

meal and at first the impression at home was that he was coming back fatigued and going directly to his hammock to sleep until the following day. But only a short time passed before I began to realize that something extraordinary was happening to him at night. He could be heard moving about in his room with a tormented and maddening insistence, as if on those nights he was receiving the ghost of the man he had been until then, and both of them, the past man and the present one, were locked in a silent struggle in which the past one was defending his wrathful solitude, his invulnerable standoffish way, his intransigent manners; and the present one his terrible and unchangeable will to free himself from his own previous man. I could hear him pacing about the room until dawn, until the time his own fatigue had exhausted the strength of his invisible adversary.

I was the only one who noticed the true measure of his change, from the time he stopped wearing leggings and began to take a bath every day and perfume his clothing with scented water. And a few months later his transformation had reached the level where my feelings toward him stopped being a simple understanding tolerance and changed into compassion. It was not his new look on the street that moved me. It was thinking of him shut up in his room at night, scraping the mud off his boots, wetting a rag in the washstand, spreading polish on the shoes that had deteriorated through many years of continuous use. It moved me to think of the brush and box of shoe polish kept under the mattress, hidden from the eyes of the world as if they were the elements of a secret and shameful vice contracted at an age when the majority of men were becoming serene and methodical. For all practical purposes, he was going through a tardy and sterile adolescence and, like an adolescent, he took great care in his dress, smoothing out his clothing every night with the edge of his hand, coldly, and he was not young enough to have a friend to whom he could communicate his illusions or his disillusion.

The town must have noticed his change too, for a short time

Even though he hoped it would be the opposite, he was a strange person in town, apathetic in spite of his obvious efforts to seem sociable and cordial. He lived among the people of Macondo, but at a distance from them because of the memory of a past against which any attempt at rectification seemed useless. He was looked on with curiosity, like a gloomy animal who had spent a long time in the shadows and was reappearing, conducting himself in a way that the town could only consider as superimposed and therefore suspect.

He would come back from the barbershop at nightfall and shut himself up in his room. For some time he had given up his evening



later it began to be said about that he was in love with the barber's daughter. I don't know whether there was any basis for that, but what was certain was that the bit of gossip made me realize his tremendous sexual loneliness, the biological fury that must have tormented him in those years of filth and abandonment.

Every afternoon he could be seen passing by on his way to the barbershop, more and more fastidious in his dress. A shirt with an artificial collar, gold cuff links, and his pants clean and pressed, except that he still wore his belt outside the loops. He looked like an afflicted suitor, enveloped in the aura of cheap lotions; the eternal frustrated suitor, the sunset lover who would always lack the bouquet of flowers on the first visit.

That was how he was during the first months of 1909, with still no basis for the gossip in town except for the fact that he would be seen sitting in the barbershop every afternoon chatting with strangers, but with no one's having been able to be sure that he'd ever seen him a single time with the barber's daughter. I discovered the cruelty of that gossip. Everyone in town knew that the barber's daughter would always be an old maid after going through a year of suffering, as she was pursued by a *spirit*, an invisible lover who spread dirt on her food and muddied the water in the pitcher and fogged the mirrors in the barbershop and beat her until her face was green and disfigured. The efforts of the Pup, with a stroke of his stole, the complex therapy of holy water, sacred relics, and psalms administered with dramatic solicitude, were useless. As an extreme measure, the barber's wife locked her bewitched daughter up in her room, strewed rice about the living room, and turned her over to the invisible lover in a solitary and dead honeymoon, after which even the men of Macondo said that the barber's daughter had conceived.

Not even a year had passed when people stopped waiting for the monstrous event of her giving birth and public curiosity turned to the idea that the doctor was in love with the barber's daughter,

in spite of the fact that everyone was convinced that the bewitched girl would lock herself up in her room and crumble to pieces in life long before any possible suitors would be transformed into marriageable men.

