

The old people had ordered that the dancing should stop at ten o'clock, but it was almost midnight before the carriages came filing up to the front door, the servants running to and fro with torches to light the departing guests, while the girls who were staying were promptly herded upstairs to the bedrooms, the young men gathering around to wish them a good night and lamenting their ascent with mock sighs and moanings, proclaiming themselves disconsolate but straightway going off to finish the punch and the brandy though they were quite drunk already and simply bursting with wild spirits, merriment, arrogance and audacity, for they were young bucks newly arrived from Europe, the ball had been in their honour, and they had waltzed and polka-ed and bragged and swaggered and flirted all night and were in no mood to sleep yet — no, caramba, not on this moist tropic eve! Not on this mystic May eve! — with the night still young and so seductive that it was madness not to go out, not to go forth — and serenade the neighbours! cried one; and swim in the Pasig! cried another, and gather fireflies! cried a third — whereupon there arose a great clamour for coats and capes, for hats and canes, and they were presently stumbling out among the medieval shadows of the foul street where a couple of street lamps flickered and a last carriage rattled away upon the cobbles while the blind black houses muttered hush-hush, their tiled roofs looming like sinister chess boards against a wild sky murky with clouds, save where an evil young moon prowled about in a comer or where a murderous wind whirled, whistling and whining, smelling now of the sea and now of the summer orchards and wafting unbearable childhood fragrances of ripe guavas to the young men trooping so uproariously down the street that the girls who were disrobing upstairs in the bedrooms scattered screaming to the windows, crowded giggling at the windows, but were soon sighing amorously over those young men bawling below, over those wicked young men and their handsome apparel, their proud flashing eyes, and their elegant moustaches so black and vivid in the moonlight that the girls were quite ravished with love, and began crying to one another how carefree were men but how awful to be a girl and what a horrid, horrid world it was, till old Anastasia plucked them off by the ear or the pigtail and chased them off to bed — while from up the street came the clackety-clack of the watchman's boots on the cobbles, and the clang-clang of his lantern against his knee, and the mighty roll of his great voice booming through the night: *'Guardia serena-o-o! A las doce han dado-o-o!'*

And it was May again, said the old Anastasia. It was the first day of May and witches were abroad in the night, she said — for it was a night of divination, a night of lovers, and those who cared might peer in a mirror and would there behold the face of whoever it was they were fated to marry, said the old Anastasia as she hobbled about picking up the piled crinolines and folding up shawls and raking slippers to a corner while the girls, climbing into the four great poster-beds

that overwhelmed the room, began shrieking with terror, scrambling over each other and imploring the old woman not to frighten them.

‘Enough, enough, Anastasia! We want to sleep!’

‘Go scare the boys instead, you old witch!’

‘She is not a witch, she is a maga. She was born on Christmas Eve!’

‘St. Anastasia, virgin and martyr.’

‘Huh? Impossible! She has conquered seven husbands! Are you a virgin, Anastasia?’

‘No, but I am seven times a martyr because of you girls.’

‘Let her prophesy, let her prophesy! Whom will I marry, old gypsy? Come, tell me.’

‘You may learn in a mirror if you are not afraid.’

‘I am not afraid, I will go!’ cried the young cousin Agueda, jumping up in bed.

‘Girls, girls – we are making too much noise! My mother will hear and will come and pinch us all. Agueda, lie down! And you, Anastasia, I command you to shut your mouth and go away.’

‘Your mother told me to stay here all night, my grand lady!’

‘And I will not lie down!’ cried the rebellious Agueda, leaping to the floor. ‘Stay, old woman. Tell me what I have to do.’

‘Tell her! Tell her!’ chimed the other girls.

The old woman dropped the clothes she had gathered and approached and fixed her eyes on the girl. ‘You must take a candle,’ she instructed, ‘and go into a room that is dark and that has a mirror in it and you must be alone in the room. Go up to the mirror and close your eyes and say:

“Mirror, mirror,

show to me

him whose woman

I will be.”

‘If all goes right, just above your left shoulder will appear the face of the man you will marry.’

A silence. Then: ‘And what if all does not go right?’ asked Agueda.

‘Ah, then the Lord have mercy on you!’

‘Why?’

‘Because you may see – the devil!’

The girls screamed and clutched one another, shivering.

‘But what nonsense!’ cried Agueda. ‘This is the year 1847. There are no devils anymore!’ Nevertheless she had turned pale. ‘But where could I go, huh? Yes, I know! Down to the sala. It has that big mirror and no one is there now.’

‘No, Agueda, no! It is a mortal sin! You will see the devil!’

‘I do not care! I am not afraid! I will go!’

