

Conjuros, seducción y tribulaciones en *La última fada* de Pardo Bazán

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Irony is Fate's most common figure of speech.
Trevanian

1. Introducción

El 21 de diciembre de 1914, en su columna “La vida contemporánea”, que publicaba *La ilustración artística* de Barcelona, Emilia Pardo Bazán¹ alaba el genio musical de Richard Wagner por su tradicional factura y su sentimiento modernista (830). Y abunda en esta idea, cuando dice que “Uniendo el pasado al presente con lazos de oro, Wagner ha logrado quitar a la evocación del ayer esa frialdad arqueológica, ese gris de telaraña, que la apartan de nosotros, y la aíslan de la vida actual. No hay gente más moderna y contemporánea, en cierto respecto, que Tristán [e] Iseo” (830). Dos años después publica *La última fada* (1916)², una de las pocas obras que incorpora la tradición artúrica a la literatura moderna española, fundiendo la tradición británica del rey Arturo con una derivación española que tiene su origen en lo que el arcipreste de Hita escribe en el siglo XIV sobre las cartas de Tristán e Isolda. Pardo Bazán recrea la presencia de un personaje de leyenda cuyo heredero se ve envuelto en acontecimientos históricos acaecidos en tiempos de Juan II. Referencias anteriores a Tristán, transmitidas por trovadores provenzales de la tradición catalana de principios del siglo XII, por Alfonso X el Sabio en el siglo XIII y por dos anónimos titulados Tristán de Leonés (1501) y *Tristán el joven* (1534), apuntan a que este ya era un personaje popular en el panorama literario español. En *La última fada*, Pardo Bazán presenta su versión de la historia de este afamado y legendario caballero de la mesa redonda, atribuyéndole un hijo llamado Isayo de Leonís y desarrollando una historia secundaria construida sobre la mitología de Merlín y Viviana. Evocando también la obra de sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*³ —en especial el quinto de los ocho cuentos: “El primer y segundo libros de sir Tristram de Lione”— y dándole un tinte wagneriano, Pardo Bazán relata cómo la última de las hadas está relacionada con sucesos que se desarrollan en el contexto histórico español de la expulsión de los moros, y construye así la imagen de un héroe cuya valentía sin parangón asegura la victoria sobre los invasores.

Por ser escritora en una época en que la mayoría de los autores eran hombres, Pardo Bazán ha sido muy estudiada por la crítica, más allá de su clasificación canónica. Según Joyce Tolliver, en sus escritos se trasluce en muchos casos un “serious —i.e., masculine— discourse” (38), y *La última fada* es un ejemplo muy claro de ello.⁴ La obra entronca con las corrientes realista y naturalista, y les añade la perspectiva intrahistórica típica de los autores de la Generación del 98, así como matices de carácter modernista, en una combinación única que suscita la respuesta del lector a la incorporación de la leyenda artúrica al contexto de la historia de España. La autora encaja, en este sentido, en lo que afirma Mary Lee

1 Emilia Pardo Bazán (1851-1921) es la escritora más destacada de su tiempo. Publicó cerca de dos docenas de novelas, más de seiscientos cuentos, multitud de ensayos y numerosas contribuciones a algunos de los periódicos más relevantes de su época. Los estilos realista y naturalista que ella incorporó a su ficción del siglo XIX —como en el caso de *Los pazos de Ulloa* (1886), su novela más aclamada por la crítica— dieron paso al modernismo y simbolismo literarios del siglo XX. *La última fada* es una de la decena aproximada de novelas cortas que escribió Pardo Bazán.

2 La novela apareció inicialmente en la publicación periódica *La Novela Corta. Revista Semanal Literaria*, dirigida al gran público.

3 Concluida en 1449, esta obra combina y recrea antiguas versiones francesas e inglesas de las leyendas artúricas.

Bretz cuando dice que “Modernist writers return to the Golden Age and rewrite the narrative of national formation to incorporate the voices of women and racial and religious minorities in contrast with versions of history that privilege class and racial exclusion and a rigid honor code” (168). Recientemente, Juan Miguel Zarandona ha descrito *La última fada* como una obra imbuida del simbolismo que caracteriza a las obras de la última época de la escritora (814). La vertiente creativa de Pardo Bazán en este caso se encarna en el hijo de Tristán e Isolda, Isayo de Leonís, quien se convierte en defensor de la identidad ibérica frente a la ocupación mora. El ideal subyacente de salvaguarda del cristianismo y consolidación de una identidad nacional y autóctona está en la línea de otro tipo de ideales similares que se empezaron a cuestionar en la misma época en que se escribe esta novela.

2. Conjuros, seducción y tribulaciones

Las tres mujeres de posición social privilegiada que se relacionan con el protagonista recurren a las armas propias de su género para contribuir a que el rey alcance su condición de héroe, en el contexto de una coincidencia temporal del rey Arturo de Bretaña y el rey Juan de Castilla durante la ocupación musulmana. No obstante, y de acuerdo con la afirmación de Peter Brooks de que las narraciones que se centran en el cuerpo “dramatize ways in which the body becomes a key signifying factor in a text: how we might say it embodies meaning” (8), las representaciones del cuerpo femenino y los símbolos que materializan el tipo de relación que estas tres mujeres mantienen con Isayo nos señalan tres motivos diferentes por los que Isayo es incapaz de hacer que perdure la relación con ninguna de ellas. Todo lo inalcanzable —significado mediante esos símbolos— sitúa al héroe en una privilegiada posición de fama que tiene que sacrificar posteriormente cuando se ve abocado a vivir una vida en soledad. La hoz de Bibiana, el collar de perlas de Ginebra y el pañuelo de la infanta apuntan a la progresiva incapacidad de Isayo de hacer que perdure su relación con cada una de las tres mujeres. Aunque Bibiana, en su condición de protectora venida de otro mundo, es el objeto de su deseo erótico, también es objeto del deseo de Merlín; el matrimonio de la reina Ginebra con el rey Arturo excluye la posibilidad de una relación con ella; y la infanta, como hermana del rey Juan —a pesar de ser la más accesible de las tres— posee características que la hacen indeseable. [He tratado de modificar esta parte para que no aparezcan las formas del verbo ‘hacer’ tantas veces en la misma oración.]

El personaje epónimo —el hada, *fada*, Bibiana—, cuya etérea belleza cautiva a Isayo, se sirve de varias transformaciones en su papel de desinteresada protectora del caballero; ella es el impulso que guía sus acciones a lo largo de la narración. Por otro lado, la sensualidad de la reina Ginebra es el recurso del que se sirve la autora para caracterizar a la seductora en acción y el influjo que esta ejerce sobre Isayo. Finalmente, la infanta pasa con gran rapidez de su papel original de bella doncella al de dama atribulada [¿En vez de dama atribulada, se podría decir ‘damisela en apuros’?] cuyo rescate acaba restableciendo el orden en una Castilla asediada. Cada una de estas mujeres desempeña un papel fundamental para que la novela alcance su irónico final que culmina con el intento —en un acto de heroísmo que se torna dudoso— de Isayo de romper el conjuro de Bibiana por el que Merlín está confinado en un espino. . La atípica ubicación espacio-temporal introducida por Pardo Bazán deja abierta la puerta a innovadoras caracterizaciones femeninas que forman parte de un continuo constituido por sistemas que impiden la unión con Isayo: la pertenencia de Bibiana a otro mundo, la condición de casada de Ginebra y la pertenencia de la infanta a otra cultura, así como su calidad de modelo prototípico del sexo débil. La

4 Según James Taggart, “In nineteenth-century Spain, the literary fairy tale emerged. These stories—which ranged from adaptations of oral tales to wonder tales and stories of the supernatural and fantastic—were produced by well-known writers such as Pedro Antonio de Alarcón, Cecilia Böhl de Faber, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, Luis Colmena, Juan Eugenio Hartzenbusch, Antonio de Trueba, Juan Valera, and Benito Pérez Galdós. The tradition continued into the twentieth century with fairy-tale writings by Concha Castroviejo, Aurora Mateos, Carmen Martín Gaité, and others” (910-11).

descripción que Pardo Bazán hace de estas mujeres pivota sobre el poder de seducción que, según Jean Baudrillard, “is a challenge, a form which tends always to unsettle someone in their identity and the meaning they can have for themselves. In seduction they find the possibility of radical otherness” (22).

Para empezar, un grupo de hadas de avanzada edad se compromete a cuidar al pequeño Isayo y a interceder por él en situaciones peligrosas. Bibiana hace voto de protegerlo y de acudir cuando la llame, aunque solo en casos muy graves. Ella considera que el muchacho representa el futuro y la esperanza y que debe dársele la oportunidad de aspirar a la grandeza, permitiéndole abandonar la ermita para protagonizar gestas heroicas. Como ella se transforma normalmente en una anciana mendiga, Isayo no relaciona a esta mujer con la que conquista su corazón una noche de San Juan. Su corazón se acelera cuando descubre a Bibiana en medio de los gigantes de piedra. Ve a una mujer rubia, con una túnica blanca y una hoz de oro en el cinturón; aquella era la imagen de la que Merlín —encarcelado ahora en el gran espino— se enamoró. Solo Bibiana sabe cómo romper el hechizo que le mantiene prisionero, pero la revelación del secreto tiene funestas consecuencias. Bibiana representa el ideal de apariencia física femenina al que se refiere Jacqueline Rose cuando dice que “women are meant to look perfect, presenting a seamless image to the world so that the man, in confrontation with difference, can avoid any apprehension of lack. The position of woman as fantasy therefore depends on a particular economy of vision” (389). En este sentido, Isayo solo ve el impecable exterior de Bibiana, sin referencia alguna a sus cualidades interiores.

Aquella noche de verano, Bibiana promete revelar la identidad de los padres de Isayo la noche siguiente, pero el joven se niega a partir hasta que el hada —a la que él se refiere como “madrina”— le permita besar el borde de su vestido. Cuando ella le concede este deseo, “[s]us pupilas se buscaron. Él, arrodillado, cogía ya la orilla del cándido ropaje, y ponía en ella unos labios fervorosos y devoradores” (1175).⁵ Este sensual encuentro entre los dos no se da en términos de contacto físico entre los cuerpos, sino de los labios de él en contacto con el vestido de ella, a fin de suavizar el trasfondo erótico de la interacción. La incorrección a la que apunta el encuentro se salva rápidamente la siguiente vez que se ven, cuando Bibiana —todavía pertrechada con la hoz a la cintura— se cubre el pelo con un velo gris. El tono neutro anula la melena rubia, ahora constreñida. Juntos localizan el sarcófago con los restos de los padres de Isayo, de modo que puede celebrarse una ceremonia con un doble significado: el descubrimiento de sus orígenes y su investidura como caballero.

Bibiana le entrega su espada —un acto que puede equipararse a conferirle la virilidad— y esto despierta en él el placer erótico que obtiene con su presencia y con los pensamientos sobre ella. Sosteniendo la espada en actitud amenazante, él le exige a ella que le revele la identidad de sus padres. La fortaleza física que lleva aparejada el nuevo sentido de masculinidad que experimenta el joven le dota de un poder no natural que le permite abrir el sarcófago. Bibiana alza la espada oxidada que ha colocado en la mano el esqueleto de su padre, y con esa espada Isayo es investido caballero. Los símbolos de la hoz de Bibiana y la espada de Isayo avalan el carácter físico del ambiente en que se desenvuelve la escena, aunque actúan honradamente..

Antes de separarse, y dado que no saben cuándo volverán a verse, Isayo coge una rosa del rosal, la besa y la introduce por una abertura de su jubón, lo que le produce una sensación de calor extraordinario que le quema la carne cuando entra en contacto con la piel de su pecho. La constante quemazón, junto con su anhelo por el hada, intensifica la atracción y el deseo de su presencia. Se da de esta manera una continua presencia simbólica de Bibiana, además de otro recurso narrativo que se revelará al final de la historia. En cualquier caso, el caballero debe seguir su camino. Isayo emprende su viaje en busca de aventuras dignas de su condición de caballero acompañado por su corcel, Azor, y por su fiel escudero, Tronco: “Y me llaman así porque soy un tronco mal formado, y me adorna una joroba doble” (1177).⁶ Pronto se establece entre ellos una relación tipo Don Quijote-Sancho Panza en la que el escudero es un fiel servidor de su amo. En el camino encuentran un monasterio donde vive un abad que le

5 Las citas del texto de *La última fada* provienen de la *Obras Completas*, Tomo II de Emilia Pardo Bazán (Aguilar, 1964).

sugiere a Isayo que vaya a la corte del rey Arturo para conseguir de este una oportunidad de luchar y consolidar así su reputación de caballero. El abad advierte a Isayo de los peligros de palacio y le previene contra el sospechoso comportamiento de la reina Ginebra, muy aficionada al baile y al divertimento, dejando entrever un carácter licencioso que él podrá comprobar muy pronto por sí mismo.