That was why I knew that rather than a supposition with some basis, it was a piece of cruel gossip, maliciously premeditated. Toward the end of 1909 he was still going to the barbershop and people were talking, organizing the wedding, with no one able to say that the girl had ever come out when he was present or that they had ever had a chance to speak to each other.

One September that was as broiling and as dead as this one, thirteen years ago, my stepmother began sewing on my wedding dress. Every afternoon while my father took his siesta, we would sit down to sew beside the flowerpots on the railing, next to the burning stove that was the rosemary plant. September has been like this all of my life, since thirteen years ago and much longer. As my wedding was to take place in a private ceremony (because my father had decided on it), we sewed slowly, with the minute care of a person who is in no hurry and has found the best measure of her time in her imperceptible work. We would talk during those times. I was still thinking about the street room, gathering up the courage to tell my stepmother that it was the best place to put up Martín. And that afternoon I told her.

My stepmother was sewing the long train of lace and it seemed in the blinding light of that intolerably clear and sound-filled September that she was submerged up to her shoulders in a cloud of that very September. "No," my stepmother said. And then, going back to her work, feeling eight years of bitter memories passing in front of her: "May God never permit anyone to enter that room again."

Martín had returned in July, but he didn't stay at our house. He liked to lean against the railing and stay there looking in the



opposite direction. It pleased him to say: "I'd like to spend the rest of my life in Macondo." In the afternoon we'd go out to the plantations with my stepmother. We'd come back at dinnertime, before the lights in town went on. Then he'd tell me: "Even if it hadn't been for you, I'd like to live in Macondo in any case." And that too, from the way he said it, seemed to be the truth.

Around that time it had been four years since the doctor had left our house. And it was precisely on the afternoon we had begun work on the wedding dress—that suffocating afternoon when I told her about the room for Martin—that my stepmother spoke to me for the first time about his strange ways.

"Five years ago," she said, "he was still there, shut up like an animal. Because he wasn't only that, an animal, but something else: an animal who ate grass, a ruminant like any ox in a yoke. If he'd married the barber's daughter, that little faker who made the whole town believe the great lie that she'd conceived after a murky honeymoon with the spirits, maybe none of this would have happened. But he stopped going to the barbershop all of a sudden and he even showed a last-minute change that was only a new chapter as he methodically went through with his frightful plan. Only your father could have thought that after all that a man of such base habits should still stay in our house, living like an animal, scandalizing the town, giving people cause to talk about us as people who were always defying morals and good habits. His plans would end up with Meme's leaving. But not even then did your father recognize the alarming proportions of his mistake."

"I never heard any of that," I said. The locusts had set up a sawmill in the courtyard. My stepmother was speaking, still sewing without lifting her eyes from the tambour where she was stitching symbols, embroidering white labyrinths. She said: "That night we were sitting at the table (all except him, because ever since the afternoon he came back from the barbershop for the last time he wouldn't take his evening meal) when Meme came to

serve us. She was different. 'What's the matter, Meme?' I asked her. 'Nothing, ma'am. Why?' But we could see that she wasn't right because she hesitated next to the lamp and she had a sickly look all over her. 'Good heavens, Meme, you're not well,' I said. But she held herself up as best she could until she turned toward the kitchen with the tray. Then your father, who was watching all the time, said to her: 'If you don't feel well, go to bed.' But she didn't say anything. She went out with the tray, her back to us, until we heard the noise of the dishes as they broke to pieces. Meme was on the veranda, holding herself up against the wall by her fingernails. That was when your father went to get that one in the bedroom to have a look at Meme.

"During the eight years he spent in our house," my stepmother said, "we'd never asked for his services for anything serious. We women went to Meme's room, rubbed her with alcohol, and waited for your father to come back. But they didn't come, Isabel. He didn't come to look at Meme in spite of the fact that the man who had fed him for eight years, had given him lodging and had his clothes washed, had gone to get him in person. Every time I remember him I think that his coming here was God's punishment. I think that all that grass we gave him for eight years, all the care, all the solicitude was a test of God's, teaching us a lesson in prudence and mistrust of the world. It was as if we'd taken eight years of hospitality, food, clean clothes, and thrown it all to the hogs. Meme was dying (at least we thought she was) and he, right there, was still shut up, refusing to go through with what was no longer a work of charity but one of decency, of thanks, of simple consideration for those who were taking care of him.

