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The Desecrated Church

by Manuel Pinheiro Chagas

I

It is a quiet night with no moon shining in the sky or sprinkling the earth with sadness or concealing some fantasy, some poet's dream in every fold of its pure white tunic; only stars glitter in the dark veil of the firmament.

Not that starry nights do not have their own beauty, but they lack the tender melancholy of moonlit nights; whilst the sight of those myriads of luminous spheres may captivate our spirits, the rays of the moon speak a mysterious language that touches our hearts.

When the stars outshine each other in the dark night, it is almost as if we could hear the majestic music of the spheres, but when the moon illumines the earth with its sweet light, the whole of space seems filled with vague canticles of longing, the sighs of a lovesick virgin, the song of a fisherman lost far out on the waves, a tune sung by a shepherd, sounds that fade and die as they reach our ears, intimate melodies that speak to us of love and sadness.

The stars are scornful queens from other skies, suns from other worlds, who send to us, as if by chance, a hint of their grandeur, a pale shaft of their immense light, whilst the moon is the eager lover who has bound her existence to ours, our eternal companion on this our endless voyage through space.

The stars make our solitude more absolute, the darkness deeper. The woods, valleys and mountains remain wrapped in a sombre veil despite all the efforts these nocturnal suns may make to penetrate the darkness with their rays; the waves roll on indifferent to the starlight glinting on them, they barely notice the rays which, here and there, fret with gold the whiteness of their foaming fringes.

When the moon comes out, though, all nature comes alive. The breeze stirs in the perfumed lairs of the forests which, in turn, exhale the intensest of aromas. The fairies come to comb their blond locks in the mirror of the fountains whose crystalline surface trembles with pleasure. Torrents of silver pour down the mountainside, diamonds glitter on the leaves of the trees. The waves rise in a vague ecstasy of voluptuousness, like the first ecstatic sigh breathed by a virgin breast. Like a tiny censer, the violet exudes the tenderest of perfumes, just as the censer of the heart exudes regret and longing.

The stars are the angels of God, denizens of the depths of the Empyrean where they intone their hymn to the glories of the Everlasting One; the moon is the consoling archangel who lends a sympathetic ear to humanity's complaints.

The stars are the golden candelabra that burn constantly before the throne of the All High; the moon is the silvery urn in which the tears of those who suffer are transformed into pearls which the angels empty into the lap of the Almighty.

The stars are the delight of the philosopher, whilst the moon is the delight of the poet.

The stars reveal the power of Jehovah, the moon the charity of the Redeemer.

It is a quiet night tonight and the light from the lamps set in the celestial vault glint feebly on the sleeping face of the sea. The waves rise slowly, curling as they rise, then saunter in a long line towards the beach where they spread their dark mantle upon the sands.

The surface of the ocean is black as black; even the starlight, like a luminous castaway struggling amongst the waves, barely tinges them with gold. From the depths of this darkness comes a cavernous moan. It is the eternal voice of the watery lion, the calm but terrible roaring of the monarch of the vast deep.

The vibrations from the foamy strings of that sea-harp sound ceaselessly; first plangent, then terrifying, that unending song echoes out into space.

And what a diversity of voices there is in this vast concerto! The majestic roaring of the proud waves as they rise and swell on the high seas, the boom when two of these colossi meet, the howl of rage when they crash onto the rocks on the shoreline, the amorous sigh they utter as they kiss the sands, the chattering murmur of the tiny drops of water reluctantly leaving the shells on the shores, the moans they emit when the storm winds lash them, all this becomes part of a sublime, untranslatable hymn, such as poets dream of but never write.

Ah, the sea! The opulent imagination of Greek antiquity peopled your waves with sirens and appointed to rule over them old Glaucus with his seaweed beard and his thunderous voice; it placed on your bed of foam not only the rosy scallop shell that sheltered white-skinned Aphrodite but also seductive Lamia and the hideous Graecae, and even then it fails to capture the ineffable charm that draws us to you, the vague terror with which you fill us, the softness of your voice and the wild vitality of your songs! Ah, vast sea, what enchanted lyre did the Lord bestow on you, with what mysterious powers of seduction did he endow your salt wastes?

