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Petrona and Rosalía (Translation of Félix Tanco y Bosmeniel's "Petrona y Rosalía")

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Recommended Citation

"Petrona and Rosalía" (translation of Félix Tanco y Bosmeniel's "Petrona y Rosalía"). *Metamorphoses: A Journal of Literary Translation*. Spring 2017: 170-193.

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FÉLIX M. TANCO Y BOSMENIEL

*Translated from the Spanish by Thomas Genova**Edited by Thalia Pandiri and Elliott Lopez Farquhar*

PETRONA AND ROSALIA

Señor Don Antonio Malpica y Lozano and his wife Doña Concepción Sandoval Buendía were sprawled out in the armchairs of their spacious dining room, luxuriating in the fresh breeze that, in the searing dog days of summer, normally kicks up between ten and eleven in the evening, much to the consolation of those of us who live in Cuba sweating and panting with the seasonal heat.

These two were from rich and noble families in Havana. As far as the señor was concerned, however, they used to say that his people were not members of any ancient and venerable house, but upstarts who had belonged to the commonest classes of Spain. Maybe that's true and maybe it isn't; it matters little to our story whether his lordship's ancestors were filthy rich or just filthy.

"You know what," Doña Concepción said to her husband one day while discussing household matters, "I figure that black girl, la negra Petrona's¹ pregnant."

"Perhaps she is," answered Don Antonio, yawning.

"How can you be so cool about it?"

"Well, what are we supposed to do about it, Conchita?" If she's pregnant, like you figure, then she'll give birth. We'll have one more slave or one less slave to show for it. A little patience."

"And what, you think I'm going to tolerate such shamelessness in the negra?"

"I'm not saying you should. What I'm saying is what can we do about it."

1 "Negra" is the feminine form of the Spanish word for "black." Given the incommensurability of North American and Cuban racial categories (resulting from the two regions' sharply different colonial experiences), wherever possible, I have endeavored to leave racial designators in Spanish, glossing them within the body of the translated text when their meanings are not obvious (as I have done here). While the effect may occasionally transgress against contemporary Anglophone racial mores, I wish to avoid the epistemic violence of assimilating the nineteenth-century Cuban society that Tanco's story critiques to twenty-first century North American racial paradigms. For the same reason, this translation uses a similar non-assimilative strategy for references to Cuban plantation culture and culturally specific forms of address. (T.G.)

"What can we do? Send her straight to Santa Lucía and tell the overseer to settle accounts, and let her have the thing in a slave hut."

"But, *hija*, consider that this *negra* has been serving us for fourteen years with the utmost decorum and—poor thing—her only crime is falling in love."

"Well, *hijo*, she can go to the sugar mill. There are more than enough negro bucks to make love to her there. She won't have the thing in my house, I'll tell you right now so that we don't have problems later. I can't allow scandals in my house, not of that sort. We have a son who's not a little boy anymore and it's not fitting for him to see such indecency.

"Don't get yourself all worked up, *mujer*. We can send her to the sugar mill and that'll be the end of the story."

"Then send her—and have them lay her face down and give her a good *bocabajo* whipping."

"Alright. She'll get her *bocabajo*. What else?"

"Nothing else. What a shameless *negra*. And who's the cad that got her into this mess?"

"The Devil. Who'd bother to worry about such things?"

When they had arrived at this point, the clock struck eleven and husband and wife stood up and, agreed as to what had to be done with Petrona, serenely tucked themselves into bed.

Four months went by, the slave's pregnancy began to show, and it became clear that Señora Doña Concepción had not been mistaken in her suspicions. Firm in her resolution to send the slave to Santa Lucía, she told her husband to have the muleteer from the sugar mill come to the house with three mules, and return at six o'clock the next morning. Don Antonio listened to his wife calmly and agreed, but told her to dispense with the *bocabajo*, as Petrona was already going to suffer more than enough feeding the mill with sugar cane and putting up with the crack of the overseer's whip.

"Out of the question," answered Doña Concepción. "If we don't punish the shameless wretch thoroughly, tomorrow we'll be back to our old ways again."

"Agustín! Agustín!" Don Antonio called out to the muleteer, who instantly appeared with his hat in his hand.

"Look, Petrona is going to the sugar mill on one of those mules. Ask her for her clothes, and put them in the pannier with her."

Agustín withdrew to carry out his master's orders and told the wretched creature to get ready to go to Santa Lucía. Her whole body trembling like a shaky tub, Petrona ran to Don Antonio's side and begged

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him, with bended knees and teary eyes, not to send her to the sugar mill, asking at the same time, surprised, what offence she had committed to be dismissed from household service.

"Get up," Don Antonio answered her, "and ask the Señora."

Doña Concepción, who was present, said: "You don't think that belly's reason enough to skin you alive, you stupid whore?"

"My mistress," Petrona answered, "forgive me, Your Grace."

"Aren't you fresh? You want me to forgive you? Señor Pantaleón'll give you your penance at the sugar mill. Out! Out! And pack your rags."

"My master," said the slave, addressing Don Antonio, "Save me! For the love of Young Master Niño Fernandito, whatever Your Grace does, don't let them send me to the sugar mill."

"Impossible. The Señora has ordered it, and you must obey."

"And Your Grace consents?"

"What can I do if those are the Señora's orders?"

"Give me a letter granting your permission to seek another master, sir."

"I'll give you a letter, you great cur, telling the overseer at Santa Lucía to give you what you deserve," said Doña Concepción, "Get out! Get out, I said!"

The negra had no choice but to keep quiet, obey, and resign herself to the terrible sugar mill where toil, torture, and death were in store for her.

The next day she got on the mule and went on her way, weeping inconsolably and thinking a thousand sad thoughts about the mill, the whip and the overseer waiting for her.

