

THE ANGEL OF LUST

I. The First Appearance of Lust

Almazan admitted it to himself, with astonishment: he was afraid. He did not know why. He experienced an anguish without any apparent cause, the expectation of an unforeseen event of a terrible nature.

He lifted the canvas door-curtain of the room where he was walking, traversed with firm tread the Andalusian patio where the moonlight put gleams over the multicolored azulejos and opened the narrow window that overlooked the quay.

He leaned out, with the sensation that a form sprung from the shadows was about to seized him by the neck.

Everything was calm. The suburb of Triana was at rest. Almazan could see the mass of the Golden Tower on the other side of the Guadalquivir, and the great ochre-colored rampart that linked it to the Alcazar.

The tranquil strength of the stones reassured him. The minarets that some houses had retained from the Moorish epoch were outlined in the sky like young women exalted by the warm night. To his life were the illuminated lamps of the ghetto of Santa Cruz, and further away the Moorish quarter, where the carders and weavers lived. The landscape that Almazan had before his eyes was familiar and peaceful.

In any case, what did he have to fear? Several years ago, the militia of Saint Hermandad had organized a nocturnal police, which rendered armed attacks more difficult. Was he not known throughout Seville? Since the Jewish physician Aboulfedia had ceased, by an inexplicable eccentricity, to practice medicine, he was the one, in spite of his youth, whom everyone came to consult. He was loved by the poor people of Triana, whom he treated gratuitously. It was true that the Holy Office suspected him of heresy. He knew that he was hated by Doctor Juan Ruiz, the queen's counselor, one of the two Dominicans appointed by the Pope, who was directing in Seville the initial investigations against conversos and Jews. But he had powerful friends who would warn him in case of real danger. His soul was well-tempered and, until now, inaccessible to fear.

He closed the shutter of his window. The sound made him shiver.

He shrugged his shoulders. He was irritated by his weakness, He talked to himself aloud.

"Come on! Am I losing my mind?"

His voice resonated with an unexpected tone in the little stairway that rose up to his bedroom.

He was about to cry "Guzman!" but he remembered that his servant, who slept above the gallery overlooking the patio, had asked him for permission to go and see his mother a few leagues from Seville, and would not return until the next day.

In any case, what would Guzman be able to do for him? It was the excessive heat that was agitating his nerves. Perhaps he had read too much of the guide to the ramblings of Maimonides, of which a large folio manuscript written in Arabic was open on his table.

He traversed the patio again and stopped, open-mouthed, holding his breath.

Like a blade traversing him, like a cold sweat covering his body, palpable and mute, hallucinatory and invisible, terror had just gripped him.

Everything was silent. A leaf from one of the laurel trees surrounding the pool placed in the middle of the patio was detached with a small sad sound and fell into the water. Almazan had a desire to utter a howl in order to break the spell of fear that enveloped him. But his voice caught in his throat.

It is in such cases that prayer is useful to those who believe, he thought.

His reason rebelled. He made a great effort of will. He remembered the words of his master and benefactor, the Archbishop of Toledo, Alfonso Carrillo:¹ “There are sometimes hidden powers that deliver themselves to great combats around us, without our being aware of it. Fortunately, a dense material form covers our understanding and veils our perception, for we would go mad in contemplating them.”

Archbishop Carrillo was right. There were a thousand living forms around him. Some were beneficent, but others were full of hatred and terrible to humans. Had not that old insensate Aboulfedia given him a description of gray larvae that floated above certain evil places, deformed ephialtes that physical eyes could not see because they were composed of a matter more subtle than that of our bodies. All the alchemists and scholars with whom he had conversed were unanimous regarding the existence of the world that populated the ether. At certain moments of great intellectual exaltation, had he not glimpsed himself the ideal contours of ravishing but immaterial young women?

He raised his eyes and looked at the somber blue sky, dotted with stars. Was not the end-point of all reason, the ultimate wisdom of the Greek, Hebrew and Arabic books that filled his house, the cult of the human will? He had the greatest strength possible within him.

That thought rendered him calmer.

Come on! The best thing I can do is sleep, he thought.

