

# Gustavo Adolfo Becquer: Legends-A Selection

by Antonio Varela

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*A sample of the opening pages*

The Legends

Green Eyes

A Legend

**I**

"The stag is wounded ... He is wounded! There is no doubt about it. You can see blood on the brambles, and you could see his legs buckle when clearing one of the bushes. Our young lord begins where others end ... In forty years as a guide I have not seen a better shot ... But by San Saturio, patron saint of Soria, cut him off through those oaks, set the dogs on him, sound the horns until you burst your lungs, and sink a quarter of spur into your steeds! Don't you see he is heading for the pool by the poplars, and if he clears it before dying we can give him up for lost!"

The valleys around Mount Moncayo reverberated over and over with the echoes of the hunting horns, the howling of the hounds, the hunters' voices ringing with renewed fury. The jumbled mass of men, horses and dogs directed itself to the point Iñigo, the chief tracker of the Marques of Almenar, signaled as the best path to take in order to cut off the buck.

It was all in vain. When the most agile of the greyhounds arrived at a ravine, panting, its jowls covered with foam, the deer, like an arrow, had cleared the ground in a single leap, and was lost among the thickets surrounding a narrow path that led to a pool.

"Halt! ... Halt everyone," yelled Iñigo. God has decided to let him escape.

And the galloping stopped, and the horns went silent, and the greyhounds stopped sniffing the track as the hunters held them back.

At that moment the hero of the group, Fernando de Argensola, the oldest son of the Almenars, reunited with the party.

"What are you doing?" he exclaimed, directing his voice with surprise painted on his features and anger burning in his eyes at the tracker. "What are you doing you imbecile? Can't you see the stag is bleeding, that it is the first I have killed, and you quit tracking it so that it will be lost to die in the deep woods. Do you think I came to kill deer so wolves can have them?"

"Sir," murmured Iñigo, between his teeth. "It is impossible to go beyond this point."

"Impossible! Why?"

"Because that path leads to the pool of the poplars: the pool of the poplars, in whose waters lives an evil spirit. He who dares to step into its waters will pay dearly for his daring. The deer will have leapt past its edges. How will you clear them without attracting some horrible calamity? We hunters are the kings of Mount Moncayo, but kings who have to pay tribute. An animal lost in this refuge is an animal lost."

"An animal lost? I will first lose my noble family's ancestral lands, and I will first lose my soul to Satan ... before I let that buck escape, the only one my crossbow has wounded, my first attempt as a hunter. Do you not see it! ... You can still make it out at intervals from here. His legs are weakening; his pace is slowing. Out of my way; ...let go of my reins or I'll knock you to the ground!"

Rider and horse took off like a hurricane. Iñigo followed them with his eyes until they were lost in the thickets.

The tracker finally exclaimed:

"Gentlemen, you have seen it; I tried my best to stop him. I have done my duty! Bravery is no match for Satan. This is as far as the hunter with his crossbow can go, let the chaplain go on from here with his dispenser of holy water."

The Legends

## II

"You lack color; you are despondent and depressed. What is wrong? Since that day that I will always see as unfortunate, in which you arrived at the pool of the poplars chasing after that wounded buck, one could say that an evil witch has cursed you. You no longer go into the wilds preceded by a howling pack of hounds nor does the sounding of hunting horns awaken the echoes of old. Alone, pursued by your own thoughts, every morning you take the crossbow and set out for the woods and remain there until sunset. And when night darkens and you return pale and tired to the castle, I search in your sack for the spoils of the hunt. What preoccupies you for so many hours far from those who most love you?"

While Iñigo spoke, Fernando, absorbed in his own ideas, mechanically cut splinters from an ebony bench with his hunting knife.

After a long silence, interrupted only by the scratching of the blade as it slid over the polished wood, the young man spoke to his servant, as if he had not heard a single word:

"Iñigo, you are old, you know every animal's hideout on Mount Moncayo, you who have lived pursuing beasts on the sides of the mountain, and in your hunting expeditions have more than once reached the mountain's top, tell me: By chance, have you found a woman living among the rocks?"

"A woman!" the hunting guide exclaimed with surprise while looking at Fernando up and down.

"Yes," said the young man; "it's a strange thing that is happening to me, very strange ... I thought I could keep this secret forever, but it is no longer possible; it fills my heart and appears on my face. I am going to reveal it to you ... You will help me understand the mystery that surrounds that creature who, it seems, exists only for me, since no one knows her, nor has seen her, nor can explain her to me."