"Only at midnight did your father come back. He said weakly: 'Give her some alcohol rubs, but no physics.' And I felt as if I'd been slapped. Meme had responded to our rubbing. Infuriated, I shouted: 'Yes! Alcohol, that's it! We've already rubbed her and she's better! But in order to do that we didn't have to live eight



years sponging off people!' And your father, still condescending, still with that conciliatory nonsense: 'It's nothing serious. You'll realize that someday.' As if that other one were some sort of soothsayer."

That afternoon, because of the vehemence of her voice, the exaltation of her words, it seemed as if my stepmother were seeing again what happened on that remote night when the doctor refused to attend to Meme. The rosemary bush seemed suffocated by the blinding clarity of September, by the drowsiness of the locusts, by the heavy breathing of the men trying to take down a door in the neighborhood.

"But one of those Sundays Meme went to mass all decked out like a lady of quality," she said. "I can remember it as if it were today. She had a parasol with changing colors.

"Meme. Meme. That was God's punishment too. We'd taken her from where her parents were starving her to death, we took care of her, gave her a roof over her head, food, and a name, but the hand of Providence intervened there too. When I saw her at the door the next day, waiting for one of the Indians to carry her trunk out for her, even I didn't know where she was going. She was changed and serious, right over there (I can see her now), standing beside the trunk, talking to your father. Everything had been done without consulting me, Chabela; as if I were a painted puppet on the wall. Before I could ask what was going on, why strange things were happening in my own house without my knowing about them, your father came to tell me: 'You've nothing to ask Meme. She's leaving, but maybe she'll come back after a while.' I asked him where she was going and he didn't answer me. He was dragging along in his clogs as if I weren't his wife but some painted puppet on the wall.

"Only two days later," she said, "did I find out that the other one had left at dawn without the decency of saying good-bye. He'd come here as if the place belonged to him and eight years later he left as if he were leaving his own house, without saying

good-bye, without saying anything. Just the way a thief would have done. I thought your father had sent him away for not attending to Meme, but when I asked him that on the same day, he limited himself to answering: 'You and I have to have a long talk about that.' And four years have passed without his ever bringing up the subject with me again.

"Only with your father and in a house as disordered as this one, where everybody does whatever he wants to, could such a thing have happened. In Macondo they weren't talking about anything else and I still didn't know that Meme had appeared in church all decked out, like a nobody raised to the status of a lady, and that your father had had the nerve to lead her across the square by the arm. That was when I found out that she wasn't as far away as I'd thought, but was living in the house on the corner with the doctor. They'd gone to live together like two pigs, not even going through the door of the church even though she'd been baptized. One day I told your father: 'God will punish that bit of heresy too.' And he didn't say anything. He was still the same tranquil man he always was, even after having been the patron of public concubinage and scandal.

"And yet I'm pleased now that things turned out that way, just so that the doctor left our house. If that hadn't happened, he'd still be in the little room. But when I found out that he'd left it and that he was taking his trash to the corner along with that trunk that wouldn't fit through the street door, I felt more peaceful. That was my victory, postponed for eight years.

"Two weeks later Meme opened the store, and she even had a sewing machine. She'd bought a new Domestic with the money she put away in this house. I considered that an affront and that's what I told your father. But even though he didn't answer my protests, you could see that instead of being sorry, he was satisfied with his work, as if he'd saved his soul by going against what was proper and honorable for this house, with his proverbial tolerance, his understanding, his liberality. And even a little empty-headed-



ness. I said to him: 'You've thrown the best part of your beliefs to the swine.' And he, as always:

"'You'll understand that too someday.'"