After arriving at the sugar mill, the muleteer Agustín reached into the tin satchel hanging around his neck, removed Don Antonio's letter for señor Pantaleón, and delivered it. In the letter Don Antonio said, among other things, that he was sending the negra Petrona to labor in the fields like the other slave women, omitting the part about the boca-bajo whipping, not believing in his conscience that rigorous justice called for it. But, suspecting this voluntary omission on her husband's part, the Señora dropped her own note to the overseer, telling him to cut off the buns of Petrona's hair, make her wear a rope shift, and give her fifty lashes.

Said and done. The order was carried out punctiliously and there is no need to say what the slave suffered upon receiving her "fifty in one sitting" (to use the vocabulary of masters and overseers) so far along in her pregnancy.

Like all those of her race, Petrona's natural strength led her to

triumph over the toil and mistreatment that she experienced those three months, at the end of which time she gave birth to a niña—no, not a little girl, but a little mulatress. This mulatica was named Rosalia. Señor Pantaleón shared this news with Don Antonio the same way he would share the delivery of a cow or a sow. (It was an increase in the master's estate, after all.) At lunchtime Don Antonio said to his wife:

"Did you hear that Petrona has given birth?"

"And what was it?"

"A mulata girl."

"Well? Do you see now that that negra is shameless?"

"But, hija, I think the shameless one is the fellow who made love to her and seduced her."

"Him, too, but her more, because, after all, a negra should not get mixed up with white men."

"But it is not negras who become mixed up with white men, but white men with negras."

"And who has the stomach to get stuck on Petrona?"

"The devil, or some grocer or clerk, or any of the thousand needy men among us, or of the thousand fellows out there who are keen on a little African color."

The Young Master Niño Fernandito, a boy of ten, heard this dialogue, and could not refrain from asking his mother if Petrona had married some white man.

"No, little boy," Doña Concepción answered him. "Your father and I are talking about things you don't understand. I've told you before, at the dinner table, children are seen and not heard."

"But I want to talk—that's what I've got my tongue for," answered the boy. "Don't you talk?"

"Fernandito, what words are these, child?" asked Doña Concepción, in a somewhat serious tone.

"I want to talk," insisted the lad, pretending to get upset over his mother's scolding.

"Come, come," Don Antonio said to him. "You can talk as much as you want as long as you don't cry."

For the longest time, they did not discuss the matter that was of so little importance to them; that is, the unhappy negra Petrona cutting cane at the Santa Lucía sugar mill and living a life of toil and wretchedness with her mulata daughter.

What Don Antonio and Doña Concepción did occupy themselves with (or at least think about) was their son's education; but it was

an education on their terms, according to what they understood the word to mean and how they wanted it for an heir to their name. Until the age of twelve, nothing useful had been taught to the Niño Fernando in his home because, Don Antonio said (and rightly so), when the boy went to school he would learn everything and learn it well. Thus, he received nothing of domestic education, of that moral and religious education which parents should provide their children by example more than by words, without which the formal education of the public establishments is worth little, recommendable though those institutions may be.

The first ten years of his life he spent ripening up for school (that is, vegetating in absolute abandon). Mischief, wandering around, hitting the household negritos, and eating and sleeping when he felt like it were some of his daily occupations during those wasted years. His parents looked on the child and worshiped him as an idol, taking care not to go against his increasingly despotic will, fearful lest he have an epileptic seizure and dash their only hopes.

"Mamá," the Niño Fernando would sometimes say to his mother, "I want Julián to get down on all fours and let me ride him."

"Julián," the Señora cried, and a negrito who was maybe two or three years younger than the capricious boy would come running.

"Get down on all fours so the Niño can ride you."

Julián would do as he was told and the Niño would straddle himself brusquely across the unhappy wretch's back, often kicking his heels into the boy's stomach so hard that he made him hiccup and even cry.

"Mamá, I want to thwack Julián with the whip," the Young Master Niño Fernando would say on other occasions.

"No, hijito, because he hasn't done anything to deserve a thrashing."

"But I want to."

And the stubborn and brutal lad would insist so much, crying and throwing himself on the floor, that his mother, always fearful of a seizure, would call Julián and order him to get down on his knees so that the fruit of her womb might whip him to his heart's delight (which did not fail to tickle Julián soundly, as his little master was ten years old by then).

From these two examples it will be clear what sort of upbringing the Niño Fernando was given at his parents' house.

When the time came for school (which, in his parents' understanding, was fourteen years of age), the Niño Fernando was put in the institution Don Antonio thought the best, not because of the establishment's reputation for letters, but because of the good room and board

it provided its pupils. This point was pivotal in the mind of the Señora, who grieved deeply the separation from her son; and so he was placed in one of the best schools in Havana, under the rule and rod of Don Pánfilo Bobadilla.

A year went by, and the Young Master Niño Fernando presented himself richly attired for the Christmas exams in reading, writing, and religion (the only things he had learned—and badly, at that—in the past eleven months). In attendance at the public event, his proud father believed the boy a wonder of intellectual precociousness when he heard him read (albeit haltingly) from Padre Duquensne's *History of Spain* and when he saw the outline that had been drawn for the Young Master two days before the exams so that he could color it in with ink. The Niño Fernando received the gold medal as a prize for his skill and progress, and out of consideration for the high regard in which his father, the rich and noble Havanan Don Antonio Malpica y Lozano, was held by one and by all.

Despite the unfair preference over other students shown him on this and other occasions, the Young Master Niño Fernando, accustomed to the doting and indulgent atmosphere of his home, found the confinement and discipline of the school to be unpleasant.

To escape, he would frequently feign illness, and at other times he would write little notes to his mother complaining of abuse and starvation at his teachers' cruel hands. Doña Concepción was more inclined to believe than to doubt the lies that her son wrote her, and finally determined to place him in another establishment; of course, as the Niño Fernando did not want this move, but the freedom of his home, the pretend illnesses would quickly return and new letters home would produce in his mother's spirit, not what the boy wanted, but a transfer to yet another school.

