

## Under the Red Light

Sitting in a large armchair beside the fire, elbows on his knees and hands stretched toward the flames, speaking in a slow voice, he abruptly began to whisper: “Yes... yes...,” as if he needed to acknowledge his recollections and verify his weary memory before taking up his interrupted thoughts once more.

On the table lay papers, books, a handkerchief. The lamp gave out a poor light, so that I could see nothing of him but his slightly gray face and his hands that in the light from the hearth cast two long shadows.

The purr of the cat in front of the fire, and the crackling of logs on which strange gleams danced, were all that disturbed the silence. His voice seemed to come from very far off, as if he were dreaming:

“Yes... yes... It was the great, the very greatest misfortune of my life. I could stand being reduced to poverty, being crippled... anything... but not that! To have lived ten years beside a beloved wife, to see her disappear and to remain alone, all alone, with the lonely future ahead... That’s not easy!... Soon it will be six months since she’s gone!... how long it’s been! and how brief the time before that!... Even if it’s true I’d been ill for a while, if only she’d helped me understand!... It’s terrible to say, but when you know in advance, your reason can prepare itself... the heart empties little by little, and you get used to it... but like this!...”

“I thought,” I said, “that she’d been suffering for some time?”

He nodded:

“Everything, everything went wrong... The doctors could never say what was wrong with her... She was taken from me in two days. How or why I’ve lived since then, I don’t know. I pace through the house all day long, chasing a fleeing memory, imagining that she’ll step out from behind a curtain, that a bit of her scent still floats through these empty rooms...”

He stretched out his hand across the table:

“Yesterday, I found this, look... this veil was in one of my pockets. She’d given it to me one evening when we were going to the theater. It still seems to smell of her perfume, still seems warm from having brushed her face... but no! Everything is gone: only sorrow remains... Anything else would have been fine, but this!...”

In the first moments of pain, extraordinary ideas can occur to you... Would you believe that I photographed her on her deathbed! In that poor bedroom her soul had just departed, I set up my camera and lit the magnesium; at that dreadful moment, I prepared, carefully and with meticulous precaution, things that today repel me... Even so, when I think of that photo, I tell myself she’s there, that I can see her just as I saw her the last time!”

“And where do you keep the portrait?” I asked him.

He leaned forward a little, and replied softly:

“I don’t have it, or rather, I do... on film. But I’ve never had the courage to develop it... it remains in the camera... I’m afraid of touching it... and yet! How I’d like to!...”

He put his hand on my arm:

“Listen: tonight... with you here... speaking with you... I feel better... I feel strong... Will you come with me to my laboratory... Shall we develop the film?...”

He searched my face with the anxious look of a child who trembles at the thought of being denied his desired toy.

“Alright,” I said.

He rose quickly.

“Yes... With you, it won’t be the same... With you, I’ll be calmer... and this will do me good... a great deal of good... you’ll see...”

We entered his laboratory: a darkroom in which bottles were arranged on the shelves. A slab with a basin, vials and books stretched from one wall to the other.

He didn't speak, checking labels on bottles and wiping vials, as the trembling candlelight cast quivering shadows around him.

After lighting a red glass lantern, he put out the candle and said:

"Close the door."

That darkness, cut through by bloody light, had something dramatic about it. Unsettling reflections clung to the sides of bottles, to the wrinkles on his cheeks, to his hollow temples.

He said:

"Is the door closed? Then I'll begin."

He opened the chamber of the camera and removed the plate. He picked it up carefully, fingers spread, thumbs and index grasping the corners, and stared a long time, as if his eyes could see the sleeping image that would soon awaken.

He murmured:

"There she is! It's horrible!..."

Then he slowly let it slip into the bath, and began to stir the basin.

I don't know why, but the sound of the enamel tongs hitting the basin at regular intervals seemed to me strange and painful. Under the red light, the liquid splashed against the plate in a monotonous back-and-forth motion: the faint noise it made reminded me of the sound of sobbing, and I couldn't take my eyes off the square of milky-colored glass, which little by little was being tinted black at the edges.

Clear at first, the bath darkened gradually; and soon, a smudge appeared in the middle of the plate, which gradually widened, softening in areas into a lighter shade.

I looked at my friend. His trembling lips murmured unintelligible words.

He removed the plate, lifted it to the level of his eyes, and spoke, as I peered over his shoulder:

"Now it's coming... slowly... my bath is so weak... but that doesn't matter... The whites are appearing... Just wait... you'll see..."

He dropped the plate, which sank into the liquid with a suction-like noise.

There it appeared a uniform gray color. He lowered his head and said simply:

"That black rectangle is the bed... Above it, this square you see (he pointed it out with a flick of his chin) is the pillow; and in the middle, this lighter zone with a pale stripe that contrasts with the black background... that's her... with the crucifix I placed between her fingers."

His voice choked a little:

"My poor thing... my darling!..."

Tears ran down his cheeks, he gave out painful hiccups... He wept, effortlessly, like those in the habit of sorrow, for whom crying has become as familiar as smiling.

Through tears, he said:

"The details are growing clearer... Here, near her, are lighted candles and a branch of blessed box elder... here is her hair I loved so much... her hands she was so proud of... and the little white rosary she kept in a prayer book... my God!... It hurts me to see all this again, and yet I am happy... very happy... It seems that I'm looking at her, my poor little one..."

Feeling that emotion was overcoming him, I wanted to hurry things along. I said:

"Don't you think the plate has been in long enough...?"

He removed the plate, approached the lantern, examined it closely, put it in the bath again, took it out again, examined it once more and whispered:

"No... no..."

I remember that the sound of his voice and abruptness of his gesture struck me. But I had no time to think, for he began to speak again.

"There are things that still need to come out... It will take a while, but I told you... my bath is weak... the details only appear gradually."

He counted: One... two... three... four... five...

"Now it's been long enough. I wouldn't like to keep it in too long, and damage it..."

He picked up the plate again, shook it up and down, rinsed it in water and handed it to me:

“Look.”

But suddenly, as I held out my hand, he drew back rapidly, leaned over and held the film to the light. At that moment his face lit by the red light seemed so frightening that I cried out:

“What’s wrong?”

His eyes were open too wide, his raised lips exposed his teeth, his jaws chattered; I could hear his heart leap in his chest, and saw his big body sway back and forth.

I put my hand on his shoulder, trying to understand what had provoked that dreadful anguish. For the second time I cried out:

“Well... answer me... what’s the matter?”

Then, turning a face toward me with nothing human left in it, sinking his bloodshot eyes in mine, he grabbed my wrist with such a brutal movement that his nails dug into my flesh.

Three times he opened his mouth, attempting to speak, and then waved the film above his head, screaming into the night flecked with red:

“The matter!... The matter!... Wretch! Scoundrel! Assassin that I am! The matter... she wasn’t dead!... The matter... Her eyes moved!...”