

The Reader of Time: "Midnight Mass", by Machado de Assis

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When my eyes finally deigned to open that morning, I saw that it was already day, and from the strength of the light coming through the shutters I knew the hour was well advanced.

I rose from bed still wishing to stay in it, but the day's obligations burst into my mind and forced me up. I chose the dress for the day. I sat before the dressing table to improve my appearance; I saw at once that the rice powder would be most useful to me.

When I entered the dining room, breakfast was already waiting. I sat at the table alone. The children were playing in the garden with their nurses, and my husband had had to go out to deal with his coffee broker, even though it was Sunday. I believe he gave me the customary parting kiss before leaving, though I confess I do not remember it — at least not now.

I served myself a slice of cornbread and filled my cup with coffee. At the first sip my palate was graced with a delicious fresh coffee, made from beans newly roasted from the farm. Wrapped in the quiet of the room, I noticed the copy of the *Gazeta de Notícias* that my husband had left on the table.

I reached out for the paper and began to look over the day's news without much enthusiasm, until a note caught my attention: a story by Machado de Assis had been published in the magazine *A Semana*, in issue no. 41.

I finished my coffee in haste. I greatly admire Machado's writing, and I have followed his publications ever since I acquired a taste for reading.

Do not think ill of me, but there was a time when I did not like to read — until one day I discovered a writer who seemed to be speaking with me. I think that for every kind of reader there is a kind of writer to match; and if you still believe you have no inclination for reading, do not give up: sooner or later a book will appear that wins your esteem.

I set about looking for the copy of the magazine, which had arrived at my house the day before; I had not been able to give it proper attention, so occupied was I with the children's lessons. I found *A Semana* on the side table in the parlor, and the story "Missa do Galo" on its second page, in the first column. I began to read.

I read each word slowly, trying to keep the end of the text at bay. I am in the habit of tasting each word without hurry, so as not to risk swallowing one without savoring it; an unnoticed detail can change the sense of the whole. Just as food, when it is not properly chewed, can make us choke or sit badly.

Inevitably, I finished. The text did not disappoint me. I confess that at first I judged the work by its title, which made me form false expectations. I expected to read a description of the Midnight Mass of that year; I imagined the presence of Emperor Dom Pedro II, since the text is set in 1861 or 1862; I even expected something about the priest's sermon. But to my surprise, the story takes place in a scene before the event, and narrates a conversation that at first seemed unassuming, yet subtly revealed the nuances of its characters.

That was my impression. And if you wish to form your own opinion of the story, I leave the issue of *A Semana* here for you to read and draw your own conclusions. And perhaps, afterward, we may talk about it.

Midnight Mass

By Machado de Assis — originally published on May 12, 1894

I have never been able to understand the conversation I had with a lady many years ago; I was seventeen, she was thirty. It was Christmas Eve. Having arranged with a neighbor to go to the midnight mass, I preferred not to sleep; I agreed that I would wake him at midnight.

The house where I was staying was that of the notary Meneses, who had been married, in his first marriage, to one of my cousins. His second wife, Conceição, and her mother received me kindly when I came from Mangaratiba to Rio de Janeiro, months before, to study for my examinations. I lived quietly in that two-story house on Senate Street, with my books, few acquaintances, and a few walks. The family was small: the notary, his wife, his mother-in-law, and two enslaved women. Old customs. By ten at night everyone was in their rooms; by half past ten the house was asleep.

I had never been to the theater, and more than once, hearing Meneses say that he was going to the theater, I asked him to take me with him. On those occasions the mother-in-law would pull a face, and the women would laugh behind their hands; he would not answer, would dress, go out, and come back only the next morning. Later I learned that the theater was a euphemism in action. Meneses was carrying on a love affair with a lady separated from her husband, and slept away from home once a week.

Conceição had suffered at first from the existence of the rival; but in the end she resigned herself, grew accustomed to it, and came to think it quite proper.

Good Conceição! They called her "the saint", and she deserved the title, so easily did she bear her husband's neglect. In truth she was a moderate temperament, without extremes — no great tears, no great laughter. In the matter I am treating of, she might have been a Mohammedan; she would have accepted a harem, with appearances preserved. God forgive me if I judge her wrongly. Everything in her was subdued and passive. Her very face was middling, neither pretty nor plain. She was what we call a sympathetic person. She spoke ill of no one; she forgave everything. She did not know how to hate; it may be that she did not know how to love either.

That Christmas Eve the notary went to the theater. It was in the year 1861 or 1862. I should already have been in Mangaratiba on holiday, but I stayed until Christmas to see "the midnight mass at Court". The family retired at the usual hour; I settled in the front room, dressed and ready. From there I would pass into the entrance hall and go out without waking anyone.

There were three keys to the door: one was with the notary, I would take another, and the third stayed in the house.

"But, Senhor Nogueira, what will you do all that time?" asked Conceição's mother.

"I shall read, Dona Inácia."

