

THE GNOME

(A Legend of Aragon)

I

The girls of the village were returning from the fountain with their pitcher resting on their head. They were singing and laughing with a happy, boisterous spirit that could only be compared to a band of swallows flying noisily around the weathervane on a bell tower.

In the portico of the Church, seated at the foot of a juniper tree, was Uncle Gregorio. Uncle Gregorio was the oldest person in the village. He was about ninety years old; his hair was white, his mouth was smiling, his eyes sparkled, and his hands were trembling. When he was a child he was a shepherd, and as a young man he was a soldier. After that he cultivated a small farm that he inherited from his parents, until finally he became tired and he calmly sat down to wait for death, which he neither feared nor desired. Nobody could tell a funny story better than he could, and no one knew as many fascinating stories full of the marvelous events which he was able to describe so vividly.

When the girls saw him they increased their pace, hoping to go and talk to him, and when they arrived at the portico, each one begged him to tell them a story to pass the time until night fell, which would be soon, because the setting sun was already spreading its slanting rays over the fields and the trees of the nearby forest.

Uncle Gregorio smiled as he listened to the request of the girls who, once they received a promise that he would tell them something, placed their pitchers on the ground and sat down around him, forming a circle in the center of which the old man began to speak in the following way:

“I am not going to tell you a story because, although I can think of several, they deal with things so serious and grim that a group of giddy, young girls like yourselves would not be able to pay attention and listen to me, plus the fact that it is getting late and there would not be time to finish it. Instead, I will give you a bit of advice.”

“Advice!,” several girls exclaimed with annoyance. “Who needs advice; that’s not why we stopped. If we want advice, we can get it from the priest.”

With his habitual smile and his shaky voice the old man went on, “In this case, I don’t think the priest would be able to give you as good advice as that which you receive from Uncle Gregorio, because he is so busy with his prayers and his litanies he would not have noticed, as I have, that every day you are leaving earlier to get water, and then you come back later.”

The girls looked at each other with a slightly mocking smile, and some of those who were standing behind him even touched their forehead with their finger and continued with the usual gesture.

“And what do you think is wrong if we stop for a while at the fountain and chat with our friends and neighbors?...” one of them said. “Are they spreading gossip that a few boys come out to flirt with us, or offer to carry our pitchers back to the village?”

“Yes, there is some of that” the old fellow replied to the girl who had spoken on behalf of her companions. “Some of the old women were complaining today, saying that the

girls are just going to the fountain to get water as an excuse to frolic and have a good time, and I think that it's not good that, little by little, you are losing the fear we all have of the place where that fountain is located. Because sometime you might be caught out there at night."

When he said these words, Uncle Gregorio spoke with such an air of mystery that the girls looked at him with a mixture of curiosity and mockery, and they went on to insist:

"At night! So what is there at night in that place which is so terrible that it makes you speak to us with such frightening and sinister words about what might happen to us? Do you think we might be eaten by wolves or something?"

"When the snow covers Moncayo, wolves are driven out of their dens and come down the mountainside, and we have often heard them howling, and not just near the fountain, but also in the village. But the wolves are not the worst inhabitants of Moncayo. In the bottom of the deep and solitary chasms live diabolical spirits that come out at night and travel down the slopes. They fill the empty places and swarm over the plains; they jump from rock to rock, they float in the water or hang from bare branches of trees. They are the ones who howl in the mountain crevices; they are the ones who start the avalanches that come down the slopes and cover everything in their path; they are the ones who rattle our window panes during rainstorms and float like blue flames over the surface of the swamps. Among them are the spirits that are driven out by the blessings and exorcisms of the church and have gone to take refuge on the inaccessible peaks of the mountains. There are many different types of spirits, and they can assume many different forms; however, the worst of all are the gnomes, who can insinuate themselves into the hearts and minds of the young with their sweet words and their tempting promises. The gnomes dwell in the bowels of the earth. They know all the subterranean pathways and they jealously guard their veins of gold and silver, and their precious stones. Do you see?" the old man said, pointing with his cane to the peak of Moncayo that was rising over his shoulder and was silhouetted against the dark and cloudy, nighttime horizon. "Do you see that immense mountain covered with snow? Well, it is inside it where these diabolical beings have their dwelling. The place where they live is both horrible and magnificent at the same time.

