ask how the sick man was getting on and ask him to give her a little scented water, perfumed alcohol, or cologne in a bottle that she had with paraffin oil. You mix it, shake it, and put it on your hair. Your hair gets shiny, silky, and easy to wave.

Since the barber didn't return her greeting, she had spoken to him from the door, as good manners call for, she went over to the chair, thinking that he was asleep. Yes, he was asleep, but so deeply that he seemed far away. Whirling about his face was an umbrella of flies and mosquitoes. A green horsefly, just like an emerald, was walking across his forehead, over his eyelids.

Piedrasanta's wife mingled her palpitations and her breathing, her wind and her blood, the blink of a sob and the quivering lips of a laugh as she touched him, as she tried to put together the sound of the word that she then shouted out . . .

"Deeeead! . . ."

Señora Mincha, his wife, who knows whether legitimate or

otherwise, the illegitimate ones feel the same as the legitimate, came with her hands and arms soaped up. She was finishing washing a sheet. It was probably an attack, a fainting spell. While she half-dried her hands she repeated the words "spell" and "attack" and she had a hard time swallowing them, and she swallowed them with an effort, turning to the waters of weeping, for her husband was not unconscious because of the cold fever of malaria, but was dead.

She unbuttoned his shirt, but it was more of a tear that was heard, placing her ear with a large gold earring to the barber's chest. Filth, hair, ribs. Great, long, silent tears were pouring from her eyes and she couldn't find what she was searching for, his heart, his living heart, because once it's dead it's no longer a heart. From one of the small cupboards of the barbershop they took out a bottle with cologne water and sprinkled it on her head, forehead, clothing as they pulled her, dragged her away from the cold remains. Air, air . . . But it was not a lack of air, and the friends who had gone out so that the widow could breathe found her with the same sobbing asphyxiation broken off at the throat, her mouth twisted, not knowing what to say, wanting to lift her hands to her ears and cover them so as not to hear the people embracing her and shaking her hand. I'm sorry . . . sorry . . . sorry . . . The flies clinging to the mirror opposite the chair seemed to be feeding on the image of the dead man.

At wakes the light from the candles and lamps doesn't rise up, it slips and falls. It falls down from the walls, the ceiling, the furniture, all objects, and forms a puddle on the floor. Because of a lack of room for the mourners, more women than men inside, the house consisting of the small barbershop, a half dining-room, and a rudimentary kitchen, the men went out and settled themselves on chairs and benches placed on the sidewalk in front of the house to chat, those who felt stifled fanning away with their hats, a slap here, a slap there in pursuit of insects; handkerchief after handkerchief amidst cataracts of sweat for

those with their wet clothes sticking to their skin; cigarette to cigarette for the smokers; the drinkers from drink to drink, with no lack of those who later on, while the "Beg thee" of the midnight rosary was recited over the dead man, would take up the Raffle of Souls, games of chance, cards, dice, telling off-color stories and tales of love.

Don Lino Lucero deigned to come to the wake, smoking a Havana cigar that made one regret that it was burning in someone else's mouth and not his own, a gold chain over his fifty-year-old belly, and a walking stick that looked like a tortured root.

The widow thanked him for his attention, and when she went to greet other visitors, people kept on coming, Don Lino was approached by a veteran of the First World War, down in his luck and on the coast as a salesman of pharmaceutical products and drugs, Florindo Key.

His odyssey of thirty years ago was consecrated in a poem dedicated to him by a festive poet who on that one single occasion became serious.

The young volunteer goes off to the war,
blindly in love with glory,
something of higher beauty for him
than all that had gone before . . .

That was how the poem began. During the war he came back to his homeland dressed in the uniform of a *poilu* and gave lectures to bolster Allied morale *parmi les Indiens.* The Florindo of today, a veteran of the First World War, and the veteran part served him better than having been a hero at Verdun because they often called him veterinarian, had been at that time a dashing young man who came on stage devoured by the eyes of the women, and he would greet everyone, answered by the heads of the men, bald for the most part, and when the room grew dark he was transformed into a mysterious voice that explained the film.

"*Voilà Verdun*! . . ." he would shout as on the silver screen piles

of human refuse appeared, mountains of corpses, and some men with mustaches, others with helmets, and cannons of all calibers, and soil and stones leaped from the earth like the spray of a siphon with every explosion of a shell.

"*Voilà les taxis de la Marne*!" Florindo would announce, and on the streets of Paris (he said the capital) those pavilions on wheels that determined victory appeared.

"*Voilà les berthas*!" cannons with which the Boches intended to wipe out Paris . . .

Florindo Key returned to the front. When the war was over he was discharged and stayed in France. A friend and disciple of Barbusse, he was a member of the Clarté group and he translated the master's work *Le Couteau entre les dents*, published under the title *With a Knife between the Teeth.*

Thirty years . . . How easily it is said . . . How rapidly recalled by Florindo as he shook hands with Don Lino Lucero, so much like his father in looks and affability. And as soon as he greeted him he asked, pretending to be worried:

"Is everyone a little more relaxed at your house? They must be since you decided to come here. You were in great danger, according to what people said . . . What a terrible thing! . . ."

"They didn't find the sticks of dynamite that they meant to blow up the house with, but it looks as if they wanted to blow us to bits."

"Things are getting pretty grim . . . Won't you sit down? . . ."

"Thank you, you take that chair, I'll sit here."

"I suppose you've heard the latest news," Key lowered his voice. "There was an attempt at a strike among the fruit haulers."

"Yes, yes, there's talk of a general strike . . ." Lucero said with a vaguely tired voice, pulling the cigar from his mouth, returning it to his lips again, and savoring it with more delight.

"And the attempt today might be a trial balloon with the object of testing the spirit of the workers and the reaction of the Company and the authorities. They brought up the question of a raise or a work stoppage and the Banana Company decided to

grant the raise. But that's not what's most serious. In every fight it's dangerous to give ground. What has alarming characteristics in my eyes is the attitude of the men who came looking for work and refused to replace the strikers who were demanding a raise in wages."

"Oh, I didn't know about that. Tell me about it!"

Lucero spilled ashes on the lapel of his jacket, submerged in a kind of blindness or stupor; but what Key had said shook him up and lighted his face with distant lightning flashes of sympathy for those anonymous men, long-suffering and miserable, who out of solidarity with their comrades had refused to load a single bunch of fruit.

"There isn't much more to tell," Key said cautiously. "What I wanted was to get your comments . . ."

"Yes, yes, what's happened now has a different meaning, now there's a class feeling that the instigators of the general strike will know how to take advantage of, because animals instinctively join together to defend themselves when they see themselves in danger, and why shouldn't people?"

While the cigar ashes continued to lay a marble coating on Lucero's lapels, Key raised his eyes to tell from his look whether he was saying "instigators" for his benefit.

"The worse thing, Don Lino, business is bad all over. Mine gets worse every day. No one's looking for medicine to get cured. They're all waiting, they're hanging on the great panacea, the general strike. Are you laughing? Well, I'm not joking. The barber himself died thinking that the strike would cure him."

And, protected from all suspicion after the picture he gave of his business, he went to the point.

"If Tropbanana, as you people called it in your day, doesn't conjure away the general strike by giving in to what the workers are asking for, it'll be the beginning of the end, conflict will follow conflict, each time in larger proportions, and blood will keep on flowing the way it is in Bananera and . . ."

"There's no doubt that the situation is serious," Lucero agreed.

"And that's what Senator Clapp will have to be made to see, because there's a rumor that he's going to spend two or three days at your house. Is he coming or is it just a rumor?"

"We've been expecting him. There are some things that don't seem to be true when you tell them. Waiting for the senator, great expectation in the house, lights on the stairs, in the parlors, in the gardens . . . Suddenly somebody coming up the walk . . . The senator! . . . The senator! . . . Ha! Ha! . . . Who do you think it was? . . . That mulatto servant from President Thompson's house, all gone to ruin."

"What's he up to?"

"He came to the coast to take care of his mother, who's old and all alone. That's what he says. But I think he has the key to the situation."

Florindo coughed so naturally that Lucero would never have guessed the distress that his words caused in him. Hadn't he gone with the mulatto that night right up to the walk to Semírames? Hadn't he convinced him to go in dressed like the prodigal son?

"I'd like to know what he's up to. It would be too much if he were a striker, too much . . ."

"No, Don Florindo, no. He came because he couldn't get along without seeing Bobby, Thompson's grandson, who's spending some time at the house."

"You're right, that's the answer . . ." Key breathed easily. "Old servants, like old dogs, have a smell of affection that's passed on from grandfather and father to son and grandson."

"Here comes the Yawn! . . ." Lucero murmured as he saw the Commandant arrive accompanied by his brother Juan.

The widow had wiped her nostrils away from so much blowing of her nose. A reddish splotch was all that was left and there she rubbed and rubbed with the handkerchief, her nose running, weeping.

"You don't know how much I appreciate your coming to be with us on his last night . . ." and the weeping broke out again. "Thank you so much, Colonel, and you too, Don Juan, so very

kind. Just yesterday the poor man, desperate that there'd be no relief on the coast, decided to put a piece of cardboard on the door of the barbershop, I don't know if they took it down, something in his own writing that said 'For sale because of trip.' And he was so worked up about the trip that he said to me: 'I'm going to go to the Barbers' Association as soon as I get to the capital and ask the members to make common cause with the banana workers if the general strike is declared' . . ."

"He said that? . . ." The Commandant twisted his upper lip as if the twirls he had given his mustache were not enough. "Well, if he said that . . ."

"Delirium from the fever, Colonel," one of the Equinoxes group intervened. "During his last days his mind was always wandering and since they'd shoved that 'General Strike' paper under his door it was to be expected, it stuck in his mind . . . Poor Don Yemo! . . ."

"He'd be under arrest if he weren't dead!" the Commandant threatened. "A fine thing, everybody going around to see who they can stir up, going to stir up the Barbers' Association!"

"But he was a member, sir, he was a member!" Mincha made it clear amidst weeping and displeasure. "His certificate is there among his papers and we paid the dues and charges religiously . . ." she sobbed, sobbed, choking. "Now that he's gone, the members of the Association will have to answer his call! . . ."

"All very fine except wanting to go around proposing strikes and other kinds of foolishness!"

"I didn't know anything about that . . ."

"But what you do know is that he made a donation of a picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe to that little Mexican priest . . ."

"It was just about his last wish . . ."

"Why did he do it?"

"Because it wasn't right for us to have it here in the room when Father was asking for a holy image like that for the church. That's what I think . . ."

"The Virgin of America . . . the figure on Hidalgo's flag . . . the patroness of the Indians!"

The Commandant said all of that, defeated, going toward the door followed by Don Juan Lucero. As soon as he appeared in the street those present ran to place two chairs on the broadest part of the sidewalk. The night was clear, deep, starry, but when it touched the earth it turned into a hot iron.

"Let's not stand on ceremony, Don Juan. You sit there and I'll sit here."

They sat down. At a prudent distance, Captain Cárcamo was chatting with Andresito Medina without losing sight of his chief:

"That woman really did love me, Andrei . . ."

"Of course she loved you . . ."

"I never saw her again. I even thought she was dead."

"The same as dead. Being headmistress of a school in a town like that is like being buried alive."

"I'd like to write to her, Andrei."

"Why hurt her like that if you don't love her? Let the dead rest in peace . . ."

"What if I still loved her . . ."

"You'd bring her back to life . . . only love can bring people back to life."

A tray with glasses was passed before them and in less time than a rooster can crow, and some roosters were already crowing, deceived by the lights of the wake, and others at the wake were acting like roosters and needed only a guitar, Cárcamo drank down three glasses of cognac, and he would have had more had there been any.

"She must be old now," the Captain said after moving his tongue around and touching his lips with the fiery taste of brandy grapes.

"She had a lot of years over me . . ."

"Do you remember why we called you Andrei?"

"How could I forget! Your little brother always called me Andrei."

After the silence of a wake the Captain sighed.

"Malena Tabay! . . ." He wrapped the name in the sigh.

"Captain Cárcamo! . . ." the Commandant called him.

"Yes, sir, Common . . . dant! . . ." he let out.

"We'll get to that insolent bit of 'Common . . . dant' later . . . Get going and get me all the papers belonging to this barber, all the papers you can find in the house, whether they're his or his wife's, and leave them on my desk, lock my office, and come back here. Here's the key."

Cárcamo saluted, turned on his heels, and went inside the house to carry out the order.

From the drawers and cabinets the Captain, aided by those present, took out letters, bills, notes, newspaper clippings, pictures, notifications, death announcements, and the famous certificate that listed him as a charter member of the Fraternal Association of Barbers, along with an envelope of almost the same size on which a skull and crossbones was painted.

Andrés Medina slipped away like a shadow when he heard the order given Cárcamo and went over by Florindo Key. At that moment Key was discussing the role of the press in the strike with Don Lino Lucero.

"The newspapers that are talking against the strike today, Don Lino, the ones that justify the killing of workers on the Caribbean plantations in the name of public order, are the same ones that in Lester Mead's time, when they arrested you people because of the cooperative, asked for your heads for having conspired against the security of the state. What can you tell me . . . But excuse me, I've got to leave now because I have to talk to this friend who's also a distributor of my medicines."

"Hello . . . I didn't know you were around here . . . How did those sales go? Did you bring some orders? . . ."

They went off talking aloud about quinine, urodonal, sarsaparilla. The news was burning in Medina's mouth.

"The Commandant gave orders to search the house and carry off any papers."

"When?" Florindo asked, visibly upset.

"Just now . . ."

"Who did he give the order to?"

"Cárcamo . . . and he told Cárcamo to take them to his office . . ."

"We can't let him get there . . ."

"How, our people are all celebrating out in the sandpit . . ."

"I don't know how, but we can't stay here with our arms folded and accept the sacrifice of the comrades involved, who'll be arrested before we can warn them."

"I hope that the old man burned everything that was compromising . . ."

"Medinita, we can't confuse cowardice with hope; I've got my weapons and the time to get away without their noticing is now: they're going to bring the widow over to say good-by to her husband before they put him in the coffin."

Piedrasanta's wife and some other women, with pushing and deep sighs, led Mincha, dressed in black, more of a nightgown than a tunic, the grief making her feet drag, to the room where Don Yemo was laid out so that she could say good-by to him before they put him in his coffin. It was good that they had combed his hair with cinchona water. He smelled like a saint, dressed in clothing that had been stored away. They dressed him in his new suit, he hadn't worn it very much, and he was taking it away almost new. It feels so strange to dress a frozen person and the barber took a long time to stiffen. As if he didn't want to. A dead man starts being a corpse when he begins to grow stiff. It's as if the weight of a dead man has left the bones.

"Poor man, he was so good, but he couldn't stand the climate," the mayor commented. "And he took a trip to a cold land without waiting to sell the business. I don't know whether you people saw the notice he put on the door: 'For sale because of trip . . .' with dots after it as if he had a presentiment, there are dots that are nothing but a presentiment."

"He we-we-went t-t-to Topaledo . . ." stammered the musician

who accompanied the priest at high mass. He sang in such a mournful way that it was more an outpouring of Latin shouts.

"And that Topaledo, where is it?" the mayor inquired.

"In D-d-don P-p-pascualito's ju-ju-jurisdiction . . ."

"I'm not familiar with it. People who don't come from a place know it better than those who do."

"On the c-c-contrary, Topa-pa-paledo they know better than p-p-people from the town except for the one c-c-called Genova be-be-because it's extra fine . . ."

"Without extras and Genovas, what is Topaledo? . . ."

"The ce-ce-cemetery . . . p-p-place where everything gets d-d-dry . . . ce-ce-ceme . . ."

A big woman with a Salvadorian accent added with laughter:

"What ce-ce-ceme . . . Don Yemo is nothing more than dust now . . ." They all let out a laugh and she went on playing the innocent as what she said had a double meaning, "bone dust thrown into the pit of death . . ." laughter and more laughter, "Don Yemo is gold dust for the spiritualists now because it's true that barbers talk their heads off with their customers and now those same customers can call him and can talk to him without his cutting their hair . . ."

The laughter was general and loud . . .

"Here's a spiritualist with the glow of a yam for you!" was whispered into her ear with a deep male voice by one of her more faithless lovers.

"Where did you come from, God-Child?"

"Out of the darkest night . . ."

"Well, watch out that it doesn't blacken you and you must be here for the same old reason, desperate for a drink. But it's all over, they aren't even serving water."

"We'll fill up somewhere else, Lichona, and if the barber should come to life maybe and ask about me . . ."

"If he knew you he'd never shear you, you hairy beast! . . ." and she pursed her lips to touch him with her mouth.

"If he asks for me, tell him that I went off with the ninny and

that we'll meet later on Judgment Day or All Souls' Day in Topaledo. Do you people put up with that Topaledo business? It's the collision a person gets into when he pushes the accelerator all the way down to get out of this stinking life."

He put his naked arm, dark, pure steel, around the coppery neck of the ninny and they left amidst the protests of the dice throwers, complaints that there were enough dead people already and calling for silence. Sucking away on their cigars around a lantern, squatting down, they watched the dice roll on the ground. Luck is like a blast, a current of air that twirls some and lifts others up. A toothy man with the hand of a black corpse had just lost his shirt and had managed to recover his luck with a pair of wild bets.

"What are clouds but distance? What is the night among the feet of the palm trees that walk, feet with thousands of toes on millions of stars?" Juambo asked himself, no longer hiccupping, on his way home.

The graveyard in the light of the stars showed the whitened graves and crosses that seemed to be bathed in the flesh of soursop. Sambito passed by there on his way home, and, without stopping, he shouted:

"Father! . . . Agapito Luisa! . . ."

26

Medina went ahead mechanically with his eyes on the bouncing branches of the bamboo trees, so far away a moment before and now over his head. He was following Florindo Key closely, very closely. They climbed, they descended, slipping through the thick underbrush like hunters until they came out into a clearing of shifting sand, stones, and dry leaves that slipped under their feet as they searched for the spot that from high up dominated the road to the Command Post at the point where it made a sharp horseshoe turn in the midst of the bamboo groves.

Little could be seen, more night dew than light, a dew with the gleam of old water, necessary, however, for Andrés Medina to see with his own eyes the assuredness with which Florindo Key was operating. He didn't show the assassin's hesitation or the hateful insensibility of the executioner. "Ha!" he had laughed through his nose when they left the wake to get their weapons. "War teaches that one must kill the enemy without feeling the slightest remorse, like a duty! For the sake of gaining sixty feet of terrain I saw one thousand, two thousand, five thousand men

sacrificed, I saw them fall, left behind on the barbed wire in the smoking craters left by the shells, in trenches that were sticky with blood, so much blood that you thought it would never dry up . . . I saw them, I saw them torn apart, moaning, changed into a mass that mingled with the mud and was finally quiet, finally, yes, finally! . . . After a battle, when the firing stops, when the wounded have been brought back and most of the others left to their fate, a person felt close to the fatigue and revulsion of the battle, the suffering of all those who died without help, without consolation, and only when all of them had finally ended their hours and hours of agony did the relief of death pour out into the night. Death is the only relief that war can give. Assassins? Murderers? . . . Words that don't have any more meaning after a war. Or have different meanings. That's why we're going after Cárcamo without being assassins or murderers, like members of a firing squad. In the name of his law they execute workers who demand better pay, better treatment, fewer hours of work on the plantations on the Caribbean coast. Plenty of judges, plenty of defense attorneys, plenty of nonsense about laws and military men when the poor devil has already been sentenced to death in the Secretariat of the President of the Republic. If all of those who take part in those executions are not assassins or murderers, neither are we, since we're going to execute . . . sh . . . sh . . ."

They halted, thinking that they heard footsteps. The wind seemed to have made the trees walk, to have changed places with them, changing into a static mass while they, no longer with any roots, were advancing in fluid form through the depths of the night like octopuses with their arms in motion.

Medina rubbed his ear, his left ear, the side by his heart, the side for a friend. He would have liked to have erased Cárcamo's voice and everything. The last thing he had heard him say before the Commandant called him was the name of the headmistress at the School for Girls in Cerropóm, Malena Tabay . . . His shoelace came untied. He stopped to tie it. Between his fingers, while he made a bow, he felt the hand of his childhood

friend, that breath of a hand that was begging his right hand not to fire the weapon. When he got up he threw his head back. Some refuge, some signal in the sky. Darkness and silence. Run away, abandon the fight. He was drenched in sticky perspiration that smelled of blood. He stopped. No, he didn't quite stop. But why wasn't he stopping, since every step he took as he went ahead forward Florindo was bringing him closer to what wasn't possible? . . .

His shoelace became untied again. As he leaned over to tie it he had his nose so close to the smell of the hot sand that he felt he wasn't tying the ends of the laces that he couldn't tie well with the damp heat, but was lifting a handful of that dry fire, pulverizing it to throw it into his mouth and end it once and for all. The sweat was pouring off his eyelids and his lips. He spat. The path went on and he followed behind Florindo, stepping on his heels like a poor devil who can't hear, because he no longer wanted to hear the pleading of the friend who was going to die, whom he with his footsteps was drawing nearer to the impossible, and who was telling him: "Andrei . . . Andrei . . . not so quickly! . . ."

A hard knot, yes, he had to make a hard knot in the lace so that it wouldn't become untied again. Now he was in a hurry. Going along, going along fast in order to get it all over with. Opposite Cárcamo other friends were lining up with the painful faces of criminals, just the way they would be photographed by the police as they were booked. They had more right to life than Cárcamo. A horse half-turned as they passed. It was asleep and it stayed asleep. They were already on the height. It dominated the shapeless panorama of the flats below, a deep darkness over which the phosphorescent light of the sea glided for moments, the dust of tropical nights, sugary and salty.

Why didn't Florindo let him stop Cárcamo on his own and at his own risk, talking to him as a childhood friend to get him to turn over the papers, and in case he couldn't get them, at least to give him the challenge of dying in a fight?

Florindo was right. Had they let our people in Bananera die

fighting? Hadn't they shot them down, some of them with their hands tied, others in handcuffs, and not a few of them in jail, with the cell doors still closed?

The shoelace again. He didn't stop. He went ahead that way, as if a foot had become loose. Damn it. It wasn't the one with the knot, it was the other shoe. Tie another knot, then. He leaned over. The blood ran to his head. His eardrums filled up. "Andrei . . . Andrei! . . ." Cárcamo's voice alternated with the voices of the friends who, without knowing it, Cárcamo would be bringing to the command post among the barber's papers and documents. Yes, he had to be sacrificed . . .

The rough hay on the ground was smoothed down by the weight of their bodies as they lay prone, stretched out their arms, and sighted their rifles, with the muzzles ready to open fire on the road that connected the town and the command post and which there, at the spot they dominated, formed a rather sharp horseshoe bend between small bamboo groves. Florindo would shoot first. No, sir. Both at the same time so as to get him in a crossfire as they both shot quickly and then went down, quicker than deer, to recover the papers and documents from the body.

They were on guard. Night's execution wall and the one sentenced about to arrive at any moment, with no alternative except to die. The spent sound of the sea. They didn't hear it. They were listening to the silence, ever vaster and vaster. A leaf that fell. A bird that took flight. A drop of water. The slightest sound made their skin ripple. Was it a forewarning? They instinctively held their breath, settled their bodies better, clutched their weapons and turned, all eyes, to the road below.

The Commandant was still at the wake, chatting with Don Juan Lucero. He saw Cárcamo come out and he called him over.

"Did you carry out my order?"

"I'm taking everything I found with me . . ."

"You're forgiven for your lack of respect, but I don't want it to happen again. Hurry up, put those papers on my desk, lock the door, and come right back. Are you armed? . . ."

"My pistol . . ."

"That's more than enough . . ."

"With your permission, then, I'll leave."

"You can go."

"The way times have changed!" Lucero exclaimed as he saw Cárcamo go off. "It was different before. It wasn't a question of life and death, weapons and more weapons . . . Would you like a smoke, Colonel? . . ."

"As you know, I only smoke tobacco from our own country, but I don't want to be rude and I'll accept one of yours . . ." and he put his heavy fingers, thumb and index, into Don Juancho's cigarette case, all gold with a monogram of diamonds and rubies. "What brand are these?" the military chief asked, lifting the extra-broad cigarette to his nose to smell before putting it in his mouth, and from his nose he raised it to his eyes to read the brand.

"Well, Colonel, as I was saying, it's just our luck to be living in difficult times."

"And if you people who are filthy rich notice it, what can we say, those of us who live trapped with our measly salaries, hung by the neck every month if it wasn't for happy little pay day."

"And it's getting very hard in all ways, Colonel, in everything. If you don't think so, there's the turn that events in Bananera have taken, the general strike they're threatening . . ."

"We should be in Belize! . . ." the onion-headed yawner said, half-authoritarian and half-smiling.

"Which is the same as saying that we're in a worse situation, and not because the fight's been against Tropbanana so far, trying to make it change its ways. There was a lot of fighting in my time too, so much that my brother Lino and I were arrested. They took us to the capital with our hands tied and held us incommunicado. If it hadn't been for Lester Mead we would have rotted in jail."

"He was a gringo, and just between you and me gringo means powerful."

"He was a gringo, but he was one of the good ones . . ."

"For you people, naturally. It was like winning the lottery . . ."

"An idealist, a practical idealist. I remember that he told us right off when we were organizing to face up to Tropbanana, 'This isn't a fight with machetes, boys, but an economic fight, and we have to win it by creating sources of wealth, setting up industries that come from it . . .' That was what he said . . . Oh, if that man only hadn't died. Damn the strong wind that carried him off. He would have organized a business of free men, workers, and without so much hate!"

"But that's how it goes, the good man to the grave and the cream for the knave . . ."

"He saw everything that's happening now coming: armed battles, a fight to the death . . . that's what he said . . . And he wasn't so much outside of it that he didn't try to organize a banana company which, far from compromising the interests of the investors, fortified them in the long run with just treatment for the country and the workers. If Lester Mead had lived he would have changed the banana policy and the conflicts that are getting sharper all the time today wouldn't have arisen, or he would have set up a separate company . . ."

"Which the big company would have swallowed up afterward, the way they did in Hibueras . . ."

"There were two ideas, two systems of banana production: the Green Pope's and Lester Mead's, and the pirate-pontiff's system won out with the help of the blind force of nature, the strong wind that hit the southern plantations and cut off the life of Lester Mead. But in the long run was the victory final? Didn't Lester Mead himself foresee that another strong wind would come, a strong wind of workers demanding justice, and that it would sweep everything away, and that time is coming now . . ."

"The one I would have liked to have known was the woman . . ." He scanned Lucero's face with his glassy eyes of an old crocodile, snorting through his nose and his mouth, with all the heat of his body seeming to come out, and he added,

"because she must have been quite something, as a wife and as a woman."

"I never looked on her, to tell the truth, Colonel, except as the highest embodiment of her husband's ideal . . ."

Lucero brought his chair closer to the Commandant's, and the latter, thinking that he was going to tell him something confidential about Leland, leaned his body over to get his ear closer, but when he heard him still talking about the banana company he yawned in his face.

"And in this case, as always, the violence started with the Company . . ."

The Commandant, unable to interrupt his great yawn with the hollow of his hand as his mouth didn't fit into his hand, protested as best he could.

"In the main! In the main! . . ." Lucero tried to explain. "The workers, when they saw themselves attacked, tried to defend themselves at the end of the dock. Why did the troops fire on them? . . ."

"The army, my friend, for your information, follows orders, and orders are orders!"

"No one said the army was to blame. We're talking about the Company. It's true that the army follows orders, but the members of our armed forces, my dear Colonel, should start to think about where those orders come from. Have another cigarette . . ."

"I'll smoke one of mine. Take one if you like . . ."

"I accept, although they're a little strong for me . . ."

They lighted the hand-rolled cigarettes that the military chief smoked and after a few coughs and the sound of throat-clearing (it was a tobacco as biting as chile), Lucero went on in a confidential tone:

"Yes, of course, the army obeys orders and is only asked to obey them. But those orders, where they come from . . . The answer is in the newspapers, real keys for the company because they open all doors. The most insignificant trouble, the smallest

complaint by the workers is transformed by the skill of the press into a national problem . . ."

"But everybody knows that they do it to fill up space since they haven't got anything to say. When something happens they raise a great row . . ."

"The matter isn't as harmless as it seems . . . At first they blow the thing up, give it proportions that it doesn't have, with an aim to bury its origins, the simplest initiative on the part of the workers for their own betterment. And what happens: starting out on that plane of lying information with a bit of truth, seeing that demands coming from poor treatment and hunger don't die in embryonic form, they begin to raise the pitch of their news, the size of the letters giving a look of truth to fantasy, they put out bigger editions, the newsboys shout louder, the public snatches up the editions, and, as a last resort, the intervention of the government is advised, called for, demanded, and the public powers take action, use the Army, have recourse to force. Who pays those newspapers? . . . Have military men taken the trouble to investigate who pays those newspapers? . . . Tropical Banana, Inc., just as sure as I'm telling you."

"They must pay them in gold . . ."

"No, sir, and that's the sad part. Our countrymen aren't even any good at that, selling themselves for a good price."

"They're behind every riot . . ."

"And you're the ones who carry off the corpse . . ."

"Yes, I think they do take advantage of us, but since orders are orders, they're obeyed . . ." And a moment later he added: "What would happen, Señor Lucero, if they weren't obeyed?"

"What would happen? . . . The Company, because of a lack of blind followers of their orders who had become changed by shameful publicity, would jump through the hoop, give their workers humane treatment, accept what a good number of us stockholders have proposed . . ."

"Are you blaming the Army, then?"

"Up to a certain point. It's one thing to maintain law and order

and something else to maintain law and order that's good for the fruitmen. That's clear and things have to be said."

"The armed forces can't think things over . . ."

"Nobody's asking them to think things over. What I'm saying is that they shouldn't let themselves be manipulated by that string of gringos so that we stockholders who are men of good will . . ."

"Yes, they're your partners . . ."

"Unfortunately, yes, but that doesn't mean that we haven't tried to follow in the footsteps of the ones who before us openly opposed the methods that the Company uses."

"There couldn't have been many of them . . ."

"A few cases are known. That old one-armed man, Jinger Kind, died protesting the methods that were used to set up the plantations on the Caribbean coast: bribery, evictions, fires, deaths . . ."

"It's too bad that one swallow doesn't make a summer . . ."

"And then Lester Mead. He was terrible. He vomited out so many truths to the stockholders that they must have thought he was crazy. He proved with figures that by using honest methods the Company would get just as big profits without creating a source of permanent hate for everything American the way they're doing now."

"But you Luceros aren't on such good terms with the workers as people say: the dynamite threat the other night, the guard for Semírames that your brother Lino asked for, where does that leave us? . . . The only thing we know, Don Juancho, is that there isn't a single rich man who isn't grateful. We sacrifice officers and men to defend your interests, your property, your goods, everything you have. We risk our skins so that you can sleep peacefully. That Captain Cárcamo we just saw leave, don't you think that he could be shot down?"

"I don't deny that. The Army belongs to the rich, it defends the rich, but tomorrow, when the Army belongs to the workers, what's going to happen . . ."

"The Army, my friend, so that you will understand and act

accordingly, doesn't belong to the rich or the poor. It belongs to us. Just as the rich have their property, their farms, their ranches, we have the army. I'm not sure whether I make myself clear."

"Yes, yes, the Army is a piece of private property that's called national and it belongs to the military."

"And it would be very unpleasant for you people to wake up in the morning if we weren't around . . ."

"Unpleasant? . . . I have to laugh. Horrible! We'd wake up on the edge of a cliff."

Piedrasanta's wife came by with a tray full of glasses offering drinks of Comitán brandy.

"First the authorities . . ." she said smiling, going over to them.

"The authority," Lucero corrected her.

"No, you're an authority too, Don Juancho. Where there's money there's command, right Colonel?"

"Of course, of course . . ."

"And here we have the other authority . . . A glass of Comitán, judge?"

The judge accepted the glass and stayed to talk with Don Juancho Lucero and the Commandant.

"There was an attempt at a strike among the fruit haulers. I don't know whether you people were talking about it . . ."

"About everything, judge," Don Juancho answered. "The Commandant and I were talking about how times have changed. In our days, I was telling him, we were guided by ideals, we were idealists . . ."

"If I'm not mistaken you and your brothers were part of the Lester Mead group . . ."

"That's right . . ."

"Well, we have to consider those nice days as dead and buried. Idealism, even to us idealists, has a feeling of vagueness today, that of an empty soul."

"Excuse me, but now that the judge mentioned the attempt at

a strike by the haulers, I'm thinking about Captain Cárcamo again . . ."

"What happened to Captain Cárcamo, Colonel?"

"He went on an errand to the military post and he hasn't come back. I'm a little nervous and worried."

Piedrasanta's wife came back to offer them another Comitán.

"There's nothing like being under your holy protection, right, ma'am?" the judge said, and with an inquiring tone, "The one we haven't seen is your husband . . ."

"He stayed behind to mind the store, but he'll be right along . . . Excuse me, I have to serve those other gentlemen, their palates must be dry. I'll bring you some coffee in a while. Here comes Don Lino. I'll have them get four cups of coffee ready."

Don Lino, after greeting Piedrasanta's wife and taking a glass of Comitán, joined the group made up of the Commandant, the judge, and his brother.

"Just in time, Don Lino," the judge patted him on the back. "We were talking about ideals, and you're the romantic in the family . . ."

"Ideals? . . . This is a funny wake . . . If the barber should revive he'd go back to his coffin and die voluntarily: a wake where no one's telling jokes, where there's no gossip, isn't a wake . . . and . . . a barber's wake, if you please! . . ."

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The wind began to rise. A low, browsing wind. Moments later all the bamboo shoots, agitated by the wind, were giving off an effervescent sound. They had to sharpen their ears, file them down so as not to lose Cárcamo's footsteps as soon as they became audible, until he would appear among the large hammocks of the branches and the endless shaking of myriad small leaves. Key spat into the darkness, or tried to, for he had no saliva, and he cursed the wind. He would have to redouble the watch with his eyes. Trying to make out the shape as soon as it appeared at the bend in the road, for now the steps would no longer be heard, and get it in his sights before it was too late. He moved his hands over his weapon. Andrés Medina shook his head. He couldn't bear listening to his companion's fingers going over the weapon. It gave him the impression that he wasn't very sure of himself. Well, if that were the case, the roles had changed. Now he was the one who was sure of himself. He had the conviction that the man out there, childhood friend and all, had to die that night. The crossfire from two rifles and Cárcamo dead from the shots.

In the midst of the uproar of the wind they were unable to hear anything. They hadn't foreseen the inconvenience of the bamboo trees which, when they shook, deafened those eager to take shelter under their leaves, which would hide them and allow them to spy on the road with their rifles ready or resting on branches. In addition to the rifle barrels, like two muzzles of even colder steel, were their eyes, round and fastened on the spot where Cárcamo would appear and turn from one moment to the next.

"What if the Yawn countermanded his order? . . ." Florindo said in a low voice. The delay was already long and it seemed like an eternity waiting for the person with the compromising papers to appear at the bend in the road.

"No, he'll be coming . . ."

Key used doubt as a possible evasion of what he had to do, doubt about Cárcamo's passing; not Medina, Medina felt he would pass in one way or another and they would finish him off. "It's an execution," he repeated to himself, "an execution, and no matter how long the night becomes, the dawn of executions always arrives."

Florindo began to move his hands about the weapon again. Andrei, on the contrary, kept his firmly on the piece, his eyes on the road, breathing heavily as if he were telling himself with each breath: "it's an execution . . . an execution . . ."

"Why are you moving your rifle so much, are you afraid?"

A controlled laugh was heard and then Florindo in a low voice as he said:

"My hands are sweating and the rifle sticks to my fingers, but I'm sweating from the heat, not fear . . . I've never known fear, not even at Verdun . . . You'll soon see how your little captain will jump like a mouse in uniform . . ."

He didn't say anything else. They didn't even breathe. Eyes and rifles . . . Eyes and rifles . . .

The road filled with soldiers advancing in a column and alongside the soldiers marched Cárcamo and Captain Salomé, the

former with the packages and documents, the latter returning with his patrol after making the rounds of the plantations and relieving the guard at Semírames.

Key lowered his head, the weight of the rifle made him lower his arms. What was he grinding in his teeth? The air of the coast, which tastes like a purgative. Without thinking about anything, he closed his eyes. So as not to see, not to see the papers going away with the names of some comrades who were involved . . .

Andrei, with the docility of soldiers who leave the execution place because of a pardon for the one still standing and waiting to be shot, rubbed his cheek on the rifle. "Wipe your sweat off with your rifles," was what that speaker in Puerto Barrios had said at the end of the dock while the strikers from camp T-23 fought for their lives between the soldiers and the sharks.

Florindo jumped from Spanish to French in order to curse. Medina didn't understand, but it was terrible to hear that cooing language accompanied by gesticulations and blows on the head. In order to calm him down he suggested:

"We can only hope that the barber burned the compromising papers before he died."

"*Merde*! . . . *Merde*! . . . *Sacre couyemol*! . . . If instead of these damned things we'd had a machine-gun he wouldn't have gotten away from us . . . And that's the picture of our movement . . . No arms, no violence, while the others are armed to the teeth . . . This isn't a war! . . . We already know that it isn't a war! . . . It never was . . . It's worse than a war because they don't want any prisoners—'shot while trying to escape . . .' Sabotage? . . . Fine. But since the only effective sabotage would be to kill their crops with Panama disease, economists appear and decide that we shouldn't, that it would be bad for the economy of the country. And what the hell do we care about the economy of the country when there isn't any country . . ."

The patrol stopped at the entrance to the military post and Corporal Rancún approached the sentry for permission to go in.

He returned with the authorization and the patrol took the last steps to the barracks door.

"I was having a time at her place . . ." Salomé said when he met Cárcamo before they reached the bend by the bamboo trees.

"You were surprised to see me, Captain . . ."

"I really was . . . I was having a time at her place . . ."

" 'I fell asleep,' is what they usually say," Cárcamo corrected him, "and that game, I told you once, my friend, is dangerous for two reasons: if the chief finds out he'll punish you, what do I mean, punish, he'll court-martial you; remember that guarantees have been suspended and therefore, as far as the Yawn is concerned, we're practically in a state of war; or else the ones behind the strike movement will find out and give you a big surprise by attacking the patrol while you're sleeping with that female, and that could make you lose some sleep."

"Corporal Rancún is completely trustworthy and . . ."

"In the militia, as the Yawn says, there's no subordinate who can be trusted, and never trusted completely, and every leader should mistrust the one under him."

"Yes, what really happened is that I corked off, my eyes got heavy, and I woke up all of a sudden with my heart in my mouth: I saw, actually saw a lot of hands pushing an officer toward a field covered with crosses, and I arrived just in time with my patrol and broke up that cobweb of hands that already had the officer surrounded, just like a fly. They were the hands of a crowd that was advancing, hands like spiders, like big spiders . . ."

"A nightmare . . ."

"Yes, a nightmare, and the officer they were pushing toward the field with the crosses looked like you . . . Captain Cárcamo . . ."

"Oh, hell, I went out to have a good time too!"

"And that was why, I don't know whether you noticed, I couldn't hide my surprise when we met . . ."

"Quit telling your stories. You were upset because I was needling you about coming to report in so late! Your poor men,

you ought to think about them. Fine for you, giving your body pleasure on a soft mattress, but the soldiers sleeping outdoors, and tired . . . it's not right . . ."

Salomé remained silent. Cárcamo, like him, was a captain, but for reasons of seniority he could make observations like that, even though it wasn't proper to scold him when he had just saved his life, in a dream, but he'd still saved it, and, besides, he was upset because he'd messed with that woman . . . she even threatened to "burn his bobbin" . . . Fucking women! . . . When they entered the post each one went his way. Salomé to his tent, where his guitar was waiting for him on his bunk, more coquettish than a woman with its blue and white bow. And Cárcamo to the Commandant's office. He turned on the light; he went to the desk, deposited the papers that had been found in the barber's house, and . . . he was petrified. On one of the envelopes he read: *Rosa Gavidia* . . .

He picked it up quickly, as if the bulb in the lamp on the desk would burn it; but, more quickly, he took his eyes away from the sheets of paper it contained. What should he do? Leave it? Keep it? It was already in his pocket . . . He searched feverishly through the other papers to see if there were any with the same name: Rosa Gavidia . . .

He hastily put them in order. They were sticking to the fingers of his sweaty hands. Not just because of the heat, for in spite of its being close to three in the morning it was as hot as noontime, but because of the sweat of sorrow.

Inside his tunic he was carrying the hidden papers on Rosa Gavidia when he returned to the wake and reported to the Commandant to inform him:

"Orders carried out, sir!"

"Stay around, Captain, we'll be leaving soon."

Without losing sight of the chief, he went for a drink and to find Andrés Medina. Andrei, whom he hoped to find at the wake, because he was a childhood friend and "a rebellious man with strange and mixed-up ideas," whom he could have told

everything to, man to man. He couldn't find him; and there was nothing left to do except burn the name Rosa Gavidia off his lips with brandy: turn it into smoke, like tobacco.

28

They were squint-eyed from laughing, more with their eyes than their lips, which they also opened under mustaches like poorly trimmed manes, showing their teeth and biting that piece of palpitating joy with their laughter, the only way they could celebrate the victory as they came together at the Prospector's Sandpit or the Prospectors' Sandpit as they called it with no distinction of singular and plural.

"We all need a few good hugs, right, brother?"

"Yes, but not like a tree-killer vine that kills the tree it hugs!"

And hugs and more hugs and handshaking and more handshaking, for the pleasure of it, the joy, the triumph. But a celebration like that isn't carried out with hugs alone. Of course not. You have to gullet down a few beers and slug at the rum by the glassful, accompanying the drinking with bread and sardines, tortillas and cheese, slices of imitation tongue, Spanish plums, guavas, and nance fruit. A party! Let it be understood: a party!

"Somebody play the ocarina . . ."

"Go ahead, friend, so we can hear something besides the racket of this gang of blacks!"

Ocarinas, small violins, small guitars, bandurrias, and guitars in the hands of the Samuels.

"What have you people done, ehhh?"

"What have we done that we can't undo? Right, brother?"

The three Samuels, Samuelón, Samuel, and Samuelito, appeared with their instruments.

"But it sure took off fine," Samuelón said, "it sure took off! I'm still thinking of how circumstances were in your favor. The whips of water that fell came in handy. Whips of water like a great big bomb. And the head strawboss not much of a sailor . . ."

"He's got piles . . ."

"Something was itching him in the rear, that's for sure . . ."

"But he couldn't reach it with his fingers because the cape was too thick," another of the Samuels put in. "The cape had him all tied up, ha, ha . . . He looked like a whaler."

"From now on," Samuelón first said the words and then began to laugh, "from now on we have to warn the company that when it rains they should put the people who work for them in their *own* submarines, because the cloudbursts around here put everything underwater."

"We'll fight them underwater. And the best one was that string-bean comrade of mine who raised his singing voice when they wanted to sign on those poor people who were looking for work."

"And the one with the hiccups, where have I seen that mulatto?"

"I don't trust him . . ."

"Naturally . . ."

"He came here the first time with that great big gringo . . ."

"The President of the Company, no less!"

"He came here the first time with him during the distribution of Cosi's inheritance, a nigger lunch with all those millions, and now he's come back with the excuse of taking care of his old mother. Because I think it's an excuse . . ."

"You better run yourself another movie, because you're going to make us all sad!"

"Naturally it's nothing but a movie down here and we should

open our mouths to the people from that great country to the North, because in order to say hello to that nation you have to open your mouth, the way little fish open their mouths before the sharks swallows them; the people from up there fix things up with their sentimental drivel and some of that's stuck to the mulatto, he cries about his buried father and hovers over his old lady . . ."

"Cut it out and get away if you want a drink!"

"Up and down my gullet. Man was created to drink, right, Samuelito? This Samuelito is a quiet one. Strum your guitar and sing me a song . . ."

There they go, go, go,
the ones about to die,
without any love, love, love,
life is no good say I . . .

"That beanpole who was against the other people working, I know him. He comes from down there, from the other coast. From Tenedores or Los Amates, he's from around there, at least I saw him there once. I can't remember whether it was Los Amates or Tenedores."

"Then he *knowed*, he wasn't new at the business."

"*Knowed*! *Knowed*! You simple Indian, talking like that! Knew is how you say it."

"Me a simple Indian? *Knowed* is better than knew!"

"You're a sap!"

"Sap, the blood of a tree; knew, something new to trick a man."

The evening wind was noisy, the flutter of leaves in the silence was disturbed by the distant roar of the sea, the distant echo of the stone drills, the lowing of the cattle who knew they were condemned to death, the barking dogs around the houses, and the navigating of the pelicans as they water-slopped the air that the flight of herons had left tense and sonorous.

"If we stick together we're enough . . ."

The voice of the one who spoke lay buried under the laugh-

ing chatter of the guitars, which were like fine mares lowering their quivering rumps under the blows of the fingers that spurred them, pinch, pinch, so that the *son* came out wrapped up, and it was a pity that there were no females to dance with, doing with their feet what the guitarists were doing with their hands on the bridges and the strings.

Dust was raised by a man the color of orangewood shavings who got up to dance by himself. Some clapped their hands to keep time. Others didn't have time, their hands busy with food and drink, the poor hands of fruit loaders, hard and scorpioned.

At the end of the song, with applause and hurrahs, the more intoxicated ones ran to embrace the Samuels who had trouble rescuing their guitars from the embraces and the crush . . .

"If we stick together we're enough," insisted the one who'd been left with what he had intended to say on his lips, "and it doesn't have to be a lot of us, because if we stick together we'll be one single will, the way we are here, we become something bigger. Señor Lino Lucero . . ."

"Don't talk about that rich traitor, the turncoat, with all the millions he was left to help the workers with, to start cooperatives, because that was the condition under which the money was left to him, to push the company, and what did he do, he and his brothers, what did they do?"

"I was going to tell you what Rito Perraj, the great Shaman, told them. It was like a prophecy about what we got when we refused to load fruit if they didn't pay us more."

"Listen . . ."

"Together we're even more than enough . . ."

"Together, but not in revolt, right? . . . This one doesn't seem to have drunk the liquor but the corkscrew, look at how his bunghole goes on . . ."

"Let him talk . . ."

"Lucero says that the Shaman asked him one day: 'You see there?' 'Yes,' Don Lino answered, 'I see the ocean there.' 'Big, very big?' the Shaman asked him. 'Yes, more than big, immense,

more than immense, the size of God.' 'Well, even though it looks immense to you, the size of God, it's made up of dewdrops. Dewdrops that you can't even see, smaller than the head of a pin, maybe like the point of a needle, it's fearsome,' the Shaman said, 'when it joins with others like it and they form rivers, lakes, oceans . . .' "

"And he didn't even learn the lesson from that. It's going to cost him plenty. Just now they went to ask him for a little help for the families of the strikers in Bananera and he refused. He said that he wouldn't give anything because the strikers were people fighting for their bellies and not for any ideal."

The sky was scaly with small clouds of silver and gold and it closed the horizon behind rows and rows of palms that submitted to the constant blowing of the wind and the lashing of the agitated air. Elastic, divine, when they had braved the hurricane they had seemed to join with the wind as it roared among the sword points of their highest branches, and during the storm, in the cloudburst, they had become electric plants, golden in the lightning, rumbling with the thunder, and flashes that were destroyed amidst the bolts. But that afternoon, as seen from the Prospectors' Sandpit, they looked more as if they were made of threads and hair.

The men saluted the resistance of the palms after the storm and they swallowed the lesson without feeling anything.

"A lot of us getting together, a good many, any number, like the drops that make up the sea, that is fine, but we have to be resistant too, like the palm trees you see there, thin, fragile, and bearing up better than great big trees."

"Which one among you knows where that big fellow lives who refused to work and was against the unemployed people working and whether he's still around? We should have him here before we go on playing the guitars and we should talk to him. This strike business needs a lot of people and a lot of news. We'll tell him that we're celebrating the raise and that he has a place in the party too because of what he did, refusing to work

and to let the others haul the fruit that had been cut. Don't you think so, boys? . . ."

It was approved and they went off to find him.

"If they're bringing me here for something good, why am I like a prisoner?" the great big man said as he came into the sandpit with the comrades who had gone to get him.

"You're having a party," he went on, "and I'm glad you're not selfish, you invite people! I thank you because I've been at loose ends since a comrade who came with me left! . . . He didn't like the coast at all and he took off . . . I stayed on alone, standing up to the storm . . ."

"Well, friend, you've got all of us if you need company! We're celebrating. The boys wanted to have a little guitar music for the raise, with songs and polkas. It's the first time the Company gave in to a demand from the workers around here."

"You deserve to celebrate!"

"We deserve it, right? But you too! You, friend, you played a big part! You stopped their scheme of signing on the people who were out of work. You sang out to that pig of a head strawboss just in time. If not, we might not have got what we wanted."

"I'm still crossing myself," another said, "and unbelievers tease me, but I've got my faith in the Virgin that the priest says is a full-blooded Indian, the one who's going to lend us a hand when we fu . . . fu . . . fu . . . those evangelist gringos . . . fu . . . fu . . . fu . . ."

"This one's got the fuck stuck in his mouth!"

"We shouldn't exaggerate, the Company won't be affected at all by the pinch of a raise they gave us. The important thing isn't that they gave us a raise but the way we got it!"

"If it hadn't been raining, with all that fruit cut, they never would have given in . . ."

"And if they didn't have a ship in port . . ."

"It could be because of anything you want it to be, but none of those was the reason: because it was raining, because there was a lot of cut fruit, because they had a ship in port waiting to

load, because they didn't want to call in the troops to break us up with their rifle butts, because the boss was being eaten by his piles and couldn't scratch through his thick cape, because the foremen from El Gancho weren't there; we're not going to forget our own reason for all those reasons of theirs! They raised us because we refused to work and because we stood up to them, refusing like men if they didn't raise our pay a few cents, and the lesson is that without our arms and backs they can own all the gold in the world and raise the most beautiful crop of bananas on this land, but it won't do them any good! It's the combination of them and us that up till now has made them rich and us poor, but that's what's going to change, comrades, because it has to be the same for everyone, and that's why I don't like to see our victory broken up by foolish talk!"

"Can I say something?" The great big man thought it prudent to ask permission. "Can I say something? . . ."

"Of course, go ahead!"

"You already spoke back there, friend, when you took our side, and now that you're one of us you can speak!"

"Well, just so you all should know: what our friend here said was said on the other coast. That was what they found out, and not just on the plantations, but with the dockworkers, the lowest and worst-off people, people who got into that work as if they were on the run, desperate at finding nothing in their own country except that miserable kind of work which makes them sick, turn to vices, get corrupt, and rot away . . . man cannot be crushed . . . and we've seen . . . from those people . . . from those dockworkers who were human trash how the unbelievable can happen . . . From those dockworkers who were human garbage, how the unbelievable can happen . . . From those dockworkers who were turned into animals from the animal work, the lack of shelter and not much food, along with malaria, dirty and ragged, a whirlwind of will and rebellion grew up, no one knows how or from where, or when it started, and it slowly grew until it paralyzed the port. Just as all of a sudden during the

most peaceful part of the day, out of somewhere, a whirlwind forms, scrapes the dust from the ground, rises up like a corkscrew of navels and blinds everything it meets, that was how that rebel whirlwind was formed. 'We won't work, we won't load a single bunch of bananas if they don't raise our pay!' was what they said. And they didn't work, and the fruit went bad, and the ship burned out its engine, and the railroad cars piled up on the dock without being unloaded, immobilized and immobilizing everything until the fighting started . . ."

"They fought . . ."

"They sure did, boys, they sure did! . . ." several voices were heard to say.