The old hunter, without opening his lips, dragged his chair over to his master's bench. He did not take his stunned eyes off of Fernando who after organizing his thoughts began thusly:

"Since that day, when despite your warnings of danger, I arrived at the pool of the poplars, and crossing its waters, I recovered the stag your superstition would have permitted to escape, my soul has been filled with an overwhelming need for solitude.

"You don't know that place? Look: a spring emanates from the bosom of a crag, and falls, slipping drop by drop, amongst the green and floating leaves of the plants that grow alongside its cradle. Those drops, that on falling shine like points of gold and sound like notes from an instrument, gather together amongst the grasses and, murmuring, murmuring, with a sound similar to that of bees humming among the flowers, move through the sand and gravel until they form a small stream, and struggling with the obstacles that get in their way, and folding in among themselves, then jumping and slithering, and racing, sometimes in laughter, other times, with sighs, they fall into the pool with an indescribable sound. Laments, words, names, songs, I don't know what I have heard while listening there, alone and feverish on a rocky outcropping at whose feet leap the waters of the mysterious stream in order to eventually stagnate in a deep pool, whose unmoving surface is barely touched by the afternoon wind.

"Everything there is big. Solitude, with its myriad unknown sounds, lives in that place and it seduces the soul with its ineffable melancholy. On the shining poplar leaves, in the hollows of the rocks, in the waves of the water, there seem to talk to us invisible spirits, who recognize a brother in the immortal spirit of mankind.

"When at first light you saw me take the crossbow and head for the woods, it was never in order to lose myself among the thickets chasing game, no; I would go and sit beside the stream, to seek in its waves ... I know not what, an insane something! The day that I jumped over it with my horse, I thought I saw shining in its depths a very strange thing ...very strange: the eyes of a woman.

"It was probably a ray of sunlight that shimmered lightly in the foam; probably one of those flowers that float among the water plants and whose calyxes in its bosom look like emeralds ... I don't know; I thought I saw a gaze that met mine, a gaze that ignited my breast with an absurd, unachievable desire: that of finding the person with eyes like those. In my search I returned to that place day after day.

"Finally, one afternoon ... I believed I was being toyed with by a dream ... but no, it was true; I have spoken with her many times as I am speaking to you now ... one afternoon I found seated at my usual spot, dressed in robes that reached as far as the waters and floated upon its surface, a beautiful woman beyond all comprehension. Her tresses were like gold; her eyelashes shone like rays of light, and between the lashes there were those restless pupils that I had seen before ... yes, because the eyes of that woman were the eyes that I had riveted in my mind, eyes of an impossible color, eyes that are ..."

"Green!" exclaimed Iñigo with a voice accented by terror as he leapt from his seat.

Fernando looked at him surprised that he had concluded what he was going to say, and he asked him with a mixture of anxiety and joy:

"Do you know her?"

"Oh no!" said the tracker. "God help me that I never know her. My parents prohibited me from going to certain places, telling me a thousand times that the spirit, goblin, devil or woman that inhabited those waters had green eyes. Swear, by whatever you value most, never to return to the lake of the poplars. One day her vengeance will reach you and you will die, die, from the sin of having disturbed its waves."

"By what I love most!" murmured the young man with a sad smile.

"Yes," continued the old man; by your parents, by your relatives, by the tears of the one heaven has destined to be your wife, and by your servant, who saw your birth."

"Do you know what I love most in this world? You know I would give away my father's love, give away the kisses of the mother that gave me life and I would give all the love that all women can hold? I would give it all for one look, for just one look from those eyes ... How can I possibly not look for them!"

"May heaven's will be done!"

### III

"Who are you? Where do you come from? Where do you live? I constantly come looking for you, and I never see the mount that brings you here nor the servants that carry your litter. Open the mysterious veil that you wrap yourself in like the deepest night. I love you, and, noble, or commoner, I will be yours, yours forever ..."

The sun had dipped behind the mountain's peak; shadows were moving down its flanks; the breeze hummed among the lake's poplars, and fog, rising bit by bit from the water's surface, was beginning to obscure the rocks at the edge.

On one of the rocks, one that looked as if it were ready to collapse, could be seen reflected on the water's surface, trembling, the oldest son of the Almenar family, kneeling before the feet of

the mysterious lover, trying in vain to discover the secret of her existence.