In this way he passed through almost all the schools in Havana, falling behind, as a result, in what little he learned and acquiring new tricks and vices at each establishment that he entered. When Don Fernando had reached the age of twenty-two, Doña Concepción decided that eight years constituted enough time to have been duly educated, and told her husband that it would be necessary to begin thinking about setting their son up in some career befitting his class.

"The only career to give him," answered Don Antonio, "is for him to come home and learn how to manage the sugar mill and deal with his inferiors among las gentes."

And so the niño was taken out of school, to his great delight.

Now at complete liberty, young Don Fernando—barely knowing how to read, write, cipher, jabber in French, and foil fence—wanted to take up riding. A handsome Moorish horse was purchased for him and every afternoon he paraded his lack of gentility and gallantry around the city streets and avenues, sometimes galloping at full speed like a barbarian, sometimes strutting slowly between the rows of carriages that formed the lane (mostly to attract the attention of the señoritas).

His trap and coachman were also bought for him and he was outfitted with all his heart desired: a magnificent Breguet watch, a solitaire for his chest and another for his hand, an Indian cane with his initials monographed on the gold bauble, and whatever money his whims and debts of honor might require.

Finally, the Crown honored him with two stripes and a small Cross of Her Most Catholic Majesty, La Reina Isabel la Católica, and he was inducted into the rural cavalry, whose soldiers and officials are respectfully known among us Cubans as "the corn fodder dealers."

He frequented the theater and the philharmonic society, where he played guerra at the billiard table with ounces of gold, having obtained a reputation as one of the boldest dandies of the aristocracy. When playing monte he was strong and feared, having taken two windfalls in one game at the Marqués de Casanueva's famous gambling table.

The discomfort and disgust produced by hearing Don Fernando talk only confirmed what everyone already knows about those dapper young gents that grow on trees in Havana: that they think too much of their wealth and surnames, which, having once burdened the unwashed masses of Madrid, by the grace of material fortune, are now proudly borne by the most splendid markees and counts of our Havana, their titles purchased at the auction house of the Court.

But where Don Fernando really made a name for himself (because it was getting to be time for the tree to bear its fruit) was in the corruption of his habits. In addition to gambling (a vice he picked up from the distinguished ladies and gentleman gracing his parents' brilliant soirées), he indulged in libertinage—and with all classes of women, too. In order to illustrate this corruption, allow us, gentle reader, to return to the story of what befell Petrona and her daughter Rosalía.

II

This poor niña, or, this mulatica, was born on a board in the hut assigned to Petrona. Here she was raised, eating little and wrapped in

disgusting rags, but healthy and possessing a certain natural robustness. By age six, that grace particular to women of her class could already be spotted in her black eyes and long lashes, full of a seductive liveliness that the weight of servitude and toil would never crush as long as she lived. Pained by the mulatica's lot and considering her most suitable for domestic help, the overseer's wife brought Rosalía to her house at the sugar mill and cared for her and loved her as though she were her own daughter. Meanwhile, unable to hear or see her child for days at a time, it was impossible for Petrona to enjoy the indefinable satisfactions of motherhood. (Maybe the overseer's wife would not have been so compassionate and rational with her had she been her own slave.)

Doña Concepción and Don Antonio had already noted Rosalía's grace on their visits to the mill at grinding time; and the Señora, fancying the slave girl as an ornament for her house in Havana, resolved to carry her off one day. When the time came, Petrona figured that she would go, too, as seemed right and natural in her mind. She delighted inwardly at this idea and, in her most forgivable credulity, even spoke to Rosalía about the trip and about Havana, telling her all there was to see and admire in this city—its many houses, its many churches, its many people, its many carriages.

Poor Petrona was making a grave miscalculation, for the Señora's will was not what she so ingenuously imagined it to be. Rather, she planned to take only Rosalía, it never entering into her head, or even her heart that she committed an injustice or an evil in separating—sheerly out of a mistress's vain whim—a daughter from her mother's side.

Surprised by this cruel news, Petrona felt intensely that they had snatched from her the only consolation she could find on Sundays and during her brief moments of rest in that prison. It pained her keenly to stay at the mill, which she detested with all her soul. Kept in perpetual agony by these thoughts, she looked for a favorable occasion to talk to Don Antonio before the family left for Havana. She found him on horseback in the aisle between two rows of sugar cane at five in the afternoon on the eve of that fateful trip. Getting down on her knees before him, she said in a sad and humble voice:

"My master, for the love of God, take me to Havana with Rosalía; tell the Señora that I have been punished enough during the thirteen years of pain and toil that I've spent here, please, Your Grace. Look at the bruises on my shoulders, Your Grace; look at my feet and hands, these hands that have sewn clothing for Your Grace, for the Young Master Niño Fernandito and for the Señora. Your Grace knows that I..."

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"Enough," interrupted Don Antonio, guessing what she was going to say, "go to your mistress and tell all of this to her. I will gladly accept whatever she decides."

"But, my master, all Your Grace has to do is order me to go with Rosalía and the Señora won't say a thing."

"Maybe you think she won't say anything," Don Antonio answered. "The Señora has a harsh temper, as you know, and I don't want any problems. You go and talk to her and I'll do whatever she decides."

With that, he dug his spurs into his horse and rode off while the unhappy Petrona stood in the field weeping over her misfortunes, her eyes fixed on her master as he rode away, and with no plans to do what he had suggested. All too well did she know Doña Concepción's imperious and unforgiving temperament.

"Oh, what a man, Dios mío," exclaimed Petrona, and she continued walking down the aisle between rows of sugar cane with despair in her heart.

The next day the family left the sugar mill for Havana. Rosalía could do no more than weep over the separation from her mother, unable even to offer her a last embrace, as she was working on a field far from the big house that day.

"Pablo," Rosalía, seated on a mule, said to one of the farm's slaves, "please tell mamá that I am going and say goodbye and tell her not to forget me."