Cuando escudero y señor llegan a la corte del rey Arturo, Isayo se convierte en el objeto de la penetrante mirada de Ginebra, una mirada que él devuelve percibiendo la belleza externa de ella. La reina se sirve de artificios diversos para resultar más atractiva, y utiliza técnicas de la época tales como el teñido del pelo y una exquisita selección de su atuendo. Ella intenta disuadir a su marido el rey cuando este plantea la posibilidad de enviar al caballero a luchar contra los infieles en Iberia —“¿no fuera mejor conservar a vuestro lado al Caballero Triste, que con su valiente espada puede acorreros tanto?”(1181)—, al tiempo que acaricia con coquetería su collar de perlas y no quita los ojos de Isayo, aguantándole la mirada. El rey Arturo no tiene en cuenta los deseos de su esposa y hace la observación de que siempre pide lo mismo para los jóvenes y gallardos caballeros que llegan a la corte. Y continúa con un comentario que relega a su esposa a una posición de poder sojuzgado: “Bien sabemos lo que hacemos, esposa mía” (1181).. El retrato que se hace de Ginebra es el de seductora. Su matrimonio con el rey Arturo, que, según lo que apunta David Boyd, buscaba en parte contribuir al bien de “her dark land to lighten it” (167), le da a ella el poder para servirse de la esencia de la claridad, aunque su interacción con Isayo denota una aproximación cargada de matices de carácter sexual. Sin embargo, sus intentos se ven frustrados cuando Isayo rechaza sus insinuaciones. La doble imagen de las perlas —tensas cuando Ginebra tira del collar y menos rígidas cuando lo coge relajadamente— reproduce la dicotomía del marido y el objeto deseado, por un lado, y la de la relación con Isayo, potencialmente adúltera o solo platónica, por el otro. Esta representación sustenta la afirmación de Rose cuando dice que “[t]he relationship between viewer and scene is always one of fracture, partial identification , pleasure and distrust” (388). La visualización que hace Isayo solo descubre aspectos aislados de un todo caracterizado por una distancia física que excluye la propensión a la indecencia. Dado que Isayo basa su interpretación en lo externo —lo mismo que había hecho con Bibiana—, la existencia de intenciones ocultas solo se revelará mediante la combinación de las palabras del rey Arturo con la intervención del narrador. Más aún, a fin de evitar que se planteen dudas sobre lo apropiado de su conducta, Isayo y Ginebra interactúan únicamente en presencia de otros. Además, la inextricable unión entre la identidad de la reina y su condición de esposa del rey no hace sino dejar al descubierto sus cualidades de Eva tentadora, que sugieren más una conducta insinuadora que actos deshonestos reales⁷. Lo que no aparece es la reacción de Isayo, con lo que se quiere destacar el comportamiento de la reina en sí mismo, independientemente de cómo sea percibido.

Después de su partida, se le presenta al caballero una nueva oportunidad cuando llega a la corte del rey Juan, menos refinada que la del rey Arturo. La descripción inicial de la infanta —hermana del rey Juan— es una comparación con Ginebra que incide en las diferencias físicas. La infanta —más joven— tiene una piel cuyo color recuerda al trigo maduro, mientras que el cutis blanco de Ginebra refleja la más avanzada edad de la reina. Por otro lado, la infanta católica contrasta con la pagana Bibiana.⁸[Nota para Juan: confirmar la ubicación del punto, antes o después de la nota, consistentemente. Esto lo puedo verificar yo también después de saber cómo se hace en el resto del libro.] La infanta e Isayo expresan su mutua admiración y querencia, haciendo que todos piensen que están destinados a casarse. De hecho, en

6 La apariencia física de Tronco se inserta en el tipo de la doble joroba, según la clasificación de tipos en los cuentos de hadas de Aarne-Thompson (Uther 503). Otro de los múltiples ejemplos de intertexto de cuento de hadas es el de las ramas que se unen (Uther 970), referida a los padres de Isayo: “Two lovers are not allowed to live together. They die of grief (commit suicide) and are buried side by side (in the same cemetery). Plants grow from their graves; the branches intertwine (meet over the roof of the church). Thus the lovers are united in death” (606).

7 El comportamiento de Ginebra hace presagiar su traición al rey Arturo en la versión de Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485), reelaborada por Tennyson en *Idylls of the King* (1856-1885).

una evocación de las imágenes de la Trotaconventos y la Celestina, Tronco insta a Isayo a que se case con ella para asegurarse un futuro y una vida libre de preocupaciones. El galanteo entre ambos transforma el ambiente de austeridad de la corte, y se celebran justas y campeonatos de lanzamiento de jabalina. Por su destreza y agilidad, la infanta obsequia a Isayo con un fajín de color carmesí. Si seguimos el planteamiento de Soliño de que los zapatos —especialmente si son rojos— se utilizan como metáfora de la sexualidad femenina (26), podemos interpretar que el uso por parte de la infanta del vistoso fajín —que coloca primero sobre Isayo para atárselo a continuación a la cintura— revela su intención y señala al caballero como objeto de sus deseos.

Sin embargo, Isayo no consigue olvidarse del hada rubia de ojos verdes, y su amor por la infanta se desvanece de manera súbita cuando ella le pregunta por la leyenda de los dos desventurados amantes que yacían entrelazados para siempre. Desde ese momento, Isayo “empezó a encontrar que la Infanta era demasiado morenucha, y que sus ojos se parecían a los de muchas aguadoras que iban a llenar sus cántaros a las fuentes de la ciudad” (1184). Y esta imagen empeora cuando Isayo empieza a pensar que no sabe vestirse con la elegancia con que lo hacía la reina. Las impertinentes preguntas de la infanta y su menor belleza acaban siendo determinantes para que Isayo la rechace. La explicación a este rechazo la podemos encontrar en las palabras de Peggy Pehlan, cuando dice que “[t]he relationship between the real and the representational, between the looker and the given to be seen, is a version of the relation between self and other” (448-9). En tanto que es la única mujer de la historia que, según los cánones tradicionales, está en disposición de casarse, la infanta se convierte en la indeseada, en una metonímica representación de un grupo de personas con las que a Isayo le resulta difícil identificarse: “Fue allí, en la misma corte del monarca castellano, entre una gente que no sabía de conjuros, ni de encantamientos, como no lo supo nunca el Cid Ruy Díaz, cuyo recuerdo estaba vivo en Burgos y en su iglesia juradera, y en sus muros grises y recios, donde el Triste comprendió que su alma era distinta de las almas de aquellos campeadores sin complicaciones, sin melancolías” (1184).

Cuando, poco después, la infanta es raptada por el poderoso moro Almilhacen Quevir, Isayo deja a un lado su indiferencia por ella y parte raudo al rescate de la atribulada damisela, presa en Nájera; le acompañan numerosos soldados y Tronco, transformado en una [Nota para Juan – no se trata de disfrazarse sino transformarse/convertirse en] anciana mendiga —a su propio amo le cuesta reconocerle— para conseguir entrar el primero en la ciudad sin que nadie se entere, mientras los demás preparan el asalto. La escena es breve, pero de gran intensidad: en un alarde de galantería, Isayo se hace con la infanta y la conduce a un lugar seguro, huyendo entre la confusión del fuego que ha provocado Tronco para distraer a la guarnición. El rescate, unido al retorno de Isayo a Nájera para liberar a la ciudad de sus recientes invasores moros, lo eleva definitivamente a la categoría de héroe, y sobre su escudo queda grabado, por orden del rey, el retrato de la infanta. La perenne marca de la infanta —que, por extensión, refleja el inminente casamiento y larga vida juntos— aflige al heroico caballero. Este se da cuenta, con el paso de los días, de que su corazón anhela a la misteriosa hada y solo consigue desplazar estos pensamientos mediante otros sobre los preparativos de la vuelta al campo de batalla y la lucha con los infieles. Para romper definitivamente con la infanta, no habla directamente con ella, sino que le envía un mensaje a través del rey diciéndole que desea anular su compromiso y abandonar la corte del rey Juan. Su objetivo es doble: volver a su tierra para liberar a Merlín e ir al encuentro del objeto de sus amores. Al partir se encuentra con una desconsolada infanta que llora mientras dice adiós agitando profusamente un pañuelo adornado con lazos, en una escena en que cobran sentido las palabras de Carmen Parrón cuando dice que “Isayo solo puede amar a una mujer etérea, en su imaginación, pues ante una mujer real su virilidad desaparece” (221). El contraste entre la solidez de la hoz del hada y la flacidez del pañuelo pone de manifiesto la falta de deseo de Isayo por la infanta.

8 Otra notable diferencia es que, mientras el hada existe como entidad autónoma que se ha liberado del yugo al que debía de haberla sometido Merlín, la identidad de la infanta se define por referencia a los marcadores que constituyen su hermano y la comunidad.

Cuando vuelve a la corte del rey Arturo, Ginebra devora a Isayo con los ojos. Esta mirada no solo no le resulta acogedora al caballero sino que hace que se distancie y se vaya a la mañana siguiente.⁹ Antes de irse, “la Reina le clavó una vez más los ojos, como si quisiera beberle el semblante” (1188). La unidireccionalidad del deseo evita tener que asignar a Isayo ningún papel de respuesta favorable a la lascivia de la reina.

Camino de su siguiente hazaña —la liberación de Merlín—, Isayo divisa las figuras del Círculo de Gigantes, lugar que le evoca el recuerdo del hada: “Era allí donde se le apareció, en su radiante belleza, la Fada madrina, suelta la cabellera de fino y cendrado oro, que la vestía de pies a cabeza, y flotaba sobre el candor de su túnica” (1189). La presencia de Bibiana sugiere la paradójica y terrenal condición etérea que da credibilidad a la creación del hada.

Cuando el caballero extiende su mano para increpar a las colosales rocas a fin de que le digan cómo deshacer el conjuro de Merlín, estas van cobrando vida progresivamente, hasta el punto de amenazar con aplastarle. En ese momento de crisis, Isayo invoca al hada para que acuda a rescatarlo. Ella aparece tal y como él la recordaba y le cuenta cómo se había convertido en su fiel Tronco y le había acompañado para hacerle más corto el sendero y más leves las horas. Él hace su última petición —el secreto para liberar al magistral mago—; ella acepta reticente y le explica el secreto que había prometido no divulgar jamás: debe matar a la tórtola que canta en las ramas del árbol. Siguiendo las instrucciones del hada, atraviesa el corazón del ave con su flecha y descubre que hada y tórtola son una y la misma. Aunque Merlín es liberado, el mago maldice a Isayo por haber matado a la última hada. La muerte de esta última hada, junto con la falta de correspondencia a los requiebros de la reina Ginebra y el abandono de la infanta, cuestiona la observación de Soliño en su estudio sobre los cuentos de hadas, cuando dice que “[a] woman showing a sexual side to her character was considered dangerous, and the reader was invited to participate in her punishment, which often was an important element of a happy ending that celebrated the pain or even death of the female character” (26-7). Finalmente, ninguna de las mujeres resulta adecuada para Isayo y, por tanto, el foco que se centraba en los deseos que tienen por objeto o sujeto a las mujeres pasa a centrarse en la vida de Isayo, una vida predestinada a la soledad.

3. Conclusiones

Hoz, collar de perlas, pañuelo. En este orden, representan la intensidad del deseo de Isayo por cada una de las mujeres, que decrece con cada uno de los personajes. Por el contrario, en ese mismo orden, el nivel de atracción que las mujeres sienten por el caballero va en aumento. Los intentos bidireccionales e infructuosos de asegurar su deseo de compañía marcan a cada una de las mujeres como inalcanzable. A pesar de que Isayo se siente atraído por el hada, su pertenencia a otro mundo y, finalmente, su muerte suponen barreras infranqueables para que la relación entre ambos pueda consolidarse. Por otro lado, la posibilidad de sucumbir a las cualidades de tentadora de una mujer casada y madura como la reina Ginebra desdice del modelo de decoro que debe seguir un caballero heroico. La falta de sensibilidad por parte de la reina para comprender los sentimientos de Isayo parece indicar que el interés por flirtear que muestra Ginebra no es mutuo. Por último, la distancia geográfica y cultural que separa a Isayo de la infanta parece imposible de superar. Isayo no consigue mantener una relación equilibrada con ninguna de estas mujeres, sea por las personales circunstancias de ellas, sea por sus propias circunstancias, sea por una combinación de las circunstancias del uno y las otras.

Los ocho capítulos en los que se desarrolla la historia son un relato de la vida de Isayo de Leonís que abarca desde sus comienzos hasta un momento decisivo de su adultez, en el que ya le precede el valor demostrado en gestas caballerescas: el momento de resolver el enigma del confinamiento de Merlín y las posibilidades para liberarlo, asuntos inextricablemente unidos a la presencia de la bella y etérea última

⁹ Recibido por Arturo como un hijo, se insinúa una relación incestuosa madre/hijo, aunque el rechazo de Isayo acaba por descartarla de plano.

hada. Si en esta historia la autora “buscaba negociar un espacio para una nueva construcción de la mujer” (Bieder 75)—tarea que Maryellen Bieder identifica como una característica propia de las obras de Pardo Bazán (75)—, el resultado final es que las circunstancias no permiten que las tres mujeres satisfagan su deseo de compañía, como consecuencia de las fallidas experiencias de Isayo¹⁰. Él debe cargar con la cruz de la soledad y dejar atrás lo inalcanzable, lo cual contrasta con la fama y gloria que sí ha alcanzado como caballero. Este irónico giro al final de la historia nos muestra el precio que hay que pagar por conseguir los propios objetivos a cualquier precio. Aunque Isayo vivió una inquebrantable lealtad a ambos reyes y se comportó de manera admirablemente heroica —especialmente en las batallas contra los moros—, esas acciones de caballero no compensan el fracaso de sus relaciones amorosas. La incapacidad para relacionarse con éxito con ninguna de las tres mujeres apunta a la necesidad que Isayo tiene de reconsiderar sus objetivos, e invita al lector a ponderar la necesidad de sus acciones.