It was then that he perceived the sound of light footsteps on the quay and the presence of a human being behind the entrance door of his house. Someone was now pressed against the wood of the door, someone who had come through the streets of Seville to spy on him by night.

Quietly, he traversed the vestibule, and thought he distinguished a friction on the wood, as if a hand were groping for the bronze knocker in order to lift it.

He waited, but the knocker did not resonate. An absolute silence followed. Almazan drew nearer to the door. He listened with all the force of his attention, but he did not know whether he could hear the breath of a halting respiration or whether it was his imagination that made him think that someone was breathing close by.

He had put his ear to the lock. He could stand it no longer. With all his might he shouted: “Who’s there?”

No one replied. Presumably, a thief coming to assure himself of the solitude of his house, or a spy of the Holy Office, would have fled at that appeal. He would have heard footfalls on the quay. A sick or wounded man desirous of his cares would have knocked and shouted.

All the forces of his attention were alert. Fear had placed a passionate curiosity in his heart. The danger, if there was one, was of a human order and did not frighten him. A weapon was unnecessary; he had confidence in his strength. Slowly, he turned the key. He listened again. This time, the silence seemed absolute—there was no longer the slightest breath.

Then he leaned on the catch and opened the door slightly. A light push made itself felt, as if someone were trying to make the batten swing faster. Almazan maintained it momentarily, and then decided to open it abruptly.

“There’s no need to push, you can see I’m opening up...,” he began to say.

But at that moment he had the vision of a blanched and contorted face, with immeasurably wide eyes, of which he could only see the white, with a wide mouth stretched on the right all the way to the ear as if by a monstrous hilarity, a face of ceruse or chalk, singularly dappled by gray patches.

He did not have time to be astonished by that spectral apparition. The bearer of the frightfully livid face, who was a man of tall stature, let all his weight fall upon him.

Instinctively, Almazan extended his arms and seized the unknown man by the neck, but he did not have to fight. The man collapsed heavily, as if his feet were made of lead and were dragging him down. Almazan contemplated him with amazement, lying on the mosaic tiles of the vestibule. Tics were still

¹ This character is based on Alfonso Carrillo de Acuña (1410-1482), who was appointed as Archbishop of Toledo in 1446. He was one of the main instigators of a bloody civil war in Castile in the 1460s. The details of the character’s later life given in the story are all fictitious.

running over his revulsed features. His mouth stretched immeasurably, almost climbing as far as his eyes. The expression of laughter become demonic, and froze.

Almazan put his hand over his heart and made sure that he was dead.

He closed the door. He lifted up the recumbent body and dragged it across the patio as far as the room where his books were. He meditated profoundly.

He had just recognized the man, who must have expired behind his door at the very second that he opened it. It was Pablo, the confidential servant of his master Alfonso Carrillo. By the white foam on his lips, the torment of his features and the milky whiteness of his face and hands, Almazan saw that he had succumbed to a mineral poison of rapid effect, which had disorganized his nerves and abruptly decomposed his blood.

But why had the Archbishop of Toledo sent his servant to him at this late hour of the night? Why had the messenger crossed the few leagues that separated Seville from the dwelling to which Alfonso Carrillo had retired on foot and not on horseback?

Almazan had announced his visit for the next day. He wanted to consult his master about the propositions he had received from the Moorish king Abul Hacen,² who was attracting to Granada the poets and scholars of Morocco and Spain to be installed in the Alhambra. The Archbishop must have had a very powerful reason to see Almazan to want to bring his visit forward by a few hours.

What could that reason be? What had happened?

Almazan searched the dead man's pockets. There was nothing in them. The message was doubtless oral.

He had to leave immediately. It was necessary to inform the Archbishop of his servant's death. But could he leave the corpse alone in his house? When his domestic Guzman returned in the morning, would he not be struck by terror on finding it? Who could tell what unforeseen steps terror might drive him to take? Then again, the nearest hirer of horses in Triana was in bed and would not open the doors of his stables until sunrise.

Almazan sat down in his armchair and tried to reconstitute the sequence of events that might have brought that cadaver to him.

