

THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

Machado de Assis

Originally published ([*O caminho de Damasco*](#)) in the *Jornal das Famílias*, Rio de Janeiro, in 1871. Translated by Francis K. Johnson, 2021.

I

THE THREE FRIENDS

It was two o'clock of an afternoon in June and it was a magnificent winter's day – neither cold, nor rainy, nor sunny. That's to say, the emperor star was still dominating the skies with his splendid rays but, on that particular day, his rays were soft and gentle. So, it wasn't a sun for lizards to warm themselves by, but it was just the right sun for someone who was walking across Aclamação Square.

Ouvidor Street was just as busy as usual. There were people standing in front of the shops or sitting inside them; people walking down the street, people walking up; men, ladies and, once in a while, a horse-drawn carriage – all of which gave the principle road in Rio de Janeiro a bright and breezy look. Here and there, you could see a group of politicians exchanging news or ogling the ladies as they passed by, which, after all, is far more pleasurable than talking about the defence budget. As it happens, the minister of defence was speaking about that very thing in the House of Representatives at that very moment.

There were also dandies – *la jeunesse dorée* –, who were discussing the latest goings on or the latest fashions. And amongst them, funnily enough, were some grey beards and even white beards. But if you were to ask those grey beards and white beards what they were doing there, they would no doubt have replied that youth has more to do with what's inside than what's out, and that ice can cover the mountain tops without descending to the plain. (And by “the plain” they mean “the heart.”)

Near Quitanda Lane, between the Garnier bookshop and the offices of the *Jornal do Commercio*, three elegant young men had been having a chat. One of them was just heading off downhill, another uphill and the third was about to get into a tilbury, which was standing there waiting for him. The first had black sideburns, the second a full beard, while the third just had an elegantly waxed, chestnut-brown moustache.

“So we're agreed,” the sideburns called out to the others. “Ten o'clock at the door of the Alcazar Theatre.”

“Whoever arrives first will need to wait,” said the full beard.

“Yes,” said sideburns. “But let's try not to be late.”

The moustache agreed, but asked for some laxity for himself. “I need to take care of the old lady.”

Sideburns shook his head impatiently.

“Really, Aguiar! I don't know what to make of you. You're a grown man, but you live like a nun!”

Full beard couldn't help smiling: he was well aware of how little his friend resembled a nun. And he knew that sideburns was equally well informed about what Aguiar got up to.

Aguiar explained, as well as he could, the situation with the old lady, and the three of them promised to be at the door of the Alcazar at 10 o'clock that evening.

And just when Aguiar was about to say his final goodbye, a carriage drove out of Quitanda Lane into Ouvidor Street. It was pulled by a chestnut horse and driven by a youth dressed in white, whose expression of disdain for the pedestrians he passed would almost make you think that Cleopatra or Achilles must be inside the carriage; but one glance would disabuse you of

such a notion: lolling on the seat of the carriage was a thin, blond girl, whose looks might have come from heaven, but whose dress and adornments were more reminiscent of purgatory.

The tears of sinners were crystallised in the refulgent jewellery that adorned her ears, her neck and her fingers. She was looking lazily at the passers-by to the left of the carriage, but without moving her head, and with such an aristocratic expression that one could understand both the arrogance of the coachman and the curiosity of the passers-by.

When she saw our three friends, she smiled and inclined her head slightly. Sideburns gestured something to her, to which she responded with a raised hand. All of it without the carriage stopping.

“Good – Candinha knows,” said sideburns. “We won’t have to send a note.”

And, after once more promising to be there at ten, the three friends continued on their separate ways.

Of the three, it’s Aguiar who’s of most interest to us. He’s off in the tilbury, but it doesn’t matter: we’ll arrive in time to enter his house with him.

II

THE BLACK SPOT

At the time, Jorge Aguiar was 23 years old. The previous year he’d returned from São Paulo with a degree certificate in his pocket and a number of young ladies jostling in his heart. I could say he also brought some knowledge of the law in his head, that is, if I didn’t intend to be scrupulously historically accurate. The fact is, he’d learnt only the minimum necessary to scrape through the exams, and even that minimum had remained behind on the Cubatão Mountains, without him missing it at all. The young ladies in his heart had been carried as far as Guanabara Bay, but it’s certain they didn’t disembark with him. Anyway, they weren’t worth it: his affection for none of them had merited being brought back home.

He’d have had a hard time if he’d had to make his living from what he’d learnt at college. But even though some say fortune is blind, in his case it had the eyesight of a lynx and knew it would have to make some adjustments to his life if he wasn’t to come a cropper. Jorge’s family was sufficiently well-off to keep him in the style to which he was accustomed. So he could sleep soundly and awaken in peace.

But it wasn’t all roses for him. There was a black spot in his blue sky. A black spot that wasn’t his father, who had that sort of blind affection for him that would accept no ifs or buts. In that respect he was a sort of Dr Pangloss, seeing a good reason for each and every deviation of his son from the straight and narrow. Not only that, but he nursed a dream of seeing Aguiar become a government minister. For that, he said, it was necessary to allow him a few months of freedom; after which he’d rein him in and try and get him the first seat that became available in a provincial assembly.

Such were the thoughts and plans of old Silvestre Aguiar, whose own youth had not been exactly monastic.

No, the black spot was Jorge’s mother. Dona Joaquina was an austere and respectable lady, even though sharp-tongued, loud, despotic and possessed of unusual energy for a fifty-two-year-old. No-one in the Aguiar household could remember her ever having been quiet for a whole hour – other than when she slept, of course, which did provide some blessed relief for the rest of the family. But she slept very little, waking at five in the morning.

You wouldn’t need to be terribly perspicacious to notice that Dona Joaquina was the real boss of the house. Silvestre was one of those anything-for-a-quiet life husbands: he never got annoyed, impatient or bored; he was known to have had various affairs, but none of those ladies had displaced his affection for his “plump little pudding.”

“Nature,” he used to say, “includes raging rivers and placid streams. If we were all raging rivers, humanity would have no placid streams. It’s good to have both. Providence likes there to be a tranquil rivulet, like me, at the foot of a mighty waterfall like Joaquina. And that’s called ‘harmony’.”

I should point out that, when he married Dona Joaquina, Silvestre was aware neither of her garrulousness, nor of her impetuosity. But it's possible that, at the time, those gifts of hers weren't yet fully developed. Their romance had begun on the occasion of the coronation festivities. One of Silvestre's relatives had given a dinner, at which the two families – his and Joaquina's – had met. It was generally thought she'd never marry because she'd already had five or six suitors and had despatched each and every one with a decisiveness that gave a foretaste of her future *modus vivendi*. So it was quite a surprise when, three months later, after Silvestre had gone to ask her parents for her hand, she replied to them in the affirmative.

"They'll be happy together," said her mother. "The reason she refused all those offers of marriage must be that God has been keeping this one for her especially."

And, indeed, they were happy, Silvestre's character perfectly complementing that of his wife. Dona Joaquina would occasionally get annoyed with the passivity of her husband, and would have no hesitation in letting him know; but, as he didn't offer any sort of resistance, she always ended up having – as he explained it to himself – to "forego the joys of battle."