"Foremen, police, soldiers, nothing could beat them, because on all sides that miserable human garbage appeared, changed into fierce beasts, not on the defensive but on the attack. They attacked with sticks, iron bars, shovels, picks, pieces of rail, ties, anything they could tear up from the roadbed and on the docks to throw at the forces surrounding them. From the white shell of the ship, one of the steamers of that damned White Fleet, Negroes armed with hoses poured out like demons to drive them back with powerful jets of water. Water, rifle bullets, heavy explosions, cars rolling like catapults which, when they collided with others on the rails or jumped the track, made the foundations of the docks and the buildings shake . . . That was when the first burst of machine-gun fire was heard . . . the order was final . . . 'finish them off . . .' The whistling of the bullets and the lead wads of chewing-gum from the 'stutterers' perforated the great silence which covered everything like a field of smoke, except the furious sea which, as if fighting too, could be heard below . . . Death was imposed . . . Hands in the air, some groups were surrendering. Through the sieves of silence and the stinking smoke of the battle appeared the men that police and soldiers received, apparently in peace, but once behind their lines, brutally, with the usual brutality, with the brutality of wanting to get revenge on them for what everyone had done, attacked be-

cause they asked for a raise in pay. They all surrendered except for a few who kept drawing back to the end of the pier. Time began to be measured by the steps of those workers, shadows of fire under the broiling sun, faced by the muzzles of their pursuers' weapons, their backs to the sea, their backs to the sea which was a stew of sharks . . ."

"What work do you do, friend, you talk so fancy . . ."

"I work as a Honduran . . ."

"What do you mean, as a Honduran?"

"Yes, I was working as a Honduran poet in a hotel. The owner, Cleotilde Benavides, was from Tela and she liked poetry. She was a half-countrywoman of mine . . ."

"Why half-countrywoman, didn't you say you were from Honduras?"

"From along the border, and I don't know which side the place I was born in ended up on, with the frontier question, whether on this side or the other. What I do know is that whichever side I was born on, it was on Fruit Company land, because everything was one big meal for the Company . . ."

"Tell us some more," one of the Samuels put in with a tight, anxious voice. "Tell us whether those of our people who were fighting at the end of the pier between the sharks and the police gave up in the end. Did they surrender? There was nothing else to do. Where could they go?"

"That's not true, friend. A man always has something to hang onto. And when all the doors are closed he hangs onto death . . ." And after a long pause in which the breathing of the men who were listening to him could be heard trembling, he went on. "They hung onto death, but they sold themselves dearly . . ." They all breathed. "They sold themselves dearly . . . One of them, in desperation, grabbed a soldier's rifle, another a policeman's pistol, already wounded, badly wounded . . . In another place an officer stopped the one who was attacking him with a shot in the mouth, but one body fell and as if it had been raised up another one fell on him and grabbed the revolver from the

officer, who was left lying there . . . The fight didn't last long . . . It couldn't last long . . . Over the bodies of his comrades the one with the rifle took cover lying prone and kept on firing until his last cartridge . . . Staggering, wounded and bleeding, some fell into the sea, where the sharks twisted around like great big greedy tongues . . ."

They were silent. The big man went on:

"But things didn't end there. A military train arrived at the end of the line from the capital, under the command of a general who spoke English. I saw him from a distance: hooked nose, mustache, and green eyes. And the trouble started again. There were no more deaths because there were no more people they could shoot 'while trying to escape.' The General, with the help of his field glasses, followed the details from a parlor car he'd made into his headquarters, with tables covered with whiskey bottles and couches with naked women. He closely followed the smoke and puffs of flame among the groves and huts which showed the places where his forces were putting an end to the inhabitants as a show of punishment, while his fingers twirled about a patch of pubic hair . . .

"That night there was a banquet in Bananera. The General arrived on a section of the military train, rolling about with the women, bathed in cold champagne which leaped out of the bottles and which he drank with great relish in the midst of the enervating coastal heat, sipping it or lapping it off breasts, thighs, sexual organs.

"When it got close to Bananera the train stopped so that the General could bathe. And he got off to receive the homage of the banquet in his honor for his role as the great pacifier, impeccable in a white tunic, olive-green breeches, boots with a metallic gleam, spurs that tinkled like a woman's earrings, in his mouth a long holder with a cigarette of light tobacco, a wisp of smoke which obliged him to half-close one eye, a lack that made his other open eye glow all the more with its great pupil of green glass.

"At the end of the banquet, which was attended by the Vice-president and other high officials of the Fruit Company, who asked the Victorious General to say a few words, he did so with the voice of a worn-out child's rattle, the rhetoric of a mummy, the constant twisting of his Kaiser Wilhelm mustache, and the rubbing and patting of one hand upon the other, as if he were lathering up with pleasure over what he was saying and what he was going to say. He lifted his glass in a kind of toast and exclaimed: 'Gentlemen, with the pacification complete, I want to remind you with the frankness of one who is speaking to businessmen, that a General of the Republic does not move about just for a change in climate . . .' "

"At least he was frank in asking them to grease his palm," one of the Samuels commented.

"And that same night," the one who called himself a poet went on, "in the section of the military train on which he had come to the banquet, he returned to the port, which he reached at dawn, without the females . . . He had ordered his aides to throw them off from both sides along the tracks, drunk, half-naked, while he, unbuttoning the white tunic bathed in gold, used a straw to sip on a glass of peppermint liqueur and cracked ice, as if he were feeding his eyes with the drink, or the one eye that he kept open. The vastness swallowed up the cries of those unhappy women who, half-naked, by the hair, the arms, the legs, were dragged from their places, pulled out onto the platform by the aides, and thrown into the emptiness with no concern that the train was going at full speed. The night filled with the shrieks of women who grew mute as they fell and lay by the ties, abandoned, beaten, bleeding, like inert sacks of meat . . ."

And, after a short silence, he added:

"When he had got rid of the naked flesh and was alone, he brightened up the green glow of his eye as he brought his pince-nez glasses close to his hooked nose, putting them on with an elegant gesture and reading on the check how sensitive the officials of the Fruit Company had been, the ones who had dined

him for the victory over the masses that had risen up in demand for better pay, how far they had interpreted his very direct indirect remark about a change of climate. And he really had no reason to complain. A series of zeros trembled on the pentagram of a check which was paying him what it was worth for a general to come down from eternal spring to the fire on the coast."

Samuelón interrupted:

"And you, friend, how did you learn all this? You've left us like our guitars, with our mouths open."

"Everything can be explained. In the hotel where I was working as a Honduran poet there was another poet staying, ugly as a horse and mysterious. He took the largest room, he needed space to walk about in because he paced all night long, as he explained, and because only a large room had enough space for the three closets he needed, paying whatever he had to, and where I helped him hang up more than forty suits. A tailor or a salesman of American clothes, I said to myself, and Doña Cleotilde, the owner of the hotel, said the same. But the days passed without his being seen going about his business at all. The fellow began to drink cognac by the bottle and give away his suits. Since everybody who gets drunk gives away his clothes, that didn't seem strange to us. But some days later we realized that the ones wearing his fine clothes were all Negroes and the mystery was solved. He was a *pliro*, one of those men who like men, and he was giving away his suits in exchange for the pleasure-merchandise. And not so quietly. Early in the morning, while the favored Negro hid like a bundle under the sheets or fled frightened onto the balcony, he would roar with a hoarse thunderclap, as if his throat had turned to wood, transfigured, his jaw down to his chest, his hair tangled over his ears, as if it were the reins of an impossible bridle, his grainy teeth wet with the great amount of saliva that dribbled down or which he swallowed, pausing like that in the long verses he was declaiming. His eyes would then rise up until the height of the great white eggs of his eyes made him look as if he had fallen into a

well and he was groping for the way out with his eyes. And then he would moan and shout: 'Ho, get me out, I've fallen in deep, so deep! . . .' A lament that would end in the region of his mouth, hoarse, as if he were tasting the *De Profundis*, until he grew tired of repeating: 'so deep . . . so deep!' when he would leap onto the bed and clutch the Negro, lifting up his great ebony member with a hand that was covered with emeralds in the midst of sinister laughter . . .

"But the mystery goes on. What was that fellow doing there? The mistress of the hotel heard rumors. He was on the staff of and was the chief editorial writer of a newspaper in the capital which, out of fear of the government and to gain favor with the Fruit Company, had twisted the news of the dockworkers' fight. When this man, who had written several editorials against the workers based on the false news that the newspaper published realized what he'd done, he became furious, took the typewriter on which he'd written them, threw it into the street, and ran off to hide, to disappear. He wanted to go to the port and defend the dockworkers, but it was too late and all he found were half-dried pools of blood on the mourning of the beams and the pitch-covered rails. And through him I learned the truth of what I told you."

"What about the General? . . ." someone asked.

"The part about the General has a stub end to it. If your ears aren't tired . . ."

"A check stub," another said, "because the man was frank, he hadn't gone there for a change in climate."

"Let me tell you, but first I'd like a good swig from that still of yours."

"It's the real thing . . ."

"Here's to the health of you people and to the raise and to all the raises to come!"

He tossed down the drink of white liquor while they all replied to his toast, and after a thin spit, the saliva jumping like a small feather along the sand, he ran his hairy arm over his face to wipe the sweat away a little, and continued:

"The part about the General has a stub to it because one of the women he threw off the train was an American . . ."

"Whore!"

"Right you are! And through that woman, who lived in the hotel, I found out about the orgy on the train and the tragic ending. A shriek filled my ears. I came out of my sleep with one shoe on and the other in my hand and I ran half-awake, half-asleep to the door of the bewitched poet, as he liked people to call him, and instead of the usual Negro I found in his bed a guest who looked more like a blond schoolgirl, her delicate flesh sunken in clouds of purple, her arms shattered, some broken ribs, her mouth bleeding, trembling, with dark circles under her eyes that hung down below her breasts. She was asking for a doctor, a bite to eat, relief, a drink of whiskey, and the poet was joining and separating his spoon lips as he tried to convince her that she could be cured by swallowing one of his emeralds every hour. 'No emeralds, no!' the gringo woman shouted. 'A green eye! No General, no! No Nero, no!' . . . I'd run out of my room without putting my shoes on completely, with my one shoe making a sound as if I had a leg missing or had an extra one, and I went to wake up the owner, who was a friend of the American Vice-Consul. Doña Clótil, in a nightgown that was a showcase because of its size and because it didn't hide anything, went with me to the room of the poet, who, when he saw us come in, swallowed the emeralds one by one with the help of great gulps of cognac while Doña Clótil attended to the beaten gringo woman, who was weeping with the moans of a woman who has suddenly turned good. We took her to her room and there she told us what had happened, while the poet skipped rope along the hotel terrace with a clothes line he'd found, chanting: 'I'm one tea-head, two heads, three heads! . . .'"

"The indemnification that chippy must have collected for the beating and for keeping quiet, because none of it came out in the newspapers!" Samuel said.

"And you're a good preacher, friend! Better than an evangelist!

He preaches better than that little priest with the Virgin of Guadalupe!"

"He knows how to preach and how to drink!"

"That's why he's a poet, right? . . . But you haven't told us your name!"

"My name?"

"I'll bet he says he can't remember! . . ."

They all burst out laughing . . .

"People call me Parrot Rámila . . ."

The laughter redoubled . . .

The guitar players were arguing. Samuel with Samuelito and Samuelón with Samuel. That always happened.

"Right, friend Rámila?" Samuelito came forward. "Was the famous Tabío San there during the trouble? My brother Samuel says no and I say yes and Samuelón as usual washes his hands. Was he or wasn't he? You can tell us!"

"At the trouble at the pier? No. But he was at Bananera and it was rough there too. Remember that the General hadn't gone for a change of climate, and Tabío San got away through a fluke on a train that was going to the capital. He jumped off before he got to the Puente de las Vacas, where the train starts to slow down, and by trails and shortcuts he got to the North Quarries, where he hid out for a long time."

"You see?" Samuelito turned to his brothers.

"But all you know is that he was at the trouble in Bananera," Samuel argued, quick to say then, turning to Rámila, "and there's talk that now he's coming to Tiquisate, is that true? . . . We all want to talk to him . . . Tabío San . . . he's famous and not many of us know him!"

"We want to talk to him about the strike," Samuelón put in, "because this business of being between sharks and bullets doesn't convince me. Me, what can I tell you, I'd rather play the part of a rodent, a gnawing *taltuza.* That's what we have to be or learn how to be: *taltuzas.* To undermine the building without their knowing it until it falls down on top of them and the crash

tells them. Patience and blind work with claws and teeth, eating with our claws and scratching with our teeth, the way they say *taltuzas* do. And with the building undermined, they'll be left under the ruins with their police and everything, their banks, their judges, their president, their commandants, and their generals . . ."

"And then you woke up . . ."

"Woke up . . . you're the ones who are asleep, dreaming that brave men are good for something! Brave men are good for dying. I'm not just saying that. But I like a man who's brave enough to live. Among us there shouldn't only be men brave for the moment of death but for the long moment of life!"

"This comrade is competition . . . very good," Rámila got up to shake Samuelón's hand. "You speak very well!"

"And how do things here look to you, Rámila?" Samuelito asked.

"Yes, yes, tell us how you see things!" Samuel repeated his brother's question.

"What you people did to get your raise," Rámila addressed the Samuels, but everyone crowded around him to hear better, "shows that you can get the better of the Company, but you have to organize, and how can you organize the fruit haulers since they don't have steady work. That's the problem . . ."

"We'll take care of that . . ."

"And do you know the strength you represent? The human bridge over which the bananas go from the field to the market. Without your hands the Company is left with its hands empty, with its trains and ships without fruit . . ."

"The idea that we have," one of the Samuels spoke, "we don't know if it's good or not, is to call ourselves The Prospectors or just Prospectors, because of the sandpit, and we already know each other by that name, right boys?"

"It sounds fine to me. You can call yourselves whatever you think fits you best, but before you look for this or that name

for the group, the first thing you should do is join the movement formally . . ."

Many voices were raised at the same time:

"Where? . . . Of course! . . . Right now if you want! . . ."

"I'll see to that," Rámila said, "if you all agree . . ."

The answer was unanimous:

"Everybody!"

"We have to back up, maintain, and support the general strike once it's declared."

"Like a single man!" they shouted in one voice.

Then each his own way so as not to leave the sandpit of the Prospectors all together, they took their leave and scattered through the underbrush. Tracks upon tracks, shadows upon shadows, and in the distance the voices of the Samuels, who went away in different directions singing in a mocking tone:

> . . . *On the broad, flat plains of the sea,*
> *the sea,*
> *watch the submarines pass on the lee,*
> *the lee . . .*

29

Captain León Cárcamo, accompanied by Father Fejú, stopped at the door of the Commandant's office. One of the soldiers stayed behind, blowing out the lantern. He had gone with them to light the way. The soldiers of the guard, asleep with their eyes open, pale, bronzed by the electric light of the Command Post, became aware of the passing of living beings and straightened up on their benches. The second lieutenant of the guard coughed. His face wrapped in a white towel gave him the look of a Moor. Without saying a word he went a few steps with the ones who had arrived and slowly returned to the guard.

"Request permission to enter, sir . . ."

Cárcamo's voice was heard. It woke up all the sleeping things in the room that smelled of coconut leaves, tobacco, sweaty shoes, damp clothing, and the metal of weapons, anguishing and impersonal, like death. The sound of a yawn swallowing up words meant that the chief had told him to come in.

"Orders carried out, sir . . ."

Another guttural sound dismissed Captain Cárcamo, behind

whom Father Ferrusigfrido was standing, thin and small like an acolyte.

"Father, I have orders to send you to the border before cock-crow," the Commandant said without harshness but without friendliness either. "You're accused of having been organizing what they call the general strike around here."

The words of the person who drowned his hand in the big crate of a yawn upset the priest. The color drained from his face tanned by the coastal sun. His eyes were linked by water. A trace of weeping that the Commandant was unable to notice, because, in a rapid succession of emotions, conquering his moment of surprise, the other one reacted without being cowed:

"It's unconstitutional to go ahead and expel me with a simple order . . ."

"There's a decree of expulsion . . ."

". . . and my consul will have to know too. I'm a foreigner . . ."

"There's a decree of expulsion, and as far as your consul is concerned, even if there was one, he'd look the other way because he knows where the shoe pinches . . . and besides, why such an act, it's all out in the open, Father . . .

"You ran off at the mouth . . ." he opened his mouth, not to yawn but to touch his tongue with a finger, "you were going around trying to be another Father Hidalgo! A fine thing! But things like that don't catch on around here . . . Not around here . . . How could it have occurred to you, I ask myself, to put a Virgin who's an Indian in your church here, where even the saints have to be blond gringos with blue eyes . . . saints made out of white plaster that they sell by the dozen, not our old images, the ones made out of native wood, because the mold that makes them, even if it's in heaven, has to be made of the same wood . . . I'd better have a yawn, I'm running off at the mouth too! . . ."

And after being quiet and quieting his yawn:

"Captain Cárcamo! . . ." he raised his voice and when the officer appeared he informed him that he was to take some soldiers

and accompany Father Fejú to the milestone closest to the Tiquisate station where the passenger train that went to the Mexican border would stop long enough to turn Father Fejú over to the person who would pick him up after identifying himself as a member of the police.

"Father," he went on after giving those instructions to his subordinate, "let's get a couple of horses so that you and Captain Cárcamo can ride. It's not far, but you'll be more comfortable."

Father Fejú interrupted him:

"Does the order say to send me on horseback?"

"It doesn't specify how to deliver you alive to the milepost where you're to get on the passenger train to the border; but since it doesn't say 'send him on foot' or 'send him with his hands tied,' I can afford the luxury of sending you on horseback. The less time you spend here the better, Captain," he said to Cárcamo. "Don't let him speak to anyone and I hope he accepts keeping quiet of his own free will so as not to expose himself to unnecessary unpleasantness. And if anybody asks where you're going, there are always old church-biddies around, tell them to confess somebody who's sick, even though with all the Protestant influence the people here don't even want confession, they die in the grace of the dollar . . ."

Father Ferrusigfrido did not find the Commandant's words very amusing, but it seemed to him that the man who was only following orders from above was trying to make the pills less bitter, and in time like these, that was all one could ask.

He said good-by. The sweaty hand of the officer, belly sweat, that was where he had held it, grasped for a moment the delicate hand of the priest, as thin as the page of a missal, a hand which had never known work in the garden of his seminary in Chiapas, for ever since his student days he had been attracted to brush and palette. He said good-by, but he couldn't bring himself to leave the office.

"Colonel!" he stopped to say at the door, sweaty, angry, "do I go in the status of a prisoner . . . or in exactly what status do I

go? I haven't seen any order or decree of expulsion. This is an unspeakable outrage!"

"You're going in the status of someone being escorted. A person being escorted is neither a prisoner nor a free man. You're not a prisoner because you're free, and you're not free because you're a prisoner . . . oh, but of course if a person being escorted puts up the slightest resistance or tries to flee, he continues his trip, not on top of the earth, but under it. Thousands of persons being escorted are buried, off on a cold trip somewhere or other . . . you'd go to heaven, we know, of course, straight to heaven; but why go so soon . . . and as far as the order is concerned, and the decree of expulsion . . ." he yawned with his whole mouth, "which worry you . . ." he yawned with half his mouth, "which worry you so much . . ." he yawned again, "Captain Cárcamo will take them along . . ."

"I haven't been notified . . ."

"My dear Father, the charges will be settled on the way, and don't interrupt my yawning by coming here like that shitsweater of a judge who wants everything in stamped documents. My advice is for you to be on your way, to just stop by the church and pick up your things, and to be far away from here before cockcrow . . ."

A rooster was heard to crow.

The Commandant added:

"What do you know, there's one crowing already, but he's one of those civilized roosters who think electric lights are the sun!"

Outside the Commandant's office, lighted by a few bulbs, Father Fejú, Captain Cárcamo, and the two soldiers who accompanied them fell into the well of deep darkness, hot, irritating. No one spoke. They walked. The rhythm of the military stride of the Captain and the soldiers over the hump of a road covered by a crust of crushed stone and crude oil contrasted with the uneven walk of the priest, whose feet sounded like a clapper hitting the bell of his cassock, the clapper of Hidalgo's bell, which only he heard . . . oh, if he could only take the picture of

the Virgin of Guadalupe from the altar and go up to the improvised belfry and ring the bells! . . .

The fireflies, the stars, the lights on the posts that illuminated the railroad tracks as they approached the Company buildings where the lights stayed on all night, witnessed the step of the four shadows that were coming from the military post on their way to the totally dark town. A lost pin could have been found in the area of the Company buildings, but in the village, anyone who ventured out at night couldn't even see his hands.

Feeling their way, (Cárcamo would not allow any lights) they lifted the latch on the half-built parish house so that Father Fejú could pick up his things.

Cárcamo stopped at the door with his sword and the handkerchief with which he wiped his perspiration and into which he dropped in half-words, talking to himself, back and forth, what was pouring out of him, coming from inside now: the need to tell someone of the danger Rosa Gavidia was in. No matter how much he tried he couldn't find Andrés Medina, his childhood companion. But how could he talk about that to the Father . . . Still, this was the chance . . .

"Take your time, sir," the young officer said to him, "because the cocks will start to crow only when we hear them. The soldiers went to get some horses near here . . ."

Father Ferrusigfrido, without lingering in his room, went into the empty nave of the church where the smell of wax and incense persisted in spite of the penetrating odor of the straw flowers, the jasmines, the roses, and fragrant fruits too, limes, oranges, grapefruit, cypress nuts, nances that popular fervor poured over the small threadbare rug that served as carpeting for the main altar, laid at the feet of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

He kneeled on the floor with all the weight of his poor body and the only thing he could say was: "Before cockcrow . . . I have to leave you . . . I have nothing . . . I leave nothing . . . I take away nothing . . . my homeland is everywhere until I go to heaven! . . ."

He trembled as if he could hear the voice of the Yawn, who was no longer the Yawn, as they had nicknamed him, but a whole bundle of yawns: ". . . you'd go to heaven, we know, of course, straight to heaven; but why go so soon . . ." The savage; what could a child ask for more than to return to the side of its mother . . . but no, why hide it from you . . . I'm afraid . . . and he ran his trembling hand over the glass that covered the sacred image as if he were groping for some way out, some escape . . .

"Before cockcrow!" he murmured with the voice of an automaton, not realizing that they were already crowing, that over the fields it was all the pink light of dawn; the burning atmosphere, the pink pearls of dew that gleamed like perspiration on the grass and the trees, the drowsy clouds, the things that the immense sphere was revealing as the stars hid themselves and the colors of the earth grew clear.

His body rose above the horse and alongside him that of the officer, mounted on a larger one, and at the level of his knees, help up in the air because of the support given by the short stirrups, the deep blue fringe of the horizon on which the light of dawn began to unfold. He hadn't slept, but when they reached the green gulleys which threatened the balance of the road with successive hollows, he had the feeling of waking up from a dream that was still a nightmare, a nightmare which, far from ending when he opened his eyes, went on in reality, with his eyes wide open, with all of his senses awake.

He let himself be borne by the horse at the pace of the one the Captain was riding. The soldiers trotted behind, farther and farther behind, but always in sight, their rifles slung across their backs, the barrels showing over their shoulders and the butts below their waists, where they sometimes rested their hands for balance.

The joy of the day entered through their pores. Roosters, flights of birds, trills, barking, whistling from the fruit trains, the voices of cowherds, lowing. They felt cleansed of the evil night, predisposed to pleasant conversation, to communicate something

more than words, the condition of their blood in contact with the rebirth of the day. The Captain settled himself in his saddle and as if speaking to a stranger going in the same direction, that was actually what Father Fejú was to him, he pointed out the banana groves that had been watered by the still burning sleep of night.

"Over there, on the other side of those banana trees, you can't see it from here, there's a field where the soldiers must be drilling right now. They take advantage of the coolness of the morning because later on, with the sun up, even the rifles melt."

The officer took off his cap (a gesture which in barracks language meant: "what a mess!") and scratched the hair on his head that tended toward chestnut brown.

"Marching back and forth," he went on explaining, "movements, formations, rifle drill, attacks, fall in, kneel, prone, fix bayonets, attack . . . Everything's very impressive and a soldier has to have drums in his blood from a very early age . . ."

"Yes, so that in a short while everybody can do what he wants with him," the priest chanted with his touch of a Mexican accent, "that's how it is, everybody does what he wants with him . . ."

"And I was going to ask you, did the chief tell you why they consider you a dangerous foreigner?"

" 'Captain Cárcamo will bring the decree of expulsion,' he told me."

"All I got was a simple verbal order to deliver you to the police on the passenger train that will stop at the milepost . . ."

"I thought so . . ."

"Then you don't know why they're putting you out . . ."

"He said something about a strike . . ."

They were silent. In Cárcamo's chest the name of Rosa Gavidia fell heavily as if part of that word. Strike . . . the sound of a word among some papers and a feeling of emptiness! . . . But was it her? . . . Was it the same person? . . . That schoolteacher he had met at a dance at the military club so many years ago . . . At first she told him her name was Rosa Gavidia, he remembered

that, then it turned out that it wasn't her name, that her real name was Malena Tabay . . . Was it her? . . . Was it the same person? . . . Rosa Gavidia . . . Cerropóm . . . No doubt about it . . . and the priest, that half-bald little man was his opportunity . . .

The wind danced through the leaves of the banana groves. They passed a bend where there were grazing fields with grass and a few bushes. The cattle looked like castaways. Their black, brown, white, reddish rumps were barely visible and their horns shone in the sun.

"Luckily it's not too hot," the priest said, straightening out the step of his horse, which limped on one foot when it was given free rein.

Cárcamo kept on intentionally:

"Putting you out of the country as if you were a criminal, there's no name for such a thing."

"There's a name for it, Captain, there's a name! It's an iniquity because of the abandonment in which so many poor people will be left: children without baptism, souls without baptism, souls without confession at the hour of their death, men and women living together like animals without the sacraments, a stew all set for the evil doctrine, and they didn't give me time for anything, you saw that just last night, the time you came to get me at the parish house, there was no news and it was the Commandant who told me point blank that I had to leave the country."

"The order came in code, and, in defense of the chief, I have to tell you that he was very upset, and, of course, if you have a family, some friends of acquaintances that you want me to tell or send a message to, I'm at your service."

"Thank you for your kind heart. What I would have liked was to have said good-by to the town and to have turned over to them the Patroness who, rising over the Angel, lifts up her being of an American Virgin made of flowers . . . it's pleasant thinking about her . . . there's no thorn to prick you . . . stamped on the poncho of the Indian . . . dark . . . oriental eyes . . . her hands together

like two doves kissing each other . . . her hair in black braids . . . her beautiful black eyes and a smile on the trembling of her dimples . . ."

And, growing more excited:

"Do you know what I call her? . . . Cuauhtemocina . . . And do you know why? . . . For Cuauhtémoc the hero . . . God forgive me, but for me the smoke that came from the braziers where they burned Cuauhtémoc's feet went up to the sky, turned into a cloud, a cloud that later fell to earth as rain or dew . . . down to the earth where the rosebushes were planted from which Our Lady told the Indian Juan Diego to take the roses that he was to carry in his poncho as proof and evidence of the one who had appeared to him . . . Instead of the roses, as you know, the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared, Cuauhtemocina, with the angel alive and moving under her feet. But I have to tell you something else. When I was a student at the seminary I had the inclinations of a poet, then I turned to painting, which is the most neutral and inoffensive art there is, and I wrote several songs, I even composed a laud for one twelfth of December, the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, in which I called her Cuauhtemocina. They almost threw me out and I think that my case went as high up as the Bishop of Mexico, because one of the characters in the laud addressed Cuauhtémoc as follows: 'Our Father who art not on a bed of roses, hallowed be the soles of thy feet, and, Lord, thy lava will be done!' "

The sun was crushing everything down, sky, earth, and vegetation yielded to the weight of the heat, the evaporation, the air with no motion other than vibrations.

Sparks were breathed, thirst was spat, there was sweating, uninterrupted sweating, soaked clothing and the sticky saddles, their feet swollen in broiling shoes, the hide and manes of the animals damp and toasted, impossible to touch, burning like hot irons.

"And because of the Virgin of Guadalupe you're being counter-exiled now, exiled to your own country, that is," the captain con-

tinued the thread of the conversation, more and more determined to tell Father Fejú about the papers found in the barber's house the night of the wake.

The cleric had put on some dark glasses so as not to go mad with the blinding and burning light of noon.

The stony road, as it left the broad flatland of the coast, fell into steep, naked draws, clumps of pines with slippery iguanas on the trunks and pitch melted by the fiery sun, then the climb up onto the first plateau.

Mule trains with loads of fruit, sacks of alligator pears, mangos, matazanos followed the mule with the bell, who seemed to be setting the pace with his ears more than with the metallic tinkle. It was no road for wagons. Mule teams, people on horseback, people on foot would stop with their hats in their hands to greet the priest.

Then the canefields. Groups of young men napping on the banks of fast-running rivers or at the doors of their huts, under the shade of coconut trees, next to their machetes, their wives, and their children, all naked.

Sometime before two in the afternoon they reached the milestone where Father Ferrusigfrido was to board the train on his way to the frontier.

The soldiers collapsed under an amatle tree on the grass, with no pillows except their arms, and the riders withdrew in search of some shade, the Captain in front, trying to get the priest as far away as possible so that the others would not hear.

They dismounted and let themselves down at the foot of some tall bamboo trees, stretched out, the officer and the priest, each leaning on an arm. The flies and the mosquitoes stuck to their sweaty faces when they couldn't drive them off. The sound of lizards among the dry leaves.

"Sometimes a person feels as if he were losing all his breath . . ." Cárcamo exclaimed, his handkerchief like a sponge full of sweat in his hand. He had already opened his tunic and his shirt, "air . . . air . . . air . . ."

"Then you think, Captain, that my expulsion really has to do with the strike business, that it's not because of the Protestants as I thought."

"The coincidence, Father, that your sermons on the Virgin of Guadalupe seemed linked to certain things outside, of course, with your intention of raising the workers' spirits. I don't know whether you heard about a raise in pay that the fruit haulers got, refusing to load if they didn't get more. It was a few days ago. We found out about it at the military post because they ordered us to organize a squad of soldiers and there was even talk of sending in machine-guns. Later the order was countermanded, and that's what I don't like. That second order didn't come through regular channels, which are the authorities of our own country, but directly from the United States to the offices of the Company, who were the ones who told us. What kind of a thing is that? Who are we supposed to take orders from? What are we? . . ."

Cárcamo, who was lying down, sat up before he went on:

"But getting back to your case, I wanted to ask you something: what were your relations with the owner of the Equinoxes barbershop?"

"The one who died? . . ."

"That's the one . . ."

"No relations, really, except that one day he sent his wife to get me, to hear his deathbed confession, I thought, I knew that he was very ill, but no, he was sending for me to give me a holy gift, the picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe that I left behind for them on the main altar . . ."

"Nothing else? He didn't tell you that he had propaganda material hidden in his house, sheets of paper and flyers calling for the strike?"

"He barely had time to show me where the picture was when I ran off with it. I was so happy I didn't even know whether he was already in heaven or not . . ."

"But that's what this is all about . . ."

The priest was silent, waiting for the officer to say something more. Then he hinted timidly:

"That's what this is all about, Captain? I didn't want to leave without knowing why they're dropping me at the border. It's as if they're sending me back home blind . . ."

"And for my part, I wanted to talk to you, yes, I wanted to talk to you, but . . . how can I say it . . . Not really man to man . . ."

"What? . . ." The priest raised his eyebrows, his voice, and he almost raised up his body. "You doubt my manhood? I won't permit it! . . ."

He muttered something like "man to man and I'm a Mexican besides . . ."

"No, Father, don't be offended! . . . What I mean is that I don't want to talk to you man to man but the way a person talks to a priest in confession, secretly. What I have to tell you is so serious that . . . It's the core of a great conspiracy . . ." he remained listening, "the core of a great conspiracy . . ." he remained listening to his own words, they sounded like words, simple words . . . and he twisted his fingers, hot and sweaty but with a cold trembling running inside them . . . "No, it couldn't be . . ." he shook his head from side to side, thinking that those words he was speaking, those sounds from his sleepless night-walking, from his waking days with lack of sleep, could place his body in danger of disappearing, his soul, his existence!

The priest turned his unshaven face to where the soldiers lay under an amatle tree, and when he realized that they were lying down dozing, with their helmets over their eyes, he reached out his hand and placed it on the captain's knee to urge him to speak.

"It's the core of a great conspiracy . . ." Cárcamo started up again, breathing with difficulty and as if speaking to himself, "and I wouldn't care, what is it to me, if it weren't that I have to save one person who's deeply involved . . ."

"Then it's a conspiracy that's already been discovered . . ." the priest stretched out the last words until they became a confi-

dential question, as in the confessional, forgetting for the moment that all of Captain Cárcamo's confession was based on the fact that he, Ferrusigfrido Fejú, was also involved in that plot which the barber had set into motion.

"In my position as a military officer I can be sentenced to death because of the simple fact that I didn't inform my immediate superior about what I know . . . But it wasn't a matter of not informing. What I've done is worse, Father . . ."

He raised the handkerchief soaked in sweat and turned into a cord to his mouth with the gesture that he was not going to wipe his lips but shove it all the way into his throat to choke himself and not go on speaking, or to draw out the words with that corkscrew of white cloth.

"Calm down and speak, Captain, the train might come along at any moment and you can get some relief from your trouble by talking to me. It's worse, you were saying . . ."

"Yes, yes, what I did is worse! I withheld, just what I'm saying, withheld from the Commandant's knowledge some of the documents that were discovered in the barber's house the night of the wake . . . what a stupid man . . . keeping those papers in his possession! . . ." (he became upset when he said that because what else had he done, imprudently, but keep in his possession the papers on Rosa Gavidia, for what reason, to give them to her, to see her again, to rekindle perhaps . . .).

"And you saw my name on those papers?" the priest asked in alarm.

"No, not your name," the Captain shook his index finger negatively, "but the name of the person who, without identifying myself because of my position as a military officer, I want to warn. What happened, Father, was that I couldn't read all of the documents, I withheld those where the name of that person was very evident, but among the ones I left, and there was a pile of them, I'm afraid that the name of that person might be mentioned too . . ."

"What about mine? . . ."

"Yours too . . . who can tell!"

"In that case, Captain, it would be charitable of you to tell me quickly, before the train comes, the name of the person and what I must do is warn him that he's in great danger and should escape, all without involving you because of your status as a military officer on active duty."

The priest ran over in his mind at that moment whatever his heart told him and if he could have he would have swallowed the words, snatched them out of the air by just breathing in deeply, drinking in the world, fearful that the Captain was putting on that comedy with him in order to make him fall into the role of an accomplice in the complete work stoppage that was being prepared, and then he could bring him back as a prisoner with the proof in his pocket.

And while Father Fejú was thinking things through in the midst of the torment that follows a person who has spoken and regrets his words, Cárcamo was explaining in more detail how, because of the barber's wife's loose tongue right there at the wake, the Commandant had ordered him to take immediate possession of all the barber's papers and put them in his office, far from imagining, naturally, that the man who had just shuffled off and was lying between four candles as thin as fingers, wild flowers, prayers and weeping, was the number-one contact for the strike movement in Tiquisate.

From the earth that was beaten down beneath the sound of the vegetation, the living fire of the coast rose up, damp and burning like an infected scab. From time to time the horses stamped, as if they were tasting the thirst of the soil with four tongues, and some heavy bird would let go without moving its wings, sailing over the highest trees to the arc of the horizon where somewhere the sea was pounding.

The Captain gave so many details and revealed such secrets about the strike prepared for the zero hour of a day not yet fixed and which would paralyze the entire country according to the document he had in his possession, that Father Fejú, in

spite of the drowsiness of the hour began to breathe more trustfully.

"As soon as they turn me loose on the other side of the border in my own country, I'll help them. Someone can cross the border where there aren't any authorities and go tell him . . ."

"Father, you Mexicans are famous for giving all the help you can!"

"What else is there to do but give it! Sometimes we keep our word and this time I give you my promise. I need his name and address."

"I have the address, but let me explain about the name. The one that appears on these papers isn't hers . . ."

"It's a woman, then . . ."

"Yes, a schoolteacher . . . I have her address, but the main piece of information, which is her name, is just barely stuck onto a very old memory. Years ago, during a masked ball at the military club, I turned myself loose, you might say, in a carnival of pleasure with a very pretty country girl who told me her name was Rosa Gavidia. We danced all night together, we dined alone, I declared my intentions, she almost accepted me, and her name hasn't been on my lips since the moment we said good-by, when she told me that it wasn't her real name, that it was Malena and that her last name wasn't Gavidia but Tabay. Malena Tabay is her real name . . ."

And then, with complete trust, the Captain went on after looking at his wrist watch. The train would be along soon.

"We wrote each other a lot of letters. I was falling more and more in love but she decided to cut it off. I was too young. The years have passed. I never heard or saw the name Rosa Gavidia written again until that night when I put the papers I found in the barber's house on the chief's desk. And everything came back to me. I saw her again. I saw her again just as she was when I took her dancing at the club, except that now, by withholding the documents, I was giving her my arm as a volunteer for death, not to a masked figure but to a shadow, to a beloved

shadow, why not say so, inviting her to dance the most frightful of all dances, the one of torture and firing squads."

"And if it's not the same person . . ." the priest cut in.

"I've thought a lot about it, I turned it over a lot in my mind, but there's no doubt. Malena Tabay was headmistress of the School for Girls at Cerropóm at that time, and Rosa Gavidia, according to those documents seems to be living in the same town. It's a mountain village, isolated, almost inaccessible.

"God will help us," the priest said, and he unbuttoned his cassock a little. Then he took off the collar that he wore backwards, opened it, and on the inside with a trembling hand he wrote Rosa Gavidia, Malena Tabay, Cerropóm . . .

When he finished making the note, he put his collar back on after struggling with the collar button, the heat, the sweat, the nails, and the tips of his painting fingers. It would have been better if they cut a person's head off once and for all rather than suffer that permanent guillotine, and when the buttons of his cassock were easily fastened once more, he was able to speak.

"I really don't have any need now, Captain, to ask you why I'm being put out of the country. The barber, God rest his soul, was . . . what you said, and when I asked in the pulpit for an image of the sacred mother of Guadalupe, he was the one who offered it to the church . . ."

"Yes, it was very suspicious because the man was, or had the reputation of being an atheist, and if he didn't believe in anything, what was he doing giving away that picture of the Virgin? . . . What was more than suspicious was that a lot of printed flyers inciting the general strike and subversive newspapers were found in his possession . . ."

"And before the train comes I want to explain something to you: don't think that my insistence on having the decree of expulsion or the order throwing me out, we have to use strong words in some cases too, was simply a desire for formality, papers, something in writing. My insistence was because of the fact that the document would establish the cause for my being declared *persona non grata*, as I looked ahead and intended to

deny it if it said that I was an arsonist; you know that they burned down one of the Protestants' chapels and more than one nasty tongue said that I was behind it, and there was even someone who saw me with the torch, about to fall down because I'd tripped on my cassock."

The train was felt beating on the rails before the locomotive appeared and the soldiers were already standing beside the horses with their arms slung.

"So," the cleric smiled bitterly as he got up from where he was sitting, "they threw me out . . . evidently because I'm a Mexican . . ." Cárcamo also smiled, "and because of the Virgin of Guadalupe . . ."

The train began to put on its brakes from a long way off. A wide curve allowed one to see the chain of cars that it hauled and the curious passengers looking out of the windows, trying to guess, talkative and half-smothered with heat, why they were stopping there where there was no station.

"That's good of you," Fejú thanked the captain, who was intensely pale, when he ordered the soldiers to take care of the horses so that the passengers, anxious for news, wouldn't know that the priest there had come under military escort. The officer tried to appear as a friend who had come to see him off.

The locomotive was slowly stopping its pistons until it was motionless on the squealing of the rails where the sand which poured out of its tanks stopped the wheels from slipping; but as soon as the Reverend Ferrusigfrido Fejú, with his suitcase, climbed onto the first step, where he was received by a man the color of old saffron who was blinking ceaselessly, the train regained the elasticity of its movement with the rumble of the embankment and the hands of the unknown passengers that had been thrust out to wave to the captain.

Cárcamo jumped on his horse. The two soldiers climbed up on the other one. The one in front with his feet in the stirrups and the reins in his hands. The one in back with his feet dangling and clutching his comrade's waist. They rode back as fast as the animals could go along the main road, a skein of black, shoe-

polish earth, through trees that crossed their branches to give shade. Up ahead the branches rose between bushes as they reached a forest or a piece of forest which was like a domesticated wild animal, opulent with leaves that looked like flowers, flower-leaves with coral specks on a yellow background, stripes of blood on a lead-gray background, stars in the shape of drops of orange fire on a black background, violet flies on white backgrounds, and long leaves tinted with pink and amber, and twisting leaves streaked with mother-of-pearl, and leaves with hair and leaves with holes . . .

"Where did you borrow the horses?" the officer asked.

The soldier who was riding on the rump answered:

"The preacher loaned them. Orders from the Commandant, we told him, and on orders from the Commandant he loaned them to us. 'Take them,' he said, 'orders from the Commandant,' that was what the preacher said, and we saddled them and took them, orders from the Commandant."

"If the priest knew, he wouldn't have got on . . ."

"And the evangelist might not have loaned them if he knew they were for priesty," the soldier with the reins said.

Cárcamo dug his heels into the horse to make it go faster. Great gulps of road. Only with great gulps of road could he believe what he had seen. Blinky, the cruelest agent in the secret police assigned to escort Father Fejú to the border. Did they intend to do away with him? . . . How? . . . With a pistol shot? . . . Throwing him off the train? . . . Grabbing him and taking him back to jail him or impale him in a dungeon for life while someone who looked like him, pretending to be a priest, would cross the border so that in the immigration offices there would be evidence that he had left the country? . . . Blinky was not a man who moved unless there was a sure victim, and . . . one Mexican less, and with the proof in his collar where he had written down the names Rosa Gavidia, Malena Tabay, Cerropóm . . .

They stopped in front of the houses without sidewalks on the

outskirts of town. The soldiers leaped off, feet right onto the ground, and the officer got off, using the stirrups.

"Take these animals back to where you got them," Cárcamo ordered his men, "without saying where we went or who went with us, and then go to the post and report to the officer of the guard . . ."

It was beginning to grow dark. The soldiers went off, one behind the other, leading the horses. Cárcamo turned to look all around. Since he had found and hidden Rosa Gavidia's papers, it was strange, but he had the feeling of being followed and several times he mistook the echo of his own footsteps and his shadow. He stopped to light a cigarette and in the glow of the match, inside the cage of his fingers, which he put together so that the wind would not blow out the flame, without closing them completely so as not to cut off the oxygen and make it go out, he thought that he could do the same thing with those documents which kept his life in danger, put a match to them.

30

Deep in the tunnel of his cassock, sweating from the heat, sweating from anguish, sweating the heavy drop of the suitcase in his hand, Father Fejú appeared in the first-class coach, unable to keep his balance because of the jerking of the cars as the train slowed and picked up speed. He was weighted down as much by his dislike of being escorted against his will as by fatigue, and if he picked up his feet it was only because the same steps that were bringing him toward one of the empty seats were making him flee from his senses, escape from reality, only halfway realizing that they were sending him back to his own country as a dangerous foreigner, as an undesirable, guarded by a cop in civilian clothes who blinked with a soft drizzling sound, the only sign of life on his mummy's face, pale lips, long nose, high cheekbones, big ears, and fangs gilded with gendarmish decorations, the same as his hands, which were covered with rings, outstanding among which was a big one with a blood-red ruby. Father Fejú was completely unaware as to who that sinister jailer was, the one they called Blinky.

The passengers, their curiosity satisfied, detached themselves from the windows and settled back into their seats with the train in motion again. They greeted the priest with a word or a nod and there were plenty of unbelievers who considered it an evil omen to be traveling with a black bird and believers who felt closer to the eternal truth in the presence of a priest, and they began to ponder where the priest might be coming from at that hour. Some thought he was returning from having said mass at some local festival, others thought he was coming from giving the last rites to some rich man in the area.

No, the priest did not have a festival face, rather, he carried the mist that clings to the features of people who have helped someone die properly.

And the officer who had brought him? That was something else. He stayed with him until he got on the train. No doubt because of the rumors about the strike or the dangers of the roads.

Blinky, who had clear orders to conceal his identity and the priest's status as a political prisoner, described as a dangerous Mexican, put on his most desiccated expression as he offered him a choice of where to sit on the seat they would occupy together. Father Ferrusigfrido chose the window because of the air, the light, and because by sitting in the corner he would be more secure for the policeman, although, paradoxically, pushed in and imprisoned in that place, he felt freer by just looking at the sky.

He turned his eyes away from the window. The sky joined the earth. He had decided to read the breviary that he carried in his right hand resting on his knee. He raised his left hand to unbutton the collar of his cassock before starting his prayers. Perhaps in that way his sense of being smothered, his distaste for physical contact with the policeman would be less. But his fingers became paralyzed when he touched the first button and it cut through his body and chilled his blood as he thought that behind that button, on the white collar, he carried in writing the name of Rosa Gavidia, one of the persons most involved in the activities of the strike that was about to be unleashed. Rosa Gavidia, who was

also named Malena Tabay, and that of a village, Cerropóm, which he had never heard of.

He covered his expression by touching that half of an apple which our father Adam had not swallowed, without losing sight of Blinky out of the corner of his eye. How awful if he were to guess his secret! He would hang him. He would hang him right there with his collar turned into a noose. He ran his watchful eyes over the faces and forms of the few people occupying that rolling jail—first-class passengers or high-class prisoners?—all rumpled, sticky, scratching their clothing, scratching under their clothing, half-asleep, scratching their heads, their necks, their sweat-swampy armpits, the women at full fan as they used the pages of newspapers that had been read over and over again, their coiffures in disorder, their make-up in bad shape, annoyed by the intense heat, and the men irked by the deafness that comes with a loss in altitude and which made them stretch open their mouths, a grimace of laughter and pain, blew their noses with a sound like castanets, or moved their heads as if they were swimming underwater, in search of sounds beyond the rolling of the train, afraid that they would remain deaf.

At the end of the car two Chinese were traveling. The younger one, the color of wax and amber, black hair like the thread on a bobbin, and the older, fat, with a pockmarked face and dark glasses.

Motionless and without eyelids, they didn't seem to be a part of that mass of passengers soaked in sweat who changed their positions at every moment, unable to get comfortable with their bodies or anything, despairing over the monotonous rolling of a train that was being crushed by the sun like an iron insect against the tracks of melted fire, over the scaly rising of the milky, unbreathable evaporation, and over a watch that did not advance.

A young couple with the rejection of all creation reflected in their eyes followed their small children as they shuttled between the seats back and forth to the lavatory. They took every opportunity for the pleasure of urinating, urinating as the train

traveled along. Shut up in the shadows of that small musty room that smelled of disinfectant, cigarette butts wet with saliva, and rusty metal. They stood stock still as through the bottom of the toilet bowl they saw the ribbon of the tracks pass cinematographically as the train left it behind, while their urine, as soon as it left their hooded little doves, fell yellow, maddened by the collision with the column of air that was blowing under the train. They urinated little by little, time and again, but both of them looked with the eyes of small trapped animals at the metallic cup to watch the leaping and dispersion of their urine before it fell, reduced to large and small drops over the strip of earth that moved along ties like lines in a school notebook.

On their way back from one of those excursions Father Fejú called them over. They stopped to look at him timidly. They didn't want to come closer. They didn't dare. The policeman moved his legs to let them by. What would they say to Father if he asked them why they kept going to the toilet?

Not to urinate. The last time only to spit, to see how those strings with heads of froth fell to the earth as it fled under the wheels of the train, with the advantage that the saliva clung together on its own, without their knowing why, and they would salivate abundantly when they felt themselves alone, closed up in that dark little room.

The priest shook hands with them as with adults. Then he asked them their names, where they were from, how old they were. They answered everything, and since they had just had their first communion it was easy to answer the questions about doctrine that he asked them. The answers were still fresh on their lips like mother's milk. The older one, bolder, asked him for some holy pictures.

Holy pictures?

He had some, but in the suitcase that was under the seat and it was a lot of trouble . . . Nevertheless, he asked Blinky's permission to take it out and he pulled on the straps of the sleeping animal, a valise always gave him the impression of a sleeping

animal, when one of the passengers in the next seat came to his aid.

"Don't trouble yourself, Father. Let me get it for you . . ."

"God bless you. I want to get some holy pictures for these youngsters . . ." And without opening the suitcase all the way, he groped about in one of the corners until he found them. "Children, here are two pictures of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the American Virgin who appeared to the Indian Juan Diego."

The passenger who was kind enough to take the priest's bag out from under the seat, offered Blinky a cigarette, but, with a trembling, indecisive gesture, he rejected the pack that the man held out to him with a cigarette almost sticking out, and without a word he calmed his eyelids down over his eyes as he put his head back against the seat. He was breathing with difficulty, sweating with large drops, and he felt a cramp in his intestines that was like a lightning bolt.

The boys went off on a signal from the priest, jumping on one foot, happy to have the pictures in their hands, each one wanting to get there first to show their parents, who didn't pay much attention as they looked out to watch a river pass under a bridge while Blinky's mouth filled up with an acid emptiness that first became liquid and then solid, an uncontainable mouthful of water and a lacework of food that he managed to carry to the door, his hand held tightly against his lips, before he shut himself up in the lavatory where, leaning with his arm crooked around his forehead, he interminably released through his mouth and nose what he had formerly considered a succulent lunch, which now was a soup made up of crabmeat, alligator pears, meat, potatoes in red sauce, beans, bananas, butter, and coconut milk . . .

"Father! . . . Father! . . ." the passenger who had just come over to help with the suitcase hastened to say to Father Fejú. Until then the priest had noticed that he was a very tall man and that he spoke with the lilt of a Honduran, as if leaving the words behind his voice. "Father, my name is Rámila, Parrot Rámila, and

I've brought you these things that you forgot in your room! . . ."

"Oh, yes . . ." Fejú answered without knowing what he was doing or saying, his eyes, his ears, all intent on what was happening to Blinky, with the fear that he would overcome his indisposition and return to find him talking to that fellow. But he recovered and managed to say: "I left in such confusion that when we were halfway along the road I realized I'd forgotten all of these souvenirs of Jerusalem I had . . . God will repay you! . . ."

Rámila was quiet so that the priest could still hear Blinky throwing up his insides while the trail slipped along the rails as if it were asleep. Then he went on:

"But what I wanted to tell you is just how those objects that you left in your room reached my hands . . ."

The cleric seemed to be interested but he was paying more attention to the policeman's vomiting.

"From the time that soldier Cárcamo came to get you to take you to the military post until you came back with him, we stood guard with our comrades. I was inside the church. I hid in the pulpit and that's why, without meaning to, I heard your complaint to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Listening to you I realized that faith is beautiful, because it returns a person to a mother who doesn't die, and a mother to me is someone a person can unburden himself to and know that she's listening. You were unburdening yourself like a son to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Then you left on the horses that the Protestants loaned . . ." the priest was on the point of getting up and brushing off the seat of his pants. Later on he would sprinkle holy water on them . . . Luckily it was his rear end that was next to the saddle belonging to those people and along the way he had let loose a few good puffballs . . .

"When you left," the man went on, "I ran to your room, thinking that maybe you'd left some letter, some papers, and I found the few things I brought. I was lucky to have had enough time to catch the train in Tiquisate and there I was, sitting strategically

here, because one of our comrades, most of the people working on the railroad are with us, told me that Blinky was on board, and I said to myself that cop must have something to do with Father, and that's how it is, here we are . . ."