How majestic the ocean seems, lost in the darkness! Not even a candle can be seen flickering on that vast, lonely expanse! Yet in the midst of that solitude the waves continue to live out their harsh fate! They come and go, collide and overlap, they kiss, swoon, scethe, whirl, sing and sigh, and far off in the distance perhaps, some dreamer, leaning on his window ledge and hearing that ineffable noise, thinks of eternity, of God!

Meanwhile, right by the beach, a short distance from a house whose white façade looks silently out at the eternal stirrings of the ocean that occasionally, lovingly, sends a wave to kiss its feet, a boat lies rocking indolently and in it a fisherman whose sleep is warmed by these sweet murmurings.

The waves rock the boat as gently as a loving mother might rock the cradle of a newborn babe.

At one of the windows cut into the white façade of the house on the beach is the figure of a woman. Below her stands another figure, manly and elegant. Above the wave concerto you can hear the mysterious whisperings of two voices.

Leander and Hero, Rosina and Almaviva, Romeo and Juliet!

The crashing of the sea muffles the gentle sound of their voices, but both the roar of the ocean and the mournful whispering of the two lovers are heard at the throne of the All-Powerful, for they are just two more notes in the immense hymn of the Universe that can be summed up in one word: Love.

II

Everything in this world has an end, including the sweet conversations of lovers. Less fortunate even than Shakespeare's unfortunate heroine, the young lady of the house on the beach could not wait for the morning cry of the lark to greet the dawn. The night was not yet half spent and already they must part.

They exchanged sweet promises, a thousand times our Romeo left the white façade, a thousand times he went back, as if the waves almost bathing his feet were dragging him with them in their incessant ebb and flow.

At last, like a timid murmur, the word 'Goodbye' slipped from the lips of the two lovers; the elegant young man walked rapidly away and, with a well-timed leap, landed feet first in the boat rocked by the waves.

The unexpected bump woke the boatman with a start. He sat up immediately and, recognising his master, fixed his eyes somewhat anxiously on the starry sky, the infallible chronometer of men of the sea.

'You've been gone a long time, sir!' he said somewhat breathlessly. 'We'll have to hurry, though I can't be sure we'll reach the beach in time.'

'What are you afraid of?' asked the man, settling himself

in the stern of the boat. 'The sea's like a millpond, there's not the slightest breeze stirring the waves, not a cloud on the horizon! The storms are all sleeping, my friend!'

'It's not storms I'm afraid of,' retorted the boatman, shaking his head. 'The storm and I are old friends and I'm not afraid of being caught in a rainstorm on a dark night, nor of being swallowed up by the waves. A man has to die some time and it's better to fall asleep loosely wrapped in this shroud of foam than sewn up inside a white sheet and placed in a grave where our poor body will never again be able to savour the smell of the sea! Even if I were afraid, it's not on a night such as this that an old salt fears the storm. You're quite right, the sea is calm as a millpond and the boat will slip as easily through its waters as a carriage through the dust on the king's highway.'

'So what are you afraid of, old friend?'

'It's almost midnight, sir.'

'I see! You're afraid that your good lady's spindle might be running rather less smoothly than usual through her old hands, because she's weary of waiting for you. Don't worry! I'll cool Catarina's wrath and I'll promise her a roll of linen for the winter evenings. You'll see, she'll be so pleased, she'll quite forget to tell you off for being late.'

'Don't you worry about Catarina, sir, she knows it's not my fault I'm late. Oh, she understands all right. She may be a toothless old woman now, but once she was a lusty young girl and she remembers how we used to let the hours slip past with her sitting outside her cottage mending her father's nets and me sitting on the sand saying the things lovers say, making her blush red as a May rose. That's not what I'm worried about either, sir.'

'So what is it then?' asked his master, slightly irritated now.

'It's just that it's best for two Christian souls not to be out on the sea hereabouts when midnight strikes.'

'Why not?'

The boatman looked anxiously around him and then murmured in a voice so low he could barely be heard:

'The desecrated church!'

The slender youth looked at him, startled.

While they were talking, the fisherman had untied the boat, taken up the oars and started rowing vigorously. They were already far from the beach and the waves beat against the side of the boat with a doleful murmur that kept time with the rhythmic sound of the oars in the water.