So, this was the Dona Joaquina who was the black spot in Jorge's sky. He had to be home by 10 p.m. at the latest, despite Silvestre's feeble attempts to support his son's cause. This he'd do by remarking that the lad couldn't be expected to live the life of a nun; and that word "nun" – so insignificant in the mouth of anyone else – would then, in Dona Joaquina's, give material for a lecture running to ten fullscap pages. Her husband would resort to silence, and 10 p.m. at the latest it was.

For a long time, Jorge followed his mother's orders, but his friends helped to pervert his upright and chaste character; with the result that one night he arrived home at 11. His mother was still up and came to open the door for him in person.

"Oh! Mummy!" he exclaimed in shock.

Dona Joaquina said nothing. She closed the door and ascended the stairs quietly in front of him. It was the only occasion she hadn't used her mouth to deal with a problem, and her reaction was all the more sublime on that account.

From then on, Jorge was scared of disobeying his mother; but, as strolls and visits to the theatre and to parties didn't really fit with such obedience, the young man eventually got a key made for himself, which gave him ample opportunities to take wing.

In addition he managed to conjure up lots of invitations to dinner parties and dances, which the good lady didn't object to.

And in these ways, and various others, our Jorge Aguiar managed to evade the vigilance and the orders of his mother. The one who wasn't fooled was his father, who frequently saw him slipping out and guessed the real reason for all those invites; but good old Silvestre applauded his son's craftiness, thinking it augured well for a career in politics.

III

CLARINHA

When Jorge Aguiar arrived home, Dona Joaquina was giving her final orders in respect of a large quantity of coconut cakes and checking on the task she'd given to two young seamstresses that morning. Silvestre was playing backgammon with Fr Barroso, and Clarinha was playing some German variations on the piano.

This Clarinha, who's suddenly appeared in this story unannounced, was a niece of Dona Joaquina, and thus a cousin of Jorge. She'd lost her mother while still a child; and her father had become infatuated, two years before, with an Italian woman who'd arrived in Rio on the dubious pretext of being a singer; so he'd hitched his star to the lady of his dreams and was now accompanying her around Italy. Thus, to all intents and purposes, Clarinha had lost both her parents. But Dona Joaquina treated her just as if she were her own daughter.

The young woman was extraordinarily beautiful, which was only enhanced by her air of deep melancholy – a melancholy that was understandable, given that, having been born into a well-off family, she'd seen her father squander his inherited wealth and had lost her mother at an

age when she most needed her; and then to be completely abandoned by her father and obliged to depend on the goodwill of her aunt and uncle. Consequently it was no surprise that she didn't often laugh.

However, she overcame the slings and arrows of her outrageous fate by learning to work with a docility which her aunt found enchanting. Dona Joaquina used to say her niece had inherited her own competence in the art of home management. Indeed, it would have been difficult to find another young woman – Clarinha was 18 at the time – possessed of such gravity, prudence, energy and orderliness. She spent such spare time as she had in studying music and French, because she was hoping to become a teacher eventually and to be able to make her own way in the world.

Whilst admiring her niece's prudence, Dona Joaquina sought to allay the fears that gave rise to it by assuring her that, for as long as she was alive – and even afterwards – Clarinha would want for nothing. In addition, she was young, and it wouldn't be long before marriage would provide her with absolute security.

"Marriage?" said Clarinha, sadly. "That's not for me."

"Why not?"

"Who'd want to marry me?"

"Any young man who's not an idiot, Clarinha. You think it's easy to find a wife like you?"

Clarinha shook her head and said nothing.

Indeed, her behaviour confirmed a predisposition to spinsterhood. She seemed indifferent to men, she didn't beautify herself before going to balls, she didn't dance at them, she didn't linger by the window, and she was perfectly deaf to the admiration that her beauty elicited. She usually wore dark clothes because she was drawn to their melancholy colours; her manners were modest and reserved; she didn't talk much and, as I said, she laughed even less.

So, at the request of Fr Barroso, she was playing the piano in the lounge. The priest was crazy about music and, with the insouciance of a born backgammon player, was wont to remark that music would take the edge off Aguiar's defeats. It certainly was the case that the host rarely overcame his guest.

"A two and a one," said Commander Aguiar as he threw the dice and tapped one of the priest's boards.

"No chance!" replied the priest as he shook the dice. "Now you'll see what it's all about! I need double four."

"Stop gabbing and throw!"

The priest threw the dice.

"Double four!"

Silvestre Aguiar scratched his nose, while the implacable priest, having beaten his opponent twice, blew his nose noisily into a red handkerchief.

"It's no good without snuff," he muttered.

"Hasn't the boy come back yet?" said Aguiar. "It was careless of me. I should have bought some yesterday."

Clarinha stopped playing and was just about to go and check whether the boy had returned when her uncle told her there was no need.

At that moment, Jorge entered the lounge. He kissed his father's hand, shook hands with Fr Barroso and went to greet his cousin.

"You know what?" the priest whispered to the commander. "Why don't the two of them get married?"

"I wouldn't get in their way, if they wanted," Silvestre replied. "But it's up to them. I don't think they're courting. And anyway, the lad hasn't quite left the folly of youth behind yet."

"Forgive me for saying so," said the priest, "but he's heading for trouble like this. Youthful habits are rarely left behind. You need to rein him in before it's too late."

"I was no different myself at his age," said Silvestre, "but nowadays I'm second to none when it comes to behaviour. Leave him be. He'll follow the same path as his father."

Jorge exchanged a few words with his cousin before heading to his room, leaving her to continue playing the piano, and the two old gentlemen to finish their game.

But then a new character appeared upon the scene: Dr Marques – forty-four years old, ruddy-faced, energetic, with greying hair and beard. He was the family’s doctor and had known the commander since they were boys. Indeed, they were the closest of friends. He and the priest were the most regular guests in the house.

“Just the person!” said the priest. “Have you got the box?”

“Of course,” said the doctor, after going to shake hands with Clarinha.

“Thanks be to God! Let’s have a pinch then.”

“Two!” Silvestre corrected him. “Two pinches! The attack has to come from both port and starboard.”

The two backgammon players wiped their fingers before each taking a generous pinch from the doctor’s bag. The priest inserted his in both nostrils, after which he used his handkerchief to brush off the dust that had fallen on his shirt. For his part, the commander pressed down his right nostril with his thumb before introducing the whole pinch into his left.

Dr Marques left them to carry on with the backgammon and went over to the piano, just as Clarinha was about to get up and leave the room.

“Don’t you want to play any more?” he asked.

“I need to do something,” she whispered, without looking up.

Dr Marques gave a quick glance at the two backgammon players. Seeing they were concentrating on the dice, he whispered in her ear:

“And your reply?”

“Let me go...”

She walked rapidly to the door and disappeared, leaving Marques standing awkwardly by the piano – as the reader will certainly imagine. Meanwhile Fr Barroso threw the dice before exclaiming happily:

“Poor you, Commander! Poor you!”

IV

A PIECE OF ADVICE

Dr Marques went to look for Jorge and found him in the study, sitting in the sofa and reading a novel by Feydou. He shut the door and pulled up a chair. Without changing his position, Jorge closed the book, using a bill from his tailor as a bookmark.

“Any news?” he asked.