‘Oh, you wicked girl! Oh, you mad girl!’

‘If you do not come to bed, Agueda, I will call my mother.’

‘And if you do I will tell her who came to visit you at the convent last March. Come, old woman — give me that candle. I go.’

‘Oh, girls – come and stop her! Take hold of her! Block the door!’

But Agueda had already slipped outside; was already tiptoeing across the hall; her feet bare and her dark hair falling down her shoulders and streaming in the wind as she fled down the stairs, the lighted candle sputtering in one hand while with the other she pulled up her white gown from her ankles.

She paused breathless in the doorway to the sala and her heart failed her. She tried to imagine the room filled again with lights, laughter, whirling couples, and the jolly jerky music of the fiddlers. But, oh, it was a dark den, a weird cavern, for the windows had been closed and the furniture stacked up against the walls. She crossed herself and stepped inside.

The mirror hung on the wall before her; a big antique mirror with a gold frame carved into leaves and flowers and mysterious curlicues. She saw herself approaching fearfully in it: a small white ghost that the darkness bodied forth – but not willingly, not completely, for her eyes and hair were so dark that the face approaching in the mirror seemed only a mask that floated forward; a bright mask with two holes gaping in it, blown forward by the white cloud of her gown. But

when she stood before the mirror she lifted the candle level with her chin and the dead mask bloomed into her living face.

She closed her eyes and whispered the incantation. When she had finished such a terror took hold of her that she felt unable to move, unable to open her eyes, and thought she would stand there forever, enchanted. But she heard a step behind her, and a smothered giggle, and instantly opened her eyes.

* * * * *

‘And what did you see, Mama? Oh, what was it?’

But Doña Agueda had forgotten the little girl on her lap: she was staring past the curly head nestling at her breast and seeing herself in the big mirror hanging in the room. It was the same room and the same mirror but the face she now saw in it was an old face – a hard, bitter, vengeful face, framed in greying hair, and so sadly altered, so sadly different from that other face like a white mask, that fresh young face like a pure mask that she had brought before this mirror one wild May Day midnight years and years ago ...

‘But what was it, Mama? Oh, please go on! What did you see?’

Doña Agueda looked down at her daughter but her face did not soften though her eyes filled with tears. ‘I saw the devil!’ she said bitterly.

The child blanched. ‘The devil, Mama? Oh ... OH!’

‘Yes, my love. I opened my eyes and there in the mirror, smiling at me over my left shoulder, was the face of the devil.’

‘Oh, my poor little Mama! And were you very frightened?’

‘You can imagine. And that is why good little girls do not look into mirrors except when their mothers tell them. You must stop this naughty habit, darling, of admiring yourself in every mirror you pass — or you may see something frightful someday.’

‘But the devil, Mama – what did he look like?’

‘Well, let me see ... He had curly hair and a scar on his cheek — ’

‘Like the scar of Papa?’

‘Well, yes. But this of the devil was a scar of sin, while that of your Papa is a scar of honour. Or so he says.’

‘Go on about the devil.’

‘Well, he had moustaches.’

‘Like those of Papa?’

‘Oh, no. Those of your Papa are dirty and greying and smell horribly of tobacco, while these of the devil were very black and elegant – oh, how elegant!’

‘And did he have horns and a tail?’

The mother’s lips curled. ‘Yes, he did! But, alas, I could not see them at that time. All I could see were his fine clothes, his flashing eyes, his curly hair and moustaches.’

‘And did he speak to you, Mama?’

‘Yes ... Yes, he spoke to me,’ said Dofia Agueda. And bowing her greying head, she wept.

* * * * *

‘Charms like yours have no need for a candle, fair one,’ he had said, smiling at her in the mirror and stepping back to give her a low mocking bow. She had whirled around and glared at him and he had burst into laughter.

‘But I remember you!’ he cried. ‘You are Agueda, whom I left a mere infant and came home to find a tremendous beauty, and I danced a waltz with you but you would not give me the polka.’

‘Let me pass,’ she muttered fiercely, for he was barring her way.

‘But I want to dance the polka with you, fair one,’ he said.

So they stood before the mirror; their panting breath the only sound in the dark room; the candle shining between them and flinging their shadows to the wall. And young Badoy Montiya (who had crept home very drunk to pass out quietly in bed) suddenly found himself cold sober and very much awake and ready for anything. His eyes sparkled and the scar in his face gleamed scarlet.

‘Let me pass!’ she cried again, in a voice of fury, but he grasped her by the wrist.

‘No,’ he smiled. ‘Not until we have danced.’

‘Go to the devil!’