Almazan had not known his father and could scarcely recover the image of his mother in the earliest memories of his childhood.

He saw once again, confusedly, a bronzed face framed with long dark tresses, with ardent eyes, and heard an Arabic song that she sang at sunset along the ramparts of Almazan, which was inexpressibly sad. He bore the name of the city of his birth. He had quit Almazan when his mother died, never to return.

"It's a pity; he's too handsome!" Archbishop Carrillo had said, when he had seen him for the first time in Toledo, where he had been confided, in order to be brought up, to a poor family of laborers. He had never been able to obtain exact information about his birth. Inigo, who worked steel for an armorer, hardly ever spoke to him, and his wife Juliana was a gossip who scarcely recounted anything but lies. He only knew that his mother was a Moorish captive and his father a foreign scholar who only stayed in Almazan for a few days after having gone to visit the Archbishop of Toledo.

The esteem that he had for the father had earned the son, on the part of Alfonso Carrillo, a protection that had never been belied. First he had given the order that he be taught the *métier* of arms, which was done. Inigo's brother, an old soldier who had made war against the Moors, the Portuguese and the French, taught him to handle the sword and the lance, and to make use of an arbalest. But Almazan, who had shown a precocious love of study, was sent to the University of Salamanca, where he followed the course of the Trivium and Quadrivium, which comprised the education of all the known sciences.

² This character is based on Abu l'Hasan Ali, who was the Sultan of Granada from 1464-82 and again from 1483-85. He refused to pay tribute to the realm of Castile in 1477 and invaded the city of Zahara in 1481, which sparked a war against Isabella I of Castile. The latter events are juxtaposed in the story, and chronological liberties are taken with a number of other datable events, but the principal action appears to take place in 1481-82.

The Archbishop of Toledo's protégé seemed destined to follow the ecclesiastical path and to succeed rapidly therein, but to everyone's surprise, he was distanced from it by the Archbishop himself, who encouraged him to neglect theology and go to study medicine with Abiatar in Cordova,³ and then Abouldefia in Seville, who was more alchemist than physician, was reputed to be a heretic, and whom the protection of Jewish bankers had difficulty preserving from the pyre.

Almazan followed his master's advice. He settled in Seville and had a rapid success there.

It was then that the Archbishop of Toledo, the violent, capricious and extravagant Alfonso Carrillo, henceforth neglecting war, the Church and women, which he had loved equally, underwent a singular evolution. Abruptly, he shut himself away in his palace at Alcala de Henares, no longer to emerge therefrom. Faith had withdrawn from his soul like a tide leaving a limitless strand uncovered. He had glimpsed a new world.

He had cartloads of Arabic manuscripts brought from Cordova and set about deciphering them feverishly. He discovered the extent of the heavens. Quickly, one of his envoys departed for Malaga and bought from the Emir of that city the largest astronomical telescope in the world, which came from the times of the Almohade caliphs and had once been on the Giralda of Seville.⁴ He had a special furnace brought from Fez, of a considerable weight, for the cooking of metals. He chartered a ship in Valencia and charged a cleric to go and search for a college of Syrian Sufis in the Orient, which possessed, it was said, engraved on a copper plate, a copy of the Emerald Tablet of Hermes.⁵ He gave money to all-comers for chimerical secrets and insensate discoveries.

His servants had orders never to go into the rooms where he worked and where he was sometimes perceived clad in a white robe and crowned with a strange miter that did not resemble that of the Church.

The inhabitants of Alcala murmured dully. In the evenings, they went to throw stones at his windows. There was talk of sorcery and necromancy. Cardinal de Mendoza, his personal enemy, had written to the Pope about him. In spite of that, his situation at Court was as powerful as ever. He had once been Queen Isabella's confessor. She manifested several times the desire to have the Archbishop of Toledo beside her again, for whom she retained her affection. He had not responded to her advances.