A laconic and singular farewell, but as natural as it was tender and affectionate in the mouth of the slave girl, given the circumstances of her young age and sad condition. It pained her, too, to leave the overseer's wife, who had raised her and her fellow suffers in servitude since she first saw the light of day in that house of blood and death. And so she traveled the road to Havana with the heavy heart of one who abandons her homeland (which is what the Santa Lucía mill was to her) and all that she holds dear.

Having finally arrived at the capital, the Señora resolved to buy Rosalía clothes and shoes the next day—fine clothes if one compares them with the jute shift (her daily attire) that Rosalía had worn on the way from the mill. In the meantime, the Señora had the slave girl put on a ready-made Silesian linen chemise and striped shift, as well as a pair of gold earrings, her painted Nankeen shoes, and her own yellow gauze handkerchief, which she had buried among the cast-offs of her wardrobe.

Decked out in this manner, Rosalía looked much more interesting than she had in her burlap clothes and the very Señora, despite the grim

character she generally displayed towards slaves and the gente de color, smiled momentarily upon observing Rosalía's graceful countenance, her beautiful eyes, and her dashing figure—though she was careful not to let the slave see.

There was no coquetry or flippancy in Rosalía's easy and seductive movements. She knew not such arts of corruption, lacking society's bad example. Everything in her was the work of Nature, and if Man ever had his hand in this work, it surely was not to beautify and perfect it, but to degrade and destroy it; the coarse hand of a master or an overseer is not the hand of a pedagogue or mentor.

Needless to say, everything surrounding Rosalía was the object of surprise and curiosity for her senses, accustomed as she was, from the time she was born to the moment she was taken from the mill, to seeing only the white expanses of sugar cane fields, oxen, mules and naked negroes confined by the farm's fences. The situation in which she now found herself produced an inexplicable joy in her youthful spirit, compared to the life she had lived for thirteen years at the Santa Lucía mill.

But this very same joy, so natural, necessarily brought with it sad thoughts of the misfortunes and toil that her mother was suffering. The weight of this melancholy memory on her heart would fill Rosalía's eyes with tears. She wished that her mother could participate in what she, with all the candor of innocence and ignorance, called her happiness.

"Poor mamá," she would say to the other slaves in the kitchen after the table was cleared. "Me eating so many good things and so rested here, with mamá at the mill barely swallowing a piece of *tasajo brujo* or a bowl of corn cereal. If only someone could send her this plate of beef stew, so that she could eat it in my name."

"She can take it," another slave said. "That's her lot. Who asked her to fall in love, anyway?"

"The poor thing has taken enough," Rosalía answered. "I know for sure that mamá was tricked."

"And what did the little fool let them trick her for?" the same slave replied.

"Because the poor thing was a slave like you and me, and she was afraid that they would punish her."

"And who was she afraid of? Your father, maybe? And who is your father?" asked a chorus of curious slaves.

"I don't know anything," and Rosalía maintained a profound silence on the subject.

And so Rosalía spent two years enjoying her illusions and learning

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to sew everything from the thickest cloth to cambric without it taking the Señora much effort to teach her. In this time she became a diligent seamstress, learning to tailor clothes for both men and women and other feats of the needle. It seems the chore made her almost pretentiously clean and careful in her appearance. Braiding her hair (which she had grown out with the permission of the señora) as women of her color braid it, the charm of her face and eyes stood out infinitely. She looked lovelier every day, cleanly and modestly going about her labors on the sewing bench beside her mistress, where she would remain until she retired to help with the table service. Guests at dinner would involuntarily fix their eyes on Rosalía, though she dared not raise hers to return their gaze.

The brutish clown Fernando, disrespectful towards his mother and heedless of his place as master and Rosalía's as his slave, would often overstep his bounds by touching her face and making untoward and indecent remarks. Doña Concepción witnessed her son's behavior once while sewing in the parlor with Rosalía, and could not avoid reprimanding him—in her fashion. (Perhaps the lady feared that Don Fernando, at twenty-four years of age, would have a tantrum.)

"What behavior is this, Fernandito?" she said, noticing his liberties with the servant.

"I suppose Your Grace will go to the Opera tonight," he asked his mother.

"I don't know yet."

"Well, I wouldn't miss it," he said as he lay across (not sat on) the armchair. *Elisa and Claudio* is my favorite opera. That ending with Pederotti in the last act is divine, it's to die for."

And he began to sing it tastelessly and then to whistle so out of tune that the song was unrecognizable. (He had the ear of a wall panel.) As he sang, he spun a cane that he had in his hand and, in one of the spins, it fell near his feet.

"Mulata," he said to Rosalía. "Pick up that stick for me."

The servant got up and fetched the cane and, when she gave it to him, Don Fernando again had the indecency to touch her face. Rosalía stepped back ashamed and returned to her place.

"It looks like you're stuck on that mulata," said Doña Concepción somewhat uncomfortably.

"That little whore thinks she's pretty," Don Fernando changed the subject; then, turning to the servant he said, "Well, don't, because you're not."

"There you go starting with your foolishness," Doña Concepción said to him. "You'd best go shave—you're getting hairy."

"But I'm beat," he said, throwing his right leg over the arm of his chair. "I'd give anything for them to shave me right here, just like this."

"Have them fetch you a barber, then."

"But I want them to shave me without me having to move from here, without getting my face wet, without feeling it."

"Well, hijo, that's a lot of hogwash."

At that time (it must have been one in the afternoon), Don Antonio entered the parlor with Don Lucas González, the family doctor; Doctor Pastrana, the prebendary canon, and the Marquis de Casanueva.

"Conchita, at your feet," the nobleman said.

"Señor Marquis, welcome. Welcome, gentlemen," she said to the others. "Do be seated."

"So, were you lucky last night?" the Marquis asked Doña Concepción.

"Making up for my bad luck the night before."

"Win some, lose some. What was the net gain?"

"Forty ounces."