‘What a temper has my *serrana*!’

‘I am not your *serrana*!’

‘Whose, then? Someone I know? Someone I have offended grievously? Because you treat me, you treat all my friends like your mortal enemies.’

‘And why not?’ she demanded, jerking her wrist away and flashing her teeth in his face. ‘Oh, how I detest you, you pompous young men! You go to Europe and you come back elegant lords and we poor girls are too tame to please you. We have no grace like the Parisiennes, we have no fire like the Sevillians, and we have no salt, no salt, no salt! Aie, how you weary me, how you bore me, you fastidious young men!’

‘Come, come – how do you know about us?’

‘I have heard you talking, I have heard you talking among yourselves, and I despise the pack of you!’

‘But clearly you do not despise yourself, señorita. You come to admire your charms in the mirror even in the middle of the night!’

She turned livid and he had a moment of malicious satisfaction.

‘I was not admiring myself, sir!’

‘You were admiring the moon perhaps?’

‘Oh!’ she gasped, and burst into tears. The candle dropped from her hand and she covered her face and sobbed piteously. The candle had gone out and they stood in darkness, and young Badoy was conscience-stricken.

‘Oh, do not cry, little one! Oh, please forgive me! Please do not cry! But what a brute I am! I was drunk, little one, I was drunk and knew not what I said.’

He groped and found her hand and touched it to his lips. She shuddered in her white gown.

‘Let me go,’ she moaned, and tugged feebly.

‘No. Say you forgive me first. Say you forgive me, Agueda.’

But instead she pulled his hand to her mouth and bit it — bit so sharply into the knuckles that he cried with pain and lashed out with his other hand — lashed out and hit the air, for she was gone, she had fled, and he heard the rustling of her skirts up the stairs as he furiously sucked his bleeding fingers.

Cruel thoughts raced through his head: he would go and tell his mother and make her turn the savage girl out of the house – or he would go himself to the girl’s room and drag her out of bed and slap, slap, slap her silly face! But at the same time he

was thinking that they were all going up to Antipolo in the morning and was already planning how he would manoeuvre himself into the same boat with her.

Oh, he would have his revenge, he would make her pay, that little harlot! She should suffer for this, he thought greedily, licking his bleeding knuckles. But – Judas! — what eyes she had! And what a pretty colour she turned when angry! He remembered her bare shoulders: gold in the candlelight and delicately furred. He saw the mobile insolence of her neck, and her taut breasts steady in the fluid gown. Son of a Turk, but she was quite enchanting! How could she think she had no fire or grace? and no salt? An arroba she had of it!

‘No lack of salt in the chrism

At the moment of thy baptism!’

he sang aloud in the dark room and suddenly realized that he had fallen madly in love with her. He ached intensely to see her again — at once! — to touch her hand and her hair; to hear her harsh voice. He ran to the window and flung open the easements and the beauty of the night struck him back like a blow. It was May, it was summer, and he was young — young! — and deliriously in love. Such a happiness welled up within him the tears spurted from his eyes.

But he did not forgive her — no! He would still make her pay. He would still have his revenge, he thought viciously, and kissed his wounded fingers. But what a night it had been! ‘I will never forget this night,’ he thought aloud in an awed voice, standing in the dark room, the tears in his eyes and the wind in his hair and his bleeding knuckles pressed to his month.

* * * * *

But, alas, the heart forgets; the heart is distracted; and May-time passes; summer ends; the storms break over the rot-ripe orchards and the heart grows old; while the hours, the days, the months, and the years pile up and pile up, till the mind becomes too crowded, too confused: dust gathers in it; cobwebs multiply; the walls darken and fall into ruin and decay; the memory perishes ... and there came a time when Don Badoy Montiya walked home through a May Day midnight without remembering, without even caring to remember; being merely concerned in feeling his way across the street with his cane; his eyes having grown quite dim and his legs uncertain — for he was old; he was over sixty; he was a very stooped and shrivelled old man with white hair and moustaches, coming home from a secret meeting of conspirators; his mind still resounding with the speeches and his patriot heart still exultant as he picked his way up the steps to the front door and inside the slumbering darkness of the house; wholly unconscious of the May night, till on his way down the hall, chancing to glance into the sala, he shuddered, he stopped, his blood ran cold — for he had seen a face in the mirror there – a ghostly candlelit face with the eyes closed and the lips moving, a face that he suddenly felt

he had seen there before though it was a full minute before the lost memory came flowing, came tiding back, so overflowing the actual moment and so swiftly washing away the piled hours and days and months and years that he was left suddenly young again: he was a gay young buck again, lately come from Europe: he had been dancing all night: he was very drunk: he stopped in the doorway: he saw a face in the dark: he cried out ... and the lad standing before the mirror (for it was a lad in a nightgown) jumped with fright and almost dropped his candle, but looking around and seeing the old man, laughed out with relief and came running.