### VIII.

December arrived like an unexpected spring, as a book once described it. And Martín arrived along with it. He appeared at the house after lunch, with a collapsible suitcase, still wearing the four-button jacket, clean and freshly pressed now. He said nothing to me but went directly to my father's office to talk to him. The date for the wedding had been set since July. But two days after Martín's arrival in December, my father called my stepmother to the office to tell her that the wedding would take place on Monday. It was Saturday.

My dress was finished. Martín had been to the house every day. He spoke to my father and the latter would give us his impressions at mealtime. I didn't know my fiancé. I hadn't been alone with him at any time. Still, Martín seemed to be linked to my father by a deep and solid friendship, and my father spoke of him as if it were he and not I who was going to marry Martín.

I felt no emotion over the closeness of the wedding date. I was still wrapped up in that gray cloud which Martín came through, stiff and abstract, moving his arms as he spoke, closing and opening his four-button jacket. He had lunch with us on Sunday. My stepmother assigned the places at the table in such a way that Martín was next to my father, separated from me by three places. During lunch my stepmother and I said very little. My father and Martín talked about their business matter; and I, sitting three places away, looked at the man who a year later would be the father of my son and to whom I was not even joined by a superficial friendship.

On Sunday night I tried on the wedding dress in my step-

mother's bedroom. I looked pale and clean in the mirror, wrapped in that cloud of powdery froth that reminded me of my mother's ghost. I said to myself in front of the mirror: "That's me. Isabel. I'm dressed as a bride who's going to be married tomorrow morning." And I didn't recognize myself; I felt weighted down with the memory of my dead mother. Meme had spoken to me about her on this same corner a few days before. She told me that after I was born my mother was dressed in her bridal clothes and placed in a coffin. And now, looking at myself in the mirror, I saw my mother's bones covered by the mold of the tomb in a pile of crumpled gauze and compact yellow dust. I was outside the mirror. Inside was my mother, alive again, looking at me, stretching her arms out from her frozen space, trying to touch the death that was held together by the first pins of my bridal veil. And in back, in the center of the bedroom, my father, serious, perplexed: "She looks just like her now in that dress."

That night I received my first, last, and only love letter. A message from Martín written in pencil on the back of a movie program. It said: *Since it will be impossible for me to get there on time tonight, I'll go to confession in the morning. Tell the colonel that the thing we were talking about is almost set and that's why I can't come now. Are you frightened?* M. With the flat, floury taste of that letter in my mouth I went to my bedroom, and my palate was still bitter when I woke up a few hours later as my stepmother shook me.

Actually, many hours passed before I woke up completely. In the wedding dress I felt again as if I were in some cool and damp dawn that smelled of musk. My mouth felt dry, as when a person is starting out on a trip and the saliva refuses to wet the bread. The bridal party had been in the living room since four o'clock. I knew them all but now they looked transformed and new, the men dressed in tweeds and the women with their hats on, talking, filling the house with the dense and enervating vapor of their words.



The church was empty. A few women turned around to look at me as I went down the center aisle like a consecrated youth on his way to the sacrificial stone. The Pup, thin and serious, the only person with a look of reality in that turbulent and silent nightmare, came down the altar steps and gave me to Martín with four movements of his emaciated hands. Martín was beside me, tranquil and smiling, the way I'd seen him at the wake of the Paloquemado child, but wearing a short collar now, as if to show me that even on his wedding day he'd taken pains to be still more abstract than he already was on ordinary days.

That morning, back at the house, after the wedding party had eaten breakfast and contributed the standard phrases, my husband went out and didn't come back until siesta time. My father and stepmother didn't seem to notice my situation. They let the day pass without changing the order of things, so that nothing would make the extraordinary breath of that Monday felt. I took my wedding gown apart, made a bundle of it, and put it in the bottom of the wardrobe, remembering my mother, thinking: *At least these rags can be my shroud.*

The unreal groom returned at two in the afternoon and said that he had had lunch. Then it seemed to me as I watched him come with his short hair that December was no longer a blue month. Martín sat down beside me and we remained there for a moment without speaking. For the first time since I had been born I was afraid for night to begin. I must have shown it in some expression, because all of a sudden Martín seemed to come to life; he leaned over my shoulder and asked: "What are you thinking about?" I felt something twisting in my heart: the stranger had begun to address me in the familiar form. I looked up toward where December was a gigantic shining ball, a luminous glass month; I said: "I was thinking that all we need now is for it to start raining."

