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THE LIGHTHOUSE

Alfonso Hernández-Catá

Translated by Angel Flores

PROBABLY NONE of you is acquainted with El Delfin. One must possess something of the spirit of an explorer to discover it among the winding byways of the port, where numerous alleys run athwart the central street after the manner of a ship's rigging. Travelers on the enormous transatlantic steamers, which, after a voyage of eight or ten days, come to rest against the piers, prefer the luxurious restaurants where amid colored lampshades and the deplorable dresscoats of the waiters they may partake of their heavy sauces. Only a lunatic of my stripe could find pleasure in this ramshackle eating place facing the ocean and with its lanterns used on God only knows how many different vessels.

Here you can dine well, and drink according to your conscience. At this resort, filled with smoke and tremulous with shouts and gestures, life acquires the harsh flavor of the dishes and the wine. When the southwester, spitting the dirty green contempt of the waves on the sailors, causes the board partitions to creak and the huge jagged backbone of the fish hanging outside the door to swing on its hinges, El Delfin—with its swaying lamp, its smell of gin and pitch, its railing of copper covered with verdigris, its hubbub of voices, at one and the same time candid and blasphemous—becomes to me the smelly hold of a ship, one of those ships that have traded in crime off the beaten route, and now, after a great storm, are cast by the surf upon this shore of civilization.

If some new patron asks me, from table to table, whether I am the

pilot of the brigantine just arrived with coffee from Para, or the supercargo of the steamer that is having its bottom scraped in the dry-dock, I flush with gratified vanity and evade a reply. Only in El Delfin can one be taken for a sailor. It is not the hunger of the stomach, but the hunger of the soul, that brings me here day after day.

"Do you know who it is lying at the point of death? The boatswain of the Ipiranga. He came in with skins from the Antilles where he was bitten by a blue fly. . . . They say he cannot escape. . . . All the better he does not leave any children."

The speaker is a gaunt old man. His skin, the color of a furrow, gives him the appearance of a laborer, but his eyes, tinged with blue, do not deceive. A fat man with a jovial face answers him, peering out apoplectically from the fumes of his dish of rice and pollock: "He that could not be killed by a pint of rum is laid low by a fly; and those that did not drown in a Cantabrian nor'wester, a Caribbean tornado, or a typhoon of the eastern seas, are knocked over afterward by a breath. Therefore it is better to eat and drink and not to bother with anything. That is my idea."

"He was a trifle quarrelsome when hitting the grog, but he was a hustler. . . . We do not have men like him now. He sailed with me for three years, and there wasn't a port in which he did not raise a shindy. . . . Ah, when he got into a fight, he was a demon. . . . Now it is time for him to keep still!"

The man pronouncing this epitaph is Jeronimo, the pilot. His soft voice contrasts sharply with his Cyclopean stature, and yet harmonizes with his features, as chubby as those of a child. In his face, however, there is something perplexing; it fails to leave in one's mind the impression of any marked outline and suggests the absurd idea that it has no bony structure. Yet it possesses characteristics so rude and virile that when he enters into a conversation others speak less and lower their voices. Several crosses hang from the breast of his uniform. A great swimmer, he has already saved a number of lives and has never been known to hesitate a second, whatever the risk, when anyone struggled in the water. In spite of his fearlessness and courage, and of his being a religious man, he is not well liked around the waterfront. It seems that when he is about to bring in a transatlantic steamer and climbs the jackladder, making his way to the bridge to grasp the wheel, no captain dares to say anything to him. He is acquainted with the channel stone by stone; with politeness hardly by sight. As for myself, he waited two

years before speaking to me, and this although we ate almost side by side. To him landsmen do not count.

“Are you going to sit with him?”

“No sirree! I have no hankering for viewing the dead. . . . I hate the dead!”

“A hard life, that of the sea.”

“A hard life and a hard death. . . . I have seen people die in a thousand ways. . . . I have seen death seeking men, and men seeking death. . . . This fellow went for two round-the-world voyages, over an affair of a woman who had deceived him, without finding anyone to kill him. . . . Ah, strange things happen at sea. . . . Tremendous yarns . . . yes, tremendous, without yarning. . . . Once in Valparaiso this man, who was no more than a pilot, had a dispute with one of those striplings that come from the naval school, and . . . but I am not going to tell you about that, which, after all did not go beyond a fright that caused the young dandy to turn gray in two hours. . . . I am going to tell you another yarn, worse than the stories of slavers and those vessels sunk to collect insurance and the hundred others that go the rounds. . . . It did not happen exactly at sea, but on land: on land surrounded by the sea, however. . . . } Do you see that light to starboard, under the lee of the cape? Now it is shining, look. . . . It is an islet on which there is a lighthouse, about five miles from the shore. . . . I am going to tell you what happened under that light.”

I shall not be able to reproduce his tone and his effort, at times violent. I shall not be able to preserve a certain nebulosity, like a child's nightmare, that contrasted with the vivid details of some of the scenes. I shall not be able to copy his style, prodigiously direct, with its vulgar adjectives, its repetitions. In passing through me, the story will be affected by grammar. Education is a kind of uniform of minds. . . . However, even if I did succeed in evoking his words without detriment, there would always remain the silences; pathetic silences invaded by the murmur of the sea close at hand, during which, in order better to pretend not to see his moist eyes, I fixed my eyes on the mossy line left on the wharves by the falling tide and drew in the smell of the seaweed, in whose depths—a felicitous symbol of the great things of the world—could be perceived the odor of decay.