The priest thanked him but at the same time with his eyes he begged him to go away.

"I'm compromising you . . ." he finally said, as if asking him diplomatically to go back to his seat.

"I don't see why. When Blinky comes back . . ."

"Is that what they call him?"

"And he's the meanest cop in the whole secret police, and who knows but that they picked him out not to take you to the border but to get rid of you before you reach your own country. But I was telling you that it doesn't compromise you and it doesn't compromise me for me to be next to you chatting. No one has to know that that evil beast is a policeman and that you're a prisoner."

Father Ferrusigfrido's nervousness was growing, not only because of Blinky's imminent return but because of the information Rámila was giving him.

"Rest easy, Father, you're not traveling alone! You're in safe hands. There are a lot of us with you and I'm armed too. If anything happens that devil will die. If it weren't for involving you . . . Now that he's throwing up his guts it would be a good chance to drag him out to the platform by his hair and, as if we were helping him to keep on tossing up his insides, we could throw him off the train so he'd die and go to hell and they could start torturing him there right away."

The priest was not listening and he was not peaceful and Rámila understood.

"Calm down, Father! Calm down, I'm going back to my seat! But first I wanted to tell you that if you want me to tell anybody, relatives, friends, the curia, the Mexican consulate, just tell me and I'll do it . . ."

"Tell somebody . . ." the priest repeated, remembering Captain

Cárcamo's request, but his voice and his thought melted away, (yes, yes, warn Rosa Gavidia or Malena Tabay in Cerropóm . . .), with the sound of the lavatory door which was opening to release Blinky, who was coming back and trying to squeeze the emptiness of his stomach, his teary eyes still clouded, his ears curled, his hair in disorder, and even so the tips of his shoes and the cuffs of his pants didn't go unnoticed, all speckled with a rejected lunch, and he immediately had the urge to stop and clean them with the handkerchief which was also sticky, like his nails, his cuffs, his tie, and his lapels.

Fejú tried to pray, but the leather binding of his breviary, damp with sweat, and the pages of Bible paper, sticky, inseparable, made him close the book. He was praying, nevertheless, praying from the bottom of his heart to all the saints and asking for help, for one out of all of them to leave his eternal celestial happiness for a moment and with his quill pen come down to tickle the uvula of the wretch he had at his side so that he would get up again to throw up.

And as if, in effect, one of the learned saints had taken his quill away from the sacred book and put it into Blinky's throat, the latter, after gagging one, two, three times, without substance, after rolling his head from one side to the other on the back of the seat and groaning with animal rancor, got up, staggering like a drunkard, and shut himself up again in the lavatory.

This time the priest was the one who signaled Rámila to come over quickly. Captain Cárcamo's errand was burning on his tongue. To warn Rose Gavidia or Malena Tabay in Cerropóm that they had discovered papers in the Equinoxes barbershop that were very compromising for her . . .

When he said Equinoxes he clutched his breviary in his hand, and he put it into the pocket of his cassock, remembering Don Yemo who, moribund and all, had made him indescribably happy when he gave him the picture of Cuauhtemocina for the church, where it glows on the main altar . . .

"Oh, but I still have the joy of having enthroned her!"

"I think they took it down when you left."

The priest became all upset, that was even worse, he frowned and opened his eyes, trying to understand.

"Speak . . . tell me . . ."

"And if they haven't taken her down, they're going to, because the Company decided to enthrone St Patrick . . ."

"St. Patrick? . . ."

"Yes, because he's the patron saint of New York, according to what they say, and because it's natural that wherever they pitter-patter St. Patrick should be on the altars . . ."

Rámila laughed until he almost choked, with the cavernous laugh of a parrot, which isn't really laughing but imitating, although more than laughing, he was swallowing his untimely guffaw because of Father Fejú's depression as he said something about the evil use they were making of St. Patrick as the protector of pirates, when he had nothing to do with the English and even less with their American descendants, for he was more likely opposed to all of them as the apostle of Ireland. And while the priest was speaking and blinking in order to cut off his tears, he smiled without wishing to, thinking that he was imitating Blinky. Rámila put out his ear to find out what was going on with him in the lavatory, nothing more could be heard, silence . . . He got up. It was best to go see. He went over and came back.

"Nothing to worry about, Father, we can keep on talking. That devil's sitting on the toilet unconscious. He can't see or hear anything . . . I went over to touch him and he's colder than a corpse . . ."

"I should be with him . . . perhaps he wants to confess . . ."

"Oh, no, Father! Nothing like that! For you to want to open the gates of heaven for that criminal!"

"But don't you see it's my obligation, he might be condemned . . ."

"Just hearing that! Just hearing what you said is a consolation for me! That's what I want for him, to be condemned!"

"It can't be! Eternal fire! It's eternal life in hell!"

"Not too bad! Not too bad for everything that bloody beast

has to pay for! Oh, if my eyes could only see him dead without confession, because you won't move from here! Oh, if it's only true that there's a hell!"

"Blasphemy!"

"Blasphemy, yes! . . . If only there's a hell . . . the damnable doubt that stops me from enjoying . . . wallowing in vengeance . . . that bloody beast not being saved. He was one of the people who penned in the strikers on the pier between their guns and the sharks . . . And I saw it, I saw those men trembling in the face of certain death, comrades, dressed in rags, retreating to where the pier ended, wounded, broken, bleeding, and I saw them fall into the sea that was stained red . . . Then the sharks and the silence . . . Oh, if that bandit is alive it's because of you, because if not I would have finished him off by now with my pistol, and look at my bad luck, because it's the first time I've had him in my sights . . . he's alive because of you, because it would complicate things. But to let you go and pray and wave your hand over him so God would forgive him! . . ."

"And if it's just waving my hand why don't you let me go?" the priest begged.

Rámila's answer was spontaneous and quick:

"Because of my doubts . . . Because of the doubt that it might all be true and he could be saved! . . ."

The lavatory door was heard to open. The argument was useless. There came Blinky, having dismounted from a horse he had ridden through his intestines, with nothing left of it but the weight of something like a saddle that clung to his buttocks. When he realized that in the affliction of his vomiting he had sat down on the toilet without dropping his pants and when he felt that stickiness that seemed to be a saddle running down his hips and thighs, he quickly shut himself up in the lavatory again.

He was lucid. That cleansing of thought that comes after lightening oneself of food through mouth, nose, and . . .

He would have to bathe, change his clothes, his shoes, but how could he get out of there, how could he get out . . .

Not until the agents who were traveling under his orders in

the second-class coach appeared, in plain clothes, like any other poor person, a team of dark men who, forgetting their obligation to be always in sight of their chief in case something happened, were dozing as the train went along, forgetting what they were and what they carried in their pockets, waistbands, and cartridge belts: bullets, pistols, rubber truncheons that hit without leaving a mark, whistles, and handcuffs. (Oh, but I'll give them a good scrubbing, Blinky said to himself, feeling himself gingerly through his pants without making many movements, feeling the substance that the shaking of the train made hot against him).

"There's no need for excuses if you repent your saying 'Waving your hand.' I'll erase the words, which were sinful . . ."

"Good sins, Father . . ."

"Good sins? . . . Holy Mother of God! . . ."

"But look at the way things are," he went on, deep and reflective, "the officer who asked you to warn that teacher in Cerropóm about the discovery of the papers in the barbershop was on the point of being killed that same night when the Commandant ordered him to take everything he'd found at the barber's and leave it under lock and key in his office. Of course, not even the Commandant knew what it was all about. If he had he would have taken the things personally and telegraphed the authorities in the capital right then and there, telling them that he'd just uncovered one of the most important contacts in our movement . . ."

From time to time Blinky could be heard opening the door of the lavatory, Rámila and the priest would be silent; but then they would hear it slam; Rámila and Fejú went on talking.

"Well, that night, who would have known, two comrades were on guard waiting for the Captain to go by . . ."

"How did they find out he was carrying the papers?"

"One of those same comrades, a childhood friend of Cárcamo's, had heard about it at the wake . . ."

"A childhood friend and . . . he informed on him?"

"His obligation there was to save his companions in the struggle and that's why he not only told what had happened but also ran to station himself there with another good shot in an obvious spot where the Captain had to pass in order to get to the post, to do away with him and take the papers and to see at all costs that they didn't reach the Commandant's desk."

And after a pause in which they heard Blinky open and close the door, beyond which he couldn't move and where he was listening for the footsteps of one of his subordinates coming to check on orders, Rámila went on:

"Unfortunately it couldn't be avoided . . . The papers reached the hands of the authorities and the whole plan has to be changed, the movement speeded up . . . An officer who was reporting back late because he'd been having a time with a wench, who's a half-countrywoman of mine, by the way, a Honduran, was returning with his patrol after his nightly rounds and he met his companion in arms a few steps from the place where two rifles and plenty of rounds were waiting, and that's how, willy-nilly, his life was saved, because the ones waiting for Cárcamo couldn't shoot anymore seeing that their firepower was inferior . . ."

"They lacked the courage . . ." the priest was more specific, letting himself play the Mexican.

"They didn't have the firepower . . . That business of brave men and cowards is fine terminology when it's a matter of a duel, but in struggles like ours it doesn't count . . ."

"But God in heaven! . . ." the priest leaped forward, raising his hand to cover his forehead from one temple to the other and shielding his eyes. "I've handled things very badly . . . I'm all confused . . . I've given the name of the person who asked me . . . and he's an officer on active duty . . . they'll shoot him . . . you have to forget . . . promise me . . . I ask you before God . . . don't let it escape from your lips that it's Captain Cárcamo . . . but how can I ask you since he's your enemy . . . Use my

name if you want to . . . say that I found out the secret in those papers when the barber called me to give me the picture of Our Lady, that some of those documents stayed in my possession and that's why I was able to warn that teacher to get away . . ."

"Cárcamo's no longer an enemy, Father, rest easy, and I'm the one most interested for it not to be known about the great service he rendered for the cause of our people in withholding the most compromising papers! Cárcamo's the important one now! . . ."

"I'm sorry, with your knowing the secret I didn't want . . . what a lack of faith, what a lack of faith on my part . . ."

"Thinking that with my knowing the secret I'd try to make him turn over the documents . . . That would be blackmail and we're not interested in either buying or blackmailing military men, who, at the right moment, in order to save their skins and what they have, will join the side of the people, so they can change later on and go back to being their executioners . . . Cárcamo's the important one now, as I was saying, because by his conduct we know how he thinks, and even though someone might accuse him now, we'd save him, we'd risk our lives for him . . ."

"Thank you, friend Rámila, thank you! You're taken a great weight off my mind! . . . your words . . . your arguments . . . That doesn't mean that I won't beat my chest with the hardest stone I can find for not having been able to keep the secret of a man who for some reason sacrificed himself to the point of risking his life for that schoolteacher!"

"Cárcamo's the important one!" Rámila repeated almost mechanically. "Rosa Gavidia or Malena Tabay, it's all the same, will fall if she has to fall, if her name is still among the papers that the captain didn't have time to read or if we don't reach her with the warning you're giving me for her to get away . . . But the one who's important right now is Cárcamo, do you understand? He's the one we have to save from the uniform that isolates him so that he can take the great step . . ."

"I'm grateful for your insistence on stressing the value you

assign to the attitude, to the conduct of that officer. I feel as if your words are easing my responsibility . . ."

"Sometimes I have the impression that we're all closed up in a dark room looking for each other and we can't find anyone . . ."

"And if I can help you people in anything, count on me . . ."

"That Chinese man there, not the young one, the older one . . ." Rámila pointed out the two passengers who were still motionless at the end of the car, as if enclosed in their tight, pale oriental skin. They were now practically the only passengers in that deserted car, just right for Blinky to get rid of the priest without any witnesses.

But although he pointed at the older Chinese, he could not say anything more. Steps and voices at the door to the lavatory. Clothes, shoes, water, soap for a bath, a quick change, Blinky was demanding from his subordinates, who had finally appeared, one after the other in Indian file, asking if he needed anything . . .

"Need anything? . . . God . . . mother . . . damned . . . fucking . . . sons . . . of a . . . bastard . . . bitch! . . ." Blinky shouted, beside himself.

Asking if he needed anything when they found him a prisoner of his own shit, full of vomit and crap and rotting away locked up in there . . . !

The agents ran to get what was needed. Water, soap, underwear, a suit, shoes . . .

"They're his men," Rámila muttered without removing from his lips the cigarette he had just lighted, "but don't worry, we have our people too, armed and ready for anything . . ."

A cold, leaden chill ran up the priest's spine. The coast was breathing with more and more lungs. Only he, good Lord, minute, insignificant, unable to breathe, unable to speak, twisting his fingers . . .

More with his expression he asked Rámila what he was going to tell him about the older Chinese.

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry, I forgot to tell you that the Chinese are

traveling on with you to the other side and that the older one is to turn some papers over to you . . ."

"Some papers? . . ." he managed to put the words together.

"Don't be alarmed. They're copies of telegrams between the Company and the Ministry of Justice . . ."

"Telegrams?"

"I said don't be alarmed. The Chinese man will give them to you when you've crossed the border and you're safe on your own soil. Those telegrams prove that you were put out of the country not by a request but almost by order of the Banana Company for having been stirring up the spirit of the Catholic population in favor of the general strike."

In the lavatory the splashing of Blinky's washing and bathing could be heard. Two agents in shirtsleeves were soaping and bathing him, while the others waited at the door with his clothes and shoes.

"The telegrams are so explicit," Rámila went on, "that with them you'll be able to prove to the authorities in your country, to the press, and to your ecclesiastic superiors that the real reason for your expulsion and the uproar will help those of us here make people outside know what the cables keep silent . . ."

"And I can't be accused of being an arsonist . . . just that makes me feel better, because people don't know . . ."

"Why? . . . Because of the burning of the Protestant chapel?"

"Yes . . ."

"That was our doing . . ."

"Yours? . . . The people in the strike? . . ."

"Ours . . ."

"A person hears things he can't believe. That was just giving them more reason to run me out, so they could run me out as an arsonist, which wouldn't be any good either for you people or for me . . ."

"We went ahead after we already had our hands on the copies of the telegrams that the Chinese is going to give you . . ."

"I understand less and less, whether it was better for them to run me out because of the strike . . ."

"No! And that's why we burned the evangelists' building, so that your expulsion wouldn't serve their ends of intimidating our people, of making simple men, who are not always very decisive, think that if a priest, just imagine, if a priest and a foreigner is dumped across the border, what can they expect? . . ." He got up from the seat. "And I'm going back to my seat, here comes Blinky . . . smelling like . . . cologne water . . . like all vomiters after the act . . . have a good trip and don't forget! . . ."

"Give me your hand," Fejú asked him.

"Both hands. One isn't enough. Along with the promise that if we win, the Virgin of Guadalupe will go back to her main altar and we'll invite you to celebrate the mass . . ."

And while Rámila went back to his place, the priest licked his lips, pale, toasted, like pancakes, the honey of hope.

Drowsiness. A sky of sand. Blinky sitting beside him, sniffing himself and sniffing around him, without stopping his blinking. The Chinese motionless. Fejú touched his ears. From so much rolling of the train they felt like wheels. An imprudent thing to do. Terribly imprudent. The secret police are called "ears." Luckily, Blinky, in his urge to sniff about and sniff himself, pursued by a slight smell of vomit, didn't notice. The thing called for was to pray. He took his breviary from the pocket of his cassock, but it was more as if they had been through a tempest. A cloud of smoke that turned into hot rain in his eyes. Rifle fire. The contrast of the vermillions of the afternoon as the sun sank with the distant flashes of lightning. Father Ferrusigfrido closed his eyes. The train was no longer a train, it was distance . . .

31

With his eyes crouching from having been up all night and from not having had a siesta, Cárcamo went off in search of someone to talk to. People, not ghosts. Flesh and blood people and not shadow beings punctured by small dots of light like pieces of a mechanical toy that he assembled and disassembled in endless combinations . . . if Rosa Gavidia . . . if Blinky . . . if Father Fejú . . . if the warning arrived on time . . . if she was able to escape . . . if the compromising papers . . . could her name have been left behind among the papers that he left on the chief's desk, the ones he did not have time to look over? . . . but first he had to think about Blinky and Father Fejú . . . would he get across the border? . . . would they let him go? . . . not kill him, no . . . because of the scandal . . . the most likely thing was that they would beat him until he was unconscious and take him to the capital on a freight train to rot in an underground dungeon . . . with the justification on their part that they had found written on his collar the names of Rosa Gavidia . . . Malena Tabay . . . Cerropóm . . . anonymous notes . . . a blind alley.

Luckily he was off duty. If he could go to town and have a few beers. Going out what was he needed. Getting away from the command post.

He stopped by the entrance to Captain Salomé's tent for a moment to ask him if he could bring him anything from town, but the latter, saying no with his head, mumbled out a tango as he picked out the notes of a melody on his guitar . . .

Men called her the rose of fire,
and her lips burned when she kissed,
her eyes two embers, and dire
fate for a love that was missed . . .

"Bye, bye! . . ." Cárcamo said in English and went off with the words of the tango in his ears, except that instead of *rose of fire* his companion in arms seemed to be saying: Rosa Gavidia . . .

Did Captain Salomé know something?

Why did he sing or hum that tango every time he went to his tent?

Rose of fire and her happy laughter,
Rose of fire, the fun that came after
when she saw her victims fall
ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha . . .
the woman laughed at them all.

He stopped. He felt like pawing, like a horse . . . *ha, ha, ha, ha, ha* . . . he heard the tango . . . raising dust until he calmed down . . . *ha, ha, ha, ha* . . . Blinky . . . The papers . . . The compromising papers that he had burned in the most suitable spot the night before as he pretended that he was taking care of his necessities in a cesspool . . . ha, ha, ha . . . the fun that came after . . . ha, ha, ha . . . her happy laughter . . .

He quickened his pace. He had to flee, forget, escape from his thoughts. If not, why had he left the command post? To have some sun? . . . He would have been better off in his hammock! . . .

Shade trees with thick foliage, hedges, banana groves, guarumo trees, prickly-pear cacti, courtyards with hanging wash, others with small ovens, hand mills, cesspools, in one a cowhide staked out to dry, bloody and covered with the fierce buzzing of flies, huts of toasted straw, adobe houses with corrugated tin roofs on which the heat was sharpening its nails, drowsy animals, garden plots of sweet vegetables, radishes, lettuce. A boy had just pulled up a radish like a red bell and was shaking it as if to make it ring as he knocked off the dirt before sinking his teeth into it.

He heard steps. Someone was coming behind him.

"Are you off duty?"

The voice materialized into a shape that appeared in the corner of his eye. It asked him the question as it came up to his back, now almost alongside. It was the nasal-voiced teacher, Juventino Rodríguez. Since they had cured him of his drinking he no longer wandered about through the village lost and drunk, asking for Toba.

"Off duty?"

"That's right, professor, and you're still on vacation. That load of liquor you gave yourself left you as a convalescent for the rest of your life . . ."

"Out of work, you mean . . ."

In the town square, where the trees had been cut down, amates, guarumos, pines, cypresses, mangos, in order to provide an open green space for the mayor's English garden, nothing was moving, not even the air. A solid atmosphere, vertical, like a lead weight.

"And where are you off to, Captain, if you don't mind my asking?"

"To Piedrasanta's to have a beer," Cárcamo answered, going ahead; only a few steps separated them from the grocery store which, as everyone knew, was also half-lunchroom and half-beerhall.

The storekeeper, in his undershirt, with his chest heaving, was snoozing in a corner that was more dark than light among old,

flea-bitten dogs, a cat, and two pigeons who ran off frightened when they heard the steps of the Captain and the teacher.

"Who is it . . . what is it . . . who is it . . . ?" Piedrasanta managed to say from the nap that was halfway between sleeping and dreaming.

"We come in peace! . . ." Cárcamo shouted. He was blinded by the sun and it took him a while to get his bearings and find a table with two chairs.

"Piedrasanta," the Captain ordered when he was seated, "give us a couple of ice-cold beers."

"Just one," the nasal voice spoke up, "because I don't drink alcohol."

"There's not much in it," Piedrasanta put in.

"Even so. For me, since the captain invited me, an ice."

"You don't even drink beer?"

"Not even beer, thank you."

"That's since the Protestants cured him," Piedrasanta said, and then, completely awake, "Oh, that's right, it wasn't the Protestants!"

"Whether they cured me or not," the teacher was patient, "is nobody's business. You almost had it bad the other night . . . they didn't beat your face in because they took pity on you!"

"When? . . ." Cárcamo inquired while the storekeeper went to get the beer and shave the ice for Rodríguez.

"Squeezed, or do you want it loose?" Piedrasanta asked.

"Loose!" the twang was heard.

"Yes, because if it was squeezed you'd have to suck it and you don't like to swill things . . ."

Without paying any attention to what the storekeeper was saying, Rodríguez explained:

"The other night, while a group of boys were playing dibs, a fellow came by and invited us to set fire to the Protestants' building. Some accepted, others of us stayed behind, I'm through with raising hell, and when the group was taking off Piedrasanta came along, telling them not to go, that the fellow was a communist . . ."

At that moment the storekeeper came over with the beer and the ice and the teacher interrupted what he was saying:

"I was telling the captain what almost happened to you with that dead man you said was a communist . . ."

"Dead man?" Cárcamo put in with a mustache of beer that he was tasting.

"Well, being a communist and being dead are the same thing with this government."

"And if they'd paid any attention to me," Piedrasanta reacted, full of reasons, "they wouldn't have burned that there chapel and the priest would still be in his church here. The one they really burned was the priest . . ."

"That must have been the reason," the twang hastened to say, lips frozen by the ice and at the same time looking as if they were burning up from the scarlet color of the strawberry syrup, "they expelled him, because, since he was a priest, they couldn't kill him anymore than they could accuse him of being a communist . . . A priest and a foreigner . . . voom, go pick off your fleas somewhere else!"

"And what could have made them say he was a communist?"

"What? The fact that he supported the strike, a small matter . . ."

"The priest?"

"Don't be surprised, Piedrasanta, you knew all about it!"

"Me?"

"You . . . you were a close friend of his!"

"Not a close friend. He used to come here to have his cup of chocolate before he went to bed, and that's all. He paid just the same as you people pay for your drinks. A customer-friend, right, Captain?"

"What's for sure is that nobody knows why they ran him out," Cárcamo put in.

"Everybody arranges things in his own way." The storekeeper raised his arms and lowered his head, and, hanging in that posi-

tion of a person crucified, he said, "They're even going around saying that he was killed . . ."

This time it was the Captain who almost leaped from his chair: "What are you saying, they killed him?"

And when he realized that he had unconsciously given himself away by showing so much interest in the fate of the priest, he added:

"The news bothers me because if they killed him in our jurisdiction we'll be getting it from the tongues of the people, the press, and even from his ecclesiastical superiors, who only spend their time looking for someone to put the blame on. They'll accuse the military authorities in the zone of a lack of vigilance, and we have all we can do guarding the Company's plantations and bosses, managers, administrators, foremen, prostitutes, guarding the mayor's crazy ideas, the Protestants' crazy ideas, the priest's crazy ideas . . ." He thought it prudent to add, in order to put them off the track, "not to mention specifically guarding railroads, fuel dumps, drinking-water supplies, electrical plants, telegraph, mail, radio, hospital, landing strips, roads, bridges . . . and, I was forgetting, the crazy ideas of the spiritualists, who are always raising cain."

"That's up the professor's alley . . ." the storekeeper said.

"I'm a spiritual man, not a spiritualist . . ."

"And the crazy ideas of that gang of boys, and because they're the sons of rich families, we have orders not to do anything to them . . ."

Cárcamo was piling word upon word in order to remove from his eyes the repugnant image of Blinky standing on the steps waiting for his victim, the one whom he, he, he handed over to him. He pictured the bloody body of the priest being flung from the train, that was the most probable, and the hands that tore off his cassock, his clothes, his collar in order to disfigure him and on that last item, written down with a trembling hand, the names of Rosa Gavidia, Malena Tabay, and Cerropóm.

"The Captain's right about that," the storekeeper added. "The

authorities are the ones who bear the blame for everything that happens in the end because they'll accuse them of not being on the lookout for go-betweens and accomplices, but in the case of Father Ferrusigfrido . . ."

"How well you know his name!" the nasal-voiced man put in.

"He was my neighbor and my customer, right? . . . But in the case of Father Ferrusigfrido Fejú, I know his last name too, even if the professor doesn't like it, you shouldn't worry, Captain, because they say he got to the border."

"The strange thing," Juventino interrupted, "is that there wasn't anything about it in the newspapers or on the radio . . ."

"Don't make me laugh! . . ." the storekeeper exclaimed. "The newspapers and the radio? It's easy to see that the professor's a young man, even if he does look old. Alcohol made him old!"

"The Mexican radio, Piedrasanta! The Mexican radio! . . ." Rodríguez reacted with annoyance. "If you don't let a person speak . . ."

"That makes sense . . ." Cárcamo added, taking shelter in what the teacher had said as if it were a valid hope.

"A lot of sense!" the other one said, "because if what Peidra's saying . . ."

"I'm not saying anything, sir, I'm just repeating . . ."

"Well, what he's repeating; the Mexican radio not only would have given the news, and I listen to it almost every night, but since it's a case of a citizen of theirs, a priest, and a crime, and they really are scandalmongers and sensationalists . . . a dish all made to order . . ."

An unexpected customer, but one whom all recognized at once, appeared in the doorway.

The storekeeper, who had his back turned when he heard the steps and looked around, had trouble concealing his displeasure with the new arrival. In any case, he did better than the Captain, who could barely hide his joy when he saw Andrés Medina, his childhood friend, enter, someone he had met again after many years at the barber's wake, and who had vanished from there until he ran into him again now.

Piedrasanta went to the counter, and trying to maneuver efficiently, offered a drink to the one he considered his enemy, a drink might disarm him, but the teacher ruined his intentions as he invited Medina—while under his breath he whispered to the captain: "He's the communist! He's the communist!"—to come over to the table since he wanted to have the pleasure of introducing them . . .

Cárcamo was on the point of shouting:

"Andrei!"

But he held back and lowered his eyes shaking hands as if with a stranger.

"Have a drink with us," Cárcamo invited.

"I won't have anything, thanks . . . I just came to settle accounts with this shitty storekeeper . . ."

Piedrasanta, who had prudently stationed himself behind the counter, pretended that he had not heard, but Medina insisted:

"I'm talking about you, you piece of shit!"

And he went toward Piedrasanta. Juventino tried to seize his arm, asking him to control himself, but as soon as he got his sleeve loose he ran over with a chair in his hand in such a way that if Piedrasanta had not disappeared through the door in the rear of the store he would have split his head open with it.

"You fairy bastard, if you were only a man! . . ." the paleness on Medina's face was such that it looked as if he were having an attack of jaundice.

Yellow, yellow, he paced about like a caged animal, until someone who was a sort of employee in the store appeared.

Seeing him and shouting was one action with Medina:

"Call that coward, tell him not to hide behind his wife's skirts, to show his balls since he was brave enough to call me a communist!"

"Calm down, Andrei, what's the matter with you?" Cárcamo went over to speak to him in a low voice while the teacher spoke with the helper.

"What happened was that this guy was all upset about setting fire to the Protestants' carnival, a carnival where there wasn't any

dancing, but where they preached nonsense, because it's nonsense to be talking about God while we're dying of dysentery, malaria, bodily misery, blind, tubercular, all maimed, and not just us, but our children and our wives . . ."

"Beat it now, don't leave yourself open. It's very urgent for me to talk to you."

"I'll come see you . . ." Medina managed to say to Cárcamo before the teacher came close to hurry him along, almost pushing him:

"Get away, don't lose any time! Beat it! . . . I got out of the clerk that Piedrasanta went for the police . . ."

Running, whistling, and shots were heard on the street. There was an expectant silence.

The nasal-voiced man, who had stationed himself at the door, came in saying:

"He got away from them . . . They didn't catch him . . ."

"Then we have a good reason," the captain raised his voice, "to go from beer to rum. Two rums," he ordered from the helper, but then he corrected himself. "Just one, because this gentleman doesn't drink, and something to nibble on, some cheese, or some more of those olives."

The storekeeper came in, accompanied by the judge.

"Naturally," the latter said, "we accede to your demand, as an arsonist or as a communist, one of the two, but it can't be both . . ." Piedrasanta opened his eyes on the mousy smallness of the lawyer, who was speaking with insistence. "As you heard, as a communist or as an arsonist. You pick the accusation you want to give us . . ."

"Both of them, Mr. Mayor . . ."

"It can't be both . . ."

"Why can't it, since I'm accusing him of both?"

"Because since it was the priest who ordered the Protestants burned out, if the accused man was one of the arsonists following their beliefs, their fanaticism, how could he be accused of being a communist? It can't be done, Piedrasanta, it can't be done!"

"If that's how it is, I accuse him of being a communist . . ."

"Have you got any proof?"

"The fire, mayor . . . the fire! Isn't that enough?"

"No, Piedrasanta, the fire, I told you already, was something the Catholics did, roused up by that Mexican priest!"

"Others say it was the Company who ordered it burned," the storekeeper grumbled, "you never can understand them . . ."

"That's nonsense . . ."

"Not as much nonsense as you think. They needed a pretext to throw out that priest, and the fire . . ."

"We thought about the same thing. Without accepting it, and as far as I'm concerned, it's nonsense. Let's just say for a moment that it was the Company. They would have done it with their own employees and not with communists."

"Well, then, that man, what is he? . . ."

"That's what I'm asking you. An arsonist, of course. You heard him recruiting people, you were against it, and that's why he came to insult you in your place of business. Put all those things together and they constitute a serious crime. Why do you need anything else? Why all the communist business?"

"That's what'll come out . . . and they'll shoot him . . ."

"As an arsonist too . . ."

"Then it's all the same to me. I accuse him of being an arsonist."

"What an evil man! . . ." Rodríguez protested, entering the discussion. "If they call me as a witness I'll tell what the man said, and since I was present I'm an eyewitness, and it was something like, 'Come on, fellows, let's go see the fire . . . !'"

"And while Piedrasanta was arguing with the nasal-voiced man, the judge went over to Cárcamo:

"So nice to see you. I didn't recognize you and that's why I didn't say hello. It's so rare to see you military men out of uniform!"

They shook hands and the judge took advantage of it to whisper in the captain's ear:

"And how was the stroll you took with that little priest?"

"Orders are orders . . ." the officer cut him off with a sharp

voice, annoyed that the man was reminding him of his role of executioner, the executive arm in the service of . . . of who knows who . . .

"Fine! Fine! . . ." the judge exclaimed, clasping his hands with palms as chubby as a child's buttocks, satisfied and ready to cut off the argument between the storekeeper and the teacher with this promise: "As for the fugitive, Piedrasanta, we'll soon be on his trail. I think that today or tomorrow a state of siege will be declared in the country, in the whole country . . ."

"You have news from the Company . . ." Juventino needled, even more nasal-voiced from his argument with Piedrasanta.

"From the friends I have in the Company . . ." the judge softly corrected, "who tell me what they know, and they say that the general strike is inevitable."

"And don't you think that everything will be settled without a strike?" the storekeeper asked, more and more in control of himself and his business, possessions that he had thought lost for a moment at the hands of that possessed person who had come to kill him and doubtless set fire to his place.

"According to the Company, and I can speak because I've just come from lunch with one of the managers, the whole thing rests with the government's suppressing the rebel strong points as they did in Bananera and at the port. Chopping off every head that rises up. And I think that the first one is going to fall here. I don't know whether you people have heard of a certain Tabío San, whom we're expecting. I keep the fountain pen that Mr. Ferrols gave me full of ink so I can sign his death sentence."

"But don't forget, judge, that the people are waiting for him too," Rodríguez said in his nasal way, with an air of not having said anything, "and it isn't just one or two or three or five or a hundred or a thousand, but many thousands of workers who'll go to meet him at the station."

"Let me interrupt," the storekeeper came over to say, "to ask you gentlemen if you want a drink. My wife sent me this bottle

of genuine Spanish anisette from the capital. What do you say to our opening it?"

"It's too sweet for me. It's a drink that doesn't do much for a person . . . or one that you take for a stomach ache."

"What the judge likes is genuine scotch," Captain Cárcamo spoke up, having kept himself on the edge and as if removed from the discussion.

"That's what we drink with friends from the Company. What a bouquet of a whiskey! But that doesn't mean we're snooting our friend Piedrasanta. I'd prefer a cold beer."

"Cold beer for us too," Cárcamo said, forgetting that the teacher didn't drink.

"Nothing for me . . ." Juventino corrected the Captain's request, as the latter turned and excused himself:

"Without wanting to I keep putting temptation in your path. I forgot. Don't think I want you to fall off the wagon. And what did they use to cure you, if I might ask? . . ."

"Mud . . ."

"What's that?" the judge became interested.

"Yes. They make a brew of mud and water, that's all, divided into four batches, and then they let it rot until it gets to the point where the mud takes on a strange color, greenish, coffee-colored, dark . . ."

"And that's what you drink?" the Captain asked nervously. He could almost be heard rubbing against his chair.

"Yes. From one batch they fill four bottles with that creamy mud and you drink it for twenty days . . ."

"And that was done," Piedrasanta clarified, "by the mother of that mulatto who goes around here half-crazy, that Juambo . . ."

"A great charity . . ." Juventino exclaimed.

"Not charity. They had to, professor, because you started drinking over Toba. But that's an old story. I'll go get the beers, beer for the judge, beer for the Captain, and . . . for me, I'm going to have a beer too, to see how it affects me after getting so mad, and we'll talk some more about the strike, about the arrival

of this Tabío San, who I think is someone I met here on the plantations a long time ago. If it's him, he's a fellow with bulging eyes, puffed-up cheeks, thick lips, big ears, something like elephantiasis . . . It would be easy to recognize him . . ."

"With a description like that . . ." the nasal-voiced man laughed.

"Yes, I knew him . . ." the storekeeper insisted.

"Yes, I know," the teacher said, "but the description that Piedrasanta's giving would be useless to recognize the leader. On the contrary, they say he's thin, narrow-faced, sunken, close-set eyes, and teeth as white as chalk. And, after all, there won't be any need to identify him because this time he'll come with his name, Tabío San, and his face uncovered . . ."

The gang of boys headed by Bobby (Bobby Maker Thompson, grandson of the President of the Company, was still visiting at the home of the millionaire Luceros) appeared at the top of the church among the roof beams, where they had climbed by scaling an abandoned and wobbly scaffold that looked as if it were built onto the walls of the building like the skeleton of an old ship. Bobby put out his head and remained looking into the interior of the church. It was like an empty swimming pool, where the dim light from the few windows, and with the main door closed, had the tone of a dead angel.

The other boys appeared at once, looking for a place to put their eyes, happy to find people moving below with the pace of ants. Bobby spoke to them of holding their eyes in space, without focusing them on anything. Turning them loose in space.

Those who tried the recipe of Gringo, as they called him, couldn't resist. The immensity attracted them, sucked them in. It was better to follow the people who were moving about below, praying, lighting candles, who stopped, who knelt, who entered . . . But how had they gotten in since the main door was closed and the saints on the altars gave the impression of perpetual prisoners? The people there came and went through the sacristy.

Bobby threw a piece of old mortar that flew along giving off smoke and broke against a prie-dieu near the pulpit.

Someone in the gang protested:

"Gringo, don't be a fool!"

Another piece of dry mortar landed next to a kneeling woman. Who dared throw stones at the people in church, dared to commit such an act of disrespect, profanation? . . . The word soon went around: the evangelists! . . . the Protestants! . . .

And while some fled or took shelter in the shadow of the pulpit, behind the screen at the entrance or in the baptismal chapel, others, feeling themselves martyrs and ready to be stoned by the infidels, opened up their arms and recited the *Forgive them, Father,* kneeling in the form of a cross . . .

"I'll throw a strike on the arm of that old woman . . ." Gringo said, and he did, just like a bullet.

The woman bit off the cry of pain on her tongue, carnal there between her lips and her teeth, while she closed her eyes, which she then opened, opened wide as if they would pop out before the zigzag lightning bolt fell.

They had taken the Virgin of Guadalupe down from the main altar. The Indians from the mountains who came down to work on the plantations came in in groups, and when they didn't find their Patroness, they crossed themselves, saying to each other, not without theatrical gestures: "A miracle, she came . . . a miracle, she went away . . ."

The more fervent knelt on one knee, the right one, to place lighted candles in the floor among small paths of flowers which they had formed by letting the petals fall from the trembling tips of their smooth fingers.

In love with fire, they contemplated the flame of the candle for a long time. Two seedlike pupils on the quivering glow of golden flesh and a wick which quickly consumed the yellow tallow.

Dressed in burlap cloaks, shirts, pants, white and clean, with their kneeling faith, their eyes on the fire of the flame, they were

waiting for the Virgin to appear again to them, domesticated animals for four hundred years, dark faces like dried meat, the dark hair, stiff and long, over their thick necks.

They crowded around Bobby to read some printed sheets of paper they found hidden by one of the cross-beams, with the fire of the tin roof heated by the sun near their heads and underneath the cool silence of the church, where no one was moving any longer, abandoned. There were three packets of paper on which the words "general strike," "just strike," "freedom and bread, yes" were printed repeatedly in large letters. As they crowded around Bobby they forgot about the battle he had started with a stone attack on the worshippers, people who were now proclaiming through the streets and squares: "They stoned us, just what we're saying, they stoned us! . . . the Protestants . . ." "They climbed up on the roof of the church and from there they stoned us . . ." "One lady made the form of the cross, ready to be martyred, and they made her drop her arms by stoning them! . . ." "It wasn't enough for them to throw out the parish priest and steal the Virgin from the main altar . . . now they're stoning away the few of us who go to church, where we sneak in through the sacristy like thieves!"

"This crap has to be turned over to the police . . ." a lanky boy with long eyelashes nicknamed Cocko said.

"This crap stays right where it is," Bobby decided, "right here where it is," he repeated, "until tomorrow, and we're not going to turn it over to the police, but to someplace I know. Now we have to get together with the others guys and there's no time, let's go down now, if we want to get rid of our thirst with some ice."

"As long as we can smoke a cigarooty first," Cocko Lucero proposed.

"Go ahead," Gringo authorized and out of their pockets they all took mangled cigarettes they had hidden, loose matches which they lighted by scratching them on the walls or on the soles of their shoes, and there was always the one with a cigarette holder.

They climbed down laboriously along the wobbly scaffolding.

It was a difficult straddling of planks, embracing poles as they slid down under their own weight, feet and knees serving as brakes until they touched the ground and ran to Piedrasanta's to be the first to have the ices in their hands and to lord it over their companions.

"What flavor do you want?"

"And you, what do you want?"

"Strawberry for me!"

"Me, orange!"

"Lemon for me!"

The storekeeper would have liked to have done away with them and instead of ice with syrup, to have sold them ice with poison, asking them whether they wanted strychnine, laudanum, cyanide . . . Interrupting, with their great hubbub, the comments that the judge was making about his conversations with the agents of the Company about the strike, in case it was declared. But who would ever declare it? Who would dare to put the bell of a general strike on the *Beast*? . . .

"I'm going to get rid of those devils," Peidrasanta got up from the table where the judge and the Captain were still drinking beer and the teacher sat without drinking anything, referring to the boys, who, pushing themselves against one of the walls, by the door or by the counter, would let themselves slide along the cement floor with glides that the others imitated or greeted with applause, clapping, shouts, leaps, laughter and more laughter.

"We're leaving, Piedrasanta . . ." The others went over to the place where the storekeeper, with the ice-scraper in his hand and the metal mold in the shape of a bottomless glass, was preparing the ices. The judge, as always, had been the first to raise his singsong voice.

"We'll leave you with this gang, and remember, you can't send these fledgling millionaires to the execution wall . . ." Cárcamo emphasized, resentful at the accusations against Andrés Medina.

"Hello, boys! . . ." the teacher greeted the young people. He seemed to envy their mobility and joy, and he went out behind Cárcamo and the judge, who took leave of them at the door of the store, going off in the opposite direction.

"I noticed, Captain," the nasal-voiced man said familiarly, grasping and releasing the officer's arm as they began to walk, "that you were impressed by the rotton mud with which they cured me of drinking. But you'll see, I wasn't only cured because of that, but by a happy coincidence. When I came out of that last attack I found something that gave my life a reason . . . But we'll talk about that another day. Right now you seem to be in a hurry . . ."

"Not at all, professor, all I want to do is get across this open spot fast because the sun is skinning me alive."

Limping because of a squeezed bunion that was punishing his left foot and a pair of patent-leather shoes that had been given to him, apparently stiff with cold on the outside because of the snow-colored dust, and boiling inside like mustard plasters heated with an iron, the teacher went along, more on his heels than his toes, trying to follow the Captain across the open spot that was covered with pebbles.

"It's what I've always maintained." Cárcamo reopened the conversation when they reached a cooling eave beside a tumble-down wall. "A man stops drinking when liquor disagrees with his stomach or when, as in your case, he finds an illusion in life."

"And that's why, Captain, we have to differentiate between those who drink because their insides, a worm, or their blood demand it, and those who do it because they have too much soul in their breasts, a too much that isn't really an overabundance but more of an emptiness, because unlike the case with material things, the more soul there is, the greater the dissatisfaction, the greater the deep pit."

Now it was the officer who took the teacher's arm, as if inviting him to keep on talking.

"Those who drink because their insides demand it," the teacher went on, "can be cured with a strong purgative, with rotten mud, with anything like that. But the drunks with a lost paradise, which was probably my case, can't be cured with anything unless they find a higher reason in life, because along with their insatiable thirst for alcohol, hidden inside themselves they carry a gambler and a suicide. If it's the gambler they no longer drink for the pleasure of the drinking and the drunkenness, but to win an imaginary wager, and if it's the suicide, they toss down their liquor like poison, feeling themselves infinitely alone."

"That's a very good classification for them, professor!" Cárcamo exclaimed and clapped him affectionately on the back.

"That's natural, because if I bore arms, I think it would be in the suicide squad!"

"But, professor, now that you've told me about the miracle, don't keep from me the name of the saint who did it for you, because it's obviously not just the rotten mud . . . Some fine figure of a female after Toba?"

The teacher sighed. A seashell in his heart heard, as if in a sea of lost pulsations, the name that he had spoken most in his lifetime, awake, asleep, drunk, sober, in company, alone: Toba . . . Toba . . . Toba . . .

In the light of the sun how strange and how sad the *chirriiiii*, *chirriiiii* of the crickets sounded.

"Some fine woman?" the officer insisted, not because he really wanted to know, but because it amused him to juxtapose with a mocking smile the "fine woman" against the squalid figure of the teacher, so lost in his clothing that it looked like someone else's, and his nasal twang, which made him even less attractive. "Or a thousand-dollar woman or affair? . . ." the other added with his laugh already sketched from just calculating the astronomical distance that separated the teacher not from thousands of dollars but from one dollar.

And since the teacher left him without an answer, he adduced so as not to give up:

"Some trip, professor?"

"When I was young my mouth used to water, sea water, for ships, yes, ships!" He gave the impression of losing and finding his thoughts again, then, appearing to leave the officer's questions without answers, he inquired: "Captain, what books that you've read have you liked the most?"

"I really haven't read very much. All of *Rocambole* and *Quo Vadis* . . ."

"Then if you've read *Quo Vadis* it will be easy for me to explain to you why I gave up the bottle, was unfaithful to Bacchus, stopped taking the divine nectar. Simply because I became a Christian like the ones in the catacombs, the ones who knew they were going to be turned over to the wild beasts in the imperial circus and accepted martyrdom so that they could set up the kingdom of God on earth . . ."

"Come on! Come on, professor . . . who's going to believe all that these days?"

"It's enough if I believe it! That's where I have to start, with my believing it. And you, Captain, you'll be one of us!"

"Just tell me when! . . ." the military man answered, half-serious and half-joking.

"When the general strike is declared!" the teacher let go point blank.

Cárcamo grew pale. Down at his feet he became the color of death inside his shoes. And he went away stammering good-by. It was better to pretend that he hadn't heard. Such insolence! The unawareness of a drunkard! It made him want to go back and strike him. Knowing that he was in active service and making such a proposition to him, to join the stri . . . stri . . . what a feeling of hollow strife, of emptiness, of a bitter grave the word "strike" left in his mouth when he saw that he was wrong going through that whole comedy, reacting that way in front of the teacher, whom he left with the word on his lips, when he was up to his neck, perhaps more than the teacher, in that dirty business

ever since he held back the papers on Rosa Gavidia and made use of a priest to let that other schoolteacher know that she had to get away . . .

The shouting of the gang in Piedrasanta's establishment reached infernal extremes. They began by changing their minds about the flavors of the ices. The one who asked for strawberry, jumping up as if it weren't enough for him to taste it with his eyes and mouth, would rectify it and rather have lemon, lemon or grape . . . yes, maybe grape . . . Orgeat and raspberry, another demanded, or just orgeat . . . And orange for me, demanded a haughty and greedy fat boy, with a double serving of syrup . . .

Patiently the storekeeper shaped the ice peelings that came off his scraper in the tin mold and immediately confronted each one involved concerning the flavor he wanted, using a glass as a measure to pour syrup as red as blood over the ices of strawberry or raspberry, as yellow as gold, like Bobby's hair, for the lemon, milky syrup on the orgeat, and violet on the grape . . .

When all had been served, Piedrasanta dried his hands on a cloth that hung from a nail behind the counter. He felt his long fingers, longer from the cold contact with the ice, his nails whitish and as pale as flesh, and his fingertips wrinkled like an old man's.

"Who's paying?" he asked, almost without looking at them.

They all came over to pay, sucking without moving their eyes, enjoying the coldness of the ice and the sweetness of the syrup, their feet dragging as if groping their way along, and with their left hands maneuvering in their pockets until they brought out the money, which, to the despair of the storekeeper, was syrupy when it got to his hands.

The shlurping, as the storekeeper said for slurping, the shlurping and reshlurping of the gang exasperated him. And it was always the same, but he was not in any mood to stand for it now. The displeasure caused by that rascal who came to insult him, the bad shape his business was in, with the people in the fields not coming into town, afraid of the strike affair, his wife's extended

stay in the capital, all added up to those endless slurps of lungs and lips, like a musician playing an instrument with the suction and noise of breaking wind.

"Go eat your ices outside!" he shouted at them.

"The sun's too hot, we won't," Bobby answered him, sinking his eyes into him like two blue daggers, slurping along on his cone of ice that was bathed in red syrup, raspberry, to cool himself and at the same time to sweeten his lips.

"What do you mean you won't?"

"We won't leave!"

"Then I'll throw you out . . ."

The gang immediately clustered around Gringo Thompson as he confronted the storekeeper.

"Try it . : ." Gringo gave a smile.

Piedrasanta decided to go into the back room, trembling, frantic, cold with rage, as if he were a cone of ice like the ones those barbarians were sucking on, shlurp after shlurp, and staying there, his eyes half-closed, the hot lids over the raging seeds of his eyes . . .

"They do it on purpose," he said to himself, "because they know that with their *shluuuurrrp . . . shluuuurrrp* they put my nerves on edge, but I won't give them the pleasure, I won't go tell them for the fortieth time to take their music somewhere else! . . . Oh, if they weren't sons of . . . of who they are, I would have broken the door bar on them!"

Shluuuuuuuurrrppp! . . . Shluuuuuuuurrrppp!

The orchestra continued outside and . . . to hell with it, he broke his idea of not throwing them out, now the way those young bandits were sucking on the little syrup they had left was scandalous and insulting, as they also tried to swallow the water dripping down from the ice that was melting in their hands, so that now every *shluuuurp! . . . shluuuuuurrpp! . . . shluuuuuuuurrrrpppp!* of the infernal sucking was longer, louder, since they had to suck the syrup from the very bottom, extract from among the pores of congealed water those remains of a sweet corpse,

pale and liquefied, while they slipped the small cone of ice that ended in a round shape into their mouths, chewed it, and swallowed it, right down to the last drop of ice and sweetness.

"Are you leaving, you sons of . . . !"

He couldn't finish. A frozen bullet broke in his eye and the small amount of raspberry syrup that Bobby had left poured down his cheek like blood.

And before he could recover from the impact, several other remains of ices broke over his face, just as if he had been exposed to a rain of flavored and colored hail.

They left him in the dark. When they went out they closed the doors. He heard the noise, unable to explain to himself what they were doing, but when he opened his eyes and found himself in darkness, he ran to open them up again.

The doors of his store closed during the day by strange hands, an evil omen for him!

An omen of death!

One after the other he went about opening them as they fell aside. If someone came along the street at that moment, or if the judge, the Captain, or the schoolteacher came back, they would have thought he was bathed in blood, that that communist fellow had come back with a knife and marked his face, and . . . it was only red syrup, scandalous, sticky, vivid, and thick like blood . . . No, I'm not wounded! . . . No, I'm not wounded! . . . he was repeating in a rage, contented with the clinging of the flies that alighted and flew off quickly, until he found a barrel of rainwater that he kept in the courtyard, where he washed his face, his hair, his ears, his neck, his arms, and finally had to take his shirt off to wash his chest. He had been honeyed down to his navel. He pulled a towel from a line. He dried himself rapidly and went back into the store. Nobody. The flies. The flies in search of that person who had been underneath their feet, their wings, and their sucking mouths, bathed in syrup.

"Oh, Lord . . . !" came out of his depths after meditating on the fact that he could have no revenge on those bully sons of the

rich. "Let the strike come. I was against it, but now I ask you for it! . . . The strike! . . . The strike, which is like work turned into trash, so that they and us, all of us, will have our wealth or what we own turned into trash!"

32

The mobility of the juvenile patrol under Bobby's command could be compared only to the wind. The ever-scorching temperature that became insect, reptile, swamp, marsh; the abandonment of beings beside the disproportionate hugeness of the trees, all of that excited them as they drew near to the coast, to the wavy slapping of the Pacific Ocean, tired of swallowing, not from hunger, out of pure voracity, the fruits cut from the hot branches like loaves of bread taken out of an oven, with an urge to taste all the pleasures of creation, and they ran. Nothing held them back. An appetite for living, for living rapidly. To be males. To be masters, with an inner ferocity, not merely instinctive but somewhat thought out, of whatever fell into their hands to be used or destroyed along the way. A bird here, a nest there, later on a lizard, an anthill.

They advanced in all directions, wherever they wanted to go, with the determined drive of subjugation. What indomitable spirit did the boiling tropics awaken in them? What past knowledge of the material, the essence, the substance of life? . . .

Mad with the blue, drunk with the light, they had been decanted from a world of families who slept in opulence into a world of torrential problems. They advanced in disorder, not obeying any human laws. A youthful rebellion against everything that was a limit or a measure.

Behind them was the village, crumbled in the sun and drowsiness of siesta time. They had to reach the rise with the tallest palm trees where they would join up with the gang made up of the sons of native employees who occupied high positions in the Company. More numerous and less decisive, they were never punctual. Bobby and those of his band lay down to wait for them, passing the time with smoke and saliva, cigarettes and chewing gum, and there was always one who had a metal flask, a pint of whiskey.

Footsteps. They turned their heads. But it was not the other group. They would have arrived as they always did, shouting and waving their machetes. That was why they were waiting for them. They brought machetes along, and only by opening up a path with a blade could a person get down to the mouth of the broad river, the place where the "metallic visions" took place.

The footsteps sounded closer and closer until out of the underbrush a naked Indian appeared, barely covered by a breechclout, a long-haired skeleton, his teeth showing, he was so thin, and eyes like illuminated bubbles of dark soap.