Many years ago a shepherd who was looking for a lost sheep entered the mouth of one of those bottomless caves which are covered by dense thickets. When he returned to his village he was as pale as death. He had found the secret of the gnomes; he had breathed their poisonous atmosphere and would pay for it with his life. But before he died he spoke of incredible things. As he was walking through that cavern he had found some immense, subterranean galleries that were filled with an uncertain, phosphoric light shining on the rocks that seemed to be bits of crystal carved into strange, bizarre forms. Although the floors, the roofs, and the walls of those galleries were the work of Nature, they seemed to shine like the richest marble; the seams of the marble were gold and silver and the spaces between those seams were covered with a multitude of precious stones of all colors and sizes. There were heaps of jewels including emeralds, diamonds, rubies, sapphires, and many other different types of stone whose names he didn't know, but which were so marvelous and beautiful that his eyes were dazzled on seeing them. No sounds from the outside reached the depths of those fantastic caverns. All that could be heard was an occasional gust of wind blowing through that enchanted labyrinth, a confusing noise like compressed, underground fires, and the sound of flowing water.

Alone and abandoned, the shepherd wandered through that vast area for many hours without being able to find his way out, until he finally stumbled by accident on the spring whose water he had previously heard. The water was gushing out of the ground, forming a spectacular cascade and making a gurgling sound as it splashed over the stones; around it there were many plants growing which he had never seen before, some with large, thick leaves, and others with leaves like thin, floating ribbons.

Half-hidden under those fronds were many strange creatures, some that were human and others that were reptilian, or both at the same time, since they seemed to be rapidly transforming, first appearing like tiny, grotesque human creatures, and then like glowing salamanders, or like flames that danced over the spout of the fountain. There, scurrying in different directions, running over the ground or climbing on the walls, appearing like a group of ugly dwarves, were the gnomes who were the Lords of all this fabulous wealth, and who were singing and dancing over their treasures. They are the ones who know where misers hide the riches that their heirs search for in vain; they know where the Moors hid their money and jewels before they fled. Whenever something valuable is lost, they search for it and find it, or they steal it and then hide it in their lairs, because they know all the secrets of the unknown passages beneath the earth. And that is where they have amassed a hoard of many different kinds of rare and valuable objects. There were jewels of inestimable value, necklaces of pearls and precious stones, ancient golden urns full of rubies, carved vases, opulent weapons, coins with inscriptions that were impossible to decipher, in short, a mountain of fabulous treasures which the mind could hardly imagine. All of it with sparkling colors and reflections so vivid that it appeared to be burning, moving, and trembling. At least that was how it seemed to the shepherd.”

When he got to this point, the old man stopped for a moment. The girls, who had first listened to Uncle Gregorio with a mocking smile, were now locked in a profound silence and were waiting for him to continue with wide-open eyes and an expression of curiosity and interest painted on their face. One of them finally broke the silence and, without being able to contain herself after hearing the tale of all the fabulous riches seen by the shepherd, she exclaimed:

“So, did he bring any of it back with him?”

“No, nothing,” Uncle Gregorio answered.

“Oh, what a fool!” the girls responded.

“Heaven assisted him in that difficult situation,” the old man continued, “because at the moment when greed was beginning to overcome his fear, when he was captivated by the sight of those jewels, any one of which would have been worth a fortune, and was about to grab some of them, he heard something incredible; in spite of the noise made by the gnomes who were dancing and cavorting with glee, he heard the bell of the chapel of Our Lady of Moncayo, as though he were at the foot of the hill where it is located. When he heard this bell, which was sounding the Ave Maria, the shepherd knelt on the ground and invoked the Mother of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and without knowing how it happened, he suddenly found himself outside the cavern, on the road that leads to the village in a profound stupor as though he had just awakened from a dream. Since then, everyone understands why, when they approach the fountain, its water sometimes has a tint of golden dust, and when night falls, in the sound it makes there are confusing words, deceptive words which the gnomes, who have corrupted the fountain since its origin,

have used to seduce the incautious, promising them riches and treasures that cause their damnation.”

When Uncle Gregorio reached this point in his story, night had already fallen and the bell in the church was sounding the angelus. The girls crossed themselves devotedly and said a quiet Hail Mary. After saying goodbye to Uncle Gregorio, who once again advised them not to spend time at the fountain, each one took her pitcher and silently left the church. And once they were far enough away from the place where they had spoken with the old man, when they had finally reached the village plaza and were about to go their own way, one of the most resolute and bold girls exclaimed:

“Do any of you believe that nonsense Uncle Gregorio was telling us?”

“No, I don’t,” one said.

“I don’t either,” another declared.