“Do not ask me whether I witnessed the events, or whether they were described to me or who told me about them. At the least interruption I shall shut myself up in my shell again and I shall go another

two years before I speak again. . . . I do not speak for your benefit but for my own. On another occasion, I was about to tell you the story. Some five or six months ago, a new sailor, in his efforts to get ashore ahead of time in order to see his family, in lowering himself into the boat, lost his footing in a surge of the sea and swallowed in three or four minutes as much water as he ought to have drunk during his whole life. . . . That day, when I saw him swollen and rigid on the rock of the pier, I recalled the death at the lighthouse and I was on the point of speaking. . . . Now, thinking of the pilot of the Ipiranga, the recollection has come again. . . . Perhaps you might be able to settle certain doubts for me, because I do not quite understand why that which happened did happen, nor have I ever been able to explain to myself the words spoken by the engineer. It may have chanced that you, as a man of letters—they have already told me that you are such—have carried in your mind from childhood some lesson or some expression that you did not understand when you learned it. I do not know whether I shall ever understand the words of that old man, even if I live a thousand years; but I have them engraved here. . . . Perhaps you may be able to toss me a line and hoist me out of my uncertainty. . . . In short, whether you can or not, it matters little to me. This is how the thing happened. . . . ”

The islet is so small that when one is but a few fathoms away, the lighthouse seems to rise from the sea; it is, as it were, a buoy on land. . . . Even on the calmest days, the breakers, like mad dogs ready to devour it, surround it with their foam; and as soon as the wind rises the waves pass over it, and it is necessary to seek shelter. According to the chart, it is nine miles from the port, but I assure you that when one goes and comes, it seems like many leagues, because all the furies of the sea meet at that point. At times it is impossible to make the trip between the shore and the island for fifteen days or as much as a month, even in the summer. One is unable to count on the fingers of his hand the number of craft that have turned their keels toward the sky off there. You must have heard tell of the naphtha launch that went out with provisions . . . and they are still waiting for it . . . if that hell of a sea were meant to guard some very good spot, but, yes, yes. . . . The soil is black, and they say that it contains ore. It may be so, for not a solitary plant thrives there. The beach, instead of being of fine sand, is of stone torn by the sea from the cliffs in front. . . . I tell you

all this in order that you may understand that life in the lighthouse is very hard and that the keepers have to be thorough men and also perfect saints to stand it.

Well, then; there . . . where much patience and much being together are not sufficient to enable one to put up with the narrowness of the life and solitude . . . there, those two had begun to hate each other; and what hatred! The older keeper, the boss, was a hulk of a man about two meters high, like myself. He had a wife and six children: a litter of cubs, ten years old and under. The other was a bachelor or widower, very pale and short. The boss was named Samuel Arbizuyes, the same surname as mine—and the other they called Solorzano, with no handle to his name. Samuel's wife was about thirty years old, but she looked older, from bearing so many children and because of some heart trouble. She was very white and almost pretty; not because she had a well-formed face, but because of the tender sadness that shone from her eyes. . . . No one would have ever fought over her. The gentlest of women! Yet her wish to keep out of trouble did her no good, for the husband—it must be admitted—had a disposition! When he started to bawl, everything shook. The lips of the woman seemed, even when she slept, to contract with an air of recommending silence to him; it was painful to behold that expression on the colorless mouth . . . a kind of coaxing to tranquility, an entreaty to moderation. Above the constant noise of the sea, the husband's voice constantly thundered, and when the waves increased, his shouts increased so as not to be outdone. Near Samuel all, even the children, seemed to speak in secret. Although I said that about his disposition, you must not believe that he was bad. Strange, rough, moody, yes; but a doer of his duty to the point of mania, and good-natured and cheerful on clear days, so much so that, perhaps on this very account, he seemed worse on the others. When he was on his high horse one had to keep out of his way. He often had an attack of fury without any reason, and they all looked at one another, fearful, asking one another the cause. . . .

I, who am also half a giant, can understand that the island was becoming too small for him. He must have felt caged, imprisoned, fearing that he would not have room for his whopping shoes, that looked like seven-league boots. . . . With wild steps he tramped through the house, went out and walked kilometers on end from one side to the other with a force that indicated his rabidness at not being able to dash

himself against the sea, until at last he pounded up the stairway and began to prepare the wicks, to estimate the contents of the tanks or to polish the metal-work with so much vim that one was soon afraid to look at oneself in it. Have you ever seen an alarm-clock that ran all right, but whose bell went off at the wrong time? Such was he. In the discharge of his duties he was a clock: in his dealings with his family and with the other tender, a crazy, irritating bell. One of them being as big as he was, and the other so small, it had to happen. We oversized men must be somewhat rough. If the little fellows shouted, and we spoke softly, we should feel ridiculous. . . . You understand. . . .

To seek the origin of the antipathy that existed between them is like going in search of the source of the evening breezes. It sprang from their living together and their not being able to cease to see each other; it began with the fact that the first tyranny that Samuel attempted to exercise over Solorzano was met with firmness and without shouts. If Samuel had been in the right that day, or the other had raised his voice, perhaps nothing would have happened.

"You say that I did not attend to my work yesterday? Take a look at the tank; it is full of oil; cast your eyes at the reflectors and see whether they are not clean; see where the weights of the clockwork apparatus are; examine the sheet, and see whether everything is noted or not."

"Yes, yes . . . but from my bed I heard your whispering."

"If it bothers you to have me read in an undertone I shall stop doing so. At other times I hear your shouts and I say nothing to you. In this life of ours we have to put up with each other; if not. . . ."