"No one . . ." he mumbled when he saw them, "will ever win against the green fire! No one will ever dispute the rule over the land by the green fire, which is red fire inside and turns green on the outside! Destructive light! Light mixed with salt! Light mixed with the sea! Machines will grow weary someday! Someday the foreigners will be overcome by a desire to sleep, and at that instant, by just closing their eyes, by just slowing down their machines, they will be buried along with everything that is theirs, what had once been beauty and metal glowing with oil and motion will turn into skeletons and old iron!

"The darkest blindness, green blindness," the Indian with spiny

hair went on, "the blindness of advancing vegetation, drunk and spongy, will take over everything alive and everything dead, and the roots, appearing from under the earth, will perforate, drill, raise up houses and buildings, crumble them, will destroy foundations, walls, roofs, dams, will ravage uninhabited churches, raping them, leaving nothing of their pews but empty spaces, gaps, pieces of terrace for the wind to shake and crumble!

"Rito Perraj speaks through my mouth! From him I give testimony of the one who was, who is, who will be the final master in these expanses which today are in the hands of other men! The violence, not of men, but of the elements! The violence of the elements and the waiting of the one who knows that at some time, imprecise but certain, victory will come and with it the expulsion of the foreigners! Woe to him who does not keep watch by night! Woe to him who does not lock his house! Woe to him who does not know that the eyes of the interred, wide-open, waiting for the day of justice, only then will close their lids and sleep in peace!

"Everything is in motion! Everything is in eruption! Everything is in the serpent! The trees are not trees but parts of that vegetable serpent that comes out of the earth, falls with the rain, and covers with white-hot poison what it must destroy!"

One of the gang offered the Indian three five-cent pieces so that he would end his monotonous sermon, and he asked him if he knew anything about the "metallic visions."

The Indian refused the coins, turned his head toward where the sun was falling and said:

"A fire tide! A tide of light! A metal tide! . . . Rito Perraj reads the enigmas of time in those visions . . . streaks of blood and a foam of darkness under a rain of precious fire that breaks up into smaller drops and even smaller drops . . ."

Abraham Lincoln Suárez, the leader of the other gang, appeared at the head of his host. He explained that they didn't want them to go out of their houses, much less with machetes. Some of them had to climb out the window. That was why they

were late, and not all of them had come. The news was going around about a group of anarchists who had met the night before and swore they were going to dynamite all the Company installations: electric plant, reservoirs, oil tanks, bridges, dikes, railroad station, town . . .

Bobby tightened his mouth and rolled his blue eyes. The word "strike" took him back to scenes spent beside his fearsome grandfather the last time he was in Chicago. If the Indian had threatened that all of that impressive wealth would end up covered with the green fire of the earth, the unextinguishable vegetation, and the anarchists were preparing to destroy it and bury it with dynamite, worse yet were the strikers, who were peacefully on the road toward taking away from its owners' hands the empire of George Maker Thompson, of whom he had the image of a man thin down to his bones, sagging as he walked on his tall legs, with yellowed skin, earthen-colored, white hair mussed under the storm of the hand that kept ruffling it, speechless, drooling, an egglike coating clouding his pupils, desperate for a cigarette.

That was all that was left of the Green Pope in a trunk that was still strong but with the ribs now clearly showing under the Chinese silk pajamas.

His mother was against his staying with them. Between Pearl Harbor and Hiroshima she snatched her son away from the hands of his dying grandfather, from whose throat, obstructed more and more by cancer, a thick drivel came that male nurses with gloved hands gathered in skeins of endless threads.

"He can't stay with us!" His mother was determined. "The war won't get down there to the plantations. He'll be safe there!"

His grandfather had lost his voice. He was choking. Before Bobby's eyes they drove a platinum tube into his trachea. The agony of the asphyxia was such that he did not even wince when the sharp end of the tube cut his skin. His hair, his ears, his jawbones, which he closed very little now, trembled with every blow of the doctor's hammer. At last, finally, Bobby saw the old man turn his thankful eyes toward someone, toward something, to-

ward the life that was entering his lungs through that minimal hole...

He was allowed a glass of champagne, which he drank in sips. They laid him on a cot. While he lasted he wanted his grandson by his side, but the doctors hoped to remove the tumor, reduce it at least, with applications of intense therapy, and in the meantime Bobby was in danger, Bobby, who, according to the wishes of the old man, would be the heir to his fabulous fortune...

Pearl Harbor! ... Hiroshima! ... His crazed mother repeated those words ... What was the use of any more arguments? ... Pearl Harbor! ... Hiroshima! ...

The Green Pope gave in ... His cold hands, the coldness of bone, a sponge of iciness and silence under the skin, pressed those of his grandson ... His grandson must not die, let him be the one to die! ...

He asked for pen and paper, he could no longer speak, and he wrote: "Leave him here with me ... down there is where his life's in danger ... pay attention to me ... don't send him to the plantations ... keep him away ... keep him away ... the strike..."

His trembling hand couldn't write any more. His fingers wouldn't obey him. Through the tube in his trachea a gargling, saliva-loaded breath of air could be heard, as if he were trying to repeat with shouts what he had written, but his daughter was not prepared to obey. Bobby would leave on the next plane for Central America and let the old man endure it.

The uproar of the gangs when they met, more punching than greeting, brought Bobby back to reality. They set out. They had to get to the mangroves before the sun went down. Bobby and his group marched behind Lincoln Suárez and his machete crew, who went ahead with their knives, clearing the way in the closed-in vegetation that seemed to move, to run along next to them like the water in the river. The passage of the bodies and the machete strokes through the leaves was all that could be heard. Little by little, as they descended toward the sea, the vegetation

flattened out and the trees turned into nothing but roots blue with mud and salt, petrified.

Someone gave a cry of alarm and the ones who were singing and the ones who were whistling and the ones who were talking fell silent. They were in quicksand! Vines and roots were woven over that trap of mud, a flexible floor, hanging, giving way. The bravest, those of Bobby's group, breaking the cautious advance of the troop, began to jump up and down for the pleasure of feeling themselves flung back up again as they landed.

Lincoln Suárez took command. If they kept on jumping he would use his machete on them. They were crossing a bog that would swallow them up forever if the network of vines gave way...

To die of drowning is horrible, but to drown in mud . . .

The advance was becoming ghostly, not breathing, not blinking, not putting their feet all the way down, knowing that each step might be their last, until they touched dry land on a sandy bank and ran forward onto it at full speed, as if they had been crippled and had only then suddenly recovered their movement.

They went up and down across immense banks of reddish sand from where the river looked like a broad plain which turned to liquid as it approached the river.

The whistling of their fiber slings and rubber slings, pellets of clay as hard as lead, echoed for a long way among leaves and tree trunks with each shot, and on all sides the victims could be heard falling. A troupial, but what was it to kill a troupial among thousands of troupials. A squirrel, but what was it to kill a squirrel among thousands of rodents. Poor hunters. The concert of four hundred crystal throats in the throat of one single cenzontle greeted them. And they brought death in their children's hands. But, death! . . . what a ridiculous fantasy, the death of a bird, of many birds from the swing of their slings, there, where death was as universal as life.

They went down to the shore wrapped in a mass of white-hot dampness where, if it had not been for their slings, they would

have remained inactive, halted, in suspense, following islets of flowers across the sky that were not flowers but birds, while, in the water, electric fish splashed out the moment. An orgy. An intoxication of heat. From having chewed the heat like cane trash. The drowsiness of the afternoon that was closing its crocodile fans of fireflies, of felted whistles, and the slipping of the water and the earth. They too slipped down to where the waters of the river broke so quietly that one had the feeling of moving through a forest of dream reflected at his feet and a living forest on his shoulders, alive with birds, monkeys, parakeets, parrots, macaws, scarlet birds, black birds, herons, a gamut from those with pink plumage to those of immaculate white. No, it was no longer the river. It was the tail of a comet that was sinking into the marine shadows loaded with clouds of cotton or dreams. They stopped. The throbbing of the open spaces. Someone shouted. Among the blue-green mangroves, hydropic, lethargic, a fire was running along. They came together, closed ranks. Over the surface of the water, as if bonfires of colors had been lighted below, in the midst of an overwhelming silence, the luminosity of the burning liquid was increasing in brilliance until it blinded them. The walls of the air became translucent, incandescent.

And that vision was followed by another, and another, each time with brighter tones and infinitely capricious shapes until suddenly the last ingot of the day was extinguished with the sound of red-hot metal being submerged in water.

Near that place where the earth bares its gums and the mangroves suffer like teeth with exposed roots, hidden from the eyes of the gangs led by Bobby and Lincoln Suárez, who seemed to sense that someone was hiding there, other eyes were burning in ecstasy at the contemplation of the "metallic visions," a pretext that Captain Cárcamo had used to take a few steps beyond the area to which they were restricted now that they were virtually mobilized.

"Andrei, they say you're a communist . . ."

"That's what they say, but I'm not . . ." It sounded like splashing as he spoke. "And you had me come here just to tell me that . . ."

"Yes, because I want you to get out of it, stop being a communist . . ."

"I just told you that I'm not . . ."

"But the catch is that everybody thinks you are, and since they've already got their sights on you, without any investigation you'll end up by the execution wall, and I don't know why, Andrei, but I've got the feeling that they'll put me in command of the firing squad . . . That's hard . . . You're my childhood friend . . ."

"Do you want me to tell you something? . . ." Andrés Medina's voice hesitated, squeezed in his chest by the palpitations. He didn't wait for the other one's permission, he had to tell him, shout it at him right there . . . "Do you want me to tell you something? . . ." he repeated, "you just take whatever comes, brother, if you're picked to lead the squad that shoots me, because I was ready to shoot you . . ."

"Me?"

"When you were carrying the papers they found in the barber's possession."

"That's why you disappeared from the wake . . ."

"I ran off to get a rifle, and another comrade went with me. We were determined that those papers wouldn't reach the command post . . ." his voice sank. "Forgive me!"

"And that's why you were going to kill me?"

"How else could I have got the papers?"

"Yes, only with me dead . . ."

"And you wouldn't be here talking to me," he went over to touch him affectionately, to feel his arms, as if shaping him again, with the harsh tenderness of a man who feels he has come back from a long nightmare. "You wouldn't be here talking to me if you'd passed by alone where we were waiting for you, but you had your lucky star, brother, you were saved by the company of Captain Salomé and his patrol of night owls."

"My lucky star or the cowardice of two brave men!"

"Cowardice? . . . All right. We weren't hiding in ambush there out of bravery or out of fear, but to pull off something that was necessary for our plans. What would we have gotten out of it by killing you with the patrol coming along? Could we have got hold of the papers that you would have turned over to the other officer, even if you were fatally wounded? When it's your turn to shoot someone are you a coward or a brave man? Neither . . ."

"Are you sorry about it, Andrei?"

Andrés Medina had his head resting on his chest as if it weighed down on him.

"At the moment I was, yes, it made me sorry, I have to be frank with you, but now I couldn't forgive myself . . ."

"Why couldn't you forgive yourself?"

"You must know . . ."

"Maybe I don't know. Why couldn't you forgive yourself?"

"You must know . . ."

"Maybe you don't know why I did it, why I betrayed the trust placed in me. In those papers there was the name of . . . you know who, Rosa Gavidia, written on an envelope . . . I don't even know what time it was when I took it and hid it in my tunic, squeezing it against my heart, which dominated me at that moment. Then I quickly shuffled through all the papers in my hands and I didn't have enough eyes to look and see if her name was somewhere else . . ."

"You did us a great service . . ."

"Andrei, what do you communists swear by?"

"I told you, I'm not a communist . . ."

"You're close enough to it. That matter of being able to kill a person who hasn't done anything to you . . ."

"And you people, when they order you to shoot someone, what do you do? And you're not communists!"

"Swear to me, Andrei, swear that you'll never say a word of what we've been talking about!"

"If my word's enough . . ."

"By certain means I tried to let Rosa Gavidia know that she

should hide, bury herself, disappear, because they'd look for her dead or alive. Her name might still have been among the papers I wasn't able to inspect. I told you there were a lot of them, and it wouldn't take them any longer to capture her than to read it. But I don't know if my warning reached her on time and you can find out for me . . ."

"I don't know how, but I promise you that as soon as I get word we'll get together . . ."

"Andrei, I won't have any peace until I find out that nothing happened to her, that what I did at the risk of my life, keeping those papers, wasn't in vain . . ."

The two gangs started back when night came on. Silent from having drawn apart over foolish rivalries in machete-handling, marksmanship with their slings, and from passing through swarms of crane flies, mosquitoes, and gnats who got into their mouths when they spoke, as far back as their gullets, and which they had to spit out like sediment or coffee grounds. Some pushed others, in silence. They threw pebbles at each other, they put small crabs into each other's pockets, or they slipped icy frogs and scaly insects down each other's necks. But what finally made them enemies was something that Lincoln Suárez said.

"Before you tell any fairy tales, learn your name . . ." Cocko Lucero shouted at him in a mocking tone. "Don't let anything happen to you here when the strike's declared . . ."

"Oh, brother!" someone interrupted, it was not known from which gang, stumbling and in the rear, nor was it known whether he had said it in the sense that the strike was imminent or was something that Cocko's eyes would never see.

"Well, you fu . . . mblers, even if the strike isn't declared," Cocko went on, "what I don't want is for anything to happen to Federico." They all gave out with a laugh, some knew why Lincoln Suárez was called Federico, others thought it was a play on reeky. "What I don't want is for the same thing to happen to Federico here as happened to him in Bananera . . ."

"And what happened to Lico? . . ." The question was asked

in the midst of contained laughter by a short boy with a big head who was walking in front, his hands in his pockets, his thin black hair over his face like the night wind.

"Let him tell it!" Cocko pretended not to know as he nudged the ones walking beside him, getting them to keep the joke going.

"Yes, yes, let him tell it . . . let him tell it! . . ." Several voices from the group that followed Bobby rose up, not because they didn't know, but to tease Lincoln Suárez. "Let Federico tell what happened to him in Bananera!"

"Tell us, Lico! . . ." a muffled voice put in.

"If he doesn't tell you, I will," Cocko said.

"Tell us, Lico!" the same voice insisted in a sarcastic tone.

"Tell us," Cocko went on. "Tell us, tell us that they wouldn't open the door to you when you hollered and hammered, Abrahammered Lincoln Suárez!"

Shouts . . . Laughter . . .

"But finally they opened it . . ." a voice that was more of a laugh rose up.

"Yes. When they understood his name an old woman opened up and said, 'Come in, Don Lico . . .' "

"Ha, ha, ha! . . ." they all began to laugh. "Don Lico! Don Lico! . . . Ha! Ha! . . . You didn't tell us that your name was Federico!"

But the laughter froze on their teeth now as on their fleshy lips, as thin as ribs, a white rage, animal and infantile, appeared, in spite of the threatening penumbra of fuzz that on some of them bespoke a small mustache which could already be felt.

Lincoln Suárez, without paying attention to the laughing or the teasing, insisted:

"It's not a fairy tale! It's true! On the plantations they're all hiding out, managers, superintendents, administrators, foremen, strawbosses, over the rumor of the arrival in Tiquisate of one of the leaders of the general strike, a certain Tabío San. Now things are going to get rough! . . ."

In the darkness, without seeing their faces, they saw each other

better by what they were saying. Their words reproduced their faces and their transparent bodies in sounds, inwardly and outwardly, in clear relation to expression, thought, gesture, and feeling with the porous sound of the white-hot night, constellations of golden sweat, amidst the distant sea, the tireless breaking of the waves, and the silence woven by spiders who sucked in the echo down to the last drop of sound without exhausting the music of the universe.

Clearer than on their faces covered with earthworms of sweat, on the voices and replies of Bobby's group was painted the fury of their families against the strikers, who should be hanged . . .

"Did you ever notice in the movies?" Bobby's voice could be heard like a reflection of his blond head in a clearing among the leaves. "Did you ever notice in the movies how the bodies of people who've been machine-gunned seem to hang on the smoke? That's what should be done to the strikers . . . *tecky, tecky, tecky, tecky,* hang them on the smoke of the machine-guns . . . *tecky, tecky, tecky, tecky* . . . like in the movies . . . *Tecky, tecky, tecky, tecky* . . ."

The ones who followed Bobby, children of families who breathed through the green lungs of their plantations and their dollars, felt the chattering of the machine-guns they were firing grow real . . . *tecky, tecky, tecky, tecky, tecky* . . . against the strikers who were falling, hanging on the smoke . . . *tecky, tecky, tecky, tecky, tecky, tecky* . . .

Lincoln Suárez and his people breathed through the artificial but juicy lungs of the salaries of their fathers, high officials in the company, and although extremists, they were of the opinion that before hanging the strikers on the smoke of the machine-guns, it was necessary to hear them, find out what they were asking for, and shoot them according to law in case they weren't only strikers but something like communists . . .

After much argument, such an attack of words, such warlike gestures, such drive in their expression, Bobby's people accepted the fact that they should hear the strikers out as long as it was a

question of their being nuisances and not strikers, nuisances who could receive more pay as long as they worked longer and better.

Lincoln Suárez's people made it clear that it was not a question of being nuisances or giving them salaries or raising their daily wages. On the contrary, what the strikers were demanding was more pay for less working time . . .

"That's just the start," the ones with the machetes stressed aggressively, "because the strikers are demanding more than that!"

Cocko Lucero drew Bobby aside, nudged him, and whispered: "Let's give them a screwing! What's all this about demands? . . ."

"When we get to the electric lights," Bobby murmured as an answer.

"Because besides that, the strikers demand . . ." The ears of the millionaires rang with what had been said in a flutter by Lincoln Suárez's people.

Demand! Demand! Demand! Demand!

Tecky, tecky, tecky, tecky . . . demand! . . . demand! . . . *tecky, tecky, tecky, tecky* . . . demand! . . . *tecky, tecky, tecky* . . . de . . . *tecky, tecky, tecky* de . . . ! de . . . ! *tecky, tecky, tecky, tecky, tecky, tecky, tecky* . . . nothing . . . they weren't demanding anything now, hanging on the smoke of the machine-guns . . .

"Let's give those sissies a screwing!" Cocko insisted, now almost aloud.

Gringo didn't answer him, but his blue eyes, followed by Cocko's dark eyes flew low over the blades of the machetes that gleamed in the moonlight in the hands of the Lincoln Suárez group as they opened the way through the thick woods like silver lightning.

The electric lights gave them back their faces and snuffed out the words. Bobby strutted forward toward Lincoln Suárez, and planting himself a half-step away, very close, he gave him a punch:

"What are the strikers demanding? . . ." With his famous left hand ready to knock him down with a punch on the jaw.

Lincoln Suárez stepped back to make room for the machete that he held out with the point resting on the ground.

"What are they demanding?" Gringo repeated with stronger words.

"Among other things . . ." Lincoln Suárez looked straight back at his rival, leaning on his machete, calm, master of the spot where he was standing straight from his shoulders down to his feet. "Among other things they demand that they speak Spanish and not English on the plantations, that they use local money and not dollars, which is all the same, and that they fly the national flag instead of the Yankee one . . ."

"That's foolishness!" Gringo spat out in his face.

"Foolishness for you!" Lincoln Suárez lifted his machete without retreating and put it on his shoulder. "Because you don't come from either here or there and . . . they have a good reason for keeping you hidden on the plantations! . . . Tell us! . . . Don't be quiet! . . ."

"Why, not going to war you mean? . . . What about my age, you animal!"

"Everybody knows you're hiding out here because you're afraid you'll be killed in a bombing raid!"

"Me afraid?"

Gringo's wild eyes glowed like two blue flames in a lake of pale oil.

"Drop your machete and let's see if you're a man!" he shouted in a rage.

Lincoln Suárez, with his hair like a cock's comb over his narrow brow, threw his blade to where his gang was, stepped back, and put himself on guard . . .

A burst of machine-gun fire paralyzed them . . . *tecky, tecky, tecky, tecky* . . . Some fell to the ground. Others ran home . . . *tecky, tecky, tecky* . . . This time the chatter of the machine-guns was real, it was real . . . *tecky, tecky, tecky, tecky* . . .

33

The green light gave a clear track for the arrival and departure of the engine that was coming and going pulling the freight cars. Sometimes the locomotive was in front and then it was content to give a push, a shove to the row of empty or loaded cars that it had to move. The empty ones more quickly, the loaded ones more slowly, after the impact of the locomotive, by momentum, they scattered along the rails, some going to one side, some to another, with only a few remaining as part of the freight train that was being formed and which was to leave at the first hour of daylight.

From one siding to another, amidst the swinging of red lanterns, like hammocks in the hands of the ones guiding the engineer in those marshalling operations, a group of three cars was rolling along to a track hemmed in by underbrush and pools of water covered over with crude oil. And there it stayed, as if forgotten by the lights that kept on swaying.

Royal palms and coconut palms. The high, tight world of the stars. The parasitic heat that lived off human sweat, sticking to

the body, joined to the body, suppressing the living being, replacing it with an amorphous mass, without will, a kind of sponge from invisible worlds that seeks the freshness of the night in order to dream of a climate that is better, more bearable, less stifling.

That was what Florindo Key was thinking, lost in the surge of frogs that swelled the damp vegetation, milky and prostrate, made of trees that couldn't lift their heads, loaded down with a family of limbs and leaves.

When the three cars stopped on the elevated siding, Paulino Vélez appeared. A phlegmatic, slow-moving man, with a gold fang that glowed like a firefly in a mouth black from chewing-tobacco every time his hand rose with the swaying of the signal lantern.

"He's here now," he went over to say to Key, "but let's wait . . ."

"Have a smoke?" Florindo offered him a cigarette . . .

"No, thanks. You know that tobacco isn't smoke but saliva for me . . ." And he changed his tone, adding: "Last night they were having a good time. I don't know whether you heard the machine-guns. They say they were testing them or showing people from here who don't know much about them how to shoot them."

"Who'll ever believe that? . . ."

"That's what I say . . ."

"They're doing it to scare people," Key added. "So late at night and giving shooting lessons. Spreading panic is what they want."

"Spreading panic, like you say, the way sulfate is spread in the banana groves to kill the diseases. But the way things are going, fakery like last night's is just going to make people all the hotter. And it's lucky, you know, that the moon's not carrying water. That's in our favor, because when it rains here people wander around and aren't any good for anything if their spirits get wet. What does your watch say? . . . I'm leaving some time

for the boys, because they want to see him and talk to him. We have to know what to believe. There's so much news, so many rumors. It seems that in the capital the students gave it to the police."

"What we mustn't do is lose time. There are more hidden eyes than visible stars, and if a lot of them are coming to talk to him, there's no doubt that it's not wise . . ."

"Let's get him out, then." Paulino went over to the last of the three cars that were on that hidden siding. "We can explain to the people later on that we had to move fast."

"And also because our comrade must be roasting alive," Key said, following closely behind Vélez, a man who, in addition to being short, had a head that sat right on his shoulders for lack of a neck, all of which, in his case, was compensated for by his long, long arms. "It's not right keeping him locked up in there if we can get him out." Key followed behind Vélez through brambles and barbed wire which the angry wind had pulled off the fences. "And I can imagine what he must be thinking. At the least that everything's been discovered and he'll have to stay in that same boxcar to the Mexican border and go into exile!"

The door of the car slid open, pushed by Paulino after he unsnapped the catch, opening the padlock and loosening the chains. The entire night seemed to grow silent with them, to grow silent and remain listening for someone coming, whether those sounds like footsteps were the dripping of the dewdrops as they walked through the leaves. Nothing. The puffing of the locomotive that went on with its coming and going, like the head of a snake of fire that came and went collecting its pieces, re-forming its body to crawl away afterwards. And the contrast between the crickets and their shrill chirps and the croaking of the frogs.

Florindo looked into the open space, into the interior of the car and said:

"*Chos, chos, moyón, con*!"

"Key!" From inside the voice of Tabío San was heard, along with his hesitating steps in the darkness.

"Octavio Sansur! . . ." Key said his whole name as he embraced him.

"And look who's here! . . ." Tabío San cut him off. "Paulino Vélez, with his jacket still inside-out and over his shoulders!"

"You know, comrade," Vélez answered him, expanding as he shook his hand, "that an inside-out jacket is my trade mark!"

"How was the trip?" Key asked, his voice mingling with San's:

"Boys, what I am right now is thirsty. I ran out of water a while back and I had a few bad moments with the heat and the train never seemed to get here . . ."

"Water's just what we haven't got," Paulino exclaimed, distressed, "because what I brought was a little dri . . . bble."

"Well, thy kingdom come, right Florindo? Just as long as it's liquid," San accepted, and was already jumping out of the boxcar to receive the offer of the bottle, happy to see himself out of that imprisonment which had lasted for hours on end from the capital to Tiquisate. It had been no use sleeping, cutting the trip short with sleep, because while he had slept that procession of cars had been halted on a siding until what was evidently a passenger train passed.

"The worst part of it," Tabío San explained, sweating, "was that I was traveling in the midst of some glass plates in wooden racks, which only made me thirstier because sometimes they looked like enormous cakes of ice locked up in there with me, and other times like pools of water where I could even see the ripples and the bubbles . . ."

"What about Malena?" Florindo hastened to ask while Paulino closed up the car.

"In the capital, hiding out," San informed him. "She managed to get away and . . ."

"There'll be plenty of time for you to me tell me about it." Florindo still used the familiar form of his class. "It's enough to know that she got away . . ."

"She slipped through their fingers . . ."

"At your service," Paulino came over to say, then addressing Key: "I think it's best for me to go ahead and start the motor. Then we can take off as soon as you get in . . ."

"That sounds like a good idea," Florindo answered, giving him the keys to the small medical delivery truck, the one he used for consignments to the pharmacies in the region, "but don't give it too much gas, so there won't be any noise. A soft start and easy on the gas . . ."

"And before I forget it," Paulino stopped, "they say that our comrade here," addressing Tabío San, "passed himself off as an ashman in the capital, and he shows it, different from when I knew him here. Your hair's turned white, as if the ashes had stuck to the hair on your temples."

"We're getting old, but that's all right as long as we see the accomplishment of the things we've dreamed about . . ."

"Everything's here," Key said as he sat down and the small truck, driven by Paulino, started up, with Tabío San sitting in the middle, "medicine, weapons, food, drink, and the last leaflets that they sent us and which we kept hidden in the roof of the church. Paulino was the one who got them down . . ."

"Yes, I brought them down last night," Paulino answered, *tracing* the route with the steering wheel, as he said, "and the text of the three flyers is very good, but the one I like best is the one that says 'Freedom and Bread.' "

It was possible to hear the boiling of the kettle of black beans in which the coast was being cooked, more immense at night.

"Where are they planning to have the meeting?" San asked.

"The first one at the Prospectors' Sandpit," Key answered, "but we intend to have several . . ."

"The Prospector Sandpit," Paulino corrected, still tracing the route with the wheel. "The name can't be changed just because a few foolish people want to. It was always called that because it was near Prospector's Cave, where, according to what they say, those gringo millionaires who were carried off by the strong wind could have been saved if they'd stayed inside."

"They're fruit haulers," Florindo explained, annoyed that

Paulino was butting in where he wasn't concerned, "they like to call it that. That was where they organized their first work stoppage, and they call themselves the Prospectors."

"A beautiful name for a secret society!" Tabío San exclaimed. Then he said: "Now that we're talking about fruit haulers, what ever became of Juambo? Remember him? That hard-headed mulatto I risked everything for to get him down to the coast, certain that he'd be very useful to us, and he hasn't done anything at all."

"He's gone half-crazy," Paulino hastened to answer, unable to be silenced by the angry Key, looking like a monster as he sat in front of the wheel, with no body, just his great head and his overlong, hairy, endless arms.

"What I was asking was whether he went to work as a hauler. He was pretty old for that."

"Yes, and he was good during the work stoppage," Florindo answered. "Then he stayed down here. He divides his time between his old mother and his father, who he keeps digging up and burying again to see what his eyes are like. He's serious about that business of the eyes of the interred . . ."

"He was good but they don't trust him . . ." Paulino put in.

"I did everything I could," Florindo went on, "to convince him to get into the manager's office according to our plans. It would have been quite easy since Bobby Thompson, the grandson of the President of the Company, is spending some time here with the millionaire Luceros. What better recommendation? What better kind of in?"

"That's right, what better kind of in!" Paulino added. "I only have to tell you that one day just after he got here, Bobby rode his horse right up to the Manager's office . . ."

"What's the boy doing here?" San asked, his eyes fixed on the dark strip of road that the wheels of the vehicle were devouring at a good speed.

"First they said he was here for a visit," Key said, almost with-

out taking a breath, still talking so that Paulino Vélez wouldn't get the floor away from him. "Then he stayed on."

"And nobody knows what he's up to!" Paulino managed to exclaim.

"It seems," Florindo went on, "that there was a great argument in Chicago between the boy's mother and his grandfather. The mother, afraid that the Germans would bomb Chicago, didn't want her son to stay there with them, and she sent him off to the plantations. She was right in that. He's safer here. This is probably the last place the Germans or the Japanese will bomb. But the old man, who's dying of throat cancer, thinks that his grandson is more in danger here because of the strike. Senile old man, who's going to bother the boy!"

"Not senile at all!" San turned in the seat as he spoke. "Like a good gangster he probably thinks that we'll kidnap him and ask for the improvements we're demanding as ransom."

"That's an idea," Paulino said.

"A Yankee idea," San cut him off as the small truck stopped. San would continue on foot with Florindo and Paulino would take the truck back to the garage.

They said good-by. Paulino stuck out his immense head and his long arm on the end of which there was a small hand to shake Tabío's, and he repeated what he had said at the station about the ashes on his brows. He was old now, his always weak mechanic's body only occasionally had to do hard work, his eyes were stuck to his nose, affectionate and glowing, wrinkles by his lips and on his forehead.

Everything remained dark and silent as the echo of the motor disappeared along with the glow of the headlights. They had to accustom their eyes and ears again to the phosphorescent ashes of the stars, embers hanging in the great oven, and to the sounds of the night.

With their first steps, the first slaps. The attack of winged poison audible in pugnacious buzzing that was impossible to repel. The mosquitoes were eating them alive. Quicken their

pace. The same thing. Better to pretend they weren't there. There were so many that at times instead of waving them away they picked them off like leeches as they stuck to their sweat, tropical sparks, Key thought, while San explained:

"Malena was able to escape because Rámila's warning arrived in time, but she was within a hair of being caught. They didn't find her at the school when they came for her. That was a piece of luck. She'd gone to a little pottery school that she'd set up near Cerropóm. And she didn't come back. But they didn't search, they sacked, not just things, her things, but the whole school. Because they couldn't beat up any people. They took some people to the capital in a prison van, the headmaster of the School for Boys, the director of the Pottery School, a magnificent old man named Popoluca, Indalecio Popoluca, and a little teacher named . . . named . . . Ana María . . . Ana María, what's her last name . . ."

"Here yesterday," Key said, "they arrested the teacher, Juventino Rodríguez, for the crime of vagrancy, but what we're afraid of is that somebody turned him in because of his activities in favor of the strike."

"Because this business of teachers in revolt is something unheard of before," Tabío exclaimed. "They've always been the most long-suffering group. The students, as everyone knows, were always the opposite, the ones with a spark of rebellion. But the teachers! . . ."

They were silent. They felt the discomfort of the mosquitoes even on their teeth, buzzing jets that got into their ears; on their eyelids that hung down from lack of sleep, heat, and fatigue, the dull spelling out of the same letters by the same frogs . . . *ae . . . ae . . . ao . . . ao . . . ae . . . ao . . .*

So clear and distinct were the sounds of the vowels they heard that they both thought of a password exchanged by an immense conspiracy of batrachians against the stars.

And they thought further: what were they but frogs peering

out of their puddles of misery, mouthing the *chos, chos, moyón, con* of mulattoes at the Fruit Company constellation?

That same night, near dusk, Juambo was repeating those sounds, invisible, huddled, buried . . .

It was hard to tell. Were they fire beetles? . . . Were they fireflies? . . .

There were lights climbing up the scaffolding that clung to the side of the church, and they went along high up under the roof beams like glow worms, lighting here and there, and when they didn't find what they were looking for, they came down with blinking leaps.

"You know something?" Cocko Lucero said when they were all on the ground, perplexed, their flashlights out. "You know where I think they took those packages to hide? To the cemetery . . ."

The gang let out a noisy laugh and as one man they shouted:

"To hand them out to the dead people, Cocko? . . . Ha, ha, ha . . . every dead man with a sheet of paper in his hands reading 'General Strike!' 'Just Strike!' What else did they say . . ."

" 'Freedom and Bread!' " someone else added, giving the other title of the three that sealed the packets of single sheets which they had discovered hidden at the top of the church the morning of the day before.

Bobby didn't even blink:

"To the cemetery," he said. It was an inspiration and an adventure. On the way he asked: "Is it near? . . . Isn't it far? . . . Who knows how to get there? . . ."

"I know how to get there without going through town, but we have to climb over a lot of fences . . ."

"Forward, boys!" Gringo commanded.

Some jumped over, others crawled under the barbed wire fences, creeping, elbows and knees, all on their way to attack the cemetery, where they soon were among loaded papaya trees, many-breasted goddesses, palm trees with a metallic sound in

the wind. Nothing indicated that the place was a cemetery except the crosses, when they could be seen, not hidden because of the darkness, as the flashlight beams crossed back and forth, but because of the raging vegetation that hid them, swallowing up cross and corpse.

The insects and lizards went wild with the lights of the invaders; they woke up the owls, guardian birds of the dead; the electric beams pierced in all directions at the gravestones submerged in the grass. And the juvenile group suddenly stood paralyzed around a pit from which they heard sounds and voices.

Bobby, because of his height, his ability to lean over and stretch his neck, saw from up above what was going on in the bottom where the lights were reaching—there, there, there, they all thought the flyers were hidden—and he saw someone burying a body, more bones than flesh, skin like the husk of a fruit, the remains of hair on the head, and teeth showing in the lipless mouth.

Gringo drew back as pale as death, unable to speak, bathed in cold water, a frozen sweat that covered his warm sweat, and he would have fled in terror if he hadn't realized that the person handling the corpse, he didn't know whether he was burying it or digging it up, was Juambo.

The mulatto, followed by the lights of the flashlights, trapped in his ditch redoubt, was motionless when he recognized his master's grandson among the faces from which a rain of hallucinated eyes fell.

Cocko, who was next to Bobby, asked him what he was doing, why he was desecrating those human remains.

"I speak to dead! Father talk to me!"

"Savage!" Bobby shouted at him in horror.

"Father no leave me in woods, no! I ask him here and he say so! Father give me to Bobby's grandfather, that was what, not leave me lost in woods for jaguar to eat, not that! . . . Who tell me that? . . ." He heard voices and he kept on talking. "Bobby's grandfather told me once, twice, three, hundred times, thousand

times . . . (Must have been joking). Was it joke when he told me? . . . Father no, father no leave me in woods for jaguar to eat! And I dig him up, talk to him, ask him to forgive, close his eyes, eyes of man buried with eyes open, like all poor people who die and even after dead wait . . . wait . . . I dig him up and ask him to forgive, for me, for the jaguar who didn't eat me, for Anastasia who abandoned him . . ." (He shook the body). "Forgive me, father, forgive me, because I cursed you, because I spat every time I heard your name! I am your blood and I will be your bones! Auuuuu . . . auuuuu . . . auuu . . ." he howled, "auuuuu . . . auuu . . . auuu!"

And as he howled he slipped the corpse into a hole, carefully, so that it would not hit as it fell. And yet, how hard it touched the bottom. One could hear the rumble of the bones in the blind space of death. When it disappeared he huddled in silence, whispering for his own ears: *"Chos, chos, moyón, con! . . . Chos, chos, moyón, con!"* so low that what he was saying could not be heard.

Some thought he was praying. Later on they wanted to stone him. But Bobby was not only against it, he jumped into the place where the mulatto, still repeating his complaint, was struck by the first stones on his arms and back. In the sticky dampness of the earth dug up by Juambo, hot earth that gave off the vapor of a concoction of herbs among recently pulled roots and the trunks of old destroyed trees, Bobby fell over other bodies.

"Don't take me out of here!" the mulatto protested. "Bury me! Bury me! No, Bobby! Don't take me out, Bobby! . . ."

The gang ran off in terror in all directions and then all together in a group when they realized that Bobby was pulling out a madman who thought he was dead and wanted to be left buried there . . .

Cocko, the most faithful, hesitated, but he couldn't stay. Stronger than he was the fear in his legs.

And all the way home to Semírames. He got into bed, under the covers, trembling with fear from head to toe, trembling when

he thought that Gringo slept with him there in that other bed that was empty now, and that at any moment he would come in, he would arrive accompanied by . . . by . . . by . . . he didn't dare say by the madman who thought he was dead . . .

When Bobby arrived, Cocko was asleep, drenched in sweat, naked on his bed, the sheet that had covered him on the floor like a white dog because of the way it had fallen, a faithful dog, vigilant, stretched out with one ear doubled over and its snout between its paws.

He woke up Cocko and told him:

"The gang's all through! They deserted me, the bunch of scaredy-cats! Tomorrow I'm going to tell them that the gang's all through."

Cocko didn't answer. With his eyes barely open he understood that Bobby was right and he went back to sleep.

The psalm-singing of the frogs ae . . . ae . . . ao . . . ao . . . ae . . . more than a batrachian password, which Tabío San and Florindo thought they were hearing when they got out of the vehicle which had left them in the open country, was a measuring of the passage of time by sound, a transforming of the flow of the water, so similar to life, which goes off with the rhythmical vocalizations of a clock . . . ae . . . ae . . . ao . . . ao . . . ae . . .

"As it turned out," Key said, "we didn't need Juambo's help in the offices. A high official with access to the management, to the head office, everywhere, has supplied us with very good information."

"Is he a native?" San asked.

"Yes, from the capital," Florindo answered. "One of those capital people exiled from the circle of their friends, their club, the kind who only have their names left, their English, some notion of bookkeeping and documents, along with their good handwriting and drowsy conversation. I didn't trust him at all the first time. He told me that we'd met in the capital, at the French women's place. It wasn't the best recommendation. He excused himself by saying that he didn't go there for a good time

but so he wouldn't forget his French. I used to go to practice French too, I told him, one cynic to another. Then talking on and on he began to complain about the Company. I didn't give it any importance. It's what all the native employees do, and I can't speak for the Yankees, from the highest to the lowest: they complain about the Company in confidence, between friends, just for your ears, you won't repeat anything . . ."

"Bandits!"

"But this one didn't stop at complaints. One day, all of a sudden, he was talking to me about the strike, commenting that the ones planning it would be happy with the normal demands in a movement like that, but that it was necessary to go further and make the Company jump through the hoop. A provocateur, I said to myself, and I pretended that I didn't understand or that his conversation didn't interest me. He used to visit me a lot because he was a collector of . . . what do you think? . . ."

"Condoms . . ."

"Because of the Frenchwomen, ha, ha . . ." Key let out a laugh. "But you're close. Medicine bottles were what he collected."

"Empty or full?"

"I don't know, but he'd grab them with the hunger of a maniac. The samples in strange bottles, the pill containers that looked like drops of blood . . ."

"And what ideas does that loony have about the strike?" San asked.

"The same as ours . . ."

"I'll be damned!"

"I was careful to keep my mouth shut, just in case . . ."

"A spy instead of a provocateur . . ."

"That's what I thought. Until the very last I thought he was a spy. But wait a minute, let me get my bearings. We can get lost going along talking like this."

He lifted his head to the hot, starry sky. From the earth too the burning vapor could be felt. The atmosphere of the night was oppressive with its strong aroma of white-hot flowers and the oily smell of ripe bananas.

"Let's go, we're all right," Key said and started walking and talking again. "The document proved that he was helping us in good faith. You had it in your hands. The minute he gave it to me I sent it on to you."

"He entrusted it to you?"

"Very valuable, don't you think?"

"It certainly is, especially at this time, because even though it isn't the opinion of the State Department, we were able to find out President Roosevelt's ideas. But to my way of thinking, and I'm sorry, he spoke about the matter without any basic knowledge."

And with Key's silence and surprise he continued:

"In all of this, my dear Key, there's a mistake that favors us and which we can take advantage of. When President Roosevelt referred to our strike he was making a judgment from the point of view of a politician in a country where striking is a right and not a crime, the way it is with us. And in that way our case was nothing-but-a-strike to him." He said it word by word. "But it's the deluge. We're going to submerge the country, not just the Company, in a sea of social reforms under a cloudburst of labor laws! We're going to free our economy! . . ." San stopped to sneeze.

"Bless you."

"Thank you."

"And what I don't know if you're aware of," Key went on, "is that the Company consulted Washington because of a suggestion-ultimatum from our government that the strike would weaken the Allied cause. Well, if that's how it is, Washington answered, you have to negotiate with the workers. But how can the Company negotiate if the presidential *Beast* knows that the slightest slip in this country means his downfall, and, on the other hand, how can he break up the movement with blood and fire if Washington says to negotiate . . .

"That proves that the dictatorship and the Company, that trusts and tyrannies, broadening it, are inseparable, and if plagiar-

ism is permitted, you could say that just as a cloud carries a storm in its bosom, so the Fruit Company carries dictatorship."

The leader stopped, changed his tone of voice, and added:

"I hope the place is close by . . . This devilish coast. It makes you so tired! Have you got a cigarette, Key?"

And after the first puffs he spoke of what he had inside his voice in a tone of confidence, unloading interior things:

"Smoking for me is blowing out smoke. Letting it go, watching, hearing the smoke. For me and I guess for all of us who smoke and don't have a tobacco vice but the vice of instability . . ."

And going further:

"Smoke is a translation, friend Key, in the concrete case of our movement, of the instability, the fantasy in which we operate. We don't play with fire. That's what people who can count on labor organizations in these cases do, a spirit of struggle, a class feeling . . . We're playing with smoke, Key, yes, playing with smoke, with what exists as an exhalation of our rebelliousness and our revolutionary aspirations . . ."

"Then it means . . ."

"It doesn't mean anything and it means everything! Let's keep going. The people around the presidential *Beast*, lifetime ministers, secretaries with ventriloquist voices, courtly hunters, convince him that he shouldn't worry in the least about that talk of possible strikes, because in this country there aren't any organizations except the fraternal orders, which only serve to bury their dead members, and, in the last analysis, if they tried anything, all he has to do is take the trouble to reach out one of his precious fingers, touch one of the precious buttons on his desk, and have their throats cut . . ."

"That's just what he won't be able to do!" Key exclaimed, putting his hands in his pockets, moving his head from one side to the other, and starting to walk ahead, stopping, turning, looking at San, and saying: "Even here the news says that he's cornered . . ."

"Of course, but the last attack of a cornered beast is the most dangerous."

"But organizations are no good against that, San, beacons are. As I was telling you, even here the news is that he's cornered, and the Company people who know where the banana pinches have begun to send their families away to the United States, and the millionaire Luceros are getting ready to leave for a vacation there too with their children and their house guest, Thompson's grandson. There's something else: last night they were shooting off machine-guns, a show of force that goes against what you say, that the authorities pretend not to see newspapers and pamphlets that couldn't be read before even in hiding, and which they let circulate today, along with the almost complete absence of the police, who seem to ignore our meetings, which are more and more open and public."

Key lowered his voice, looked again, and went close to Tabío:

"Comrade, we've managed to talk to some retired officers. And in this respect, I don't know whether you know, there's something that could happen. When the famous papers were discovered in the barber's house, the Commandant ordered one of his officers, the officer who had gone to the wake with him, to take them to the command post. Since that couldn't be allowed, Andrés Medina and I stationed ourselves with rifles to wait for him. Either we had to kill him or a lot of our people would fall into the hands of the police. But the Captain, who was supposed to pass by alone, was accompanied by another officer and a patrol that was making its rounds or was on its way back to the command post to report in, and fate saved him and saved him for us."

"That's the famous Captain Cárcamo . . ." San interrupted.

"Why famous?"

"Because of the papers . . ." Tabío hastened to say, disturbed because he had let out the word *famous* as he thought about other papers, the pages of a book, that last page of Malena's diary . . .

He was famous for him and the sound of the wind in the leafy

branches of the trees under whose shadow the road they were taking curved along, recalled for him the night in Cerropóm when in the shadow of a willow he almost went mad with that cursed "and" which didn't close but left open-ended the chapter that Malena had dedicated to the impossible love of her life.

"And tell me, Florindo, how did that Captain know that Malena was Rosa Gavidia?"

"That was what we wondered ourselves, but Andrés Medina, the one who's been in touch with him, they're childhood friends, cleared up the mystery for us and it wasn't a mystery anymore. It seems that Cárcamo, when he was a second lieutenant, met her at a masked ball at the military club."

"Ah, yes, a masked ball!"

It seemed that Tabío San was emphasizing that detail in order to take importance away from what Florindo was telling him, but the real reason for his repeating the matter of a masked ball was because he remembered that Malena had not spoken about it in her diary.

"It's rather strange, after all. Malena was disguised as a peasant girl and Cárcamo as a mustachioed hussar. She spoke in a higher voice so as to seem younger and he deepened his to appear older. When the hussar spoke to the peasant girl, she told him her name was Rosa Gavidia. They danced. They hit it off. And when the time to unmask came, the peasant girl turned out to be a mature woman and the hussar a boy. 'My name isn't Rosa Gavidia,' she explained, 'it's Malena Tabay.' But he asked if he could keep on calling her Rosa Gavidia. 'That means,' she laughed to hide her disappointment, 'that you prefer me as a young girl . . .' "

Florindo shortened his steps. They were doubtlessly getting there and he wanted to give himself time to answer San's question about the reason why Cárcamo had been interested in Malena after so many years.

"Comrade . . ." he laughed easily but softly, an earthy laugh between his teeth, "I'm surprised at the question! Where there

was once a spark . . . I imagine that when the little Captain read the name Rosa Gavidia in the papers he was putting on the Commandant's desk, he remembered the peasant girl, the one he was in love with, the Rosa Gavidia from his masked ball, not the Rosa Gavidia, revolutionary, who we know."

"Do you think so? . . ." San stammered doubtfully, as if thinking about something else, and then he asked: "What about the papers?"

"He burned them. But it's gone beyond that with the officer, with him and with another officer who's a captain too and whose name is José Domingo Salomé. Some guitarists here have been working on him. They're known as the Samuels. They're three brothers, Samuelón, the oldest, a mastodon as good as gold, Samuel, the middle one, lively, wily, prudent, and Samuelito, the youngest, short in height but as brave as a midget dog."

"And how do these Samuels work on him?"

"They give him guitar lessons and . . ."

"I bet they sing him revolutionary songs . . ."

Florindo let out a noisy laugh that he tried to snuff with his hand as he said:

"Revolutionary songs . . . ha . . . ha . . . ha! . . . At the command post? . . ."

"That," San said while Florindo laughed with his mouth open, "and without guitar accompaniment, is called a 'Home Course in Revolutionary Preparation at the Command Post . . .'" Key continued laughing. "And some day, even if we don't see it, your children will: our soldiers singing revolutionary songs in the barracks, not to the accompaniment of machine-guns but to plows . . ."

"They won't be revolutionary anymore if they're sung by them . . ."

"No, no, they'll still be revolutionary because the army will be revolutionary too!"

They were at the door of a building sunken in the darkness of a grove. They couldn't even see their hands. Their last steps were

by feel, slipping their feet along grains of sand. Silence. The sound of the trees. The breathing of many men who were waiting. The door opened and Tabío San entered behind Florindo, going into what would be his hiding place and his lodgings. Hard, callused hands. Hoarse, distant voices. In total darkness except for their hearts.

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Tabío San left at dawn, with no more luggage than what he had in his pockets, like someone going to the corner, and he was leaving forever. Neither the baggage of his feet nor the sound of his footsteps, which were swallowed up by the ashpits. He was with Malena until very late at night, burning papers, documents, printed matter, all of which ended up as nothing but a handful of sticky dust that joined the sea of ash which submerged the streets and shacks in those ghostly trash piles where a world that was sinking was now trying to rise up with the warmth of news reports.

He intentionally kept Malena up very late so that sleep would overcome her at dawn and she wouldn't hear him leave. But she wasn't sleeping either. She hadn't even gotten undressed. Rigid, awake, she was waiting in Judasita's bed in the room at the rear of the house. The old woman had improvised a bed in the dining-room out of a chair and a mattress in order to be between them so that the devil would not come before they were joined together, for until he saw victory he could not get married, only

if he did it under a different name, and even then they might recognize him and dispatch him to the other life, for there was still a price on his head. In the meantime it was better like that, at a distance, because kiddies didn't come from hugs and kisses. Judasita's female sense of smell, her instinct of an old maid-widow, just what it sounded like, because her husband had long been dead and buried and it had been some time since her son had been shot, so that she felt as if she had never known a male and she even liked to be called "miss," all of which made her receptive to operations like that, and that was why she gave Malena her room off what was the inner courtyard when she arrived from Cerropóm to hide out with them. Also, because holed up in that dump she would be better hidden, although who was going to find her in that tumbledown white district where friends of the movement were now arriving more often with the latest bits of information, hot coals which were still burning in the embers of their voices . . .

Something was going to happen . . . troops confined to barracks . . . the police issued rifles . . . some schoolteachers arrested . . . on the roads in and out of the city they were asking for the name and identification of people entering and leaving and vehicles were searched . . . they were looking for weapons . . . bombs . . . dynamite . . . and they found nothing . . . nothing . . . papers . . . caricatures . . . rumors . . . rumors . . . they say they say they say . . . rumors . . . rumors . . .

Judasita put the pot of coffee on the fire that she had buried there. Blowing and blowing until she revived it and was able to toast a few slices of bread. How could he leave on an empty stomach? Something hot at least . . .

But Tabío accepted only the coffee, Malena a sip and he a sip from the same cup of coffee that was drunk without bread, and he left the dining-room while Judasita tightened her eyelids, paunchy with tears, so as not to see him leave, and a bit nauseous, she rested her white head, the dirty color of lime, against the peeling wall.

Malena went to the small courtyard with him, their last steps together, and there she remained as if lost after a long kiss, clinging to the door with cold hinges, damp in the morning dew, not hearing his footsteps as they were swallowed up by the ashes, as if he were not walking away but were pulled along by some higher will, obeying a command that gave him a reason for the existence of both of them.

San was walking faster and faster, not turning around to look so that he would not appear suspicious, although there was a moment in which his legs grew weak as he heard himself being followed, closely followed, closer and closer, and he began to run, not realizing that it was the sound of his own footsteps which had been given back when he left the ashpits and came out onto the more central streets. He straightened up, the idea had been working on him that his shoulders were sagging with his years, his hands in his pockets, a cap with a small visor over his forehead, his jacket collar turned up, trying to reach the area of the Central Station before dawn. It was a shed that bore the resounding name of International Railways of Central America.

The streets were becoming alive, the city was waking up, the coming and going of people, automobiles, carts, trucks, bicycles, platforms filled with travelers, troops passing on their way to the Campo de Marte, the officers on horseback, mustachioed and asleep, the cannons on mule-back, the infantrymen to the rhythm of a drum or a military band.

Without losing time or his pace, San fell in with the workers who were going through one of the side doors of the station, still lit by small electric bulbs, and as he went inside he turned to the right toward the railroad repair shop, which he was not long in finding. He saw the man he was looking for from a distance, a mastodon sick with jaundice, who, when he saw him coming, lit a cigarette and started walking, leaving behind a sound of rain, the sound of the rubber cape he had hanging from his shoulders.

