

LBRIS

We know
books

The Penguin
Book of Spanish
Short Stories

Introduced and edited by
MARGARET JULL COSTA

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



First published 2021
004

Introduction copyright © Margaret Jull Costa, 2021
Translation copyright © Margaret Jull Costa, Thomas Bunstead,
Peter Bush, Kit Maude, Kathryn Phillips-Miles, Simon Deefholts, 2021

The moral rights of the authors and translators have been asserted

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-39050-4

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Contents

<i>Introduction by Margaret Jull Costa</i>	xi
BENITO PÉREZ GALDÓS The Novel on the Tram	I
EMILIA PARDO BAZÁN The Talisman	24
LEOPOLDO ALAS, 'CLARÍN' Duet for Two Coughs	30
MIGUEL DE UNAMUNO The Likeness	37
RAMÓN DEL VALLE-INCLÁN The Poor Wee Child	42
PÍO BAROJA The Unknown	46
AZORÍN The Reverse Side of the Tapestry	49
EDUARDO BLANCO AMOR The Biobardos	55
JOSEP PLA Counterpoint	61
ROSA CHACEL The Genie of the Night and the Genie of the Day	70
RAFAEL DIESTE Light and Silence	76

RAMÓN J. SENDER The Boy	79
MAX AUB Ingratitude	81
MERCÈ RODOREDA Like Silk	84
ÁLVARO CUNQUEIRO Jacinto's Umbrella	92
PERE CALDERS Feat of Arms	95
ALONSO ZAMORA VICENTE On a Visit	97
JULIÁN AYESTA At the Beach	101
MIGUEL DELIBES On Such a Night	105
CARMEN LAFORET The Return	115
IGNACIO ALDECOA Come Twelve o'Clock	121
ANA MARÍA MATUTE Conscience	127
MEDARDO FRAILE Berta's Presence	133
CARMEN MARTÍN GAITE Behind the Eyes	138
JOSEFINA RODRÍGUEZ ALDECOA Madrid, Autumn, Saturday	143
RAFAEL SÁNCHEZ FERLOSIO The Recidivist	149

JUAN BENET Reichenau	152
JUAN MARSÉ The Street of the Sleeping Dragon	157
ESTHER TUSQUETS Summer Orchestra	163
ÁLVARO POMBO Luzmila	173
JOSÉ MARÍA MERINO The Deserter	185
MARINA MAYORAL Then He Began to Forget	190
CRISTINA FERNÁNDEZ CUBAS A Fresh Start	196
JUAN JOSÉ MILLÁS She's Everywhere	206
VICENTE MOLINA FOIX The Real Hairdresser	210
SOLEDAD PUÉRTOLAS Traffic Jam	225
CARME RIERA The Return Home	228
ENRIQUE VILA-MATAS Sea Swell	234
JAVIER MARÍAS A Sense of Camaraderie	245
BERNARDO ATXAGA Teresa, poverina mia	254
QUIM MONZÓ The Fullness of Summer	266

PALOMA DÍAZ-MAS In Search of a Photograph	268
JULIO LLAMAZARES Balancing the World on His Chin	272
MANUEL RIVAS The Butterfly's Tongue	275
CARLOS CASTÁN The Usher	286
TERESA SOLANA The Second Mrs Appleton	289
JAVIER CERCAS Against Optimism	297
ELOY TIZÓN About the Wedding	300
KARMELE JAIO The Scream	309
JESÚS CARRASCO 10.10.10	316
JAVIER MONTES Hotel Life	329
HARKAITZ CANO The Keys to the Apartment	342
EIDER RODRÍGUEZ And Shortly After That, Now	348
ELVIRA NAVARRO Love	360
CRISTINA GARCÍA MORALES The Generation Gap	368
AIXA DE LA CRUZ True Milk	370

<i>Copyright information</i>	379
<i>My Fellow Translators</i>	387
<i>Translator's Acknowledgements</i>	389

