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THE DEVIL CAME TO TRINIDAD — A Short Story

The *camino real* enters Trinidad from the north along a narrow hog-back where the trees are thin and often have slid away down the steep western slope in seasons of great rain. Through the gaps you get a view of other tumbled ridges, fold behind fold becoming paler and bluer into the distance where three cones of volcanoes trail thin clouds of steam the hazy edge of the sky. There is a clean coolness in the air in these mountains, even in midsummer, and the little Indian women in their youth have pale skins and a purplish flush in their cheeks. In the morning they trot to market along this trail, bent forward from the hips under great burdens, and in the evening they trot home again, their backs still bent forward under the memory of a lifetime of burdens.

The road, following always the highest ridge, comes out upon the last slope which overlooks the wide mountain valley and the little town of Trinidad. Here the trees are mostly pines with red-barked trunks scarred by fire; small deep-blue lilies jewel the grass, and dull green hummingbirds hang booming around the cardinal flowers. In the bowl of dark green hills stands the little town, brown mud-walled houses with gardens of peach trees and coffee bushes, dull red-tiled roofs, and above all the high whitewashed façade of the church, large enough to hold all the dwellings in town. There is nothing new in this sight, for the Central American churches seem to embody the great faith which in part redeemed the cruelty and rapacity of the *conquistadores*.

The church was the centre of the town, an impressive baroque front of flat bricks, plastered and whitewashed, with a nave of sun-baked adobe and a roof of village tiles, a monument in front, a warehouse behind. I took the first opportunity to attend mass and stood at the back among the poor worshippers. In the dusk ahead, beyond the red point of the sanctuary lamp, there hung a huge crucifix with a pale Christ dabbled with blood. In front of me were three Indians from some distant village, flat-nosed coppery men with broad shoulders, dressed in the usual loose white shirts and short white trousers, but with rectangular black *serapes* strapped over their left shoulders and with their palm-leaf hats, banded with rolls

of red cloth, under their left arms. As the little brown priest entered and posted himself before the altar, these Indians produced candles and lighted them and knelt stiffly erect throughout the service. The ritual rolled on, the gong rang, the congregation bowed like grain swept by the wind, but my Indians knelt unmoved and erect. One candle guttered in a draught and poured molten wax over a brown hand, but the hand remained steady and the black eyes above never wavered from the priest.

The mass ended and the congregation poured out into the plaza where cobbles of black obsidian glinted in the sun. The ruling *gente del centro* gathered for a few words of gossip, the men in stiff collars and panama hats, the women in black mantillas, and the little Indian women trotted away homeward, their heads erect, their backs bent under the invisible burdens of their fate. There was a cry, and at once the Indian men were running and waving sticks, for the more usual machetes were forbidden by law within the town. The little priest had appeared at his vestry door, and the Indians fell in behind him as a body-guard and marched him triumphantly to his house.

Trinidad was a sleepy town. The Indians lived by traditional farming, burning the woodland and planting corn and beans in the ashes, as from time immemorial, and the ruling class lived by fleecing the Indians through rents and taxes and trade, as it had always been. In between these two extremes was the fluctuating class of the townspeople, neither ritualized nor satisfied, hungry for they knew not what, tinder for the revolutions that swept through the land.

Some years earlier an earthquake had shaken down much of the town, and the ruins still lay as they had fallen. Opposite the room where I found my meals there was a tumbled building, and one day I saw creep from its cavelike depths a strange monster which begged from me with unintelligible mouthings. He was dark brown of skin, with bristly hair and a stubble of black beard, although his stature was that of a child. Later I learned that this was Jacinto, the village idiot, long an orphan. At times I saw him leading about a crippled girl who helped herself with tapping stick, for this ruin had been her home, and her parents had been killed and she blinded when the earthquake brought their house down upon them. These two waifs had found comfort together, lived by the charity of the very poor, and slept in some warren in the ruin.

In the chill of the grey dawn one found Jacinto shivering at the doorway of a kitchen where the blue wood-smoke was already seeping from under the eaves and between the tiles. Sometimes he thought to take food for Carmela, but more often he forgot, and she crept out and tapped her

way about until someone took pity upon her. Yet even Jacinto had at times his gala days when Don Gumersindo, a local landowner, was in jovial mood. Then the rich man took the poor wretch into his house and fed him and gave him whole glasses of raw white *guaro*, so that he reeled about the town, waving a stick and shouting abuse of his benefactors in imitation of Don Gumersindo when he celebrated. The spree ended when an insulted man caught Jacinto and drubbed him or when the soldiers clapped him into jail to sleep it off, neither of which misfortunes ever befell Don Gumersindo. Then in the morning Jacinto found only harsh words at the kitchen doors, and he listened and cringed uncomprehending.