“No,” came the reply. “And that’s the worst of it.”

“How come?”

“I asked her for her reply just now, but she didn’t say anything; and the way she left the room has left me with no hope. I think your advice about writing the letter wasn’t so good.”

“Nonsense! It was perfectly good advice: a letter doesn’t prove anything about her not liking you. It could still turn out fine. Let me tell you something.”

“What?”

“Don’t get disheartened. My cousin will have to yield because she won’t find a better husband than you... You’ll make her happy. The only reason she didn’t reply is because she’s so shy. She’s worried it might be taken amiss. Look, why don’t you have a word with my mother?”

“Your mother?”

“Yes. Clarinha has great respect for her; I’m sure it’s the thing to do. Go and speak to her. That should do the trick.”

Dr Marques stood up, took a pinch of snuff, walked to the mirror, patted his whiskers and returned to his seat by the sofa.

“Are you sure she hasn’t got another suitor?”

“Well, I can’t be absolutely sure, but nothing suggests she has. Clarinha’s a very private person; she spends her time looking after the house. So, I can’t see inside her head, but I haven’t heard anything... Take my advice: speak to my mother.”

“Fair enough!” said Marques. “I will.”

As can be seen, the family doctor was in love with Silvestre Aguiar's niece. I don't want to make out that this was one of those fiery, unbridled passions of youngsters, nor one of those mellow, latter-day loves of maturity. Rather, it was a mild, temperate and considered affection. Dr Marques had never married; everything suggested permanent bachelorhood, and so it would have been until the day he died, if Clarinha's qualities – her industry and her innocent and grave demeanour – had not impressed themselves on him so far as to awaken the idea of marriage.

The prospect of staid family life began to seduce him. And reason soon backed up the idea, comparing a solitary old age with an old age made easier by the care of a worthy and solicitous wife. Clarinha seemed to have all the necessary qualities to be his companion, and he'd confided in his friend Jorge. In turn, Jorge had recommended an epistolary approach, and – with the docility of an obedient dog – Dr Marques had duly plucked up the courage to write a letter to the young lady.

And that's the letter they'd been talking about. We already know that the young lady not only had not responded, but had even, apparently, fled from her suitor. This could have been because she was in love with someone else, as he'd suggested to Jorge, or it could simply have been the result of her timidity, accustomed as she was to comply with the rigid doctrines of Dona Joaquina. In the opinion of that good lady, a bride should only get to know the groom on the day of her marriage.

“And that's more than enough,” she used to say.

It's certainly the case that old Aguiar's wife no longer remembered their wedding day, not to speak of their courtship. But that's only natural: people have ideas appropriate to their age; fifty-year-olds don't have much sympathy for the folly of twenty-year-olds, and the latter find the austerity of fifty-year-olds distinctly odd.

Clarinha, however, was happy to be guided by the ideas of her aunt, and it's quite possible that her reserve was simply the result of that influence.

What's certain is that Marques had made no progress when Jorge suggested going to speak with his mother, a suggestion which the doctor accepted and resolved to put into practice the following day.

It should not be thought, however, that Jorge's advice originated in sympathy for his friend's cause. In fact he was completely indifferent who his cousin might marry. He would have given the same advice to any man who'd asked for it. The principal concern of the commander's son was to be completely free to enjoy life as he wished, without the need to worry about anything. The lady who'd passed by when he was talking with his friends in Ouvidor Street was – hard as it is to say – more important to him than his cousin. In a nutshell, he was well advanced in the career of a libertine.

As soon as the doctor had left the study, Jorge resumed his reading. Shortly after that, he was called to dinner. He dined, he dozed a little, later on he pretended to be having a cup of tea and, at half past ten, when his mother thought the whole house was reposing in the lap of her virtuous doctrines, our Jorge opened the door and hurried eagerly towards pleasure.

V

HOW A LAD IS LOST

I think the reader can do without a description of the party at which Jorge was the life and soul. It was one of the most magnificent suppers there had ever been in the hotels of Rio. And it finished when dawn was sweeping the darkness from the sky, and the sweepers were sweeping the streets.

Jorge had rather overdone it with the wine, as a consequence of which his mind was a little dulled. Fortunately no-one saw him enter the house, where he slept until midday, having ordered the servant – who was privy to his adventures – to tell the old lady he had been unwell in the night. The good woman was greatly alarmed when she was told, but nevertheless she ordered that he should not be woken up – exactly as her son wanted.

Jorge's adventures were legion. He'd completed his education so successfully that he'd acquired the reputation of being one of the greatest madcaps in the whole of Rio. As a result, there was hardly a banquet, an outing or some hare-brained scheme in which he wasn't a conspicuous participant.

His father was giving him a generous allowance, and Jorje didn't tarry in squandering it. Although he used it, at first, for his necessities, it wasn't long before his allowance became much less than his expenditure; and when such a situation arises, either in the finances of an individual or in those of a country, the result is a thing called "a deficit." Finding himself in possession of such a thing, Jorje was faced with two choices: work or credit. The latter had the great advantage of dispensing with the former. So, Jorge addressed the problem partly by leaving some of his debts open and partly by having recourse to lenders.

He did this without losing either his glittering social position or the disinterested affections of some of the young ladies of that time. These affections generally showed themselves in the form of a mad, headlong passion. And during two or three weeks they'd conjure up for him visions of a heavenly, romantic life, filled with the purest and most devoted love. They wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice, for his sake, all and every suitor, past or present. Jorge was in seventh heaven. Although, in theory, he didn't believe in love, whether in relation to these young ladies or to anyone else, in practice he was flattered by the attentions of such frivolous and giddy butterflies.

His self-satisfaction, however, tended to be dented somewhat, round about the end of the second or third week, when the butterfly would send the object of her attentions a bill for some present he'd bought her, or a simple request for repayment of a loan. So Jorge's illusions proved costly.

And there were other outgoings. In the society in which he occupied such a prominent position, there was a certain class of men whose communist ideals had only one defect: they related to other people's pockets. Jorge's pocket – ever available and ever generous – was one of that number. Not only that, but the commander's son had his pride and would have been mortified to have been called a cheapskate.

The real person who suffered all those setbacks was his father, who paid for his son's frivolities, including his bills and debts. After a few months, the Commander came to the conclusion that Jorge's apprenticeship was proving rather costly. So he decided it was time for it to end.

After all, he thought, he must be bored with bachelor life by now and ready to turn to more serious things. It's very wrong to try and engage young men in serious things before they've become bored with frivolities. A man who doesn't make mistakes in his youth, makes them in his old age. So, let's sort it out.

But it was too late.

Jorge was thoroughly entrenched in his bad habits; he'd gone further in that direction than many others in a lifetime. He was no longer open to reason. Silvestre tried gentle persuasion, but to no avail. And when he tried more robust methods, the resistance he encountered made him realise how bad the situation was – the situation he himself had created.

Dona Joaquina didn't let the opportunity pass of justifiably pointing out to her husband, in the strongest possible terms, the error of his ways. The boy wouldn't obey her any more, which she blamed on Silvestre's complacency when their son first set out on the wrong road. I could give a verbatim transcript of the speech in which Dona Joaquina described the situation to her crestfallen and shamefaced husband; but I won't, if you don't mind, because she didn't stop until she ran out of breath.

