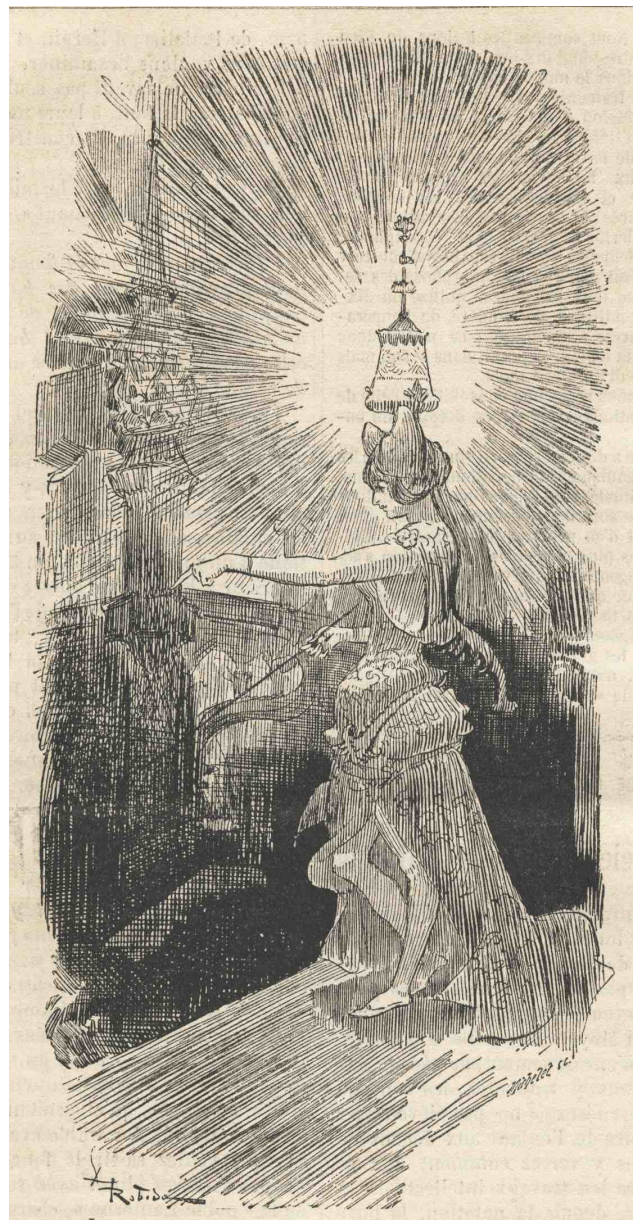


# Miguel A. Calvo Roselló's “A Strange Country” (1919)

Introductory Note and Translation  
by Marlene Hansen Esplin

Written nearly a hundred years ago, Miguel A. Calvo Roselló's “A Strange Country” is eerily prescient. The story anticipates both the advances and intrusions of automated technologies and warns of the reach of a totalitarian state with these new means of control and surveillance. The beleaguered Pablo Orellana, the story's main narrator and protagonist, laments his constant remote surveillance via “telephonoscope” by the inspectors of the “Free Country”: “The idea of never being alone unsettles you, afflicts you like a terrible nightmare, and made me delirious for freedom.” Decades before George Orwell's “telescreen” in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Calvo Roselló describes the unnerving possibility of always being seen or heard. On the heels of the 1917 Russian revolution, the story interrogates communist ideologies and precedes a pantheon of dystopian literary texts, including Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and the aforementioned *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. “A Strange Country” follows a tradition of dystopic fiction already established in Spain, notably the play “Sentimental Club” (1909) and other works by Ramón Pérez de Ayala, who in turn claimed H.G. Wells as an influential predecessor (Lázaro 73). While a thinly veiled response to political occurrences in Russia, Calvo Roselló's story is a pioneering dystopic narrative and an utterly absorbing read.