The fisherman looked anxiously up at the sky again and, ignoring any further questions from his passenger, bent forward, put the oars in the waters and, bracing his sturdy arms and again raising the oars, he threw up a cascade of foam on either side of the small boat.

Like a brave charger that rears up when it feels the knight's spurs in its flanks and then, shaking its mane, gallops off at vertiginous speed, the boat hesitated for a moment then slipped through the waters at a remarkable rate, leaping over a wave that came proudly to meet it.

The passenger had hardly had time to repeat his question before the air shook with the distant sound of midnight being struck by the bells of a church built near the shore.

That sound had a sinister effect. Each bell, chiming at regular intervals, rang out and died away in the ears of the two sailors, in melancholy harmony with the continuous roaring of the waves.

The boatman let fall the oars and cried out: 'Sweet Jesus!' Even his master felt a tremor of inexplicable fear.

Then they fell silent; both the boatman, his hair on end, and the lover, filled by a mixture of curiosity and terror, counted each slow beat struck by the sacred bronze bell.

Such a sound could not come from a simple church bell, it was as if some avenging angel sent by the Lord were ringing the bell and giving it that supernatural, terrifying tone.

They counted one . . . two . . . three . . . up to twelve. The last note was like a tender moan, like the mournful howl uttered by the genius of midnight which, unfurling

its black wings, announces to the ghosts the beginning of their reign.

The boatman, who had stood up, fell back again into the boat and hid his face in his hands, while his master let out a cry of horror.

A reddish light had suddenly stained the waves as if a fire had broken out in the depths of the ocean. The waves whimpered like children being beaten and a terrible music composed of many voices rose up from the depths of the seas and those voices were singing psalms of penitence.

The words, however, though full of piety and imbued with all the sadness of the sublime poetry of the prophet king, took on an ironic tone, as if uttered by the scorched lips of fallen angels.

In the midst of these hoarse voices there rose the gentle, silvery voice of a woman, sweet as the breeze that murmurs over the wastes of the ocean, as enchanting as the voice of seductive sirens.

Yet that sweetness too was tinged with terror and the celestial melodies reverberated with the fires of hell.

From within even the tenderest of notes another harsher, more dissonant tone emerged, as jarring in effect as the sound of a string breaking in the middle of a harmonious recital on a harp.

The voice was possessed simultaneously of deep sadness, plangency, pungent irony and something else, something ineffably attractive and seductive that made one think of happiness.

The young man's eyes involuntarily filled with tears and with arms outstretched, lost in some vague ecstasy, he looked ready to fly on the wings of that melody down to the submarine depths where the enchanted siren lived.

And these were the words that the voice sang:

O Lord, rebuke me not in thy wrath:
neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure.
For thine arrows stick fast in me,
and thy hand presseth me sore.

There is no soundness in my flesh
because of thine anger;
neither is there any rest in my bones
because of my sin.
For mine iniquities are gone over mine head:
as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me.
My wounds stink and are corrupt
because of my foolishness.

The voice that sang in the depths of the ocean the opening words of the first psalm of penitence was sad, profoundly sad. It grew gradually weaker until it faded away almost entirely on the last line. But then the voice rang out again, but harshly this time and the ironic tone in which it repeated the following lines was almost like a demonic laugh thrown defiantly in the face of the Everlasting One:

O Lord, rebuke me not in thy wrath:
neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure.

At that moment the waves parted, as if a new Moses had touched them with a magic rod. The depths of the sea lay half-revealed to the eyes of the terrified young man. It all happened with lightning speed, but there was time enough for him to see the interior of a Gothic church splendidly lit with a profusion of candles. A long line of medieval warriors surrounded the altars but, strangely enough, in the middle of the nave stood a table, set as if for a bacchanalian feast, with wine-filled golden goblets placed on the tablecloth. A woman appeared as if borne up on invisible wings to the surface of the sea; though lovely as an angel, she bore on her pale forehead the ineffable mark of divine damnation. The abyss closed again and the waves, tinged purple by the light of the candles, spread their watery canopy over that mysterious church.