The first skirmish ended thus. If Samuel had been so furious as not to understand that the other one was on firm ground the affair would have continued longer; the firmness of tone and the duty scrupulously performed detained him. What had occurred must have left Samuel discontented with himself; must have awakened a rancor that grew and changed into surveillance. He did not long delay in finding a pretext for retaliation. When it is an affair of a task performed daily, even in the case of one that receives the utmost attention, there appears some crack which the scolding of one's boss may enter.

With an air of complaisant anger which waited for the first protest in order to overflow, Samuel called Solorzano one day and said to him: "When you left the watch this morning you did not cover the light thoroughly."

"No?"

"No."

"Excuse me. It will not occur again."

"I hope not."

The reprimand had taken place in the presence of all, at the dinner-table. The children, of course, did not understand; but the woman turned pale and she dully pretended to be merely devoting her care to the ladle with which she was stirring the stew. . . . Afterwards she exchanged glances with Solorzano and between them they had only one purpose: that of excusing Samuel. The latter's anger, not being able to find a vent, began to boil within and to work. . . .

A few days later the monthly visit of the engineer, who had been acquainted with Solorzano at another lighthouse and liked him, relieved the pressure of the other's injustice. When the engineer left, after informing them that next month a new inspector would come, because they were going to retire the one that had formerly been in charge, Samuel began to speak confidentially in shouts with an invisible interlocutor about persons that only knew how to flatter superiors and only spoke in a hypocritical whine: "the whine of a traitor."

Solorzano's face set, and he thrust his hands forward as if to push against the table in order to arise. . . . But the tender eyes again supplicated, and his face became serene; he shrugged his shoulders slightly. His hand, instead of grasping the knife, took up a spoon and carried it to his mouth. Lacking outlet, the tremendous voice boomed on, and the imprecations became more direct: "And he that is over a sneak knows only too well what awaits him . . . and as for myself, to catch a spy and squash him like a crab is easier than lighting a lamp—that's how it is!"

As is always the case when the paternal voice reaches a paroxysm, the children made off furtively to hide away in the rooms. The conclusion of the meal was painful. In the afternoon, at a moment when Samuel had gone into the tower, the woman approached Solorzano and entreated him in a supplicating tone. "Do not pay any attention. . . . He is good at heart, only he is thus. . . . Do not pay any attention to him."

"It would be better that we have nothing to do with each other if we cannot do so in peace."

"He is good at heart; you will see."

At that moment Samuel appeared on the turn of the stairway with

his eyes flaming and his right hand clutching the rope of the railing. Without waiting for the silent fury to take the form of words Solorzano went forward, approaching him, and said to him, "Do not believe that we were speaking against you; on the contrary your wife was saying that you are all right in spite of your disposition. I, on my part, wish to say to you that I desire nothing so much as to get along well with you. If I have failed in anything I have done so without wishing to do so, and I beg your pardon. Is that sufficient? Here is my hand as a friend."

The mutton-fist hesitated a moment and finally it extended and enfolded the other within its enormous grasp. Unable to restrain herself, the woman exclaimed, "The Virgin be praised!"

Nothing more occurred during the day. At night, when Solorzano went above, the husband and wife seated themselves for a moment outside, as always when the weather was good. The four luminous lenses made the circuit of the horizon, and the wings of night silvered as they passed. Every now and then a star fell to be drowned in the sea. Leaning his face toward the railing, Solorzano heard the murmur of voices that soon rose clearly and broke the immense silence, hardly disturbed before by the noise of the waves.

"Now you see that he is neither a hypocrite nor a meddler."

"Yes."

"You get angry so easily and carry on so. . . . From the very first day, he seemed to me to be a sensible man."

"Yes; I am the wild beast. . . . You ought to have married a man of his disposition and not one like myself, who has made you ill with fear. . . . You ought to have married him. . . . I am not surprised that you take his side against me."

"Samuell!"

As if his own voice, going further than thought, had cleared up the mystery of his antipathy, he proceeded, biting off his words one by one with a doleful pleasure.

"It is all clear. . . . I am a savage giant, and he is small like you, pale like you, silent and prudent like you. . . . You were made for each other. . . . It is natural."

"What are you saying, for God's sake!"

Probably her poor soft eyes were dilated with fear and her mouth sought the other's with a desperate grimace. Everything was now futile. Fury had just found a point of support on which to cast its entire weight, without pausing to observe anything. Everything that is

touched by envy and jealousy is accursed. . . . Neither sweetness nor innocence nor a desire for peace could stop the onrush of that poor imagination.

The only excuse for him is that he must have suffered horribly while causing suffering. . . . Is it not true that only those that coldly hurt the feelings of others are the really bad? Those that suffer while causing suffering are unfortunate, rather than bad. . . . In order to understand that he suffered, it was sufficient to see how he lowered his head at times and how he held one hand in subjection with the other: the right hand with the left always. . . . The man that is afraid of himself ought to be pitied.

From that night began the stubborn silence, the gushes of words that burst out unexpectedly like lightning, the absurd recriminations, the insults, the threats, the implacable interpretation of looks that did not exist and of words that had not been spoken. It was as if she had committed some great sin and had to pay for it by enduring the contempt heaped on her. . . .

I do not know whether he ever went so far as to beat her. . . . At times, from the children's room, moans could be heard. . . . The younger ones were asleep, but the oldest of them was not, and his tears were an echo of the weeping of those soft eyes. No one knows what that boy suffered! . . . He ceased to be a child. What I have told you was the first link in the chain of an enormous anchor of suffering, and they paid out its full length.