We have scant information about the author. Calvo Roselló was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico in 1878 and is said to have been an engineer in the Spanish army who retired from military service by 1940 (Uribe, n.p.). He was a regular con-





## A Strange Country

tributor to Madrid's long-standing art-and-literary magazine *Blanco y negro*—founded in 1891 and the precursor of the current weekly supplement to the *ABC* newspaper, *ABCD*. “Un país extraño” first appeared in *Blanco y negro* on September 28, 1919, together with a number of intriguing Art-Deco illustrations by Joaquín Valverde and a small black-and-white sketch of the author. The story was published again in 1925, one of hundreds of short texts disseminated in the *Novela Semanal* series in Argentina. The *Novela Semanal* editors “nationalized” the story by either eliminating references, words, and phrases specific to Spain or by replacing them with Argentine equivalents. My translation closely adheres to the *Blanco y negro* edition, though I have incorporated some of the minor typographic changes from the *Novela Semanal* edition. I have also corrected one or two apparent mistakes in chronology (e.g., “48-6” saying that she has been married four times when context reveals that it was five) and have accounted for a number of inconsistencies in punctuation or capitalization. Yet, for the most part, I have retained the highly unconventional punctuation employed in both editions of the source text—including numerous dashes and ellipses—in order to preserve the very fragmented and rambling character of the prose.

My main aim in translating was to render the story readable and accessible while also conveying the inherent strangeness and suspense of the narrative. Accordingly, I have resisted idiomatic translations of phrases that are already somewhat bumpy in the source text. The characters talk about becoming “united” (*unirse*) instead of getting “married”; they go to the “feeder” (*el comedero*) instead of to the “restaurant” or the “cafeteria”; and they use the “telephonoscope” (*el telefonoscopio*) instead of a less cumbersome English equivalent. To service strangeness, I have opted for a number of fairly literal translations, relying at times on Latinate cognates—the “aspirador neumático” becomes a “pneumatic vacuum”

and the shocking “trepanación” is simply “trepanation.” Likewise, I have tried to pair somewhat elevated or antiquated Spanish words with English words of a similar register. I have also resisted, as much as possible, taming Calvo Roselló's unwieldy run-on sentences or breaking up his hefty paragraphs. My hope is that English and Spanish readers alike will become accustomed to the peculiar rhythms of the text.

Some of the most difficult moments while translating involved retaining the story's wordplay and conveying language-specific tensions involving the use of titles such as “don” and “doña” and “Señor” and “Señora,” as well as the shift from “usted” to “tú.” When possible, I tried to signal wordplay through the repetition of certain sounds, e.g., by rendering the “*chac-chac-chac*” of the typewriter as a “click-click-clacking” in English. I indicated the shift from “usted” to “tú” by emphasizing Pablo's concern for formalities and his surprise at the “familiar” manner in which the other characters speak with him. On balance, I sought to preserve the rapidity of the narrative when adhering too closely to the Spanish would have slowed the story unnecessarily. As the narrator says of the pages that Pablo sends him from the mental institution: “I honestly confess that I did not find anything of order in their jumbled lines, only the lamentable deliriums of a sick mind... In short; here it is: you can judge for yourselves.” In translating, I offer “only the lamentable deliriums” of correspondence, and you, the readers, can judge for yourselves. ●

### Works Cited

LÁZARO, Albert. *H.G. Wells en España: Estudio de los expedientes de censura (1939-1978)*. Editorial Verbum: Madrid, 2004.

“Un país extraño de Calvo Roselló.” La web de Augusto Uribe: Ciencia ficción, aventuras fantásticas y textos de conjetura. Accessed 23 July 2018. <<<http://www.augustouribe.com/extrano.htm>>>



Miguel A. Calvo Roselló

## A Strange Country

*Pablito Orellana, the kind and distinguished artist, amid his ill-spent youth and just when the arts could expect so much from his inspired genius, sends me these pages from the asylum in which the unfortunate young man has been committed. I have read them with curiosity, thinking that they could confirm the idea that "children and madmen tell the truth"; however, I honestly confess that I did not find anything of order in their jumbled lines, only the lamentable deliriums of a sick mind... In short; here it is: you can judge for yourselves.*

### I. From Astonished to Shocked

It would be impossible for me to explain how I came to this strange country; all that happened to me in it has remained deeply embedded in my memory, while, in contrast, my earlier memories have faded to the extent that I can only reconstitute diffuse, general outlines, isolated details with large gaps between them, which, despite my insistent efforts to remember, I can't fill in.