San followed him across platforms, rails, ties, switches, walking, jumping, stumbling, tense, anxious, his mouth dry, afraid of

everyone and everything, to a string of boxcars lined up on a siding. *Chos, chos, moyón, con . . .* was all that he heard the railroad worker say. An instant later he was inside a freight car, feeling in the darkness until he found the spot that had been prepared for him. He took out a handkerchief to dry the sweat on his hands, his face, the sweat which dampened his hair. A sound of machinery, and farther off the awakening of the city. Suddenly, close by, he heard the bells calling people to mass, so different from the locomotive bells of the engines that were coming and going rapidly. A hoarse whistle perforated the sky. That of El Zapote. Seven in the morning. The brewery workers inside. And the sharp whistles of the sawmills. Seven o'clock. Inside the workers were moving slabs of wood toward the teeth of the saws. Horns. Traffic congestion. Always at the corner by the station. Always. Buzzers, whistles, and horses' hooves, echoes in the shape of an orange skin that had been removed intact, slipping and straightening up on the stones of the station courtyard, pulling handcarts coming to be loaded or unloaded on the platforms of the warehouses that deliver and receive merchandise and packages.

He forgot about the sounds and repeated to himself everything he had said to Malena when they said good-by, not to console himself, but, since it was what he firmly believed, it was comforting to think about it next to the supplies that his comrades had put there for him: sandwiches, fruit, cigarettes, and a canteen of water.

He had said to Malena, "We're creating an atmosphere favorable to the general strike, but the spark has to come from somewhere else, and there it is! University students and schoolteachers." She looked at him with her deep eyes, fixedly, as if reminding him that he had had doubts about the possible action of the schoolteachers. "They've lost their fear of the *Beast* and soon they'll make the big explosion. My place isn't in the city but where there are more field workers, on the plantations on the South Coast; another comrade is covering Bananera. There's

always been a certain reluctance on the south coast to back up the movement on the north coast, mainly because of a lack of organization. In the capital and other cities the political battle will be launched, and we in the south and in the north, at our battle stations, are going to demand better pay, social welfare, labor laws, and the dividing up of untilled lands."

But the other side of his thought had a different language. The language of his feelings, the babble of a person who cannot find a way of expressing such simple things as the ones involved between Malena and him. Was he incapacitated by the natural silence of his race, that ancestral changing of ideas, like clouds, not saying a word? Did not his fear of a hollow failure in amorous conventions prevent him from being spontaneous? And wasn't he happy at not having fallen into the temptation of feeling that he was acting like . . . a corner storekeeper . . . a factory owner . . . a retired businessman . . . an owner of a coffee plantation . . . ?

Two dots of bluish-green light, infinitely small and intensely alive, drew his attention. They glowed even more in the darkness of the freight car. A fire beetle. He didn't touch it. The sacred phosphorescence paralyzed him. A pair of small pinheads of moonlight. What was it doing there? Why had that tobacco-colored cameo appeared to him? What word, what sign was hidden in its presence? . . .

The train, with a jerk that almost knocked him down, unexpectedly coupled the boxcar he was in and soon he felt himself in that confusion of not being where he was, a nausea of wheels which would end with that trip which he thought was endless at times until he was attacked by the suspicion, with great despair, heat, and thirst, that the more the train traveled the farther the rails stretched out. But now he wouldn't move from there, until victory . . . He said that to the men who were waiting for him in the hut after emptying with great gulps, hurriedly at first then more slowly, a pitcher of water that was as hot as a pair of tongs, and he asked their permission to lie down on a cot

so that he could speak to them better in that temperature of reality and dreams. Some squatted, others remained standing, others sat on the ground. Coughs, a clearing of throats, questions, the splashing of lids over eyes so that they could better see the shape lying on the canvas sheet and talking to them.

Was it the same Tabío San? Sometimes he heard himself called by his full name, Octavio Sansur. Was he the same one who, years before in the Tiquisate region had worked as a laborer, his face looking like ground meat because of the deformation from the mushrooms, and had dreamed of what he was now speaking about, not as a dream but as a reality that was taking place?

. . . Ae . . . ae . . . ao . . . ao . . . as before, the frogs continued counting the march of time.

Several times he stopped to salivate upon the facts, chew them, they had such a taste of unreality, before turning them loose in the pit-deep silence of his companions, hard and humble, carved from quarry material. Was he not taking his dreams as reality? Was his dialectic not pure fantasy, a hallucination caused by the deforming mushroom?

He had to accept that it was not. Accept? A frightening word! Frightening! Reality meant going beyond everything that was imagined and it was more like a fable to picture that main hall in the university where, like naked lances, the arms of the students rose up demanding of the presidential *Beast*, before whom heaven and earth prostrated themselves, that in the course of twenty-four hours, with the threat of a strike, he answer the demands sent to him on a sheet of paper that was something like the declaration of a new independence.

It was the beginning of a *time of fiction.*

He would have preferred not using that literary expression. But how else could one describe the parenthesis of light that was opening up in the daily life of people of bread and dreams except as a time of democratic fiction? How else, if the organized workers didn't give it a content that would go beyond the shaking

and intoxicating flush of grandiloquent freedom, making the Company bow its head, obliging it to accept their demands and giving the permanence of a future to the march toward power of workers and peasants . . .

His language was taking the shape of a harangue now . . .

That was why he was there, the reincarnation of Jean Paul Marat, the liberator of birds in his youth, the reader of all revolutionary literature that fell into his hands, a born conspirator, the first in all plots favoring the people, and finally, after so much playing with fire, the bearer of what remained of the flames and the coals, the sterile and lifeless residue.

But he returned to the vision of the students and the teachers. His fear was that Malena, when she felt herself alone, desperate at not taking part, would desert Judasita, who was a walking wailing wall, in search of the shelter of heroic people, people who were risking their lives . . .

"Friend," a man approached the cot where Tabío San was lying, "you don't know what it's like to work in the salt pits! It's best that you never knew! It's best that your beard doesn't grow over the salt!"

"Yes, friend . . ." the leader agreed with him, as the voice of that man singed by sun and sea made him sit up respectfully.

"That's why it's something new that with us nobodies, the idea has caught on of not working if they don't give us better pay, a better house to live in, better everything, because we're miserable now, sir, plain miserable, we're all so poor, because nothing's any good here where we stir up the stew of the tide, you see? And think about what salt does to iron, making it scaly, turning it to dust! And remember we work naked too, with just a hat on our heads and a loincloth! Only we know the thirst that the salt brings on!"

"Well, no more work if they don't do better with pay and living conditions . . ."

"That's what we intend to demand when the general strike's declared . . ."

Did the students know that by confronting the *Beast* with their demands they were fighting for the fate of those men in the salt pits, naked, as thirsty as if they had dropsy, and devoured by the evaporation of their flesh?

Florindo Key intervened. He asked the saltman, Toyo Montoya and the comrades who had gathered together, to wait for Tabío San, to let him sleep a while. There would be plenty of time to come back and talk to him the day after tomorrow at the Prospectors' Sandpit, before or after the big meeting where it was quite probable that the first alert for the general strike would be given.

They left like water out of an open dam, and Florindo avoided speaking. Lying on the cot, the leader began to turn about in search of sleep, trying to put distance between the hands he had just joined or to bring together the legs he had held apart. The heat, fatigue, and the saltman could not be separated in his thoughts. Yes, on the day of justice the dead will revive, not those who are under the earth, but those buried in life, those men who are like skeletons with transparent fly-wing flesh, and they will speak, as Toyo Montoya had just done at the edge of the cot, saying as he left:

"I'm leaving, friend, give me your hand. I'm leaving so that I won't keep on talking about myself . . ."

Ae . . . ae . . . ao . . . ao . . . the immense clock of the frogs went on with the rhythm of a time without consonants, the winged time of vowels . . .

"I can't sleep," San complained to Florindo, not knowing whether the other one heard him, motionless at his side in a reclining chair.

Ae . . . ae . . . ae . . . ae . . .

He changed the tone of his voice, speaking to himself in spite of the fact that he was with Florindo when he repeated that he couldn't sleep.

He was worried about Malena. Rosa Gavidia to their comrades and the little captain. Not impulsive. Decisive. There was

no one who could stop her if she decided to leave her hiding place and join the schoolteachers in their struggle. Judasita? . . . The promise she made to him? . . . It pleased him to think that if things were pressing, neither Judasitas nor promises would be any good. She would leave that tomb in the ashes and go into the city, as if drawn out of some Mayan bas-relief: her nose slightly curved, her forehead in flight backward, and at the corners of her mouth the laughing softness of a sad heritage . . .

She would leave and . . . hush, my heart!, she would go from the Ashmen to the Schoolboys, the other famous clandestine group.

Until then Ashmen and Schoolboys had managed to escape any action by the secret police, a body with many heads: military, judicial, governmental, which had no qualities that were blind, feminine, partisan, voluntary, or domestic.

University students and schoolteachers made up the Schoolboy group. Revolutionaries and bohemians, who, before dealing with the *Beast*, had beheaded puppets in caps and gowns, crowned student queens, a pretext for incendiary speeches, celebrated national holidays with meetings in two voices, like a bullfighter in a double pass, civic dialogues which filled theaters and public squares with the shape of a devastating comedy. Plot, backdrops, wardrobe, lights, and the archaic language of dream vendors barely hid what, blow by blow, ended in tragedy. The actors took off their masks and went forward like suicides to challenge the *Beast* directly, openly calling him now: a "Piano Napoleon," a "Carpet Tiger."

A fair number of agitators formed the group of the Ashmen. Not too many. Protected by their trade in ashes they could enter and leave the houses of ousted politicians, retired military men, and the survivors of former plots without arousing the suspicion of the police, carrying in their sacks along with that residue which was so much an image of death, subversive pamphlets, money, small arms, type for printing presses, and messages.

Without any agreement, Schoolboys and Ashmen synchronized their conspiratorial actions, cloaking them in moves that had no reason to "annoy the Man . . ."

But why go over those same thoughts? . . .

He breathed deeply, unable to sleep, looking for his handkerchief. In his pockets . . . under the pillow . . .

Sleep is as immense as the earth, but only through a narrow gate, like the gate of heaven, can one enter its happy realm.

"Don't join up with the Schoolboys, you'd only compromise them! . . ." He heard himself talking to Malena as if she were there with him, among stars and frogs, the phantoms of tools hanging from the ceiling and a reed case on which he began to focus his eyes, trying to find out whether it was just a food cupboard or a medicine chest where there was some herb or root which, when chewed, would make him feel sleep pouring over him.

"They're looking for you, Malen! Think, reflect, that if you go with the Schoolboys . . . Oh, but it's true, the police are after them too . . . then . . . then . . . you have time to get there while the twenty-four hours of the ultimatum are running out, or rather, the one thousand, four hundred, forty minutes, or the eighty-six thousand four hundred seconds, and on the clock of the frogs . . . ae . . . ae . . . ae . . . ao . . . ao . . . ao . . . eight million sixty-two thousand clear vowels . . . ae . . . ae . . . ao . . . ao . . . while the time of the ultimatum runs out . . .

He had the feeling that she moaned as she listened to him leave, that she was being mortally wounded, that he would not see her again . . .

Why didn't he bring her along? . . . What good was victory without her? . . .

"Malen! . . . Malen! . . ."

His heart was pounding against his ribs and he had to roll over on his face.

Ae . . . ae . . . ae . . .

The time of the ultimatum counted by the frogs . . .

Ao . . . ao . . . ao . . .

Twenty-four . . . twenty-four fateful hours . . .

"Malen! . . . Malen! . . ."

Why didn't he bring her? What good was victory without her? What good was it riding in the carriage that was like a rolling theater on wheels of fire, filled with men and women with rifles, plows, and flags, the one that man Don Juan Nepomuceno Rojas had dreamed? Poor man, he had died on his way home from work. A push on the pedal made his bicycle collide with one of the gigantic army trucks. One of the twelve wheels passed over him.

What good would it be riding in the carriage of victory without Malena?

"Up the people! . . . Up the people! . . ." Juan Nepo Rojas had heard him shout.

Except that now, without Malena, he felt that the shout was sticking in his throat like an extinguished starfish . . .

And now not only the *Beast* but everybody was asking who they thought they were, who the students were to give him an ultimatum . . .

Twenty-four . . . twenty-fooooouuuu . . . uuua . . . uuua . . . ae . . . ae . . . ae . . . ae . . . twenty-fooooouuuur fateful hooooouuuurs . . .

Would they stay like that, naked alongside each other? . . . Would they stay like that, naked beside each other? . . .

Malena naked and he naked, submerged in a bath . . .

Caresses, bubbles, and . . . suddenly the water solidifies and they manage to stay there with their heads out of the straitjacket that was trapping their bodies, changed into an ice-cake of mirrors . . .

It couldn't be! Going to city hall to get married after the victory, his face in the open, his name—Juan Pablo Mondragón . . . Octavio Sansur . . . Tabío San . . . which one of his names?—and ending up in the snare of the sad pornographic pictures that can be bought on postcards, and then imprisoned in the immense insensibility of that grand-piano tail of rock crystal . . .

The deluge! The deluge!

But if they had just been married, although actually a person is never just married, a person is always getting married, how could they themselves join in the chorus of couples asking for the deluge . . . the deluge! . . . the deluge! . . . the only solution, the deluge, the deluge, seeing themselves free, seeing the mirror that held them fast liquefied into rivers, lakes, seas, oceans . . . ae . . . ae . . . ae . . . ae . . .

Their heads . . . (as the mirror dissolved in the deluge they were left without bodies), only their heads, their heads looking for other bodies . . .

This one, that one, the other one . . . pointing to the body of a peasant girl for Rosa Gavidia!

This one, that one, the other one . . . pointing to the body of a mustachioed hussar for León Cárcamo, Captain of Infantry!

And he? . . . (This one, that one, and . . . he . . .).

He, without his body, only his head, between the two of them, between the peasant girl and the Captain, acting as a referee, but it was not the clinch of a boxing match, it was the clinch of a love match, and he had to separate them, oh, horror!, so that there would be no continuation of the time of men and women born to be the flesh of bombardment or of factories . . .

With a tug he pulled the peasant girl out of the Captain's arms. She was a peasant girl, a schoolteacher, and a revolutionary, and side by side they proclaimed, on the threshold of a new day, the "bed strike" in homes where the solution was the deluge and not love.

Someone was waking him up. He quickly lowered his eyelids, snuffing out the dream that was left there, covering the stumps of visions, the way peasants cover the newly cut branches of fruit trees with earth so that they would not feel ashamed.

Florindo was shaking him, waking him up. He left the cot, half-asleep, and not knowing whether he had slept, yawning, stretching, rubbing his eyes. The first thing was to get washed. He went to a cistern at the foot of an avocado tree and sank his

hands into the water as if to rest them in the liquid, as if the liquid were soft, then his arms, and then he dipped out as much as he could with his hands to rub his face, while with his lips he made the sounds of a boisterous child.

The smell of coffee. The smell of news on the towel.

The day, early as it was, burned like a hot coal. No sound except the noisy silence of the bushes under the stainless indigo of the sky and the high eyes of the palm trees.

They had breakfast, happy to be looking at each other. Florindo mixed the coffee with some powdered milk that was dissolved in hot water, bread, butter, and deviled ham, and San set the table, that is to say, two round mugs, a single spoon, and a single knife, sugar in a paper bag, salt wrapped in a banana leaf. San looked older, Florindo more worn by the tropics. The latter drummed with the fingers of his left hand as if he were searching on the plank on which they were eating for some arpeggio hidden in the wood. Nervous, restless on the small stool that he was using as a seat, San confessed to Key his worry over Malena. The spark had come from where it was least expected, from the students and teachers, and therefore he had to leave the capital, forced by the rapidity of events, unable to get Malena out of that hiding place. What could he do . . .

He cut off the question with his chalk teeth, smoking a cigarette more with his fingers than with his mouth.

Would everything for him and her be wagered on a single card: that of the strike?

Florindo thought that he should alert the comrades in the capital. Let them know about the situation Rosa Gavidia was in, isolated and in danger of taking a decision dictated by her revolutionary fervor which would bring her to the extreme of risking her life. But how could they do it if a railroad stoppage had been called? Some other means was advisable.

Cayetano Duende! . . .

Tabío San thought of him. Without saying it at that moment the name of the old coachman and pathfinder came to his lips,

followed by the name of Popoluca. He remembered them as all-powerful beings. But both of them had stayed in Cerropóm and there was no news of them, the way one never hears again about the stones that stay behind on the road.

He had left Malena under the protection of those old men, from a distance they seemed to be divinities, when he fled through the subterranean lava trail, certain that he would find her again, but now what could he expect of Judasita since the poor creature was little more than a piece of furniture.

Florindo was cutting his nails, partly to pass the time until the people who were to come arrived and without realizing that Sansur was getting nervous from the click-click of the nail-clipper, which, like a silver-plated insect, was eating, separating and closing the two half-moons of its sharp mandibles.

The croaking of the frogs that came at dawn and dusk, as they went about leaping, bathing in the dew, with their eyes popping out, wrapped in the sunlight, was fading into the bustle of the birds, the branches filled with wind, and the distant echoes from the plantations.

The leader clenched his fist against his chest as if something material, external had been left there from the bruising batrachian that he had felt on his open flesh the night before, on his ribs, bathed in and draining his blood in alternatives of life and death, counting the hours of the ultimatum with the other frogs.

Click! . . . click! . . . Florindo continued cutting his nails, a cigarette in his lips, his eyes somewhat lost in that emptiness that comes from waiting for things that are about to happen. When a small piece was left hanging, he completed the operation by pulling it off with his teeth, chewing it then, and spitting it out.

Sansur, his handkerchief in his hand, patting his face from time to time to sponge the sweat, thought that there was no such waiting for events. What should happen was already happening with the ultimatum from the students and schoolteachers to the *Beast*, giving him twenty-four hours to accede to their demands under the threat of starting a strike at the university in case he

denied them or did not answer . . . ("Boyish pranks!" Key thought) . . . a strike that meant the desertion of hospitals and clinics by medical students, courts by law students, drawing boards at Highways and Public Works by engineering students, Health Department laboratories by students in chemistry and pharmacy, delivery rooms by students of obstetrics, and, most serious, the desertion of their schools by teachers . . .

Things here were not so simple and that was why he had come from the capital to Tiquisate to take his place in the struggle, to synchronize the movement with Bananera at the zero hour.

"Shh!" Florindo said and got up quickly, his hand near the bulge of his pistol until he reached the door, where his silhouette was sharply outlined in the luminous frame.

The steps grew closer, but until he knew who was coming, Key maintained his complete domination of the door. It was Andrés Medina. Always spirited and willing to do everything he could in support of his comrades. He had news. A piece of news that was a bomb. The *Beast* had suspended constitutional guarantees and declared a state of siege.

Sansur jumped from his seat while Key said, half as a question and half as a declaration:

"Suspended what? . . . Guarantees? . . . What guarantees? We never even saw the edges of them!"

"Ho, ho, ho, ho! . . ." San exclaimed. "The final act has begun and those of us who were just spectators of political events are going to have to come on stage and go into action."

And turning to Key he added:

"Man of little faith, youth gave the spark, and whether or not we enjoyed constitutional guarantees, now it's a question of something exceptional and unbelievable now that the *Beast* has shown his hand for the first time in ten years of rule with a recourse that only weak governments use! Why? . . . Because he feels that he's weak! . . ."

"Comrade San," Key said at the same time as he embraced the leader, shaking him with enthusiasm, "I may not be any good

when it comes to faith, but I am for action, and all the more now when there's nothing to grab onto!"

"That's it . . . that's it . . . that's everybody's reaction right now: there's nothing to grab onto, everything has to be wagered!"

"And we're going to take the gamble!" Florindo held his hand out in front of him as if taking an oath, clenching it then and bringing it down with a crushing blow. "Hard, and at the head!"

"It's going to be easy and it's not going to be easy," Andrés Medina put in. He had gone to wash a cup and served himself some coffee from the pot that was boiling on the edge of the fire. "But what I can tell you is that not only the *Beast* but all the little beasts in uniform don't know what to grab onto, between the fear of disobeying the orders they receive and the fear of obeying them: in a word, between fear of their leader and fear of the people."

"The hope," Key added, addressing Andrés Medina, "is that you've spoken to Cárcamo, your boyhood friend, and that the Samuels have spoken to that other captain they give guitar lessons to, about everything they have to do if they want to save their skins . . ."

"Well, I think that if they come over to our side it won't be for that reason," Medina answered, "but because they think the same way we do. We've won them over to our cause."

"Medinita, you'll be deceived till the day of your death!" Florindo answered him, starting to laugh, intent on what Sansur was going to say:

"Never did the *Beast* imagine, ready to repress popular uprisings in his Napoleonic way, that his Waterloo would come . . ."

"Don't get ahead of things, it'll be Water, but no loo!" Florindo's voice burst forth followed by his Carthaginian laugh, as San had called his guffaws.

"Yes, because it's easy to saddle up," Medina put in. "The hard thing is to stay on top of the bronco, and it's time for the question as to whether those boys and teachers, who aren't boys anymore,

will go ahead with the strike in the hospitals, courts, and schools now that there aren't any guarantees."

"I think so . . ."

"I don't . . ."

The voices of San and Florindo could be heard at the same time, but each one held back his arguments, silent out of courtesy.

"The only thing certain," Medina went on, "is what we've seen. Those boys have spread contradiction everywhere. When they don't argue, they fight, and at the command post, without going any further, the Commandant, a peaceful and cowardly man, chewed out Captain Salomé, kicked a soldier, rode hard on a corporal, and almost threw Cárcamo out, and he let it all out by leaning on his aide. It's hard to bear up the way tempers are . . ."

"And what Medina says about the command post," the leader added, pacing restlessly, "has to be repeated in all high circles. They're upset by an enemy they can't see, one they can only hear through rumor, rumor, rumor, that despairing language of emptiness that you hear on the telephone when lines are crossed, and an enemy they no longer dare attack because it's the abstract mass of millions of feet on the pavements. They're ready, they're organized, with their troops, their police, their newspapers, with force, repression, and propaganda to put down those who want to change the order of things in the familiar way, coups, uprisings, assassinations, but not in the way in which it's put up to them now: not doing anything! . . . heh . . . heh . . . which is very important. The machine was oiled down to the last wheel to stop a person who might do something, people who might do something, but not people who don't do anything. Have you asked yourselves yet," addressing Medina and Key after a brief pause, "what the government is going to do, because here's a government that has to do something, with the state of siege and all, if hospitals, schools, and courts break down for a lack of practitioners, teachers, and law clerks, and if, as is hoped, doctors in charge of wards and lawyers who are judges and magistrates back the strike? . . . My friends, it's our mentality that has to

change during these few hours we have left before going into action if we don't want to lose the chance to sow, not to harvest. What we have to know is how things are with the Company people . . ."

"Waiting for the army to turn their machine-guns on the strikers," Florindo explained, clearing with those point-blank words the silence in which he had elegantly wrapped himself in order to separate his calm, cold personality from San's hot humanity, and he did not add: "Which is what is really going to happen in the end. A sowing of dead people is what we're going to have," because Medina cut him off with a kind of incredulous punch, already saying:

"The Company people are going to be left with nothing but hope if they hope the army turns its machine-guns on the strikers. Times have changed and the boys won't fire even if they're given the order . . ."

"But Andrés," Florindo took his arm and held it while he spoke to him, "what you're saying is very serious, and we have to know whether or not they're things that just occur to you or whether you've spoken to someone you can trust . . ."

"Both, comrade. They occurred to me and I've spoken about them to people. Why should they just occur to me? Comrade San gave the reasons. Everything's different. In just a few hours we've entered a different reality. Lots of things we thought were dreams have been materializing in our hands. And also, also because I've talked about it with Cárcamo. He talked to me in great confidence, and it even seems that in the matter of not turning on the strikers he's in agreement with Captain Salomé . . ."

"Is Salomé the one the Samuels are giving guitar lessons to?" Sansur asked, visibly intrigued.

"That's the one," Key answered.

"And as for the Company, there are those who say that without rushing too much," Medina went on, "it will give in to the demands of the workers and you know why . . ." San and Florindo thought about the report they had seen about President Roose-

velt's opinion. "Simply because the President of all the fruit companies is dying in Chicago, old George Maker Thompson, who advised them to follow a policy of general wage increases at the threat of a strike, all the more if those increases didn't mean a decrease or a loss for the stockholders, because we'll pay for them ourselves in the end . . . ha, ha, ha, ha . . ." He laughed, moving his head from side to side like a sprinkler of laughter. "Don't put on those faces. It's obvious that you don't know that the Fruit Company, if it can gobble up one trust, can gobble up another, and it has the Coca-Cola market in this country in its pocket," and, still laughing, "Not just bananas but that American piss."

"Swine!" Sansur shouted, referring to Thompson. "Deathbed senile old man, trying to do us one last bit of damage by decapitating the peasant-worker movement with raises that have a lot of bribery about them."

"And they'll give them without limits," Medina observed. "On the union level they'll give and give until we're tired of asking for more, because they know that once we get the material improvements that we're demanding for the workers, when it's a question of something else, the people will leave us talking to ourselves. Most of the workers don't worry about the fact that the Company is the only one that wins in this business, that it's abandoning cultivation, planting less and less, and nobody knows why, that it pays the workers in scrip, and that it occupies land it doesn't cultivate, in addition to the number of crimes its commits, starting with keeping false books."

"That's why I told you what they planned to do, give in to what we're demanding and claiming in our pile of petitions without a fight so they can chop the head off the peasant-worker movement, take away its reason for existence, which is an all-out fight against the banana trust," the leader said to summarize it all.

"It's all over!" Florindo was emphatic.

"That's chicken-hearted . . ."

"Medinita!"

"Floripondio!"

And while they became entangled in a most intricate verbal duel, an imitation of the improvised "bombs" that couples throw at each other at dances, alternating between compliment and sizzling defamation, Octavio Sansur went to the door of the shack where the sunlight was coming in like blinding smoke.

A suspension of guarantees . . . A state of siege . . . Martial law . . .

Would the boys retreat? . . . Would the teachers retreat? . . . Would the strike come off in the university, high schools, and grammar schools? . . . Would they close the private schools? . . . Would the strike come off against the hospitals, courts, and tribunals? . . . Would the Army fire on the strikers? . . . Would the Company give in? . . . Would the government fall? . . .

The last two questions trembled on his pale lips:

What about Malena? . . . What about the *Beast*? . . .

Then, blinded by the sun, he closed his eyelids over the small luminous worlds that spun around before his eyes while he said:

"Arms, propaganda, police, that's what power is . . ."

35

"The breakdown's already started . . ." Samuelón let out, but what else he said couldn't be heard because of the strum he gave his guitar, drawing out of it a mountain song about a person who was searching and searching, while Captain Salomé picked up with:

"That's what it seems like. All we know officially is that the government is on top of the situation. Those chords are the ones I can't get," the Captain went on to say, his eyes on the guitarist's fingers, which were crawling down the frets of the guitar with spider steps while he made the strings weep with his other hand, and then he added distractedly: "Although there's other news. The students and the doctors have left their posts in the hospitals. In the courts only the judges are left, and they can't go out on strike. Classes have been suspended because there aren't any teachers or students. There's less and less transport. Businesses are shutting down . . ."

Samuelón, all ears for the news, seemed to be answering him with the guitar: martial airs, flourishes. The strings were speak-

ing, shouting, tempestuous, echoing, turbulent, while Captain Salomé, sweating to the limit of his ability, his eyes red, his mustache a little tight, went on aloud, not holding himself back now, as if he had forgotten that he was at the command post:

"And the latest thing, the latest piece of news is that they've asked for his resignation . . ."

"Whose? . . ." Samuelón's voice hovered over a great sneeze on the guitar. He understood whose resignation had been asked for, but he needed more precise information, he wanted to hear it as something possible and believe it. "Whose?" he repeated, "Whose resignation have they asked for? . . ."

The officer searched for his tongue in the tightness of his mouth.

"Who else's? . . ." he finally said.

Without realizing it, Samuelón began to pluck the chords of the national anthem, but the officer grabbed the guitar.

"That's not allowed!" he shouted at him.

And they remained in silence, anxious, very close to each other, like two guilty people, guilty of knowing that news about the resignation of the *Beast*, just knowing it was a crime.

"Play something to cover up . . ." Salomé opened his lips.

Samuelón didn't know whether to weep, play, or jump for joy, and he was plucking the guitar as if tuning it. Would he have the strength to take that piece of news to the place where they were gathered together discussing whether or not to declare a strike on the Fruit Company plantations? The leader, Tabío San, his second in command, Florindo Key, his brothers Samuel and Samuelito, and the rest of the Prospectors.

"And you military men, what are you going to do?" Samuelón ventured. "Confirm the news of the *Beast's* resignation?"

"We . . . ," Captain Salomé hesitated, "will obey orders, my friend, and keep on studying the guitar."

"In that case I have to tell you that you've got a good ear, but you have to exercise your fingers, like a person picking off lice, because this lady," and he hugged the guitar to his chest, "is

nothing but a great big louse-ridden woman, who, if she could talk, would ask you to practice your lessons more, because that's what she has a mouth for."

"We're not up to lessons . . ." The Captain rejected the instrument, stood up as if to go to the door of the tent, but he sat down again. "You people are nothing but mouth, mouth and a lot of wind. For all the talk about going on strike, they keep your beaks quiet by filling your gullets."

"That's about the way it is," Samuelón answered. The other's words had fallen on him like a shower of ice and he had to move.

He got up to put the guitar on the Captain's bed.

"Everybody was all a-tremble over the arrival of your leader and nothing happened. They don't even know if he came or not."

"Just now . . ." Samuelón said, but then he repented for what he was going to reveal . . . a secret to a military man? . . . not even in a storm! . . . and all the less when it concerned the whereabouts of Tabío San! . . .

"The Company people are very sharp!" the Captain exclaimed, his laughing eyes challenging Samuelón's motionless face. "They gave in to everything the workers asked for and nothing happened to them in Bananera or here in Tiquisate."

"We still don't know, boss, nothing's clear right now because there's a lot of talk. There are a lot of other demands and the Company hasn't answered . . ."

"What do you mean, they haven't answered? What more of an answer do you need than their making the strike useless?"

"As long as there's no break-up," Samuelón was on his way out, his feet itching to run, his lips itching to speak, all of his body wanting to fly off with the great piece of news, "as long as there's no break-up among us, the way there's going to be among you people if the resignation of you-know-who is confirmed, then the Company will be caught short . . ."

"That's got nothing to do with it!"

"Nothing to do with it, you say? Oh, if you only knew how bad governments and the Company go hand in hand! There won't

be another chance like this one! Knock them down together! It's more like a dream! Repay evil with evil! . . . Get rid of them both at the same time!"

When Samuelón had left, not even knowing what his name was —to sing . . . to shout . . . to laugh . . . to cry . . . to leap . . . to embrace the sunset air . . . to embrace the soldiers of the guard clustered together like hens . . . or whether they had asked the President for his resignation (impossible! . . . the resignation of the President? . . .), or whether he was going to resign of his own ugly free will or that he already *had* resigned and had no power. The *Beast* without power. When Samuelón left, the Captain picked the guitar up from the bed again, having decided to put it away, but once it was in his hands, a certain little song on his fingers made him sit down and strum out the sounds that were more thoughts than sounds . . .

Would he resign . . . or wouldn't he? . . . Would it be announced in the order of the day?

Serving a government that really had the people on its side . . . During the years that he had worn that honorable uniform he had never known what it was like . . . not feeling himself hated . . . hated by the soldiers who had been forcibly drafted . . . hated by his hated and hateful superiors, and hated by the people.

Little by little, like the last trickle that comes from the udders of a cow that has been milked a great deal, his fingers drew discordant sounds from the strings of the instrument . . .

What could one do . . . what could one do someday against that wily, disfiguring, unconfessable hatred? . . . Not someday, no! Now that his resignation had been announced, if it was confirmed!

He hitched up his pants, put on his tunic, and went down to the guard to have a look around. All at their posts, tranquil, ignorant of what was going on in the capital, of that possible resignation of the President that was in the air . . .

The sentry, the officer of the guard, the soldiers, all at their posts. It had grown dark. Suddenly, the way night falls on the

coast. In the distance the silvery glow of the lights that came from the Company buildings, more visible on very dark nights. He looked in vain for a star. Everything was pitch-black. Thinking about the millions of stars that must have been shining in happier skies! There, not a single one. The milky glow of the Fruit Company. An alien light. A light brought there by other people. Foreigners' light. How much more painful was one's own blackness, the darkness of a blindman! Beyond the foreign light, everything else, shadows, shadows, shadows . . .

The Samuels were right when they said, half-singing, half-laughing, half-weeping:

Children born
of the great bitch,
(that's right, Chon . . .
that's right, Chon . . .)
that's what I say!
A citizen here
is born a serf!
The foreigner's
always the boss,
the one on top!
(that's right, Chon . . .
that's right, Chon . . .)

He went back to his quarters and lay down on his bed beside the guitar, repeating mentally . . . born a serf . . . born a serf . . . born a serf . . .

The Commandant's steps coming up the stairs meshed with his thoughts . . . Would he know? . . . Wouldn't he know about the resignation? . . .

Judging from the heaviness with which he let his body at each step, he was worn out . . .

He must have known that the matter of the resignation was not just a rumor and that the country was going to change directions because of it . . .

And happier now, he repeated:

"A citizen here is *not* born a serf . . . Is not born a serf . . ."

The yawns of the Great Yawn, his hawking, spitting, and the thump of his boots on the wood . . .

He had spent his life in military service, and what was he . . .

A serf? No! A boss? No! On top? No!

And yet, he went up the steps as if he were the master of the universe in a colonel's uniform, and he was nothing . . . neither master, nor serf, nor on top . . . a strawboss! . . .

The officer's strides were lost as he went off in the direction of his office. The sound of the light switch was heard as he turned it on in the great silence that became filled with coughing, snorts, and barracks boredom.

The chief didn't stay in his office very long. In a short while the light was heard to go out and he went off to his quarters. Step by step, as he disappeared, Captain Salomé thought about the comments of this old nightowl, who ran the barracks like an iron ramrod:

"I've already paid," he would always repeat when he was in a good mood, "and you young fellows are going to have to pay! The species demands that it be paid in children as long as there's someone to do the pleasant duty with. I paid my debt and got my satisfaction, pleasure, delightful things. Society demands that it be paid with a conduct that's adjusted to certain norms, which for us are obedience to one's superior and the fulfillment of the duties of a soldier. I did that and I've had my name mentioned in the Order of the Day, got my promotions, and all the rest . . ."

Without being present, he was almost speaking what the captain was thinking on his bed.

Naked, just as he was, it was as hot as a nighttime furnace, children, honors, pleasures, citations, medals, promotions were not enough to fill the emptiness that is enclosed within a uniform without the people, yes, because a soldier must have the people inside of his uniform so as not to feel the unfillable hollowness that he felt. And the end of each escapade was just that, weeping, drunk with rage, when he felt authentically himself, although those contacts with his real person, even if it was made of

paste, would leave him that way, and he would lose his breath from having to cover the mouth of an insubordinate subaltern who was trying to get out of his uniform at any price and by any means, even though the only exit was the door of freedom, and among military men only one had found that door: Bolívar! . . .

The Great Captain's name, a captain with the people inside of him, a captain, just like him, brought back other memories. All of those who during his studies at military school had been moved by the figure of Bolívar had not made a career of the Army, with the passage of time and seeing their classmates who swore by Genghis Khan, Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon being promoted, it was a nullifying black mark for them.

"And is there some formula," General X had asked him during an examination, "for getting to be a Bolívar?"

"Yes," he answered, "just one . . ." he had read it somewhere, "by drinking a stiff dose of that maddening poison called 'the people! . . .' "

And no one knew whether it was because of his youthful, romantic, and measureless enthusiasm for Bolívar that he had not been named standardbearer of the corps of cadets when it was his turn. What was certain was that after having been graduated with the highest marks, he never went beyond captain, and there was no more promotion for him except that invisible musty braid of seniority, which condemned him to serve in infernal climates where the land was a prison, an embrace, and a tomb.

He slept right through until dawn. The sheet with which he had covered his body stuck to him like a wet sail. His head lay on the rabbit-hair pillow, but even with that it was not cool, next to the guitar that made him open his eyes. If it had not been for a strum with his elbow that he made in a half-turn, with all the strings sounding in alarm, he would have broken it. Half-asleep, by feel, he put it under the bed as if at the bottom of a river where he couldn't keep his head above water, thinking that if the resignation was confirmed, the dawn of men would break, not that stupid dawn that shed light over the fields for animals and slaves.

Soon drums and bugles would raise their echoes (would they be echoes of glory?) and then reveille, with the cleaning routine (for a celebration?) and the coming and going of breakfast carried by women with uncombed hair, milk stains from their breasts showing on their blouses, their offspring on their backs, and later on, with the sun already coming up, the Commandant's shooting, as he did his morning target practice.

A leap and out of bed. The urgency to find out whether the resignation had been confirmed. On other days he would meet Cárcamo and other officers in the showers. Today no one. They probably hadn't got up. He was probably the first one. It was all right. Perhaps there would be an official confirmation that morning. And . . . by magic, it was his day off and he could celebrate it with a great time with his woman and a good drunk. But not too much hope. If the news was confirmed the troops would be confined to quarters and the ones who had the day off wouldn't be able to leave. Well, just as long as it was confirmed, even if he didn't see his woman. He shaved with the hot water from his thermos. Rapidly, before his beard hardened just from the thought of being scraped off. His orderly brought him his gleaming shoes.

"Anything new?" he asked him.

"No, sir, Captain!"

And there was no more news about any resignation, but all of them at the command post looked at each other, spied on one another, feeling uncomfortable in their uniforms, their stations, their movements. They were waiting for something, but they didn't dare say what . . . the same as people passing by the post, cowering, looking at their faces.

The news wasn't confirmed, which was also a reason for raising glass after glass at the old Luceros' and then going off to fulfil his duties of love, half-tipsy already.

"Happy Memory, or . . . was it Unhappy Memory?" he entered asking, looking for the woman with the shining eyes, and when she came out to meet him, he added as he hugged her, trying to nuzzle her, "We got messed up, eh? We got messed up

by meeting in a place with a name like that! Why didn't that old-timer call her bar 'Happyfornow'? I never got beyond captain and you, losing everything you had where you came from and losing yourself to me! Captain . . . it hurts me, love, it hurts me! Captain, when I should be a brevet colonel at least, or a brigadier general! But you can't say, you can't say that I didn't smell it ahead of time! There's Don Lino Lucero, who's alive and well, and I told him in those days when I met you that I thought of putting in for my discharge and buying some land here on the coast to plant bananas on. I stopped complaining and did some drinking with him. I finished off a bottle of whiskey all by myself. Now he doesn't even say 'Come in!' "

"You haven't let me get a word in . . ."

"That's why I say a person always has to follow what his heart tells him. Captain . . . well, besides Don Lino, who discouraged me about farming, I thought I was destined for a great military career. The owner of that Happytime had me all fired up by telling me that all of us Salomés were brave men and that she'd been more than a friend of an uncle of mine that they shot! It all worked out together to keep me a captain, even you!"

"That's right . . . blame me now!"

"Yes, because if I hadn't had you I would have been promoted at any time!"

"Are you sorry? Are you throwing it up to my face? They would have shot you like your uncle!" She threw her arms around his neck, strong, caressing, almost licking his ear as she whispered in it, "The Salomés will end up being changed into shadows in love with their own dreams, do you remember that the woman said that too? . . ."

He didn't answer. He felt the force of her hard breasts, pushing out under the vaporous blouse and the jiggling of her legs below as she shifted balance, first on one foot, then the other.

Someone shouted at the door:

"Can I come in? . . ." But he was already inside and he caught them in their embrace. "A telegram for the Captain . . ."

And while Salomé was giving him a tip, the boy repeated several times:

"A telly for the Cap'n . . ."

He ran off at full speed, a lightning bolt in bare feet, with the receipt for the message signed by the addressee, while the latter quickly opened it, read it, put it in his pants pocket beside his wallet, and came back after locking and barring the door, to sit down on the edge of the bed beside Clara María, who was waiting for him, anxious, with no more clothing than a light blue piece of gauze made into panties, through which the shadow of her pubis could be seen.

"My cushion!" the Captain sighed, touching the fuzz.

"What did the telegram say?" Clara María asked.

"Military business . . ."

"Military business? . . . Business with the other one!"

"What other one?"

"The other one! Why did you put it away? Why didn't you show it to me, you bandit?"

"It's military business, I tell you . . ."

"Show it to me! If it's military business, what difference does it make if I read it? Oh, but since it's from *your* love! . . . You stinker! . . . With all of your coming here and telling me how much you love me and you're mine, that I'm your girl, that you couldn't live without me! . . . Get away . . . let me get dressed . . . but it's good I let you think I believed it . . . that I was a fool . . . so beat it . . . go on . . . beat it . . . I don't want to look at you and I don't ever want to see you again . . . 'Why didn't I know you before,' is that what I said? . . . Show it to me . . . show me the telegram! . . ."

Salomé took it out, but instead of giving it to her to read, he tore it into two, four, eight pieces until it was nothing but scraps of paper.

She didn't try anything. Paralyzed between the bed and the adobe wall, she looked more like part of that unpainted surface.

She took a yellow dress out of the closet, put it on, and tied an orange band around her head.

She was already at the street door with her back to the inside where Salomé was buttoning his shirt, button by button, waiting for a change in her attitude. Nothing. When he finished he picked up his hat. He was so used to his military cap that he doubted it was his, and his revolver, a forty-five with a long barrel which he had put on the table. He took out a cigarette and lit it.

"Give me a cigarette," she said without turning around.

"With pleasure . . ." He went over, happy to hear her say something.

"The cigarette they give condemned men before . . ." she already had it in her mouth when she said that, and she let the Captain light it for her, but he was fooling around, bringing the match up to her eyes.

"Don't be foolish, you'll singe my lashes!"

"Just a singe . . ."

"Singe the hair on the other one . . . and that's not poetry, because the devil must have her house set up on the street where you were born! . . ."

"I'm leaving, Clara María . . ."

"Good-by, Pedro Domingo . . ."

"Are we still friends?"

"Friends . . ."

And as they shook hands she told him:

"I don't have to get telegrams because my lover's close by."

"The Manager's assistant?"

"I said my lover, not that red-skinned gringo, who when he passes by here knocks at the door and shouts at me: 'Give yourself to me, love me, I'll give you an automobile and then go away!' My real lover, a young blond fellow . . ."

Salomé took her by the wrists.

"Who is he?"

"What do you care since you don't love me? Take care of your

other one, the one you really love! Cheater! Play actor! Tricker! And leave me alone with my toddler!"

She tried to get out of the Captain's grip, but she couldn't. He was holding her more and more angrily.

"It's not true . . . confess that it's not so!"

"That it's not true, that it's not so? . . . Ha, ha . . . , just the way you get telegrams I get visits. That's what men want, to have more than enough themselves, and for women to stay home weaving like a Chinaman! That's what they like, and if they're able to do it, with property and everything, with telegrams and everything! Why did you tear it up? . . . Why couldn't I read it? Because it had the name of that whore on it . . . I could sense it, because my heart told me, and that's why last night I took on my new love . . . a young blond fellow with gringo eyes, but he isn't a gringo!"

The Captain let her go with a look of disgust, spat out the butt of the cigarette that had gone out in his mouth, and turned his back on her.

"Good-by, Pedro Domingo! You can call yourself ugly . . . Pedro Domingo! My new lover's name is . . . !"

And she said a name, but it was too late for him to hear.

36

Bobby and Juambo were lost in the night. It grew deep as soon as they went into it. Where were they placing their feet? On the ground? On the ground or on the darkness? Little by little, as they took a step, they didn't touch the surface, but by feeling around more they found it there beneath their feet. Mud and darkness. Mud turned into atmosphere, breathable, enveloping, with the smell of a bog, rotten leaves, rain, animal hide. Bobby wasn't speaking. He was sweating. He was sweating and the sweat clung to his ecstatic body. A body from before. A body for now. A body for always. Confused, babbling. It pulled him off the street. Catlike. He would come back tomorrow. Love with the brains of perfume. Of night-smell perfume. Nuptial. Mounting amidst the strands of hair of a decapitated angel. The weaving vines. The hard breathing after the plain. Who was tightening the cinches? At last, at last, at last. Why more tightening? To hang himself, the tongue, the kicking feet, and the maddened blood that hasn't come from the cruet yet, still wine, which hasn't been changed into the carnal mystery. Again the sprinkle of the

catlike hand on his vertebrae, behind his ears, along his neck, there where the blood went to his head like a gush and returned like a dream; the brain is a lung where the realities that the blood draws along turn into dreams, nonexistence, pleasure, and a mad, violent, wordless flight . . . It was not a dream . . . That feeling of bursting pulses was real, a closed-up throat, unable to breathe or swallow saliva . . .

"Little master! . . . Little master! . . ." Juambo was calling him aloud from the door. "Why did you go in? . . . That one not good woman . . . better hurry! . . . It's late, little master, getting late!"

The mulatto went on his hands over to Clara María.

"Your mother's the no-good woman, you bastard!"

They were only shadows, shadows in clothing, and underneath the clothing skin, sweat.

Juambo ran away frightened, maddened, until he reached his hut.

"Mother, you no sleep?"

"No . . ."

"Mother awake?"

"Yes . . ."

"Mother hear rotten woman steal boy?"

"Why did you bring the boy to that street?"

"Not street, house!"

"Did you bring him?"

"I brought him . . ."

"Sambito!"

"No cry, mother! Tears turn to wasps and sting Sambito. Sambito no take boy, woman take! Took boy to hide. No want be chief anymore. Gang run away, gang desert him among dead people . . ."

The mulatto's mother rose up, propelled as if by a spring, by the trembling of her wrinkles, and feeling, feeling with the long blind fingers of a woman who cannot see, she went to the door of the hut.

"Come, Sambito, boy among dead!"

"No, mother, boy came out with me. Gang abandon him but he come out with me . . ."

"No, Juambo, boy be with dead!"

"Boy be in Semírames, Lucero house!"

"Among dead, Juambo, among dead! Come! He stay, stay among dead if they leave him here!"

"No, mother, they sent him here to save him from rain of fire!"

"They should take him away! They should take him away! . . ."

Nausea. She was nauseous from the breath of heat as she went out of the hut and she didn't go far. She stopped near a prickly-pear cactus. All the spines on the tabs and on the fuzzy, woolly prickly pears pointing at her hands as they navigated in the hot air. She was a clump of bones, silence, and the geometry of starched cloth.

Juambo brought her back. But the old woman would not think of it. Save Bobby, get him out from among the dead. The mulatto should go to Semírames to convince the millionaire Luceros about the threat that was drawing about the boy. If all the big shots around there had left because of the danger of the strike, what were they waiting for to pack their bags and save their skins. The strikers might kill Bobby to wipe out the Thompson line, there were no other male heirs, or to get revenge on the grandson for what the grandfather was doing to them.

And Juambo didn't know with which of the brothers he spoke. They were all old, big-bellied, with glasses, white-haired and mistrustful. There wouldn't be any such strike. The Green Pope, on his deathbed, had ordered that the workers be given everything they were demanding or might demand. That spattered against his nose with the force of a bellows from the big-bellied, white-haired, bespectacled, and mistrustful Lucero who spoke to him. Therefore there was no danger for Bobby at all. He gave him a cigar and he considered the visit at an end.

Drunk with smoke, Juambo had the feeling of not having smoked a cigar but a burning house.

He walked a trail of smoke with the lighted cigar in search of Bobby. He was not at Semírames. He had slipped away without his gang and without saying where he was going. The mulatto knew, but he wouldn't have liked to have found him there, clinging to a hedge of hot leaves on a path of earth turned up by the back-and-forth of his steps. How far he had walked, not drunk on smoke, in the same spot, the same space, imprisoned in the open air, under the sky, like all lovers, opposite a white house that rose up at the end of a flat. The surprised boy's teeth were chattering in the grating drowsiness of dusk, as if in coldness he desired the one who was waiting for him to say good-by that second night. He clenched his hands, hidden in his pants pockets as the biscuitlike face appeared, hairless, sparse eyebrows and lashes: the mulatto, who was dragging his feet, leaning backward as if telling him to be thankful that he wasn't left alone. He wanted to make him disappear. Blow and erase his presence. But then he smiled at him, happy to have someone with him, not because he was afraid, afraid of something concrete, real, afraid of the things that faded away around him, because even though he was bothered by the emptiness of the evening and the absent presence of the strangers who were passing, what frightened him was the idea of going mad in that vague urge, sniffing about and anguished as he waited, not knowing to what point his chest would expand as it was pounded by his heart, which had no way out, every time desire spread through his blood, the driving physical necessity of seeing her, of being with her.

A rapid change of thought. Juambo could stay—deep down he thanked him for his concern—on the condition that he hide, that he not appear, because she had made him swear to come alone. After that warning Bobby made him be silent with his finger on his lips, not once but every time the mulatto tried to speak, to tell him something, and he scolded him at the slightest movement, making him be still among the leaves of the hedge behind which there was a cornfield and in front the house on the

flat. The sound of quick animals among the branches, the scraping of claws on trunks, the slipping of silence as the birds returned to their nests, and here and there a first star in the unreachable sky.

The land grew rapidly blind. The dampness of wet water. Someone appeared at the door. No one. Now there was. Not that time either. It was necessary to wait. The mulatto urged him to leave. "She made a date to tease you." Bobby opened and closed his eyes. "When I open them she'll come out," he said to himself. He opened them and there was nothing. Everything in its place. The last steps of people who seemed to be returning to life, coming back from work or going away forever in trucks and cars that stopped. But nothing existed for Bobby as long as the door of that white house didn't open, the last house on the flat, with its zinc roof giving off a bluish glow. It couldn't be, he thought, and he had the urge to approach with a few leaps, go over there, knock, and ask for her. What if he sent the mulatto? No, he'd sworn to her that he would come alone. What if he threw a stone onto the roof of the house? That was what he had a good arm for. All he had to do was find one. He could barely see in the darkness, but searching with his foot he'd find one. And why on the roof and not at the door? A stone thrown at the door. Just a signal that he was waiting for her.

"Bad woman! . . . Bad woman! . . ." the mulatto muttered, sweaty, happy to be going back with the disillusioned boy, and he even touched him on the shoulder to keep him going along.

And as they were already going away, Bobby in front with his head down, in a bad mood, and Juambo unable to hide his happiness of a two-tailed dog, which was what he looked like as he waved his arms in celebration, a sound changed everything. The door opened, and she, dressed in yellow, swaggering in a soap bubble of light.

"The wild woman!" the mulatto grunted, and he would have liked to have held Bobby back, stepping in front of him, even if he were knocked down, kneeling, shouting, opening his arms so

that he could not pass; but he hesitated, such a bath of happiness lighted up the little master's face, and by the time he realized it, the boy was already going off faster than a whirlwind on legs.

Candle . . . lamp . . . firefly . . . star . . . what did that vision of a sweet soul have in her hand? Bobby wondered as he got closer, while Juambo, clinging to the hedge, his eyes hard-shelled with anger, asked himself why the wild woman didn't take the darkness out of the house with an electric light, what sort of thing was that, receiving Bobby in the dark, half-dressed, lighting up his hair of golden silk, not from a silkworm but from a goldworm, as she raised the lamp to light his last steps.

He looks at her, looks, looks . . . He holds her tight and keeps looking at her. She also looks at him, looks, looks, without saying anything, somewhere between curious and content as she feels Bobby's convulsive hand on her front, between her damp, sweaty, consenting breasts, nipples like the stumps of a begonia plant that had been cut as it was about to flower.

They closed the door. Cow manure burning in a brazier to drive away the mosquitoes and storax to counteract the stench of the smoke with the perfume of liquid amber.

They went into the house. No one. They and the radio.