VI

THE WEDDING

During those months in which Jorge gave free rein to his every whim, Dr Marques had advanced his cause vis-à-vis Clarinha, albeit only a little. After hesitating for two months, he'd plucked up the courage to reveal his feelings to the young lady's aunt. The latter responded favourably, imposing just one condition: that her niece should love him.

"Ah! Senhora," said Marques, "I can't guarantee anything in that regard. I don't know whether she loves me or not. Donna Clarinha is so shy that there's no way of knowing..."

"Fair enough," replied Donna Joaquina. "I'll make it my job to find out. But the reason I imposed that condition is that I know Clarinha very well; I know she's a very sensible girl who is perfectly able to choose her own husband. Were it otherwise, it would be down to me to find her a fiancé."

Donna Joaquina was as good as her word. She asked Clarinha if she'd ever thought of marriage.

"Marrying? Me?"

"Yes, you."

"No, I've never thought about it."

Clarinha's tone was cold and indifferent; nevertheless, it seemed to her aunt that the idea had saddened her.

Perhaps she's already in love with him, she thought.

There followed some moments of silence.

"Did you know that a man has expressed a desire to marry you?" asked Aguiar's wife in the end.

Clarinha's eyes opened wide. "To marry me?"

"Yes, you."

"You're pulling my leg, Auntie."

"Why would I do that? Don't you deserve to have a husband?"

Clarinha didn't reply.

"And that man is a good acquaintance of ours."

"Ah!"

"So you've noticed?"

Clarinha laid her hand on her heart.

"No," she murmured.

"Can you guess who it is?"

"No, I've no idea."

"It's Dr Marques."

Clarinha went pale. The dear old lady kept her eyes on her face, trying to read her feelings. But – truth be told – Donna Joaquina didn't know how to read physiognomies. Whatever the cause of the commotion in Clarinha's face, her aunt decided it was a good omen for the doctor.

She loves him, she thought. *There's no doubt. Everything's settled.*

It took Clarinha ten minutes to recover her voice.

"You know what's best for me, Auntie. I'll do as you wish."

"What I wish!" exclaimed Donna Joaquina. "No, no! Nothing of the kind! This is just a discussion."

"Dr Marques is an excellent man," said Clarinha.

"And will be an excellent husband?" asked a smiling Donna Joaquina by way of conclusion.

Clarinha didn't reply, which the Commander's wife took for agreement. Consequently she lost no time in letting the doctor know the result of her mission.

As soon as Clarinha was alone, she ran to her room and burst into tears – silent, stifled tears, so that no-one would hear or even suspect. Then she took a portrait from a draw, gazed at it for a long time and kissed it over and over again. When she reappeared in the sitting room,

there was no sign that's she'd been crying. She just looked sad but, as that was her natural state, no-one sought to know why.

When Marques heard how Donna Joaquina had got on, he couldn't contain his joy.

"But," said Aguiar's wife, "I think it would be a good idea for you to hear it from Clarinha's own lips, because I was only reading her face."

Marques lost no time to personally sound out Clarinha's heart. He was an honest man and would have hated to think of her marrying him against her will.

The result of this new attempt was more satisfactory than the result of the first. Although the young lady didn't exactly confess her love in the words of a passionate heart, she did speak very affectionately to the doctor. So Donna Joaquina set about arranging the wedding.

Silvestre Aguiar's participation in that process amounted to suggesting that his niece's wedding should take place within a month and a half. His agreement to the wedding itself had been requested as a mere formality, because Donna Joaquina's decision was perfectly sufficient in that respect. And, in any case, Aguiar had no objections at all; on the contrary, he was all in favour.

"I always said the doctor was a crafty old so-and-so," he observed. "The way in which he's stolen the young lady from us is proof perfect."

However, Fr. Barroso, who was considered one of the family, was not so happy when it was his turn to be approached for approval.

"I've nothing against it," he said, "but... does Clarinha love him?"

"No question!" said Dona Joaquina.

The priest looked at the commander's niece; the satisfaction he saw in her face was so pronounced that he did no more than shrug his shoulders and congratulate her and her aunt and uncle.

But that afternoon, finding himself alone with the young lady, he asked her:

"What's this all about, Clarinha? What about your love for...?"

"It died," she replied sadly. "It was a hopeless love – the sort of love that kills you if it doesn't die. It probably would have been better if it had killed me; but God just wanted it to die. I'm not complaining; I'm resigned to my fate."

The priest shook his head.

"No, Clarinha. Your love didn't die: you still feel it, and that's bad, my daughter; it's wrong to be marrying one man when you love another..."

"Oh, no!" said Clarinha. "No! I assure you it died; and even if it hasn't yet, I swear that it will."

"You swear! My poor child! Do you know what you're saying?"

Two tears appeared in her eyes. The priest saw them and embraced her.

"Never!" she said. "What would be the point of being married to a man who doesn't love me, who can't love me?"

"Yes," the priest murmured sadly, "Jorge is on the road to ruin."

"I'll be marrying an honest man," Clarinha continued. "It's true I don't love him; but I do have some affection and respect for him; you might even say I'm happy – as happy as a wretched person can be. But please don't mention any of this; it would only cause trouble for all of us."

Barroso hugged her again.

"You're a good soul, Clarinha, and you deserve to be happy. This is all your father's fault. If he hadn't abandoned you, you would probably never have fallen in love with your cousin; it all came from living in the same house. Your father..."

"Forgive him," she answered. "My father has a bad head but a good heart. Come now! Promise me you won't try to stop this marriage."

"If that's your wish, I promise."

She kissed his hand. "Thank you."

And it was good old Fr Barroso who celebrated the marriage, and who was trembling when he had to say the sacred words. When the ceremony was over, he whispered – with a tear in his eye – to the groom:

“Make her happy. She deserves it.”

Jorge attended the wedding. He complimented the bride rather nonchalantly, made a few off-colour jokes to some of his male friends, and left to spend the night in the Alcazar.

Now we leap forward about eleven months. All the main characters in this story are still alive. The commander still plays backgammon with the priest; Donna Joaquina’s loquacity has diminished somewhat with the passage of time; and, as for Jorge, he’s making the most of the debauched reputation he’s gained at his father’s expense. Silvestre has tried everything he could think of to drag his son back from the benighted path on which he himself unwittingly set him, but in vain; the die’s been cast.

Aguiar had achieved something, however: he’d arranged a civil-service job for his son, to see if he’d get the habit of work. But Jorge saw it principally as a source of income and spent a few hours on it as he could. He clocked in at 9 a.m., which was, in itself, quite an effort, and left the office at 11 a.m. On many occasions he didn’t go into work at all, so that the state wouldn’t get into the habit of expecting him. But he always went in on the first day of the month, which was pay day.

Meanwhile, Marques was happy; his wife was all he could have dreamt of: homely, affectionate, devoted and respectful. For her part, Clarinha wasn’t happy, but it could have been worse. Her husband was an honest man, who lived for her and tried as hard as he could to make her happy. And it pained him to see the melancholy look in her face; but she assured him it was just her nature.

“I’ve always been like this. It’s just how I am. You’ve never known me any different, have you?”