I vaguely remember that I was traveling; that in my compartment there was also a man who smoked a lot and a thick-set woman in her forties; that it was hot; that I read with horror the latest news of Russia, full of terrifying accounts of crimes, devastations, and monstrosities of all kinds... disparate matters, so it appears... Suddenly, an appalling, apocalyptic noise, of planks of wood splintering, metal clanging violently, glass shattering, resounding booms, deafening claps of air... I perceived all of this at once, it was all instantaneous and horribly overwhelming, meanwhile, as if in a cruel nightmare, I was beset by a tremendous force in my chest, my legs, my arms, my body lacerated, my head throbbing intensely, and I was thus launched into the void, subject to brutal pressure, painfully tormented by sharp and incessant spasms.

I was overcome by sudden weakness; submerged in merciful unconsciousness, I lost my sense of all that surrounded me, all that was happening, even of myself; I didn't hear any noise or feel any pain; my only lasting sensation was the dizzying sense of falling....; yes, I was still falling, I would be falling forever. For how long? I don't know; at the time, it seemed that I fell for many hours. Finally, unconsciousness overtook me, and even this last sensation vanished completely from my soul...

When I became conscious, I found myself without pain or injury, lying down comfortably and at ease; I decided that all that had happened was a bad dream, and smiling and slowly opening my eyes, I stretched out... But, oh! The simple pleasure of stretching was abruptly curtailed, and, with my arms still extended and my torso arched, I remained still for quite some time, doubting that I was still dreaming.

I did not recognize the room. The proportions and surface of it were more or less like mine own; but, it was so strangely decorated! Here and there, peculiar devices were set up in the walls: an electric circuit box; unusual contraptions that seemed to be microphones; a large panel that held thick, metallic wiring; small slanted mirrors (maybe periscopes?); and various types of buttons, with labels that I couldn't quite make out...

Utterly astonished and curious, I pulled myself together, and at this point my bewilderment came to a head; I had hardly sat up when the clothes that covered me quickly and automatically rolled themselves up; and the bed gently turned about, leaving me standing upright on the floor.

I'll admit that I was startled; that my scalp tingled and my heart was anguished; in a word, my friends, I was consumed by fear; indeed, fear of the unknown, fear of the unreal, the kind of irrational fear that a cadaver illuminated by the sinister glow of votive candles awakens in us...

As you can imagine, I more than hurried toward the door, set on getting away from there as



## A Strange Country

soon as possible... But more surprises awaited me!

In order to get to adjoining room, I had to cross a wide and gleaming plate of copper; No sooner had I stepped on it, when than an enormous disc of the same material and suspended at a regular height, dropped down, delicately alighting atop my head: I was startled at first, but the pleasant sensation that I experienced in that instant, owing, according to what was later explained to me, to the effect of an extremely high frequency current (some 200,000 amperes), induced me to stand still. I noticed, with intimate delight, something like the infiltration of new energies, a resurgence of strength, the pleasant toning of my muscles and nerves, and, at the same time, I observed that a certain fine powder emanated from all of my body, which was immediately sucked up by a kind of pneumatic vacuum; I was without a doubt more scrupulously clean than after the most fastidious bath. The effect of the current lasted just a few seconds; afterward, that diabolical disc doused me with a torrent of cold water, the unexpected impression of which made me jump and run for the outspread towel that was hanging near me; I didn't even have time to reach out and grab it, when it wrapped me up in itself, rapidly rubbing me back-and-forth; then hung itself up again, and, in that moment, a glistening nickel-plated cylinder which had been near the ceiling opened up, draping me in the most singular vestment, billowing and straight, archaic, and reminiscent of Hebrew tunics, in which I was dressed as if by magic. At my feet were some slippers; I stepped into them and turned to leave, still set on escaping.