The female figure, still wearing the orgiastic crown, her white vestments floating on the waves, brushing the foam-

ing fringe along the shoreline turned the colour of blood by the red light, began walking slowly towards the place where the boat had stopped, for the fisherman had still not even dared to stand up.

The ghost slipped over the waves as if propelled by an unseen hand; she was near the boat now and her dark eyes, in which there glittered an infernal flame, held our hero fascinated. Finally she stopped and her arms reached slowly out to him, her head lolled on to one shoulder, like a lily laid low by the winds. A strange languor softened her fiery gaze. Her black hair fell loose down her back. Her lips opened and her sweet, melodious voice sighed the following lines, like a sad complaint:

For thine arrows stick fast in me,
and thy hand presseth me sore.

Blind, mad, fascinated, the young man did not have the strength to resist the seduction. He leaned out of the boat, reached out his hands and was about to plunge into the waves.

'Sweet Jesus,' yelled the boatman.

The ghost let out a howl of despair, the waves opened up once more and when the young man opened his eyes, which he had closed, dazzled by the flame flickering in the black pupils of the lovely stranger, the woman had disappeared.

The waves were still scarlet and the singing of psalms still echoed in the emptiness.

III

It was terror that had stripped the boatman of all his strength and it was terror that gave it back to him again. He seized hold of the oars and rowed rapidly away from that terrible place.

'Do you know the story behind what we've just seen?' asked the fisherman's companion, his voice still trembling.

'Oh, I know it, sir, and a terrible story it is. But this is neither the time nor the place for me to tell it.'

'Tell me,' said the young man imperiously, 'we're far from the fateful place now, the voices of the damned are already fading on the horizon.'

The boatman hesitated for a moment and then, still vigorously rowing and in a voice so low as to be almost inaudible, he began to tell this story:

'Many years ago, a church used to stand next to that castle whose ruins you can still see perched like an eyrie on top of the cliffs. It was ordered to be built there by the castle's devout owner, a gentleman who died in the odour of sanctity. The church was consequently believed to be a place of miracles and many of the faithful flocked there, drawn by the fame of the temple itself and by the virtues of the chaplain, a man who led an austere life, was kind to the humble and never servile to the great to whom, when he felt that his duty as a minister demanded it, he did not hesitate to tell the truth, however bitter.

The castle's next inhabitant was a libertine, the son of the founder of the church from whom he had inherited his wealth but none of his virtues, for earthly treasures remain on earth, but heavenly treasures return to the breast of the Almighty.

This nobleman had a sister. She was a lovely girl, as graceful as they come. They say that the face is the mirror of the soul and, if that's true, no one had a more beautiful nature or a more innocent spirit than Guilherme's sister, the daughter of the virtuous Pelaio. This was not the case, however. Nature had taken such pains to perfect her physical beauty that it had apparently quite forgotten to endow her with any corresponding moral beauty. That's why they say that Satan is so seductively beautiful and that he would make a handsome archangel if his goat's feet did not betray him to anyone foolish enough to be captivated by the ethereal beauty of that fallen angel in league with the father of lies. Unfortunately, Inês did not have a comparable sign to distinguish her from the angels whom

she so resembled and if some cautious lover, for his own peace of mind, had glanced at the charming little feet of Pelaio's lovely daughter, his enchantment would only have been compounded and he was more likely to cover them with kisses than to sprinkle them with holy water, for they were so graceful and so tiny, it seemed that nature, having forgotten to fashion a soul for her, had also forgotten to fashion her a foot.

When she rode on horseback through the fertile plains, elegantly mounted on a fine black horse, everyone fell in love with her at first sight and there wasn't a young nobleman or a man of property who would not gladly have given up his life to make love bloom in the lovely Inês' dark eyes. No one managed to do so, however, and the marble skin of that adored face never flushed with passion. No, I'm wrong. She did feel passion, a vehement, incestuous, hideous passion, one that should have made her blush bright scarlet not with the shyness of a young woman in love, but with shame and remorse. For the reprobate loved her own brother!

And don't go thinking that she concealed this criminal passion. On the contrary, she gloried in it, shamelessly. And the spectacle those two heretics made of themselves was a continual source of scandal to the good Christians in the area.