She was beautiful, beautiful and pale like an alabaster statue. One of her curls fell over her shoulders, untangling itself among the folds of the veil like a sunbeam that crosses the clouds, and beneath her blond lashes shone her pupils like two emeralds placed in a golden setting.

When the young man finished speaking, his lips trembled as if he were going to continue on; but only a weak sigh came out, pained, like the slight wave of a breeze dying among the reeds.

"You won't speak to me!" Fernando exclaimed at seeing his hopes dashed. "Do you want me to believe what has been said about you? Oh, no! ... Speak to me; I want to know if you love me; I want to know if I can love you, if you are a woman ..."

"Or a demon ... And if I were?"

The young man hesitated for an instant; a cold sweat ran down his members; his pupils dilated as he looked more intensely into those of the woman, and fascinated by their brilliant glow, demented almost, he exclaimed in an ecstatic frenzy:

"If you were ... I would love you ... as I love you now, as if my destiny were to love you beyond life itself, if there is something beyond life."

"Fernando," the beautiful woman then said with a voice as if it were music itself, I love you more than you love me; I, who am pure spirit, who has descended in the form of a mortal. I am not a woman of this earth; I am a woman worthy of you, because you are superior to other men. I live in the depths of these waters, I move like them, fleeting and transparent: I sound and undulate like the waves. I do not punish those who dare disturb the waters where I live; rather I give them love, as if they were superior mortals who rise above the superstitions of the crowd, as if they were lovers capable of understanding my strange and mysterious affections."

While she spoke, the young man, absorbed by the contemplation of her fantastic beauty, attracted by an unknown force, drew ever closer to the edge of the rock he stood upon. The woman with the green eyes continued thusly:

"See, see the clean bottom of the lake? Do you see those plants with the long, green leaves that move back and forth at the bottom? ... They will provide us with a bed of emeralds and corals ... and I ... I will give you inexpressible happiness, the happiness that you have dreamed of in your delirium and that no one else can give you ... Come; the mist now floats over the waters like a pavilion made of linen ... the waves call us with their mysterious voices; the wind begins its hymns of love among the branches and poplar leaves; come ... come ..."

Night was beginning to extend its shadows; the moon danced on the water's surface; fog undulated in the breeze, and her green eyes shone in the dark like a will-o'-the-wisp that dances over foul waters ... "Come, come ..." These words rang in Fernando's ears as if they were an incantation. "Come" ... and the mysterious woman called him to the edge of the abyss, and appeared to offer him a kiss ... a kiss ...

Fernando stepped toward her ... another step..., and he felt thin, flexible arms fold around his neck; a cold sensation came from her glowing lips, a kiss like snow ... he did not know what to do...; he lost his footing and fell into the water with a sad, quiet sound.

The waters sprayed sparks of light and closed over his body, as silvery circles spread out, spread out, until expiring on the shore.

The Legends

The Moonbeam

A Legend from Soria

## I

He was a noble; he had been born amongst the clashing of arms, yet the disturbing blast of a battle horn would not have made him lift his head for a moment from the dark parchment on which he read the latest song of a troubadour.

Those who seek him should not look in the wide courtyard of the castle, where grooms break young horses, pages train falcons to hunt and soldiers entertain themselves on their days off by sharpening the points of their lances against a stone.

"Where is Manrique?" "Where is your master?" sometimes his mother would ask.

"We don't know," his servants would answer; "he is probably in the cloister of the Monastery of de La Peña, seated at the edge of a tomb, cocking an ear to see if he can catch a word of conversation among the dead; or on the bridge, looking at the waves of the river run under the arches; or snuggled in the fissure of a rock and entertaining himself by counting the stars in the heavens or contemplating the will-ó-the-wisps that cross like exhalations over the surfaces of the lagoons. He could be any where except where the rest of the world is."

In fact, Manrique loved solitude, and he loved it so, that sometimes he would desire not to have a shadow, so it would not follow him everywhere.

He loved solitude because in his breast, giving free rein to his imagination, he forged a fantastic world inhabited by strange creations, daughters of his poetic deliriums, because Manrique was a poet; so much so, that he could never be satisfied of the forms in which he shaped his thoughts and he never restrained them when writing them down.

He believed the red embers of the hearth were inhabited by fiery spirits of a thousand colors that ran like golden insects along the lighted logs, or danced in a shimmering round of sparks on the tips of the flames. He spent listless hours seated motionless on a small bench, next to the high, gothic fireplace, with his eyes fixed on the flames.

### **End of sample**

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