When Samuel went above at two to relieve the guard, his eyes were flaming and his mouth was bitter. They probably said nothing in particular: "A large ship passed to windward half an hour or so ago"; or perhaps: "As there is a land-breeze, the fishermen are running on this side." When he descended, the woman was asleep, and there did not occur—as there did so often afterward—the suppressed, desperate, and violent conversations that lasted until daybreak, leaving them needlessly exhausted. It was the last good sleep! The next day, when they believed the storm now remote, Samuel rose suddenly from the table, stretched himself to his enormous height in front of Solorzano and, amid the stupor of all, burst out in a choking voice: "What you said yesterday will be better: that we should not have anything to do with each other. . . . That we should not even speak to each other, outside the service. Do you hear?"

Then the days of silence began, days of lurking suspense. Solorzano,

with melancholy passivity, obeyed the order, and did not delay long in regulating his life and in preparing for himself his meals and in washing his clothes. Perhaps the increase of occupations aided him to find consolation in the increase of his solitude. On many mornings while Samuel slept, he fixed up his fishing outfit and went to seat himself on some westerly rocks. There the children were wont to seek him out, in spite of paternal orders, because they had discovered in him the qualities most esteemed by children: patience, generosity, fantasy. . . .

"Tell us another of those pretty stories. . . . We shall not tell."

He sent them away without harshness. "You must always do what your parents say," he said to them. The separation became more and more complete, until it was absolute.

If Samuel needed many hours of sleep, much food and much room, Solorzano was so modest in his requirements and in his movements that he hardly seemed to be alive. In less than a week, the violence of that life acquired an habitual rhythm; but the silence, near a person whose voice had been constantly heard, was all the more dense and sad, and the least noise awakened in the poor children a hope that they might hear some words spoken. In the morning, but only in his room, Solorzano would sing in an undertone the songs of his province, so as not to forget how to speak. When in the service, he had to attend to his duty strictly. Samuel could say nothing to him. . . . Yet whenever they were together above, and their alternate monosyllables were heard from below, the face of the woman was covered with a livid pallor, and the sweat of anguish moistened her temples. How many shocks the unhappy woman must have suffered!

They were entering the month of October; the twilight clouds no longer had the soft clarity of a short time before. The wind was not yet cold, as the children could gather, before the fall of night, behind the house to vie with one another in seeing which would be the first to make out a trail of smoke on the horizon, and afterward they could throw themselves down on the dark earth, with their faces toward the sky, imagining that the four faces of light were the upper millstones into which would fall without delay the innumerable grains of the stars.

From these diversions their mother would take them to tell the rosary. Some evenings they told it there, others within; whether Samuel were present or not, they told it with devotion. After the rosary, they said a prayer for the dead, another for those on the high seas, and still

another, which the mother prayed on her knees, for something that the children never understood. . . .

Solorzano's slight shadow, as he returned from his fishing, sometimes crossed near them; he did not look at them, as if he wished to avoid all pretext for Samuel's injustices.

In the infinite quietude, every minute, every second, burdened the hours; but, in spite of their struggle against tedium, the hours formed into days, weeks. . . . Soon the cobalt of the sea would turn dead black, and soon the mornings, in which the transparency of the air sought to penetrate the water, soon these mornings would cease; not again for a long time would the island be surrounded by a glowing immensity streaked here and there with gray and stirred by slight tremors; no longer would be enjoyed, until the next autumn, the dusks in which the day and the night mingled little by little and in which the sky and the sea were so divinely diffused on the horizon that certain vessels seemed to sail through the clouds. The sea was continuously threshed into millions of wavelets and foam frothed on the crest of each; at times the waves were long like gaunt monsters moved from the depths by an immense force. The autumn storms were near.

Soon the dwellers on the island would have to shut themselves in, lest they perish in the struggle against the wind and the water; soon they would have to battle with the artificial light, both against the ashes of the day and the shadows of the night. . . . Already were approaching the nights when the island would be like a tiny rock which the hurricane would seek to catch in its terrible hand to hurl upon the mainland from which it should not have detached itself.

One morning Solorzano observed that the door of Samuel's quarters was closed and then, as he went out, he looked obliquely through the bars of the window and was surprised not to see the woman engaged in her tasks. He made no inquiry and did not even attempt to approach the children, accustomed now, with the notable facility of young creatures, to the new state of affairs. In the change of shifts in the service, not a word more than those absolutely necessary was exchanged between the men. When Samuel had disappeared down the spiral of the stone stairway, Solorzano heard him ascend again, and he hoped and feared at one and the same time.

"The launch with the provisions ought to come tomorrow, and—I know not why—I fancy that the inspectors will come," Samuel said from the threshold.

"Maybe so."

"I inform you in order that nothing may go ill with us."

"I shall go over everything; rest easy. . . . Good-night."

"Good-night."

They said nothing more. The gigantic figure was buried in the shadow, and the insignificant figure remained in its position, intent on the clockwork under the light which the greenish curves of the lenses changed into beneficent white arms that stretched far to guide navigators.

The prediction turned out to be correct: the inspectors arrived next day. During the first moments, talk with the sailors, the transportation of boxes, packages and jars, the inquiries as to orders, diverted interest. Soon afterward, when they entered and began to appraise the technical details, the figure of the new inspector acquired its full relief. He was a bent old man, with a great beard beneath which could be seen gaunt cheeks. His brow and eyes spoke in advance of his words to give the impression of intelligence. While the inspector was going through the notes the engineer called Solorzano to one side. "It seems to me that you two do not get on well together, eh?"