Dentro del paradigma del siglo XIX descrito por Jo Labanyi, quien se pregunta “whether nature, and by extension society, are self-regulating mechanisms or whether there is a need for human intervention” (336), el final de la novela sugiere al menos una respuesta parcial a esta pregunta, implícita en la ironía del desenlace de la historia. Al contrario que en la intervención de Isayo en Castilla, que contribuye a restablecer el cristianismo en la Península, en el final de la novela se trastoca el orden de una sociedad que había existido anteriormente en un estado de armonía en el que Merlín había preferido su reclusión para preservar la existencia de Bibiana, la última hada.

10 Carmen Parrón sostiene que “[la] lectura feminista del simbólico pastiche sugiere que *La última hada* es una crítica de la mujer que se hace cómplice al discurso falocéntrico. El mundo mágico es parcela de la ensoñación y ninguna mujer ideal es real. Lo que la mujer real recibe del constructor ideal es frustración. La edad contemporánea requiere otra clase de mujeres y no hay necesidad de que continúen resignándose a hacer el papel de hadas: la de Pardo Bazán es la última” (221).

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(Traducción de Gabriel Rodríguez Pazos)

The Last Fairy (La última fada)

Emilia Pardo Bazán

Translated by Lisa Nalbone¹¹

I

When Tristán de Leonís, Knight of the Round Table, and Iseo la Morena,¹² queen of the country of Cornwall,¹³ had sighed some time ago their last sigh (being a very arduous task that of untwining their bodies so closely embraced) at the foot of a hawthorn covered the entire year by white flowers in the lands of Britain,¹⁴ country of enchantment, a secret meeting of fairies was celebrated to decide the future of the son that the two lovers had left behind.

You would not see, of course, anything prettier than that hawthorn. The whiteness that covered entirely its branches was flanked by a very subtle rose, and the wind, when shaking its foliage, made fall a rain of ever-fragrant petals. It was not a shrub, but a great tree, and its mass of silver seemed to illuminate the entire forest whose surrounding area reached almost an entire league. And the laborers were scared of this forest, knowing that it was inhabited by sorceresses and goblins, and, above all, that in the thick trunk of the hawthorn was held prisoner none other than the wise Merlin, *protobrujo*¹⁵ and master magician.

It was said that his beloved disciple Bibiana had locked him up in such a jail, she to whom the wizard, dotardly in love, gave a certain talisman, and she availed herself of it to play a terrible trick on him. The chronicles, which fail to understand afflictions of the heart, say that Bibiana committed a fatal mistake when locking up Merlin, one which weighed heavily on her, and which she very much wanted to undo; but I say to you that Merlin's long white hair, whiter than the flowers of the hawthorn, did not attract the sorceress, and when imprisoning him she tried to free herself from the weight and anger of his overwhelming affection.

Be that as it may, the fact is that Merlin, on the anniversary of his imprisonment at twelve midnight, exhaled a frightful and lugubrious shout that could be heard in all of Britain. And the peasants of the homeland and the fishermen of the coast, upon hearing the harrowing moan resonate, devoutly made the sign of the cross, entrusting themselves to Our Lady and Saint Anne, patron saint of that region.

11 I am grateful for the expertise and insights that Roger Simpson and Juan Miguel Zarandona have so generously offered me in the final drafts of this translation.

12 The 'dark-skinned' or 'dark-haired' one.

13 A present day county of England located on the south-western peninsula, Cornwall is the setting of the second act of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*.

14 Pardo Bazán's use of the words *Bretaña* and *bretón*—and its variations—refers at times to Great Britain (with mention of Stonehenge and Camelot, for example) and equally refers to Lesser Britain (Brittany, also known as Armorica during ancient times).

15 The first and foremost of all wizards.

It was the same Bibiana, fond of enchantments, who had summoned her sisters the fairies, the few still remaining in that mysterious place, in the light of the moon. The fairies began introducing themselves, now age-worn and sickly, dragging themselves along with a doleful appearance and huddling around the hawthorn jail.

Already there watching her convened sisters, Bibiana relayed the story of Tristán and Iseo, who, having drunk the love potion without being able to undo its effects, adored each other and died of love, news that none of the fairies believed as they had grown so old, although it endeared many of them and even made them spill forth pious tears. Then Bibiana explained to them that proof of that senseless passion existed, and that it was a boy whom she herself, by her own hands, had saved from dying of cold in the moor where he was deliberately left by the jealous and vindictive wife of his father, Iseo la Rubia.¹⁶

“Protect him we fairies must,” implored Bibiana, “because we are the protectors of all who truly love. From this day forward, that boy must be our godson; we will make of him the bravest knight of his time, and neither Lancelot, nor the Gaul Perceval, nor Tristán himself who fathered him, could be compared to Isayo de Leonís, whose valor and high deeds will exist in eternal memory.”

With grandmotherly prattles the fairies approved, and of the ladies of the lakes only Ranosa¹⁷ opposed the intentions expressed by Bibiana.

“Just think, sisters,” she said to them, “that boy has already been born under a bad star. Those who left him to die of cold among *retamas*¹⁸ will chase him furiously as soon as they know that he was saved. The love of his parents overstepped its boundaries and the law, and that stigma must mark the forehead of Isayo de Leonís until his last hour. What coat of arms can the illegitimate boy display? His shield will be painted black.”

Ranosa’s concerns were not very well received. It even seemed as though they were born of a petty and saddened spirit. The fairies did not know the boy; but they already imagined him a delight with his black curls, like those of his mother called la Morena. Just because they were fairies did not mean that they did not have that maternal feeling that in all females exists. And, huddled around Bibiana, they promised that Isayo de Leonís would be the godson of all, and if his knight’s shield needed a coat of arms, they would give one to him, placing on it a figure of a Breton fairy and naming him “the Knight of the Fairy.” They swore it thus to the silver-plated clear light that fell completely over the hawthorn; and they learned with joy that the infant was being kept in a poor hermitage under the care of a holy man named Angriote.¹⁹ There they could see him whenever they wished, and in visiting the hermitage they extended upon it their protection. The rejoicing of the fairies was great, thinking that they would come to know the creature, and they would give him gifts and would protect him against all evil if it were necessary.

“Since we have agreed upon this, then,” said Bibiana, “let us leave here without delay. It is nearly midnight, and, in case you are not aware, today the years of my misfortune are marked,

16 The blond-haired one.

17 Her name, deftly chosen by the author, means ‘frog-like’.

18 This low-lying shrub is known as Spanish broom or Weaver’s broom.

19 This name captures the essence of his angry temperament.

when my master Merlin the *sabidor*²⁰ was locked in that hawthorn. I do not want to hear his horrible moan...”

She had not even finished speaking when the terrifying shouts of the old necromancer were heard. It was something so sinister, so supernatural, that the fairies felt their blood freeze and their teeth chatter from fear.

“Oh, Bibiana!” Ranosa, the prudent fairy, was at last able to say. “Why don’t you release your old friend? Why don’t you uncast the spell and ask him for forgiveness? He loved you so, and he surely will not punish you.”

“I did not intend to cast a spell on him,” Bibiana unconvincingly stammered. “It was an unfortunate mistake. Now I do not know the formula to uncast the spell. That is to say, I know one, but it is frightful... No one would demand that I employ it. I will not reveal it to anyone. Leave the miserable old man in this tree, as it will become his tomb, and let us think about the boy, who is the future, who is hope. Do not challenge the decree of Fate.”

And the fairies went away, as did Bibiana, but had not yet crossed the forest’s edge when they heard Merlin’s horrid cry once again. It was as if all the forest were howling with moans of his suffering soul, filled with threats and curses; and the moon suddenly became covered with an enormous black cloud, and a glacial wind, shaking the branches of the hawthorn, uprooted its flowers until they formed a thick covering around it.

II

And so it was that the boy Isayo de Leonís was becoming the most beautiful creature one could imagine. Having turned seven years old he was admired by all who visited the hermitage. The devout, upon attending mass there, would take the young lad cakes of honey; strings of shells; small live birds or nests with their eggs. Isayo attracted attention because of his angelical expression and eyes, light green like the calm sea, which stood out against his brown skin, as brown as his mother’s. His black hair fell in long ringlets upon his neck that had already grown strong. In the hermitage there were no tailors, and the good Angriote dressed his pupil in a sheepskin vest that made him resemble a young Saint John the Baptist.

However, his godmothers the fairies from time to time and more and more infrequently, as they were slowly dying of old age, would bring him shirts of woven fabric made of linen spun on a golden distaff amidst magic songs. And the fabric was never ripped nor worn, yet seemed to stretch as the child grew, and as he grew in stature he displayed extraordinary strength and vigor.

The virtuous hermit prayed each day to the blessed Saint Anne that Isayo never leave the hermitage and, upon receiving the priestly consecration, live an abstemious, humble, and penitent life, mindful of his parents’ mistakes. But the fairy Bibiana who, dressed as a beggar, would go often to see her godson, and spoke to him of jousts, tournaments, exploits, and human greatness, and argued with the hermit telling him:

“Angriote, your years are advanced, and your hour will soon be here... But this young boy has not tasted the flavors of life, and he comes from kings, champions, and lords, and great feats are expected of him. It would be wrong to keep the son of the knight of the Round Table from fulfilling his destiny!”

²⁰ One who is knowledgeable in the law, also used to refer to a learned man.

The hermit shook his head, thinking that the shape of the world passes quickly and is like the images of a dream with only the truth of death remaining, and after it, hell, or at least purgatory, where the miserable parents of that boy would surely burn... But, as days went by, he became convinced that the boy, now a young man, was not on the path of saying mass. He would escape with the fishermen to defy the brave sea; he crossed low-lying brush to hunt wild beasts, and, when certain pirates disembarked one day intent on pillaging a monastery that hung from the edge of a cliff, Isayo rallied the villagers and with pitchforks, arrows, and knives they swiftly crushed the invaders. Isayo killed the chief with a great arrow aimed at his eye, and, from that moment and time, he was famous and popular in the region. Even when Angriote made him say several prayers for the soul of the deceased pirates, the rascal, all alone, remembered with prideful trembling the moment in which he had seen his adversary fall like a killed head of cattle, turning around and collapsing without life.

“My arm is forced,” he thought, “my heart, fearless. I wish I could have adventures, but the truth is that I do not know who I am or the origins of my blood. Only knights can fight against knights. Without being a knight I should not expect any glory.” And the thought of his unknown origin saddened his soul. It struck him to ask Angriote, but the hermit, who knew the truth from confessional secret, never divulged it. And the young man set forth to find out at any expense.

According to the legends of the country, on the night of San Juan the fairies met in an unusual place. It was at edge of the sea, at the wildest and steepest part of the coast, a vast opening of terrain where not one tree or bush or blade of grass could be seen. The land, dry and sterile, was seeded with stony sand and was as flat as if it had been made level by the hand of man. Surrounding this vast area, traces of stone, tall and enormous, were lined in a circle; the rough granite of some of the stones crudely imitated human form. Surely, those monoliths placed upright in the form of a circle were none other than the famous Giants, brought from Ireland to Armorica by the wise Merlin in tribute to the dead heroes, and the Giants at times danced a solemn dance in memory of those who fought for the independence of their country. And during the full moon when the ritual bonfires were being lit on all the mountains, the fairies convened there to console the spirits of the conquered fighters and the eternally silent bards no longer holding their harps.

The night was serene and radiant, and Isayo’s heart was beating after seeing from afar the frightful ring of the Giants of stone. As he tried to penetrate the circle, a woman with long blond hair, dressed in a white tunic of the druids and wearing her golden sickle on her belt, placed herself in the middle, and she stopped him by extending her hand.

“My godson!” she shouted, “beautiful godson, stop! Do you not know that, on a day such as today, he who enters the circle of the Giants will undoubtedly die at sunrise? Move away, and let us go to the crossing, where I will tell you what you wish to know.”

Isayo stood up straight, contemplating the fairy who was none other than Bibiana, the only one of her sisters who, because of Merlin’s teachings and witchcraft, withstood the test of time and the progress of Christianity, enemy of the old religions of the forest, the fountains, and the stones of the Druids. The ideal beauty of Merlin’s loved one, the fluid waves of her magnificent hair, surprised him. He was in his first youth and never had his eyes rested upon the crude village women or fisherwomen smelling of seafood and iodine, whose arms shone with fish scales. Isayo was trembling; he dared not approach the marvelous creature.