However, my fate was to then go from astonished to shocked: as I passed the through the door, which I thought was liberating, I found myself in an expansive study and there—my friends—an individual as eccentrically attired as myself awaited me. Once the initial surprise had passed, I confess that it was difficult for me not to burst out laughing: the effect of the electrical current, to

which I had seen myself unexpectedly succumb, gave me such intimate satisfaction, such optimism, such joy for life, that laughter engulfed me.

I looked at him closely: he looked at me as well: his eyes did not betray affection, menace, or ridicule, only curiosity: although he appeared to be fifty to fifty-five years old, his face, cleanly shaven, remained smooth and fresh, and his forehead without wrinkles, conveying kindness and intelligence, and there was scarcely any gray on his neatly shorn head: he was exceptionally tall, solidly built, and had classical features which befitted his character, calm and peaceful: I don't know what kind of powerful connection emanated from him that captivated me so strongly...there was no remedy.

The silence lasted long enough that I also had time to examine, in quick glances, the study in which we found ourselves, furnished, not exactly with elegance, but certainly with practical comfort, its walls boasting the same mysterious contraptions that I devised in the bedroom when I woke up, the purpose of which I still could not understand!

He spoke, finally, telling me in a soothing voice:

—Surely, you are surprised at all that is happening.

—I am surprised, indeed; I don't know if I am dreaming or if this is some kind of farce of questionable charm, or if this is something to do with *le ciné* as I am beginning to suspect.

—You are very far from surmising the truth, and you will be even more surprised when you know it.

He sat down calmly, unconcerned about formalities or etiquette, and I, in turn, imitated him, sarcastically exclaiming:

—I suppose that you will not be offended that I sit as well, though you have not invited me to do so.

—According to your free will—he responded with genuine sincerity—you can choose to remain



## A Strange Country

standing, or to sit down, or to adopt the posture that you prefer.

—Your logic is confounding.

—Your old customs are totally dissimilar from those that you will see here.

—Here!... Where have I been brought? What town is this?

—City Number 3.

—Number 3?... Let's see: Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia —I murmured, counting with my fingers—It's Valencia, then?

—I don't understand.

—The third capital of Spain.

—Ah, I see! This is not Spain: it is the Free Country.

Such words brought a horrible suspicion to mind: Was I, perhaps, under the control of a madman? I do not know if he knew it; in any event, his explanations and the subsequent events soon dispelled my fears.

—It surprises you—he continued— that a city would be named “Number 3.” What need is there to form a name, arbitrarily combining various letters, if only a number is sufficient for identification? It is more concise and clear... Here, as you can see already, everything is subordinate to logic and reason.

—According to this rationale, the “Free Country” should be called “Country Number 1.”

—Ah, but no! Because there can never be Country Number 2, Number 3, etc.; our beautiful country of maximum freedom is still relatively small, and it has borders that circumscribe it, unless all peoples were to regain their individual liberties and, as a result, accomplish the absolute equality of classes, laws, aspirations, and even languages...

—Of languages as well?

—Why not?... Our borders would disappear of their own accord and the Free Country (now consisting of the entire world) would have to be one entity, of necessity.

—The idea of “maximum freedom” reminds me of “bolshevism”: Are they, in effect, similar?

—What you call “bolshevism” is only the beginning, the starting point of what we are establishing; it was, indeed, our point of departure, some sixty-two years ago; but, always moving forward, those progressive theories were expanded, perfected, elevating our country to the highest level of advancement and organization.

—Organization... this is, of course, relative?

—A perfect organization.

—I don't understand: I suppose that, as the name suggests, in this Free Country everyone can freely do whatever they want.

—Everyone does *what they should*.

—In spite of having maximum freedom?

—*Because of it*. Inasmuch as individual freedoms distinguish and delimit themselves, everyone has to pursue, of necessity, the correct path in order not to impede or interfere.

—Impressive!

—When you learn more, your admiration will grow; that's why the Directive Council (the government, as you say) has agreed to, periodically, bring in some of the “unredeemed” and invite them to participate for a time in our society, certain that afterward they will recognize its superiority.

—And now I am one of the fortunate!

—Exactly: Our emissaries availed themselves of the state of unconsciousness in which you were in...

