

MOUNTAIN OF SOULS

(A Legend of Soria)

On the night of All Souls Day I was awakened by the sound of church bells ringing. The sound of their constant, monotonous tolling reminded me of a story I heard not long ago in Soria.

I tried to go back to sleep, but that was not possible. Once your imagination is roused, it is like a runaway horse and, no matter how hard you try, you can never rein it in. So I gave in and decided to write it down, which is what I am doing now.

At two in the morning, after an early breakfast, with a cigarette in my mouth, I am thinking that it would probably not be of much interest to readers of *El Contemporáneo*. I heard this story in the city where the events took place, and as I wrote, I turned my head from time to time, whenever I heard my balcony windows rattle in the cold, night wind. So for whatever it is worth, *here goes*, like a horse without a bridle.

I

“Tie up the hounds and blow the horn so the hunters will know it’s time to come back and return to town. It’s beginning to get dark, this is All Souls Day, and we are on the Mountain of Souls.”

“So soon?...”

“If it were any other day, I would not wait to kill this herd of wolves that the blizzards of Mount Moncayo have driven from their dens, but today that is impossible. Very soon it will be time for prayers, and the souls of the dead will start ringing their bell in the chapel on the mountain.”

“In that ruined chapel! Come now! Are you trying to frighten me?”

“No, dear cousin. You are not familiar with the things in this country, since you have come here from somewhere else. Rein in your mare, and I will ride with you so I can tell you about it during the rest of our journey.”

The travelers gathered in boisterous, happy groups; the Counts of Borges and Alcuéscar mounted their magnificent steeds and hurried after their children, Beatriz and Alonso, who had ridden ahead of the retinue.

During the remainder of the journey, Alonso repeated the following story:

“This mountain once belonged to the Templars whose monastery you can see on the banks of the river. The Templars were both soldiers, and members of a religious order. When the city of Soria was reconquered from the Moors, the king asked them to come from a distant land to serve as defenders of the city, which was an offense to the nobles of Castile, who wanted to protect it by themselves, just as they had reconquered it alone. Between the knights of this new and powerful order, and the nobles of the city there was a deep hatred that fermented for several years, and finally exploded. The Templars had closed off the mountain, where game was plentiful, and used it for hunting and to amuse themselves; but the nobles were determined to stage a hunt on the mountain, in spite of the prohibition of the *monks with spurs*, as they called their enemies. The news of this challenge spread, and there was nothing that could deter the latter from their decision to hunt, or the former from their determination to prevent it. So the plan of the nobles was carried out. Wild beasts do not remember it; only mothers who mourn for their children

still think about it. It was not a hunt; it was a bloody battle, and the mountain was littered with corpses, so that the wolves they had tried to exterminate had a marvelous feast. Finally, the king intervened and by his order the mountain, which had been the scene of this terrible disaster, was abandoned and the chapel of the knights, where both Templars and nobles were buried, began to fall into ruins. Since that time they say that on the night of All Souls Day one can hear the sound of the bell in the chapel, and one can see the souls of the dead, still wrapped in their shrouds, wandering through the thistles and the brambles, as though they are engaged in some strange hunting party. Deer run away in fear, wolves howl, snakes hiss, and the following day one can see skeletal footprints in the snow. That is why we call it the Mountain of Souls, and that is why I wanted to leave it now, before night falls.”

Alonso’s story ended at the point when they reached the bridge that leads to the city. There, they waited for the rest of the retinue which, after it joined the two young people, entered the dark and narrow streets of Soria.

II

The servants had finished removing the cloaks; the tall gothic fireplace of the palace of the Count of Alcuéjar cast a bright glow illuminating the group of noble men and women who were gathered before it, chatting familiarly, and above them the wind rattled the high arched windows of the hall.

Only two people seemed to be uninterested in the conversation: Beatriz and Alonso. Beatriz stared at the fire, while lost in thought. Alonso kept looking at the sparks from the red flames that were reflected in the blue eyes of Beatriz. Both had been silent for some time.

When they discuss the night of All Souls Day, the people mention fearful tales in which ghosts and witches play a leading role, while the church bells of Soria keep ringing monotonously and sorrowfully.

“Dear cousin,” said Alonso, finally breaking their long silence, “soon we will have to say goodbye, perhaps for good; I know that you are not fond of the arid plains of Castile, its crude customs and its people, its simple, patriarchal dress; at times I have heard you sigh, perhaps for some attractive young man from your homeland.”

