

THE JUDGE'S WIFE

Nicolás Vidal always knew that he would lose his life for a woman. He was predicted on the day of his birth and confirmed by the owner of the store on the only occasion when he allowed him to see his fortune in the coffee shop, but he did not imagine that the cause would be Casilda, Judge Hidalgo's wife. He spotted her for the first time the day she came to town to get married. He did not find her attractive, because he preferred brazen, swarthy females, and that transparent young woman in her travel suit, with the fleeting look and fine fingers, useless to give pleasure to a man, was as inconsistent as a handful of ash. Knowing well his destiny, he took care of women and throughout his life he fled from all sentimental contact, drying his heart for love and limited to quick encounters to circumvent loneliness. So insignificant and remote was Casilda that he did not take precautions with her, and when the moment came she forgot the prediction that was always present in her decisions. From the roof of the building, where he had crouched with two of his men, he observed the young lady from the capital when she got out of the car on the day of her marriage. She arrived accompanied by half a dozen of her relatives, as livid and delicate as she was, who attended the ceremony fanning themselves with an air of frank consternation and then left to never return.

Like all the villagers, Vidal thought that the bride would not stand the weather and soon the comadres should dress her for her own funeral. In the unlikely event that she could resist the heat and dust that entered her skin and fixed her soul, she would undoubtedly succumb to her husband's bad humor and bachelor mania. Judge Hidalgo was twice her age and had been sleeping alone for so many years, he did not know where to begin to please a woman. Throughout the province they feared his severe temper and his stubbornness to keep the law, even at the expense of justice. In the exercise of his functions he ignored the reasons for good feeling, punishing with equal firmness the theft of a hen that the qualified homicide. He wore black rigorous so that everyone knew the dignity of his office, and despite the irreducible dust of that people without illusions always wore booties polished with beeswax. A man like that is not made for a husband, the gossips said, but the unfortunate omens of the wedding were not fulfilled, on the contrary, Casilda survived three consecutive births and seemed happy. On Sundays she went with her husband to the twelve o'clock mass, imperturbable under her Spanish mantilla, untouched by the inclemencies of that perennial summer, discolored and silent like a shadow. Nobody heard him more than a faint greeting, nor did he see more daring gestures than a nod or a fleeting smile, it seemed volatile, about to vanish in an oversight. It gave the impression of not existing, that's why everyone was surprised to see his influence on the Judge, whose changes were remarkable.

While Hidalgo continued to be the same in appearance, funereal and harsh, his decisions at the Court took a strange turn. In the public stupor, he released a boy who stole his employer, arguing that for three years the employer had paid less than what was fair and the money stolen was a form of compensation. He also refused to punish an adulterous wife, arguing that the husband had no moral authority to demand honesty, if he himself maintained a concubine. The malicious tongues of the people murmured that Judge Hidalgo turned around like a glove when he crossed the threshold of his house, took off his solemn robes, played with his children, laughed and sat Casilda on his knees, but those murmurings were never confirmed. Anyway, they attributed to his woman those acts of benevolence and his prestige improved, but none of that interested Nicolás Vidal, because he was outside the law and was certain that there would be no mercy for him when they could wear it in front of the Judge. He did not listen to the gossip about Dona Casilda and the few times he saw her from afar, he confirmed his first assessment that it was only a blurry ectoplasm.

Vidal had been born thirty years earlier in a windowless room of the only brothel in town, the son of Juana La Triste and of an unknown father. He had no place in this world and his mother knew it, so he tried to tear it from his belly with herbs, sail lines, bleach and other brutal resources, but the creature was determined to survive. Years later, Juana La Triste, seeing that son so different, realized that the drastic abortion systems that failed to eliminate him, instead tempered his body and soul to give him the hardness of iron. As soon as he was born, the midwife picked him up to look at him in the light of a lamp and immediately noticed that he had four nipples.

"Poor thing, he will lose his life for a woman," he predicted, guided by his experience in these matters.

Those words weighed like a deformity in the boy. Maybe his existence would have been less miserable with a woman's love. To compensate him for the numerous attempts to kill him before he was born, his mother chose for him a name full of beauty and a solid surname, chosen at random; but that name of prince was not enough to conjure the fatal signs and before the age of ten the boy had his face marked with a knife by the fights and very soon after he lived as a fugitive. At twenty he was the leader of a gang of desperate men. The habit of violence developed the strength of his muscles, the street made him ruthless and loneliness, to which he was condemned for fear of losing love, determined the expression of his eyes.