Curiosity and a friend led me to the house of Padre Daniel, the priest, and we sat on leather-bottomed chairs in the shade of the orange trees and sipped blackberry cordial which his whitehaired mother poured for us. At first Padre Daniel was very suspicious of me, partly because I was a stranger and he more Indian than Spanish, partly because I was not of his flock. So he told us little stories to uphold the understanding piety of the Indians which I had tactlessly doubted, and dropped small hints of more impressive, if less happy, posts that he had held in the past. But here he was at home, and I soon came to realize that the Indians worshipped him. Every little while he was called away to bless a bag of seed-corn or a new *metate*, and the pious Indian left a trifling coin and went his way with a gleam of faith in his eyes. I sounded Padre Daniel about the way in which the storekeepers fleeced the Indians, but I struck no spark of interest from his mind. He cared for their souls, as a priest should, and for their corn, as the Maya traditions demanded, but their bodies and their economic welfare he left to the mercy of the state. Things that would have troubled me in his place, such as the habit of his lambs of reverting to human sacrifice in times of revolution, grieved him only mildly. He was Maya enough to sympathize with the pull of old beliefs.

But there were things beyond his understanding. "The devil has come to Trinidad," he said sadly to me when he had begun to trust me a little. A foreign doctor had moved into the town, an impious man who defied God and scandalized the Indians by working on Sunday, hammering noisily about his house during church-time, although he idled through most of the week. Padre Daniel had appealed to the mayor, but the mayor also was impious, a liberal!—a terrible term of reproach in the priest's mild vocabulary—and talked of tolerance. This doctor also preached his religion and was gathering a few followers among discontented townspeople. However, the week before, when mending his roof on Sunday, the doctor had fallen and sprained his ankle. "God is not mocked," said Padre Daniel.

When he accompanied me to the door, we found Carmela and Jacinto begging there. Jacinto fawned and muttered, and Carmela's poor scarred face lighted with unearthly sweetness which seemed reflected in the broad brown face of the little priest. "Go to the kitchen, my children," he said; "my mother will feed you." And to me he added almost apologetically: "These are the favourites of God."

I have reasonable health, apart from the inevitable malaria, but there was a young man at the mine whose state troubled me more than it did him. So I sought out the doctor that evening. I found him seated in the doorway of a bare adobe house, reading his bible with an air of complete absorption. He looked up through dark-rimmed glasses, a hawk-nosed man with colourless skin and lips and eyes.

"I wanted to consult you about a man at the mine," I said.

"I do not work today," he said, smiling thinly. "Come tomorrow. Sunday is a good day for such matters."

"I shall not be here tomorrow," I replied bluntly. "The man is ill."

"Tomorrow or whenever you will," he answered, returning to his book, "but not today."

I turned on my heel, irritated. I am not strict about keeping Sunday, but I resented his attempt to force me to treat that day in his fashion. Yet, when I thought about it, I had been doing the same by him. He was right to follow his belief, but, because he had never asked about the urgency of my need, because his ritual meant more to him than humanity, I went away smouldering and had no desire to see him again.

Some weeks passed before I returned to Trinidad. I arrived in the evening as darkness was falling swiftly, and found my usual room. In the morning when Doña Cruz was giving me my breakfast, I noticed a queer dark-skinned figure seated upon a ruined wall and howling like a dog at the empty sky. It was Jacinto the idiot. "They have taken away Carmela," Cruz explained to me, "and he does not understand." She called him to the kitchen and fed him, but soon he was back on the wall, howling out the emptiness of his soul. It seemed that Doctor Francis had taken the blind girl into his house. There had been a great scandal in the town, but the mayor had refused to let Padre Daniel interfere. "He says that he will make her see," said Cruz with awe. "That would be a miracle. Have you seen her eyes?"