One night, without informing anyone, accompanied by his only servant Pablo, he had quit Alcala, his books, his telescopes and furnaces. He had come to reside a few leagues from Seville, in a dilapidated Moorish dwelling that he had bought secretly some time before. It was in that dwelling that rabbi Aben Hezra⁶ had lived, the translator of Alfergan, the author of a mysterious book about the origin of the world, which his contemporaries had mentioned but which had never been rediscovered. A vague legend claimed that the book had been hidden in his house for three centuries.

Had he added credence in that legend and did he want to find that book? Had he left Alcala in order to escape a danger that threatened him, or was he only in search of solitude? That was what Almazan had asked himself when he had learned of the Archbishop's arrival a few days earlier.

³ Abiathar Crescas, a Jewish physician and astrologer who became the chief astrologer of King John of Aragon, who reigned from 1458-79. He became famous for restoring the king's eyesight by means of a pioneering cataract operation. Aboulfedia is fictitious, and is not to be confused with the fourteenth-century Arab historian Abulfeda.

⁴ Astronomical telescopes were unknown in Europe until the seventeenth century, but Magre consistently places them in remoter periods of history in his historical novels, and seems to have believed that they were employed in the Orient in antiquity.

⁵ The legendary Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus was reputed to contain the secret of the transmutation of primal matter, and was regarded by European alchemists as the foundation-stone of their art. The extant text, which is brief and gnomic, dates from the eighth century or thereabouts and was translated into Latin in the twelfth century. Its subsequent translators included Roger Bacon, Albertus Magnus and Isaac Newton.

⁶ Rabbi Aben Ezra, whose full name was Abraham Ben Meir ibn Ezra (1089-1167) was one of the most distinguished Jewish philosophers of his era. He was forced into exile from Spain by persecution of the Jews. His prolific writings included numerous astrological tracts. The "Alferan" whose work he is alleged here to have translated is mentioned by that name in the *Encyclopédie* as an Arab astronomer; his name is usually rendered Al-Farghani or Alfraganus, and he lived in the ninth century. Translations of his textbook of elementary astronomy became a standard reference book during the Renaissance.

With his head in his hands he reviewed the details of his last visit to the house of Rabbi Aben Hezra.

He had told the aged Archbishop that he could not continue to live in that ruin, the doors of which were shaky and the windows staved in. The roads were full of thieves and Cantillana, the nearest village, was a league away. In addition to the thieves, it was necessary to fear all the people at Court who, being anxious about his possible return to the Queen's favor, had an interest in his death.

But Alfonso Carrillo had smiled at the young physician's fear. For him, material danger no longer existed. He had confided to him that he had discovered an order of dangers far more redoubtable. He knew the secret of evil and invisible forces that oppressed humans. It was not with firmly-closed doors and high walls that one could be protected from those forces. But he also knew the art of directing the beneficent powers that opposed the evil. He no longer had any need of the books, apparatus and telescopes so patiently amassed in Alcalá. He had decided to wander henceforth among the centenarian box-trees that surrounded the ancient dwelling with a dark green forest, clad in the white robe of the Greek philosophers.

In addition, he might be about to initiate Almazan into his secrets. He was still hesitant. He thought him too young and above all too handsome, with eyes that were too large and too dark. The beauty of the body, he said, was a redoubtable bond that draws us into the chain of the passions. There was no urgency. Almazan must come again. He had adjourned the revelations.

As they parted, he had placed his hands on Almazan's shoulders, saying: "Soon."

And as Almazan had drawn way along the path, Pablo had caught up with him and made him party to his fears. He thought that his master's discourses were becoming strange and that something disquieting was floating over that solitary house. Furthermore, an unknown man had come the day before and had spent all night conversing with the Archbishop.

Pablo had made a portrait of the man. He said that he was about fifty. He was tall, with a pale face and extraordinarily bright eyes. His black garments were simply cut, but had something Oriental about them. He was not carrying any apparent weapon, and that was what had worried Pablo the most.

Why, Almazan thought, *did he make me swear that solemn oath not to reveal his retreat to anyone?* Someone knew, though. Who could the visitor be? What could the urgent message have been, and who had poisoned Pablo?