Any inhabitant of the town could swear to see him that he was the son of Juana La Triste, because like her, her pupils were watery with tears without spilling. Every time an offense was committed in the region, the guards went out with dogs to hunt down Nicolás Vidal to silence the protest of the citizens, but after a few laps through the hills they returned empty-handed. They did not really want to find him, because they could not fight him. The gang consolidated its bad name in such a way that the villages and haciendas paid a tribute to keep it away. With these donations, the men could rest easy, but Nicolás Vidal forced them to keep on horseback, in the midst of a storm of death and ruin so that they would not lose their taste for war or lose their prestige. Nobody dared to face them. On a couple of occasions Judge Hidalgo asked the Government to send army troops to reinforce his police, but after some useless excursions the soldiers returned to their barracks and the outlaws to their adventures. Only once was Nicolás Vidal about to fall into the trap of justice, but his inability to move him saved him. Tired of seeing the laws run over, Judge Hidalgo decided to ignore the scruples and prepare a trap for the bandit. He realized that in defense of justice he was going to commit an atrocious act, but of two evils he chose the least. The only bait that occurred to him was Juana La Triste, because Vidal did not have other relatives or knew him loves. He removed the woman from the premises, where she scrubbed floors and cleaned latrines in the absence of clients willing to pay for their services, put her in a custom-made cage and placed her in the center of the Plaza de Armas, with no more consolation than a jug of water.

-When you finish the water will start screaming. Then his son will appear and I'll be waiting for him with the soldiers," the judge said. The rumor of that punishment, in disuse since the time of the slaves cimarrones, reached

Nicolás Vidal's ears shortly before his mother drank the last sip of the pitcher. His men saw him receive the news in silence, without altering his impassive solitaire mask or the calm rhythm with which he sharpened his knife against a leather strap. He had not had contact with Juana La Triste for many years and he did not keep a single pleasant memory of his childhood, but that was not a sentimental matter, but a matter of honor. No man can endure such an offense, the bandits thought, as they readied their weapons and their mounts, ready to go to the ambush and leave their lives in it if necessary. But the boss did not show hurry.

As the hours passed, the tension in the group increased. They looked at each other sweating, not daring to comment, waiting impatiently, their hands on the grips of the revolvers, on the horse's mane, on the hilts of the bows. Night came and the only one who slept in the camp was Nicolás Vidal. At dawn, the opinions were divided among the men, some believed that he was much more heartless than they ever imagined and others that his boss planned spectacular action to rescue his mother. The only thing that nobody thought was that his courage could be lacking, because he had shown signs of having it in excess. At noon they could no longer bear the uncertainty and went to ask him what he was going to do.

"Nothing," he said. -And your mother? "We'll see who has more balls, the Judge or me," Nicolás Vidal replied imperturbably. On the third day, Juana La Triste no longer cried out for mercy or prayed for water, because her tongue had dried and the words died in her throat before she was born, she lay curled on the floor of her cage with her eyes lost and her lips swollen, moaning like an animal in moments of lucidity and dreaming of hell the rest of the time. Four armed guards guarded the prisoner to prevent neighbors from giving her a drink. Their laments occupied the whole town, they entered through the closed shutters, they were introduced by the wind through the doors, they remained attached to the corners, the dogs picked them up to repeat them howling, they infected the newborns and they ground the nerves of those who I listened The judge could not avoid the parade of people in the square sympathizing with the old woman, nor could stop the solidary strike of the prostitutes, which coincided with the fortnight of the miners. On Saturday the streets were taken by the rude miners, eager to spend their savings before returning to the ditches, but the town offered no entertainment other than the cage and that murmur of pity brought from mouth to mouth, from the river to the coast road. The priest led a group of parishioners who came before Judge Hidalgo to remind him of Christian charity and beg him to exempt that poor innocent woman from that martyr's death, but the magistrate put the latch on his office and refused to hear them, betting that Juana La Triste would endure another day and her son would fall into the trap. Then the notables of the town decided to go to Dona Casilda.

The Judge's wife received them in the gloomy living room of her house and listened to her reasons. Callada, with her eyes downcast, as was her style. Three days ago her husband was absent, locked in his office, awaiting Nicolás Vidal with a senseless determination. Without looking out the window, she knew everything that was happening on the street, because the noise of that long torment was also coming into the vast rooms of her house. Doña Casilda waited for the visitors to leave, dressed her children with Sunday clothes and left with them for the plaza. He had a basket with provisions and a jug of fresh water for Juana La Triste. The guards saw her appear around the corner and guessed her intentions, but they had precise orders, as well is that they crossed their rifles in front of her and when she wanted to move forward, observed by an expectant crowd, they took her by the arms to prevent him. Then the children started screaming.

Judge Hidalgo was in his office in front of the plaza. He was the only inhabitant of the neighborhood who had not plugged his ears with wax, because he remained attentive to the ambush, stalking the sound of Nicolás Vidal's horses. For three days with his nights he endured the crying of his victim and the insults of the mutinous neighbors before the building, but when he distinguished the voices of his children he understood that he had reached the limit of his resistance. Exhausted, he left his Court with a Wednesday beard, his eyes feverish with vigil and the weight of his defeat on his back. He crossed the street, entered the quadrangle of the square and approached his wife. They looked at each other sadly. It was the first time in seven years that she faced him and chose to do it in front of the whole town. Judge Hidalgo took the basket and the jar from Dona Casilda and he himself opened the cage to help his prisoner.