“I know,” she said, “that you come to ask who your parents were. I will tell you, but not until you are dubbed a knight.”

“Oh my!” exhaled the boy. “And who would dub an unknown knight, one who is misbegotten?”

“To know him is to love him,” responded the fairy. “Have no fear. Soon you will receive the Order of Knighthood. Wait for me here tomorrow, outside of the circle as darkness falls. And now, walk away. Have you seen anyone else here? This place is frightful. You come armed but without a sword. I will be the one to give it to you.”

“Godmother,” Isayo murmured sweetly, “I shall not leave until you allow me to kiss the edge of your gown. Not even the blessed Saint Anne has infused in me such veneration. In the hours remaining until I see you again, I will spend them thinking of you. If I speak out of turn, do not respond to me severely; after all I am just a boy.”

Bibiana looked at him, smiling at the request. Their eyes met. Kneeling, he took hold of the edge of her modest clothing, and he placed on it his fervent and devouring lips.

III

The next day the young man was provided some armor, and Angriote—lamenting that he wanted to leave to pursue adventures when there he enjoyed peace, purity, and a clean conscience—blessed a holy relic on his chest that was encased in a locket of mother-of-pearl and silver, an offering of sailors who came from distant lands of the Orient. And nearing sunset, he set off with a quick pace for his encounter, anxious to see the fairy once again.

She was already waiting for him. A grey cloak covered her golden hair; the sacred sickle of gold shone at her waist.

“Do not fear, handsome godson,” she sighed in a clear voice, similar to water falling into the basin of enchanted fountains.

“Oh, godmother,” protested the boy. “Fear? I know not what that is. Let us go quickly to the castle of the powerful man, or to the court of the King who will confer upon me the Order of Knighthood.”

“Let us go to where you are to receive it,” answered Bibiana, and she went forward with a quick step.

For leagues and leagues they walked. They followed the seashore lined with rocks and sandy beaches, and listened to the hoarse crashing of the ocean’s waves that broke against the cliffs moaning horrifically.

At last they reached a small harbor, situated on a promontory that dominated the bay. At the entrance of the harbor rose the ghost of a vast feudal castle. And it must have been a ghost because it was a ruin of dilapidated walls and broken doors with hinges torn off. No one could be living there. Hanging its picturesque garlands from the lofty towers large towers, the ivy partially hid the destruction, which was more the result of negligence than of time. On some parts, the blackened mark of fire could be seen: undoubtedly they had wished to set the edifice afire. Upon the blazoned, rudimentary shield, which still hung over the main entrance, the *jaramago*²¹ branches and bramble were intertwined.

“Godmother,” said the boy, “this castle is deserted. Who there will bestow knighthood upon me?”

21 A flowering plant known as wall rockets.

“You will soon find out. Now, first, you are going to keep watch over your arms in the hall, and at midnight I shall come to tell you what you must do.”

The lad obeyed and, guided by the fairy, not without effort entered the hall whose access was obstructed by debris. Inside the walls were preserved, and the coffered Moorish ceiling seemed to be intact; shreds of tapestry still hung from the walls, and in the windows were broken pieces of stained glass. Isayo laid down his arms on the stone bench at the large window through whose arches the moon rays beamed.

Bibiana was no longer at his side. The boy thought he saw fleeting shadows crossing through the air and moving around him. And also he could have sworn that these shadows emitted sounds, weak like the murmurings of the wind as the trees of the forest swayed. The atmosphere was filled with soft moans of mysterious mumbling, of words unflinching because of emotions that could not quite be uttered.

“This castle must be enchanted,” thought Isayo. “There must be elves in here. Should there be something evil, I shall pray to Saint Anne.”

And so he did, taking out his relic, and the breaths of fire and the disjointed, flattering words that he believed he heard hushed. He kept watch patiently, and it was nearly midnight when Bibiana entered, covered in her hooded cloak and with two torches in her hand. She gave one of them to Isayo, and warned:

“Go on... You are going to see things that will make your heart shudder!”

“I am willing,” declared the boy.

They threaded quietly through narrow passages, descended stone steps slippery from the humidity, circling snails that never ended, and finally stopped before a strong and quite ancient historied iron grate. Isayo saw with astonishment that the branches of a rosebush were entangled in filigrees of the grate, and a sharp fragrance overcame his senses. Never had he breathed such a scent; it was something that rose to his head, unsettling his consciousness. He turned around and looked intensely at Bibiana.

“Godmother!” he pleadingly sighed. She was fighting with herself, shaking.

“Handsome godson,” she finally commanded, “take my sickle and cut the rose bush. There is no other way to get through.”

He hesitated. It pained him to wound that green mass with his blade, where, in the light of the torches, the broken red flowers shone like enormous garnets. And having contemplated the scene for a moment, he exclaimed with astonishment:

“Godmother, they are two rosebushes! And they are embracing! Embraced, inseparable!”

Bibiana put her hand on her chest, and pulling from it a sigh, she stammered:

“Cut, cut!”

Already resolved to do so, Isayo cut without mercy, as if in fit of rage. Frogs went flying and then fell to the ground, with the incarnate roses ignited and spilling their scented capsules. And Isayo noticed the vigor of the trunks, and that they interlaced and interlocked with such zeal and fury that only by severing them both together could they be destroyed. And so much had the two rose bushes grown in that shady and hidden place that they reached the vault, and breaking through among the ashlar they had dislodged them and caused some of them to fall, pushing their branches out to the open air, triumphant over the oppressive force.

“How maddening this scent of flowers, godmother!” murmured Isayo.

And she, somewhat anguished, ordered:

“Step on them, step on them! Open, open!”

The young man struggled quite violently. Sweat ran down his forehead and his chest was panting. Finally, the heavy grate bent inwards revealing a dark and deep area. The fairy, who had taken in her hands the two torches, moved them, and they could see that the area was a sepulchral crypt. Massive pillars supported it, and toward the back below a small funeral window, the coffin was elevated. On its cover, two raised bumps of wrought stone represented a knight and a lady united in eternal sleep. He held the sword over his chest; she raised her hands as if begging for mercy.

“Who are they, godmother?” asked Isayo.

“They are,” she explained, “two people who loved each other very much and died together, their remains resting there. He was wounded with armor poisoned by traitors and she died from the pain of seeing him succumb. He was the bravest of champions that the world has ever known, one of the peers of Charlemagne, of the Round Table, and he was called (neither the duennas and the fair ladies of Cornwall nor those who make verse have forgotten his name) Tristán, because he came to the world under unfavorable stars!”

Isayo contemplated the sarcophagus, overcome by the violent emotions of one who wished to avenge an insult or punish an injustice.

“Do whatever is possible,” ordered the fairy, “to lift the cover of that sepulcher.”

It seemed like a crazy task, without tools, with no instrument other than his arms; but no sooner had Isayo approached the sarcophagus and begun to push the tile that supported the two figures in repose, than he imagined that some supernatural being was helping him, for the granite cover was softly lifted and easily shifted to one angle of the sepulcher; Isayo looked at the two mummies, tightly joined amidst dusty, tattered shrouds.

Upon seeing that these were the two lovers, the fairy stammered:

“Even beyond death!”

She placed the torches in the brackets; she made Isayo kneel with his back to the sarcophagus; she picked up the rusty sword of Tristán de Leonís, and, placing it in the dry fist of the larger skeleton, she lifted the mummified arm, and then let the sword fall on the shoulders of the young man.

“Rise,” she ordered at once. “You have received the Order of Knighthood. Tristán de Leonís of the Round Table, your father, has knighted you.”

Trembling with pride, the novice stood straight up. Leaning over the sepulcher, he kissed the blackened faces of the mummies, behind whose worm-eaten lips could be seen, in a quieted beatific smile, all of their white teeth; youth entombed!

“My father! Mother!” he did not tire of repeating, “If only you had lived to see your son!”

“If they had lived, Isayo,” declared the fairy, “they may not even have looked after you.”

And seeing the young boy absorbed in the contemplation of the two lovers, she called to him:

“We have to leave here without delay. Cover the tomb again and take the champion’s sword.”

The moment they crossed back over the gate, the awe-struck boy noticed that the rose bushes were growing long branches and new buds. He shook his beautiful head.

“On this sad site, godmother, I have received the order. Sad is my origin. I want to be called ‘Caballero Triste.’”²²

22 Sad Knight.

“So it will be,” assured the fairy. “And look, handsome godson, all that is sublime and beautiful is sad, and sad are the stories in which there are great deeds, and sad is the Passion of your Redeemer, and I say not *our* because, as you know, we fairies have not received baptismal water. Now, then, Caballero Triste, go forth in the world to right wrongs, protect orphans and widows, exterminate monsters, and keep your heart pure so that no venom wounds you as it did your noble father. Do not enter, as he did, in the lands of others. At the door of this castle, which is yours since it was your father’s, you will find waiting a fiery horse, the best breed that eats oats in all the world, and you will also find a loyal squire with another saddle and provisions; from the sword that served your father may you never be apart.”

“Are you leaving me, godmother?” implored the young boy.

“My protection will never be far from you, but only call on me in extreme circumstances.”

“Woe is me!” wept Isayo.

The fairy disappeared amidst the shadow. A weak moan could be heard in the air. It was said that she also cried upon their separation. Isayo, then—was the wrong action taken, oh devout ones of the fairies?—took one of the roses from the rose bushes that he had cut, brought it to his lips, and slid it onto his chest through the opening of his doublet. And where he placed the rose, it seemed to him that an extraordinary heat was burning his flesh.

IV

Upon leaving the castle’s inner ward, Isayo saw a deformed figure who led by the bridle two horses harnessed for a day’s ride, on whose hindquarters hung filled saddlebags. For the idea that errant knights did not eat and did not ready themselves by packing provisions while walking along cliffs and scrub is fantasy. Although the fairies protected Isayo, he was not pure in spirit, but an arrogant and virile boy, and it would not be a good start to his deeds if he died of hunger.

One of the horses had a magnificent appearance; the other, was less glamorous but robust and strong.

“Knight, my master,” said the ill-formed man, “here you have your faithful squire and your steed of battle named Azor,²³ as I am named Tronco. And they call me such because I have an ill-formed torso, and a double hump adorns my back. But be assured that I am not hunched in my understanding, and I know where my limitations lie. Ride, then, knight, and the walking angels will guide us.”

Isayo stopped short for one moment. He did not know for certain where to go. Then he picked a leaf of the rose he had kept, and releasing it in the air, headed in the direction the leaf took, his squire following step by step.

They rode for several days traversing the land of Britain without finding any adventure worth mentioning. The roads were dry and rocky, the lush groves intricate and wild; on some, the mossy stones consecrated to Teutates²⁴ were still standing. Even the townspeople, disheveled and wearing wide breeches, planted, ploughed, and dug up the earth; children with tangled hair played at the door of the huts; white-haired women spun slowly; and upon sunset, knight and squire asked for hospitality on a farm, and they supped on milk and rye bread or a simple soup.

23 Meaning ‘goshawk,’ a type of bird of prey.

24 Ancient Celtic god of War, worshiped especially in Gaul.

Tronco, who was truly ingenious and resourceful, told stories at nightfall, talking to the townspeople about the fairies that in times past used to live in the ponds and in the streams and about the circle of the Giants that one day will no longer be enchanted, and about Armorica and Caledonia²⁵ that will become the most powerful countries in the world.

In the poor homesteads they admired the young knight's handsomeness and Tronco's unusual shape and clear mind. He had a sharp and picaresque look; he jokingly courted the farm maidens and recited *lais*²⁶ to the young girls; he told stories about the lives of saints and the penances and virtues of the hermits and Cenobites;²⁷ he made crosses of reeds and stick horses for the little ones. He stoked the fire and even prepared pots of food, eating of the cabbage of the country. In each place they had wished that the errant knights would stay a few days longer, but Isayo felt an uneasiness, a gnawing anxiousness; he longed to know in detail the story of his parents, and who the firebrand was that had wanted to harm with the poisoned sword Tristán de Leonís, the finest of knighthood.

He had sent Tronco to polish the sword found in the sepulcher, and upon seeing it so shiny, dreamed of extraordinary adventures in which he could employ it. He wanted to stain it immediately with the blood of cowards and scoundrels, and with it cut off the heads of any offensive cretin or enormous monster, like a crocodile as did Saint Martha.²⁸

Finally, one evening, when tired from the day, master and squire were looking for their night's lodging, they discerned the outline of a monastery. It was an impressive building, and it was surrounded by well-cultivated grounds, garden and forest, for the monks were the first to understand things of this nature and they practiced and taught about agriculture and even gardening, but since these were times of iron, and the pirates came on land to plunder, the monastery was converted into a fort, and great walls garrisoned it with loopholes and round towers. This monastery hardly suggested anything of an exceptional adventure; but Tronco told his young master that it would be wise to rest a bit, if only to wash their clothes and sleep in a nice room at least for a couple of nights.

Old and affable, the abbot who received the visitors was the same one who showed them to their spacious room and offered for their use all that the monastery afforded.