"Well, I left content with the four ounces Teresita tricked out of me," said Don Fernando.

"Who? Colonel Rivas's daughter?" asked the Marquis.

"The very same."

"What ugly behavior."

"How would you have her behave, friend?" said the Señora. "This is from want of breeding. Her mother must be nothing less than ruined, and she took advantage of Fernando's trust in her to get four ounces out of him."

"And may they serve her well," said Fernando, getting up to shave.

"The gambling table," added Doctor Pastrana, "is where one can see who has principles and who does not. It's a rule that never fails."

"Well, look," responded Doña Concepción. "Teresita is in many ways a fine young lady, but there is nothing more tempting than money."

"To change the subject," Don Antonio interrupted the conversation and addressed the Marquis, "do you know, good man, that Santa Lucia is producing first-rate white sugar? Superior stuff. I only fear that I won't have time enough to grind all the cane I have on the fields. Yes, good man, this year the machines are churning out two thousand little boxes free of dust and straw. Next year I reckon I'll rid myself of debt.

"And how much are negros going for?" asked Doña Concepción.

"Grown men are fetching 24 ounces and young muleques 18," answered the Marquis. I bought 20 Makhuwas at the very beach. Beautiful blacks, they are."

"For now," said Don Antonio, "I can't buy any—even if I need them—because I have 30 of my best in the infirmary, with wounds and pustules. The other negros are old and worn out.

"Have them take Leroy's Vomito-Purgative Elixir," said Don Lucas. "Leroy for the negros, simple enough."

"Don Lucas, you want to cure everything with Leroy, and what Leroy has done, sir, is kill many people," said the Canon Pastrana.

"I beg to differ," replied Don Lucas. "If one does not follow the author's curative method meticulously, then I agree, but, if it is followed to the letter, then Leroy is a most admirable drug."

"Well, that's the least of our enemies," replied the Canon. "If Leroy must kill, let him kill the blackbirds and not us."

"Slow down there, friend," said Don Antonio. "We need those blackbirds to make our sugar."

"I'll watch it," continued the Canon. "But, tell me, sir, between Fernandito and a negro from Santa Lucía, which one would you give Leroy to with a clear conscious?"

"Me? The negro," answered Don Antonio.

A slave girl entered the room and told the Señora that the soup was on the table.

"Santa palabra, thank God," answered Doña Concepción. And they all got up and went to the dining room, where Don Fernando was already waiting.

Finishing dinner around five, they lingered at sobremesa drinking sherry and chatting up a storm with two more friends who had arrived in time for coffee. Don Fernando, ever so happy and talkative, proposed betting doblones on a game of manigua.

"An excellent idea," Don Antonio and the Marquis said in unison, and the cards and the customary green tablecloth were brought.

They cut the cards and played for twenty ounces. From the beginning, luck was evenly distributed between the bettors and the bank, and all remained in good spirits on this account. After an hour, Don Fernando dashed out, as though he had remembered something that he had to do, and called Rosalía to his rooms, pretending to be in need of her services.

The servant girl went to him immediately and, once she was inside her master's bedchamber, he said to her:

"Look, do you love Petrona?"

"Sí, Señor."

"And you want to see her?"

"Si, Señor."

"And, do you love your master?"

"Sí, Señor."

"Very well, I'm going to try to fix things so that your mother comes to Havana. I just have to tell mamita, and that's it. You know she does everything I want...so there you go.

"May God bless and repay Your Grace his kindness, Young Master."

"But you've got to love me, you hear?"

"Sí, Señor, I love Your Grace very much."

"Then listen..."

"Master Niño...not me, Señor...I don't..." She tried to leave the room.

Realizing, Don Fernando caught her violently by the arm and said: "Look, if you act like a little girl, I'll tell the Señora to send you to the mill."

"But, why, Niño? I'm just a poor slave."

"Come here, silly thing. What do you think? That I'm going to kill you?"

"No, Niño Fernando, I..." And she ran off towards the kitchen.

Irritated by this behavior in a slave of his, Don Fernando was more determined than ever to carry out his criminal plan.

Once he had calmed down a bit, he returned to the gambling table, where he found that two more players had joined during his absence. The betting, which had begun at a doblón, was now at four and six ounces. They were all mutual enemies at that point, suffocating and with burning faces (not only from the close quarters and heat, but from the glasses of sherry and champagne that were being grabbed from the sideboard and passed around the table). It must have been about seven in the evening.

"Bring in the candles," said Don Antonio.

"Yes," added his wife, "and go get the ice cream—I'm melting. Oh, what heat!"

Don Fernando, who had made a few calculations, took advantage of his mother's outburst and said loudly to his fellow players: "Gentlemen, to the opera! To Alameda de Paula Park! We're roasting in here."

"Yes," said those who were winning, "to the Opera! To la Alam-

eda!"

And, taking their hats, they bid farewell to Doña Concepción and Don Antonio.

Those who were losing cursed Don Fernando and his opera, but they had no choice but to accept the rule of the lucky majority.

By eight at night, the house was left to a deep silence. Don Antonio and Doña Concepción had gone to the theater in their trap and Don Fernando in his. Around nine, Fernando returned home, not waiting until the last act of the opera that he said he liked so much. He headed to his room and called for Rosalía to bring him a candle. The maid followed orders fearfully, terrified that the Niño would repeat his earlier performance.

"Listen," Don Fernando said to her after he set the candle on the table, "You upset me this afternoon with your disrespect, and that's not fitting... Well, that's all over with now; anyway, here's a quarter doblón to go buy yourself a tunic with."

What had happened to Petrona fourteen years earlier happened to her daughter now—and with the same result, as we shall see at the end of our story.

Once the wicked deed was done, Rosalía waited for Don Fernando to keep his word and intercede on behalf of her mother as he had promised. The idea of seeing the dear woman and embracing her lightened the burden constantly weighing on Rosalía's heart.