“That’s true,” the doctor replied, “but if only I could find a way...”

“I’m happy, I really am,” she said, smiling sadly.

One night, Commander Aguiar, who rarely, if ever, went to the theatre and had very old fashioned ideas on the subject, decided to go to see a play by Ginásio. His wife didn’t accompany him; she hated the theatre.

Having bought his ticket, he entered the auditorium. At the end of the first act, he went out to the vestibule, where he came across a friend.

“Fancy seeing you here!” said the friend.

“Yes, I know,” said Aguiar. “But, just like anyone else, I do like to see new things once in a while. And you?”

“I still haven’t retired... Where are you sitting?”

“In the gallery.”

“Come to my box.”

So Aguiar went to his friend’s box, which was at the second level.

The curtain was raised, and the second act began. Half way through, the door of the next box opened, and a woman entered. From the extravagance of her dress and her manners, it was clear she was a lady of fashion. All eyes, all binoculars and all eyeglasses turned in her direction and, for five minutes, the action wasn’t on the stage but in the auditorium. And although the anonymous lady had the air of an ingénue, she wasn’t: she’d elicited exactly the effect she wanted.

Like everyone else, Silvestre turned to look at her. And shortly afterwards a young man followed her into the box – an elegant, red-faced young man who was a little unsteady on his feet.

It was only with difficulty that Aguiar managed to keep quiet: it was Jorge.

Shaking with anger, Silvestre stood up and glared at his son. But Jorge didn't notice; instead he scanned the opposite boxes before sitting down on the far side of the your lady, which was about all he could do for the sake of decorum.

The commander stayed on his feet, still glaring at his son. It was not until after Jorge had looked through his binoculars at the stage and then at some of the boxes on the other side, and until after he'd stretched himself lazily on his chair, that he noticed his father.

He froze.

Silvestre continued to glare at him. Jorge diverted his eyes twice, only to return them – twice – to his father. Finally he stood up, picked up his hat and left.

Aguiar didn't wait for the play to finish.

He returned home and asked if his son had arrived; he was told that he had. He ordered that Jorge be summoned, and the latter was not tardy in arriving; on entering his father's study, he flung himself at his feet.

The commander gave him a thorough dressing-down, with the conclusion that, if he didn't mend his ways, he'd be thrown out of the house.

Jorge returned to his room, embarrassed and annoyed – but still not repentant. What extraordinarily bad luck to have met his father in the theatre, given that his father almost never went! He imagined some ill-wisher must have been behind it. He ran various plans through his head before falling into a deep sleep, from which he didn't wake until breakfast-time.

Old Aguiar told the priest what had happened in the theatre and asked for advice what to do if his son didn't mend his ways. After a few moments thought, Fr Barroso replied:

"I don't know what to say. Maybe it would be best to wait and see if he does mend his ways... Would you like me to speak to him?"

"Yes please."

"But it's your own fault, Commander. Spare the rod, spoil the child. How many times did I tell you it was a bad idea to let him run wild like that? And this is the result.

So Fr Barroso sent an invitation to Jorge to come to the presbytery – an invitation that caused the young man some alarm. What might the priest want to talk about? But, deep down, he knew.

His first instinct was to ignore the invitation but, eventually, he went. The priest was awaiting him impatiently.

The presbytery was a modest building, modestly furnished. The priest was sitting in a high-backed leather chair in front of a writing desk and was engrossed in a large book. He didn't move when the commander's son was shown into the room by the servant. After a few moments, he gestured for the servant to leave and continued reading until he got to the bottom of the page. Then he closed the book and invited the young man to take a seat in front of him.

"Jorge," he asked, "how long are you intending to continue with this sort of life?"

As the priest expected, there was no answer. So he continued:

"Your father had such hopes for you! He did his utmost to get you a good job and a position in society. And you've squandered it all for the life of a libertine. By the time your father realised how bad it had got, it was almost too late. But he never expected to see what he saw last night. Imagine – if you can – the shame and the pain that it caused him."

The priest fell silent again before continuing:

"There's still time; everything's not lost. You can save yourself; you must save yourself."

"Fr Barroso," said Jorge, "I don't deny my life's been a bit free and easy, but I haven't done anything so completely out of the ordinary."

"And well do I know it," replied the priest. "You've been doing the ordinary things of this world. And some of the ordinary things of this world are among the very worst things..."

"But I don't do anything that needs to be changed..."

The priest made a gesture of impatience.

"And what about the scandal yesterday evening?"

"What happened yesterday was just a coincidence."

"An honest man wouldn't expose himself to such a coincidence."

Jorge frowned.

“Oh! Forgive me for being taken aback! I’m old, I’m simple, and I’m a priest; but I have the right to tell you the truth: you’re an idiot. That’s the least I can say to you.”

The priest had raised his voice, and his anger was more than evident. Despite himself, Jorge felt cowed by the authority of that good, old man. He said nothing, but Fr Barroso insisted he promise to devote himself to his career and overcome his bad habits.

Jorge thought for a while before replying, “Alright, I promise to turn over a new leaf.”

“And you really mean it?”

The young man hesitated again before saying, “Yes.”

He didn’t really mean it, but the reverend father was an honest man who preferred to believe in the honesty of others.

“Glad to hear it. Turn over a new leaf, Jorge; it will only do you good, you’ll see. Just think how happy it will make your parents! When I think...”

The old man sighed.

“When you think?” said Jorge.

“When I think,” Fr Barroso continued, “that today you could have been a happy man alongside a happy wife... a woman who loved you...”

“Which woman?” asked Jorge. “Who was she?”

The priest was just about to say, when he suddenly remembered how inappropriate that would be, given that Clarinha was now married. So he said nothing.

“Which woman?” Jorge repeated.

Without replying, the old man stood up.

Jorge stared at him, trying as hard as he could to think who it could be. But he couldn’t think of anyone, so he asked yet again, “Which woman?”

“What’s the point?” said the old priest. “The benefits she would have brought you are no longer available...”

“No longer?”

“That’s right: no longer.”

“Why? ...”

“Because... Because she’s dead.”

Jorge couldn’t believe what the priest had just said.

“But if she’s dead, what harm is there in telling me her name? ... Hold on! ... Are you trying to tell me... It’s Clarinha, isn’t it?!”

The priest shook his head.

I’m right, Jorge thought. It’s her.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Fr Barroso. “The past is the past. You’ve promised to turn over a new leaf; are you prepared to do that?”

Jorge at least felt sufficiently constrained as to avoid repeating a promise he had no intention of keeping; instead he proffered his hand, as if in response to the question.

“May God be your guide,” said the priest. “It was I who baptised you; don’t let me die knowing I couldn’t save, for a second time, a soul entrusted to my care.”

Having summoned up an appearance of humility in response to those heartfelt words, Jorge took his leave as soon as he could.

VII

PITCHED BATTLE

The austere old priest was wrong: Jorge hadn’t left as a changed man; all the advice and all the promises had evaporated from his mind. Of all that Fr Barroso had said, the only thing that remained with him was the thought of Clarinha’s love.

If he’d been told back then, he’d almost certainly have shrugged and gone to tell his closest friends about it. Being loved by her was one thing, but marriage would have meant less freedom and serious obligations, things that were anathema to his way of thinking. But now

the situation was different; the idea that a married lady was in love with him when she was single opened his eyes to new hopes and possibilities.