"No, sir."

"Ah: I thought I observed that you did not speak to each other."

"Thus is avoided. . . . He was the one that proposed it . . . and it is better like this."

"Affairs of the service, because he holds the first place? A question of cards? It cannot be one of jealousy."

"Oh, no!"

"He told us his wife was ill. The chief inspector, who understands a little of everything, is going to have a look at her."

At that moment Samuel and the inspector entered one of the rooms, and there arose an astonishing noise among the children. While they were absent, the engineer tried several times to renew the dialogue, but Solorzano evaded it.

"You know we have known each other a long time, and I think highly of you. If you are not comfortable here and wish to change to another lighthouse, write me. This man must have a bad disposition. It is clearly seen."

"We all have our faults. At any rate, if it is necessary, I shall write you."

The engineer was going to add something, when the others appeared.

From fragments of the conversation, they learned that the invalid was very low, with a rapid pulse and labored breathing. Out of the medicine case came a vial of digitalis, and from the gray beard prescriptions of rest and the promise to send a physician.

They were going toward the landing, when, half way, they observed that they had forgotten and left above a case of instruments. The oldest boy wished to go up for it, but Samuel, doubtlessly as a manifestation of deference, prevented him, saying, "I myself am going; stay here."

While they were waiting, the inspector picked up from the ground a piece of stone and after scratching it stood looking at it under the light. Then he thrust it into his pocket. Taking advantage of the absence of the father, he gave a silver coin to the boy and said to the engineer, "The lighthouse impressed me very favorably. Of course, not all of those of the district are so well served."

"The service is good. . . . It should be said, among the best. . . . You have seen that the two keepers do not get along. It is often so. Do not be surprised."

It was then that the older man pronounced the phrase to which I referred before I began to tell you this story, one of those phrases that remain engraved, word for word, like a lesson the sense of which is not understood long afterward, if one ever comes wholly to understand it:

"No; I am not surprised; it will always be thus," he said. "Those that in the material as well as in the moral realm are called upon to hold aloft a great light to shine for others leave about them a zone in which the shadow is deepest. In that zone are suffered the blindest passions, the most intense pains. . . . It is the law! I know other living lighthouses in which the same thing happens."

The physician appeared two days later in a sloop. He arrived so seasick that they were more inclined to offer him aid than to ask it of him. He looked with horror on the stretch of water that he would have to cross again in order to return, and from his eyes and livid complexion could readily be divined his absurd desire to remain forever on the island. . . . Would that he might have been able to remain! However, it was not to be so. He left after applying his stethoscope to the invalid, prescribing impossible things, and uttering certain vague phrases, those of a poor fellow who is also suffering, instead of the desired spells.

"There is nothing to do. She can get up as well as not. . . . Rest, good food, and silence . . . no noises or emotions. . . . She might

continue to take those drops, yes; and as soon as they can, let them take her ashore . . . even if it be to the hospital."

In vain did Samuel endeavor, with brutal emotion, to force him from his indecision.

"What I have said, and no more," the doctor insisted, with one foot on board and his eyes filled with terror. "To make prognostications would be to deceive you. . . . It is as if I were to ask you to assure me that the sea is going to be rough or to calm down while I am on my way . . . exactly the same. I bid you good-day."

He dropped with resignation into the cockpit while the sloop was being pushed off with two boat-hooks and the sail was filling. Samuel sat for a long time on a rock watching the boat recede. When it disappeared amid the waves, the isthmus of hope that joined the lighthouse to the land was broken; even the younger children must have felt hopelessly alone and friendless on the island.

Samuel went and came with tightly compressed lips, fearful that the pain might be changed into anger and the anger into cries. His efforts not to make a noise, to come and go gently, to seem smaller at a time of suffering, were moving. More than once Solorzano felt an impulse to ask him about the invalid and to offer his services, but the grim face restrained him. While in the soul of one all was tumult and terror, and in that of the other all pity, their eyes needing the comfort of a human presence were fixed on the indifferent mass of the ocean, and their tongues uttered none but futile words.

"The Italian vessel is making nearer here this voyage," said Samuel, when he wished to say: "She is breathing worse and worse. Do you think she will be able to hold out until the naphtha boat comes, or would it be better for us to send word?"

Solorzano replied in a whisper: "Yes; the sea must be very heavy there; they do well to shelter themselves a little among the capes;" when in reality his soul dictated, in reply to the unpronounced words: "I place my hope in God! It will not be so serious. . . . The launch will come this week, and they can carry her away and cure her there. . . ."

Had it not been for the recollection of all that had taken place—the terrible nights in which he heard them disputing almost until daybreak, in which the angry voice of the giant acquired, by the restraint he placed on it, a more penetrating vibration even than the cries, and when he said: "Yes; you looked at him! He is the man born for you Go, go with him You will have to go only a

few steps," Solorzano would have dared to bridge the chasm; but he was afraid of awakening the wild beast which sorrow dominated with its tremendous lash. Only in words, at one and at the same time both indifferent and filled with anxiety, in tense silences, and in furtive, tearful glances, did they exchange the tension of their souls. At times the silence was so intense that the panting of the invalid reached to the very top of the lighthouse and to the remotest projection of the beach. Even the children lived noiselessly and were subject to sudden starts. Of course the hours of the day were shorter than those of the night. The inevitable occupations, the company of the tender little faces, a gull or two, a school of dolphins, a ship, consoled somewhat. But when night came, all the minutes betokened an ambush, and the four faces of the light, revolving tirelessly, symbolized the looks of the two men, who feared that, under cover of the darkness, the boat that was to bear away a corpse might arrive.