Juambo took his shoes off and, holding them in his hand, went from the hedge to the rear of the house to place his eye at the first crack, spying on them. She was naked, the color of golden coffee, lying under Bobby's milk-white body, illuminated by the light of the music, by the radio that was next to the bed, that limped as if it were walking, dancing, jumping to the rhythm of the movements with which they seemed to be following the hot, unstable melody that came to their ears with a sporadic volume to contaminate them with its happy epilepsy.

"Little master tame hummingbird!" Juambo put one foot on top of the other, spying on them. "Little master white and hummingbird not! And what's that? Where's anyone ever seen anything like it? With music like that! Even if it was sweet music! Hoo, hoo, hoo . . . it's a duet . . . zoom . . . zoom . . . zoom . . .

kiss her, little master . . . kisszoom her . . . catkisszoom her . . ." and the buzzing put the whistle in the mulatto's nose to sleep, between his teeth with the itching of a sneeze that didn't explode, that scattered in an effervescent spray of soda water. But the little master was going faster and faster, and the mulatto didn't know whether to spit or swallow his saliva, his tongue all frothy, snorting like a train, pressed against the crack under a rain of sweat that fell from his sparse, twisted-soot hair, as if the vapor of his breath were turning liquid on his beardless face.

"Crazy! . . ." Bobby shouted in English, frenetic, demonic, possessed, to the rhythm of the jazz played on the radio, mad as a madman, dancing on his knees, elbows, mouth clinging to mouth, stomach to stomach, open legs, closed legs in the frenzy of the swing music, feeling and transmitting, feeling and transmitting, getting there, getting there, closer and closer, getting there, closer and closer, closer and closer, stronger and stronger, getting there, getting there, closer and closer, while there was less and less of them left . . . lesssss and lesssss, *wa wa*! . . . *wa wa*! . . . disappearing, *wa*!, no resistance . . . *wa*! . . . not getting there . . . *wa*! . . . not finding each other, *waaaaaaAAAA*! . . . A GRUNT from the same trumpet, vigorous, brutal, a jungle grunt, reactivated their trembling bodies after a brief moment of not being music made of flesh, plunging them into an electric unhinging, arms and legs floating far away from them, divided and subdivided into pieces of sound until they blended into the temperature of metals and slipped away from there, lashing kisses, loose bites, clutching, panting, while the clarinet played, knotted into one single tear before falling with the velvet folds of the saxophones that suddenly began to cut the burning, stinging silences between the spurs of the cymbals, the *paah-chink-ah-paah* . . . of the drums, the walking grief of the bass, everything faster now, in an elastic tempo, in waiting tempo, the piano entering and leaving by surprise, and they between spasm and ecstasy, without reaching the jazz, percussing as if all that remained of their bodies was beat cut off by a rhythm of emptiness, the synco-

pation of a syncope, sexes-saxes, saxes-sexes, syncopation of a syncope, clashing, improvising caresses, clashing, creating new forms of kisses, word-kisses, word-bite-kisses, clashing, clashing like blind, inert masses, teary with sweat . . .

. . . she let herself go with the weight of a dead snake, and Bobby lay on his overturned shoulder, his eyes under his lids, his fingers in space, and his ears near and far away from the song that was bubbling out of the radio . . .

Play that swing,
Jazz band!
Play it for the lords and ladies,
For the dukes and counts,
For the whores and gigollll . . .

The broadcast was suddenly cut off sharply, but the interruption hadn't been at their end. Bobby raised his eyes and saw that the radio was still on, full of those little noisy worms that seem to devour the corpse of sound, and instead of the song, a voice was heard that announced in a dramatic tone:

"Attention! Attention! In a few moments the country will hear a message from the presidency of the Republic!"

The wild woman put her arm out to the radio, turned it off, and clung tightly to Bobby's body in the darkness.

The mulatto uselessly pushed his face against the crack, since he couldn't take out his eye and roll it along like a glass ball through the shadows where they had remained speaking like people asleep. He put his ear up. What would the message say? . . . Nothing could be heard . . . They were not sleeping, they were kisssing . . . What would the message from the presidency say? . . . It was probably something important . . . Interrupting a broadcast and so late at night . . . He put his ear closer . . . Nothing could be heard, only the untranslatable language of the bed, which, no longer to music, was repeating the rhythm of the bodies lost in the shadows: *keehee-din-gwin-deehee . . . keehee-din-gwin-deehee . . .*

"What was the message going to say?" Juambo scratched his

head, his hidden pupils, as if looking for the answer, but it was only guesswork in the upper part of his eyes, the naked eggshells of the corneas that stood out above his cheekbones, giving him the look of a skull.

That was how the wild woman saw him, and she almost crossed herself, through the cracks in the night light, exasperated by the heat, depressed at having been unfaithful to her man with that blond boy who was now sleeping like an angel. She had got up slowly to wash herself, without turning on the light, without making any noise, and while she was over the wash basin, washing and refreshing herself, she thought of opening the window and bathing the mulatto with that water; but as she splashed in the water she thought of the scandal. There would be an uproar and the blond boy would wake up. Better outside. Go outside and give him a few whacks with the broom. She put on a dress, slipped toward the door, and Juambo offered little resistance as he received a slap, unable to defend himself against the blows of the broom and the woman's scratching as at the same time, in order to keep in practice, that she beat him and sank in her nails she went through his pockets, not finding anything in the poor hollows of stinking rag except some remains of a dead man's bones.

Her body grew cold, as if she had been submerged in an icy bath in the midst of that fiery temperature, not knowing where to throw them, not near her house, never by her door. Those small bones were still sticky with human grease, and she ran after the mulatto, who jumped over the hedge and lost himself in the corn patch, and she shouted at him like a woman possessed:

"Evil! Evil! Tell the woman who sent you to lay the bones of the dead by my house not to send him any telegrams! Not to waste her money sending him any telegrams! That she can't do anything with a telegram! Tell her to bring her ass down here to the coast! And if you ever come back and throw dead men's bones by my door you won't get out of here alive! Listen to me, you devil, listen well, you won't get out of here alive!"

She threw the bones far off, as far as she could, and she wiped

her hands on the damp leaves, but she felt that her fingers were asleep and on her body she felt doubts about her strength against the dead man's dust that the bitch with the telegram was having thrown by her door. She was going to lose the father of her . . . tricks, her trickery, because she didn't have any children, her Pedro Domingo, who, even if he was thought of as ugly, was the oldest of her lovers, the only one she had really been right with, and the oldest, the real one, since the days at the Happytime bar, because all the others, like that towhead she had in her bed, were nothing but top-gaps, top-gaps because they got on top of a person for a while and that was all there was to it.

Juambo went through the town in darkness, unable to blow his nose with his clenched fist, contenting himself with wiping his snotty nostrils upward, because between his fingers, stiff as roots, he was carrying a strand of straight and greasy hair that he had managed to pull out of the woman who had attacked him, who for him was not a soul of this world but a malignant spirit that had jumped out of the body of the wild woman, put on her dress, and gone out to whup him for spying. If, when he stopped farther on and opened his hand, instead of hairs he was carrying guitar strings, it would confirm the fact that he had been involved with the Siguamonta in person, the Green Siguamonta, who on some nights appears in the banana groves to steal strong men, the kind she likes.

He stopped, with no more light than that of the stars, so many in the sky that they bumped into each other, because that night, and who knows why, was not lighted by the spotlights, large bulbs, and rosaries of electric lights of the Company. But now he had no time to see if they were hairs or intestines from the ones that the Green Siguamonta carries on her head, a phantom hungry for men, as he clutched them in his sweaty hand, because his eyes were growing foggy, drunk with the blood that was beating in his brain when he realized that the wild woman had stolen some of the bones from the sacred hand of his dear father which he carried hidden in one of the pockets of his jacket.

It was hard for him to believe it, two, three times in a row, in a

first impulse, and several times after that, with successive movements he searched the pocket and all the other pockets with his trembling hands, turning them inside-out like abandoned nests, the scrota of dead animals, or empty pillows. And what if they had fallen out, what if he had lost them while she was beating him with the broom, or with the great waving of his arms as he tried to stop his face from being combed by her evil nails, the most angry thing there is, or in his mad dash, feet, do your duty, afraid that she would catch him. He tried to sit down, to find out how long he had been standing, crouching little by little, but he fell in a heap around his own feet like a pile of dirty clothes. And letting them stay lost, impossible, impossible. He wiped away the sweat that ran down his cheek, gluing his face to the crust of the wall. Impossible to lose the bones of the friendly hand of Agapito Luisa, his father, who with such pleasure had held out his right hand from where he was, with his eyes open, eternal now, how comfortable, eternal now. He would have to wait for dawn, as soon as the sun came out. He would go back there on hands and knees and if the wild woman had stolen them from him, he would see that she gave them back, but who knows how much she would want in return.

The village was awake in the darkness. Doors open. Windows open wide. The inhabitants walking back and forth like prisoners. The important inhabitants. And exhaling smoke, cigarette upon cigarette, their hands on their haunches, weaving and unweaving. The women not moving, chewing gum between their teeth. Talking is swallowing things outwardly, chewing gum is swallowing them inwardly. They were feeling about with their thoughts in search of wandering explanations for the unusual silence. By swallowing things outwardly, which they did when they spoke, they couldn't explain it. But that was how it was, as they said things they swallowed them. They couldn't explain it to themselves, but that was how it was; and that was what they thought about, dully rocking in their chairs or hammocks, smothered by the heat, while their men walked back and forth within the con-

fines of their houses. The news was not the kind one closed his eyes on. A laconic message from the presidency of the Republic announcing to the population that it would take drastic measures against groups who attempted to hold demonstrations and against all those who had left their services in hospitals, courts, tribunals; against merchants who kept their businesses closed and against teachers who did not hold class; the same as against parents who refused to send their children to school. They would punish with death acts of sabotage, the spreading of rumors, the abandonment of water services, electricity, rail transportation, the concealment of weapons, bombs, explosives, the printing and circulation of flyers inciting citizens to join the strike.

Other news was going about, but only among those in the know. Travelers who went from the capital to the South on the train that passed through Tiquisate said that thousands of peaceful demonstrators, with their hands behind their backs, after several skirmishes with the police, had paraded in front of the National Palace where the *Beast* was meeting with some of his ministers, secretaries, and aides. What should they do? Why hadn't they prevented that procession of silence, that demonstration by men who were not men but ghosts emerging from fourteen years of dictatorship, mute and with no other movement than that of their feet sounding on the pavement with footsteps of protests? Where, where was the chief of police? The *Beast* had to relieve himself on one of his people. He slapped him. Dismissed. A substitute. Orders. The cavalry. Animals. Hooves. Horseshoes. Wipe the square clean with the kicks of horses that gave off sparks, ridden by soldiers in flame uniforms that covered copper-colored skins, and officers with drawn sabers. Stop that passing, passing, passing of the ghostly column, which could be heard, which went on, which did not stop passing. Only by their being ghosts could the challenge to the *Beast* in his cage in the palace be explained . . . "Yes, Señor Presidente! . . ." "No, Señor Presidente! . . ." the aides contradicted each other. "But," the *Beast* roared, "are they ghosts or aren't they? . . ." "No, Señor Presidente! . . ." "Yes, Señor

Presidente! . . ." He retreats. He drags his leg a little, he retreats to the rear of his office, fragrant with the smell of mahogany, just opened, brand new. On a table beside his desk, also of reddish, fleshy carved mahogany, a forest of telephones lined up, each one so close to the next that the silver-plated receivers, double-pointed teeth, look like the wild laugh of some enormous metallic skull. One of those instruments is enough to start the killing. But he stops, he cannot decide, he hesitates by each telephone, and everybody runs about the palace to place himself at his command, surrounding him in the presidential office, relaxing when they sense that he is puzzled, doubting whether or not to give the order to use blood and fire to finish off the strikers and the bolsheviks, because only people with that doctrine could have conceived and executed those demonstrations, real suicide parties, as well as the techniques used, strictly bolshevik in their style, more or less the same ones used by Lenin in his famous coup d'état, according to what a small man with the voice of a locust was saying. He was the most feared of his secretaries. Simultaneous demonstrations on the streets that converged on the main square, popular in appearance, spontaneous in the eyes of foreigners because they were made up by men and women who were walking along the sidewalks, on a stroll or about their business, and when least expected they leaped into the middle of the street and organized as columns of demonstrators without giving the police time to hold them back, taken by surprise as they were, or the cavalry, who at that moment were struggling to halt the human avalanche that was advancing through the square toward the palace.

"Oh, so they're not ghosts!" The *Beast* turned, the slap could almost be felt in the air, and he remained as if thinking. "No, Señor Presidente, they're not ghosts, they're bolsheviks!" the seven-, six-, five-month old premature baby's voice of the secretary chirped in his ears. From farther off the Secretary of State in the Office of Foreign Relations hinted, with diplomatic nicety, that it was not proper to accuse them of being that because the

country was at war and was an ally of Russia, that it would be better to call them "Nazifascists," an opinion that made the *Beast* swallow his teeth with the grind that he gave them—he liked the Nazis better than the Bolshies, and the little secretary had better watch out—while aides ran about waving their hands to close the windows, fearful that the presidential ears would be assaulted by what was no longer a mute silence and the step of ghosts but the shouts of students who were demanding his resignation. "No, Señor Presidente!" "Yes, Señor Presidente!" mingled among the aides standing at attention, clicking their heels, clapping their hands against their holsters. "But what are they after, my resignation?" the *Beast* roared. "Yes, Señor Presidente!" "No, Señor Presidente!" "They need a heavy hand!" the Minister of Foreign Relations advised. "I know what I have to do, you son of a bitch!" the *Beast* roared, corned by the human sea that was spilling out, overflowing the square. He did not say what it was . . . ("Resign! . . . Resign! . . . Leave! . . . Leave! . . .") but at that moment he had made his mind up . . .

The travelers who spoke about it in Tiquisate did not know what it was. There was talk of a change in policy. There were no political prisoners to free. The President had availed himself of the privilege of putting them under the earth. The exiles did not want to return, even if the doors of their homeland were opened wide. There was talk of the resignation of ministers. Some departmental heads, with their own private cemeteries, would be removed. The crowd was not only asking for his resignation but they were insulting him as he fell into his own trap, which had the strength of the web that protected him against bullets and gave him the terrifying look of a puppet, dragging his leg as he went from one side to the other, his eyelids cowardly and neat, the infallibility of his revolver at his waist, his riding crop in his hand. "They weren't ghosts, they were bolsheviks . . . bolsheviks! . . ." He had to repeat it several times to believe and to strengthen the resolution he had already taken: leave the country in the hands of the bolshies, certain that the breakdown

would be such that they would call him back to govern again, and, therefore, he felt a kind of weakening of his first impulse, the orders for mass extermination that his followers were waiting for, he shrewdly avoided machine-gunning the people, decreed that the English debt should be cancelled, that the country owed nothing to anybody, that the German holdings would be nationalized in order to announce a one hundred percent enrichment of national wealth. He would leave so that they could call him back; but no one except him knew that, and they were all hanging on his expressions, amazed at his *sangfroid*, his serenity in the face of insults from the mob, terrified at finding themselves present at a moment in which people were calling for his head with shouts of "Death! Death! Death!" Air and light were paralyzed in an atmosphere of attack, lynching, execution wall, block, and bonfire.

But the passengers who brought that news from the capital on the night train that stopped at Tiquisate on its way south wanted to know what was happening on the banana plantations, why the strike hadn't been declared, what the peasants were waiting for, because they should have already been manning the trenches for the general strike.

It was not yet dawn. Puddles of rainwater, stars like a sprinkling of gold, cattle turned out on shadow-felt, motionless on the fields, moon scrapings, awakened roosters, and the painful return of Juambo, who had brought along an electric lantern to look about the wild woman's house, between the hedge and the flat, for the bones of his father's hand.

There they were. He found them and was weighing them in his hand, thankful, driveling, in order to see if they had lost their strength as a fetish and a lodestone, when a breath of wind in his hair made him feel the silhouette, of that woman, who, whip in hand, was coming to threaten him. He did not yield his body to her. He leapt into the cornfield like a wildcat. She stayed in the shadows, olive-colored now, unleashing her threats of death throughout the expanse of silence.

"If I ever see you again around here tossing the earth of dead men and their bones at my door, in front of my house, you won't have the time to tell about it! I swear you won't! I'll kill you, I swear! The one who paid you to put a spell on me, the woman with the telegram, she'll pay with your death! If I see you around here again you won't get away alive! . . ."

Juambo ran, sweaty and damp with dew, never happier, with the bones of his father's hand, and he went into the plantations, through the banana trees at that hour of dawn when silence has color.

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For moments it seemed that there was no sense to what was being said during those hot, grinding dawn hours, a pulpy mass of humanity and a sponge of morning stars and dew. All night long until dawn they discussed whether they would strike the banana plantations or not, one piled on top of another, with so many delegates from the farms and work camps and so little space in that poorly lighted hut, unable to see each other's faces as they disappeared beneath wide-brimmed hats, the torsos of those who had no shirts on glassy with sweat, and others with shiny leather or buckskin jackets, fringed on the sleeves for more decoration. A lamp with white light under a whitewashed shade lighted the head table, which was covered with papers, an inkwell, pens, pencils, glasses of water, burning cigarettes, and the hands of those presiding at the meeting, when, tired or nervous, they would lay them on top, a game in which Tabío San's were not taking part, placed on top of the table like those of a statue until the time came when he began to bend his little fingers, a sharp anguish that was communicated to his other fingers, al-

ready in retractile movement, as if he was instinctively removing them from that poisonous snake rattle that green, crackling banknotes make, items which were now doubtless circulating among the people who opposed the strike declaration, going on about the raises the Company agreed to in the wages they paid and their promise to keep paying more and improving working conditions.

"It seems to me . . ." a sharp-nosed man was arguing. He leaned too heavily against the cane wall of the hut behind him and he fell over backward. He would have landed on the floor if a companion nearby hadn't grabbed him in time.

"Don't be startled, comrade!" San took advantage of the incident. "What happened to you would happen to all of us if we followed your idea of trusting the Company raises with the way they were given, no union ties, set up like the sticks that make this hut, stuck up in the air, and the fall would tell us that our good days were over. That's why I insist that raises and improvements like that can't be accepted if, as we've been given to understand here, the Company puts up a condition that the workers won't organize right now, that they won't start a union, which means a collective contract, social welfare, paid vacations, salaries based on family size . . ."

"Even if it is like that," the sharp-nosed man insisted, "let's accept the favor of the raises"—the "favor" part was rejected with hoots of disapproval and angry protests—"well, all right, I withdraw the word 'favor.' Let's accept the increases and then after a while we'll organize a union."

"That means," San argued animatedly without letting go of his prey, "that we're building our house without a foundation, so that it will fall in on us . . ."

They all merrily repeated the leader's words, a laugh in which the teeth-grinding of the Prospectors slipped in. They were a group made up of the fruit haulers, the ones most decidedly in favor of the strike, and the most bellicose, because of the idea, as

they themselves said, that the lower a person is, the higher he can climb.

"No, comrade delegates," Sansur went on. "Accepting those raises before organizing the union would be bread today and hunger tomorrow. The Company has to bargain about the raises it's offering us with the legitimate representatives of the union we're going to set up. That's set from the start. At the beginning of this meeting I warned, and I repeat it now, that the strike isn't up for discussion, or whether or not we accept the Company offers, but the setting up of a union that will be our legal representative from now on. Once that's voted on, we can discuss and vote on the raises and whether or not we go on strike for the other demands on our list. I think that you all agree we should proceed in the order I suggest . . ."

There were murmurs of approval, but some stood up to say no, that what they were discussing was the strike and the raises. There were some who moved about as if they wanted to leave.

"Quiet! Quiet! Quiet! . . . men!" several put in.

"Let me speak . . . listen . . . listen to what I have to say!"

"Let it out! Turn it loose! When you start talking they'll be quiet!" The one who still had his hand up asking to speak was encouraged by a halfbreed peasant with a broad body, a small head, and a turtle mouth who stood up to shout . . . "Quiet! . . . Quiet, comrades, quiet . . ." And when things began to calm down he added, ". . . because we have a hot voice here, it's been held back in a young chest!"

Someone else intervened when they were all silent:

"Go ahead, comrade, let's hear your speech!"

"By Jesus!" another let out, "he's got what he's going to say all written out."

"Comrade, this piece of paper," he showed them a sheet of paper he was waving in his hand, "will tell you better than I can what's going on in the capital city, where a total strike has been declared. It came to me as a letter. It was brought to me by one of us right here," and he clapped the back of a man with a broad-

brimmed and high-crowned hat, like that of a cowboy. "He just got here. The nut of it is that they're asking us for solidarity and backing, but the Company's trying to soften us up with little raises . . ."

"Hey! Hey! They're not little raises! They're offering us more than we've been demanding!" several voices put in.

"Not little raises, then, but honey on their fingers to quiet down our mouths, and we can't let that be when up there in the capital people who are well off have gone on strike! And why did they go on strike? Why is everything closed: stores, banks, schools, hospitals?"

"Politics!" someone who couldn't be seen shouted at the back of the hut where the day was creeping in through the cane walls as though through the bars of the eternal jail of peasant misery, Tabío San thought as he kept his hands motionless again on the table where he was presiding along with several delegates.

"It doesn't say that here!" the other waved his paper. "They went on strike because of some teachers who were thrown out and some nurses who were fired for no reason from the hospital!"

"Excuses needed for the . . . strike!"

"Who's fucking around back there?" someone on the side asked in a low voice.

"That shithead paid by the gringos!"

"Roso Contreras?"

"That's the one . . ."

"But the paper also says . . ."

"The paper covers everything!" Roso Contreras insisted on interrupting.

"The paper says that the city looks deserted: no cars, no people, everything empty, no newspapers, and the threat of staying in the dark and without water . . ."

"All because of some nurses and some schoolteachers . . . don't make me laugh!" a half-gray and half psoriasis-bald man who was beside Roso interrupted, close to the nudge the latter gave him to remind him what he had to do.

"Not just because of them!" The one who had brought the letter took a step forward. "I've just come from there and what they're demanding now is for the government to change its ways."

An old man tried to speak, but saliva prevented him. Someone told him:

"Spit first, old man!"

"I think that calling a strike because of what's going on there would be getting into a sweat because of someone else's fever. I've got a family, children and grandchildren, and I have to give them all something to chew on, and what will I be able to give them if the strike's declared, if work stops, and we don't get any pay. This is all a young boy's foolishness." He lifted his white head toward the young man who had the letter in his hand, he had taken his hat off to speak. "This business of getting into strikes that don't have anything to do with us. My own final opinion is that we accept the raises and let it go at that."

"I think it's getting late," one of the delegates presiding put in.

"Late? . . ." several voices said at the same time amidst laughter. "It's getting early!"

"Well," the other went on, "early or late, it doesn't make any difference! I wanted to tell you that we haven't heard from Chus Marín, who hasn't opened his mouth out of caution, because he doesn't agree, or for some other reason . . ."

They all turned to where the man referred to stood up.

"Comrades," he said and stopped, as if to think what he was going to say, turning his hat in two enormous hairy hands, covered even on the reverse side with coal-black fuzz, "I think that you're forgetting one thing: how we, those of us in Tiquisate, owe a debt to the ones back there in Barrios and Bananera from the last time, when a lot of dockworkers were shot dead right on the docks, the ones who didn't fall into the sea as shark food, and I don't mean because of cowardice, because that wouldn't be true, but because of a lack of organization, of someone who could move those of us who were quiet over here because we couldn't do anything else. That's why I simply ask that we name the peo-

ple presiding over this session as the provisional board of the Tiquisate Workers' Union . . ."

The proposal was received with long applause.

"And I ask too that we pass a motion right here and now stating that it's our wish that at this moment a Tiquisate Workers' Union be organized, that those of us present sign and leave three days for everyone else to sign it as charter members . . ."

"Very good! . . . Very good! . . ."

"And that the board of our union," they all stood up and those who were standing went forward to the head of the table, "be sworn in and take their oaths in our presence . . ."

Even those who were not in favor of the strike backed Chus Marín, some because of their mission and others to change the subject, out of fear for the emptiness that not earning anything during working days meant for them and their families, they saw the danger disappearing. Anything except discussing and approving the strike.

After the oath-taking, Chus Marín was invited to draw up the document, which they all signed, and later on, with the sun up, with the kind of shame one feels at dawn when one hasn't slept, they agreed to meet later to take up the question of the strike.

"What do you mean, the question of the strike? Don't get too far ahead of the game, comrades!" Roso Contreras faced Marín. "Don't get ahead of me, comrades!" he added to what he had said to those who, after signing the document, crowded around Chusito, congratulating him, patting him on the back affectionately. "No discussing the strike until we decide whether or not to accept the raises offered by the Company!"

Tabío San would not let him go on—"damned traitor," he said to himself, "I didn't think you'd be able to get your digs in so soon! . . ."

"With the Tiquisate Workers' Union set up, we can't talk about those raises because the condition that the Company laid down was that we don't organize. They and we know what to do now. With the sun this morning the union labor was born."

Roso Contreras realized that he had lost, but he reacted heatedly:

"Our comrade seems to be right." He was silent, and after a pause he added in a wily way, "which doesn't mean that we can't ask the Company to withdraw that condition and we can get the raises without going on strike."

"Indeed," San answered him. "We're going to insist on the raises. That's one of the basic demands of our request for better conditions. But not so they can give them to us as a favor, on the condition that . . . On the condition that . . . we don't want anything! They have to give us those raises because we have a right to them, because it's up to us to get more and it won't be the Company who has the last word this time, because now they'll treat us as equals, because from this great day on we're no longer just a few poor, isolated workers following their luck, but a strong labor union, and the whole thing will be a question of either giving us what we're asking for or our going out on strike."

There was an uproar. The strike business didn't sit well. A hard pill to swallow. Fresh in their memory was the way in which the earlier strikes in Bananera had been broken: with bullets! . . . And also what the strike meant in sacrifices for innocent children and their mothers when food would begin to be scarce and men would wander around aimlessly without finding any meaning in the day.

The Samuels—Samuelito, Samuel, and Samuelón—appeared in the hot underbrush. They were waving their arms and shouting at the people coming out of the hut with yawns that were howls and a stretching of limbs that were contortions. They were shouting at them not to leave, that they had an important message.

"Comrades," Samuelón spoke. "We've come a long way, walking all night. That's why we didn't have the pleasure of being with you here. We went to get an urgent message from a fellow. And late in the night we found out what it was about. The word comes from Bananera and I'm going to tell you about it. They propose to declare a strike on all the plantations of the

Fruit Company at zero hour on the day after tomorrow; a stoppage in support of our demands and backing up the big strike that's been declared in the capital by businessmen, students, teachers, judges, doctors, drivers . . . Nothing's functioning there, not even the movies, and there are practically no people on the streets . . ."

Roso Contreras cooled off the spirits that had been heated up by that impulsive enumeration.

"All very fine! It's obvious they're free and easy in Bananera, but we don't even have a spigot for this barrel. At least I don't, because the condition was given to me by the people who sent me here to represent them that we wouldn't go on strike for any other reason except wages, because in that case they'd decide it."

"Those are exactly the same instructions I had and that's why I'm leaving before something else happens," Similiano Coy put in. "Let's wink at what they're asking for in Bananera, and since they're getting ready for maneuvers here, the strike's impossible, because it won't come off, we'll stick our necks out and not get anything out of it. We have to give time some time . . ."

"That's foolishness!"

"Old man talk!"

"Give the Company time, right, comrade?"

"Give the leech some time so it can suck more blood out of us!"

"Let me explain!" Similiano Coy made an effort to raise his voice, a little hoarse now, as if his throat had closed on him.

"Quiet, comrade, it's his right!"

"We have to hear him! We have to hear what he wants to say!"

"Quiet! This is awful! Let him talk! Go ahead!"

"What I wanted to say wasn't foolishness the way they said it was over there." Coy indicated the group of the Prospectors who were riding along on their indignation, waiting now after the silence that the voices imposed on them because they were not in favor of letting him talk. "What I wanted to say, to clear up, I mean, is that if this strike is going to be successful there are two paths: either we have a little time to consult with people, or we

get all the workers together in one big meeting and let them decide what's best for them."

Many voices all together:

"Well, maybe he's right about that!"

"No, that syphilitic doesn't talk that well!"

"He's got the face of an ass kisser!"

"The face of somebody who's scared!"

"It's a fine God we've got if he's against the strike!" a Prospector shouted.

"Maybe he'll go on strike too!"

"Shit, he's been on strike ever since he made the world . . . now that heaven and earth are working on their own it's different, but one day they're going on strike too and that's going to be Ju'ment Day!"

Tabío San pounded his open hand on the table, four legs and a pine board, demanding that they not consider the proposal by . . .

"Similiano Coy!" He shouted, between Roso Contreras and his followers, all prepared to vote against the strike, and the Prospectors, who in their urge to have a stoppage were desperate for it to be declared right then and there.

One of the Samuels asked for the floor. Samuelito.

"If as Comrade Coy has pointed out here the delegates have instructions only to declare a strike for a raise in pay . . ."

"Not all of them!" the Prospectors advised.

"Well, the majority," Samuelito went on. "So I think the best thing is to win time . . ."

"That's just what I meant: win time . . . and I said give time some time, I'm sorry . . ."

They didn't hear Coy's clarification. Samuelito went on speaking:

"The best thing is to win time and this morning have the delegates present here speak to the ones who sent them and spread the word of a meeting of all workers, with nobody absent, tomorrow before midnight, because today's over, the day on which

Bananera proposes that we start the challenge has already begun. The meeting can be at the Prospector Sandpit . . ."

"Prospectors'!" Several voices were raised, followed by quick arguments among the groups . . .

"I don't disagree," two people were arguing, "but this half-cocked business of wanting a strike . . ."

"Does half-cocked mean instead of like men?"

"What it's all about is that they're trying to get some fucking advantage!"

"Some advantage, but not you bastards!"

"Being all fucked up like that, are you calling me a bastard?"

"Because of what you heard, because I'm taking advantage!"

"With dried banana or with spit, whichever way you like it best, because I'm ten times the man you are!"

"You'll have to prove it!"

"Wherever you say! We'll settle this shit!"

"That your mouth is full of!"

"Saaal . . . gado!"

"Salgado, Rubén Salgado, what about it?"

Samuelito managed to make himself heard in the midst of the uproar, while in some groups they were already cheering the workers and the strike, the students, the teachers, and after a while the Prospectors proposed a stoppage to get the jump on the people in Bananera.

"No getting the jump on anybody," Samuelito put in, "because we're not in any contest. Things here will be done the way they are, or later on they'll skin us because of our stupidity!"

Samuel went to the aid of Samuelito.

"Yes, like my brother says, not everybody has the authority to give an answer to our comrades in Bananera today." He was interrupted by excited shouts in favor of the heroic workers of Bananera. "Because it's not a matter of a handful of bums. We can meet tomorrow with all the workers in Tiquisate, without so much mixup, and decide whether we go on strike along with

Bananera or not. That's what has to be answered tomorrow: yes or no, but like men."

"It'll be yes! . . . It'll be yes! . . . That's what it's going to be! . . . That's it! . . ." the most excited were shouting while it was finally resolved to have a big assembly the following day at the . . . the . . . Prospectors' Sandpit, give everyone his due, as someone said there, and the Prospectors had done a lot for their name. Disputatious, indomitable, with a warm spot for trouble . . . One of them stationed himself in front of the table where Tabío San had his back turned, talking to Florindo Key.

When the leader turned around and with his cornered eyes came face to face with the man, the old Prospector told him:

"You probably don't remember my name, Efraín Salvatierra, or that we were together the last time you came to work here. Except that then you were all swollen up and wrinkled and not the way I see you now. How've you been? . . ."

"Just fine, Señor Efraín, just the way you see me . . ."

". . . what I wanted to tell you is that I'm not important, but my mind's made up, so much so that I don't like to hear them call you San, because they're going to say that we've got our Uncle San too . . ." He laughed as he showed his magnificent teeth in an old mouth with purplish lips: "It's better for us to call you plain Sansur, don't you think?"

"In any case I'm still me."

"Yes, but the name makes the saint, and as far as I'm concerned just San by itself doesn't seem right, better Sansur, the way I said, because you're on your way to being the Saint of the South . . . And I had to shut up a fellow out there, a newcomer who was going around asking if you were a worker or an agitator. Fuck, I told him, that man worked here with us when they were clearing those woods that used to be over there, then he planted shoots, spread seeds for things to eat, corn and beans, and he disappeared, like all of them who turn into ginger roots or go away smelling like a tamarind!"

Tabío (few words were necessary to take his feelings some-

where else, momentarily drawing him back to the time when under the influence of the deforming mushrooms he was going about those plantations) embraced Salvatierra, who in his freshness of an old man, the darkness of his skin from having been in the sun so much, his white beard, the roughness softened by his years, bones and tendons, had something of Popoluca and Cayetano Duende about him.

Florindo Key drew him out of those memories. The leader wouldn't let him speak, driven on by what he had to tell him.

"We've got to get our people moving now, not a minute to lose. I'm almost certain that the Company, in order to chop the head off the worker-peasant movement, will yield a raise in wages and those other vague improvements that they talk about in spite of our having set up the union. If that's how it is, Florindo, my dear Florindo, we're lost. It won't be easy to drag them into a strike of solidarity with the people in Bananera, with the students, the teachers, with the whole country that's out on strike! . . ." He was silent for an instant. They left the large hut where the session had taken place and which had lasted into daylight, in the direction of his quarters, another hut, not smaller but squatter, one of those huts that drag the beards of their roofs along the sandy ground covered with weeds, where a hammock was waiting for him. "Freedom, Florindo, can incite people more than bread! I never would have thought so! Even the stones have risen up to strike in the name of freedom, and these so-and-so's are still doubting in the name of bread!"

"Someone was here," Florindo said as he followed Sansur, who ducked his head to go into the hut. "Someone was here looking for you." San fell into the hammock like a stone into a well. "Comrade Paulino Vélez with news about Rosa Gavidia . . ."

"About Malena?" The leader wrinkled his brow as if his eyebrows were joined together on his forehead like two pieces of hammock above his wide-open eyes. He had the feeling that, actually, the hammock had split with his weight and that instead of falling into the realm of sleep he was rolling about in space.

He took Florindo by the hands—a sensation of falling and the urgency to hold onto something, and while his inquisitive eyes ran over his friend's face, he repeated. "News about Malena? . . ."

"Yes . . ."

"But how could there be any since Malena's hiding place was secret?"

"But she's not in hiding anymore . . ."

"Did they find her?"

"She . . ."

"She gave herself up? . . ."

"No, she went out and joined the struggle in the streets!"

Sansur, after lowering his lids, raised his eyes in search of the look of his friend, who was holding his hands spiritedly and comforting him.

"I knew it . . ." and he sighed as if a great weight had been removed from on top of him. "A person's heart never lies . . ."

"Vélez says that Malena gave a wonderful speech, a very brave one, at a student rally, and several times she demanded the *Beast's* head . . ."

"His head or his resignation?" San asked, and Florindo was quick to answer:

"No, she's not satisfied with his resignation . . . his head!" And after a second, to himself now, while Tabío dropped onto the hammock, he unfolded his lips in part of the *God knows* litany . . . "Only God knows why he keeps toads under stones! . . . Only God knows why he keeps mermaids under the sea! . . . Only God knows why he keeps women underneath men! . . ."

Sweating, sitting on the hammock, his person completely abandoned to its own weight and to the weight of his thoughts, his feet on the ground, Tabío San was weaving and unweaving his fingers without saying anything, as if he had lost his voice after a sledgehammer blow on the neck. He seemed to have fallen from somewhere. "Finally! . . ." he said, breathed, sighed, feeling crushed. At times he fixed his eyes on the things that surrounded him, at times on the image that he had made for

himself of Malena, standing on a barricade, wearing a Phrygian cap, with a blue and white flag, demanding the tyrant's head in a harsh, hoarse voice of Cerropóm stone. His heart leapt out of his open chest. He followed her, forging her out of his memory as he saw her on that night when, with her back to the bookcase in her school, weeping like a ship's figurehead bathed by the waves, she had asked him to go away after showing him her diary, giving it to him to read. The same stance on the barricade except that instead of weeping, a look of vengeance, her hair flaming like incendiary torches, her mouth opened wide with the monosyllable, the long opening of a howl, the shout with which she was demanding the tyrant's heeeaaa . . . d, her eyes like holes of eternity, a tunic and a cloak cascading down to her naked feet, lightly shod in sandals like a Greek goddess. His heart was pounding to a deafening depth, and among the streams of sweat that rutted his face, the face of a man carried away by the crowd, his eyes lost the vision of that avenging Malena, and a kind of torpor came over his limbs, a heave of affliction in his nostrils cut off the breath of glory, and he began to fear for the fate of that little schoolteacher from Cerropóm. Asking for the tyrant's head when others were asking for his resignation. Why his head? Where did she rise up from with that demand, that village Salome—tailored suit, hair in a bun, low-heeled shoes, a man's watch on her wrist, walking like a teacher—demanding a plebeian crowned head? His chalk teeth appeared as if his frightened face were trying to smile, and that ridiculous image of Malena across from him, no less pitiful or laughable, changed into a fish caught in the hammock, which, like a net, was hanging from the hooks in the hut, not knowing what to do, lost in the golden salt of the day that was beginning to toast earth and sky. Run to the capital. The logical thing. Protect her. Yes, yes—the least he could do. Run to the capital. But what could a man like him do, with a head that was not crowned but had a price on it, alive only because his comrades had kept a strict watch on him, the ones he would tell that he was going to the aid of Rosa Gavidia,

and they would answer that she was a comrade who could take care of herself, and if not, so much the worse for her . . . He rolled in the hammock so as not to be completely crushed, putting together in a low voice, word by word: "Who do you think you are, you vest-pocket Jean Paul Marat? Just because you want to, for no other reason than because Malena isn't satisfied with the *Beast*'s resignation and is demanding his head. Isn't it in payment for yours? Didn't he ask for your head to be cut off and brought to him, blind, eyeless, weeping blood, on a gold platter that the Green Pope had given him? Didn't he ask to be served separately, with salt, lemon, pepper, and ketchup, your eyes in a glass so that he could swallow them like two raw eggs?"

San turned violently in the hammock, wondering what he should do. "You protect her? . . . you? . . ." He fell into a long silence that he cut off with a laconic "finally . . ." "Finally . . . nothing!" He could do nothing, and, furthermore, it was impossible to leave his battle station at a moment when it was a question of whether or not there would be a general strike on the Fruit Company plantations, whether Tiquisate would back up the stoppage announced by the people in Bananera at zero hour of the following day, which could not be brought off with unorganized workers, with no class consciousness, if the Company, in spite of the organization of the union that morning, maintained its offers of a raise in pay and other improvements. All they could do was maneuver quickly. To suggest that if the general strike were not set up for an indefinite time, a symbolic work stoppage be held of twelve, twenty-four, or forty-eight hours until they got under their skin, even though that too would be a victory for the Company, whose plan when it offered better pay was to wipe out the union movement at the start.

And . . . what if they refused? . . . What if in order not to lose the raises they refused to observe a symbolic work stoppage? . . .

He got up from the hammock, forgetting about Malena for a moment, caught up by a horrible anguish, and he went to where

Key was putting some cold water into the boiled coffee to make it settle, the mugs ready, sugar, bread, and a few slices of soft cheese and ham, ready to serve breakfast. Unable to find each other, as close as they felt, absorbed in their thoughts, they only spoke after they took the first sips.

"Damn it!" Key exclaimed, almost spitting out the burning liquid and blowing on it, the vibration of his lips alleviating the burning of his tongue, while the leader told him about his fears for the general strike. "Failure would be the worst thing that could happen to them, and the thing to do in that case is to ask the workers for a lightning strike, a strike of a few hours."

"In that case I could leave," he said while he chewed, as if to swallow some of his words along with the bread and ham. Key understood that he was thinking of Malena, but he didn't say a word until he had tasted and swallowed, sufficient time to weigh the uselessness of the excuses of his friend and comrade who was trying to find a way out of his obligation to be there, with his amorous desire to fly, sprout wings, go to the aid of the one who was gambling everything on the barricades in the capital, as they all were doing, moments of an opening in destiny in which each one was free of his fate, without there being anything to do.

"Foreseeing solutions, studying them, having them ready before the boiler blows up seems to be a fine thing to me," Key said, acting as if he were not aware of his friend's sentimental conflict, after swallowing what he had in his mouth, how many thoughts went into his stomach with that bit of cheese, bread, and a sip of coffee, "and that would be the case," he added, "of a symbolic stoppage, a twelve, twenty-four, or forty-eight hour strike . . ."

"That's what I think . . ." San put in to alleviate his restlessness, his mind on Malena, whom he saw leaving the little house hidden in the ashpits, where the only living soul left was Judasita, and running the student meetings, to demonstrations, to the barricades, asking for, shouting for, demanding the tyrant's head.

"Still," Key's voice was heard, braked by the respect he owed the perpetual fighter, Octavio Sansur, Juan Pablo Mondragón, a

born rebel, first in conspiracies, the one in the most dangerous place in assassination attempts, "still, we can't use those waiting periods any longer or use the tactics of a step backward, which is what the symbolic stoppage would be, after all. There's no other way out except the general strike, and between today and tomorrow we have to mobilize everyone who can help us along those lines."

San stood up:

"Is there any chance of more news from Malena? . . ." His whole questioning heart in the last syllables of her name.

"Not directly," Florindo stood up and went over to his friend to pat him on the back affectionately, "and it's best that way . . . *pas de nouvelles* . . . don't you think?"

The other man didn't answer. Hammock, sweat, flies, and a toothbrush. Waiting for the comrades to arrive with whom he would have to hold some informal talks.

Not even the relief of getting some air by swinging in the hammock. He was bothered by the creaking of the guitar-playing wasp ropes as they rubbed on the hooks. And, momentarily, the nauseating disgust with the flies that stuck to his skin with the sweat.

"The most urgent thing is to get a radio," the leader spoke as he plucked a fly from the salty wetness of his neck.

"I left that up to Andrés Medina," Key answered. "A radio and a battery. Also, there's a comrade in my house who can type and he's been copying down all the bulletins broadcast by stations in the capital," and since Tabío's expression meant that all that controlled news was no good, Florindo added, after bringing to his mouth and lighting the cigarette that the other man had not accepted, "but they're copying down news from stations in Mexico, Panama, and Cuba too . . ."

The leader got as comfortable as he could in the hammock. He had lost the habit of snoozing like that, and was trying to settle down to a proper snooze before the people came.

"The real coup," he said, lying down and swinging now, "would

be to make the growing political crisis coincide with the hammer blow of a strike on the plantations . . . That would be a coup," he repeated without closing his eyes, staring, with his eyes vacant, naked, as if he were trying to guess what was going to happen.

The flies tattooed him with their flitting. The webbing of the hammock encased his sweaty flesh. Shirt, pants, shoes. He took them all off to lie down with only his shorts on in search of sleep, but how high his eyelids were and how difficult to close them, to cut off the vision of a many-storied building occupied in the upper portion by blond men who chewed gum or tobacco, lower down and in the basement by naked men, sad human trash, women and children without hope, and from all the doors and windows, over the rooftop, in the courtyards, in the hallways, the maddened voice of Malena, having come out of the ashpits, demanding the tyrant's head, as if the idea of drawing fire out of the ashes would really be fulfilled. He closed his eyes the way they say the dead will close theirs on the day of justice. The miracle would have to be kept in motion. The people were being reborn.

PART FOUR

38

Manes, eyes, whips, spurs, hooves, stirrups, and dust clouds, as if riders and horses were erasing the roads and all that remained on the deep blue blackboard of the sky above the clumps of trees was chalk dust. The people on watch, hidden in the brush near the hut where Tabío San was staying, looked at each other and that was all the consultation they needed. Rapid, elastic, while some scattered swiftly like hares through the thick underbrush of teasel, foxtail, and hollow-clawed brambles, running ahead to see who was coming, others retreated across a rise to the house where the leader was to give the word of alarm, and a few, the most stalwart, remained on guard at their posts, machetes and shotguns ready to deal out blades and lead.

A blinding noon, earth and sky suspended, the heat unbearable, and the rising dust cloud closer and closer. The ones who were gathered with the leader, people who had brought the first reports of what the plantation workers thought about striking, not just for the stinking pennies of a raise in pay, but also so as not to lag behind Bananera, hastily came to the door to see what

it was all about, ready to make Tabío San turn into smoke along a path that cut through a ditch covered with vines and overgrowth.

"It's the rural guard or the mounties," they all said together, as one person when they saw the dust cloud advancing.

"One or the other, they're the same thing, cousin, the rural guard and the mounties. You're really something, and don't push the point . . ."

"I'm insisting because they're not the same! The rural guard are police and the mounties are army."

"I like the difference. What we do know for sure is that they're people on horseback," a third man put in, short in stature and broad-shouldered, who came forward outside the hut and laid his feet down on the dust, a necessary step, not because he was a coward, "but because he had a big family."

But there was no reason for alarm. Anyone who said "fear" had died the night before and had challenged a corpse! They were people on horseback who had declared themselves free in the nearby villages and were coming along doing what they felt like. Towns and villages were left without authorities as mayors and their guards evaporated with the first news of the disorders in in the capital and military garrisons received orders not to leave their barracks and stay there until their last bullet was gone. Such a strange silence! A silence of squares and streets emptied of ordinary life and waiting for a different one. Strange human fruit hung from the trees. Policemen who were unable to hide their sad status. Some had taken off their uniforms with such haste that there were two of them who had fled like a pair of twins with their legs in the same pair of pants belonging to the fat sergeant.

"Yaaa . . . hooo! . . ."

Shouts and shots that toasted the air with bullets resounded in the dust cloud that didn't rise above the rooftops of Tiquisate, because they turned away from there, afraid of running into the stuttering braided ladies in the town and on the plantations. Oh,

if they had only known that the machine-guns had been carefully put away and that across the baldness of the streets and the green of the banana groves men of all kinds were crowding together to talk about the strike, hawking up snot and saliva in order to have something to spit out, machetes sharpened, the remains of a pint or quart of cane liquor in a bottle with a large-beaked toucan printed on the label, and the ones who were not talking about the strike, wondering whether the time had not come to cut off a few gringo heads, burn down their houses, and loot their commissaries!

Repeatedly the Manager of the Company tried to call the Commandant on the telephone, but the lines had been cut. Then Perkins, his secretary, went in person to ask the Colonel to send troops to safeguard the lives and property of the handful of Americans who had not stopped drinking whiskey because of the danger (they had, rather, increased the dosage), and kept their pipes smoking and their chewing gum cracking in the artificial springtime as they stared at the low ceilings of their bungalows from couches or easy chairs, as if nothing were happening, or as if they knew that nothing could happen because before those halfbreeds would dare to touch a hair on their heads the fleet would be bombarding the coast and warplanes would darken the sky of that tiny country.

Later on the Manager no longer asked for but demanded the presence of troops on the plantations, because the government was committed to safeguard not only American lives and property but also the freedom to work of those field hands who, satisfied with the raises that had been awarded, refused to back the general strike organized by a small group of agitators.

The Colonel, blinded in his office at the command post by the raw brightness of the day, yawn after yawn, some yawns getting halfway there, others extinguished on his lips with the sound of a funnel, was persistent: without superior orders he would not move a single soldier, and that order had not come. Several times he asked about it in code and the War Ministry always gave the

same answer: "Await orders." Later on, just a moment before, they informed him that he would receive direct instructions from the presidency, a message that coincided with an important piece of news on the Voice of Latin America which the radioman had just received . . . from Mexico . . .

The radio operator kept listening, but he didn't dare repeat it, not even to himself. How, then, could he go and repeat it to the Commandant? And, yet, he would have to go, stand at attention, and spew it out to his face. He took off his earphones and scratched his ear, then his head, the grimy back of his neck, cold with sweat from what he had just heard. He had something that was like a stiff neck. That damned neuralgia that was always running through his body. He stood up, pushed his chair back on little sounds, not little round wheels, they were so squeaky for lack of oil, and he got ready to make his appearance before the colonel with a mournful expression, but he rejected the idea, it was not very military. With a happy expression? Worse yet, it would reveal seditious feelings. With an indifferent expression? Perhaps, even though it would show a lack of affection for the Supreme Commander . . .

He stopped at the door of the office and said like a robot: "Permission to enter, sir!" And he stammered, stuttered something that he swallowed, a word that his lips could not completely form:

"Re . . . re . . . re . . ."

"What are you singing about?"

". . . signation . . ."

The Yawn arched his eyebrows. His eyes gave off sparks that were questions. He was all red from his nose to his ears and his fine colonel's mustache had drooped like a weeping willow between his fingers with their uncut nails, like the wing casing of a cockroach.

"Resignation? My resignation?" he repeated in a questioning tone as if he doubted what he was saying, and he sat there thinking: "They took away my big stick! They 'resigned' me so

they wouldn't have to remove me and give me another chance! The Company must have asked for my immediate removal because I wouldn't send them the troops they wanted to guard their plantations."

The soldier confirmed the word "resignation," and after a long silence that was made deeper by the buzzing of the flies, the sound of a clock, and the crackling of the radio that was clearing its throat in the distance, he raised his eyes, which were cloudy with fear to the portrait of the Señor Presidente displayed on high in the center of the office, and stammered:

"Hhh . . . him!" Daring to point with his finger at the figure in the uniform of a major general with the Napoleonic lock of hair over his forehead.

The Commandant was dumbfounded. Under the reddening of his skin, the lividness of the anonymous person into which the subordinate is changed as an underling, unconditional servant, and friend of the Supreme Commander when the latter's power goes into eclipse.

"That's what they've been saying for several days now and that's what they'd like, but even on the radio now! . . . You swine, who told you to listen to Mexico? . . . Don't we have our own network? Don't we have better radio stations than Mexico?"

It was impossible to tell him that the local stations in the National Radio chain had been playing only military marches for several hours now.

"Get out of here before I break your neck! Tomorrow you can consider yourself under arrest! Go listen to some other stations, but not Mexico! Not Mexico!"

The radioman put on the earphones that were connected to the apparatus and with timid care, obeying orders more than wanting to find anything, he turned the knob, looking for other stations with news bulletins, and all of them, Panama, Cuba, the BBC, all of them confirmed the news, which he went back to tell his superior, who was no longer sweating but had calmed down:

"Ummmm . . . ummmm . . ." He could not part his lips.

"Ummmm . . . what? . . ." The Yawn got up menacingly, ready to lay his riding crop on the subordinate, but he did not, pulling on the pants that were stuck to his sweaty rear, and since he was in that area, applying a brace of fingers to the itch in his anus, scratching round about and deeply, pleased that it made him forget his annoyance.

The radioman confirmed the fact that stations in Panama and Cuba also had the news, desperate at not being able to raise his hands to his ears, which were tingling from having been under the earphones.

The Commandant sent him back to his post, telling him to bring him any news that was "believable, eh?, believable . . ."

And he collapsed into his chair. His disbelief in front of the underling was only apparent, because at that moment, without too much blinking, he realized what was going on. They were all waiting for orders and now no one was in command. That was why the last message that he had from the War Ministry had been to await direct instructions from the presidency. He put his riding crop on the desk, leaned back, and crossed his legs the way gringos do, a person who gets mixed up in sh . . . weet stuff always has some sticking to him . . .

"Not so bad!" he said to himself. "I didn't fly off the handle! The devil is wise because he's a colonel! And it would have been worse if, like a gringo-lover, I'd taken the men out to guard the plantations! Once outside the soldiers would have heard the news and would have mutinied and gone over to the strike . . . They're better here with me, locked up. That way they won't know what's going on!"

He slapped his crop on the desk and when his aide appeared he told him:

"Go see if Captain Salomé has left. Tell him to come and see me before he leaves, to report to my office!"