It's true, he thought to himself, it's all getting a bit tedious. It will be good to take a break; I can get back into the swing of things afterwards. An affair would be something new. Clarinha used to love me; who knows if she won't love me again?

Jorge spent the whole night entertaining himself with these and similar thoughts. A passionate affair with his cousin would have the advantage of making it look as if he really had turned over a new leaf, as he'd necessarily have to devote to it the time that he'd otherwise devote to painting the town red.

It was with these ideas that he awoke the following day. His father still looked like thunder; so, to start creating the illusion he planned, he stayed at home that day. He took himself off to his study, where his mother found him reading. And from that day forward he adopted a way of life that completely fooled both his family and Fr Barroso. So much so, that Silvestre recovered the cheerfulness that his visit to the theatre had caused him to lose; and the priest – delighted to see the change in the young man – readily forgave all his previous stupidity. Happiness was flowering once more at home.

Up until that point, whenever Clarinha went to visit her aunt and uncle, her cousin hadn't been home, which had been a great relief to her. After the apparent change in Jorge's habits, however, not only did she find him at home, but he seemed to have a much better relationship with his parents. Whereas, before, they preferred not to talk about him, now they were overflowing with joy at the return of the prodigal son. Marques expressed his amazement to Jorge at the sudden change.

"Well," said Jorge, "it's simply that I've turned over a new leaf."

"Really?"

"Really."

Marques was delighted at this unexpected turn of events – unlike Clarinha, who saw Jorge's presence as an obstacle to her relationship with her aunt and uncle; not because she still loved him, nor because she was afraid for herself, but because he'd be a constant reminder of a recent past.

Jorge had acquired skills of dissimulation beyond his years. He treated his cousin with no more than routine affability and didn't let slip the slightest sign that he knew she used to love him.

He did notice, however, her reserve towards him, and the awkwardness his presence caused her – those vague signs that she really had been in love with him before she married the doctor.

Very well, Doctor! Jorge said to himself. *You've got a new and more difficult campaign in front of you. Before it was just skirmishes. Now I'm challenging you to pitched battle: winner takes all!*

He began to frequent the doctor's house; at first, Clarinha didn't appear; but, one day, her astute cousin invited himself for dinner. The young woman had to make her appearance. She managed to remain reserved, but it was difficult when faced with Jorge's respectful manners and affectionate language. The sinner appeared to have undergone a Damascene conversion.

In addition, Clarinha's innocence and naivety led her to a dangerous conclusion: that to continue to steer clear of her cousin would be a proof of weakness and unjustifiable fear; and that it would be more appropriate to her married state if she faced up to him. Avoiding him would be like acknowledging he still had some power over her, whereas she now knew he didn't.

So it was not long before their old intimacy was re-established, even though – as in the past – an intimacy that was no more than superficial. Jorge deluded himself into thinking she was in love with him again. Even so, he'd wait for her to make the first move; to do so himself would be too risky.

Let the enemy get tired, he thought. A good tactic. Worthy of a general!

And with that thought he let the days pass without breaking his self-imposed silence.

He noticed how attentive and affectionate the young woman was to her husband, and the peace that reigned between them – so much so that he began to envy Marques. It might be said it was only then that a window of redemption, however small, began to open up for him. The sight of the others' happiness invited him to seek his own happiness, but he was convinced his happiness lay only in his cousin, and she was lost for him.

One morning, between puffing on his cigar and drinking his coffee, his train of thought ran as follows:

What am I doing? It can't go on like this. I need to do something. The poor girl must think I'm a terrible lover.

So, later that day, while sitting talking to his cousin, he came straight out with a declaration of love.

Furious, Clarinha immediately stood up, responding to what he'd said with chilly silence before leaving him alone in the room.

But the young man was not to be rebutted so easily. He ceased his visits for a few days; and when he did return it was together with his mother and father, so that Clarinha could hardly fail to appear. Jorge calculated, correctly, that she wouldn't have confided in her husband about what had happened.

Good! he thought. *All is not lost.*

In time, the situation returned more or less to what it had been before.

One day he wrote a letter to Clarinha, left it on the piano while she was playing, and promptly headed for the door. She called him back. He turned and said, "You need to open it." She didn't. Instead, when he approached, she returned it to him unopened.

"Cousin," she said. "You might at least acknowledge the kindness I've shown you as a relative. Because it is kindness, to have heard your insulting words and not to have conveyed them to my husband. If there's one thing you could do to make up for it, it would be to forget I exist and never return to my house.

"But why such cruelty?" said Jorge, trying to give his voice a tone of misery and despair.

Clarinha didn't reply.

"And yet," said Jorge, "once upon a time..."

The young woman looked at him in astonishment.

"Once upon a time you were head over heels in love with me."

Clarinha went pale.

"That's nonsense. I always treated you with respect, but... My husband's coming! Try repeating to him what you've just said to me."

Indeed, she'd heard his footsteps in the corridor, and he was just entering the room. She'd raised her voice for the final words, in the hope of resolving things with a short, sharp shock; but Marques hadn't heard; he approached and shook Jorge warmly by the hand.

For the next three days, the latter refrained from visiting; on the fourth day, he entered the room with the intimacy of a family member – an intimacy that Marques was only too happy to encourage between the two families.

On this occasion, Marques was sitting on the sofa and Clarinha was sitting in front of him on a stool; she was looking at him with such affection and respect that the young man felt forced to avert his eyes. It was the first time the serpent of jealousy had bitten his heart.

"Come in!" said the doctor, noticing how Jorge had hesitated at the door. "Don't be alarmed! We're just two happy creatures, and that's partly thanks to you."

Clarinha looked at her husband.

"That's a surprise for you, isn't it?" Marques said to his wife. "It was Jorge who encouraged me when I didn't dare do more than admire you in silence. The idea of writing that first letter, to which you didn't reply, was his."

"Ah!" she said, before extending her hand to her cousin and adding, "Thank you!"

The happiness that seemed to be expressed by that gesture and those words delighted her husband; whereas Jorge, offended and jealous, hardly touched her fingers.

Meanwhile Clarinha was thinking:

So he had no idea at that time that I loved him; but who could have told him? Fr Barroso? ... Impossible! ... And yet no-one else knew; it was him, it had to be. But why?

VIII

FROM BAD TO WORSE

One shouldn't play with fire – a simple truth that Jorge learnt the hard way when he found himself engulfed in the flames he'd lit so carelessly.

Just to be clear, they weren't purifying flames; his love had not been ignited in heaven. The fire came from the earth or from hell: a raging, voluptuous, insensitive passion, a mixture of caprice, sensuality and madness.

But the situation had changed: he noticed that the doctor's affability towards him had completely disappeared.

She's told him everything, he thought.

He tried to find out the truth, but how? He could drag it out of Clarinha, but she wasn't giving him the opportunity: she would no longer receive him when she was alone, only speaking to him in the presence of her husband.

Jorge was desperately trying to find a way of resolving the crisis caused by the free rein he'd given to his criminal passion; he was furious with his cousin and he hated Marques; in fact, he hated the whole world in so far as it was placing obstacles in the way of his deplorable ambition.