"I," he said, when Isayo had replenished his strength with the generous amount of wine contained in an oliphant and with delicately roasted ribs of pork, "recognized you, sir Isayo, by your appearance. You are the mirror image of your incomparable father, the never-defeated Tristán de Leonís, nephew of the king of Cornwall, and one of the three Breton princes. Ah, my son! Only witchcraft and the arts of hell could cause him to commit such grave sins; perhaps his poor soul was lost! I exhorted him plenty when I saw him wounded, an ill-gotten wound by villainy of a traitor. But I was not able to erase from his memory for a single moment his memories and yearning for your ill-fated mother, and in seeing her for the last time his eagerness was amounted. The love potion that ran through his veins continued its cursed effects. And as he waited in the castle's courtyard for the lookout to announce the arrival of the ship where Iseo was riding, the signal being a white flag, there was a person who, lost in jealousy—God forgive her!

25 Scotland, particularly the northern region.

26 A poetic, musical composition typical of the 13th and 14th centuries.

27 Members of a monastic religious order who lived as hermits while stressing the importance of community life.

28 Saint Martha is known for taming a bestial crocodile.

—ordered that they tell Tristán that the boat carried a black flag, and your father expired forlorn for not having seen Iseo one last time... Moments later, Iseo, not finding him alive, died embracing his poor body. And that, young knight of Leonís, is the very sad story of the lovers. The husband of Iseo himself did not have courage to separate them and had them buried together.”

Isayo shuddered as he listened to the venerable monk’s story. Leaning over, he kissed the hands that had tried to absolve his father but failed to do so because sorceries impeded it. A grand idea germinated in his mind. Through the monk he would come to learn the name of the felon who injured Tristan with the herb-poisoned weapon whose wound is incurable.

“He was called Morlote, my son! And your father, upon being wounded, cut him with his lance. Let go of the vengeful idea that has hold of your heart, which I can see in your eyes. More noble affairs are in store for you. You may no longer avenge yourself of anyone: the traitor has died; the legitimate wife of your father, Iseo la Rubia, has entered the cloister with regret, and King Mark, the husband of your mother, was so noble as to demand that those who loved each other be buried together. Think of other feats that may honor your name.

“It is my greatest desire,” exclaimed Isayo with enthusiasm. “Tell me what the affairs are and here is my arm to go in their search.”

“Well then, my son, since all of your father’s burning desire has been transmitted to you, and now that you are going to begin your new life as a knight, listen to what a poor, old man advises you to do... Keep yourself, above all, from turning over your soul to anything impure. Keep your heart as a white lily. They say that those knights who must be in love, those who are honestly in love, may toil in all places. Fear the love potion they gave your father to drink, because I know, I assure you, that he died from the love potion and not injury. That was the true poison that ran through his veins. Place your thoughts in higher forces, and know that the Moors of the Peninsula want to attack France and make us slaves of the detestable sect of Mohammed. If the king of Castile does not defeat them once again, here we will have them. Some will stop them, but you must lead them. There is still another enterprise worthy of you: put an end to magic, the enemy of Christ, breaking the spell on Merlin imprisoned by an evil fairy in the trunk of a hawthorn, and from where he lets out horrible howls every year on the anniversary of his imprisonment.”

“Surely, I have heard the cry of Merlin,” declared Isayo, “and it is a sound that curdles your blood... But either I am deceived or that old man Merlin himself is a necromancer through and through, a sorcerer worse than the others, and an evil old man who, in spite of his years, was scheming with the fairy Bibiana, who they say is the same one who imprisoned him in the tree to punish him for his many pranks.”

“The story is true,” replied the prior, “and Merlin has committed serious sins and even some by sorceries; but when he was imprisoned in the tree, he was sincerely regretful, and, if you tell no one, I shall tell you that he has appeared to me in dreams one of those nights in which he uttered his cry, and he asked me to implore the heavens for his freedom, as he wished to be baptized and finish his days as a fine Christian, denying his idols and forgetting his ancient bard poems in which he sang idolatry.”

“Be that as it may,” declared Isayo, “I shall do what is within my power to disenchant the wise Merlin and save his soul. And as far as the war with the Saracens,²⁹ I shall participate willingly; but I wish to know where and who those Christian princes are that are ready to defend

29 A term used to refer to followers of Islam.

the same holy cause, so that I may go in their company; although the errant knight who realizes his exploits alone and is showered only in glory, one sole knight who has defeated an entire army has never been seen; and for this reason, if I am to teach the infidels a lesson, tell me where the flags are that I must follow.”

“You have spoken with wisdom beyond your years, my son,” the abbot affectionately declared. “I will respond to you. A few leagues from here there is a stronghold and turreted city that is called Camelot, and it is a court of the king of Britain, the times-over distinguished Arthur. Has his name ever reached your ears?”

“My master, Angriote,” responded the lad, “spoke to me of King Arthur as one speaks of heroes. He said that he was a defender of Britain, the leader of our people, our defender.”

“That is so, and because of him the Saxons are no longer our masters. He has defeated the Silures³⁰ and other very ferocious invaders as well, the Caledonians and the Picts;³¹ of course they came to the monastery with the intention of burning it, but we resisted with the help of God; and later King Arthur, in the open country, crushed them to pieces. He also reestablished worship, because those invaders were idolaters, and he prepared all of Britain for resistance should be necessary. All the monasteries have been converted into fortresses under order of the good king. You should go to his court, my son. Upon passing through the forest you see to the west of this holy house, you will find a road also constructed by the king. Following it, you will reach the city; I shall give you some letters for the steward of the palace that will serve as a recommendation. Now I bless you, may the Lord free you from the temptations of your youth and may you not suffer what your father suffered. Beware that in the courts there is much deceit and a fair amount of malice, and flattered senses lead to the abyss of evil. The king’s palace is full of dangers. Queen Guinevere is beautiful and takes pleasure in dancing and enjoying herself. Entrust yourself to Saint Anne and remember that the virtue of the soul increases the strength of the arm.”

And when the boy relayed this conversation to his squire Tronco, the hunched figure began to laugh gracefully, and he said in a mocking tone:

“Young man, leave Merlin in his tree, as he is quite well there, and is very deserving of what he has, and realize that the devil is found not only in the palaces. The evil-doer lurks everywhere!”

Caballero Triste followed the abbot’s instructions; he crossed the forest (the thickest of the seven in Britain), and he entered the road where he saw signs of the grandeur of the capital of Arthur. Village men and women carrying provisions, hens, eggs, vegetables; men who were going hunting, falcon in hand; great ox carts, carrying straw and oats, as feed for horses; dwellings crammed on the side of the road, and, at various stretches, a castle that served as an advanced guard in case of invasion. At the doors of these watchtowers, the soldiers were playing the game of cups and dice with pitchers of white wine on the table, and earthenware cups, to cheer on the game. Isayo felt an impatience that made him spur on Azor, even though this was unnecessary for the kind brute.

At last they sighted the walls, solid and wide, populated by sentries who guarded the corners and the long stretches of bastion, and they entered the populous, lively city, in which they could hear temple bells calling to mass and the shouting of the women who were selling in the market a vast variety of goods: tools, plowshares, sieves for flour, clogs, vegetables and some

30 People who lived in the southwest region of present day Wales, of whom one of their kings was Arthur.

31 A group of tribes in the northern and eastern areas of Scotland.

cattle for the slaughter house. Although the burghers of Camelon were accustomed to seeing knights pass every day who came to visit Arthur and to offer him their sword, Isayo's gentle composition and the magnificent stamp of his steed inspired phrases of admiration and affection from the women, and Tronco's unusual appearance brought about outbursts of laughter and joking, to which the squire responded with sharp retorts.

Isayo lodged in the heart of the city, which was situated on a hill; at the top, the King's palaces could be seen forming what looked like another fortress, as they were surrounded by walls and defended by keeps, in anticipation, without a doubt, should the city be besieged, that they would need to take refuge there as a last resort. Immense silos and wine cellars safeguarded the supplies, and fountains were flowing inside the entire quarters; it was not easy to attack Arthur by means of thirst.

Isayo asked that letters from the abbot be presented to the palace steward, count Norandel, and without delay a dwarf came out of the parapet and sounded a long horn three times, announcing that the iron gates would be opening and the drawbridge raised. The steward welcomed Isayo quite courteously and invited him to go to some lower rooms where young girls were gathered, delicately dressed and hair flowing, wearing a tightly fitted ring of thin gold over their temples. And their perfumed hair was the color of blackthorn, honey and wheat; but upon seeing them, the hair of another young lady came to the lad's mind, hair that was free-flowing, long and slightly wavy, which floated over a white tunic in the moonlight, and he realized that the memory of his fairy godmother was rather fresh in his memory. His heart became upset. When would he see her again? He could only call her in extreme circumstances...

The young ladies took care of the lad with diligence, while the stable boys put the horses in their place, and Tronco was taken with utmost delight into the majestic kitchens by the crew of scullions. Isayo was bathed, drowned in perfumes, curls combed, hands and nails groomed, for this was quite common practice in the courts, the place where people are taken care of and watched over. Then, well groomed and hair trimmed, they introduced the boy to the King and Queen, who received him with delight, and they asked him, before all else, his name and that of his family.

"Illustrious is my lineage," responded Triste, "but I should prefer not to reveal this until I may put the stamp on my shield for having accomplished a great feat. I have completed many, even though I was not yet admitted into the Order of Knighthood; but you well know, oh noble King, that what is done by a man who is not knighted is like a line in the water or a footprint in the sand, and it does not merit being stored in the memory of men."

Arthur listened pensively. He was aged and mature, hair and beard gray; but his entire person breathed energy and vigor, and in him could be seen, from this first moment, the monarch who establishes the destinies of a race, who raises towns to the dignity of History.

"Young man," he murmured at last, "all heroic action, executed by knight or villain, should be remembered and extolled. What is more, neither the lord king Alexander the Great, nor lord Darío, nor any of the famous champions of antiquity were, as far as we know, armored knights, for the laws of errant knighthood were not even known in their time. The heroes came before errant knighthood, according to what has been made known to me."

"Not in vain do they say you are a great wise man, good King," answered the youth leaning forward, "and I recognize that I have erred considerably. Nevertheless, today those who withstand the demands are knights, and I come here resolved to help you in what you have

undertaken against the Moors of Iberia, which have endeavored to fall upon these Frank kingdoms.”³²

“The young man speaks well,” opined ingratiatingly Queen Guinevere, who since the dashing lad had entered, had not taken her eyes off him. “And with such help as yours, it seems to me, oh great King, that you have victory secured.”

Isayo looked at her in appreciation. The queen was of the age in which the fruits are ripened and golden by the splendor of the sun, still unset. Her beauty, of the most splendid that Britain knew, never faltered, and the deft artifices of her oriental slaves preserved her image, or even improved it, skillful in applying to her hair mixtures that cover the indiscretion of her gray hair, and applying cosmetics to her skin to make it as fresh as a dew-covered flower. Strings of precious pearls fell on the squared neckline of her green velour dress lined with ermine to highlight the whiteness of her décolletage. Upon responding to the knight’s gaze of gratitude with one that was prolonged and warm, the Queen smiled, and her fingers caressed the strands, as if she wished to play with Triste’s curls.

“Young man,” warned the King, “as you plan on helping me in such an enterprise, and you wish to earn great fame before sprouting a beard, I shall entrust to you a perilous mission. You will go to Spain to take a message of mine to King Juan, who will be in Sansueña or in Burgos. The King has promised me that he will gather a formidable army and march against the Moors, and that, after they have been taught their lesson, they will not surface here. This desire of mine is useful above all else to King Juan and to Christianity in Spain, and although King Juan is a brave *campeador*,³³ he is reluctant to activate campaigns. This, I tell you for your own governing. On a paper you will take my instructions and my recommendation for you.

“My husband,” interrupted Guinevere, “would it not be better to keep at your side Caballero Triste, who with his brave blade may aid you so?”

“We know well what we are doing, my wife,” Arthur decided severely, for he had always noticed in his wife an inclination that the dashing and kind knights would remain in court, and he walked looking over his shoulder and even with eyes in the back of his head. “And you, young man, rest your spirit tonight and tomorrow at day break come to ask your leave of me and also for the document.”

With this, they left to scatter themselves throughout the gardens, and the ladies and maidens of the Queen, as well as the pages, took him to some thickets of very fragrant shrubs, and they entertained him during the hours before dinner singing songs and dirges of love, playing the *vihuela*³⁴ and the lute softly and deliciously. Isayo felt slip through his veins a sweet tenderness, a wave of vibrant youth. Guinevere’s ladies were pleasant women, of mild character, and their sayings and witty remarks made disappear the melancholy to which the young man was inclined. While they were amusing themselves with ballads and music, the King appeared and called Isayo, taking him to the solitude of a covered path under protection of the stronghold. Without covering or crown, dressed only in light mail, Arthur inspired deeper trust.

“Sad young man,” murmured the King when they were in a place where no one could hear them, “at first I had not taken notice of the features of your face; but now I have noticed a

32 West Germanic tribes that lived near the Lower Rhine.

33 Pardo Bazán uses here *campeador*, meaning ‘champion,’ which evokes the word used to qualify *el Cid*, Spain’s epic hero, as in *el Cid campeador*.