"I told you, he has less balls than I do," Nicolás Vidal laughed when he found out what had happened. But his laughter became bitter the next day, when they told him that Juana La Triste had hanged himself in the brothel lamp where he spent his life, because he could not resist the embarrassment of his only son leaving her in a cage in the center of the Plaza de Armas. _The Judge had his time, said Vidal. His plan was to enter the town at night, catch the magistrate by surprise, give him a spectacular death and place him inside the damn cage, so that when he woke up the next day everyone could see his remains humiliated. But he learned that the Hidalgo family had left for a seaside resort to pass the bad taste of defeat.

The hint that they were being persecuted for revenge reached Judge Hidalgo halfway, at an inn where they had stopped to rest. The place did not offer enough protection until the detachment of the guard came, but it had been a few hours ahead and his vehicle was faster than the horses. He calculated that he could reach the other town and get help. He ordered his wife to get into the car with the children, pressed down on the pedal and took to the road. He must have arrived with a wide margin of security, but it was written that Nicolás Vidal would meet that day with the woman from whom he had fled all his life.

Exhausted by the nights of sailing, the hostility of the neighbors, the embarrassment suffered and the tension of that race to save his family, the heart of Judge Hidalgo jumped and burst without noise. The car without control went out of the way, gave some stumbles and stopped at last on the side. Doña Casilda took a couple of minutes to realize what had happened. She had often put herself in the case of being a widow, for her husband was almost an old man, but he did not imagine that he would leave her at the mercy of his enemies. He did not stop to think about that, because he understood the need to act immediately to save the children. He looked around the place where he was and almost burst into tears, because in that bare expanse, burned by a merciless sun, there were no signs of human life, only the rugged hills and a sky bleached by the light. But with a second look he saw the shadow of a grotto on a slope, and there he ran, carrying two creatures in his arms and the third clinging to their skirts.

Casilda climbed three times, carrying her children one by one to the top. It was a natural cave, like many others in the mountains of that region. He checked the interior to make sure it was not an animal's hideout, arranged the children in the back and kissed them without a tear.

-Within a few hours the guards will come to look for them. Until then do not leave for no reason, even if you hear me scream, have you understood? -he ordered them. The little ones shrank in terror and with a last glance of goodbye the mother descended from the hill. She reached the car, lowered her husband's eyelids, brushed off her clothes, adjusted her hair, and sat down to wait. He did not know how many men the band of Nicolás Vidal was composed of, but he prayed that there would be many, that would give them a job to be satisfied with it, and he gathered his strength wondering how long it would take to die if he took pains to do it little by little. She wanted to be opulent and strong to resist them and gain time for her children.

He did not have to wait a long time. Soon he saw dust on the horizon, heard a gallop and gritted his teeth. Disconcerted, she saw that it was a single rider, who stopped a few meters from her with the gun in his hand. His face was marked with a knife and he recognized Nicolás Vidal, who had decided to go after Judge Hidalgo without his men, because that was a private matter that they had to arrange between the two. Then she understood that she should do something much harder than die slowly.

The villain had only one glance to understand that his enemy was safe from any punishment, sleeping his death in peace, but there his wife was floating in the reverberation of the light. He jumped off the horse and approached him. She did not lower her eyes or move and he stopped in surprise, because for the first time someone challenged him without fear. They measured themselves in silence for some eternal

seconds, gauging each other's strengths, estimating their own tenacity and accepting that they were facing a formidable adversary. Nicolás Vidal kept the revolver and Casilda smiled.

The woman of the judge won every moment of the following hours. He used all the resources of seduction recorded since the dawn of human knowledge and others that he improvised inspired by necessity, to offer that man the greatest pleasure. Not only did she work on her body as a skilled craftswoman, pulsing every fiber in search of pleasure, but she put the refinement of her spirit at the service of her cause. Both understood that they played their lives and that gave their encounter a terrible intensity. Nicolás Vidal had fled from love since his birth, he did not know the intimacy, the tenderness, the secret laughter, the feast of the senses, the joyful joy of the lovers. Every minute that passed, the detachment of guards and with them the firing squad came closer, but it also brought him closer to that prodigious woman and that is why he gave them with pleasure in exchange for the gifts that she offered him. Casilda was modest and shy and had been married to an austere old man who was never naked before. During that unforgettable afternoon she did not lose sight of the fact that her goal was to buy time, but at some point she abandoned herself, marveling at her own sensuality, and felt for that man something similar to gratitude. Therefore, when he heard the distant noise of the troops, he begged him to flee and hide in the hills. But Nicolás Vidal preferred to wrap her in his arms to kiss her for the last time, thus fulfilling the prophecy that marked his destiny.