The heat did not diminish as the night advanced. It even became increasingly heavy. The foliage of the orange-trees on the patio stood out against the moon with such clarity that they seemed artificial, carved in jade. The marble basin and the circular colonnades appeared to Almazan so pale that everything around the livid corpse had an unreal air, and he thought that he was meditating in a nightmare.

Suddenly, he leapt to his feet. Coming from he knew not where, a muffled voice had called: "Almazan!"

He looked at the body extended before him. Had the lips not stirred? Was it not him who had pronounced his name, and repeated it several times?

But no; the lips of Carrillo's servant were now pinched, so rigidly clenched that they seemed closed by leaden pincers. The dead man really was dead, and was reminiscent of a caricature in white wax.

It was from the street that the appeal was coming. The voice was alive, warm and impatient. It was a woman's voice. At the same time, someone knocked on the door of the house.

Almazan closed the door of the room where Pablo's cadaver lay, carefully. Perhaps a further envoy was about to clarify the mystery that preoccupied him. Perhaps someone had simply come to seek him for a sick person in the vicinity.

As he reached the vestibule and placed his hand on the lock, he heard: "Open up, I beg you! In the name of Christ!"

He opened the door. Someone rushed inside. It was a woman. She closed the batten of the door immediately and fell upon the bolts that sealed it. Then she threw her arms around Almazan and clung to him.

“They’re after me. I don’t think they saw me. One second more and they would have seen me. Don’t move. Don’t make a sound. They’re capable of anything.”

Almazan felt warm breath, a semi-naked body. The woman’s panting respiration caused her firm breasts to stir; her abdomen and legs quivered against him.

Shouts resounded on the quay. Several men went past at a run. There was a heavier tread behind them, doubtless that of an older man. He was trotting, grunting, and sometimes uttering insults. Almazan heard: “Oh, the bitch! Catch her! I must have her!”

Rapidly, the woman quit Almazan’s breast and blew out the lantern that was illuminated near the door.

They both stood there without moving. The pursuers drew away along the quay. They had doubtless turned left, for they could no longer hear anything.

Then the singular visitor uttered a cry of joy, simultaneously savage and childlike. Again she put her arms round Almazan’s neck.

“Thank you! You’ve saved me!”

She started to laugh: long, forced, hysterical, bizarre laughter, as if it were a matter of an enormous and dangerous joke that she had brought to a conclusion. She leapt up and down with satisfaction and her laughter went on and on.

Almazan had drawn her into the patio and considered her in the moonlight.

She was almost a child. There was something delectably passionate, ingenuous and cynical in her features. The expression on her face changed continually and nothing remained fixed but the gleam of two drops of gold that she seemed to have in the depths of her pupils, which had the same tint as the flowing gold of her hair, twisted into a sheaf. That hair agitated, framing her with flame, illuminating her, with the appearance of having a life of its own, and the nuances of that living hair were varied, by turns ruddy and dark, like a silken conflagration, or wheat in the moonlight.

She was small of stature, which further exaggerated her appearance of extreme youth. The upper part of her body was wrapped in a shawl. Her only garment was a short sapphire-blue basquine with black fringes, and one sensed that the shawl had been hastily thrown around her neck at the moment when she had fled and that the basquine had been attached in haste, and was not securely attached. Almazan saw a bruise on her naked right shoulder, caused by a blow or an excessively prolonged caress. He remarked that the carmine of her lips had been crushed by another mouth and smeared, enlarging the design of her lips. A diamond attached to a gold chain was sparkling between her breasts and she wore enormous ruby on her right hand. She had a slightly animal perfume and something lascivious and fatigued was disengaged from her skin.

For a few seconds, she quivered with rage, her face turned toward the quay.

“You heard him panting and dragging his feet,” she said. “That will cost him dear. I’ll have him tied up one night and chastise him with my own hand.”

Then, satisfied with the idea of that vengeance, she stated laughing again.

“What happened” asked Almazan. “Did someone want your jewels?”

“She shrugged her shoulders.

“My jewels? It’s certainly not a matter of my jewels. You’re naïve. Apart from little Rodriguez, who would gladly have stolen them to give to a fisherman in Guadalquivir, the others don’t care about them. You don’t know little Rodriguez? He has blue eyes and he’s well made. The old man likes him too. My God, what a night! Here, would you like my ring as a souvenir?”