BENITO PÉREZ GALDÓS

The Novel on the Tram

I

The tram was setting off from one end of the Salamanca neighbourhood and heading across Madrid in the direction of Pozas. Gripped by the selfish desire to get a seat before all the other passengers – who, naturally, had precisely the same intention – I grabbed the handrail of the stairs leading to the upper deck, placed one foot on the platform and climbed aboard, but at that very instant – I should have seen it coming! – I collided with another traveller entering from the other side. When I looked at him, I saw that he was my friend, Señor Dionisio Cascajares de la Vallina, a sensible, inoffensive fellow, who, on the occasion in question, was kind enough to greet me with an enthusiastic, heartfelt handshake.

Our unexpected collision had no major consequences, if you discount a slight dent inflicted on the straw hat perched on the head of an Englishwoman who was attempting to board the tram behind my friend and who, doubtless due to a lack of agility on her part, received a blow to her bonnet from his walking stick.

We sat down and, dismissing the incident as unimportant, started chatting.

Benito Pérez Galdós (1843–1920) is considered to be Spain's greatest nineteenth-century novelist, on a par with Dickens and Balzac. Born in the Canary Islands, he moved to Madrid when he was nineteen and spent most of his adult life there. He wrote novels, plays and stories, his masterpiece being *Fortunata y Jacinta*. Although his work is usually described as Realist, there is often an element of the fantastic in his writing (as in this story), and this was perhaps what attracted the film-maker Luis Buñuel, who based three of his films on Galdós novels: *Viridiana*, *Nazarín* and *Tristana*.

Señor Dionisio Cascajares de la Vallina is a celebrated doctor – although his fame does not rest on his deep knowledge of pathology – and a thoroughly decent man, of whom no one has ever said that he was likely to steal other people's property or kill a fellow human being other than in the pursuit of his dangerous and scientific profession. It is true that the trust he inspires in a multitude of families from all strata of society has much to do with his pleasant manner and his indulgent way of giving his patients only the treatment they want, but it is also a well-known fact that, in his bounty, he provides other services too, always of a rigorously honest nature, but which have nothing to do with science.

He knows more interesting things about people's private lives than anyone else, and is an obsessive asker of questions, although he makes up for the vice of over-inquisitiveness by his equal readiness to tell you everything he knows about other people without your even having to ask. You can imagine, then, how eagerly the curious and the loose-tongued seek out the company of this fine example of human indiscretion.

This gentleman and friend – well, he's a friend to everyone – was the person sitting next to me as the tram slid smoothly over the rails down Calle de Serrano, stopping now and then to fill up the few remaining empty seats. Indeed, we were soon so crammed together that I was hard put to know what to do with the parcel of books I had with me, and which I placed first on one knee and then on the other. In the end, fearing that I might be bothering the English lady sitting to my left, I decided to perch on top of it.

II

'And where are you off to?' Cascajares asked, peering at me over his blue spectacles, which made me feel as if I were being scrutinized by two pairs of eyes.

I gave a somewhat evasive response, and he, doubtless not wishing to miss the opportunity of gleaning some useful snippet of information, asked further questions, along the lines of 'And what's So-and-so up to these days? And where's So-and-so living?' and other similar enquiries, none of which received very fulsome replies.

Finding each attempt at conversation blocked, he finally set off along the path best suited to his expansive temperament and began to blab.

'Poor Countess!' he said, shaking his head and adopting an expression of selfless compassion. 'If she had followed my advice, she wouldn't be in the appalling situation in which she finds herself now.'

'No, of course,' I replied mechanically, thus paying the Countess my own brief tribute of compassion.

'You see,' he went on, 'she has allowed herself to become completely dominated by that man, and he'll be master of the house one day. The poor thing thinks she can solve everything by weeping and wailing, but it's not true. She should act now, because the man's an out-and-out bounder and, I believe, capable of the most heinous of crimes.'