You can't imagine the wild, frenetic orgies held in the castle by those two godforsaken people. Anyone passing at midnight along the path that snakes around the mountain where the house stood opposite the church, could not help but pause, filled by holy terror, to see on one side the great blaze of lights in the windows of the room where they held their orgies and hear the drunken songs, the disorderly laughter, the blasphemies, the voluptuous music, and to see, on the other side, the house of the Lord, silent, deserted, plunged in darkness, like a terrible archangel gazing severely down on the merrymaking of the damned and waiting silently for the hour of judgement to strike.

The sea beat ceaselessly against the rocks and that inces-

sant noise, if they could hear it in the castle, must have sounded as lugubrious as the justly angry voice of a vengeful God.

The church and the sea! Confronted by that church built out of man's piety, by that immense temple which was the embodiment of Providence, how could anyone forget the precepts of divine law?

Well, there were such people and at night when the dead rose from their beds of stone to kneel before the altar, in the mysterious solitude of the nave, when the vast ocean opened its lips of foam to intone the hymn with which it celebrates the omnipotence of God, the lights would be lit in the great hall in the castle and Guilherme and Inês would sit down at the table together with a few hangers-on who accompanied them in their debaucheries, for their peers had all abandoned that accursed Gomorrah upon which, sooner or later, the fire of heaven would surely fall. At the end of the banquet, the sister would garland her brow with roses, take up her harp and sing Bacchic songs in a pure, melodious, vibrant voice which was the envy of the angels when they sang their hymns of praise to the Everlasting One.

One day, the old chaplain, who was the first priest to say Mass in the church founded by the father of the two libertines, went to the castle intending to call back to the fold of the church those two sheep who had strayed along the paths of evil.

He succeeded only in provoking the hatred of Inês who listened furiously to the priest's reproaches and went immediately to Guilherme to complain about the priest's insolence and to ask him to prove his love for her by bringing her the head of that worthy man, just as in earlier times Herodias had asked Herod for the head of St John the Baptist.

Guilherme did not dare grant her that wish. For all his many vices, he still felt a superstitious respect for his father and dared not touch the inviolable person to whom Pelaio had entrusted the church he had founded. Inês did not

insist, but her twisted mind immediately began to plot a terrible revenge.

One night – it was Christmas Eve – the rain was falling in torrents, beating against the castle windows bright with festive lights and against the church's stained-glass windows lit by the holy light of candles to celebrate the touching solemnity of midnight Mass.

The sea roared as it pounded the rocks, uttering terrible cries, mournful complaints.

The winds blew unbridled across the waves.

The great hall in the castle was witness to even greater acts of folly than usual. From outside you could hear the drunken cries quite clearly, so that the people on their way to Mass crossed themselves in horror.

Inês was sitting on a chair next to her brother, her dishevelled hair tumbling down her naked back, her gaze, her every move oozing lust. She plucked the strings of her golden harp and sang the merriest of songs.

Outside, the wind and the sea kept up their sad, lugubrious laments.

Suddenly midnight struck in the church tower. The sound of the bell announced that Mass was about to begin.

In Guilherme's castle the laughter and singing stopped. Only Inês, a diabolical smile hovering on her rose-red lips, exclaimed:

"What are you afraid of, noble gentlemen? Do you suddenly find me so unskilled on the harp that you prefer the harsh song of the bell? Is my voice so feeble that you stop to listen to the bronze voice of the belltower?"

At that very instant a flash of lightning filled the room with phosphorescent brilliance and the storm, redoubling in strength, shattered one of the windows.

Everyone felt a shudder run through their veins and even Guilherme broke out in a cold sweat. Inês went on:

"What, are you afraid of the storm? If you want my opinion, I think we should leave this hall which will doubtless soon be flooded by the rain and made uninhabitable by the wind and seek shelter instead in the church. I'm

sure we'll find it most comfortable there. Let us make use of it. One last glass of wine, gentlemen, and then off we go."

They all did as she said. They drank a glass of wine and rose to their feet shouting resolutely: "To the church!"

The priest, dressed in his sacred vestments, had just that moment approached the altar. He commanded utter respect in his august role as immaculate sacrificer, with his crown of white hair and the invisible aura of virtue that hovered upon his brow.