She attempted to put her ruby on his finger, and as he refused her gaze made a tour of the patio, and she thought about something else.

“I like your house, but I’d like to rest for a while.”

She headed for the door of the room where the dead man lay. Almazan saw that she was tottering slightly. He overtook her.

“Not that way,” he said. “Take that staircase.”

But she was obstinate in laughing. No, it was that door she wanted to open.

“Let me go in. I’ll give you my diamond too.”

Then he lifted her in his arms and climbed the stairs. She did not resist. She rolled her head on his shoulder and he felt her hair against his cheek. Her loins folded in abandonment. She had half-closed her eyes and he could see two motionless golden dots through the quivering lashes. He put her down on his bed.

She was suddenly weary. She stretched herself out. She had undone her shawl and her breasts appeared, without her trying to hide them. In the movement she had made as she stretched, her skirt had ridden up above the knee, allowing her naked leg to be seen, the curve of which was perfect. She turned her head and there was a fleeting gaze beneath her mobile eyelids.

“I’ll tell you everything,” she said, with a spontaneous impulsiveness. “But you won’t understand. There are such singular men. You see, everything happened because of Cariharta. A whore like that! She’s filth! I’ll gouge her eyes out. As for him, he’s sure of his affair. I swear it on the Virgin!”

With her little fingers in mid-air, she made the gesture of cutting with scissors, and laughed again, childishly.

“But you doubtless know him. Perhaps he’ll come to find you afterwards in order for you to care for him. Who in Seville doesn’t know the fat Jew Aboulfedia?”

Almazan shuddered. It was a matter of the physician Aboulfedia, with whom he had worked. He was a man of great science, but bizarre and full of whims. He had departed for Rome once, in order to convert the Pope to Judaism. For a long time he had worked on a flying machine and dreamed of launching himself from the top of the Giralda and soaring over Seville like a swallow. As he grew old he had abandoned science in favor of debauchery. Almazan remembered rumors that had run around on his account, and to which he had never lent credence. There had been talk of sadistic scenes that unfurled in his house in the suburb of Triana, of a reconstitution of the ancient Sabbat, with the murder of children and the adoration of the Devil. Risible legends, surely. But it was certain that the procuresses of Seville obtained a great deal of money from Aboulfedia and that on certain evenings he received the dregs of the shady taverns of Triana.

“What are you thinking about? Perhaps you’re wondering how I had the idea of coming to knock on your door? Don’t think that it’s the first time I’ve seen you. You don’t recall having gone one evening to a little house in the Santa Cruz quarter to care for a woman who had a stab-wound in the thigh? I was in the next room, and while you were bandaging the wound I lifted up a door-curtain and examined you. You had a lock of brown hair that was falling over your eyes, and you were continually brushing it backward impatiently. It was impeding your vision. You were staring at my friend Juana’s leg so intently that I was jealous. It wouldn’t have taken much for me to wound myself in order that you’d stare at me with the same intention. That happened not long ago. A Moorish slave had gone to fetch you on my behalf. Do you remember? Isabelle de Solis?”

“Isabelle de Solis?” repeated Almazan. “You’re Isabelle de Solis?”

“That’s me. What of it? Has someone spoken badly of me to you? You don’t think I’m as pretty as is claimed? Oh! Nights in Aboulfedia’s house are tiring.”

She had propped herself up on her elbow and was looking Almazan full in the face, as if she were challenging him.

Isabelle de Solis had supplied fuel for all the conversations in Seville. She was the daughter of the Alcaide of Martos and she had been enslaved by an adventurer the previous year. Her father, a severe and pious man, had sworn to kill her. He had pursued her to Seville, but had never been able to catch up with her. Isabelle de Solis, abandoned by her lover, had caused the captain of law, a collector of royal customs duties, who had set so many ambushes in the path of the venerable Alcaide that the latter had ended up quitting Seville, in fear of his life. Isabelle was nicknamed the “hermosa hembra” because of her beauty and the tranquil audacity with which she showed off the jewels of the tax-farmer’s family when she emerged from mass.