'Oh, yes, awful,' I said, unthinkingly sharing in his imaginings.

'It's the same with all men of evil instincts and low social status when they rise a little in the world. They become utterly insufferable. One look at his face will tell you that no good will come of him.'

'Absolutely. It stands out a mile.'

'Let me explain the situation to you briefly. The Countess is an excellent woman, angelic, as discreet as she is beautiful, and she really does deserve better luck. However, she is married to a man who does not appreciate what a treasure he has and who devotes his life to gambling and all manner of other illicit pastimes. She, meanwhile, grows bored and weeps. Is it any surprise, then, that she should try to mask her sorrow by seeking honest entertainment elsewhere, wherever there's a piano? Indeed, I myself have told her as much. "Countess," I said, "life is too short, you need some diversion. In the end, the Count will repent of his folly, and your sorrows will be at an end." And I think I'm right.'

'Oh, I'm sure you are!' I said officiously, although I was as indifferent to the Countess's misfortunes then as I had been at the beginning.

'That's not the worst of it, though,' added Cascajares, striking the floor with his walking stick. 'Now the Count has got it into his head to be jealous, yes, of a certain young man who has undertaken to "amuse" the Countess.'

'It will be the envious husband's fault if he succeeds.'

'Now given that the Countess is virtue personified, none of this would

matter, no, none of this would matter if there were not a dastardly fellow involved, who, I suspect, will bring disaster down upon the household.'

'Really? And who is this fellow?' I asked, my curiosity piqued.

'A former butler, of whom the Count is very fond, and who has set out to make that poor unhappy, sensitive lady suffer. It seems he is in possession of a compromising secret and with that weapon intends to . . . well, I don't know quite what exactly. It's disgraceful!'

'It certainly is, and he deserves to be made an example of,' I said, joining him in unleashing my fury on the man.

'But *she* is innocent, *she* is an angel. Oh, but here we are at Cibeles already, yes, there's the Parque de Buenavista on the right. Stop the tram will you, my boy. I'm not one of those men who likes to jump off while the tram is moving and risk cracking my skull open on the paving stones. Goodbye, my friend, goodbye.'

The tram stopped and Señor Dionisio Cascajares de la Vallina got off, having once more shaken my hand and caused a second dent in the English lady's hat, had not yet recovered from the first assault.

III

I remained on the tram, and, the odd thing is, I continued to think about that unknown Countess, about her cruel, suspicious consort and, above all, about the sinister man who, to use the doctor's colourful turn of phrase, was about to bring disaster down upon the household. Consider, dear reader, the nature of the human mind: when Cascajares began telling me about those events, I found it irrelevant and boring, but it took scarcely a moment for my imagination to take up that same affair and turn it over and over in my mind, a psychological operation doubtless stimulated by the regular motion of the tram and the dull, monotonous sound of its wheels, grinding away at the iron rails.

In the end, though, I stopped thinking about what, in fact, held little real interest for me and, looking around the carriage, I began examining my fellow passengers carefully, one by one. Such different faces and such diverse expressions! Some seemed quite indifferent to those sitting next to them, while others reviewed the assembled crowd with impertinent

curiosity; some were happy, others sad, one man was yawning, and another fellow further off was laughing; and, despite the brevity of the journey, not a few were impatient for it to end, for there is nothing more annoying than being in the company of a dozen or so people all gazing at each other in silence and counting each other's wrinkles and moles and any other imperfections on face or clothing.

It's strange, that brief meeting with people we have never seen before and whom we will probably never see again. When we get on the tram, there is usually someone else already there; others get on afterwards; some get off, leaving us alone and then, finally, we get off too. It's an image of human life, in which being born and dying are like those entrances and exits I've described, and which, as the generations of travellers come and go, are constantly renewing the small world of the tram. They enter and leave, they are born and die. How many have been here before us! How many will come afterwards!