The last night we spoke on the veranda it was hotter than usual. A few days later he would return for good from the barber-shop and shut himself up in his room. But on that last night on the veranda, one of the hottest and heaviest I can remember, he seemed understanding as on few occasions. The only thing that seemed alive in the midst of that immense oven was the dull reverberation of the crickets, aroused by the thirst of nature, and the tiny, insignificant, and yet measureless activity of the rosemary and the nard, burning in the middle of the deserted hour. Both of us remained silent for a moment, exuding that thick and viscous substance that isn't sweat but the loose drivel of decomposing living matter. Sometimes he would look at the stars, in a sky desolate because of the summer splendor; then he would remain silent, as if completely given over to the passage of that night, which was monstrously alive. That was how we were, pensive, face to face, he in his leather chair, I in the rocker. Suddenly, with the passage of a white wing, I saw him tilt his sad and lonely head over his left shoulder. I thought of his life, his solitude, his frightful spiritual disturbances. I thought of the tormented indifference with which he watched the spectacle of life. Previously I had felt drawn to him out of complex feelings, sometimes contradictory and as variable as his personality. But at that moment there wasn't the slightest doubt in me that I'd begun to love him deeply. I thought that inside of myself I'd uncovered the mysterious force that from the first moment had led me to shelter him, and I felt the pain of his dark and stifling room like an open wound. I saw him as somber and defeated, crushed by circumstances. And suddenly, with a new look from his hard and penetrating yellow eyes, I felt the certainty that the secret of his labyrinthine solitude had been revealed to me by the tense pulsation of the night. Before I even had time to think why I was doing it, I asked him:

"Tell me something, doctor. Do you believe in God?"

He looked at me. His hair fell over his forehead and a kind of



I answered that it was natural. He went on speaking:

"All right. But you're different. Nobody likes to drive his own nails more than you. I've seen you putting hinges on a door when there are several men working for you who could have done it. You like that. I think that your happiness is to walk about the house with a toolbox looking for something to fix. You're even capable of thanking a person for having broken a hinge, colonel. You thank him because in that way he's giving you a chance to be happy."

"It's a habit," I told him, not knowing what direction he was taking. "They say my mother was the same way."

He'd reacted. His attitude was peaceful but ironclad.

"Fine," he said. "It's a good habit. Besides, it's the cheapest kind of happiness I know. That's why you have a house like this and raised your daughter the way you have. I say that it must be good to have a daughter like yours."

I still didn't know what he was getting at in his long, round-about way. But even though I didn't know, I asked:

"What about you, doctor, haven't you ever thought about how nice it would be to have a daughter?"

"Not I, colonel," he said. And he smiled, but then he immediately became serious again. "My children wouldn't be like yours."

Then I didn't have the slightest trace of doubt: he was talking seriously and that seriousness, that situation, seemed frightful to me. I was thinking: *He's more to be pitied for that than for anything else.* He needed protection, I thought.

"Have you heard of the Pup?" I asked him.

He said no. I told him: "The Pup is the parish priest, but more than that he's a friend to everybody. You should get to know him."

"Oh, yes, yes," he said. "He has children *too*, right?"

"That's not what interests me right now," I said. "People invent bits of gossip about the Pup because they have a lot of love for

him. But you have a point there, doctor. The Pup is a long way from being a prayermonger, sanctimonious, as we say. He's a whole man who fulfills his duties as a man."

Now he was listening with attention. He was silent, concentrating, his hard yellow eyes fastened on mine. He said: "That's good, right?"