34 A guitar-like string instrument, often with 12 paired strings.

certain similarity with someone whom I have known well... And I can no longer doubt: you have the same face as the great champion Tristán of Leonís when he was a young lad like you. You are, without a doubt, the ill-fated child whom your father's wife demanded be abandoned at the edge of the forest to be devoured by beasts. You are the only bloodline of that hero and prince that remains in Britain."

"I am, indeed, his son," stammered Isayo.

"Surely someone of your age should be encouraged to emulate your father in his eminent deeds, but not in what caused his misfortune and early death. Keep watch for the dragon of passions, which prowls around in search of its prey. And I say no more to you, may your discretion rival your bravery and the illustriousness of your lineage."

That night after a dinner of exquisite delicacies and aged wines and brandies, Isayo retired to his room, not without having kissed with respect the hand of the Queen and the King. At his door on the fine Persian carpet, Tronco the squire lay down, dagger in his belt.

"Here it is not necessary for you to guard me, good Tronco," declared Isayo. "No peril threatens me."

"Sometimes more perils run through the palaces, sir, than in those places uninhabited," affirmed Tronco. "It is easy to see that you are new to these adventures. But sleep peacefully until dawn, because Tronco is here so that nothing bad happens to you, and to wake you when it is time to gird your sword and put on your spurs."

It would have been close to midnight when Tronco, who was sleeping with one eye open, like hares, heard a slight, little noise at the door of the room, like soft feminine steps, and the scratching of a small hand with fine nails, at the same time as a faked cough. He stood up and slightly opened the door, behind which was a woman, her face covered with thick sendal, who made a motion to keep quiet.

"Good squire," she said in a voice so quiet that it seemed to be a whisper. Tell your master, Sir Triste, that a lady wishes to entrust him with a secret of her afflicted heart, hurt to the point of pain... She who is in need of help with her trouble and only Sir Triste can resolve her great misfortune."

Tronco's malicious appearance acquired an expression worthy of being reproduced by the image makers who carved in stone and in wood the distorted and mocking faces of monkeys and bugs. Striking up ironic reverence, he declared:

"Noble lady, return to your room, since my master, weary from the fatigue of the entire day, is in need of rest. Improper are these hours for honest ladies like you to come to the bedroom of gentlemen. If our queen Guinevere, of such good reputation, considered more chaste than Lucrecia of the Romans, were to find out, it would cost you dearly. In fact, go lie down on your fine sheets, which are waiting for the sweet weight of your flesh. This is good advice for which you should thank me."

The lady ran off, but minutes later she felt, in fact, true gratitude, because rounds were made in the palace, at the front of which was King Arthur himself with sword and round shield to see if all was in order, each in his own bed and no evil-doer in the palace. And at daybreak, Isayo, peaceful and innocent, having been given the document and permission, left the royal mansion.

The young man and his squire rode, and guided by the recently-learned news crossed all the land of France to the Pyrenees, entering through the gorges of Roncesvalles,³⁵ and they began approaching Pamplona. On the long journey, there was no shortage of perilous episodes, and not just a few were the adventures that arose promising exceptional honor to the new knight; but Isayo did not want to pursue them, even though his body boiled with desire to test his strength. He did not have the right to expose himself to grave injury or to be killed, without first delivering the message from the King of Britain to the Castilian Monarch and arrange with him the undoing of the formidable forces of the Moors, intent upon ending Christianity in Castile, to then turn against France. Isayo went straight to his destination without stopping. Upon sighting Pamplona he experienced, however, a moment of hesitation, for an adventure was presented to him that was impossible to refuse without showing signs of cowardice. At the foot of a bridge, appeared three figures armed immaculately, whose faces were concealed by visors, and who were shouting loudly:

“There is no passage; there is no passage through here! Whoever you are, bold knight, you would best be served turning back, you and that deformed and ridiculous squire that accompanies you. Search for roads with more paths, wade through the river if you so like, although it is half dry; but this bridge is guarded by three Alderetes, knights of this place, and they grant passage to no one without first having been in extraordinary battle with them.

And at this point, Tronco, with his baleful banter, offended perhaps for having heard himself called ridiculous, interjected, exclaiming:

“If they are three Alderetes, the fight cannot be extraordinary!”

To which the armed ones responded fiercely:

“Even though we are not accustomed to responding to squires, you must understand that your master will have to fight us, Alderete by Alderete.”

“With the three of you together I should like to fight, and it is a favor I ask for out of courtesy, since I am a foreigner and errant knight.”

The Alderetes conceded this to him, and shaking his large bridle, Isayo charged at them, with such force and spirit that he threw one off his saddle, and he put his lance through the joint of the visor of the other, wounding him gravely between his eyebrows, for which he began to ask for confession, and the third, seeing his brothers in such a poor state, stopped to rein in his dapple-gray, and confessing that the errant knight had won victory, and willingly without any other choice, the Alderetes let him pass freely.

Through very rustic paths, Triste was approaching the province of Burgos, and he reached King Juan’s court. It was not as polished and refined as that of Arthur, and from the first moment Isayo could see that there they lived ready for battle, and not for one moment did he lose sight of the imminent threat of the Moor who tried to overpower the capital of Castile, thus wounding the hearts of those who were reconquering Spain. When Isayo presented the letters he was carrying from King Arthur, the king of Castile took him in as a brother. The aid that he promised them was the most that he could wish for at such a time, because the Moors’ advance was threatening, and nothing else was spoken of in the country.

The King of Castile was strong and lean and had fiery eyes. However, his sister, Princess Mayor, had very lovable and affectionate eyes, which were the first thing the lad from Britain noticed about her. Her eyes were also big and black and adorned by thick eyelashes; the

³⁵ A small village in Spain’s Northern region of Navarre, this is the place where Roland (paladin of Charlemagne) died. *The Song of Roland* is the 12th century epic poem considered the oldest major representation of French literature.

Princess's lips competed with the coral Moorish earrings that hung from her small earlobes. The Princess of Castile was not a stunning beauty like the wife of Arthur, but a more attractive flower of youth, a tanned woman of a complexion of ripened wheat. Isayo was fascinated with watching her, and the King, who noticed the mutual fondness the knight and the Princess seemed to display toward each other from the first moment, was pleased that they courted each other, and, in contrast with the severity of that militarily-organized court, he arranged jousts, tournaments, and lance and javelin games, with the idea in mind that Arthur's messenger would show off his skills and agility, breaking lances on the knights from Burgos and from all of Castile that had been gathering in Burgos to prepare the resistance against the drive of the infidels.

Isayo, in effect, jousted and laced rings at the gallop, and the prize for his skills was a crimson sash that the Princess herself, with her small and shapely hands, tied at his waist. And thus in the banquets and in the evening galas, everyone ceded to Isayo the space next to Princess Mayor, and she tended to the knight, regaling him with bunches of rosemary, linen flounces, and other thoughtful trifles. The ladies of the Princess did not cease asking Caballero Triste details about Arthur's court, about how Queen Guinevere adorned herself and made herself beautiful, and one day, the Princess herself asked about the unfortunate luck of the two lovers, Tristán de Leonís and Iseo de Cornualla, and about the rosebush that, according to legend, grew intertwined in their sepulcher. In a dark moment the question was posed, because, as if the potion exercised its mysterious virtue all over again, from that moment forward, Triste³⁶ began to find that the Princess was too dark skinned, and that her eyes were like those of many water girls who went to fill their jugs at the city's fountain, and that she did not know how to dress in her finest princess clothes with the grace and finesse of Queen Guinevere of Britain nor of the ladies in waiting; and that, in short, all of Britain was more beautiful and worthy of attracting a dignified heart than in all the harsh court of King Juan, where they did not even know how to engage in war. And it was not only Queen Guinevere who enchained Triste's mind. It was there, in the very court of the Castilian monarch among people who did not know of conjurings nor of spells, as the Cid Ruy Díaz—whose memory was alive in Burgos and also in within the gray and sturdy walls of the church of Santa Gadea³⁷—never knew, where Triste understood that his soul was different from the souls of those warriors without complications, without melancholies; that if his sword was not weak his heart was, and that the only image engrained in him was the fairy's, with her blond hair that the moon silver-plated, and eyes green like the tranquil sea. And to unchain his heart, since the squire had given him a thousand tests of loyalty and had rescued him from more than one predicament, he confided in him the state of his spirit, an anxiety that he himself did not understand very well. The squire listened to him, the mocking expression of his face replaced with one of intense sorrow.

"Sir," he opined at last, "all this... what do I know? It seems to me that what is flowing in your blood are ferments and fervors, traces of the potion that harmed your parents and cost them their lives in the best time of their flourishing youth. Not in vain did King Arthur entrust you to flee from passions; and I tell you that in the little I know, dreams are far worse than passion. Passions satisfy themselves, but dreams never."

After saying this, Tronco's voice trembled, and it seemed as though within it there were tears he struggled to keep from opening up into a riverbed.

36 The original text reads "Tristán", a clear mistake, but has been corrected here to "Triste."

37 In the original text, *iglesia juradera* refers to the church of Santa Gadea, where the Cid made King Alfonso VI swear an oath that he was innocent of the death of his brother.

“Get married,” added Tronco in a dash of sincerity, “to the Princess, who raises you nearly to the stature of a King. Live with her as a faithful spouse. Keep out the poison of the potion! On your life, do not give the Breton fairy another thought! The days of the fairies have ended... Their hour has passed.”

While Isayo, indecisive, listened to his squire, doña Jerónima Torrente, the favorite lady and confidante of the Princess, entered in a panic, shouting: “Please, please! The Moors have taken your lady.”

“The King does not yet know! The Princess went this morning to delight in the royal garden, half a league from Burgos, and behold the frightful Moor Almilihacen Quevir surprised the guards that the Princess always had at her side, and he slayed them with his blade, and at this moment they are galloping with the Princess tied to the back of a horse, toward Nájera, where three days ago they succeeded in entering by blood and sweat.”

Isayo refused to hear any more. Suddenly, all of the indifference he felt for the Princess was replaced with the keen illusion of saving her and punishing her iniquitous abductors, and approaching the King, he asked for permission to attack Nájera and return Princess Mayor to her palace in Burgos.

It is deduced that the King granted this to him willingly. Of the troops the King offered him, Isayo accepted no more than twenty-five men under the command of three brave knights, named Velasco, Guzmán, and Mendoza. Just before the small troop caught sight of Nájera, the squire Tronco asked them to stop, and amidst the shade of some oak trees he removed his clothes and appeared disguised as a hunched old beggar woman, with such precision that his master hardly recognized him. Then he begged Isayo to remain hidden there until night, since he with his disguise would enter the city and it would be opened to them when the Moors would be sound asleep. Thus this is what Isayo’s group did, and, resting first at about midnight, they stealthily advanced, with their horses hooves wrapped in hemp, toward the village.

Arriving almost at the foot of the walls, they stopped and waited. Shortly after a half-hidden postern³⁸ opened, and leaving their saddles in the care of one of their own, the men from Castile went quietly and unseen into the village. Tronco, having abandoned his disguise, guided them. From the hidden corner of a shadowy street, Tronco opened the door of a shack, and from within it emerged two Christians who passed out torches to the troop, and before anyone realized Isayo and his men from Burgos had set fire to more than twenty houses that began to burn.

Amidst the confusion, the Castilians were able to send word to the inhabitants of Nájera, one by one, so that they could help; and thus they were able to focus on the monastery of San Benito, where Tronco had told them that Almilihacen had set up his residence and locked up the captive Princess. They found the doors unguarded because the Moorish garrison, with their cutlasses unsheathed, went out in a rush to see about that fire; and it was not difficult for Isayo to infiltrate the room where the Princess was on her knees praying, take her in his arms, throwing over her the veil of a Moorish slave, and leave with her on his back, repeating, “To the fire! Water, water!” He ran to the postern through which he had entered; he took the Princess to the small forest, and there he entrusted her to Tronco, who put her on the back of the horse and left in a flash on the road to Burgos. And then Caballero Triste and his small crew returned, now by horse, to Nájera, covered in flames and smoke, where only groaning and shouting could be heard; and they entered like unleashed devils, without leaving any Moor alive, until the young man managed to come face to face with Almilihacen Quevir himself and cross swords with him;

³⁸ Secondary door or gate, often in a structure such as a city wall.

but even though he wanted to finish him off in the same way as the chronicles relate that Galaor³⁹ did with the disfigured giant from the rock of Galtares, the Moor succeeded in fleeing amidst the confusion; his troops surrendered, not knowing against whom they were fighting and in absence of their leader, and Nájera reverted back to the Christians.

VI

One might imagine the joy in Burgos following the rescue of the Princess and also of the village of Nájera. With Caballero Triste's heroism and the joy in Burgos that followed this feat, Christians everywhere gained courage and hurriedly gathered, each one armed as well as they could, and they headed to the city to offer their services to the King, beseeching him to trample over the infidels until he cast them out of Castile and taught them a good lesson.