Beatriz shrugged her shoulders with an expression of cold indifference, and her entire feminine character was revealed in the scornful contraction of her thin lips.

“Or perhaps it is because of the splendor of the French Court where you used to live,” the young man hastened to add. “I can see that, in one way or the other, you will not wait long to leave... But when you do, I would like you to have something to remember me... Do you remember the day we went to the church to give thanks to God because you had regained the health, for which you had come to this land? The jeweled brooch attached to the feather on my hat caught your attention. I was thinking how nice it would look if it were fastening the veil that covers your dark hair! It once belonged to a bride. My father gave it to the one who gave birth to me, and she carried it to the altar... Would you like to have it?”

“I don’t know how things are done in your country,” the young woman replied, “but in mine, when you receive a gift like this, it implies a commitment. Only on the day of a

ceremony should you ever accept a gift from a relative... who may or may not expect something in return.”

The coldness with which Beatriz said these words troubled the youth for a moment, but after calming himself, he said sadly:

“I know, Cousin, but we are celebrating All Souls Day, which is also your saint’s day. Since today is a day of ceremonies and gifts, would you accept mine?”

Beatriz bit her lip and extended her hand to take the jewel, without saying a word.

The two young people became silent again, and once again it was possible to hear the broken voices of the old women who were still speaking of witches and ghosts, while the wind shook the high, arched windows and was accompanied by the constant, monotonous ringing of the bells.

After a few minutes, the interrupted dialogue was resumed:

“And before the end of All Souls Day, when both of us are celebrating our saint’s day, you could, without making any commitment, also give me something to remember you, couldn’t you?” Alonso said as he fixed his eyes on those of his cousin that began to shine, as though illuminated by some diabolical idea.

“Yes, why not?” she said, raising her hand to her right shoulder, as though she was searching for something in the folds of her velvet cloak which was trimmed with gold. Then, with an expression of sadness, she added: “Do you remember the blue sash I wore while we were hunting and which, for some reason, I’m not sure why, you said there was something about its color that was the image of your soul?”

“Yes.”

“Well... Unfortunately, I lost it! I was thinking of giving it to you as a remembrance, but now it is lost.”

“You lost it! But where?” Alonso asked, rising out of his chair with an indescribable expression of fear and hope.

“I don’t know. Probably on the mountain.”

“On the Mountain of Souls,” he whispered turning pale, while letting himself fall back into his chair. “On the Mountain of Souls!” he repeated; and then, he continued with an unsure and faltering voice: “You know, because you must have heard it a thousand times, in this city and all over Castile, they call me ‘the king of the hunters.’ Since I have not been able to prove myself in battle like my ancestors, I have devoted all the energy of my youth, and all the hereditary spirit of my race, to this pastime, which can also be a kind of war. The carpet on which your feet are resting has been made from the remains of beasts killed by my hand. I know their haunts and their customs, I have fought them both day and night, on foot and on horseback, alone and with a hunting party, and no one has ever seen me flee from danger, at any time. On any other night I would gladly search for that sash, and I would do so joyfully, as a challenge; but on this night?... On this night..., why hide it from you? I would be afraid. Can you hear that? The bells are ringing, prayers have begun in the church of San Juan del Duero, and the souls on the mountain will now be raising their yellowed skulls out of the thickets which cover their graves... The souls, whose very sight can freeze the blood of the most courageous, and can turn his hair white, or carry him off in a wild race, like a leaf that is caught in a storm without knowing where it will fall.”

While the young man was speaking, an imperceptible smile spread over the lips of Beatriz who, when he had finished, said with an air of indifference, as she stared at the

fire where the flames jumped and the wood crackled, while throwing off sparks of many different colors:

“Oh, in no way. What madness! To go back to the mountain for such a trivial thing! On such a dark night, on All Souls Night, when the paths might be filled with wolves!”

When she uttered this last phrase, it was said in such a way that Alonso could not help but recognize the bitter irony. As though propelled by a spring, he jumped up and rubbed his hand over his brow like he was trying to wipe away the fear that was only in his head, but not in his heart; then, with a firm voice he said to his beautiful cousin who was still staring at the hearth and watching the dancing flames:

“Goodbye, Beatriz, goodbye. I will see you later.”

“Alonso! Alonso!...” Beatriz shouted, turning rapidly, but though she tried, or seemed to try to stop him, the young man had already disappeared.