And, to make the resemblance more complete, a tram contains a miniature world of passions. We judge many of those we see there to be excellent people, we like their looks and are even saddened when they leave. Then there are others who, on the contrary, we loathe on sight: we hate them for ten minutes, rather rancorously examine their phrenological character and feel real pleasure when they leave. And, meanwhile, the tram, that imitation of human life, keeps moving, constantly receiving and letting go, uniform, tireless, majestic, indifferent to what is going on inside, entirely unstirred by the barely repressed emotions of that dumb-show, always travelling along those two endless parallel lines, as long and slippery as the centuries.

IV

I remained immersed in this ocean of unsettling thoughts as the tram continued up Calle de Alcalá, until I was snatched from them by the sound of my parcel of books hitting the floor. I immediately picked the parcel up, and my eyes fell on the piece of newspaper that served as a wrapping for the books and so I idly read a line or two of print. My curiosity was immediately aroused. Certain names scattered over that scrap

of newsprint caught both my eye and my memory. I searched for the beginning of the article, but could not find it. The paper was torn and, initially out of mere curiosity and subsequently with growing fascination, this is what I read:

The Countess was in a state of indescribable agitation. She was continually troubled by the presence of Mudarra, the insolent butler, who, forgetting his lowly origins, had dared to set his sights on her, a creature so far above him. The villain was constantly spying on her, watching her as one might watch one's prey. He was unconstrained by respect, and neither the sensibility nor the delicacy of that excellent lady proved an obstacle to his ignoble stalking of her.

Mudarra entered the Countess's bedroom late one night, and she, pale and agitated, and filled at once by shame and terror, lacked the courage to dismiss him.

'Do not be afraid, Countess,' he said with a forced, sinister smile that only increased the lady's anxiety. 'I have not come to harm you in any way.'

'Oh, dear God, when will this torment cease?' cried the Countess, letting one arm droop by her side in despair. 'Leave my room this instant, I cannot give in to your desires. How shameful to abuse both my weakness and the indifference of my husband, who is the sole author of my many misfortunes.'

'Why so upset, Countess?' asked the fearsome butler. 'If I did not hold the key to your perdition in my hand, if I could not divulge to the Count details regarding a certain young gentleman . . . but I will not make use of those terrible weapons. One day, you will understand when you see how selfless is the love I feel for you.'

When he said this, Mudarra took a few steps towards the Countess, who drew back from the monster in horror and repugnance.

Mudarra was a man of about fifty, dark, squat and bow-legged, with a bristling brush of wiry hair, a large mouth and prominent eye-teeth. His eyes, half-hidden beneath his beetling black brows, were filled at that moment by the most bestial and urgent feelings of concupiscence.

'Ah, such coldness!' he exclaimed angrily, when he saw the lady's understandable indifference. 'If only I were a certain impeccably turned-out young man! Why so fastidious when you know I could easily tell the Count . . . And he would believe me, you can be sure of that; the Count has such confidence in me that anything I tell him he takes to be the Gospel truth. And, given how jealous he is, if I were to give him that little piece of paper . . .'

'You villain!' cried the Countess in a fit of noble indignation. 'I am innocent, and my husband would never give ear to such vile calumnies. And, even if I were guilty, rather than buy my peace of mind at such a price, I would prefer a thousand times over to be despised by my husband and by everyone else. Get out of here this minute.'

'I have a temper too, Countess,' said the butler, swallowing his rage, 'yes, I, too, have a temper, and when thwarted . . . But since you're being so unpleasant, let's continue in that vein. I know what I have to do now. I have been far too indulgent for far too long. For the last time, I ask that we be friends. Don't force me to do something foolish, Countess . . .'

As he said this, Mudarra arranged his parchment-yellow skin and the stiff tendons of his face into something resembling a smile and advanced a few steps as if about to sit down on the sofa next to the Countess. She leapt to her feet, crying:

'Get out of here, you scoundrel! You know perfectly well I have no one to defend me! Get out of here!'