"Young Master Niño Fernando," she said one day when three months had passed, "When will Your Grace talk to the Señora about mamá coming from the mill?"

"One of these days," Don Fernando responded disdainfully. And he never thought about the subject, much less mentioned it to his mother.

Ever near, the Señora's perceptive eyes were not long in detecting Rosalía's shame; the very insult sent all of the blood rushing to her head. Doña Concepción punished such failings rigorously, as we have seen with Petrona. However, this rigor was not the effect of an inflexible virtue, as some might think, but of the sad comparison that Señora Concepción drew between her own sterility and the fertility of her slaves. Doña Concepción had had a child after no less than seven years of marriage, and that child was Don Fernando. Her marriage to Don Antonio finally brought her the joys of motherhood...but under mysterious circumstances, as we shall see.

Vexed, therefore, at Rosalía from the moment that she suspected the slave's pregnancy, Doña Concepción resolved to discover the truth

—not by gentle, prudent means, but by the violence that her authority and power suggested to her. The next day, very early in the morning, she called Rosalía to a room away from the rest of the house and locked the door behind her. Excuse us, gentle reader, if we mention how Rosalía's heart jumped or the trembling that took hold of her whole body.

"Strip," the Señora said, armed with a whip.

"Señora, my lady, for love of God," Rosalía said on her knees, "please don't punish me, Your Grace."

Strip, I said, unless you want me to call Lorenzo and have him tie you to that post over there and hide you with the whipping board. Strip!"

Shaking and crying silently, Rosalía began to take off her clothes until she was entirely as her mistress desired.

"Tell me," Doña Concepción asked her then, "who stuffed you like that."

"Señora, my lady...I...pobre de mí..."

This natural hesitation irritated the Señora, who, desiring to know right away, made no concessions to the slave girl's modesty. Raising her arm, she reigned horrible and cruel lashes down upon the girl's very belly and across her face, making her victim scream to the heavens.

"Who gave you that big belly?" her mistress asked again, resting her tired arm.

"I'll tell Your Grace, mi señora, but please don't hit me anymore. Forgive me, Your Grace."

"Go on, say it. Who stuffed you?"

"I'll tell Your Grace...pobre de mí...God...I resisted, mi señora... but Young Master Niño Fernando..."

"You wicked creature!" Doña Concepción interrupted. "With your master?"

And, raising the lash with even greater zeal, she beat Rosalía furiously until the slave's whole body was bleeding and covered with great welts. When she finally tired of punishing Rosalía, Doña Concepción opened the door and ordered another slave to chop off Rosalía's hair until she was fully shorn, braids, and remove her shoes and tunic, leaving her with only her shift. The Señora then ordered her to be shut up in a room downstairs next to the stable with only a board to sleep on.

We will leave Rosalía in this dungeon for now, in order to relate other events that came to pass in the house after the punishment.

The whole scene lasted a quarter of an hour, and it must have been about eight o'clock when Doña Concepción retired to her chamber to

rest and found her husband still sleeping. She went to the bed to wake him, then returned to the parlor, where she sat down to rest from the violent exercise in which she had been engaged and wait for a cup of coffee. Don Fernando stepped out of his room at the same time, also calling for Rosalía to bring him his coffee. His mother, whom he had supposed sleeping, hollered at him from the parlor and said that the mulata was busy. Don Fernando, finding it odd to hear his mother's voice at such hours, went over to her and, without the usual preliminaries of saying "good morning" or asking "bendición" for a blessing, noted his surprise at seeing her up and about:

"What are you doing up so early?"

"Not a thing," the Señora responded sternly.

"What's wrong with Your Grace?" Don Fernando asked with certain curiosity, taking note of his mother's serious face as he sat down beside her.

"Why, nothing at all."

"Her Grace seems very serious to me."

"I have good reason to be and, moreover, to be very upset with a son who I thought had some shame about him, now don't I?"

"And what is it that I've done?"

"You haven't done a thing. It seems that you like black women."

"Negras? Me?"

"Yes, you. Why don't you ask Rosalía? You got up awfully early for that cup of coffee."

"And what's so remarkable about that?"

"There's nothing remarkable about that, but it is rather remarkable that a young man who calls himself a gentleman, a young man of your class, should have children by one of his slaves. And by a mulata—that's the most shameful part.

"Who, me?"

"Yes, you. Who else? She confessed it herself."

"Who, Rosalía?"

"Yes, sir, Rosalía. Oh, but I had to beat it out of her."

Don Fernando laughed: "But, mamita, these are cosas de hombres, men's business that can't be helped—things that, as much as one might want to avoid them, you finally get caught in the lasso...and then...well, as we can see, it snaps back in your face, and..."

"Off, you shameless boy... but don't worry, the mulata will die at Santa Lucía; I swear on my very soul," the Señora said, agitated.

"I was going to propose that very same thing to Your Grace.

That'll solve everything: send her to the mill—no need for papa to find out about what's happened."

Through all this, Don Antonio did not leave his chamber. Supposing that he was in there snoring, Doña Concepción returned to the bedroom to wake him up again and found her husband sitting barefoot in a chair, complaining of a sore throat.

"What's wrong with you?" his wife asked him.

"My throat's so sore I can't even swallow."

"Well, go lie down again and we'll call Don Lucas."

Indeed, Don Antonio was violently afflicted with angina that morning; the doctor ordered him the Ugarte pill and a dozen leeches, among other things. By five in the afternoon his fever had risen and the sick man could hardly speak; Don Fernando, his mother, and all of the servants did not sleep during the whole anguished night.

The next day there was a meeting of doctors, and all declared that Don Antonio was in grave danger and that something had to be done. New remedies were applied every hour but the illness, instead of abating, became appreciably more severe. Given the situation, Doña Concepción ordered that her husband make a will and that he be administered the Sacrament, and both were seen to on the third day.