One afternoon, when Solorzano was preparing to clean the light, he heard the voice of Samuel calling him in anguish, "Come down . . . come down! . . . She is dying!"

He ran, and on the threshold of the room he found him, quivering and tragic, amid the swarm of weeping children.

"She is dying! . . . She is dying!"

He repeated these words many times, as if he wished to justify everything by means of them. Solorzano was deeply touched by Samuel's soft uncertain voice, like that of another child, and his eyes filled with tears.

"No . . . it cannot be. . . . Do not distress yourself so. It must be merely a faint. . . . We must do something. . . . Come . . . let the oldest of them take the others to my room. . . ."

The two entered hastily and stopped in front of the bed, as before an unexpected obstacle. The shape of her body could hardly be discerned beneath the bedclothes. Her head swayed distressingly on the pillow. She looked up and saw the two men standing together and she smiled softly.

"Do you see? . . . God will grant that she shall be saved. . . . Do not despair thus. . . ."

Although trying to offer encouragement, he was terrified to see how she had wasted away. He never would have thought that a few days could accomplish so much. When the children heard him, they entered little by little and crowded uncertainly about the bed. Bending over

the invalid, Solorzano asked her, "Are you suffering? . . . How do you feel?"

Her lips moved, without ceasing to smile, and she extended her hand, after vain efforts, toward the newcomer. The weariness of this effort caused her to close her eyes, which, seen between the lids, had the viscous blue of recently opened shells.

Something must be done, decided Solorzano. "Bring the book from the medicine chest. . . . Send the children to bed. They are a hindrance more than anything else. . . . The doctor said it was her heart, didn't he? Take a look in the tower while I search. . . . Heart . . . heart . . . here! Bring the lamp nearer, you!"

The oldest of the boys set the lantern closer, and the leaves of the book were slowly turned. It must have been very difficult, for, from time to time, Solorzano had to read over and over again, like one who retraces a road without being able to find the way.

Samuel returned from above and he also began to read, over the other's shoulder. The invalid breathed slightly, and to her respiration was joined that of her children, overcome by sleep, little by little. Only the oldest withstood the weariness. At times the three lifted their eyes from the letters to fix them on the bed, trying to harmonize the multitude of printed letters with the sad occurrence. Her profile was marked sharply on the wall; under the light her hair and skin were moist with sweat. Her mouth no longer smiled; the smile had dissolved over her entire face.

"See now how well she is sleeping . . . it was what is spoken of here: a collapse. . . ."

"Yes, yes; read some more. . . . Perhaps we shall find some drops. I am afraid in this affair of an injection."

"So am I."

Again they bent over the book, opened the medicine case, took out two vials, which they held up to the light, unwrapped with superstitious precautions a syringe and again buried themselves in the pages of the book, without being aware of the passage of time or of the appearance of dawn through the windows. No one aboard the vessels which approached the coast that night, guided by the lighthouse, no one would have supposed that beneath its powerful brilliance three humble lives sought together an impossible route beneath a tiny flickering flame.

They were so intent, so absorbed, that Death entered and stopped the heart of the invalid without anyone's noticing his arrival.

When Samuel realized what had occurred, he no longer had strengt to shout. He fell into a chair, broken, voiceless, with a dull sob from his soul. . . . To withdraw, Solorzano had to break the grip of the huge fist that clung to his right hand with sincere gratitude.

The sea continued to be agitated. A gleam of sunshine crowned the distant mountains. From the railing of the tower, first with rockets and then with flags, he made signs until the fishermen who were returning to the bay saw them. When a boat came near enough, he caught up the trumpet and shouted, "The keeper's wife is dead! . . . Get word ashore!"

The multiplied voice must have reached below, as the weeping of the children redoubled. The day, immense and filled with tears, clouded over and dragged on lividly about the dead woman, perhaps reflecting her pallor. In the afternoon a launch came to take away the body, which was to be accompanied by Samuel and the oldest boy. The other children remained with Solorzano, who took care of them during Samuel's absence. "As only a mother could have done," the substitute said later. The trip was a hard one. The greatest thing in the giant's life had shrunk with death and was now barely visible in the bow, under the canvas, over which dashed the spray. The sea churned and glowed with phosphorescence on all sides. The sailor maintained a funereal silence. Several times they had to pass a line over the body, because the boat heeled over so much. When they touched land, night had already closed. For some time the lighthouse with its white gaze had sought the poor body, rocked, when it could no longer feel it, by the gentle cradle swing whose caress she had never enjoyed since childhood.

I know not whether you retain any such childish recollection. If you do not, it will be difficult for you to understand this part of my story. Those three days of absence must have been, as the brothers and sisters soon assured the oldest son, indescribable, strange, sweet, sad, cruel, and ingenuous, with that medley so often indissoluble in the thought of a child. When a house is shattered by a rude blow, authority over the children suffers an eclipse, and they enjoy a sort of melancholy libertinage. They know or feel that sorrow has loosed the bonds; but still they can not fail to enjoy space and time without hindrances; and, as the days pass, there remains, as a sort of atmosphere of recollection, a haze composed of timid joys and disturbed monotony.

The oldest youngster was already on the mysterious threshold

between childhood and puberty where life communicates to the brain its first revelations; yet the child within him experienced envy when he heard the descriptions of his brothers. . . . Oh, in those three days they had not had a single quarrel! How good Solorzano was! He cooked for them, he told them stories, he made them tell the rosary as formerly; he put them to bed with pettings, just as she had done. . . . He had let them climb the tower on condition that they would not tell. . . . He had even taken them fishing two afternoons. . . . How good he was!