“Not me either! Not me either!” the others exclaimed, as they laughed at themselves for their momentary credulity.

The group of young girls dissolved and each one left, heading for different exits from the plaza. After they had entered one of the nearby streets and disappeared as they turned the corner, two girls, the only ones who were silent when the other girls expressed their disbelief of Uncle Gregorio’s strange story, now walked away slowly as though they were still preoccupied by what they had heard, until they also entered one of the dark and narrow streets.

Of those two girls the older, who seemed to be about twenty, was called Marta, and the younger, who was not yet sixteen, was named Magdalena.

During the time they had been walking they were both silent, but when they arrived at the threshold of the house and set down their pitchers on the stone steps of the entrance, Marta said to Magdalena:

“Do you believe in the marvels of Moncayo, and in the spirits of the fountain?”

“Yes,” Magdalena replied with certainty, “I believe everything. Do you doubt it?”

“Oh, no!” Marta was quick to respond. “I also believe everything. In everything... because I want to believe.”

II

Marta and Magdalena were sisters. They had been orphans since the early years of their life, and they lived a miserable life under the influence of a relative of their mother who constantly told them what to do, and humiliated them by telling them how grateful they should be for all she had done for them. All of this helped to strengthen the bonds between the two sisters who were not only joined by their blood but also by the misery of their suffering; however, between Marta and Magdalena there was also a strange rivalry, a hidden antipathy, that could only be explained by the difference in their character, which made each more or less the opposite of the other.

Marta was arrogant and vehement in her desires, with a harsh asperity in the expression of her wishes. She was unable to laugh or to cry, and was always cold in her demeanor. Magdalena, on the other hand, was humble, loving and kind, and more than once she was seen to laugh and cry like most young children do.

Marta's eyes were as black as night, and they sometimes seemed to give off sparks like burning coals. Magdalena's blue eyes appeared to swim in an ocean of light within the golden circle of her blond eyelashes, and everything seemed harmonious in the varied expression of her eyes. Marta had a lean figure with a pale skin; her stature was stiff with rigid movements, and her curly, dark hair covered her brow and fell to her shoulders like a velvet cloak, all of which offered a striking contrast to Magdalena, who was white and pink with a small, childish figure, and with blond curls that wrapped around her head like the golden halo of an angel.

In spite of the aversion they sometimes felt for each other, the two sisters treated each other with a bland indifference that could have seemed like peace and affection. Neither one had experienced caresses or affection that could be envied, so they were equals in misfortune and pain. Marta had closed herself off to suffer in an egotistic and stubborn silence, while Magdalena responded to the coldness of her sister by withdrawing and shedding tears in isolation.

Neither shared their feelings with the other. They never tried to discuss their happiness or their suffering, but nevertheless, there was one secret which they both tried to hide in the depths of their heart with the jealous instincts of a woman who was deeply in love, but which both were aware of. Because Marta and Magdalena had, in fact, both fallen in love with the same man.

The passion of Marta was a strong desire that was the result of her stubborn and selfish nature, while Magdalena's affection was like the spontaneous tenderness of adolescence that begins to love the first thing a person sets eyes on. Both tried to keep their love a secret, because they feared the man who had inspired it might sneer at their affection, which could be interpreted as the absurd desire of ordinary, commonplace girls. And yet, in spite of the distance which separated them from the object of their affection, both girls nourished the remote hope of winning his love.

Near the village, on a tall hill which overlooked the surrounding area, was an old castle which had been abandoned by its owners. During the evening gatherings the old women of the village liked to tell stories about the amazing deeds of its former inhabitants. It was said that, when the King was in Aragon and was in danger of losing his throne since he had run out of money to support the battle against his enemies, a little shepherd girl appeared and, after telling him about some underground tunnels through which he could travel without being seen by his enemies, she offered him a fabulous treasure of pearls, precious stones, and bars of gold and silver. With this fortune he was able to raise a powerful army and pay his soldiers; then, marching through the hidden tunnels during the night, he was able to surprise his opponents and, after defeating them, was able to retain his throne.

Once he had achieved this momentous victory, the King told the shepherdess: "Ask me for whatever you want, and even though it be half of my kingdom, I will be happy to give it to you." "All I want is to go back and take care of my herd," the shepherdess replied. "Then the only thing you are going to take care of is my borders," the King answered. He then gave her control over the entire frontier area and, in one of the towns closest to the border with Castile, he ordered that a large fortress be built where, after marrying one of the nobles who was among the King's favorites, the shepherdess took up residence."