The aide left and came back to say that he had already left.

"Does anyone know where he went?"

The aide went to ask and returned:

"He didn't say where he was going, but since he'd had some malaria chills, it looks as if he was going to see one of the Company doctors at the hospital."

"Yes, that's where he asked permission to go, but I thought he hadn't left yet. You can go back to your work . . ."

And no sooner had the aide disappeared through the office door than he got up, went down to inspect the guard, and gave the order that no one, absolutely no one, could leave without his express authorization, and as for entering, except for Captain Salomé and the soldiers who were bringing in the rations, nobody was to be admitted."

He didn't go back to his office but to the radio room, in the rear of the command post, and he himself began to call on the key: 25 . . . 25 . . . 25 . . .

Every line in the country was calling 25 . . .

And 25—the secret telegraphic code for the Señor Presidente—wasn't answering . . .

Endless June night. A sky of fresh skin like that which appears from under a scab after the clouds of the day before and the day before that. Stars that had been washed, hazy, not twinkling. An occasional rocket. Only one, like a furious snake with a head of gold and a tail of smoke, in the whole firmament. In other years the night of June 29 did not pass by just like that. There were festivities, rockets, and St. Peter and St. Paul with their beards of rain water over the lakelike silence of the banana groves that challenged with their green-branch swords as in a laud. A jubilation of bonfires accompanied by hot drinks, accordions, guitars, marimbas, Catherine wheels, tamales fresh from the pot, throat-scratching liquor, and an occasional female who let her wings drag and herself was dragged off in the clear sight of the gathering for some *brooding* behind the banana trees.

But this year it would have been better if it had rained torrents. It was of no use that winter had been chopped off, because, closed in now, the storms began. There were no celebrations and on that night of June 29—25, 25, 25, the colonel kept

calling with ever-growing anguish—was no different from any other night there along the coast. The piercing croak of frogs and toads with big-bellied eyelids over their small sulfur eyes. An occasional katydid, the survivor of the millions of katydids who die as they saw up the afternoon in order to fill the pillows of night with the sawdust of silence. Squeaking crickets, like lard on the fire, under the fried atmosphere, earth, conacastes, voladores, ceibas, guarumos, drainspouts of branches crackling like tall bonfires into which the lightning of a thunderless storm, a distant tempest out over the sea, was pouring golden milk between the pauses of immense seabirds who winged off into the night air swallowing darkness and the wafers of distance.

. . . 29, 29, 29, the colonel, confused, no longer knew what he was doing, calling the day of the month, but he corrected himself . . . 25, 25, 25 . . . No. It was impossible for the Supreme Commander to leave them in the lurch . . . 25, 25, 25. He continued calling, calling, 25, 25, 25 . . . He took his tunic off: air, he needed air on the hairy arms that came out of the yawns of his sleeveless undershirt, the only yawns that he had left, because he was no longer giving birth to those great yawns of satisfaction with which he had been filling his mouth a moment before, and his great mustache, feeling itself unstarched, hung down like the comb of a dead rooster.

Tiquisate . . . Bananera . . . Would they go on strike at the same time? . . . Nothing was sure on that night of June 29; everything was uncertain, fluctuating . . . A muddy dampness. Human masses baked in tear ducts of fire. A breeze that did not blow or scarcely blew enough to alleviate people half-smothered by the heat. Men dressed in the gray denim of a cloudburst sky, with greenish blood and bronchial breathing, tall as palm trees or squatting like batrachians, were to decide if Bananera and Tiquisate would join in the thrust of a strike that would paralyze the two most important concentrations of workers in the country. Students, teachers, professionals, journalists, businessmen, bank-

ers, and even moneylenders, hungry for freedom, had launched a political strike and were on the verge of ending the reign of a human beast. But if the general work stoppage was not declared on the plantations of Tiquisate and Bananera (Tiquisate was the place in a "we'll see" status), there would be no destruction of the roots of tropical dictatorships and the poisons that fed them. Tabío was thinking about all of that, his head soaked in sweat as straight as his hair. "Tabío San! Tabío Sansur!" he called himself aloud, as if he had lost himself. The sweat of joy was different, curls of enjoyment, not that flow of water strings, burning, unbearable, which stretched down across his face and which he no longer bothered to mop, more intent on blowing with his thought on the open wound in his heart so that it would not burn, as it was burning him, the indecision of the workers who were still arguing whether or not they should go on strike. Such combativeness ended up in bargaining at a moment when serious news was arriving from the capital, where they feared the worst after the student demonstrations and a parade of silent women dressed in black past the palace. The cavalry charged them several times, the police sprinkled them with phosphorus bombs, but neither the hooves nor the swords nor the bombs were able to break up that procession of protest which meant and embodied the mourning and muteness of the people.

Some women fell . . . Was Malena there? . . . Had something happened to her? . . . Was she wounded, beaten, hospitalized? . . . Had they arrested her? Or . . . or . . . The leader's body went numb from thinking that she had been left lying on the pavement . . .

And not having any other news except the scattered reports from travelers who knew or told little, afraid that their tongues would get them in trouble unless the resignation of the *Beast* was confirmed. Anything could happen. Or the small items that in the midst of the avalanche of news in those days—the Allied invasion of Europe was progressing satisfactorily—which was transmitted by foreign stations, while the local ones, part of the

National Radio network, had been sneezing out military march after military march for many hours.

Neither news of Malena nor a manly answer from the plantations. What an endless night it was, that June 29 . . . endless, no way out . . .

San lowered his head, seeking the support of his hands for his forehead, resting his elbows on the rustic table where he had been writing next to a lamp that gave off more darkness than light from a smoking tube the color of his nicotine-stained fingers. Cigarette after cigarette, using the one he had consumed with anxious drags to light the next one, smoking along with the comrades who were coming back and kept on coming.

A day that had begun in glory with the founding of the union and was ending with everybody listless, feeling that it was like a defeat!

Some of those who returned took off their shoes and rubbed the soles of their feet, pulling off, as they stuck to their fingers, noodles of dirt and worn pieces of socks that had been shredded from walking and sweating. Others, feet up, were smoking, napping, or softly singing, trying to drive away fatigue and the thoughts which would give them no peace, as if their brains were open and flies were swarming on top of them.

After covering miles and miles, here, there, visiting, going into living quarters, huts, camps, taverns, mess halls, corrals, talking with the night workers, it was becoming difficult if not impossible for them to get a majority in favor of the strike because a man who was not reluctant was against it, after having got what went into his pocket without any trouble, a few cents more in daily wages, and into the family stomach, corn, beans, bread, meat, sugar, rice, potatoes, coffee, at a good price from the Company's supply commissaries.

Since the one side stood behind its offer of more pay and food at cost after the founding of the Tiquisate Workers' Union, the other side refused to back up what Bananera proposed: a big strike starting the next day at zero hour which would paralyze

work on the Atlantic and the Pacific coasts on all plantations, becoming part of the general strike that had been declared in the capital and observed in the rest of the country, not only by those who worked but even by passersby, who left the streets empty, worshippers who stopped going to church, vendors who deserted the markets. And as a tardy protest, but a protest nonetheless, from those who had fallen a long time before at the port, on the docks of the port, where bullets and sharks had taken their toll of the people who loaded bananas on the ships, dockworkers, who, wearing nothing harder than their hearts and loin cloths, rose up to shout "Enough!" to the foremen of the fruit trust, "Enough! Enough! . . ." a shout that still echoed and which should now be taken up by the workers on all the plantations so they could face up to the Company in a strike that meant just that: "Enough! . . ."

That was what the people in Bananera had proposed. A big strike that would take the striking power away from the gringos. An "Enough!" They were proposing, not imposing. That had to be made clear. Evil hotheads were spreading the word that it was an imposition, and therefore it was necessary to have it repeated everywhere that it was just a proposal and that the people in Tiquisate had the last say. Still, except for the Prospectors, who were not fruit haulers for nothing, like the anonymous heroes of the epic fight at the port, there was no great enthusiasm, the majority did not agree and they would vote against the strike, the great majority of people who dampened sound, enemies of risking even a fingernail or compromising themselves in the slightest way. Those who only saw along, and were guided by, the direction of their noses, an interest in what something was worth, in the marks made by their pockets, full of dollars distributed by Company agents, ever faithful to their policy of bribery. And the cowards huddling in their baseness, intimidated or in a state of panic because of the pistol-toters in the pay of the Company, which not only distributed bread but lead.

"These people haven't got the slightest idea of what we're de-

fending!" San swallowed the words that had been chewed over so much, so painfully ground that they were no longer words but the saliva of contradictory thoughts, as ready to condemn the workers for their negative attitude as to defend them. "Yes, yes!" He went on with his thoughts. "The strike for freedom caught on like wildfire and if it came to a halt in the countryside it was because we didn't explain it enough to the peasants to build up the feeling that the problem wasn't 'Give us this day our daily bread,' but 'Give us this day our Nation,' something as important as that, our Nation, with no one to defend it. People who pray will have to change their words. Not asking for bread but for their country. 'Give us this day our Nation . . .'"

He lifted his head and said to those who had come back from the plantations, dimly lighted by the oil lamp:

"Did you tell the Company in what status you went to see them? As union delegates?"

"That was the first thing we did." Andrés Medina left Samuelito with the words on his tongue. "Letting them know it was a delegation from the newly-formed Tiquisate Workers' Union."

"And did the Management accept it? Was there any objection to receiving you as delegates like that?" the leader wanted to know.

"They not only accepted," this time Samuelito got ahead of Medina, "but Mr. Perkins, as representative of the Management, all things like that are taken up with Mr. Perkins, told us he was glad to know that we were a delegation from the Tiquisate Workers' Union."

"They swallowed the pill . . ."

"They're pretty sharp . . ."

"What else could they do . . ."

"That's called laughing on the outside and crying on the inside . . ."

Voices and the expressions on the faces bathed in the light of the lamp were mingled in a group around the leader.

"Right away, of course," Samuelito went on, "right away, so

that there'd be no room for doubt, we brought up the question of whether the Company, in spite of the organization of our union, would stick by the raises and improvements they offered and which were on our list of demands."

"They're not going to retreat because of any union! They're gringos, poor things, it's not their fault they were born that way, but they're not silly kids!"

"In fact," Medina put in, turning until he found the face of the one who had just made that comment, an old Prospector who had been burned between two fires, sun and rum, "Mr. Perkins not only said that the Company would keep its word, but that it would raise salaries more than we'd asked for as long as the agitation stopped on the plantations and there was no more talk of a strike."

"In other words, buying our silence," the old man hastened to say, furious, hot, and red, like a bedbug, and he could no longer speak because nothing but saliva came out.

"Was that all they offered?" someone else shouted.

"They're looking for an accomplice," another voice said, "and here we are!"

The leader calmed down the most excited ones, who, going from words to deeds, were ready to flaunt their machetes and threats against the people who were probably having a party at that time—"there are parties that have the sound of a fart," the old bedbug said—celebrating the fact that things had been settled without a strike, a bitch here and a bitch there for the mothers of the agitators, a word of praise here and there for the Yunite in the Spanish of *Selecciones del Reader's Digest* ("The advantages and progress of unionization in Central America," or "A banana workers' union in the service of good causes"), a Spanish just as tight from a lack of juices as their orifices, dry, obstructed, and Anglican.

"It's not a question of fighting, that time will come soon enough!" Tabío San took over.

"We've got all day tomorrow," Medina put in, "and who said we've lost the hand?"

"No one said that," Samuelito managed to make himself heard as the tumult grew louder, "but we can't go blind with rage. If we run out with threats today, we'll run more of a risk that tomorrow night we won't have the majority we need to declare a strike!"

"A majority of dead men is what there's going to be, today or tomorrow! Bring a scale to weigh the corpses!"

"Hold it! . . ." Samuelón faced those who were already leaving, holding up their machetes, leaping, their hats in their hands, dragging on the ground and raising dust like fighting cocks, like dancers in a medieval play. And with the giant's shout, that Samuel was quite tall, they calmed down, because they didn't want to hear any reasons, daredevils spitting more than Roman candles and fly-scratchers who brought their hands up their legs, the fingers wide open, letting it be understood that not even in that way could they hold all there was of the male in them, capable of pulling something off that night, that night with stars as yellow as molasses taffy, a reverberation that blew down upon them from the perfidious blackness of the sky the memory of lights and festivities for St. Peter and St. Paul. That year there wouldn't be any.

Florindo Key broke the moment of suspense that had begun with the shout by Samuelón calling for order. He had the latest news. Sensational . . . Sensational . . .

"The millionaire Luceros are leaving tomorrow!" Key announced as he came in. "I come from Semírames. They've made arrangements to leave in a few hours."

"Tomorrow?" The leader brought together the eyebrows that were like two question marks from which his hollow eyes overflowed, asking Florindo for more information about what looked like running away.

"By tomorrow!" the latecomer confirmed.

"That means they're not too sure!" the leader exclaimed, not

letting Florindo speak. "And according to them, hadn't the Company finished off the strike with the improvements it gave?"

Key raised his hand, waving his index finger from side to side as he said:

"No, no . . . they called them from Chicago! George Maker Thompson, the famous Green Pope, is very sick and wants to see his grandson before he dies."

"I hope he dies without seeing him and they can both go to hell!" Andrés Medina shouted.

"And weren't those big shots so sure," Samuelón put his voice in, half-affirming and half-asking, "that there wouldn't be any strike, that there wouldn't be anything, that everything would be just the way it always was?"

"Not too sure, no!" Key corrected.

"Well, then, it must be an excuse! They're leaving so they won't get mixed up in it . . . What a coincidence, the business about the grandson! . . ."

"Not too sure, no," Florindo insisted, putting his hand on Samuelón's shoulder in a friendly way, "but I don't think that it's an excuse either, and if it is, there are excuses that life gives us at such a right time that they stop being excuses!"

"We'll never get anywhere if Don Flor starts playing around with words!" Samuelón protested, half-serious and half-smiling, and then he added, facing Key in a show of challenge: "If you say they're not *too sure*, you've got to tell us why!"

"That's the other bombshell. The colonel refused to send a single soldier to guard the plantations . . ."

"That guy's a real devil!"

". . . no matter how much the Company asked him, the Manager in person, going from begging to crying and finally threatening him with immediate removal and jail for being an accomplice of the strikers. They tried every means they could without getting him to send a single soldier. He's holed up in the command post and he's stationed sentries with submachine-guns who won't let anybody pass by or come close."

"That's my boy!" the old bedbug celebrated in his corner. He was almost invisible with his pustulous eyes half-merry and half-mistrustful.

"Hold it right there. He's not doing it for our sake! . . ."

"I'd like to hear your explanation!"

"Not for us or for our pretty faces!"

"Everybody knows that, Medinita, everybody knows that, and that's why I said I'd like to hear your explanation," Key went on, "because we know too damned well that he's doing it for himself, for his own safety, to save his skin. But the result's the same for us. Without military help the great big trust will feel weak and the ones who managed to tip the scales of the strike against us with money and threats will have to think about whether they should keep it up or whether they should change too. That's what we'll see tomorrow night. But what do you want me to say? I feel optimistic, we'll get the majority . . ."

"I don't," Samuelito said, "and I think the Colonel's refusal will do us more harm than good. His refusal to guard the plantations can do us harm, and not just weaken the Company the way Florindo said."

"What we do know is that he's fortified the command post and nobody can get him out of there," Samuelón added, surprised that his brother Samuel had not said a word. What could he say, since he had a devil of a toothache? His whole cheek was trembling and even his eye was leaping about.

"Yes," Medina put in, "I agree with Samuelito that the Colonel is doing us more harm by locking himself in than if he went out to the plantations and spread out his troops. It could have gotten to the point for us that even the soldiers would make common cause with the workers."

"We can forget about that," the leader interrupted, giving the impression that he was following what they were saying, but on the edges, lost in the world of his thoughts and meditations. "We can forget about that," he repeated. "The soldiers wouldn't make common cause with the workers, the colonel's nobody's fool and

he knows quite well that in cases like this what happens is that the soldier, because he's afraid or because he doesn't want to be a soldier, throws away his weapons, takes off his uniform, and runs off to the place they brought him from by force, sometimes even with his hands tied."

And after a moment he added:

"What we know for certain is that the running away of the Luceros, and we can't call it anything else, and the colonel's refusal to send troops to defend the interests of the Company and the life and security of the important American employees, call for an examination of the situation from this new point of view."

"I repeat, it's not running away . . ."

"It is running away, Key," the leader insisted, "and if it's not, so much the better. The serious illness or death of the Green Pope can only mean a temporary weakening of the position of the Company while the stockholders meet to name a new pontiff."

"I've seen the cablegrams." Florindo reacted somewhat vigorously with his voice and gestures. "The old man doesn't want to die without seeing his grandson . . ."

"Then they can take him away . . ." Samuel managed to say with a drivel voice, moving his tongue in the middle of a mouth that pain had made seem immense and which he could barely close. "They can take him away . . ." and he would have liked to have explained to them that a boy named Lincoln Suárez had said that Bobby was a mortal enemy of the strikers and that he disdainfully called them bothersome, saying that they should be hanged on the smoke of machine-guns.

"Yes, they can take the grandson and all the relatives away," Medina added, "just as long as the news agencies don't load their cables with the idea that they took him away so that we wouldn't kidnap him. They're capable of it. Didn't they say that the last time? Wasn't the rumor going around here that we were going to kidnap him in order to force the Company to accept our whole list of demands as a ransom? They're people who don't see any difference between a gangster and a striker . . ."

"And the third bombshell," Florindo shouted, having waited for the spectacular silence now reigning to release the great piece of news word by word.

"The President of the Republic has called the generals of the Army to his palace to hand them his resignation!"

"It's all over!"

"All over for them! Not for us. Nothing's all over! It's the great beginning! We've got to put our dice in the cup and tell life: 'We're starting all over!' "

39

The sewing machine was humming away. A damp towel wrapped around her head, her body naked and her feet in a basin of water. The heat was asphyxiating her. It was making her thoughts evaporate. She was only thinking about what she was doing. Taking in the seams on her cream-colored dress. Lord, she was getting thin! Her arm went to sleep, tickling and ant-crawling, her hand hurt, her wrist, her elbow, but she did not stop. She almost pricked one of her breasts. That was where she really would have liked to have taken in a seam. Nice and tight. Twin bumps that fell down in the shape of pears from so much amorous flagellation, which didn't prevent her, with the aid of her brassiere, to have them always looking like lance points under her dress. That was where horns began, with the attraction of the lodestone of those two points.

The humming of the machine prevented her from hearing the person who had come in. Look who it was! And he was not arriving in the best of shape. A barking dog can't sleep, Clara María's thought whispered to her as she saw Captain Pedro Domingo

Salomé appear, paler than a soul in perdition, and she was pleased, proud that he had come back on his own, without her having called him as she had done other times, as she turned to face this image of St. Anthony in formaldehyde smoking a cigar.

But the spell went down the well and she shed tears when she realized how ill he was, how thin. He was no longer a living person but the eve of a dead man. His eyes had lost the sharpness of a blink, staring, glassy. He was breathing more with his stomach than with his lungs, stinking of fetid perspiration, as if he had been bathed in cold urine.

He didn't embrace her. Poor man. He ran his hands over her, feeling, as if to be sure that what he had there was his . . . everything, that she hadn't gone away. He grew so stupefied with fever that he found the bed by touch. He almost left no shape when he lay down. He asked for a drink of water. She went away and came back, but she took a little time. She couldn't give it to him in one of the ordinary glasses that she used every day. From her cupboard she took a small forget-me-not blue pitcher and a glass of the same color.

"Your malaria's come back. That's the worst kind of sickness there is . . ." she sighed, listening to him swallow the water.

Pedro Domingo nodded, with his feverish look fixed on the eyes of Clara María, who had sat down on the edge of the bed and was stroking him, clasping him, rather, as if giving him a massage along the joints that make a person with malaria feel as if they were breaking.

"A little later," she said, "I'll rub you down with alcohol and quinine."

The captain asked her to let him rest for a while. Then he would welcome the remedy, but now he had to lie down with his eyes closed, her hand in between his hands, sandy and sweaty from the boiling of the rising fever.

"At least you've got me . . . even if I'm just a fill-in," she was going to say that last thing, but she changed her mind, the best words are left unsaid, and she half-threw herself on top of him,

putting her cheek against his, which was on fire from the fever and scratchy from his incipient beard.

The sounds of the day, passing trucks, carts, the whistling of distant locomotives, drew away the thoughts of Clara María, who, little by little, as her lover began to fall asleep, withdrew her hand without his feeling it, and she ran to prepare a deep dish in which to make the mixture of alcohol and whitish quinine powder. If the malarial chills didn't go away with that liniment, her name wasn't Clara María, the girl from the Happytime bar. Yes, she'd been happy with that man. Very happy. He was prostrate. She let him sleep. She remembered something. To pick his pockets. She was an expert. But this time it wasn't in search of money, but for some letter or a picture of the telegram woman. Damn her! Curse her! Lightning should strike her! There was nothing. She took off his forty-five, a big pearl-handled pistol with a long, dark blue barrel, and she laid it alongside the bed on the night table where she had the radio.

The question of why he had come to see her wouldn't give her any peace; it would lie still for moments, stopping like a hummingbird between her eyebrows, the fly about her head at other times. Why had he come? Was he looking for consolation because he was dying? Looking for affection because he loved her? Malaria could do more than the dead man's ashes that the meddler with the telegram had sent to be spread at her door by the mulatto in order to open a trench of indifference between them, and if she was unable to separate them and make them forget each other, a trench of eternity. Nonlove or death. They were sentenced. Suppositions? How could they be since she had surprised the mulatto, taken away the hand bones! And the spells were being fulfilled. Wasn't her man there, half-dead already? Her eyes clouded over with the weeping that she held back in her lashes. Either eternity between them or nonlove. There was no choice. Why, oh Lord, did they have to separate, forget each other, or did one of them have to die? They weren't her hands, it was her heart split in two, trying to grasp the throbbing in her

fingers. Why was that bitch more powerful than she? Why did she have the dead on her side? Why, as Tonina Sansívar had told her, was there no defense when cemetery earth is brought, scraped from grave bottoms after a black mass? And that bitch was probably celebrating the diabolic ceremony, the moon was on the wane, with the mulatto as her acolyte. She would be naked, her sex anointed with fireflies, clutching a dead bat between her buttocks to be shat out like the golden bat shat out by the sun, her teats dripping with toad milk, corrosive and poisonous, and the picture of Pedro Domingo Salomé tied to her belly over her navel.

All of that had been whispered to her by Tonina Sansívar, an old busybody out of whom the deep voice of a male carouser emerged from the crate of her goiter. And she told her, in addition, that there wasn't much defense against the spell of dead man's earth spread at the door or across from a person's house, because the result was that one of them had to die if they didn't agree to forget each other, separate, and stop loving each other.

Maternal and watchful, holding back her weeping as best she could, she went close to the ear of the man who had been her lover until then, burning with fever, asking him to leave her, to forget about her, not to think about her anymore. Her ribs rose and fell as she expelled her feelings in an empty sigh, with the sadness of a person who knows that she is losing everything, separating herself from the person with whom she had spent the best years of her life, unable to keep him, because even if she tried that she would lose him in any case, she would lose him to death. Better that way! . . . Better dead! . . . She didn't get to speak those terrible words. She rubbed her lips hard, wondering whether she had said them. She lay down beside him and whispered: "Can you hear me, love? I'm going to lose you"—she used formal address in a coquettish way—"Do you know I'm going to lose you? . . . Just think, my sweet, think how great my sacrifice is . . ." She drew back, disgusted with herself, with her obvious lie. "A sacrifice? . . . liar! . . . I've lost you in any case

because there's no way you can stay with your Clara María, the girl from the Happytime bar, the one for all your life . . ." She sobbed, sobbed, sobbed. "Either the other one or death . . ." She sobbed. There was nothing to hold onto, there were too many coincidences not to believe Tonina, a lot of coincidences all at once. The mulatto's knowing exactly when to spread dead man's earth by her door, before Pedro Domingo walked out on her, walked out because of the telegram incident. And the telegram, why hadn't they taken it to the barracks? It wasn't by chance that they delivered it there. How was it that every time Salomé walked out on her she would go look for him at the guard post, ask about him, send him verbal messages and notes? This time she didn't, the dead man's earth had paralyzed her and in order to get rid of the urges that she didn't have in her body but in her soul, in order to get revenge for that deceit, she had become excited by the little gringo with blue eyes, and she made room for him in her bed . . . Ha! Ha! . . . Hot jazz! . . .

But it was useless to think about what could no longer be met or mended. Led to bed, dead in her head, and her body fed. The ashes that were spread at her door must have come from a dead man's tail-bone. She, getting hot, she, with that little towhead! She, always frigid, turning fragile! Ha, ha, ha! Her satisfaction was laughing in her breast, and in her nostrils she felt the tickle of a sneeze as she thought about saying "Jazz! Jazz! . . ."

"I'm sorry," Tonino Sansívar had finally told her, "that I teared your heart in two, but I couldn't keep from telling you that your case hasn't got no lid to it, 'less you clean yourself with blood or fire from the dead man's *tone* they spread around. It has to be with blood, the blood of the one who put the spell on you, because with fire you'd have to be turned into ashes yourself, set fire to yourself and burn up. When that *tone* falls on a living person it's hard to cure. Blood or fire! The way we are, the *tone*, even though it's only loaned to us, like our souls, is closer to us because it stays with us even after we're dead."

Tonina lighted a purplish cornhusk cigar and while she sucked

on it she seemed to be smoking more with the lumps of her goiter, trying to hide her bulging eyes under the lids which barely covered them, and she added sententiously, with the impression that the words were made of tobacco smoke:

"Only two things are loaned to us when we're born: soul and *tone*, and of the two things *tone* is closer to us than soul, and I'm going to tell why. The soul is a coward when it feels death coming and it flies off, leaves, disappears before our flesh grows cold. The *tone*, on the other hand, stays on, stays with us, because the *tone*, and you should know it once and for all, is the animal smell that we have. Everybody smells like a different kind of animal, and that smell is his *tone*, understand? . . ." (Clara María only understood that she was losing everything with her man, her soul, her *tone*, everything . . .) "And that, child, is what they've thrown on you, the *tone* of a dead man with the ashes that they've spread on the ground by the crack in your door, where, poor thing that I think you are, air, light, and sun can no longer come in, but everything that's rotten, wormy, stony, and animal from poor dead people who have turned into dust."

And holding the small extinguished cigar in her mouth, rubbing her dry hands, the Sansívar woman added:

"I figured, then, that you're the same as if they'd painted your body with death lime! You should know that what they've put on you is the *tone* of dead men, and not just one, lots and lots of dead men! If it was one, there'd be a cure; there are *fixes* for a case where a person knows from what dead person the *tone* has come; but the way they put the spell on you, it's only with blood or fire, and stop them from spreading more cemetery earth by your door, because if not, you won't live to tell the tale, because after they get your man away from you, they'll take away your life."

Who would have thought it? When she got back to her house she dragged the bed, night table, radio, straw mat, bedpan, picture of St. Joachim with the Christ child to a corner of the room near the window, ready for the next time, so that if the mulatto

came back he wouldn't get away. Scratching him, biting him, cutting him, slashing him with a big knife until he turned red and she could wash off the dead man's *tone*, because if the telegram woman insisted on sending him back, she'd be left, not with a separated man, but with a widow man, and it was no good to have a widower's back to her . . .

She turned out the electric lamp and lit the stub of a candle. Her lover was sleeping off the drunkenness of malaria. She would have to awaken him to give him the massage with alcohol and quinine, and then he could sleep a little longer before he went back to the command post. Poor, dark, toasted man, coming out in his best uniform. What time did he have to report back? If it was at dawn there was no problem. But with all the news on the radio, how had they let him leave? Could he have run away? Wasn't he most likely mixed up in something? He never got beyond captain and this would be his chance. She looked at him, deeply saddened. A chance for him . . . and . . . not her . . . the other one . . . He was probably mixed up in something . . . The tricky ones always fell flat on their faces. But taking a risk like that, sick as he was . . . And what would happen to him? Maybe the worry over what he'd done had brought back his malaria. The worry got into his liver and spread out through all of his nerves. Yes, that must be it. He was probably mixed up in something. He would have told her before. In love, oh Lord, everything is before, not much is now, and nothing is tomorrow. They used to talk before. It wasn't just a mass of fat with hair arriving, getting undressed, screwing, and pissing . . . a ball rolling in the street, like animals or tail-hounds, because even if it hurt her to say so, that was what they'd ended up as . . . or . . . or . . . or maybe they no longer had anything to talk about, like condemned prisoners who show their teeth and think they're smiling, who grab each other down below and think they love each other, who are together and think they're together, oh, Lord, Lord, they were farther apart than the moon and the sun. Before, yes, they did get along, they told each other things, he would

talk to her about his career, the promotions which, damn it, never went beyond captain, and he would give his shout of pride: "Living, for a military man, is serving! The only sin is the service put in! . . ."

She struggled to put that part about the "only sin" behind her . . . And sometime back, in order to say something, she reminded him about it, and his only answer, as if he were speaking without saying anything or with a muzzle on, was: "Did I say that? I must have been drunk with youth or off my nut! Living for a military man is serving? That really is funny, ending up as a uniformed servant or a lackey, which is the same thing! . . ."

She hoped she could give him the rubdown without waking him up, taking off his tunic and his shirt. His teeth were chattering. After the fever he was going into the malarial chill. She looked for something to throw over him. She covered him, thinking that a mustard plaster on his feet would be the best thing, careful not to burn him, because he couldn't get any worse and the urgent thing was to get rid of the attack in case he was mixed up in something now that everybody was talking about the fall of the government. That was the only way he could get more gold braid. Kept in grade as captain, an ass for the Yawn to kick, and studying guitar with those Samuels, who, she thought and she didn't know why, were another kick in the behind. That time he had to be mixed up in something . . . that time he wouldn't stop until he made colonel at least, and they would transfer him . . . them to the capital . . . that's why she was right that time in not complaining about the telegram, not starting anything . . . yes, yes, they would transfer them to the capital, with the other woman and with her, and maybe there the dead man's *tone* wouldn't reach her . . .

Maybe she should turn the radio on low . . . She did, and she slowly raised the volume . . . , maybe there was some news . . . , she searched and searched and searched . . . all she heard were military marches . . . strange that they weren't broadcasting the regular programs at that time . . . marches . . .

marches . . . she was saying to herself. Marches . . . mar . . . ches . . . mar . . . She was not surprised, but her confusion was such that she turned the volume up full and was showered with some jazz that bathed her in the whip-lash presence of her little blue-eyed gringo. She immediately turned the radio off and stayed there with her eyes closed and her heart leaping out of her breast . . .

"A pretty name, Bobby Thompson! . . ." she said to herself. "He must have gone away. That was the only reason I gave in the second time . . . only because of that? . . . You're a happy hypocrite; you gave in because you liked the boy! . . . No, no . . . !" She even moved her head negatively, talking to herself. "I swear to God I didn't! The first time, yes, I won't deny it, it was crazy, a whim, an urge to go *brooding* with him, not brooding by myself, or going breeding, the way that hoarse teacher corrected me, the one they arrested as an agitator, or maybe for liquor and being a Protestant and God knows what else, because he was the one who was agitated, before and after. Yes, the first time, yes, I almost called the little gringo, but the second time was because he was going away, so we could say good-by like modern people, with a jazz concert . . ."

Bye bye! He was probably on his way far off and she was there remembering, beside her man, who was no longer "her man," but belonged to the other one or to some whore. She had to get used to the idea of losing him if she didn't want to keep on suffering, the idea of accepting things, since she had been left with the dead man's *tone* by the mulatto, who had been sent by the telegram bitch. Small threads of sweat along her body. She wasn't sweating, she was weeping sweat, she was weeping with all of her pores, just like a shower-head . . . oh, if she could only wash herself with that sweat that was now the weeping of the curse of an Egyptian tomb that lay over her. In a magazine she had read a story about a mummy. Yes, that must have been it. And the Sansívar woman, Tonina Sansívar, didn't know or didn't want to give her the scientific explanation of what they were

doing to her, turning her into a mummy . . . a mummy . . . She a mummy and the other woman alive! . . . Putting dead men to brood on top of her? . . . Because Tonina Sansívar did tell her that, in deep secret and maybe with a double meaning, that what they did with those tomb powders was to put dead men to brood on top of a woman so that her whatnot would never be brooded on top of again, because there wasn't any room . . . ha, ha! . . . she had more than enough room for all the dead and all the living. But that wasn't what it was all about. What she had to watch out for was that they wouldn't mummify her.

She brushed back the hair that had fallen over her face and stood up. The first thing was to move, not stay like a mummy beside the silent radio, sitting on the edge of the bed as if not the wave but the bird had fled, and life is so much movement that by just getting up—a heartbeat: the mulatto must have been wandering around there, knowing that her man had come back, and he was probably spreading dead man's bones. She staggered and opened the door wide. No one. The trembling of the stars. The trembling of her body. The night, salty, swollen, damp. If she found him she would kill him with her knife, the small machete she used in the kitchen and which she now kept by the street door on guard, next to the "Hold!" of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe that Father Fejú had left her, a wooden cross, and another cross made of holy palms. If she found him, she would kill him and with his blood wipe away the curse that hung over her. Nobody. Nobody. It was hard for her to believe. The evidence of the heartbeat, of that reality which reality denies, and which remains palpitating in the chest, sometimes so real, so true. She put the machete back where she kept it hidden in a corner, and she ran her hand over her brow, trying to calm down. It was better that way. Better. She would have committed a crime to see justice done since there was no law or ordinance to punish them . . . Does there exist, perhaps, a death penalty for a person who steals a woman's lover, the way there does for premeditated murder? For love is much, much

more than life. And not stage love, or the love in books, but the small, ordinary, daily love, the love that washes across our sad life, habit-love, the love of small moments of joy. And where was there greater premeditation than what had been used against her? Not even in the movies, which is saying something. Joined to the dead by the dust of the dead, to night, because they do their harm at night. Joined to shadow, darkness, obscurity, a bloody beast of blackness that had been left outside, all held back only by the weak boards of the open door, unlocked, unlatched, ready to be opened suddenly, rapidly, to surprise the mulatto if he came on his little errand of witchcraft, and she wouldn't let him escape. But what did she sense, why did she suspect that he would come that night? Her only answer was the thought of her man. Footsteps? She stuck her ear to the door, motionless, sweaty, without blinking, not breathing. All clear. She would let them approach and she would use the protection of her machete to go out and cut his head off, because at that moment she realized that it was the sick man who was moving his feet in bed, trying to kick off the sheet, as if he were walking, getting away from there, from her, going to the one in the telegram, without his words of good-by being understood behind the hailstorm of his chattering teeth.

Clara María went over to listen to the half-words that Captain Salomé managed to utter through the clatter of his teeth, which looked to her like small pieces of white bone, half-shredded, obsessed by the small bones she had found in the mulatto's pocket the night she had found him working the spell, turning her into a mummy. But nauseated, nauseated by the browsing light of the candle that was eating its own clarity, nauseated as if she were sailing through the darkness and the mist, her body mummified, her face greenish, her hair strung out, the grimace of a big-eared mask, shiny cheekbones, beveled lips, and a dessicated smile, she understood very little at first of what he was saying with his uvula twisting up into his nostrils, although afterward, from phrases that escaped him, she understood that he was mixed up

in something, and that he had not come out in uniform, with his best uniform on, that night of June 29, just because he felt like it . . .

The news on the radio during those last days made her suppositions logical. She could have turned it on again, but stronger than her curiosity was her fear of hitting some jazz, which was the same as falling into the arms of her little gringo and having his whatnot right there. She sighed at the same time as the candle, except that candles sigh for lost souls and she sighed because she missed Bobby. The second time with him it was madness. He had turned her into a piece of chewing gum, chewy, elastic, sticky. And after one brooding, another, and another. A mummy? She a mummy? Maybe for the soldier boy there, who never got beyond captain, and every time his companions in arms went up he seemed to go down, to such a degree that he was no longer a human captain but one on a zoological level. For this one, yes, a mummy, the mummy of a mummy, perfect mummification needs no special acids, daily life is enough; but not for the blue-eyed traveler—people with blue eyes are never close, they always seem so far away—for the little gringo who had rejuvenated her, who had made her into a mass that was sonorous, brutal, alive, torn apart, with the stomach of a drum-wing dove, her great pear-shaped breasts leaping, beating each other like two punching-bags, and her arms abandoned around that body of white sand like dark rivers on a delta.

"Let me go! . . . Let me go!"

She realized that she was not clutching the little gringo but her man, and she released him like a hot coal, and that was really what he was, because the poor man was burning with fever.

"Let me go! . . . Let me go! . . ." He went on struggling in his sleep, trying to get away from someone, something that was weighing on top of him and which would not let him move.

". . . No swallowing . . . ," he went on saying, "no swallowing . . . just me, but let me go . . . let me go . . . just me . . . the Company and the government . . . bring them down to-

gether . . . it's like a dream . . ." he comforted himself, chewing his cheeks and repeating, "it's like a dream . . . like a dream . . .

". . . the bastard? . . . oh, he's going to pay for it! . . . he himself was the one who said, what do you want promotions for, you won't need any here with me . . ." With great effort and complaints he pulled his left hand away from the weight of his body, which was face down, and he fingered spider steps along the holes in the embroidered edge of the pillowcase which supported his head.

". . . no . . . no, Samuelón . . . I don't know how to play that . . ." He was moving his fingers along the pillowcase, "And with my other hand it comes out better strumming . . . picking? . . . when I pick I can't hear well . . . strumming . . . slippery . . . going from strings made from torch fires to ones that turn to gut . . ." and, speaking with the voice of a low-toned whistle, something that he might not have wanted to be heard, and which, if it were heard, would be snuffed out by his own words, he added, "slippery, slippery, torches to guts, on that day they're going to pay us for all of it . . . all new, no promotions at all . . . none for him and none for us . . . just as long as they don't transfer him, just as long as they leave him in his feudal fruit kingdom with his two captains and his two hundred soldiers . . .

". . . but what difference does it make now, Samuelón, what difference does it make if we lower the fingering while the tone goes up . . . half-tones . . . half-tones are what we've lowered and you can already hear the masses rising . . . and the people will go up to the top, not to the first frets . . . the people will give the promotions . . ."

Clara María unfolded her lips without saying a word. All that could be heard was the scratch, as if a sheet of dry saliva had been torn. "The whole thing is against the colonel," she thought, "against the Yawn." Without knowing whether or not to scratch herself, she put her open hand under her hair, which was hot and sticky, like a winding cloth. Her armpit made the sound of a hinge opening, a puddle of sweat with hair in it, as she raised

her arm to the head that was eating her up. She scratched, if only it had been that outside itching, but the uneasiness was inside, and after holding her hand in the black and sweaty underbrush for a while, she began to braid her hair . . .

It shook her with fear to hear Pedro Domingo speaking as if he were dead, his eyes closed and his face expressionless, bloodless, the color of pumice stone in the porous light of the candle, and in the air she halted the motion of her hand, which was only a bundle of shadows on the walls . . . Wake him up . . . Shake him . . . The fever was keeping him down and maybe he had to report in, even though he didn't have his patrol . . . She sharpened her ear in search of the clock . . . It seemed to have stopped . . . They say that clocks stop when they break down or when a person is delirious . . . She didn't awaken him . . . Just the gesture . . . She didn't move him . . . Pillowed and somewhat loving words came out of his rolled-up tongue, as out of a curling iron, although she was in no mood for curls . . . on guard now, more with what she was hearing, lying over him with the jealousy of a near-sighted animal scratching a rut spot with his snout, snorting saliva, eyes squinting, looking for a trace of the telegram; but she recovered in time. The Rose he was talking about was the Rose in the tango, and she had to be content with receiving the fetid exhalation of the sick man's malarial fever, the trembling of his eyelashes, the grinding of his teeth, and the suffering in which he was madly arguing with himself . . .

The sick man was including real people in his delirium: a captain who was a guitar student; Samuelón, his teacher, Prospector, striker, and revolutionary; and Cárcamo, the other of the two captains condemned to be captains for the rest of their lives as long as they didn't disturb the feudal fruit kingdom of Colonel Yawn. The Captain who was a guitar student in a moment of endless practicing, desperate, or with the sense and tenacity of a recital, was mumbling in time to the footsteps of his companion in arms the words to *Rose of Fire*, without the latter's realizing that it was meant for him. *Men called her the rose of fire*, or

Rose of fire, the fun that came after . . . Rose of fire and her happy laughter . . . ha . . . ha . . . ha . . .

Clara María heard the laugh without knowing whether it was part of his delirium or whether that bubbling laughter was part of the tango.

"Poor old man," she said to herself and she felt sorry for him, "God knows what he's mixed up in! That laugh frightens me. It's upsetting . . . it'll be worse if he's with the strikers and the government doesn't fall, and worse still if he's defending the government, which would be his duty, and the strike people win . . ." She shook her head from side to side. "Except that in this country there's nothing good, everything's the worst . . ."

"Ha . . . ha . . . ha . . ." he went on laughing in his delirium. "Ha . . . ha . . . ha . . ." and ". . . ha . . . ha . . . ha . . . ha . . .

". . . no, Samuelón! . . . no, Samuelón! . . . a citizen here isn't born a serf, and the foreigner's no longer the . . . bosssss . . ." He gave such a leap when he said that, that if she had not grabbed him in time he would have fallen off the bed.

She stopped him almost in midair, lifted his head back onto the pillow, cleaned the sweat from his forehead, the bridge of his nose, the rounds of his eyelids, his chin with a scented handkerchief soaked in drugs of love, and she rocked him like a child so that he would go to sleep. He was safer there with her, because if he were mixed up in something all of a sudden, and he certainly was, he might be killed on the streets.

She got undressed. Not even in her skin could she bear the heat. There was no peace for her. Everything passed over her without touching her, the way objects and dark clouds pass through a mirror, and she even made a motion of shaking, of throwing off the quiet movement of the furniture from her person, the legs of the tables and chairs, the foosteps of the clock, which had the walk of a mechanical fly, covering her body with the earth of dead time. She went back to her thoughts, but she couldn't keep her eyelids open or remain seated. She blew out the candle and got away from everything evil, suspended on the

soft springs of drowsiness, leaving her eyes fastened on the door in case the mulatto came back. If he knew that her man had returned and was there with her, that was the most likely thing. But he wouldn't get away alive. In defense of her love and her life she was ready for everything. He wouldn't get away alive.

40

"Good night! . . ." The last voices were heard in Semírames. "Good night! . . ." The last voices of the servants. "Good night! . . ." Everybody in bed now. They had to get up early the next day. Don Juan Lucero and Bobby Maker Thompson were leaving for Chicago. Only Don Juan was going with him. The rest of the Lucero family would stay in Tiquisate. It was not a matter of running away but of getting there in time, in time for the Green Pope, cancer-ridden, semiparalyzed, and with pneumonia now, to set his eyes of a pirate sailing far from land now over seas of morphine on the face of his young grandson, white and blond, with blue eyes, who until a moment before was rocking, propelling himself with his foot, in a chair that had been left on the terrace, his head against the back, sweaty, desperate, with a growing restlessness. He knew where it came from, but he didn't want to confess it, and he clutched the arms of the chair, trying to forget a smell that the night brought back to him in the midst of the distant barking of the dogs and the intoxicating aroma of the flowers, the cut wood, the grass wet with dew.

That smell. That smell of suffering without relief. He filled his chest with a gust of air that momentarily softened the discomfort of his tense, tingling legs, all to the rhythm of the rocker which, in the rear, with the push of his buttocks, transmitted from its edges a tickling that was so pleasant that he would have stayed there if the sensation had not gone away and he felt the need, the urgency to cross his legs and oppress that part of his being, bold and strange, which he was manipulating as if through gloves, his hands in his pockets. What should he do? . . . Where should he go? . . . He knew where, but . . .

He closed and opened his eyes without stopping his rocking, pushing faster and faster with his foot, and each time he would throw his head harder back against the chair as if to take all pressure off his neck and Adam's apple. Only in that way could he find relief, for as soon as he sank back into the chair, he had an urge for self-manipulation, his nails scratching in his damp, dirty pockets made of the cloth used on the backs of maps and through the weave of which he felt his blood pounding, the running of his blood in rivers with no outlet . . .

What was holding him back? . . . Because she didn't expect him? . . . Then he'd give her a big surprise . . . Because he'd told her he was leaving that day, the twenty-ninth, and he wasn't leaving until tomorrow? . . . So much the better! . . . It would be nicer to say good-by again with jazz and his broodear, as he called her, laughing at that *brooding* business . . .

He got up like a flash, as if he had set himself on fire with a match, but the impulse killed the decision and he went back to his chair, mechanical, perturbed, reasoning, fanning himself, leaving his neck free, his head thrown back on the chair, his hands clutching at the arms of the chair like claws. It was foolhardy to venture out into the boiling darkness of the coastal night. Going in with closed eyes, groping through the black fever of the baking night, torrid and vegetable, where cruel thorns prick with the voracious hunger of a star; orchids surrounded by ferns and moss, like immense sex organs that have been pos-

sessed and have broken apart with the gusts of hurricane spasms, where animal ferocity flies, crawls, or walks and knows no limits.

But other fears held him to the moving chair. The people who came to say good-by to Don Juan Lucero, relatives and friends, millionaires always have a lot of relatives and friends, had passed on, using the frightening tones of a ghost story, the news and rumors concerning the danger the country was in that night, when it was not known whether the *man* would resign or not, and the danger they were in there, left to their own stinking fate because the unfeeling Yawn had restricted his troops in order to defend himself, not listening to the complaints of the Company or the citizenry, not caring a whit that bandits on horseback were doing whatever they pleased, assaulting, burning, raping, and hanging people to trees and telegraph poles. The closest friends, the intimates of Don Juancho Lucero, whispered in his ear that they envied him his trip and congratulated him for taking Bobby away. The farther away the better. The strikers might kidnap him when they saw that their cause was lost. The boy was headstrong and he went everywhere, all over, raising Cain. And once he was kidnapped, as ransom they would demand everything they had petitioned for and much more. They had gotten so abusive. That was why it couldn't be worse. His grandfather! His grandfather! He saw himself in his grandson, and he would give them everything they asked for, all of his stock in the Company (the Luceros pricked up their ears), just as long as they returned him safe and sound. It was his mother who had sent him there. The old man didn't want it. The fear that the Germans or the Japanese would bomb Chicago had made his mother send him off to the plantations. At least that was what the hysterical lady had thought. He wouldn't die. The seed of the Thompsons would be saved, that of the Green Pope, which, even though it came through the female line, was so authentic that it needed only one proof, which was more than enough, the blatant resemblance Bobby bore to that salty pirate who had worn down the shores of the Caribbean and had worn down men, who are

the shores of human sweat. And among the visitors there were even those who insinuated that the Company was relaxing its firm policy against the strikers out of fear that something might happen to the grandson. Yes, yes, they should take him away. The farther away the better. Tomorrow was departure day. They would leave in a twin-engined plane. If it hadn't been so dark, the aircraft could have been seen resting on the landing field, just a clearing in the plantations, like an immense lobster in the midst of the banana groves.

Bobby fastened his blue, anxious eyes on the deep night broken by the passage of jabbering owls as they cut the silence with a roar of wind and, as there were no human lights, only stars and fireflies shone, fireflies and stars, as if all the inhabitants had gone and the land were sinking into its final sleep. He grew restless. He went from one side of the terrace to the other. But the terrace was in darkness too. Where was there to go, what was there to see, walking back and forth, the milky glow that used to rise up on the horizon from the buildings and fields of the Company? Everything in darkness. And the command post in darkness, the streets of the town in darkness, the railroad station in darkness. It was best to go to bed. He closed his eyes, because even though he was in the dark, he was ashamed. Why go to bed? To find satisfaction all by himself? He quickly raised his eyelids and searched, searched, searched in the unfathomable darkness, in the midst of the sound of the leaves, the drops of sweat that fell across his forehead, and the saliva, which in spite of his spitting and spitting clouded his eyes, the hedge of chilcas and dwarf pines, the cornfields, and the small house rising up on a flat, where she, even if she wasn't expecting him, would come to the door, happy that he hadn't gone away, when she heard him whistle a jazz tune.

But he was already next to his bed and he lay down with his clothes on, not knowing what to do, whether to go out or to stay there . . .

He got undressed without getting off the bed. Everything

bothered him. He grew desperate, irritated. A button that wouldn't come undone soon bounced off by itself, torn out. How hard it was, good Lord, to get his shirt off while lying down. And taking his pants off. The strangest movements. At last, at last he got his legs free, something like a baby wrapped in diapers, the pant legs turned into accordions. Everything flying, falling into a chair placed between his bed and that of Cocko Lucero who slept next to him. The turn of the shoes. One. The other. Then his socks. And what joy to have his free toes fanning out. He curled them. He had the feeling that they were like the points of a compass. But he curled them too late. A shudder paralyzed him. Compact, all in one piece, lifeless, motionless. But it was only an instant. His bedclothes still had the woman's smell, the smell he had brought back clinging to his skin and in which his senses scattered, rolling around, hallucinated, convulsed, pouring out, his hands held tight between his naked legs as if he were trying to tie himself down, becoming completely immobilized in order to enjoy only with his smell, opening his nostrils to that intimate odor, and then, with his mouth and nose open, pursuing in that perfume of female flesh the form of her beautiful breasts, her rounded stomach, her hips, her thighs, the secret folds of the well at the bottom of which there glitters the coin that buys everything, that pays for everything, that demands everything from the one who dives in to bring it up. But he realized that he was swimming on dry land, between the sheets, without her there in person and with her in her perfume, her memory, the echo of her voice, her laughter, that way she had of lifting her hand to her hair, of looking, of blinking . . .

In the next room the Lucero brothers were coughing and conversing.

"There'll be no strike . . ." one of them said, his voice hollow with sleepiness, without much desire to speak.

And those words: "There'll be no strike . . ." "There'll be no strike . . ." *"There'll be no strike! . . ."* grew in Bobby's head until they deafened him. "Would they hang them . . . ?" he

wondered, "Would they hang the strikers on the smoke of the machine-guns? . . ."

After a while he heard the following opinion when he thought they had already gone to sleep:

"I'm not optimistic . . ." Was it Don Juancho who was talking? "I'm human by nature and as a human being I tell you that the only thing certain in this world . . . and in the next, is doubt . . ."

"But in this case," the answer was not long in coming, "I can assure you that there'll be no strike, we've won the game, and that's because the leaders rushed people into the union business knowing it would shut the doors to any other settlement. But the Manager shrugged his shoulders and received the representatives of the famous Tiquisate Workers' Union and let them know that he agreed to all of their requests and demands, with the sole condition that they refuse to back the subversive strike in Bananera, which was to be declared tomorrow at zero hour. The members of the delegation, some willingly, others grumbling, taken by surprise, had to accept the Manager's offer as a beginning to the solution of the conflict, leaving the final word to the mass meeting that's taking place tomorrow night and which, I understand, will be attended by Company delegates with complete authority. The gringos are practical, they don't waste time on little things . . ."

Bobby rolled his face on the pillows as if wanting to break up the words that were coming from the next room, turn them to dust, forget them, so that nothing would take him away from thinking about the one whose smell he had there—oh, if he only had her!—and because it gave him pleasure, a hidden delight, rubbing until it hurt on the fine sandpaper of the starched linen, rubbing his forehead, his nose, his cheeks, his chin with its golden fuzz. He was sweating copiously. A strange languor. The others were quiet, but their last words: "Well, luckily the danger's over. They've even turned on the lights!" resounded in Bobby's ears as he kept on repeating to himself: "The danger's over, they've turned on the lights, what am I doing here? . . ."