‘Oh, Grandpa, how you frightened me!’

Don Badoy had turned very pale. ‘So it was you, you young bandit! And what is all this, hey? What are you doing down here at this hour?’

‘Nothing, Grandpa. I was only ... I am only ...’

‘Yes, you are the great Señor Only and how delighted I am to make your acquaintance, Señor Only! But if I break this cane on your head you may wish you were someone else, sir!’

‘It was just foolishness, Grandpa. They told me I would see my wife.’

‘Wife? What wife?’

‘Mine. The boys at school said I would see her if I looked in a mirror tonight and said:

“Mirror, mirror,

show to me

her whose lover

I will be.”

Don Badoy cackled ruefully. He took the boy by the hair, pulled him along into the room, sat down on a chair, and drew the boy between his knees. ‘Now, put your candle down on the floor, son, and let us talk this over. So you want your wife already, hey? You want to see her in advance, hey? But do you know that these are wicked games and that wicked boys who play them are in danger of seeing horrors.’

‘Well, the boys did warn me I might see a witch instead.’

‘Exactly! A witch so horrible you may die of fright. And she will bewitch you, she will torture you, she will eat your heart and drink your blood!’

‘O, come now, Grandpa. This is 1890. There are no witches anymore.’

‘Oh-ho, my young Voltaire! And what if I tell you that I myself have seen a witch?’

‘You? Where?’

‘Right in this room and right in that mirror,’ said the old man, and his playful voice had turned savage.

‘When, Grandpa?’

‘Not so long ago. When I was a bit older than you. Oh, I was a vain fellow and though I was feeling very sick that night and merely wanted to lie down somewhere and die I could not pass that doorway of course without stopping to see in the mirror what I looked like when dying. But when I poked my head in what should I see in the mirror but ... but ...’

‘The witch?’

‘Exactly!’

‘And did she bewitch you, Grandpa?’

‘She bewitched me and she tortured me. She ate my heart and drank my blood,’ said the old man bitterly.

‘Oh, my poor little Grandpa! Why have you never told me! And was she very horrible?’ ‘

‘Horrible? God, no — she was beautiful! She was the most beautiful creature I have ever seen! Her eyes were somewhat like yours but her hair was like black waters and her golden shoulders were bare. My God, she was enchanting! But I should have known — I should have known even then — the dark and fatal creature she was!’

A silence. Then: ‘What a horrid mirror this is, Grandpa,’ whispered the boy.

‘What makes you say that, boy?’

‘Well, you saw this witch in it. And Mama once told me that Grandma once told her that Grandma once saw the devil in this mirror. Was it of the scare that Grandma died?’

Don Badoy started. For a moment he had forgotten that she was dead, that she had perished — the poor Agueda; that they were at peace at last, the two of them, and her tired body at rest; her broken body set free at last from the brutal pranks of the earth — from the trap of a May night; from the snare of summer; from the terrible

silver nets of the moon. She had been a mere heap of white hair and bones in the end: a whimpering withered consumptive, lashing out with her cruel tongue; her eyes like live coals; her face like ashes ... Now, nothing – nothing save a name on a stone; save a stone in a graveyard – nothing! nothing at all! was left of the young girl who had flamed so vividly in a mirror one wild May Day midnight, long, long ago.

And remembering how she had sobbed so piteously; remembering how she had bitten his hand and fled and how he had sung aloud in the dark room and surprised his heart in the instant of falling in love; such a grief tore up his throat and eyes that he felt ashamed before the boy; pushed the boy away; stood up and fumbled his way to the window; threw open the easements and looked out – looked out upon the medieval shadows of the foul street where a couple of street lamps flickered and a last carriage was rattling away upon the cobbles, while the blind black houses muttered hush-hush, their tiled roofs looming like sinister chess boards against a wild sky murky with clouds, save where an evil old moon prowled about in a corner or where a murderous wind whirled, whistling and whining, smelling now of the sea and now of the summer orchards and wafting unbearable Maytime memories of an old, old love to the old man shaking with sobs by the window; the bowed old man sobbing so bitterly at the window; the tears streaming down his cheeks and the wind in his hair and one hand pressed to his mouth – while from up the street came the clackety-clack of the watchman's boots on the cobbles, and the clang clang of his lantern against his knee, and the mighty roll of his great voice booming through the night: *'Guardia serena-o-o! A las doce han dado-o-o!'*