—In order to abduct me.

—Right: an abduction it is; however, with regard for your individual liberty, it is up to your discretion to accept or protest it, and, if you so desire, you will be returned to your country immediately.

—Will my stay here last long if I accept this unusual invitation?—I asked, my curiosity kindled.

—Hours or years, it's your choice: until the moment in which you show your desire to leave.

—Under such conditions, I resist no more: I accept.



## A Strange Country

—Good. Per best practice, the Directive Council recommends that you do not limit yourself to just *observing*, that you will; enter completely into our life—new for you—that you’ll become, while you are here, one among us, because you’ll experience things differently if you’re directly involved instead of just contemplating them as a mere spectator; and since all of us work here—*we all must work*—we advise that you choose a vocation and that you practice it for some time as we do; as for everything else, it is my responsibility to guide you and to take care of you.

—These instructions seem very prudent; I am a sculptor, so I will...

—Bah! Adopt a serious vocation.

—Serious, you say?... What! Is it not serious to dedicate one’s life and soul to a supremely sublime and noble art?

—But one that is of no use to the state: art for art’s sake, it has been proven to be a form of madness, though fortunately harmless; I am confident that you will recover soon... Devote your energies toward something more useful, more worthy.

—For example?...

—Think of your likes and aptitudes... You could craft marble for furniture, make chairs for buildings, draft blueprints... or perhaps you have skills of a different sort; maybe you have some knowledge of accounting... or perhaps you know how to type...

—Of course! That I do.

—Well, then you could serve as a typist.

I hesitated for a moment, feeling waves of indignation surge in my soul at such blasphemies against art, but, in the end, a benevolent calm took hold of me.

—Done: a typist; yes, sir. And tell me, sir, Mr... could you tell me your name?

—57-4-11.3.

—Numbers, again!

—Are you still surprised by this? The old names were abolished for being inexpressive and ineffectual, and they were replaced with this precise and clear designation.

—Extremely clear, I’m sure!

—Don’t doubt it: the system that you still use is very confusing and makes it nearly impossible to compile the information and incidents that pertain to a single person. One’s birth is registered, for example, in Zaragoza; one’s academic transcript, in Salamanca; one’s marriage, in Albacete; one’s death, in Cádiz... The clarity of the method is not apparent, that’s for sure!

—And you think having the entire Pythagorean table as a name fixes everything, Mr. 57... and something?

—It simplifies things, at least. When a child is born here, he or she is entered into the...

—The Civil Registry: that is not new.

—We call it “The Social Registry,” but it is essentially the same; every city has its own, and it consists of one hundred bookcases reserved for males, and as many for females; each bookcase contains one hundred books, and each book one hundred pages...

—Having a page for every child, as when one opens an account?

—Precisely: the important events of his or her life are noted on that page, as well as the pertinent information; it doesn’t matter if he or she lives or dies elsewhere, given that each city holds the records of those born in its district or, as you would say, its province.

—Then, your name...

—My *number* (not “name”) is 57-4-11.3, and, once said, it clearly conveys that I am registered on page 57 of book 4, bookcase number 11, City Number 3.

—Unbelievable!... And when all the books are filled?

—According to how populous the city is, when the *two million* pages are filled, bookcases are added, or it all starts anew.

—How very simple! Your solutions are fascinating, my dear... umm... sir ... oh, excuse my memory!

—Just 57-4 will suffice; we usually don’t say more.



## A Strange Country

—A first name and a single last name..., though it seems more like a telephone number!... Well then, 57-4, when will I begin to serve in my new job as a typist, in the way of the Free Country?

—You can register this afternoon in the Center for Work and start tomorrow. Now, if you don't prefer to diet, let's go so that we can make it to the feeder by one o'clock, where my wife and my daughter will be.

—The "feeder," just the same as if we were birds?

—Just the same: though birds don't use a fork, and we don't eat birdseed, these are differences of little consequence from a physiological point of view and of even less import grammatically.

—Let's go then, to... the "feeder"—I said, getting up.

The good 57-4 moved toward a group of buttons on the wall and pushed one of them; I assumed that he was calling some kind of servant, and I thought to ask him how many he had.