I had with me a novel, *The Three Musketeers*, an old translation from the *Jornal do Commercio*, I believe. I sat at the table in the middle of the room and, by the light of a kerosene lamp, while the house slept, I climbed once more onto d'Artagnan's lean horse and went off to adventure. Before long I was completely drunk on Dumas. The minutes flew, contrary to their habit when one is waiting; I heard eleven strike, but scarcely noticed it — a chance thing. Then a small sound from within came to wake me from my reading. There were soft steps in the corridor that ran from the parlor to the dining room; I raised my head, and a moment later saw the figure of Conceição appear at the door.

"Have you not gone yet?" she asked.

"I have not; it seems it is not yet midnight."

"What patience!"

Conceição came into the room, dragging the little slippers from her alcove. She wore a white dressing gown, loosely gathered at the waist. Being thin, she had the air of a romantic apparition, not out of keeping with my book of adventures. I closed the book; she went to sit in the chair opposite me, near the settee. As I asked whether I had woken her without meaning to, by making noise, she answered quickly:

"No, not at all! I woke of my own accord."

I looked at her a moment and doubted the assertion. Her eyes were not those of a person who had just been sleeping; they seemed not to have found sleep at all. That observation, which in another mind might have been worth something, I quickly threw aside, without considering that perhaps she had not slept precisely because of me, and was lying so as not to distress or annoy me. I have said already that she was good, very good.

"But the hour must be near," I said.

"What patience of yours, to wait awake while the neighbor sleeps! And to wait alone! Are you not afraid of souls from the other world? I thought you would be startled when you saw me."

"When I heard the steps I thought it strange; but you appeared at once."

"What were you reading? Do not tell me, I know: it is the novel of the Musketeers."

"Just so; it is very fine."

"Do you like novels?"

"I do."

"Have you read *A Moreninha*?"

"By Dr. Macedo? I have it at Mangaratiba."

"I like novels very much, but I read little, for want of time. What novels have you read?"

I began to tell her the names of some. Conceição listened with her head reclined against the back of the chair, her eyes threading through half-closed lids, never leaving me. From time to time she passed her tongue over her lips to moisten them. When I had finished speaking she said nothing; we stayed so for some seconds. Then I saw her straighten her head, lace her fingers and rest her chin upon them, her elbows on the arms of the chair, all without turning her large, bright eyes away from me.

"Perhaps she is bored," I thought. And aloud: "Dona Conceição, I believe it is getting to be time, and I —"

"No, no, it is still early. I looked at the clock just now; it is half past eleven. You have time. Losing a night — are you able to sleep by day?"

"I have done it."

"I cannot; losing one night, the next day I am good for nothing, and I must have at least half an hour of sleep. But then I am growing old."

"Old, what do you mean, Dona Conceição?"

Such was the warmth of my words that it made her smile. Usually her gestures were unhurried and her attitudes calm; now, however, she rose quickly, crossed to the other side of the room and took a few steps between the street window and the door of her husband's study. So, in the honest disarray she wore, she gave me a singular impression. Thin though she was, there was a certain sway in her walk, as of one who finds it a labor to carry her own body; that trait had never seemed to me so distinct as on that night. She stopped now and then, examining a fold of curtain or adjusting the position of some object on the sideboard; at last she halted before me, with the table between us. The circle of her ideas was narrow; she returned to her astonishment at finding me waiting awake; I repeated what she already knew — that I had never heard the midnight mass at Court, and did not wish to miss it.

"It is the same mass as in the country; all masses are alike."

"I believe it; but here there must be more splendor, and more people too. Look, Holy Week at Court is finer than in the country. Saint John's I do not say, nor Saint Anthony's..."

Little by little she had leaned forward; she had set her elbows on the marble of the table and put her face between her open hands. Her sleeves not being buttoned, they fell naturally, and I saw half her arms, very pale, and less thin than one might have supposed. The sight was not new to me, though neither was it common; at that moment, however, the impression it made was great. The veins were so blue that despite the little light I could have counted them from where I sat. Conceição's presence had roused me even more than the book. I went on saying what I thought of the festivals of the country and of the city, and of other things that came to my lips. I spoke, mending one subject to another, without knowing why,

straying from them or returning to the first, and laughing to make her smile and to see her teeth, which shone white and all alike. Her eyes were not quite black, but dark; her nose, dry and long, a trifle curved, gave her face a questioning air. When I raised my voice a little, she checked me:

"Softer! Mother may wake."

And she did not move from that position, which filled me with pleasure, so near were our faces. Truly, there was no need to speak loudly to be heard; we both whispered, I more than she, because I spoke more; she, at times, grew serious, very serious, with her forehead a little furrowed. At last she tired; she changed attitude and place. She came round the table and sat beside me, on the settee. I turned, and could see, by stealth, the tips of her slippers; but it was only for as long as she took to sit down — the gown was long and covered them at once. I remember they were black. Conceição spoke very low:

"Mother is far off, but she sleeps very lightly; if she woke now, poor thing, she would not fall asleep again for a long while."

"I am the same."

"What?" she asked, leaning forward to hear better.

I went to sit in the chair beside the settee and repeated the words. She laughed at the coincidence; she too slept lightly; we were three light sleepers.

"There are times when I am like Mother; waking, it costs me to sleep again — I roll about in bed, I get up for no reason, I light a candle, I walk about, I lie down again, and nothing."