The butler was like a wild beast who has let slip the prey he had held for a moment in his claws. He snorted, made a threatening gesture and then, very slowly and quietly, left the room. The Countess, trembling and breathless, cowering in a corner, listened as his footsteps gradually moved off, the sound muffled by the rugs in the next room. When she thought he had gone, she could finally breathe more easily. She locked all the doors and tried to sleep, but sleep eluded her, her eyes still filled by the terrifying image of the monster.

CHAPTER XI. *The plot* – When Mudarra left the Countess, he went straight to his own room and, in the grip of a terrible nervous disquiet, began leafing through various papers and letters, muttering: 'I've had enough, she'll pay dearly for this . . .' Then he sat down, took up his

pen, and set before him one of those letters, which he studied closely before beginning another, trying to copy the handwriting. He kept glancing feverishly from one to the other, and at last, after much labour, he wrote the following letter – in a hand identical to that of the original: *I promised to see you, and I hasten . . .*

The newspaper was torn at this point and I could read no more.

V

With my eyes still fixed on the parcel, I began thinking about the connection between what I had heard from Señor Cascajares de la Vallina and the scene I had just read about in that rag, a serial doubtless translated from some ridiculous novel by Ponson du Terrail or Montépin. I know it's nonsense, I said to myself, but the fact is she intrigues me, this Countess, this victim of the barbarous machinations of a ruthless butler, who only exists in the crazed mind of some novelist born to terrify simple folk. How will the wretch take his revenge? He would be capable of anything, of the kind of atrocity dreamed up by such authors to conclude a particularly sensational chapter. And what will the Count do? And what about the young man mentioned first by Cascajares and later by Mudarra in the newspaper serial. What will he do? Who is he? What exactly is the relationship between that unknown gentleman and the Countess? I would love to know . . .

VI

I looked about me on the tram and, O horror, my eyes alighted on someone who made me tremble with fear. While I had been absorbed in reading that interesting fragment of serial, the tram had stopped several times to let off or take on the occasional passenger. One such passenger was the man whose sudden presence had so shaken me. It was him, Mudarra, the butler himself, sitting opposite me, his knees touching mine. In a moment, I had examined him from head to toe and recognized him

from the description I had read. It could be none other; even the most insignificant details of his clothes clearly indicated it was him. I recognized his greasy, swarthy skin; the untamable hair growing in all directions, like the snakes on Medusa's head; the eyes almost concealed by his wild, bushy eyebrows; the pigeon toes; in short, the same look, the same man in appearance, attire, in the way he breathed and coughed, even in the way he put his hand in his pocket to pay his fare.

Then I saw him take out a wallet and noticed that this object bore a large gilt M, the initial of his surname. He opened the wallet, removed a letter and studied the envelope with a demonic smile on his face. I could even imagine him muttering to himself:

'I've got her handwriting right off pat!'

It was, in fact, quite a short letter and the address on the envelope was written in a female hand. He looked at it hard, relishing his villainous handiwork, until he noticed that I, with indiscreet, discourteous curiosity, was peering over to read the address. He shot me a glance that struck me like a blow and immediately returned the letter to his wallet.

During the brief period of time it had taken me to read that fragment of a story, to ponder a little those strange events, and to find the unlikely, fantastical figure of Mudarra himself transformed into a living being and a fellow passenger on that journey, the tram had left behind it Calle de Alcalá, crossed Puerta del Sol and emerged triumphant into Calle Mayor, pushing its way past the other carriages, scattering the slower, loitering carts and frightening the pedestrians who, in the tumult of the street and dazed by the hubbub of noises, often failed to see the great hulk approaching until it was almost upon them.

I was still studying the man as one would an object of whose real existence one is not quite sure, and I did not take my eyes off his repellent features until I saw him stand up, call for the tram to stop and get off, only to disappear at once among the crowds filling the street.

VII

Several people got on and off, and the living décor of the tram changed completely.