The kneeling multitude felt the spirit of God descend into the church, into the body of that holy priest. The organ began to play its sweet tunes. The storm too seemed to respect that sacred place of asylum, sighing plaintively at the Gothic windows, not roaring fiercely as it had when it flapped its black wings about the castle.

In that divine space all was peace and serenity.

Suddenly, the drunken rabble burst through the door of the church, singing loudly. The devout congregation froze in terror. Interrupted just as he was unfolding his immaculate spirit to God, the priest turned round and met the eyes of the beautiful Inês who approached him leaning insolently, shamelessly on her brother's arm.

Filled with holy rage, the old minister came down the steps of the altar and, addressing the new arrivals, roared out in a booming voice that carried in it a faint echo of God's wrath:

"Stop, do not profane this temple and do not oblige me to strike you down with the thunderbolt of excommunication which, even now, hangs over you."

He was a venerable figure, every inch an apostle. The people fell to their knees and, respectful, tremulous, the storm too ceased its moaning.

The wild elements were listening to the voice of the minister of the Almighty. Only the ungodly stopped up their ears.

The fateful hour had arrived and the cup of iniquities had finally overflowed.

Inês smiled tenderly at her brother. What a sweet, angelic smile! Who would have thought such a loving smile was in fact an incitement to murder?

Well, it was. Guilherme, half-crazed, pulled out a dagger and stabbed the old priest.

Blood gushed forth from the wound, spattering Inês' white dress with scarlet.

The congregation had fled in horror; the servants, as ungodly as their masters, had just carried in the bacchanalian table.

As the priest fell to the ground, the storm, suspended for a moment, burst forth with renewed fury. The wind growled outside the church windows, lightning flashed, the furious ocean roared as it crashed on the rocks and the stone tombs in the church shattered as if made out of glass.

And from the most exquisitely carved tomb of all emerged the ghost of the founder of the church, Pelaió, wrapped in a shroud. His snow-white beard still flowed over his funereal scapular and, horror of horrors, burning tears fell from his hollow eyesockets.

He rose and rose; his feet no longer touched the marble floor of the church. The wind rushing in through the church door caught up the folds of his shroud. With his hands folded in prayer, the old man, rising slowly into the air, looked like one of those prophets whom the Lord God used to sweep up into heaven.

When he reached the roof, it opened as if by magic and the venerable old man continued his majestic ascent into the air that grew bright about him as if his very corpse irradiated light.

Below, the ungodly stood stock still, rigid with terror. No sooner had Pelaió disappeared into the distant region of the clouds, however, than the noise of a terrible explosion filled the church. With no human hand to play it, the organ began thundering out the *Dies irae*, pouring torrents of harsh music through the nave of the church. The pillars shook, the wind moaned out sinister canticles amongst the friezes and garlands and the great hulk was lifted from the

ground, as if the storm had torn it up by its roots; it trembled in the air, as if held by an invisible hand, before being hurled into the ocean, carrying in its bosom the desecrators of the church who let out one final howl of despair.

The sea opened to swallow the enormous prey offered to it, then the surface closed over again and the immense shroud, whose folds are the waves, unfurled to cover that stone cadaver.

Ever since then, whenever midnight strikes, the candles in the drowned church are lit and in the depths of the sea the reprobates sing their psalms of penitence.

The voice of Inês rises above them all and from the ocean deep she still exercises her irresistible fascination.

Sometimes the ghost of the beautiful woman rises above the waves and drags into the abyss anyone foolhardy enough to surrender to the magical power of her charms.

May the Lord keep us from such temptations . . . But look, we've reached the shore.'

The boatman tied up the boat and jumped out. The young man remained for a long time contemplating the ocean.

Far off, the waves still gleamed scarlet, but by now the voices of the reprobates, their melancholy tones enfeebled by the distance, were only barely audible on the beach.

At daybreak everything disappeared; the red light gradually faded as the horizon grew brighter and the waves grew white in the tenuous glow of dawn.

The song of the damned also faded little by little until the last note vibrated alone in space and the singular silence that always precedes the break of day was interrupted only by the eternal hymn sung by the murmuring waves.