"I think the Pup will be made a saint," I said. And I was sincere in that too. "We've never seen anything like him in Macondo. At first they didn't trust him because he comes from here, because the older people remembered him from when he used to go out hunting birds like all the boys. He fought in the war, he was a colonel, and that was a problem. You know how people are, no respect for veterans, the same as with priests. Besides, we weren't used to having someone read to us from the Bristol Almanac instead of the Gospels."

He smiled. That must have sounded as odd to him as it had to us during the first days. He said: "That's strange, isn't it?"

"That's the way the Pup is. He'd rather show people by means of atmospheric phenomena. He's got a preoccupation with storms that's almost theological. He talks about them every Sunday. And that's why his sermons aren't based on the Gospels but on the atmospheric predictions in the Bristol Almanac."

He was smiling now and listening with a lively and pleased expression. I felt enthusiastic too. I said: "There's still something else of interest for you, doctor. Do you know how long the Pup has been in Macondo?"

He said no.

"It so happens that he arrived the same day as you," I said. "And what's even stranger still, if you had an older brother, I'm sure that he'd be just like the Pup. Physically, of course."

He didn't seem to be thinking about anything else now. From his seriousness, from his concentrated and steady attention, I sensed that I had come to the moment to tell him what I wanted to propose:



"Well, then, doctor," I said. "Pay a call on the Pup and you'll find out that things aren't the way you see them."

And he said yes, he'd visit the Pup.

## IX.

Coldly, silently, progressively, the padlock gathers rust. Adelaida put it on the room when she found out that the doctor had gone to live with Meme. My wife considered that move as a victory for her, the culmination of a systematic, tenacious piece of work she had started the first moment I decided that he would live with us. Seventeen years later the padlock is still guarding the room.

If there was something in my attitude, unchanged for eight years, that may have seemed unworthy in the eyes of men or ungrateful in those of God, my punishment has come about a long time before my death. Perhaps it was meant for me to expiate in life for what I had considered a human obligation, a Christian duty. Because the rust on the lock had not begun to accumulate when Martín was in my house with a briefcase full of projects, the authenticity of which I've never been able to find out, and the firm desire to marry my daughter. He came to my house in a four-button jacket, exuding youth and dynamism from all his pores, enveloped in a luminous air of pleasantness. He married Isabel in December eleven years ago. Nine have passed since he went off with the briefcase full of notes signed by me and with the promise to return as soon as the deal he was working on and for which he had my financial backing came through. Nine years have gone by but I have no right to think he was a swindler because of that. I have no right to think his marriage was only a pretext to convince me of his good faith.

But eight years of experience have been of some use. Martín could have occupied the small room. Adelaida was against it. Her

opposition was adamant, decisive and irrevocable. I knew that my wife wouldn't have been bothered in the least to fix up the stable as a bridal chamber rather than let the newlyweds occupy the small room. I accepted her point of view without hesitation. That was my recognition of her victory, one postponed for eight years. If both of us were mistaken in trusting Martín, it was a mistake that was shared. There was neither victory nor defeat for either one of us. Still, what came later was too much for our efforts, it was like the atmospheric phenomena the almanac foretells, ones that must come no matter what.

When I told Meme to leave our house, to follow the direction she thought best for her life, and afterward, even though Adelaida threw my weaknesses and lack of strength up to me, I was able to rebel, to impose my will on everything (that's what I've always done) and arrange things my way. But something told me that I was powerless before the course that events were taking. It wasn't I who arranged things in my own home, but some other mysterious force, one which decided the course of our existence and of which we were nothing but docile and insignificant instruments. Everything seemed to obey the natural and linked fulfillment of a prophecy.

Since Meme was able to open the shop (underneath it all everybody must have known that a hard-working woman who becomes the mistress of a country doctor overnight will sooner or later end up as a shopkeeper), I realized that in our house he'd accumulated a larger sum of money than one might have imagined, and that he'd kept it in his cabinet, uncounted bills and coins which he tossed into the drawer during the time he saw patients.