Samuel, dressed in mourning, with his eyes sunken, bent with weariness and sorrow, seemed smaller. On disembarking, he gave his right hand to Solorzano. When he saw the children so clean, he must have deemed this show of friendship insufficient, and he gave him the other, without words, in an impressive silence, full of repentance and sincere promise. When the boy saw them thus, so united, the impression that grief had shrunken Samuel vanished: beside him, Solorzano was like another child.

The substitute departed, and the common life was re-established. The first night, when the glances of the two met in the empty place, Solorzano said, "You ought to ask for a transfer to another place. This lighthouse will be too sad for all of you. . . . Everything will speak to you of your dead one."

"Yes . . . but forget her, no! . . . I do not wish to. At the headquarters they proposed to transfer me, but I did not wish them to do so. . . . Besides, we should have to separate."

Thus began the truce. When I say "the truce," you understand that the drama was not concluded. The body, taken ashore some days before under the foam-flecked canvas, ought to have carried with it all the causes of rancor and left only remorse, repentance. . . . It was not so. Would it might have been so! . . . Death, by removing the woman—the terrible pretext chosen by the men to justify their frenzies—offered them union in a new life of solitude, peace, and recollection. But baleful passions penetrated the most obscure corners of the soul, deep down, where reason did not rule, and violences matured suddenly after slow mysterious gestations, without apparent relation to external causes. . . .

You already know what the engineer had said: "The light on high for others and the shadow round about. . . ." It was something absurd, unjust. . . . It is futile for me to endeavor to seek excuses for Samuel's

action! As I must reach the end, I shall now proceed without beating about the bush, rapidly. Listen:

The first symptoms did not manifest themselves for about a month. The children, who had been hitherto an invisible swarm, from which the oldest stood out, began to acquire individuality, two of them especially: Paquito and Luis. Luis was strong, wayward, dominating tall; Paquito was pale and puny, and his eyes were so soft that, seeing him, it was impossible to think of death. . . . By the natural tendency of his spirit, also by contrast with Samuel's rough virility, Solorzano began to be to the children something like a mother of the wrong sex and his only severities fell, doubtless justly, on Luis. Paquito, on the other hand, he always treated with a tender solicitude. Because they were the nearest to each other in age, Paquito and Luis quarreled with most frequency, and Solorzano's partiality showed itself without disguise. Even before the mother died, these disputes had not been rare, and Samuel was given to punishing impartially with a heavy hand. Therefore his first defense shocked every one, especially as he chose a day when Paquito was in the right.

"Paquito is your favorite, Solorzano. . . . The other, although such a hobbledehoy, is also God's."

"But, it is because I do not wish Luis to get in the habit of picking on the weak."

"The other is a great little hypocrite; do not believe . . . but, let Luis suffer the punishment. You are the one who has to struggle with them; so that. . . ."

Nothing more occurred. Luis submitted to the kindly penance that Solorzano had imposed, but from that day the shadows of other years again passed over Samuel's face, and he seemed to be less shrunken in his black clothes. A few days later, the question came up anew, and this time his interference was more serious.

"See here, Solorzano; have your way with all of them except Luis. It may be because he favors me, if you will, but it hurts me when you punish him. Do we understand each other? Buy the other one all the knick-knacks you please, as if he were your own; I do not object. Now this one . . . this one is thoroughly mine, and you have nothing to do with him."

The thing was so groundless, so confused, that Solorzano did not understand it at once. For several weeks he restrained himself, and in spite of the differences in their characters, he treated all the children

alike. Samuel's somber silences continued, however. He alone was the cause of them. . . . He once more took up his tasks with the earnestness of one who wishes to bury his preoccupation. The metal-work again shone with startling brilliancy. The oldest boy noticed that their tongues began to utter phrases different from those their hearts desired to express. Solorzano's goodness must have been somewhat irritating to Samuel. That meekness, that tireless concern with everything, that prevention of grounds and occasions for disagreement, instead of increasing the memory of gratitude, irritated a wound in the soul of Samuel, a wound unreal but incurable, opened by the imagination. As formerly, his voice went beyond his thought, completing it, as it were: Luis was thoroughly his, and Solorzano had nothing to do with him;—if Luis were thoroughly his, in size and character, and if the other were small, pallid and gentle, like them, it was because. . . . No, no! The one they would have had, if they had known each other before, or if they had not feared his vengeance. . . .

The struggle must have been tremendous from the time this idea began to gnaw at his brain until it emptied it of everything to take possession of it day and night. That battle must have lasted three months, perhaps even four months, during which his words became harsher and harsher every day. Signs of spring appeared; one could feel the approach of the days of chicha. Samuel got rid of the long black coat, which had shortened his figure, and became in every one's eyes the same as before: a sort of force of nature, almost like the wind and sea. . . . His shouts resounded unexpectedly, and the island seemed to tremble. . . . Near the wound opened another, less mocking. Do you know what it was? That Paquito never afforded him any ground for complaint. With a terrible patience, he began to look out for the first fault. A little wine spilled on the table, and then his great hand descended upon the tender face, leaving a broad red trace and a miserable sobbing that lasted until daybreak. The stupor of the children, Solorzano's pallor, the look of the oldest son, who, without fully understanding, already perceived that something strange was happening, rarefied the air. Samuel sprang up and rushed out muttering confused threats. . . . Solorzano gathered Paquito in his arms, carried him off to bed, and tried to lull him to sleep with pettings. The giant voice resounded from above, rabidly, "Leave him alone, Solorzano! . . . Leave him alone, or I shall come down again!"