Uncle Gregorio's amazing story about the gnomes of Moncayo whose secret was in the village fountain had helped to arouse the mad fantasies of the two enamored sisters, and this became even more evident when they heard the story of the rich treasures found by the shepherdess, who then married one of the King's favorite noblemen. All this offered both a slight ray of hope.

During the evening of the day on which the village girls had their encounter with Uncle Gregorio, there were many discussions about the incredible story he had told them. However, Marta and Magdalena maintained a profound silence, and neither on that night, nor during the following day, did they make any reference to the subject which had been the topic of so many conversations among the rest of the girls of the village.

At the time when they usually went to get water, Magdalena picked up her pitcher and said to her sister:

"Are we going to the fountain?"

Marta did not respond, and Magdalena repeated her question:

"So are we going to go to the fountain? If we don't hurry, the sun will set before we return."

"I'm not going today," was Marta's brusque reply.

"Then I am not going either," Magdalena said, after a moment of silence during which she kept her eyes fixed on those of her sister, as though she were able to read in them the reason for her decision.

III

It had been almost an hour since the village girls had all come back from the fountain. The last rays of the setting sun had disappeared from the horizon and the night was beginning to darken, when Marta and Magdalena, separately and each one following a different route, left the village and headed in the direction of the mysterious fountain, which was flowing in a moss-covered cleft in a remote part of a large grove of poplars.

The last sounds of the day were disappearing, and all that was heard were the voices of the workers who were returning with their team of oxen and were singing to the beat of the beam of the plow which bounced as it was dragged over the ground. After the monotonous sound of the cowbells and the voices of the shepherds had disappeared, the angelus sounded in a nearby church tower, and the silence of the night reigned, a silence that was full of strange, short murmurs which made it even more noticeable.

Marta and Magdalena slipped through the trees and, protected by the darkness, they both arrived at the fountain without being seen. Marta knew no fear, and her footsteps were steady and firm. Magdalena trembled at the sound of her feet, as they crept over the dry leaves which covered the ground.

After they had arrived at the fountain, the wind began to rock the poplar trees, and the uneven sound of its gusts was accompanied by the steady noise of the water bubbling from the fountain.

Both Marta and Magdalena became aware of the multitude of sounds that were spreading under their feet and floating over their head like a lament that rose and fell, before it vanished among the trees. As the time passed, the constant sound of the water and the moaning of the wind began to produce a strange excitement, a feeling of vertigo that blurred their vision and echoed in their ears, until it disturbed their minds.

Like a sound one hears in a dream, they seemed to perceive some nameless and barely perceptible whimpers like those of a child who tries, and is not able, to call his mother; then there were words that were repeated over and over and were still always the same; after that, disconnected and confusing phrases that made no sense, and finally... finally, the wind in the trees and the rippling water began to speak clearly. And this is what they said:

Water: "Woman! Listen to me! Come here and listen to me, and I will kiss your feet as I reflect your image in the dark depths of my waves! Woman, listen! For my ripples are words."

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Wind: "Child! Sweet child, raise your head and let me kiss your forehead while I caress your hair. Sweet child, know that I can also speak, and I will fill your ears with loving phrases."

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Marta: "Oh, yes! Speak! Speak, and I will understand, because my reason is floating amid the vertigo, just like your hesitating words! Speak, mysterious flowing current."

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Magdalena: "I am frightened. Night wind, sweet-smelling wind, cool my brow that is burning! Tell me something that helps to build my courage, because my spirit is weakening."

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Water: "I have passed through the dark bosom of the earth, I have discovered the marvelous secret of its fertility, and I know all the features of its inner workings and the place where future creations are born. My sound sleeps and then awakens. Wake up, and you will understand."

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Wind: "I am the air that is fanned by the wings of angels as they cross through space. I gather the clouds in the West so they can provide a bed of purple for the sun, and at dawn I bring the mists which dissolve into drops of rain that fall on the flowers. My sighs are a balm. Open your heart and I will fill it with happiness."

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Marta: "When I heard the murmur of your subterranean current for the first time, it was not in vain that I fell to the ground to listen. I knew that it held a mystery which I would eventually have to resolve."

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Magdalena: "I know you, sighs of the wind. During my childhood you used to caress me when I was exhausted from weeping, and while I slept, your sound seemed to me like the words of a mother who lulls her daughter to sleep."