When Meme opened the shop it was supposed that he was here, in back of the store, shut up because of God knows what bestial and implacable prophecies. It was known that he wouldn't eat any food from outside, that he'd planted a garden and that during the first months Meme would buy a piece of meat for herself, but that a year later she'd stopped doing that, perhaps because



direct contact with the man had made a vegetarian of her. Then the two of them shut themselves up until the time the authorities broke down the door, searched the house, and dug up the garden in an attempt to find Meme's body.

People imagined him there, shut in, rocking in his old and tattered hammock. But I knew, even in those months during which his return to the world of the living was not expected, that his impenitent enclosure, his muted battle against the threat of God, would reach its culmination much sooner than his death. I knew that sooner or later he would come out because there isn't a man alive who can live a half-life, locked up, far away from God, without coming out all of a sudden to render to the first man he meets on the corner the accounts that stocks and pillory, the martyrdom of fire and water, the torture of the rack and the screw, wood and hot iron on his eyes, the eternal salt on his tongue, the torture horse, lashes, the grate, and love could not have made him render to his inquisitors. And that time would come for him a few years before his death.

I knew that truth from before, from the last night we talked on the veranda, and afterward, when I went to get him in the little room to have a look at Meme. Could I have opposed his desire to live with her as man and wife? I might have been able before. Not now, because another chapter of fate had begun to be fulfilled three months before that.

He wasn't in his hammock that night. He'd lain down on his back on the cot and had his head back, his eyes fixed on the spot on the ceiling where the light from the candle must have been most intense. There was an electric light in the room but he never used it. He preferred to lie in the shadows, his eyes fixed on the darkness. He didn't move when I went into the room, but I noticed that the moment I crossed the threshold he felt that he wasn't alone. Then I said: "If it's not too much trouble, doctor, it seems that the Indian girl isn't feeling well." He sat up on the bed. A moment before he'd felt that he wasn't alone in the room.

Now he knew that I was the one who was there. Without doubt they were two completely different feelings, because he underwent an immediate change, he smoothed his hair and remained sitting on the edge of the bed waiting.

"It's Adelaida, doctor. She wants you to come look at Meme," I said.

And he, sitting there, gave me the impact of an answer with his parsimonious ruminant voice:

"It won't be necessary. The fact is she's pregnant."

Then he leaned forward, seemed to be examining my face, and said: "Meme's been sleeping with me for years."

I must confess that I was surprised. I didn't feel any upset, perplexity, or anger. I didn't feel anything. Perhaps his confession was too serious to my way of seeing things and was out of the normal course of my comprehension. I remained impassive and I didn't even know why. I was motionless, standing, immutable, as cold as he, like his parsimonious ruminant voice. Then, after a long silence during which he still sat on the cot, not moving, as if waiting for me to take the first step, I understood what he had just told me in all of its intensity. But then it was too late for me to get upset.

"As long as you're aware of the situation, doctor." That was all I could say. He said:

"One takes his precautions, colonel. When a person takes a risk he knows that he's taking it. If something goes wrong it's because there was something unforeseen, out of a person's reach."

I knew that kind of evasion. As always, I didn't know where he was leading. I brought over a chair and sat down opposite him. Then he left the cot, fastened the buckle of his belt, and pulled up his pants and adjusted them. He kept on talking from the other end of the room. He said:

"Just as sure as the fact that I took my precautions is the fact that this is the second time she's got pregnant. The first time was a year and a half ago and you people didn't notice anything."



He went on talking without emotion, going back to the cot. In the darkness I heard his slow, firm steps against the tiles. He said:

"But she was ready for anything then. Not now. Two months ago she told me she was pregnant again and I told her what I had the first time: 'Come by tonight and be ready for the same thing.' She told me not that day, the next day. When I went to have my coffee in the kitchen I told her that I was waiting for her, but she said that she'd never come back."