He turned over, a person thinks better face up . . . "What am I doing here? . . . The old men are asleep now . . . I'll go to the little house on the flat, whistle a jazz tune . . . Yes, yes, the old men are asleep now. I can hear them snoring . . . What am I doing here? . . . If I got dressed . . . But I've got to do it now . . . No one'll hear me leave . . . I'll get there . . . I'll whistle . . . She'll open the door . . . I can feel her legs . . ." Maybe he should have Cocko Lucero go with him . . . He put out his arm to reach the hand of his sleeping friend, there was not much space between their beds, and how good the contact with that half-dead, hot, sweaty hand felt . . . But he stopped short of his intention . . . It would be setting the table for him when he went away . . . leaving him the secret . . . the address . . . the house . . . the possibilities of his *broodear* . . .

Naked, he went to the terrace and was startled. It wasn't the same night that his eyes had just left. It was a different night. It wasn't the night of June 29. It was a different night. From the installations of the Company, of *his Company*, sometimes the Thompson in him came out, the glow of the lights was climbing up to the highest point on the horizon, and from there it powdered down in luminous dots like the water of the artificial rain that bathed the banana groves. The danger had passed. Obviously. Even the barking of the dogs wasn't the same. They were barking, but not complaining and anxious as in complete darkness. And he could feel the coolness of the early morning. A kind of bowing down by the burning climate. Those were the hours when one could breathe.

He got dressed, not with two hands, with all of those that blossom out on an anxious person, and he was about to awaken Cocko, but there was no time and . . . there was no time except to leave, to sink into the mist, into the hot greenness of the grazing land, kicking the damp earth, going, going, going, as if getting free from himself as if leaving a jail to find certain happiness . . .

Clara María had also begun to weave a happy dream. She

touched her man close by, it had been so long since he had slept with her, and she stuck to him the way water clings to crags. She was unconsciously struggling so as not to hear what was perhaps only an illusion of her ears. And it was so nice. She snuggled up. The coolness of the early morning. It was the only time on the coast that a person could sleep. What can be called sleeping. The rest of the night one dozed. But it was obvious that someone was prowling around the house. No, that time it wasn't her obsession that made her hear the movement of the mulatto by her door. He might be spying. But that couldn't be. How could anyone spy in the dark? She calmed down, shrugged, pulled up the sheet to cover herself . . . no, she didn't cover her feet, the movement of her hand, her fingers slowly pulling on the cloth, her body half-erect, quickly changed as she sat on the edge of the bed, more ears than eyes, trembling, completely awake and mistress of the situation. The mulatto's footsteps. His movements as he squatted to spread the dead man's bones by her door. She got up from the bed little by little. The machete was next to the door. She would hit him with the flat and the blade until she drew blood with which to wash away the dead man's *tone* that he was coming to spread on her, no longer to make her man leave her but so that he would be widowed. Standing. She managed to stand up with no more sound than that of her joints. But something held her back. On the table where the matches and the candle were her hand hit something that would really help her get revenge for the mulatto's operations, and without hesitation she went to the door and emptied the pistol she was carrying in her hand at a shape . . .

The shots made Salomé jump out of bed and go through the smoke-filled room to where Clara María had just shot off his pistol at the shadow that was fleeing down the street, staggering . . .

"What did you do? . . ."

"The mulatto! . . . The mulatto! . . ."

"What mulatto? . . ."

"The one who came to my door to spread dead man's bones!"

"If you didn't do him in he must be in bad shape! . . ."

And, looking into the street, the captain added while the silence grew . . .

"He fell over there . . . Let's go!"

She couldn't take a step. Salomé ran alone to the place where the figure had collapsed. How could he tell who it was? He used the small flame of his cigarette lighter and came right back.

"Did I kill him? . . ." Clara María asked, her voice frozen and her jaw rigid, hoping that he would say no.

"Yes, but it wasn't the mulatto . . ."

"Who was it?"

"The grandson of the President of the Company!"

"It can't be . . . he went away . . ." and she went over with steps that were strides, stumbling over stones, roots, followed by the captain, who lighted Bobby's face with the small flame.

His hands and stomach were bloody, burned, smoked, like the golden hair which still had traces of the strong smell of the shots, his eyelids half-raised, showing glimpses of his blue eyes, his lips half-open.

When Clara María came to, collapsed on her bed, she heard the captain wash his hands, put on his tunic, and come over to tell her:

"I turned on the electric light and you didn't notice anything . . ." But why was he talking to her as if nothing had happened, as if it had all been a nightmare, a bad dream? "I had to have some light so that we wouldn't leave any traces of blood from the door to where he fell."

Clara María closed her eyes, two immense tears rolled down her cheeks. It wasn't a bad dream, it was true. Reality can't be erased, so let all the blood be washed away, all the blood . . .

"Now," he continued speaking to her, buttoning up the last buttons of his tunic, "I'm going to the barracks, and don't you move out of here. Nobody's seen anything. They'll blame the strikers or the bandits that are going around on horseback carry-

ing on. If they ask you or interrogate you, you heard the shots and that's all."

"Get me a drink . . ." She unfolded her lips with a hoarse voice.

The officer went to the cupboard and brought back a bottle of cognac and two glasses.

"I'm going to have one too," he said, and he filled the glasses up halfway.

She got up, took the bottle in a trembling hand, filled her glass to the brim, and drank it down. She filled it again until the liquor spilled over and she drank it with the blind avidity of a killer, a murderer. The alcohol hit her and she softened, became limp, her nails digging into the flesh of her hands, her teeth into her pale lips, sometimes convulsed, sometimes wailing.

The Captain picked up his weapon, locked the door from the inside, and went out through the window.

It wasn't dawning. That night would never end.

41

"He reeesigned! He reeesigned! He reeesigned!"

The crowd was bellowing, shouting, their faces, which yesterday had been made of clay, were metallic and bronze; their hair, which yesterday had been strings, was black froth; their nails, which yesterday had been bread crusts, were feline, and their bare feet, which yesterday had been slave feet were like brutal hooves . . .

"He reeesigned! He reeesigned! He reeesigned!"

Some were weeping with joy, others were laughing, others were weeping and laughing at the same time, and others, like Judasita, alas, she wouldn't see the return of her son who had been shot, were silent in their sobs . . .

"He reeesigned! He reeesigned! He reeesigned! . . ."

Believing it. Believing it. First it was a matter of believing it, becoming accustomed to the fact that what had seemed impossible was true. Knowing that it wouldn't disappear with the cry, with the dream when one awakened, as with the few early risers who abandoned their sheets, slipping out, their faces startled,

dressed in whatever clothes they had close by, anxious to go out into the street to confirm it, doors, windows, footsteps, embraces, jumping, running, to hear what the radio said about the presidential resignation in the midst of the great shouting of the crowd.

"He reeesigned! He reeesigned! He reeesigned! . . ."

Hearing it. Hearing it was not enough. Saying it. Saying it was not enough. They needed to shout it, shout it, shout it in the midst of that morning with the pounding of the sun and the smell of turpentine. The *Beast* had resigned. And it wasn't a trick. The radio announced the formation of a military government.

"He reeesigned! He reeesigned! He reeesigned!"

They all needed to hear it, say it, shout it. The boy who arrived bareback on a race horse, the puzzled old man on a nervous mule, the one getting out of a car, the one getting into a truck, going about or abandoning their chores they joined the throng.

"He reeesigned! He reeesigned! He reeesigned!"

And brothers, brother with brother, and fathers with their sons and sons with their fathers, and husbands and wives, and uncles, and nephews, and cousins, and brothers-in-law, and old friends, and servants, nuzzled each other with their eyes, and after looking into each other's faces without saying a word, mute with joy, mad with weeping and laughter, they shook hands, embraced, forming the knot of the survivors who were safe and sound after death throes of months and years in the same house, under the same roof, in the silent dying that came every day, every hour, every minute, swallowing what they thought, what they felt, reduced to domestic things, or getting drunk so as not to think or feel . . .

But not just relatives and friends embraced. Strangers, people who had never seen each other embraced, shook hands, celebrating the fact that they were alive, free, and in their homeland . . .

"Alive and free and in our homeland? . . . Let's have another drink! . . . Give me another hug! . . . Let me have those five lily fingers of yours! . . ."

They jumped with joy, eyes dead-atom drunk from the bright sunlight, in a glow of tears, their mouths wet with liquor that reeked of a tannery, their gun-barrel nostrils giving off tobacco smoke, their straw hats scratching their ears and their mustaches pouring down . . .

"No foolishness here, anyone who doesn't join the fun can go fuck himself! Palm trees are palm trees! Up the workers! . . ."

"Down with the gringos!"

"Hurray for Bananera! Hurray for Tiquisate!"

"Gringos out! Gringos out!"

"He resigned! He resigned! He resigned! He resigned!"

The sentry didn't lay Don Juan Lucero out with a shot because he obeyed the command to halt at the last moment. He hadn't realized, tormented as he was, so stupefied, so unaware of what he was doing. The sound of the weapon, already cocked to singe him with a shot at point-blank range stopped him.

"There's nobody at the police station!" Don Juan shouted at the sentry, his lips trembling from sorrow, doubt, intimidation. "There aren't any police there, only the Commandant is left with any authority and it's urgent that I see him!"

"What do you want to see him for?" The soldier used the familiar form with Don Juan, cold, authoritarian, his Asiatic eyes barely showing under the tildes of the *ñ*'s that left his eyelids half-closed, his chin-strap tight on his jaw.

Lucero explained to him with a voice of desperate pleading, not caring that the sentry was still aiming his weapon at him, because the soldier was still on the alert, thinking that he might jump him, that the grandson of the President of the Company had been murdered early that morning and they couldn't claim the body without an order from the authorities.

"You can't see the Commandant today," the sentry cut him off. His helmet moved like a puppet as he spoke, "And you better go away, because I have orders to shoot . . ."

Lucero measured the path of the bullet along that menacing voice, the barrel of the rifle, his body, and eternity, and he moved

from where he was standing with the movements of a robot, walking backward, since it might occur to the sentry to shoot him from behind.

Bobby's corpse was already in a coffin in the Manager's office. They had put it on a metal desk, surrounded by a telephone and a typewriter, an adding machine and a pencil sharpener.

"The Company is foresighted, like all of our enterprises operating in the tropics," the Manager said to Don Juan, who, with his hand on Cocko's shoulder didn't dare look at the ivory-colored wooden box, "and as you can see, Mr. Lucero, we have a stock of caskets *Made in . . .*"

"All we need to bring is an electric chair," the Superintendent grumbled, half-angry and half-joking, chewing tobacco with his gold teeth, "and then these strikers would find out whether or not they can kill without being punished . . ."

"But as far as I'm concerned, what can I tell you." Another old-time employee spoke, chewing gum with increasing speed and quantity (chacle . . . chacle . . . chicle . . . chacle . . . chacle . . . chicle . . .). "As far as I'm concerned, it wasn't the strikers . . . What good would it do them? . . ." (chacle . . . chacle . . . chicle . . .)

"Aah! . . ." The Superintendent, chewing away on his tobacco, raised his arms like a bird about to take flight.

"The blame," a young employee from Illinois who was eating peanuts and putting the shells on the coffin, spoke up, "rests with the authorities. Nowhere to be seen . . ."

"Chacle . . . chacle . . . chacle . . . chicle . . ." The gum man was heard chewing and speaking, but it was hard to understand what he was saying, something like: "Mr. Lucero lot to blame . . . chicle . . . chacle . . . chacle . . . chicle . . . chacle . . . Mr. Lucero knowing Bobby in danger . . . chacle-chi-cle-cha-chi-chi . . ."

"Danger of being kidnapped, all right." The young employee from Illinois, with a green-eyed face as pale as the ivory of the casket, came closer as he said that and blew on the peanut shells, a blowing that became a whistle . . . *"If you want some fun with your beak, get a bag of peanuts cheap . . ."*

"And that's why," the gum man chocochicled, "the strikers aren't to blame as far as his death is concerned. They would have kidnapped him and asked for ransom. They wouldn't have killed him..."

"I don't think his grandfather will be able to stand the news! It's brutal! Brutal! . . ." Juan Lucero turned toward them as if speaking to ghosts, the truth was that he couldn't see or hear too well, it was as if he'd been placed inside of another Juan Lucero, a Juan Lucero made of opaque glass.

"And the news was sent in a cable, with all the details," the Superintendent went on, the corners of his mouth with a slight diarrhetic stain from the tobacco.

"Addressed to . . ." Lucero was running ahead of himself, leaving the "to" of the question waiting in his open mouth, which had the taste of dry tears.

"To his mother! To his mother!" The Superintendent calmed him down, knowing that Lucero would have stopped breathing, not out of feelings of pity, but from the fear that, if the old man found out, he might be capable of changing his will concerning some shares of stock that he had marked for Lucero provided that he took as good care of Bobby as his own two eyes.

He sighed deeply and took out his handkerchief to mop his sweat, waiting for Cocko, whom he had sent to Semírames to ask if there was any news from the capital.

Chicle . . . chacle . . . chicle . . . chacle! . . . could be heard from the gum man, who was standing watch over the dead boy with his tireless ruminant saliva, and the peanut man, the young man from Illinois, sounding like a rodent, one peanut after another.

"The cable was sent to his mother, and she'll have to be very careful so that Thompson doesn't find out . . ."

"You think . . ." Don Juan tasted those two words, feeling comforted. Gringos always comforted him. Even if they spoke bad Spanish they had so much aplomb, so much security in their words that they didn't seem to be speaking with sounds but with facts.

"I don't just think so, Mr. Lucero, I'm sure of it." And the Superintendent stood there with his lively little eyes behind his gold-rimmed glasses, the muscles of the web of his jaw leaping while the salivary extract of his wad of tobacco slipped down his throat, his tongue quiet now, like a bulk to be spread about his golden teeth before he went on speaking. "You know very well that the old man was against the boy's leaving Chicago."

Don Juan nodded with his heavy head.

"And it was Bobby's mother who sent him here, afraid that her son would be killed in Chicago if the Japanese or Germans bombed the city . . ."

"And just look, just look how things turned out." The words came out of Lucero. "Coming here just to be killed!"

He moved his arms, which were hanging from his shoulders in a gesture of abandonment and helplessness to remedy things.

"Chicle chacle . . . chicle chacle . . ." the gum man was heard.

"Let's hope that his grandfather dies without finding out," Lucero added, and here he said what he felt. "Why not admit it? It would be better for him to die thinking that he was leaving his seed behind, the grandson, who, as his legs and shoulders grew, was looking more and more like him! Good Lord, the things fate makes happen! This feeling that the end is near with all these strikes and nonstrikes!"

Chicle . . . chacle . . . chicle . . . chacle . . . ! could be heard from the gum man, a ruminant beside the ivory-colored coffin that held Bobby's remains, and the young green-eyed rodent from Illinois, who was piling peanut shells on the coffin while he hummed, very low, almost with his breath . . . *"If you want some fun with your beak, get a bag of peanuts cheap . . ."*

Aurelia Maker Thompson, false eyelashes far apart like small pennants on the rims of her eyelids, bluish hair, elastic neck, a body which massage, exercise, dieting, and paraffin baths kept slender, put out her cigarette in the ashtray, making room among the others for that new straw-tipped butt lightly tinted with lip-

stick, and she went to the door of the living-room, peeping into the garden from one of the windows, and received the cable which a messenger had just given to one of the servants. She was waiting for it anxiously. It was no doubt the cable which gave the exact time of Bobby's arrival in Chicago. She would snatch up her son at the airport and drive him back at full speed so that his grandfather could get to see him. And that morning, in the stupor of the drugs, the asphyxia, and the agony, he had called his name and asked for him several times with small howls from his larynx, where there was a mingling of the squeak of a mouse and the creak of an old piece of furniture.

She didn't know how long she stood with the cablegram in her hands, her eyes on the letters that rose and sank, rose and sank, like the keys on a player piano, petrified, swaying in space, trying to find the words that corresponded to the play of those fleeting signs, the letters of a cablegram, the letters of a machine with gigantic type that left behind an audible image of that being who was no longer the splendid, magnificent grandson of George Maker Thompson . . . not now, not now . . . not now . . . she abbreviated repeatedly, icily, until she forgot the "not" and left between her teeth like a nervous chill the now, now, now . . . how . . . how . . . how . . .

She closed her eyes, kept them tight, tight, tight, and when she opened them she was already on her way to her father's bedroom shouting:

"They killed Bobby! . . . They killed Bobby! . . . They killed Bobby! . . ."

The old man, sitting up, eyes of glass and mist, sticky dead hair, a skull, a skeleton outside of the silk sheets, wouldn't let her speak. He was gargling saliva with the joyful bubbling of a liquid laugh in the corners of his mouth, trying to express the joy that his eyes and gestures were translating into words which he managed to bring out through his nose and half-open pit of his mouth, between his tightened jawbones, with little weeping howls . . .

"Bobby . . . Bobby . . . Bobby . . . was . . . just . . . here! . . . Here with me!" he managed to say clearly

Aurelia crumpled the cable in her hand, which had lost its feeling, as the tears she held back burned her eyes, and she went over to the dying man who was gesticulating happily, happy to have had Bobby sitting on the edge of his bed beside him . . .

Crushed, she crumpled the cable tighter in her fingers. She couldn't give him the news, that horrible, frightful news. She had to swallow it by herself. And even if she told him, he wouldn't have believed that Bobby had been killed. On the edge of the bed one could see the place where the boy had been sitting, the weight of his weightless body, his dream presence . . . she reached out her convulsed hand . . . touched the spot . . . put out her fingertips . . . laid down her cheek . . . her lips . . . her closed eyes . . . her head . . . but Thompson's voice interrupted her actions . . .

Lucid, his eyes bulging as if he were looking for someone, he shouted:

"Find him! . . . Find him! . . . Find him! . . ."

Aurelia instinctively turned to look about, but there was no one there. She was alone between the absent corpse of her son and the rigid remains of the Green Pope, who had just died . . .

"He reeesiiigned! He reeesiiigned! He reeesiiigned . . . !"

A sun of fire. Straw hats. Clay faces grooved by the sweat that was weeping over them like liquid glass. Made out of mangrove roots, squatter than they were tall, more nerves than tendon, more tendon than flesh.

"He reeesiiigned! He reeesiiigned! He reeesiiigned . . . !"

The words were rising ceaselessly as they drew the inhabitants out of their houses to leap about and embrace in the streets and squares in their madness. Improvised groups of musicians tried to outdo each other with their marchlike airs, and there were plenty of marimbas, fireworks, and shots in the air by ruffians on horseback and on foot who stretched out their arms, aiming

at the sky with the rocket in their hands, firing it so that the blue could witness their oaths, along with drunkards who embraced so tightly that they were knotted together, slobbering over one another, because in everyone's own way it was the image of Freedom . . .

"Freedom with the F of a freedom-loving man!" someone with his hair hanging down and half-hunchbacked from drinking so much, belched out.

"No, damn it . . ." his companion answered, "with the F of a freethinker!"

"No, sir, gentlemen," the town pharmacist came over, swaying from one foot to the other, his shirt tail out, showing underneath his jacket in the rear, his hat askew Napoleonically, a bottle in his hand, "with the . . . with the effff . . . the effff . . ." his tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth . . . "with the effff of glycerophosphate . . ."

And he went off laughing and repeating, "He resigned! . . . He resigned! . . ." while with his left hand he made a kind of hollow, the bottle, already empty, under his arm, and with the other hand the gesture of grinding something in a pestle. "He resigned! . . . He resigned! . . ."

And the blacksmith echoed his words with the strong voice of a wind caught in an alley . . . "He resigned! . . . He resigned! . . ." hammering with his sledgehammer fists on an anvil with one blow after another, as if shoeing a horse to the rhythm of the great news, the formidable news . . . "He resigned! . . . He resigned! . . ." while the shoemaker seemed to be nailing soles with tacks of yellow bronze, almost invisible, onto the shoes of a new life that would follow the aphonic resignation, hunched over, smelling of black wax and shoe polish . . .

"Freedom! He resigned! He resigned! . . ."

The carpenter launched the magic word. "Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!" with the voice of a plane amidst the laughter of shavings and the sneezing of sawdust when he showed his rip-saw teeth. And the stonemason plastered it on the air, on the walls

of the air. "Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!" His hands open, fingers together like spoons, the dribble of liquor and saliva as mortar to build dreams upon. "Freedom! Freedom!" And the printer composed it, pulling the letters out of the type-box of his heart. "Freedom! Freedom!" And the weaver with the threads of his loom. "Freedom! Freedom!" And the potter with the clay that was turning the color of blood on the fire . . . "Freedom! He resigned! He resigned! He resigned! Freedom! Freedom! . . ."

One call, and another, and another . . .

Tiquisate was calling Bananera without cease . . .

Bananera . . . Bananera . . . Tiquisate calling . . . Tiquisate calling Bananera by radio . . .

Hello . . . hello . . . Bananera, hello . . . hello . . . Bananera . . . Bananera . . . Tiquisate calling Bananera by telephone . . .

Tick . . . tick . . . tick . . . tick . . . tick . . . Bananera . . . Bananera . . . tick . . . tick . . . tick . . . Tiquisate calling Bananera by telegraph . . .

All means of communication were in the hands of the people, but no one answered. Cranks, keys, microphones, and the same feeling of emptiness, of deserted offices, of equipment abandoned by employees who joined the popular rejoicing, which, after the first explosion of joy, of immense, infinite joy, hurrahs and shouts that were like hungry people biting on freedom, pulling the pieces of blue out of the sky, was becoming toneless, sad, and enlivened and maintained only by the dribble of liquor and the festive shooting off of pistols.

Bananera finally answered.

Tiquisate proposed moving up the strike from zero hour to nineteen hundred hours that day. Without quick intervention by the great masses of workers concentrated on the banana plantations, the political downfall would be no more than a change of figurines, the kind that eat up the people and belch out tyranny, and the word Freedom would be only the surface of a cheer.

Bananera accepted. Five hours would be gained and they would take advantage of the existing agitation to stop the fruit

trust from breaking the unity of the workers, who now were not only demanding more pay and improvements, but were also asking for land . . .

"Land! Land! Give . . . us . . . back . . . our land! Give . . . us . . . back . . . our land! . . ."

"He reeesiiigned! He reeesiiigned! . . ."

"Freedom! Freedom! . . . Bread and Freedom! . . . Land and Freedom! . . ."

Florindo Key was thinking about the Paris Commune, his ear clinging to the music of an accordion and a song . . . (*"Mais il est bien court le temps de cerises . . ."*), his hair in disorder, his eyes protected against the sun by dark glasses, his sleeves rolled up, burning up in a small Ford which he had taken to town, not because of the celebration, it was no time for celebrations because the organizers of the union and the leaders of the strike had been accused of the death of Bobby Maker Thompson, but to see if it was possible to get in touch with Captain Pedro Domingo Salomé through Samuelón, his guitar teacher, and with Captain León Cárcamo, using Andrés Medina, his childhood friend. Both of them, Salomé and Cárcamo, had agreed to take care of the Yawn, take over the command post, and take the side of the people when the moment came. And since the moment had come . . .

Medina and Samuelón returned to the car almost immediately. Impossible to reach the command post. Impossible. Not even to get close. The sentries wouldn't let anyone approach. Something was going on inside there, but no one knew what, and the telephone lines had been cut. A flag on the tower pole. On the platforms machine-guns on tripods and a full supply of ammunition. Below, blind windows, closed doors, and the pacing of the sentries, who unstuck their steps from the silence and drowsiness of a day that fell without causing any reduction in the mirrorlike flow back and forth, moving like water, of thousands and thousands of straw hats, wide-brimmed, looking like crates, of men and more men and more men who moved through the streets

shouting, not hurrahs anymore, but threats, waving their hats, brandishing their machetes. Or they were jammed together on the square, trampling the grass, such a savage luxury, ruining the English garden built by the mayor, who should be hanging from a pole now, riding the dictator's statue to the ground, not leaving anything untouched in Piedrasanta's establishment, where, during the looting, behind some boards and mats used for pressing chocolate and therefore, of course, smelling of cacao, they found the picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe that the barber of the Noxes (they didn't say Equinoxes) had given to the little Mexican priest who had been thrown out as an agitator, Ferrusigfrido Fejú, so he would put it on the main altar. It was quite a story, the fruit company opposed to the enthronement of the Virgin of Guadalupe in its domains, expelling the priest, and the picture coming to rest among Piedrasanta's odds and ends.

The discovery excited the pious feelings of the looters, who, while they distributed the wealth of those stores of food, cloth, liquor, chocolate mills, coffee roasters, and cornmeal grinders, happy with their acquisitions and of being able, with no other expense but the gargle in their throats, to tip up bottles of wine, beer, cognac, and whiskey, found themselves with the blessing of the Virgin, whom they handed over to a group of women of quiet joy who were following along behind. In the twinkle of an eye, by blowing and with the fringes of their shawls, they drew from the image, not roses but dust and cobwebs, and once it was clean, they carried it to the church with prayers and songs that mingled with the shouts of the crowd . . .

"Give . . . us . . . back . . . our land! Land! Land! . . ."

"Bread and Freedom! . . ."

"Land and Freedom! . . ."

"Land! Land! Land! . . ."

"Conceived
without sin . . ."

"Freedom! Freedom! . . ."

"Hail Mary,
full of grace!"

"He resigned! He resigned! He resigned! . . ."

"Beyond Thee
only God,
only God!"

"Land! Land! . . ."

"Give . . . us . . . back . . . our land! . . . Land! . . . Land! . . ."

Dark masses, sticky, patient, made from the dreams of a tree, moved from the plantations toward the town, leaving behind planted lands that gleamed as the fire of the sunset evaporated the evening dew, as if immense kettles were pouring out the liquid afternoon, green, like the spittle of banana trees covered with stars or golden little spiders, with the rigid pulsation of the twinkling network superimposed on crystallizations of sweat. That slow march of human ants kept coming and coming as it came to settle, without entirely stopping, about the square, by the station, waiting for trains with news, everywhere except by the command post, where the presence of machine-guns and sentries kept the field clear.

Suddenly, among the mass of hats speckled with women, which was the same all the way to the square, whirlwinds began forming, snaking rivers of people in single file, one man after the other, trying to open a way, to get close, to reach the corner where someone was addressing the crowd . . .

It was his voice . . .

Key jumped out of the car and stopped to listen.

Medina and Samuelón were sure. It was his voice . . .

The three of them looked at each other, and without saying a word they began to struggle through the crowd; Samuelón leading the way as the biggest (He went ahead laughing and saying, "Let me through, I'm the biggest ox here . . . !"), then Florindo, and bringing up the rear Andrés Medina, nervous and small.

"It's unwise!" Key said. "Unwise," desperate at the slowness with which they were moving through the crowd, which, as they got closer to the square, was more compact, tighter, until their way was blocked, held up for moments, although they kept on advancing, tormented by the mirage that they were not advancing or were advancing in reverse, when it was the whole human mass, a cloud of hats, shoulders, and heads that was moving with them.

"Terribly unwise! Terribly unwise! . . ."

"Look, Keycito, don't keep saying that!" Samuelón turned to say to him amidst pugilistic poses with which he was boxing his way through the crowd, pushing aside the weak, bumping into the strong, resistant, pugnacious. It was impossible to imagine that man with a guitar in his hands. All one could think of was St. Christopher with the Christ child on his shoulder.

He took a breath and added:

"I like men who take chances, and San is taking a chance! He's a wild one!"

"Land and Freedom! Land and Freedom! . . ."

"Give . . . us . . . back . . . our land! . . . Give . . . us . . . back . . . our land . . . ! Land! . . ."

And with redoubled shouts which, as they approached the corner where the speaker was, died down to a silence . . .

"*Land*! . . . *Land*! . . . La . . . aaa . . . a . . . a . . . a . . . !"

"Gringos out! Gringos out! . . ."

"Out! Out!"

"Get . . . out! Get . . . out! Get . . . out . . . !"

"Out! . . . Out! . . . Gringos out! . . ."

The shouting was fierce. Something had happened while Key, Medina, and Samuelón had been trying to get in contact, without much success, with Captains Cárcamo and Salomé.

Events had moved so rapidly that Tabío San abandoned his hiding place and put himself at the head of the electrified and revolutionary mobs who were going to the square to declare the strike ("No time to lose!"), demanding the return of the land and the expulsion of the gringos . . .

"Get out! Get out! Get out!"

Mr. Perkins had just informed the workers that there would be no raises or improvements as the Company had offered even if the strike was declared, and that, on the contrary, they would be fired en masse because the Company intended to abandon their cultivation and not plant another inch in that damned country.

"Pull up the banana trees!" The orders had come from Chicago, but they wouldn't pull them up. They would let them go wild so that the plantations would be ruined, unless there were orders to the contrary.

Which they didn't think would come because of the impatient, angry, delirious tone with which Aurelia Maker Thompson gave those orders to the Manager of the Pacific Division, whom she discharged over the telephone after shouting at him, "I am the Company! . . ."

And she wasn't lying. In addition to her own shares, she had inherited those of her father and those of her son, whom the former had named heir to all of his possessions. The newspapers in Chicago and the whole world carried the news of the death of the Green Pope and of an airplane that was bringing back Bobby Maker Thompson's remains. A tomb in the sky for her son, she thought in her delirium, a tomb supported by the two crosses of spinning propellers.

And she put her dream into effect. For a month it was an airplane turned into a tomb, flying with her son's body. She could really say that her son was in heaven. Another plane refueled it, so that it didn't have to land. Until one day it fell into the sea. A merciful lie. It fell into the hands of the stockholders, who buried him secretly beside his grandfather, the *Pirate*, as they called the old man—no other name would fit him—fearful that they would have to declare the bankruptcy of the most powerful company in the Caribbean if every important stockholder, not to be outdone, decided to provide a flying tomb for his loved ones, and the order to reduce cultivation in the Tiquisate zone, a sentence of death for those lands against which nothing or little could stand up, considering the strength of Aurelia's shares, as she insisted on

building a Gothic cathedral the shape of which would reproduce that of the banana groves and which would come to be the American Gothic: columns that were thin below and thick on top, almost aerial, an arch with falling leaves, and a rose window of genuine emeralds. She was out of her mind and she immediately called an influential friend in the Department of State asking that troops be sent to Tiquisate ("Stupid people, invading Europe when they should be invading Tiquisate! . . ."), and she ordered a yacht to be built so that she could look for her son at sea . . .

Finally, nauseated by the heat, deafened by the shouts of the crowd, sometimes walking and sometimes carried along, Key, Medina, and Samuelón succeeded in reaching the corner where Tabío San, surrounded by the Prospectors, half-naked or dressed in rags, was haranguing the masses.

". . . That kind of solution," San was saying when they managed to get to the intersection, their clothes torn, their bodies bruised, as if they had been devoured by an immense serpent, by a human sea, and thrown up after a long digestion, "that kind of solution is no good for us . . ."

"Nooooo! . . ." A storm of voices arose. "Noo! Nooo! . . ."

"Waiting, which is what people believe here, for another Hermenegildo Puac to give his head to a witch doctor and unleash a new 'strong wind' is to leave in supernatural hands problems that we have to solve ourselves with a single will: that of the strike!"

A prolonged applause drowned out his voice.

"No waiting for heaven to give what heaven hasn't got to give! No waiting for it to rain, because we're not toads!"

Laughter mingled with new applause.

"And besides, comrades, have you asked yourselves what advantage we'd get from destroying this wealth that isn't just the product of capital, but of the sweat of workers? And which therefore is ours . . . hear me well: *Ours!* . . . and all of you repeat

it . . . *Ours!* . . . *Ours!* . . . because that's what it is, *Ours!* . . . *OURS!* . . ."

"*Ours!* . . . *Ours!* . . . *Ours!* . . ." they shouted until they grew hoarse.

"It's our wealth, and keep that in mind, very much in mind, comrades, so that nobody goes around destroying things here or letting others do it, because it's ours! The 'strong wind' that's starting now, right here on this square, must be heard by those who have to hear it, and it's not coming to wipe out the plantations but to see that justice is done! . . ."

"Very good, comrade! Very good!"

"Which doesn't mean that we disapprove, we would be ungrateful, and we'll never be that, comrades, never ungrateful for the sacrifice of Hermenegildo Puac, a hero of the same cut as those who fell at the port, either on the tar surface of the dock or into the ocean and the sharks during the time of the fighting there; nor the act of vengeance of the Shaman Rito Perraj. They . . . They had no other means of standing up to powerful people, they lacked this growing but tremendous strength that we have: the union of organized workers and the drive of the revolutionary masses! It's here, it's in this square with us, in these moments, by our will to fight, that a new policy is being born in our country, that of the revolutionary masses!"

"Yesssss! . . ." The affirmation arose from all hearts.

"But others came ahead of us in this drive to unite wills. Mayarí and Chipo-Chipó, heroes of ours! Heroes of ours! Mayarí preferred the water, the mirror of the sea to the arms and riches of the Pirate, and Chipo-Chipó went with her, went singing along the river . . . 'Of the water I know the song, only I . . . only I . . .' We know it too, Chipo-Chipó! We know that before making a pact with the enemies of the workers it's better to jump in the river among the alligators! No alliance, submission, or condescension with the ones who exploit us!"

"Noooooo! Noooooo! . . ." the human sea was heard.

"Not with the ones who exploit us and not with the ones who

talk about humanizing the working conditions of the Company, creating the false image of a kindly exploiter, an image that the 'strong wind' buried in the person of Cosi, that millionaire who engendered in our people a pernicious belief that those on top would give them what they didn't know how to, couldn't, or want to get for themselves! The fight's different now because we've strengthened ourselves against an enemy that's already begun to slander us, calling us murderers, accusing us of having killed the grandson of the President of the Company, turning away the delegates of our union, cancelling with a stroke of the pen the offers they'd made for an increase in pay and a lowering of the cost of living, not recognizing the delegates of our union as such when only yesterday they received them and dealt with them, along with their threats to suspend and not increase cultivation in order to bring on unemployment. Comrades, the fight hasn't caught us by surprise or unarmed! We're together and unity will give us victory, today, tomorrow, it doesn't matter when, because what we're sure of, absolutely sure, is being able to do more than they can with all of their weapons, their millions, and their plots! The important thing is to stay united, shoulder to shoulder, forming a single battle line, staying together the way we are now as we come to answer provocations with a strike!"

"Yesssss! Right now! Right now!"

"The strike will bring us victory!"

"Yesssss! Yesssss!"

"A cheer for the workers of Bananera! Hurray for Bananera! . . ."

"Hurraaaaay!"

"A cheer for the workers of Tiquisate! Hurray for Tiquisate! . . ."

"Hurraaaaay!"

"A never-ending cheer for all the workers of the world!"

"Hurraaaaay . . . hurraaaaay . . . hurraaaaay . . . !"

The Prospectors barred the way to the delirious crowd that tried to grab Tabío San, ride him on their shoulders. Hats, faces, mustaches, machetes, they came and broke like a wave, saluting

as they passed and were lost in the wave of applause, while the night poured down from every star the eternal time of its golden hourglass.

"Strike! Strike!"

"Strike today! Strike today!"

"Strike right now! Strike right now! Strike right now!"

A clamor filled the streets, a cry swept the ground like an erasing wind, a wind with faces, hands, heads, eyes, feet, shoulders, the arms of a people united in a single will, a hurricane, blinding, implacable, mute, silent, deadly, the dust and residue of other winds . . .

"Strike! Strike! Strike! . . ." The shout grew as the time approached when the same cry would be heard in Bananera. "Strike! Strike! Strike! . . ."

The fumigation teams and the gangs of night workers who had been getting ready to leave dropped their clothes, gloves, masks, helmets, equipment, followed by the gangs assigned to pruning, vermin and insect control, while the black-lava night grew cool without hardening, compact and penetrable, heavy and light, the strength and fatigue of the crowd in a kind of dream lucidity.

Among the trees that were drunk with fatigue and human, the sunlike headlight of a locomotive appeared, passed by, and disappeared as it pulled a half dozen empty freight cars. It was the train put together for the comrades who would go to Bananera. A long and difficult trip, but for them, for the ones who were to go as delegates, a trip that they would make in song. Not having to work. They began to feel strange, for only moments before had they really begun to quit work on the night gangs, among the winter fireflies that lighted up and went out as if they were counting the seconds of those first minutes, although at times they were not fireflies but the sputtering of torches. Everything could be heard, a kind of cooking of insects in an immense pot of crickets, except for what the delegates of the union were saying as their expressions and movements could be

seen through the windows of the Town Hall, which was surrounded by workers waiting for an official declaration of the strike, because, in fact, all of those who should have been working that night were already dropping out of the late shit, as the Prospectors called it, the ones in charge of holding back the seas of fire, for that was what that mass of torches and ocote sticks was like.

"Reee-signed! Reee-signed!"

"Land and freedom! . . ."

"Freedom! Freedom! . . ."

"Land and freedom! . . ."

The shouting, the waving of hats, the brandishing of machetes, the raising and lowering of the flames of the torches which were like the stumps of demon arms grew from one second to the next in fury. Either the delegates would declare the strike or the furious mass would attack the Town Hall. Even though officious people kept coming out to say that they weren't discussing the strike, that it was all settled, already a fact, but were planning the new demands on the Company, what conditions they should impose, what they should ask for . . .

And it was delirium, madness, the final touch, when, after repeatedly asking for silence, Tabío San began to read the strike declaration, which said: "The Tiquisate Workers Union, in convention assembled . . ." The applause wouldn't let him continue. But there was also news from the command post, and the important thing was to secure the railroad station so that the delegates could leave. Soon the word went around: "To the station . . . to the station, to save time . . . the strike declaration will be read there along with the message to the workers in Bananera . . . It'll be read there . . ."

The march began amidst cheers and applause, a torrent of white hats gleaming in the light of the torches that moved toward the station through streets and over dirt roads wet from recent rain and the dew.

A large locomotive cut off Tabío San's voice with its snorts.

He was reading what the workers of Tiquisate had declared in the glow of the enormous light of the engine, in the reddish glow of the coals in its firebox, standing on the front end among thousands of torches that waved to greet each paragraph, sentence, word, as if the sovereign lights of heaven had come down to the hands of those men of the people to start the fire.

Suddenly the train turned out its lights. San felt the darkness snatch away the paper and he just had time to jump to the ground as the train started up. There was shooting in the direction of the command post. First a heavy firing of rifles, then scattered shots, and, cutting through the silence, a wave of machine-gun fire and something like the explosion of grenades and mortars.

Tabío San jumped off the moving train. They had to avoid a massacre. The clatter of the machine-guns mingled with the cheers of that docile crowd, which, when the train disappeared with its delegates, returned with their incendiary torches to face death. A moment later the station was burning. The machine-guns stopped and rifle fire was heard. Soon they realized that the fighting was inside the barracks, and from some soldiers who had escaped when they learned that Captain Cárcamo had mutinied. Samuelón and Medina brought more precise news. The military coup had been a failure for them. Salomé hadn't arrived in time to blow up the munition supplies and, all by themselves, Cárcamo and the group of soldiers who followed him, couldn't resist for long. The workers dispersed. There was no reason to intervene. It was a "military matter." Everybody to his den, to his lair, to that place the size of his person that often was not earth but air, the air in which he hung his hammock. Go home. That was the order. Stay inactive and don't lose contact with the members of the union council, who, from that moment on, had declared themselves to be in permanent session.

Tabío Sansur found out from one of the Prospectors . . .

But day was already coming on and it was dangerous to move. A sun formed by the crowing of all roosters rose up in plumes, in flames of raw gold through an unreal greenish sky the color of

cactus, of high-trunked volador trees with only a few branches at the top, royal and coconut palms no less erect and leaves painted like tigers and leaves like eucharists and leaves in the shape of guitars and vines that were the cables of underwater fishing nets.

Tabío San learned from one of the Prospectors that Captain Cárcamo was wounded and in Prospector Cave over near the sandpit.

No, Cárcamo was not among the bodies they brought to the cemetery. Eleven bodies in soldiers' uniforms, with their modest braid, some stained with blood and others with the geographical maps that death-sweat paints on the clothing of those who go away dressed. They dug a common grave—death sometimes buys and sells wholesale—and they covered them with earth. Not very deep, not much earth . . . soldiers! . . . And that was what they were doing when Juambo came along, pushing a hand cart converted into a hearse of the lowest order with the body of a woman who was either dead or drunk. The ones who were burying the soldiers came out to stop him and were opposed to his burying her. She seemed to be in a trance. "But," the mulatto said, "I want to bury her alive . . ." One of them dropped his shovel and with a hand daubed with black earth he parted the cobweb of hair which the woman had netted about her face. And he recognized her. It was the woman involved with Captain Salomé. María Clara . . . Clara María . . . What was her name? . . . "They can bury her alive as far as I'm concerned!" the one who recognized her said, and running the back of his hand over his mucus-covered nose, he added: "A real nympho! It's her fault we spent whole nights out in the open while she and Captain Salomé . . ." and he said the rest by sticking the index finger of his right hand into a hole made with the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, moving it up and down. "No, no!" Others were against it. "We can't let him bury her alive! . . ." "They're going to kill her in any case," Juambo said, his voice lost in his mouth, his eyes showing their whites, "so why not bury her now, since

she'll be shot anyway? . . ." "Shot for what?" another one put in. "The one they're going to shoot as sure as two and three make five if they catch him alive is Captain Salomé. But why this one . . . ?" "What do you mean, why? It's funny you don't know!" the mulatto exclaimed. "They have to shoot her, they have to shoot her . . . she killed Bobby . . ." "He was killed by the strikers. Stop telling us tales!" shouted the one with the shovel, under a sun that was beginning to heat up the cloud of flies, green, pink, black, which fell on the cemetery drawn by the smell of the corpses. "She killed him!" Juambo said, pointing to the frozen figure of Clara María. "She confess me. Ask me hide her among eyes of the interred! . . ."

The temporary gravediggers, without thinking about the poor soldiers who were roasting in the sun or about the flies, listened to Juambo's story.

When she realized—her words—that she had killed Bobby, she began to drink . . . to swill, not to forget but to kill herself . . . she didn't have the courage to take a different poison, and less yet to end her life by jumping in front of a train . . . swilling was what was left to her . . . maybe she wouldn't feel the passage from drunkenness to death . . . and while she was drinking she slowly began to grow cold and her arms were turning to rags, her legs, her feet, rags which ants were walking on. She threw her head to one side in the place where she had fallen in a corner of the room, her head which kept on thinking, and that was why she threw it back, far back, to one side, until she couldn't feel anything . . .

And that was how the mulatto found her, lost, beyond life, as cold as ice, to such a degree that he was sure she was dead. But he went closer and opened one of her eyes with care, lifting the lid, which was heavy, as if her lashes were made of lead. Glimpsing Juambo with that single glassy eye, with that remnant of an empty bottle, and leaping up was all one motion. The fingers of her hands doubled over like claws as she tried to tear the atmosphere that separated her from what she thought at first

was a vision from her alcoholic dream . . . "I . . . I . . ." she stammered at the mulatto, "I killed Bobby thinking I was killing you . . . I . . . I . . . thinking I was killing you and your dead man's bones . . . your dead man's earth . . . take me . . . come, take me to the cemetery, where you brought all my troubles from! . . ." And she fell asleep again . . .

But the soldiers who were burying the other soldiers made him take her back to her house, hitting him a few times on the back with their rifle butts. His shoulder blades sounded like old pewter.

One more street. The first time a reverse funeral had ever been seen. And on a hand cart. Several dogs followed him. The first time that a person had returned home from the cemetery. The cart almost rolled down the incline, tipping over next to the hedge where he had waited for Bobby that night before he went up to spy on what he was doing: he was dancing his last jazz number with the wild woman, and where afterwards, chased by her, he had lost the little bones of his father's hand. This time he didn't throw the body of the woman back into the cart. Too much work. He dragged her inside by her arms and was sweeping the ground with her, over the earth that had been spread on top to hide the traces of the crime, revealing the stains of Bobby's blood, the blood that leapt from his heart when he fell to the ground.

The mulatto closed his eyes and began to wail. Then he ran away, his eyes obliterated, lost in a shadow of trembling crystals. No one. He alone on the streets. The strike was complete. He ran toward the plantations. No one. He alone in the banana groves. The workers were in their houses, in their camps. They were sleeping. Others were sitting in their doors and watching the day pass, the first day of the strike. The delegates, gathered together at the union headquarters, were arguing, getting heated, for moments it seemed that they would come to blows, irascible, irritated. The problem was to break the Company's resistance, thinking about the losses in millions of dollars that it meant for them, not just the work stoppage, but the rapid invasion of un-

derbrush onto the plantings, the avalanche of insects which in a matter of hours would eat everything up, devour it, destroy it, make it rot. They were their best allies and they had never thought about them until now, with the first days past, the first week of dozing day and night, listening like loafers to time crawling along. But winter had begun again and torrential rains were unleashed. They went back to sleep and awoke at night, and it was raining a storm. So much the better. Lightning and more lightning. The zigzag of the pincers of enormous golden crabs. Lightning and more lightning. There wouldn't be a single granary or deposit that would be safe. The animals would break out of their corrals and bolted stalls and good-by milk cows, oxen, and horses. Thunder and more thunder, deep, stammering. It was nice that it was raining now that they didn't have to go into the fields because of the strike. Their lot would have been different if it hadn't been for the work stoppage. Gangs of half-naked men under the orders of foreign foremen would be working now. It was raining on the strike. The women, frightened by that inexplicable attitude of the men, spied on them. The men, with their idle hands, would end up with the law of the bosses on top and the workers pushing from far below. It could be. They wanted a different law. A new law. A just law. It also gave them something to think about, because, except for a few cases, the men were so quiet, not grabbing a bottle or their machetes so much. Some had even set traps or were cleaning their shotguns to go hunting. Others were fishing. The tip of a hook and something to hunt would help them through the bad times. Diligent, quiet, pensive, tolerant. They had never seen them like that. Never. They were like different people. It was still raining. It was raining on the strike. It was raining on the strike and some began to get restless, to feel that things wouldn't be settled, to consider the strike as lost. Go back to work? It was all that was left. Maybe they could reach an agreement with the new manager. But there was no sign of him. Days later it was said that the new government would intervene in a friendly way. But that was only talk. During the brief moments when the sky

cleared they would take advantage of it to exchange ideas and tobacco . . . Yes, yes, he was wounded, but they'd taken him to the capital! . . . Salomé? . . . No, Cárcamo, the one who was wounded! . . . What about Salomé? . . . Nobody knows anything about him! . . . The Yawn was transferred to the Under-Ministry of War! . . . Did he do better? . . . Of course he did better, dead soldiers are good for a fat-belly like him! And there's a new Commandant! . . . A new one? . . . Yes, a little colonel! . . . And he's already visited the union! . . . To shut it down? No, to pay his respects and to say that he hoped that the strike would be settled through negotiations with the Company, which is quite willing! . . . And what did the boys tell him? . . . They said no, even if it looks like they'll have to reach an agreement! . . . What about Bananera? . . . That's the question. They're waiting for Bananera to answer whether or not they'll accept the terms of the new work contract! . . . Who's bringing the answer from there? . . . Rámila, they say . . . Who's Rámila? I don't know the name, but they say he's been leading the movement in Bananera and that he'll bring the answer! . . . It was raining on the strike. It was raining on the strike and the losses were incalculable. A lot of banana trees down, lots of rotted leaves, lots of ripe bunches of fruit, and underbrush, more underbrush, ready to inundate what was left uncovered by the liquid pavement of the irrigation water . . . What was the answer from Bananera going to be? . . . The same as that of Tiquisate: *No!* . . . Then there's no agreement? . . . None unless the Company bows its head! . . . I don't think we'll get that, it didn't bow its head even in the time of the "strong wind," and they saw the fruit loaders on the docks machine-gunned before they'd do anything for them! The Company's still the Company! . . . Well, that's what we're going to see! . . .

The sky began to clear and the sun appeared, splashing across the flooded lands like a many-legged steed with shining horseshoes. And the news of the victory poured down like the light.

The powerful organization had accepted the conditions. Tabío San, followed by Rámila, left the Company building in the capital. They had just signed the new working agreements. Malena was waiting for him at the door, a rifle slung over her shoulder, her hair barely held in place in a bun, all the days of her struggle in the streets showing on her dark paleness, and she went over to kiss and embrace him to the shouts and applause of friends and acquaintances who had been waiting there nearby for the latest news. At zero hour the general strike would be lifted. Yes, yes, in Bananera and in Tiquisate too. The Dictator and the Fruiters were going down at the same time and now those who were interred and waiting for the day of justice could close their eyes. No, not yet, because they were only on the threshold of that great day. Hope doesn't begin with what has been done but with what has been said, and if it had been said that "other women and other men will sing in the future," they were already singing, but they weren't others, they were the same ones, they were the people, they were . . . Tabío San, Malena Tabay, Cayetano Duende, Popoluca, Parrot Rámila, Andrés Medina, Florindo Key, Cárcamo and Salomé, the captains, the ashmen, the teachers, the students, the printers, Judasita, the merchants, the farm workers, the craftsmen, Don Nepo Rojas, the Prospectors, the Samuels, Juambo el Sambito, his parents, Toba, Anastasia, the nasal-voiced man, the drunkard, Father Fejú, Mayarí, Chipo-Chipó, Hermenegildo Puac, Rito Perraj . . . some alive, some dead, others absent. They were singing now . . .

IRPM – 1975

Miguel Angel Asturias, the first Latin American writer to have been awarded the Nobel Prize, rivals Joyce in his fabulous wealth of expression and has been compared as an innovator to Faulkner. Dyed with the violent colours of tropical nature, *The Eyes of the Interred* is set in the vast stretch of banana plantations in a Central American republic which is dominated and exploited by a powerful American fruit company.

Chairman of the company, and ruthless American founder of the plantations, is the Green Pope. Only the orphan Octavio Sansur, and the prim headmistress of a remote village school whom he loves passionately, realize that the true source of imperialist corruption is the President of the Republic. Feared and omnipotent, he must die before the Green Pope can be toppled. Octavio, an exuberant guerrilla, plots, hides out in a labyrinth of caves, disguises himself by eating a poisonous cactus that makes his face swell unrecognizably, and ultimately escapes to the burning coastal plains. There he provokes a general strike whose repercussions reach the very roots of the system, culminating in ancestral rebellion of the oppressed.

Asturias paints a vast canvas of myth and revolution. An exhilarating whirlwind of characters, as poetic and luxuriant as the vegetation of his native Guatemala, parade across the pages — peons, prostitutes, cripples and drunks, and the rich, the soldiers, the priests and con-men. Although *The Eyes of the Interred* forms the climax of Asturias's epic trilogy begun in *The Cyclone* and *The Green Pope*, it can be fully enjoyed as a work on its own. It is a sprawling, alarming evocation of political corruption, with a richness of style that raises the worst reality to the level of legend.

Translated from the Spanish by
Gregory Rabassa

£5·00 net

Miguel Angel Asturias

Photograph by Lutti Ozkok

THE GREEN POPE

'Asturias reads like a South American Faulkner, powerful, thrillerish, intense and occasionally obscure.' *Sunday Times*

'The novel is dazzlingly visual ... Gregory Rabassa's translation has done it proud ... distinguished Asturias ... clever translator.' *Guardian*

'Sr Asturias is most powerful with his Indians and his Shamans in the deep green of the jungle ... His novel flows on, as poetic and luxuriant as the vegetation, hypnotic as the drumming feet of the Indians.' *Daily Telegraph*

'Asturias remains a great writer; one of those who prove the validity of the novel as a living force ... Images, strange, haunting, white-hot, leap from the pages and brand the imagination.' *Hibernia*

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