On the fourth day there was a momentary improvement and everyone grew hopeful; but this relief from the severity of the affliction proved false, and, on the morning of the fifth day, the patient was again stricken with such fury that, by two in the afternoon, he had delivered his soul to the Creator. You should have seen how the slaves came running to see Don Antonio's corpse as soon as the news was known throughout the house. The wretches wailed in a show of pain and suffering, as though they had lost a benefactor or a father (which was not the case); what hypocrites, these slaves, fulfilling the momentary obligation to moan or wail because the situation called for it, the same way they would have laughed in the opposite situation (or even in this one), if it had been demanded of them.

By eight in the evening Don Antonio was laid out in a magnificent coffin that had been prepared in the parlor, surrounded by bright candles. The gathering of friends at the wake was large and brilliant and anyone would say (if they didn't see the dead man in the parlor) that they were at a wedding or a soiree. Gradually, a makeshift tribunal formed in the great dining room at the entrance where señoras and caballeros debated diverse matters in hushed tones; all their muted whispers produced a sort of restless humming, not unlike the sound of a million flies

drawn to the appetizing cadaver of some dead animal. Doña Concepción and Don Fernando were off in a room with the Marquis de Casanueva, Canon Pastrana, and two close friends of the lady. Everyone was quiet and forlorn, their arms crossed, from time to time muttering a few monosyllables to themselves.

At ten at night beer and cider were served and the señores and señoras given to drink guzzled a few dozen bottles. While the midnight dinner was being prepared, there were acts of gallantry; murmurings about Doña Concepción and her late husband, still unburied; disputes about Italian opera; and debates about the immortality of the soul, some considering the body before them with irreligious eyes, as a mere machine that had become deregulated, while others viewed it as the former dwelling of a spirit that had returned to the bosom of Eternity. This is how they whiled away the two hours before dinner, which proved abundant and splendid and to the satisfaction of the gourmands in the group.

"What a man we have lost in Don Antonio," one of the feasters said to another nearby, and he began to devour his meal.

"Funny thing life is," added his companion, "some of us heading for burial and some of us heading for the buffet. Tomorrow we'll follow our friend, and others will revel at our expense."

"Let's leave these sad musings aside—this isn't the time for them—and think about what we have in front of us. One gets nothing out of life but good sandwiches."

"You know, friend, our Don Antonio did not deprive himself when it came to food."

"Of course not. You can tell he had talent and taste and lived like a king. Poor dear, I hope God has forgiven him."

"Caballeros," a third gentleman interrupted the two gourmands' conversation, "why do you suppose the Marquis de Casanueva hasn't come to the table?"

"He must be off consoling my Señora Doña Concepción," another attendee replied with something of a malicious smile.

"Or perhaps the loss of his dear friend has taken away his appetite," a gourmand added with the same irony.

"Be charitable, gentleman; the man is still lying in the parlor," interjected another caballero, comprehending all the malice in their conversation.

Finishing their dinner at one-thirty, some of the guests lingered at *sobremesa* chatting about different topics; others returned to the corridor where they slept and snored on stools and benches until daybreak; still

others paced quickly about (the better to digest, they said)—these were the gourmands.

The funeral was held at nine o'clock the next morning at San Agustín Church with all the solemnity due to such a distinguished character. Rest assured that the public papers did not fail to print the obligatory obituary written by the Marquis de Casanueva, which declared (in keeping with the necessary laws of all obituaries) that Don Antonio Malpica y Lozano, in addition to his certifiable nobility and loyalty to the King, had been a good father, a loving husband, a faithful friend, and a kind master. In short, the deceased came across as a downright, upright fellow.

Steeped in the deepest mourning, Doña Concepción and Don Fernando naturally did not receive visitors for an entire week; yet, as days came and went, their grief gradually subsided. Before two months were up Don Antonio was no longer spoken of, only mentioned perfunctorily (as they say) one morning when the new widow entrusted Don Fernando with the administration of their assets.

"Fernandito," she said one morning, "let's go put your father's papers in order."

"As Your Grace wishes."

They immediately passed into Don Antonio's study, where the widow opened the bin and the two of them began to remove files of all sizes and examine them one by one. After half an hour of scrutiny, Doña Concepción observed a loose sheet of paper set off in the far corner of a small cabinet; no more interested in this item than in any of the others, she picked it up to see what it was and put it in its proper place or else rip it up if it proved useless. Imagine, gentle reader, how surprised the widow must have been when she read the following missive:

Señor Don Antonio Malpica y Lozano.

My esteemed friend: From what you explained to me last night in the home of our Canon, it seems that the twelve little papers I prepared for Petrona have not produced the desired effect. I thought I would bring you different, more efficient papers myself, but I have a bad cold that does not permit me to leave the house, so I am giving them to my intern. You should follow the instructions that he will give you. God willing you will achieve your goal. Take care, friend, not to get mixed up with more slave girls in the future. Your faithful friend who kisses your hand, Dr. Lucas González.

Doña Concepción experienced an involuntary flash of anger and jealousy when she finished reading the letter; then, reflecting a bit on the

events of late, she felt horrified by Fernando's criminal actions with Rosalía, suddenly revealed to be the daughter of Don Antonio and Petrona. She calmed down a bit in regard to this point, however, when she remembered, with certain satisfaction (not so much because it lessened the horror of the deed as because it offered restitution for the infidelity she had recently discovered in her husband), that Don Fernando was not the son of Don Antonio, but of the Marquis de Casanueva.

"I am avenged," she said to herself, and tucked the paper away.

The late Malpica was indeed guilty of the weakness (or the wickedness) of tricking and seducing his own slave and, horrified at the idea of having a mulato child (and of Doña Concepción discovering his shameful infidelity), futilely attempted to avail himself of the criminal means that we have just seen in Don Lucas's letter.