"That is what happened to you tonight."

"No, no," she broke in.

I did not understand the denial; it may be that she did not understand it either. She took the ends of her sash and tapped them against her knees — that is, her right knee, for she had just crossed her legs. Then she told a story about dreams, and assured me that she had had only one nightmare, as a child. She wanted to know whether I had them. The conversation resumed thus, slowly, at length, without my noticing either the hour or the mass. When I finished a narrative or an explanation, she invented another question or another subject, and I took up the word again. From time to time she checked me:

"Softer, softer..."

There were pauses too. Two or three times it seemed to me that I saw her sleeping; but her eyes, closed for an instant, would open again without sleep or fatigue, as if she had shut them the better to see. One of those times I believe she caught me absorbed in her, and I remember that she closed them again — I do not know whether hurriedly or slowly. There are impressions of that night that come back to me truncated or confused. I contradict myself, I lose my way. One that is still fresh is that at a certain moment she, who was merely sympathetic, became beautiful — became most beautiful. She was standing, her arms crossed; out of respect for her I made to rise; she would not have it, put one of her

hands on my shoulder and obliged me to stay seated. I thought she was going to say something; but she shivered, as if with a chill, turned her back and went to sit in the chair where she had found me reading. From there she glanced at the mirror above the settee, and spoke of two engravings that hung on the wall.

"These pictures are getting old. I have already asked Chiquinho to buy others."

Chiquinho was her husband. The pictures spoke of the man's principal business. One represented Cleopatra; I do not recall the subject of the other, but they were women. Both were vulgar; at that time they did not seem ugly to me.

"They are pretty," I said.

"Pretty they are; but they are stained. And then, frankly, I would prefer two images, two saints. These are better suited to a young man's room, or a barber's."

"A barber's? You have never been to a barber's shop."

"But I imagine that the customers, while they wait, talk of girls and courtships, and naturally the owner cheers their eyes with pretty figures. In a family house I do not find it proper. That is what I think; but I think many odd things like that. Be that as it may, I do not like the pictures. I have an Our Lady of the Conception, my patroness, very beautiful; but it is a sculpture, it cannot be put on the wall, nor do I wish it. It is in my oratory."

The idea of the oratory brought me that of the mass; it reminded me that it might be late, and I meant to say so. I think I even opened my mouth, but closed it at once to hear what she was saying, with sweetness, with grace, with such softness that it brought a laziness to my soul and made me forget the mass and the church. She spoke of her devotions as a girl and a young woman. Then she told some anecdotes of balls, some incidents of outings, recollections of Paquetá, all mixed together, almost without pause. When she tired of the past, she spoke of the present, of the affairs of the house, of the cares of family life, which she had been told were many before she married, but were nothing. She did not tell me, but I knew she had married at twenty-seven.

By now she no longer changed places, as at first, and had scarcely left the same attitude. She no longer had those great long eyes, and sat looking idly at the walls.

"We must change the paper in this room," she said after a while, as if speaking to herself.

I agreed, for the sake of saying something, to come out of the kind of magnetic sleep, or whatever it was, that bound my tongue and my senses. I wanted and did not want to end the conversation; I made an effort to draw my eyes away from her, and drew them away out of a feeling of respect; but the idea that it might look like boredom, when it was not, carried my eyes back to Conceição. The conversation was dying. In the street the silence was complete.

We remained for some time — I cannot say how long — entirely silent. The only sound, and a scant one, was a mouse gnawing in the study, which woke me from that kind of drowsiness; I meant to speak of it, but found no way. Conceição seemed to be daydreaming. Suddenly I heard a knock at the window from outside, and a voice crying: "Midnight mass! Midnight mass!"

"There is your companion," she said, rising. "It is amusing: you were the one to wake him, and he comes to wake you. Go, it must be time; goodbye."

"Is it time already?" I asked.

"Naturally."

"Midnight mass!" they repeated from outside, knocking.

"Go, go, do not keep them waiting. The fault was mine. Goodbye; until tomorrow."

And with the same sway of her body, Conceição slipped into the corridor, treading softly. I went out into the street and found the neighbor waiting. We made our way from there to the church. During the mass, the figure of Conceição came between me and the priest more than once; let that be put down to my seventeen years. The next morning, at breakfast, I spoke of the midnight mass and of the people who had been in the church, without exciting Conceição's curiosity. During the day I found her as always: natural, benign, with nothing to recall the conversation of the night before. At New Year's I went to Mangaratiba. When I returned to Rio de Janeiro, in March, the notary had died of apoplexy. Conceição was living at Engenho Novo, but I neither visited her nor met her. I heard later that she had married her husband's sworn clerk.

Machado de Assis

Historical documentation

These were the periodicals I read that Sunday morning. I present them so that you may enjoy the same reading I had.

Sources: *Gazeta de Notícias* (Rio de Janeiro), May 13, 1894. — Machado de Assis, "Missa do Galo", *A Semana*, no. 41, May 12, 1894.

Note on this edition: Machado de Assis's story is in the public domain; the English text above is a new translation made for this publication, and does not reproduce any existing published translation.

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