The King was more inclined to celebrate with feasts the happy news of the rescue of his sister and the recovery of the village than to leave and suffer the discomforts of a battle that might be long and possibly end badly for the armored Castilians. But no one judged from this that the King was a coward. On the contrary: he had given clear signs that he did not overestimate the value of life and that he had accomplished feats of heroism. But even though he did not fear the scythe, he did fear annoyances and privations and would give anything in the world not to suffer them. Nonetheless, since Isayo encouraged him and even reprehended his laziness, King Juan in the end joined the fight and demonstrated with much determination truly commendable zeal and enthusiasm.

Before setting off on his journey, he announced to the counts and the knights and to the good people of Burgos, by heraldic proclamations, that the knight Isayo de Leonís would bear on his shield from this day forward the figure of the young Princess, and at her feet many severed Moorish heads, and that, upon returning as victors over the Saracens, great festivities would be celebrated in Burgos to solemnize the wedding between Isayo, Prince of Britain, and the Princess Mayor of Castile.

Isayo listened to the proclamation with ill grace, since each day he was more convinced that it was not for the Princess that his heart burned but for the mysterious fairy, the one with hair made of light. Nevertheless, he consoled himself by thinking that the betrothal had not taken place and that now the only thing that mattered was to finish off the Moors in the service of God and also, indirectly, of King Arthur.

Thus began the preparations, and the good city of Burgos offered piles of gold coins to arm easily all those who came to sign up for the joint enterprise. Isayo organized the cavalry, and King Juan placed himself at the front of the archers and soldiers. The blacksmiths did not cease to forge lances and iron arrows, round shields and armored helmets. With threads and fabrics of oakum, women made types of cuirasses, defensive pieces against spears and sharp darts. The monks sent their strongest and most spirited novices to combat, with provisions of medicines and salutary herbs, barrels of wine, and large loads of bacon and cured meats. Eager to begin fighting, lords and counts arrived from afar with their banners and vessels and their armed retinue, eager to fight.

Appearing out of nowhere, some Frenchmen came to introduce themselves to Isayo offering their swords.

³⁹ The brother of Amadis de Gaul and hero of romances of chivalry.

Burgos was full of noise, activity, and military cheer. In the cathedral, which did not close day or night, hundreds of candles were burning, and the melody of the prayers sounded like the intense buzzing of a swarm of bees.

And finally one morning the army started in motion. The bells tumbled, and from the crowd could be heard cries as well as exclamations of hope and encouragement. The women lifted children in their arms so that fathers and brothers could see them one more time. Two abbots wearing miters blessed the troops. The archbishop did not do the blessing because he was riding on his finely caparisoned mule next to the King, prepared to fight like any other. On his saddlebow, an ivory virgin was placed in a box of morocco leather, and in a pouch the chalice to say mass.

From the balcony of the palace, the young Princess, broken down into tears, shook her luxuriously laced-trimmed handkerchief. Isayo tugged his small bridle. The stream of men and horses cleared the gates of the city and spilled forth through the yellow field, where the wheat had just been freshly reaped. The townspeople went out to the road in double file to see those men pass by who were to save for evermore their crops and their lives. A laborer, young and of good constitution, ran to the town asking to borrow a rusty lance, and he joined the troop, singing happily.

They walked three days in a row, until the frontrunners and lookouts advised that they spotted the army of the Moors. It was so numerous, they said, that it covered all the plain with countless soldiers on foot and on horse. Tronco, as agile as a monkey, went ahead and was able to bring encouraging news.

“Many are they, oh King!” he came to say, “But so many are the spikes that the harvester harvests them together. They are many, but we will see at the moment of the attack how many remain, because they are quite a close-knit people and there are more than a few Jews.”

In fact, the infidels had executed a decisive endeavor so as to dominate Castile once and for all, and capitalizing on their victory, to turn to France, a rich country, which aroused their greed. King Juan entrusted himself to Our Lady; Isayo thought about the rose that he carried hidden and that never ever withered; and the electrified Christian crowd shouted:

“Santiago, and at them!”⁴⁰

At the name of Santiago, Isayo became unsettled. Angriote had related the legend of the Galician Apostle, and he was aware that, in the formidable battles where the Cross is in peril, the martyr never refrained from fighting for his own people.

He spurred on Azor, saying that he wanted to be the first to challenge the infidels. And finding himself a good stretch of level field, he screamed out and threw down his gauntlet, shouting that he would challenge to single combat to the utterance the villain Almilihacen Quevir, captor of young ladies, and that here he would not manage to escape from him as he had done in Nájera. And since the Moors did not deny the laws of chivalry, and even practiced them at times, behold, that Almilihacen Quevir in the flesh, ruling over his Cordovan colt harnessed with elegant ornamentation, appeared at the forefront, and his squire picked up the glove that the Christian had thrown, as a sign that he accepted the challenge.

The two armies stopped marching, and there was a marvelous silence. Both challengers came out at once, their horses at full speed, lances lowered; and upon meeting each other, their shields made a sonorous crash. Isayo could see that his adversary was muscular and tall, with eyes of fire and a serious, bearded face. Distracted by contemplating him, he did not avert the

⁴⁰ This battle cry—*¡Santiago, y a ellos!*—frequently appears in chivalric romances.

second round of the lance, so vigorous that it broke his shield in two, and almost went through to his side. Triste then threw down his sword, and with surprising speed, cut into the helmet of the Moor, such that he split it apart; the steel going into his skull, and with his brains exposed, the infidel fell from his horse, with his arms open, like a diver who dives into the sea. With unseen speed, Isayo then jumped off his saddle, stripping the Moor of his gorget,⁴¹ cut off his head, raised it high as it oozed blood, hung it from his saddlebow, and, riding once again, turned his horse around, followed by a cloud of arrows; because the crowd does not understand chivalrous acts, and even when it was not polite to attack he who had won a good fight, what they wanted to do is finish him off, in revenge of the cruel death of their leader Almilhacen Quevir. And, at once, the Christian army, indignant and grateful for the victory of the one they called the Knight of the Princess, threw themselves into the group of Moors. Those of the Cross were outnumbered one to five, but they felt something mysterious that seemed to reveal to them a complete and resplendent triumph.

The fight lasted until the sun descended. Miracles of valor occurred in one place and another, in the barren field and in the stubble field, and immense poppies of blood blossomed by the thousands. The horses' legs were red, and on many the red covered their bellies. The swords were jagged from plunging them so deeply into the flesh and even cutting to the bone. Still, however, victory had not been definitively decided. There were moments in which the lead in numbers disconcerted the Christians. King Juan, wounded by an arrow to his shoulder, fainted from the sharpness of the pains and had been kept back at a distance in his tent, and the physicians applied ointment to his wounds, after having removed the sharp tip. Isayo took command and injected himself again among the group of Moors in a show of extreme spirit. He opened them as the prow of a boat opens the waves, but like them, they then closed in around him. Tronco, at his side, covering him with his deformed body, yielding his dagger with precision, approached his ear.

“Isayo de Leóns! Call upon Lord Santiago! I cannot. I have not been baptized!”

Isayo actually called the Apostle three times in a pleading voice. His soldiers seconded the shout.

“Lord Santiago! Lord Santiago! Invincible one! Look after us, as we are yours!”

And there where the west was tinted by the flaming sunglow, among the clouds of rose and ruby, a white steed appeared, carrying as its rider a pilgrim wearing a cape also white, sword unsheathed that he brandished over the Moors. The sky beamed with brightness wherever the steed went, and abysses of light could be seen behind the figure of the Saint, and on the ground the bundles of Moors suddenly fell, cut like the harvest, while others fled in droves, terrified. The Christians shouted crazed with joy:

“Santiago! Santiago! Victory!”

Isayo, astonished, could not take his eyes off the apparition, visible only to him, foretold by the rest... He planted his feet, kneeled on the bloody ground and made an oath to go in pilgrimage to Compostela as soon as he completed the other vow to break the spell on the wise Merlin so that he may be baptized. He would wear a short cloak, sew shells on it, wield his pilgrim's staff, humbly, and go to give thanks to the great errant Knight of the airs, to the one who flies over the battlefields and collects the souls of those who die defending the country and God.

41 An armor plate that protects the neck.

The night was drawing to a close when the Christian army began to realize what kind of day it had been. Thousands of Moors lay in piles. An immense booty would be collected the next day and justly distributed. The Moors who fled in confusion, wounded and with afflicted soul, were very few. Such a triumph, not seen since the days of the Campeador, was of utmost importance for the safety of Castile, and not only of Castile. So said Caballero Triste to the King upon asking him for permission to leave early the next day.

“And how is it that you wish to leave now, with your engagement to the Princess announced, when we are going to celebrate in Burgos the outstanding triumph, in such a large part, a work of yours?”

“Mine, no,” declared Isayo. “Lord Santiago and Saint Mary did it. And with respect to my wedding, you must know that I do not deserve the Princess. My blood is poisoned, for being born with the same love potion that destroyed my parents; I love a woman... who is not even a woman; who perhaps does not belong to humanity. I cannot explain any better what is happening to me. I beg you to ask the lady Princess to grant me her forgiveness, and to think from time to time with kindness about her knight who saved her from the Moor and went to battle for her, and that she pray often for Isayo de Leonís. And now consider also, oh great king of Castile! (that from today you are even greater), how I am obliged to take to my lord Arthur the answer to the message with which he sent me away, and how I have a vow to honor in Britain, which is breaking the spell cast on the wise Merlin. It does not bode well for errant knights to immerse themselves in the delights of marriage, and look at how the Cid was insulted because of his daughters. The errant knight, free and unrivaled. Good-bye, King Juan... Do not waste victory. Forward!”

VII

Isayo departed early, in fact, following thanksgiving mass that the archbishop said with sublime fervor, and knight and squire retraced the road, not without any encounters with lingering and dispersed Moors, in which Isayo managed to prove once more his invincible fearlessness. Once on French land, he noticed that the news of his outstanding triumph had traveled (in spite of the non-existence of radiograms then); and the jubilation was great, since at that time France found itself as threatened as Castile. Upon reaching at last Arthur’s Court, they received him with spectacular displays of affection and enthusiasm. The people on the street kissed his stirrups, and the young ladies had planted for him a road of flowers. In their minds, they imagined that it was Isayo, and no one else, who had destroyed the power of the Mohammedans, like another Charles Martel.⁴²

The young man’s protests were not enough to impede the extremes of idolatry. The King, although more reflexive and aware of the role that the Castilian soldiers played in the endeavor, also welcomed him as he would a son, hugging him and giving him the highest seat at the banquet. Guinevere devoured him with her eyes; and this was part of the reason that the knight, before nightfall, asked the King for permission to continue his journey and leave so as to sleep in the monastery.

42 An 8th Century, Belgian ruler of the Franks (West Germanic ethnic group), known for his victory at the Battle of Tours (732), which stopped Islamic presence in Europe.

“Pledged is my word, sir,” he affirmed respectfully, “and I must break wise Merlin’s spell, which will redound to the great benefit of Christianity and particularly of these kingdoms. Upon baptizing the Wise One, idolatry and old superstitions will come to an end. With the council and science of Merlin your kingdom, already so glorious, will reach utmost splendor. My conscience does not permit me to neglect this matter any longer, nor to fail at it by delaying. Thus then, oh King!, allow me to kiss your valiant hand as a sign of farewell.”

The King embraced him; the Queen drove her eyes into him once more, as if she wanted to drink up his face, and the young man left moments later and without restraint for the monastery. The prior received him also, nearly under a pallium;⁴³ the community lined up in double file to greet him upon his arrival, and one old man, considered saintly, murmured words of mystery. He was the one who had conquered the Moors, the protected one of the Apostle of Compostela!

They gave him the best quarters, next to the abbot’s; they uncorked in his honor bottles of aged wine that they were saving to fete the monarchs, and the next morning, the abbot bade farewell to his guest, his pouches well supplied, and even his pockets, since Isayo, as any good errant knight, was not concerned with such minutiae. But before climbing on Azor, he asked the abbot for advice on the enterprise he was about to undertake.

“In God and in my soul,” he said, “I have no idea how I might be capable of such a disenchantment. I have prayed, in case Our Lady wishes to inspire me, and it seems that I feel compelled to go toward there, toward the forest where the magic hawthorn grows; but this is all that occurs to me, and I know nothing about what I must do there. If it about fighting, that would be an easy thing, and I hope that it involves cutting off the head of some dragon.”

“My son,” declared the abbot, “I, who have spent the night in prayer so that God may enlighten me, do not know what to answer you. Not for this should you lose faith, nor faint, nor fear. Walk straight to the white hawthorn, and if you find no other measure, cut it at its base, as the wise one is imprisoned inside.”

“That is what I shall do,” exclaimed the knight, and soon thereafter at full trot with Azor, he headed with Tronco always following the sea shore toward the enchanted forest.

“Tronco, my friend!” he exclaimed when they stopped to regain strength. “I have seen through experience that, as well as being valiant and loyal, you are of ingenious subtlety. You do not know what leads me to the forest of the Fairies. I want to disenchant the wise Merlin, free him from the cruel prison in which the maligned Bibiana has confined him.”