Almazan had perceived her at a distance and had admired her. The beauty of women impressed him, but he avoided them out of pride, fearing rejection. He had arrived at considering amour as a danger, a sensual chain that attaches us to what is material, draws us downwards, and diminishes our power of

thought. He had decided to banish it from his life. How would he have been able to recognize the “hermosa hembra” in that semi-naked girl running through Triana by night?

He leaned over her. So Isabelle de Solis was in his house, on his bed! The most beautiful young woman in Seville had come to him of her own accord to request protection! And now, with an equivocal grace, she had let herself fall back on his pillow, closing her eyes as if to go to sleep, only to open them again suddenly and provoke him with an oblique gaze and an abrupt stretching of her supple loins.

“Be chaste, if you want to be great in intelligence,” his master Archbishop Carrillo had often said to him.

He knew that the pleasure of the senses was rapid and followed by sadness. It diminished intellectual capacity, the faculty of loving life.

He had a kind of vertigo. A warmth departed from his feet and ran all the way to the roots of his hair. He had a desire to throw himself brutally on that creature, sent to him by a mysterious whim of destiny, and to possess her, willingly or by force. But she would not resist. He sensed a tacit consent in the abandonment of the legs, in the weight of the head sinking into the pillow.

He thought about the dead man lying directly underneath, in a position symmetrical with that of the bed. He thought about the danger that his old master might be in at the present moment. And, at the same time, he imagined Aboulfedia with his flabby jaundiced face, his fat belly and little legs, among naked whores, pale adolescents and the silhouettes of assassins in rut.

He was disgusted with his own desire. He stepped back two or three paces, and then left the room quietly. He went down to the patio.

Suddenly, almost ungraspable, an odor reached him. It was an odor he knew well, that of human decomposition. Almazan had heard it said that certain mineral poisons had an effect of instantaneous disaggregation on the organism they attacked, but he was amazed that the dead man could make its power of destruction sensible with such rapidity. That mortuary odor, which mingled with that of the orange-trees in the calm light of the pale moon, had something atrocious about it.

But was he not mistaken? He opened the door of his study room. He picked up the heavy bronze lamp that was burning there in both hands and leaned over Pablo’s body.

The blanched face was now stained with streaks. The veins of the neck and hands were lacquer red. The lips were green-tinted. An intense curiosity animated Almazan before the mysterious molecular labor that was commencing.

Death, the termination of a temporary form, was the beginning of a more extraordinary activity than that which had made the body move when it was alive. The cells coordinated for the existence of a whole were resuming their autonomy, changing into liquids and gases. In that flesh and those bones, under the action of the destructive mineral, there were liquefactions, explosions, multiplications of parasites, the unfurling of populations on the march amid lakes in formation and on the shores of putrescence, and an incomprehensible life was seething there.

What a drama that was! How much time would humans require before having found the intimate secret of the substance of which they were molded?

He passed his hand over his forehead and stood up. He thought that it was necessary to make a decision, and the embarrassment of the situation appeared to him. It was not in vain that he had sensed invisible evil influences floating around him. His dwelling, once peaceful, now sheltered a dead creature and a living creature more dangerous than the dead one. What was he to do?

While he reflected, it seemed to him that the light was modified and that the dawn was already spreading its first tints.

He thought he heard a slight sound. He had the impression that someone might be looking at him through the keyhole and seeing the singular spectacle that he must form, standing next to the corpse in an attitude of anguish. He launched himself forward, ran up the stairs rapidly and opened the bedroom door. The bed was empty. He went down again immediately and looked behind the orange-trees and the laurels. He made a tour of the patio. An orange was detached and made a splash in the pool.

He perceived that the entrance door was ajar. He ran to it. He looked outside. On the quay to the right, already far away, in the shadow that the Golden Tower made, there was a woman of small stature drawing away.

She was drawing away slowly, without fear, without haste, indolently, as if nothing in particular had happened. Sometimes, she stopped, to respire the morning air, or to contemplate the first roseate hues of the rising sun on the walls of the Alcazar.