One Sunday, when he was mulling over all this in his room, Fr Barroso appeared at the door. Jorge stood up to speak to him but, with a look of thunder, the priest ignored him and went to sit in a chair.

Jorge tried to make a joke about how grumpy Fr Barroso looked, but the priest interrupted the attempt:

"I haven't come to make jokes, Jorge, but to give you a piece of my mind and, if needs be, to punish you. Don't be surprised! I can easily tell all to your father, who's an honest man. You might think I'm meek and mild, but it's just my thin outer shell; inside I'm burning with hatred for anything that offends morality and virtue."

"But I've mended my ways..."

"No," said the priest. "It's even worse than it was. New wine shouldn't be poured into old bottles."

Jorge realised that the reference was to the current state of his passions and, in his heart of hearts, he had to admit that he hadn't changed for the better.

The priest sat in silence for a while, before saying, "I know everything."

"What everything?"

"I know that you dared to set your sights on someone who only deserved your respect; and I regret that, inadvertently, I was the cause of it; but that doesn't excuse you: it was vile, what you did. She told me everything and asked my advice. I advised her to tell her husband, but she didn't want to; she said it would only make him feel ashamed, and she didn't want that. I accepted her point of view, but I too had something on my conscience, and I told her everything."

"You did!" Jorge got to his feet all of a sudden.

"Yes, I did," said the priest calmly. "What's that to you? I did what I saw as my duty: I listened to my conscience."

Furious, Jorge stood there biting his lips.

Fr Barroso continued:

"I also asked her not to let it become a scandal, for her own sake and for the sake of your parents, who are decent people. You yourself were irrelevant to my request. She promised, and she was as good as her word – which doesn't prevent her from holding you in contempt."

"And?" said Jorge, with a gesture of impatience.

"At first she wasn't in agreement: she was afraid that if she said anything it would disrupt her domestic harmony and the happiness of her aunt and uncle. But when I assured her that nothing of the kind would happen, she thanked me... I can see you find all this mortifying, but

bear with me... Clarinha deserves to be adored like an angel. You have forfeited that treasure... Yes, I can say that now, given that you already know it; you've forfeited it because she loved you in silence and you knew nothing about it, so immersed were you in the world of bought love and futile pleasures."

This was salt added to Jorge's wound. He felt humiliated and angry. He wanted to speak, but the priest wouldn't let him.

"So," said Fr Barroso, "I've come to ask you or, to be more precise, to insist, that you never go back to your cousin's house, and that you forget her. You must do that whether you like it or not. And let me tell you: I'm prepared to do whatever it takes to protect her."

"Protect her?" said Jorge, after a pause. "But she doesn't need to be protected: I've never done her any harm. Is it my fault that I fell..."

The priest interrupted him.

"Let's not talk about love, let's talk about duty. Do you agree never to return to her house and to stop thinking about her?"

"Fair enough," said Jorge. "I won't go there again, but when it comes to thinking about her..."

"My son," said the priest, lowering his voice. "There are sins of thought as well as of deed. It will be better if you wipe her from your mind. May I give you some advice."

"What advice?"

"Leave Rio for a while. When you return, I'm sure you'll come and give me a hug because you'll have realised what an abyss I've saved you from."

IX

GOING AND COMING

Fr Barroso's visit had left the amorous young man irritated, but a few hours of reflection were enough to convince him that further efforts would be in vain. Everything and everyone was against him; it was a contest he couldn't win.

Added to this was his growing annoyance at the knowledge that his cousin had been in love with him and that he hadn't noticed.

The most sensible thing would be to call it a day.

But his vanity got in the way; that great motor of human activity is often more powerful than any reasons of conscience or impulses of the heart. Jorge asked himself if it was appropriate to lay down his arms in the face of danger, no matter how great; and if it was appropriate to succumb to a stupid imposition of polite society. His vanity said No. But, as his vanity was saying one thing, and reality another, he found it best – like it or not – to adopt the priest's suggestion.

When she finds out, he thought, that I've left for her sake, in order to assuage the pain, she'll believe my pain is real, and that will only be to the good. Once upon a time she loved me, and she won't have forgotten that.

Having obtained permission from his work, he left Rio after a few days. He told his father he hadn't been feeling too well and needn't to go to the country for a bit of rest and quiet. Aguiar and Dona Joaquina were suspicious, but Fr Barroso managed to convince them their son was telling the truth.

"Off you go," said the priest to Jorge the day before his departure. "I'm glad you've listened to me and that you can still hear the voice of your conscience."

The poor priest! If he'd only known that this was just another ruse! A way of giving the rejected lover a certain *je ne sais quoi*.

And so Jorge departed.

That night, Aguiar and Fr Barroso sat down to start a game of backgammon.

"Tell me, Father: do you think my son has really turned over a new leaf?"

“Yes, I do, Silvestre. He’d gone off the straight and narrow, but his heart is sound and he’s pulled himself together now. Believe me!”

In recent times, Clarinha had looked even sadder than usual but, after her cousin’s departure, she looked really cheerful and was even more affectionate towards her husband. This was due, in no small part, to the unshakeable confidence the doctor had shown in her during the previous goings-on.

When she consulted her heart, she found nothing relating to her cousin.

Or rather, there was something: a shade of disgust, a bitter memory that this honest wife could not forgive. A comparison of the affection, kindness and respect she received from her husband with Jorge’s cold and calculating passion was all in favour of the former.

This is the way things were when Dr Marques fell gravely ill. From the very first days, it was clear the illness was terminal. His suffering was considerable and, if anything, Clarinha’s was even more so. A secret voice seemed to be whispering to her that she was going to lose her companion. One of the doctors who was attending Marques thought it best to tell her the sad truth; on hearing it, she held herself together bravely, even though the depth of her sorrow was clear. Meanwhile Fr Barroso visited the patient as often as the priest’s age and duties permitted.

One day, Jorge appeared from out of the blue. He’d found out about Marques’s illness and had returned to Rio as fast as he could. At least, that was the explanation he gave. The truth was that he was fed up with being away; he’d only heard that Marques was ill when he arrived in Rio. He’d gone to his home, but his parents weren’t in. One of the servants, however, had told him the illness was terminal.

He hurried to his cousin’s house.

The sight that met him affected him more than he’d expected. Clarinha was sitting beside her husband’s bed, sad but resigned, and indifferent to everything around her.

Marques looked at Jorge and recognised him. He extended a skinny and tremulous arm, and the young man grasped and held his hand. Jorge then offered his hand to Clarinha, but she either didn’t notice his gesture or didn’t want to cause grief to Marques. The patient smiled weakly.

Jorge left the room.

The doctors gave Marques only five or six days more. He was aware of his state and was preparing himself to die.

No matter how sad all this was, however, it wasn’t enough, at first, to stop Jorge thinking almost exclusively of his cousin – except that he eventually started to experience a new sensation. It was as if the presence of death had started to purify his passion. Seeing the poor wife on the verge of widowhood and dedicating herself entirely to caring for her life’s companion until his last breath; seeing how zealously she was looking after him, her silent tears, the hours and hours she stayed with him, her words of consolation, her tenderness; it was as if all of this awakened something that had lain dormant in his heart, and the pure flower of his eighteen-year-old self began to bloom anew.