As I was walking up the street, the doctor fell in beside me. He knew my name, which was not wonderful, since we were the only foreigners in fifty miles. Seemingly he was surprised that I had not come to meet him on his terms. He asked about the sick man, and I told him what I

knew. "I will not undertake to treat him for less than one hundred dollars," he said coldly. "That is more than he can afford to pay," I replied; "he has a mother to support." "Do you realize the origin of the trouble?" he asked stiffly. "I have a suspicion," I admitted, "but I am not concerned with that nor with trying to make money out of it." To my surprise he swallowed that remark, so I asked after Carmela. "I have operated on her," he said, suddenly enthusiastic. "One eye had been destroyed but one was merely twisted out of line by the fractured bone. I have removed the bone and shortened some muscles, but I cannot know for a few days whether I have been successful. It will be a blessing for her." I assented doubtfully. She would be able to emerge from the night of blindness and the unseen squalor of her life, and then—? Undersized, crippled, unused to life and to work, she would have to face the dragging hopelessness of the very poor in a world which at best she would see and understand only dimly. I heard the words of Padre Daniel, "the favourites of God," and I felt helpless in face of the dumb misery of life.

To my surprise Doctor Francis rode out to the mine one day and began the treatment of my man at a reasonable charge. He was merely calling in passing, he explained, on his way to visit a sick woman, the wife of a local landowner. I watched him work and admired his sure movements. The man had ability. But his eyes were steely cold, and I saw a smouldering malevolence on the face of his patient. A queer world this, where good deeds are done for money and are poisoned by hatred.

I asked again after Carmela, and the doctor's face brightened. She could see, but as yet she could open her one good eye only for a few seconds at a time and had not learned to interpret what she saw. However, in the course of a few days she would learn.

Some weeks later I visited Trinidad, and before I had been an hour in the town, a little Indian came padding barefoot beside me. "Holá, señor, vos!", he called. I looked down into his broad brown face with its grotesque wisps of moustache and beard, and I met the blank hostility of his eyes which shut me out from all humanity because I was not Maya. "Amigo?" I replied. "Padre Daniel has sent me to fetch you," he said abruptly. "Venite, ya!" Bad manners are less common in Central America than in most lands, but these Indians were normally familiar and insolent when speaking Spanish, for this was the only type of Spanish that had been spoken to them.

I found the priest just leaving the house, a crowd of broad-shouldered brown Indians accompanying him. "My friend," he said earnestly, "it is too late. I had hoped that you might have prevented this. The devil is

loose in Trinidad. The gringo—that is, the foreign doctor is going to show Carmela to the people. He says that he has performed a miracle and made her see."

As we walked along, I tried to make him understand that here there was no question of miracles, that this was simply an operation, more skilful perhaps but not more miraculous than setting a broken leg. But reasoning never meant much to Padre Daniel, and today he was more than usually unwilling to think. "If God had wished her to see," he insisted stubbornly, "He would not have blinded her. Especially He would not have chosen a Prote—an *impio* as His instrument." So I walked in silence, for the logic of the religious depends upon premises which only their co-believers share, and there are better methods of expending breath than by arguing with them.

A small crowd had gathered in the street before the doctor's door. I noticed that Jacinto was there, that the chief of police was among them with his Indian soldiers with their ancient rifles, that the doctor's converts were leaning upon sticks like those of the Indians. Probably their piety was bolstered by the hope that there might also be a fight. They were singing a hymn as we approached, but they sang awkwardly, discordantly, defiantly, without pleasure or exaltation. After all, they were chiefly of Spanish blood and tradition, with an immense personal dignity which here they were violating. They were not musical or piously convinced or group-loving; for them an unappreciative world was out of joint, and they must assert themselves at all costs.

Inside the door a tiny harmonium hummed an accompaniment and a brassy voice blared, and at the end of the hymn the doctor appeared in the doorway and from there began a sermon. His Spanish was fluent and fairly accurate, although the harshness of his intonation made it sound like a strange language. His eloquence was not of high order and was completely un-Spanish, since it depended upon the logical scoring of points instead of upon rhetorical repetition. His logic, too, seemed to be strained by his effort to assert the miraculous powers of true belief without detracting from his credit as a surgeon. Oddly enough, he carried conviction on both points and seemed to serve God and Mammon with equal sincerity. At last he brought out Carmela, the familiar twisted small figure, still carrying her stick but now wearing dark sun-glasses. He asked her questions, rather like a music-hall magician, and she answered with the mechanical emptiness of the magician's assistant. As a demonstration this was a failure in proportion to its genuineness, for it was obviously unrehearsed. The poor child could say that he had something in his hand, but

devil is conquered as he will always be conquered. Let us go to the church and give thanks." The Indians formed up behind him, and they moved away.

Jacinto, munching a handful of looted food, came whining up to Carmela, who was standing desolate in the street, and the two moved away together. As she went, Carmela steadied herself with a hand upon the idiot's arm and tapped her way uncertainly with her stick after the fashion of the blind.