“Careful,” responded Tronco. “Before you believe malignities, become well acquainted with that story. I have heard them say that Bibiana did perfectly well in holding the sorcerer in eternal prison. While the sorcerer was free, Christian religion would not advance in the land of the Breton. And, besides, his imprudent love for Bibiana was a source of scandal for all.”

“It matters not,” responded the Knight. “I have offered King Arthur the wizard’s rescue, and rescue him I shall. Put your keen understanding in play, Tronco, and get me out of this mess in which I find myself.”

The pity displayed on the squire’s face, ever-effused with malice, surprised Isayo. It was evident that the idea of the disenchantment repulsed him immensely, although it was difficult to imagine why.

They walked, then, on the shore of the rough coast, sleeping once again in the humble farms or fishermen’s huts, where news of Isayo’s exploits had not arrived, but they recognized in

43 A canopy held up by four poles under which people of importance stand during solemn or notable events.

him with affection the knight of before who one day shared in their frugal pittance and who lodged under their roof. The children met him with innocent laughter, and the old women, leaving the spinning wheel, sang sweet melodies. And the Knight of perennial sadness felt this sadness dissipate upon his contact with those simple souls who had not forgotten him.

At last one afternoon they reached the place where the fairy godmother set the meeting with her godson that memorable day. It was, as will be remembered, the place of the Giants' Dance⁴⁴ or their Circle, where enormous rocks were believed to have been brought from the country of Wales by Merlin in days past. The view of the extraordinary monument made a profound impression on the Knight. Memories flooded back to him. It was there that the fairy godmother appeared to him in her radiant beauty, with flowing hair of fine and pure gold that cloaked her from head to toe and floated upon the whiteness of her tunic. And once again he felt that he could love only her with an inconsolable love, a love of bewitchment as well, and of those loves that know no cure and are not subjected to the rules of reason. And, concentrating his thoughts on the memory of his adored one, he extended his hand toward the circle of frightening rocks, and he conjured them, for they were placed there by Merlin's black magic and sorcery, to suggest to him, if only out of gratitude, how to break his spell.

It was already night when Isayo expressed this desire. The moon had just appeared, like a nimble druid⁴⁵ sickle ready to cut, from the tree of the bloodthirsty God, the sacred mistletoe⁴⁶ of the Celts. And under its weak light the Knight saw a strange spectacle. The stones of the Circle of Giants that commemorated the glory of the slain warriors began to oscillate gently, with measured rhythm. Trepidation filled the first moments in which the said stones came to life and executed their terrible dance. Little by little, the colossal monoliths began to move, as if they were coming out of their age-old sleep and wanted to come back to a life that rested obscurely in their entrails of stone.

They wobbled now, over their deeply buried base, and at times in their swaying they bumped nodding heads together, producing a noise like shields hit by lances, or like the deafening rumbling of the armies that crash against another. In the end, with the strength of the violent vibrations in which they leaned toward the ground, the stones managed to pull themselves up and break loose completely, freed to dance, which they set about doing with fury. Isayo, frozen with terror, saw them run as if they were agile roe deer, and he noticed also that they acquired human form, though rudimentary and rough. They looked like warriors armed with clubs, lances, and deformed swords, their helmets crowned with laurels larger than shrubs, and, under their laurelled helmets, their face was one of a skull of hollow eyes. The heroic giants had turned into skeletons, like Tristán de Leonís, and love and glory had been reduced to this, to dried bones, perhaps to condemned souls. Thus thought Isayo, while the giants danced furiously softening their arms and narrowing their circle around him, frightened of what he was seeing. Yes, the giants were surrounding him, joining closer and closer. Their faces—like those of all skulls—seemed to laugh sarcastically, while their colossal arms threatened. The frightful wall of skeletons was drawing together; the circle was now so closed that the young

44 Stonehenge.

45 A priestly and learned man in the ancient Celtic societies. Druids served as priests, judges, scholars, and teachers, and also appear as wizards and magicians.

46 A symbol of immortality for the Druids of the Celtic communities, associated with the winter solstice and the birth of a new year.

man saw himself crushed by the stones turned men, and he felt the sweat run down his face and his teeth chattering from fear. There are cases in which, regardless of how much of an errant knight one is, and how intrepid one's heart, one feels faint before a somber force that subjugates us. Isayo could not see with tranquility how the Circle of Giants managed to surround him, and he shouted with the anguish of one who is drowning:

“My Godmother! Godmother of my soul! Help me!”

The noise stopped as if by a spell; each stone returned to its place; the light of the moon illuminated the eternal repose of the enormous posts of granite, and from some flakes of vapor appeared the fairy, hair flowing, white robe floating, at her waist the traditional sickle.

If Isayo were less moved he would have observed that his squire Tronco was missing from this scene. But he did not have eyes or heart except for the godmother, doubting still of the happiness of having her within arms' reach.

VIII

With a shout of infinite excitement, of mad passion, Isayo pulled the fairy closer to him, and she let herself be drawn to him.

“Did you not recognize me,” she stammered, wrapping him in the silk blanket of her luminous hair. “Did you not recognize me? Tell me, my love. It was I who accompanied you under the name and shape of Tronco, defended you, attempted to make the road shorter and the hours easier. I did not leave your side for one instant. I was Tronco, your squire... And now, fulfilling my promise, I come when you call me... But, why have you called me? Our passion is fatal, and I ask you, Isayo, to forget it, as you will forget the tremendous impression of the dance of the giants. In a cursed hour and by misfortune I cared for you; in a cursed hour, I took you to your father's castle so that from the pale of death he would arm you as a knight.”

“Do not say that, my love,” the warrior murmured, vibrant with excitement and madness. “In a favorable moment I find you, in a favorable hour you have returned and appeared to me with your seductive shape of a woman. You will be a woman for me, and I shall you love you like the Galician Knight Mariño loved Sirena⁴⁷ and lived long years of happiness with her. Here, on this seashore where I have spent my childhood, or in the castle of my parents, which I shall rebuild for you, the two of us will be forgotten by the world and surrounded by so much happiness.”

“Isayo, you are dreaming. You are destined for greater deeds than you have already done. And I... I, in the end, would be happy with you for a short time, but... you must give up the endeavor that brings you here; that you give up on breaking the spell of the *protobrujo* Merlin.”

“I cannot, my beloved,” answered Triste, devouring her with caresses, pressing her against his heart. “I cannot... I have given my word; I have pledged before God to free Merlin so

47 The most common thread of this tale recounts that a sailor shipwrecked on the Galician island of Sálvora falls in love with a beautiful siren, who is unable to speak. He names her *Mariña* (meaning ‘of the sea’). They marry and have a son. To cure her of her mutism, he frightens her by pretending to drop their son into the open flame of a bonfire lit on the night of San Juan. In a state of fear, she shouts her first words, “My son!”, thus gaining the ability to speak from that moment forward. One version holds that the sailor is the famed Roland, who in fact survived the Battle of Roncevaux Pass, contrary to the popular telling of *Song of Roland*.

that he may be baptized. I must save his soul, and yours as well; because in my castle I shall baptize you, just as the knight Mariño is said to have baptized his beautiful Sirena in the lands of the Apostle Santiago.”

The fairy became quiet. Her eyes were filled with tears, her face became pale, and she wilted visibly as a white lily that has just been cut.

“It is Destiny!” she murmured. “Destiny that orders it. Then may destiny be fulfilled.”

“Yes, it must be fulfilled!” affirmed Isayo, who blind with love could not see the painful and mournful calm that the fairy began to show. “Yes, I must disenchant Merlin; but, my love, I know not how! From you I hope for what I have failed to find: the formula. What should I do? Tell me. If you do not know, look for the evil Bibiana, who had no objection treating so poorly her lover and teacher, and convince her to tell you the secret and the talisman. Whatever is necessary for me to do I shall do, even if I have to pass through a bonfire flame higher than the lighthouse or combat the giants that all together have just surrounded me.”

A desperate moan escaped from the fairy’s breast, and admiring with subtle hands the curly hair of Isayo, she said in a tearful voice:

“Do you see the branch that is growing to the north side? In it rests a turtledove that coos a tone so painful that it pulls on your heartstrings. If you bring the turtledove to death while it intones its amorous elegy, with its blood Merlin will become disenchanted. Now you know. Let me go, my young man, because I do not want to see such a loving bird die, so tender, so faithful, so unhappy...”

“Will you return? You will not leave me alone very long?” implored Isayo, taking her by the waist and pulling her closer to him.

“I shall return without delay,” declared the fairy in an unexplainable tone in which the mystery of her soul was revealed. When you mortally wound the bird and disenchant Merlin, you will see me!”

Isayo closed his eyes to better feel the fairy’s spirit close to his mouth. When he opened them, the fairy was no longer there, and in the branches of the pine tree, the turtledove’s nostalgic cooing could be heard.

Isayo himself, he who was going to be its slayer, was moved with pity, and he would have given anything for the disenchantment of Merlin to consist of a deed worthy of a knight, such as fighting with a man powerful beyond measure or descending to the bottom of the seas or a dreadful chasm, instead of wounding without risk a defenseless, innocent, little bird. Nevertheless, in his resolve, he prepared his bow, which he always carried with him supplied with short arrows, and guiding himself by the song, for the turtledove could not be seen, shot the arrow with precision. A pitiful moan was heard, not from the tree but at its base, and within a moment resounded Merlin’s tremendous shout, clamorous, superhuman.

The white hawthorn had split in two, and the frightful wizard came out with his hair and beard as white as the brilliant whiteness of the snow, and that reached his feet and covered completely his aged nakedness. His face was barely visible, and his dry hands emerged from the thickly tangled gray hairs. He was a frightful and spectral apparition there in the moonlight. And since the hawthorn had become bare of its vegetation and the flower that covered it, Isayo understood that the florescence of the enchanted tree was nothing more than the white hair of Merlin, which grew out as a plea and a constant lament of the captivity of the wizard.

And when Isayo thought that the old man was going to thank him for his freedom, for the incalculable service, behold that he sees him furious, brandishing nails that measured as long as a

palm, grown beyond measure, like his beard and hair, and wanting to rip the eyes out of his benefactor.

“Miserable man, illegitimate son of Leonís, what have you done?” he shouted. “You killed her! You killed her! The last fairy, the genius of Britain, the celestial Bibiana, my love, my star!”

“I?” repeated Isayo, without knowing what was happening. “I? Yes, I shot a turtledove with my arrow!”

“You shot Bibiana, the one who was the charm of my tired years, Bibiana, the one with hair of gold!” frenetically repeated the specter. “She imprisoned me in the hawthorn; but she would have freed me in the end, and then, only looking at her, I would have been happier than King Arthur in his court. Oh, Bibiana, my charm, come, so that I may catch your last glance.”

And bending down to the ground, Merlin lifted in his skeletal arms the body of the fairy godmother, in whose heart, still beating, was driven the arrow of the young man.

And upon his seeing that, actually, it was his idol, the one he adored, the one who was lying without life because of him, he exhaled a frightful shriek, and threw himself over the dying woman, wanting to revive her. And Merlin with his magical power could not do it because Destiny, superior to all magic, had thus decided it. The last Breton fairy was dying, and her green eyes turned toward the slayer with a light of inextinguishable passion.

Still her lips seemed to murmur:

“Isayo! Isayo!” And then her eyelids closed; her breath stopped.

Merlin was crying... The tears slid down his dry face and rolled through the forest of the fluvial beard, thick like the fleece of lamb, burning tears. And turning for the last time toward Isayo, he hurled the curse:

“May you see yourself eaten by crows... May your drinks turn into bile, and your food to ashes... May you be conquered by villains... May all that you undertake in good faith turn against you... May all identify your parents so as to dishonor them... And Arthur, who sent you to disenchant me, may he be affronted and then turned into a crow.”

Isayo fled, chased by the cavernous voice of sorcery and by the pure horror of his act. Of what good was his desire to serve by doing good? Pure and saintly love? Virtue? His heroic valor? An unknown force takes us and guides us in spite of ourselves; we believe we are doing good, and we do harm; we fumble along in the darkness, and we send death like sending a caress, in an instant of error in judgment. We plan to be noble warriors, and the stain of illegitimacy and of sin slaps us in the face.

The entire night Isayo wandered through the deserted low-lying lands filled with brush, through the rough coast, tempted to let himself fall from an elevated rock to the sea that bellowed and deafeningly reverberated... Inside his brain he heard something like the galloping of horses, and his heart produced a sound of forging. He thought he saw coming out of each *retama*⁴⁸ the exact image of the last fairy, and the words of his romance and the cooing of the turtledove enchantress echoed in his ears. But the lands were deserted, the stones of the Giants immobile, and no apparition disturbed the painful and dry serenity of the landscape.

And seated on a rock, Isayo cried as a child, calling futilely to Bibiana, and even invoking her to appear, at least in the ridiculous figure of the squire Tronco. No one answered his calls. Day was breaking, and slowly he headed to the hermitage of Angriote.

48 Spanish broom brush, also the type of surroundings in which Tristán was left to die (note 6).

The hermit gave him bread, milk, and sympathy. Isayo confessed without hiding anything, and regretful, and sadder than ever, walked away to fulfill his vow of visiting the sepulcher of the Apostle Santiago in Compostela.