Shortly after that, the sound of a horse was heard, as it galloped off in the distance. The lovely young woman, with a radiant expression of satisfaction coloring her cheeks, listened attentively to the sound of the horse that grew weaker and weaker, until it finally disappeared completely.

Meanwhile, the old women continued repeating their tales, of souls who come back from the dead, while the wind rattled the windows, and bells rang in the distance.

III

An hour... then two... then three had passed. The clock was about to strike midnight when Beatriz finally withdrew to her room. Alonso still had not returned, in spite of the fact that it should have taken him no more than an hour to return from the mountain.

“Oh, his fear must have slowed him!” the young woman exclaimed. Closing the book she had been reading, she climbed into bed and tried in vain to say some of the prayers which the church devoted to All Souls Day. She finally was able to sleep, but her sleep was restless, light, and nervous.

The clock on the Postern gate struck twelve. In her dreams, Beatriz felt the constant vibration of the bells, until she opened her eyes. It seemed as though she had heard the sound of her name, but it came from far away, very far, from a voice that was labored and suffering. The sound of the wind was coming through the windows.

“Yes, it was probably just the wind,” she said, putting her hand over her heart in an effort to calm her nerves.

But her heart kept beating even more rapidly, and the oaken doors of her house began to creak on their hinges, with a prolonged and strident sound.

First it was one door, then it was others that were closer and closer, until all of the doors that led to her room creaked, one after the other; and the sound they produced was a noise that was nerve-wracking and filled her with fear. Afterward, there was silence, a silence which was filled with the strange sounds of midnight: the distant barking of dogs, confused voices saying many unintelligible words, echoes of footsteps coming and going, rustling of cloth as though it were dragged over the ground, sighs that were choked off, labored breathing which was barely audible; and a mysterious shaking that announced the presence of something that was unseen, but whose approach was still noticeable in the darkness.

Trembling with fear, Beatriz stuck her head through the curtains surrounding her bed and listened for a moment. She heard a variety of different sounds. She wiped her hand over her brow and listened again, and this time there was nothing but silence.

However, out of the corner of an eye in the midst of a nervous crisis, she could see that there were elusive shapes moving around her; but when she looked directly at them, there was nothing but darkness and opaque shadows.

“Bah!” she exclaimed, once again resting her head on the blue satin pillow of her bed. “Am I as fearful as those people whose hearts beat with terror every time they hear the mention of ghosts?”

And closing her eyes, she made another effort to go back to sleep... but that effort was in vain. She soon got back out of bed, even more pale and nervous, even more afraid. There was no longer any doubt; the brocade curtains of her doorway had separated, and she could hear the sound of measured footsteps moving over the carpet. The noise of those steps was soft and indistinct, but it continued, and she could also hear a scraping sound, like wood or bone. And it came closer and closer until she heard something move the prayer stool at the foot of her bed. Beatriz uttered a sharp cry; she ducked her head under the covers and held her breath.

The wind rattled the windows of her balcony; the falling water of a distant fountain continued splashing monotonously; the sound of barking dogs was carried by the wind, and the bells of the city of Soria, some near some faraway, continued tolling for the souls of the dead.

In this way an hour passed, then two, then the entire night, which seemed endless to Beatriz. Finally, day began to dawn. Recovering from her fear, she opened her eyes to the first rays of light. After a night of insomnia and fear, the bright light of day was a wondrous thing! She pushed back the silk covers of her bed and cast her eyes over her surroundings, ready to laugh at her fear; but suddenly, a cold chill spread over her body, a pallor covered her cheeks, and her eyes bulged, as she stared at the torn blue sash covered with blood that was draped over the prayer stool at the foot of her bed; it was the sash she had lost on the mountain, which Alonso had gone to find.

The next morning when her mortified servants came to inform her that the son of the Count of Alcudiel was dead, that his body had been discovered on the Mountain of Souls where it had been devoured by wolves, they found Beatriz motionless and stiff, with both hands clinging to the ebony bedposts, her eyes bulging, her mouth open, her lips white. Her heart had stopped beating, and she had died of fright!

IV

They say that, some time after this happened, a hunter became lost and was forced to spend the night on the Mountain of Souls. Before he died the following day, he was able to describe what he had seen; he insisted that he saw the ghosts of the Templars and the knights of Soria rise out of their tombs in the chapel at the time of prayers; then, he saw them mount their skeletal horses, and they began to pursue a beautiful woman, pale and disheveled, whose feet were bare and bloody, and who uttered cries of terror, as she ran around and around the tomb of Alonso.