On many occasions he sat with the patient himself, in the course of which he often found himself alone with his cousin. They helped each other with whatever needed to be done; but whenever Marques fell asleep, they both remained silent, she with her eyes fixed on her husband, he with his on her.

It wasn’t easy for her to agree to her cousin’s presence; but her uncle had insisted on it, and she had to concede.

The old priest was also not happy about Jorge being there, but it was the young man himself who’d said to him, the day after he’d arrived, “You’re probably surprised that I’m here.”

“I am,” said the priest.

“I swear to you that...”

“Swear nothing,” said Fr Barroso. “All I ask is that you respect death.”

When it came to the end, Marques died in the arms of his wife. The widow's tears and despair were heart-rending. Everyone tried to console her – everyone except Jorge, who left the house and didn't return until the next day.

X

THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

Three months later, Fr Barroso was in the house when Jorge appeared. He was cheerful and unusually polite.

"Father," he said. "I'm arriving happy, but I could be leaving sad. It all depends on you."

"On me?"

"Yes, Father."

"Explain."

Jorge sat down.

"Do you remember me telling you I'd turned over a new leaf?"

"I do."

"I was lying."

"And I'm sorry to hear it."

"Yes, I was lying, Father. You shouldn't be surprised. At that time, I thought common sense was just prejudice, and that I was right while everyone else was wrong. But now, Father, I've really turned over a new leaf.

The priest smiled.

"And you won't be surprised," he said, "that I have every right not to believe you."

"You do, but I hope to convince you this time."

After a few moments, Jorge continued.

"When I agreed to leave Rio, it was not with the best of intentions. I was just pretending to go along with your advice; but, in the depths of my soul, I was only interested in one thing. I returned unexpectedly because the thought of... of the person we both know had taken control of me."

"I guessed as much," said the priest.

"But when I arrived," Jorge continued, "and when I saw that divine woman, so tormented, so sad, at the side of her dying husband, lavishing ever care on him that nature or religion could inspire, when I confronted that sombre spectacle, I swear to you, Father, that at that moment all my recent past dissolved, and I became a new man."

What?! thought the old priest. Is this really the same Jorge?

"I didn't tell you this at the time," Jorge continued. "I wanted to make sure I wasn't mistaken, that I really loved that girl with the pure adoration she deserves. Three months have passed, and I still feel the same... I love her, and I beg you to say a word on my behalf."

"What do you want then?" asked the priest.

"I want to marry her."

"Really?"

"With all my heart and soul."

The priest stood up and took the young man in his arms.

"That's good," he said, "that's very good. You can count on me, Jorge. I shall be the advocate for your cause. Didn't I say you still had a good heart? Everything was not lost..."

Jorge's response to the old priest's kindness was no less sincere; he told him all his hopes and fears, the greatest of which was that he'd be turned down."

"Why?"

"It would be entirely understandable if she won't forgive me for the way I behaved."

"She will forgive you," said the priest. "Perhaps she won't love you now, but she'll grow to love you. Go in peace and leave it to God, who loves sinners who repent."

Jorge left the presbytery torn between fear and hope. But he believed in the old priest, and he knew that if anyone could convince Clarinha it was he. And when his parents got to know the situation, they too would speak in his favour.

Jorge didn't want to get married without there being an alliance of hearts first; but what seemed most essential to him was to convince his cousin that he was desperate for her love.

Would she grow to love him again? Aye, there's the rub, as Hamlet said.

Jorge headed straight for home. On the way, he met some friends. All of them were amazed at the change that had come over him.

"God help us!" said one. "You look like an anchorite!"

"Finally!" said another, who was standing a little way off.

"Finally what?" asked Jorge.

"You've finally fallen in love. Why else would you look so pale?"

Others – those who owed him money – gave him a wide berth. Jorge didn't even notice them; he had just one thought: Clarinha.

No surprise, therefore, that when, continuing on his way, the lady we met briefly in the first chapter of this story called his name on passing him by, he didn't so much as raise his hat. She felt mortally offended and, that night, seated between two acquaintances at the Alcazar, painted a sorry picture of him.

"Do you remember," said one of them, "that it was Jorge who bought you your carriage?"

"That's all water under the bridge," she replied philosophically. "Whatever he bought me or didn't buy me back then, he's turned into a complete lout."

Fr Barroso was as good as his word; he went to speak to Clarinha. The widow greeted her old friend with real affection. It was a week since he last visited, and she was becoming concerned for his health.

"It's good to see you," she said. "I was worried you might not be well."

"No, I'm perfectly well," he said. "On the contrary, I've never been so healthy. And do you know why?"

"Why?"

"Because I was talking to your cousin Jorge yesterday."

Clarinha said nothing.

"He's saved, he's cured, the good fellow. He's just worried about one thing: that you won't forgive him. You need to forgive him, Clarinha."

"I forgive him everything."

"No, not like that; you need to forgive him sincerely, with a bit of oomph! Because he's truly sorry, and all he needs to be as happy as he was once upon a time, and as he should be now if he hadn't gone off the rails, is to be pardoned by you. You will pardon him, won't you?"

"You know very well," said Clarinha, "that I can't disobey you. I grant him forgiveness as you request."

"With all your heart?"

"With all my heart."

"It's a question," said Fr Barroso, "of saving a soul. Anyone else would happily refuse to get involved, but I'm a priest; it's my duty to contribute to the cessation of sin. Jorge has come back to life, but anything could knock him off course again, and forever."

Clarinha had already guessed the rest.

"It's only three months since my husband died," she said. "Give me time to grieve for the best of men. As for Jorge, his soul is beyond saving. I've forgiven him; that's all."

The young woman remained resolute, and Jorge didn't find out how the conversation had gone because the old priest thought it best not to tell him – perhaps, despite everything, because he still felt a touch of resentment about the way Jorge had behaved. But he did try to console him.

Old Aguiar insisted on his niece coming to live in her old home; but she declined – she didn't want to live so close to her cousin.

Meanwhile Jorge lost no opportunity to meet her and see her. His presence, the respect he showed her, the proofs of his dedication, his exemplary life and, in addition, certain memories that remained in the young woman's heart, all of this set in motion the natural denouement.

A year after the death of Dr Marques, the cousins got married. The news caused amazement in the dubious society that had been Jorge's early education in adulthood.

"He was half lost already," was the mocking comment of the lady he'd accompanied that night at the Ginásio when the Commander had seen him.

It was Fr Barroso who conducted the wedding ceremony. His joy can hardly be imagined, almost as if it was all his own work. And, in truth, he wouldn't have been far wrong.

A month later, when he was visiting the new couple in their house, Jorge recalled the profound impression he had in the five days during which he'd accompanied the death throes of Dr Marques.

"It was only then," he said, "that I really fell in love."

The priest smiled.

"*Nihil sub sole novum*," he said. "Nineteen centuries ago, the same thing happened to a famous man who used to persecute Christians. When he was on his way to Damascus, a vision turned his life around. That man was St Paul. He married the best of brides, the Church, and – please God – you two will love each other as those two did. God will forgive me the comparison because to love is to be close to heaven."