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The water stopped speaking for a moment, and everything was silent except for the ripples it made as it flowed between the rocks. The wind was also mute, and there was nothing to be heard except the rustling leaves. Some time passed until they finally began to speak again, and this is what they said:

Water: After seeping drop by drop through veins of gold in an inexhaustible mine; after I pass through a bed of silver and flow over pebbles surrounded by a numberless quantity of sapphires and amethysts, while carrying diamonds and rubies instead of sand, I have formed a mysterious relationship with a powerful Spirit. Enriched by its strength, as well as the hidden virtues of the precious stones and metals with which I am saturated, I can offer you all that you desire. I have the strength of an incantation, the power of a talisman, and the virtue of the seven stones and the seven colors.

.....

Wind: I have traveled through the open country, and like a bee that returns to its hive with a booty of sweet-smelling honey, I carry the sighs of a woman, the supplications of a child, chaste words of love, and the aroma of wild roses and lilies. During my journey I have collected nothing more than these aromas and harmonious sounds. My treasures are immaterial, but they give peace to the soul, as well as the vague joy of pleasant dreams.

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While her sister, as though drawn by a mysterious enchantment, was leaning over the edge of the cleft in order to hear the fountain better, Magdalena was instinctively pulling away from the cleft where the spring was bubbling. Both had their eyes fixed, one on the depths of the water, and the other on the depths of the sky.

As she saw the stars shining in the heavens, Magdalena exclaimed: "Those are the halos of the invisible angels who watch over us."

Looking down, Marta saw the reflection of the stars in the bubbling water, and she declared: "Those are the particles of gold that the water has gathered during its mysterious journey."

The fountain and the wind, which had been silent for a moment, began to speak once more:

Water: "Come and enter my current, cast away your fears like a worn-out garment and dare to cross the threshold of the unknown. I can see that your soul has the essence of superior spirits. Those who envied you have cast you out of the sky so that you wallow in the mud of misfortune. Nevertheless, on your somber brow I can see a sense of pride that makes you worthy of us, the powerful and free spirits... Come; I am going to teach you magic words of power which, when you say them, will break open the rocks so that diamonds spill out like pearls falling from shells which the fishermen bring from the sea. Come; I will give you rich treasures so that you live happily, and then, eventually, when you are finally able to break out of the prison which confines you, your spirit will be assimilated with those of us who are your sister spirits, and all of us together will be the

driving force, the vital ray of creation which flows through the subterranean arteries of the earth.

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Wind: "Water washes the earth and lives in the mire. I travel in the ethereal regions and fly through limitless space. Follow the movement of your heart, and let your soul rise like the flames and the blue spirals of smoke. Woe is he who has wings but then descends to the depths to look for gold, when he could rise to the heavens and find love and contentment! Be modest like the violet, and I will bring you the fertile kiss of the life-giving seed of your sister flower; I will open the fog so that you will always have sunlight to illuminate your happiness. Be modest and humble, and when your spirit departs, I will lift it up to the region of light on a cloud of gold."

The wind and the water were silent, and the gnome appeared. He seemed like a tiny, transparent man, a sort of dwarf, like a will-o'-the-wisp, who was laughing madly without being heard while jumping from stone to stone with a vertiginous movement. At times he dove under the water and kept on shining in the depths like a multicolored stone; then again he returned to the surface, where he shook his hands and feet and waved his head from side to side with incredible rapidity.

Marta saw the gnome and watched his amazing movements with fascination, and when the diabolical spirit finally passed through the rugged surface of Moncayo like a moving flame that gives off a shower of sparks, she felt an irresistible attraction and began to rush after it in a frenetic race.

Shortly after that a voice cried out: "Magdalena!" and it was carried away by the wind until it gradually disappeared.

And Magdalena, step by step, like a sleepwalker who was guided through a dream by a friendly voice, followed the call that echoed across the plains. Afterward, everything became quiet once more in the poplar grove, while the wind and water kept on making their usual murmurs and moans.

IV

Magdalena returned to the village pale and distracted. She waited in vain for Marta during the rest of the night.

By the afternoon of the following day Marta still had not returned, and when the girls went to get water, they found a broken pitcher next to the fountain. It was pitcher which belonged to Marta, who was never heard from again. After that, the village girls went to get water as soon as they could after it got light in the morning. Some of them told me it was because, at night, and on more than one occasion, they had heard the sorrowful voice of Marta, who was imprisoned in the fountain. I don't know whether to believe that part of the story, because the fact is that, since then, no one has dared to enter the poplar grove after night falls.