The little bed was abandoned, and decided steps sounded on the

stairway. It was not Samuel descending; it was Solorzano ascending. After him also went up the oldest boy, with fear and caution. He could listen in the shadow.

"What you did was not right, Samuel."

"Have you come to scold me?"

At that moment the difference in the height of the two men was not so marked. To the ironical and provocative tone of the question responded another tone, energetic but soft, a tone none would have expected from that mouth.

"No; I am not the one to scold you, but I have come to speak with you. Listen to me. . . . Do not double your fists. I know you can smash me or throw me over the railing. It is not a question of fight. It is a question of having peace. You can be just or unjust with your children. . . . That is an affair between you and your conscience. . . . Today you have not been just. . . . Not to give you another occasion, I come to propose to you our former course; each one in his own house, without words, without dealings. . . . Do not think that it costs me nothing. . . . I do not shrug my shoulders . . . but that is not all; the day you again maltreat Paquito . . . or any of the others, I shall write to the engineer to ask for my transfer. Now you know."

"Is that all? Begone, begone, or . . ."

Without haste, without fear, Solorzano turned his back on him, passed near the oldest boy without seeing him, and went to his room.

The next day there fell over the island the hostile silence that was not broken by the exciting murmur of the sea or even by the tempests. The children received the order not to speak to Solorzano on any ground; and his attitude helped them to obey it. Only, from a distance, soft eyes followed him from a moist and tremulous sadness that did not dare to change into tears. Left to themselves, they soon fell a prey to untidiness. Samuel tried sometimes to multiply himself in order to look after them; at others he fell into spells of inactive depression. Seeing them ragged increased his fury. Only in respect to the requirements of the lighthouse was he capable and orderly. When his efforts encountered the impossibility of caring for them he glanced at them, laughed with an evil laughter, and abandoned himself to the somberness of a calm, almost worse than anger. The calms were wont to last two or three days, and then, without a cause, came a night of brooding of rage. . . . On one of those nights the oldest boy felt as if his hair were beginning to turn gray. Ah! only those who have been robbed

of their childhood at a blow will be able to understand his bitterness. The bitterness of the sea came that night between the father and the son. . . . No; something more bitter and larger than the sea. With the words of a madman, without understanding that he was rending a poor heart to which he had given existence, Samuel began to utter his terrible calumnies against the dead woman and against Solorzano. . . . The son had to bear the abominable accusations many times.

"That accursed weakling with soft eyes and a yellow face was the son that they would have wished to have! . . . He was their son, yes, their son! . . . Do not say it is not so, or I will kill you!"

The boy trembled and divined.

The furious voice continued: "But I shall remove that yellow from his face with blows. . . . The blow of the other day will be nothing compared with what I am going to give him!"

Hitherto the boy had believed that the longest night in the world was the one he had passed looking alternately at a book and at a face disfigured by the nearness of death; but no; this night was still longer. Every word disclosed to him an abyss. He felt the vertigo of a man and the fear of a defenseless child in the presence of the tempestuous power of his father. He closed his eyes, summoning sleep, and he would have wished to close his ears also. Finally sleep came. . . . When he awoke, it was very late. Weeping came from outside; he arose filled with a sudden assurance of what was happening. The paternal hand had again fallen on the child's little face.

"Ah! I shall kill you! . . . I shall kill you!" Samuel vociferated.

He went outside, and he made his first man's decision.

When Samuel felt some one pinion his arm he turned around, assured of finding Solorzano; but when he saw his son he meekly lowered his head and let himself be led away. He passed the whole day between excitement and anguish. . . . When the time for his watch arrived, subconsciousness awoke in him and he wished to get up.

"No! Stay here! . . . You must rest. Today, I'll go up."

Samuel sank back again in the disordered bed without protest. There above, Solorzano arose when he heard the steps. He was paler than ever. His eyes were red, and his skin where the tears had flowed very dry. He refused to leave the boy alone, and, after a long silence, he got up, pressed him in his arms and said to him, breaking into sobs: "I love you, all of you, very deeply . . . him also; but I must go away. This very day I am going to write."

Then he fled by the stairway, leaving infinite pity in a heart, half that of an old man, half that of a child.

On the following morning Solorzano left the house very early and went to bathe in a recess of the beach where the waters were somewhat quieter. Samuel must have heard him, must have spied him from the window, for he went out with furtive steps, locking the door behind him. When the boy tried to get out it was too late. From the window foreseeing the drama, yet without daring to awaken his brothers, he witnessed the scene. His voice caught in his throat. A voice stronger than his own told him that everything would be futile, that his shout would only serve to summon his brothers to view the crime that would never be blotted out. Ah! what an experience he had already had. The pursuit continued for some minutes, but Solorzano's weak arm could not strive against the arms of the giant, who overtook him at last near the land. The struggle was short. For some seconds both were submerged, and at length only the bust of the colossus reappeared swaying, as if he had beneath his feet something that was fighting desperately. A minute passed, an immense minute. The enormous stature diminished suddenly by some inches, advanced toward the land and appeared among the rocks. In the distance an inert mass floated on the waves.

What was the son to do? Denounce him? Give a name of ignominy to his brothers? At the age of thirteen, that boy had to wrestle with the most tremendous problem of conscience that could be endured.

He said nothing. . . .

The drowning of a light-keeper is not a rare occurrence; neither is it an unheard-of thing that a man, who cannot bear the death of his wife and takes to speaking to no one, dies of grief. . . .