Doña Concepción thought of making good use of the prescription by giving it to Rosalía to see if she might free Don Fernando from having a colored child—and herself from such a grandchild. (She shuddered with embarrassment at the very thought of it.) But there remained the difficulty of her not knowing what kind of papers Don Lucas was talking about in his letter. To overcome this problem, the lady rather indelicately made up her mind to speak to the doctor in secret. She sent him a message with a negro two or three days later, saying that she needed to speak with him urgently.

Don Lucas appeared right away and, as there were no visits in the way when he arrived, the widow had him sit beside her; the following dialogue ensued between them:

Doña Concepción produced the incriminating letter from her reticule: "Do you recognize this handwriting, Don Lucas?"

Don Lucas, pushing up his glasses and taking the letter: "That is indeed my signature. But, what letter is this?" And he began to read it with surprise.

"Well, well, Don Antonio," he exclaimed when he finished. "Señora, the letter and signature are all mine, but these are men's weaknesses, and they are inevitable. I could not deny aid to a friend in such circumstances—specially if a slave of his was mixed up in it—and I do not believe myself to have burdened my conscience for this reason, seeing as how I was trying to save our Don Antonio's compromised honor.

Doña Concepción: "Whatever you say, Don Lucas. We'll leave my husband's ashes in peace. What I want—and this is what I called you for—is for you to render me the same service you were going to do for Antonio and supply me with what is written in this here letter."

Don Lucas looked at Doña Concepción with surprise:

"Conchita...! For whom? Is it possible?"

Doña Concepción, turning somewhat red: "Why, Don Lucas, you are very naughty."

Don Lucas: "No, I am not, Señora, and you must speak to me with all the earnestness that our old friendship demands. I know all about the passions and natural fragility of women. How far along are you, more or less? Because it will be necessary to know how many months have gone by in order to write the prescription."

Doña Concepción: "I repeat, Don Lucas, that you are taking your nastiness much farther than the situation calls for. It's not what you think—maybe for a good reason—but, still, it's not that. It's for someone else entirely. If you want to do the favor I ask, I'll thank you; if not, I'll find another doctor.

"Say no more, Conchita, and consider your wish granted. I hope you'll find it in you to forgive my misjudgment in this matter."

So saying, Don Lucas got up and said goodbye and, the next day, personally brought Doña Concepción what she had asked for, as well as instructions for their use.

Let us turn now to Rosalía, who had spent all this time suffering in her dungeon, her wounds slowly healing. In vain she had sought the Señora's forgiveness, endeavoring on various occasions to have Don Fernando use his influence to soften the Señora's heart and return her to the lady's good graces.

"Lorenzo," she said to the coachman, "do me a favor and ask the Niño Fernando to talk to the Señora and get her to forgive me and let me out of here."

Moved to pity, Lorenzo pled earnestly on Rosalía's behalf, but Don Fernando, who kept the slave girl out of sight and out of mind, would reply with angry disdain:

"Tell her fine. I'll talk to her."

And the last thing he would think to do was to arouse his mother's suspicions and displease her—not that he felt much compassion for his victim in the first place.

Early one morning the Señora ordered that Rosalía be brought to an upstairs room, and the slave was taken to the very same place where she had suffered the lashes weeks before.

"¡Virgen santísima! Most holy Virgin!" exclaimed Rosalía. "Does the Señora want to punish me again?"

But that was not what lay in store for the poor wretch, but a test of

the doctor's prescription, which had the same effect as it did on Petrona—that is to say, that Nature made the same mockery out of medicine as before, and the crime was frustrated for a second time.

With Doña Concepción discouraged and Rosalía coming along in months, the Señora ordered that, upon the muleteer's return, the slave girl should go to the mill. So it came to pass eight days later, and all of the slave's tears and pleas for compassion, at times directed at Don Fernando and at times at the Señora, were not enough to move the masters to compassion and dissuade them from their wicked design.

Rosalía had endured eighteen summers and winters on this earth when she returned to the prison of her former cane fields; there, in the miserable hut where she had first seen the light of day, she found Petrona lying limply on a board and covered with wounds and lacerations, too useless to work anymore. Upon seeing her mother in that state, Rosalía's eyes filled with tears and the two wretched women embraced each other and cried; suddenly realizing that her daughter was pregnant, Petrona asked:

"What is this, Rosalía?"

"Por el amor de Dios, mamá, ask me nothing. For God's love."

"Could the master have been capable? With his own daughter?"

"What has happened to you has happened to me, ma'am."

"Is it possible? And this man calls himself a Christian, calls himself a gentleman, calls himself a white man? After what he did with me, he dared to commit a sin like this?"

"It wasn't him, mamá."

"Who was it, then?"

"The Niño Fernando."

"Is it possible? And the Señora knows it was him?"

"She beat it out of me, so I had to tell her. She was going to kill me if I didn't tell her."

"And the Niño Fernando didn't defend you? He didn't even give you the 25 pesos to free your child?"

"You are so good natured, mamá. Did the master Don Antonio defend you, mamá? Did he give you 25 pesos to free me? I haven't seen so much as the quarter doblón the Niño Fernando offered me to buy a tunic with."

"What wicked men!" exclaimed Petrona, crying and embracing her daughter. "May God forgive them their hearts of stone! Have patience, Rosalía, and offer your labors to Our Lord el Señor. I'm sorry I shall die soon and leave you in this damned mill."

"Don't cry, mamá," Rosalía answered. "I know how to suffer toil. Besides, who knows if God wishes for me to die in childbirth."

The dialogue had reached this point when the crack of the overseer's whip was heard next to the hut, his harsh voice bellowing "mulata, get out here." Rosalía stepped outside, trembling and crying because she expected that they were going to punish her; Señor Pantaleón, noting her great fear and timidity, threw his head back in laughter and gave her a few good lashes, plowing the slave around the field.

"Get to work, bitch, and shake those paws of yours."

Petrona died a fortnight later; three months after that and in the same hut, Rosalía and her son met the same fate in childbirth.

The overseer communicated this news to Doña Concepción and her son:

"Oh well," they said. "A thousand pesos down the drain!"