He'd come over by the cot, but he didn't sit down. He turned his back on me again and began to walk around the room once more. I heard him speaking. I heard the flow of his voice, back and forth, as if he were rocking in the hammock. He was telling things calmly, but with assurance. I knew that it would have been useless to try to interrupt him. All I could do was listen to him. And he kept on talking:

"Still, she did come two days later. I had everything ready. I told her to sit down there and I went to my table for the glass. Then, when I told her to drink it, I realized that this time she wouldn't. She looked at me without smiling and said with a touch of cruelty: 'I'm not going to get rid of this one, doctor. This one I'm going to have so I can raise it.'"

I felt exasperated by his calmness. I told him: "That doesn't justify anything, doctor. What you've done is something that's twice unworthy: first, because of your relations inside my house, and then because of the abortion."

"But you can see that I did everything I could, colonel. It was all I could do. Afterward, when I saw there was no way out, I got ready to talk to you. I was going to do it one of these days."

"I imagine you know that there is a way out of this kind of situation if you really want to erase the insult. You know the principles of those of us who live in this house," I said.

And he said:

"I don't want to cause you any trouble, colonel. Believe me. What I was going to tell you is this: I'll take the Indian woman and go live in the empty house on the corner."

"Living together openly, doctor?" I asked him. "Do you know what that means for us?"

Then he went back to the cot. He sat down, leaned forward, and spoke with his elbows on his legs. His accent became different. At first it had been cold. Now it began to be cruel and challenging. He said:

"I'm proposing the only solution that won't cause you any distress, colonel. The other thing would be to say that the child isn't mine."

"Meme would say it was," I said. I was beginning to feel indignant. His way of expressing himself was too challenging and aggressive now and I couldn't accept it calmly.

But he, hard, implacable, said:

"You have to believe me absolutely when I say that Meme won't say it is. It's because I'm sure of that that I say I'll take her to the corner, only so I can avoid distress for you. That's the only reason, colonel."

He was so sure that Meme would not attribute the paternity of her child to him that now I did feel upset. Something was making me think that his strength was rooted much deeper than his words. I said:

"We trust Meme as we would our own daughter, doctor. In this case she'd be on our side."

"If you knew what I know, you wouldn't talk that way, colonel. Pardon me for saying it this way, but if you compare that Indian girl to your daughter, you're insulting your daughter."

"You have no reason to say that," I said.

And he answered, still with that bitter hardness in his voice: "I do. And when I tell you that she can't say that I'm the father of her child, I also have reasons for it."



He threw his head back. He sighed deeply and said:

"If you took time to spy on Meme when she goes out at night, you wouldn't even demand that I take her away with me. In this case I'm the one who runs the risk, colonel. I'm taking on a dead man to avoid your having any distress."

Then I understood that he wouldn't even go through the doors of the church with Meme. But what was serious was that after his final words I wouldn't have dared go through with what could have been a tremendous burden on my conscience later on. There were several cards in my favor. But the single one he held would have been enough for him to win a bet against my conscience.

"All right, doctor," I said. "This very night I'll make arrangements to have the house on the corner fixed up. But in any case, I want you to be aware of the fact that I'm throwing you out of my house. You're not leaving of your own free will. Colonel Aureliano Buendía would have made you pay dearly for the way you returned his trust."

And when I thought I'd roused up his instincts and was waiting for him to unleash his dark, primal forces, he threw the whole weight of his dignity on me.

"You're a decent man, colonel," he said. "Everybody knows that, and I've lived in this house long enough for you not to have to remind me of it."

When he stood up he didn't seem victorious. He only seemed satisfied at having been able to repay our attentions of eight years. I was the one who felt upset, the one at fault. That night, seeing the germs of death that were becoming progressively more visible in his hard yellow eyes, I understood that my attitude was selfish and that because of that one single stain on my conscience it would be quite right for me to suffer a tremendous expiation for the rest of my life. He, on the other hand, was at peace with himself. He said:

"As for Meme, have them rub her with alcohol. But they shouldn't give her any physics."