—In the Free County—he replied gravely—we don't have masters or servants; we are all equals; I have notified the Hygienic Service of our departure so that they will clean and disinfect while we are out.

I fell silent, and we left.

### II. Meeting 48-21 and 12-6

Outside of the *restaurant* (sorry, dear 57-4)..., of the "feeder," we met the wife of my companion, a respectable woman of haughty bearing, grave and solemn like her husband, and also without wrinkles on her face or any clear signs of age among her classical features; she wore her hair up in the Greek style, and her attire was similar to ours, though with borders and adornments that we didn't have, and with a singularly elegant and billowing cloak. Apparently, feminine conceit smiles with the logic and reason of maximum freedom!

She was returning from her daily work (employed in a lightbulb factory, as I later found out), and she was walking in the same direction as we were. When she saw us alongside her, she stopped:

—Freedom!—said 57-4, putting his hand over his chest by way of greeting.

—Freedom!—she responded, making the same gesture.

Upon realizing that they were looking at me expectantly, I murmured, bowing, "So very nice to meet you, Madam," which even sounded strange to me.

—Is this the unredeemed?—she asked.

—The unredeemed—nodded my companion; and turning to me, he continued:—This is my wife; her number, 48-21.

Introductions were made. She kept looking at me, without hiding her curiosity.

—Do you like what you see, dear?—she asked me familiarly.

I could not contain an expression of surprise, which 57-4 promptly noticed, and, before I had time to respond, he told me:

—We don't use forms of speech that indicate differences here; they are already happily eliminated, and with some difficulty (for lack of practice), I maintain formalities with you.

—Well, don't resort to verbal gymnastics on my account, sir, or, rather, 57-4. Did we not decide that I would be one among many while I am here with... you, you all? I assure you, Madam, Mrs. 48-21, that I am liking the Free Country very much. We resumed walking, still talking, and we shortly arrived at the feeder. At the door there was a worker, with whom both 48-21 and 57-4 exchanged hand signals; and then 57-4, motioning to me, said the word "unredeemed," which, frankly, was starting to bother me.

We went in. The ambience of the spacious establishment was like that of any *restaurant* in any other country, and, at first, I didn't even notice the total absence of serving staff.



## A Strange Country

It was very busy, but, notwithstanding, conversations were so subdued and in such measured tones, that, overall, there was only a gentle murmur.

As we moved to sit down around a small table, an extremely beautiful young woman with a rhythmic and alluring stride, walked toward us.

—Freedom! —she and my companions exclaimed, bringing their hands to their chests.

—Freedom! —I exclaimed, copying them, a bit clumsily.

The young woman fixed her large dark eyes at me, which were brimming with playfulness, and remarked with charming candor:

—Because of how you bungled the greeting, we already know that you, dear, are...

—“Unredeemed, yes, Miss...” —I wryly interjected...

Her as well?... I was very tempted to give her a swat! The vixen!... but, in spite of it all, she was so very beautiful!...

The voice of 57-4 rang out again, by way of introduction:

—This is my daughter, 12-6.

I bowed with the most gallant of gestures.

—I got here a bit late— the girl said—because the stopping bell caught me in the middle of assembling a box, and I decided to stay and finish it; the whole morning was rushed today.

—Well, then; let's eat *à la carte*—proposed 57-4, as we sat down in some rather comfortable and elegant chairs. They looked over and gave me to look over four to six cards, each consisting of a simple menu and, at the bottom of each, the prices were listed in a form which, translated to our currency, was roughly equivalent to: “one cent per gram.”

—You pay by weight here?—I asked jokingly.

—Logic and reason preside over everything —57-4 replied coolly; and nothing is more logical and reasonable than paying proportional to what one eats; these small scales, placed in front of everyone, keep track of the weight that

one consumes so that one can keep track of the expense.

Until that moment, I hadn't even noticed these contraptions; the whole process was very curious.

Having chosen a menu, 57-4 placed it in the middle of the table and gave two gentle taps. Immediately, the central part of the table descended, and, soon after, it reappeared with the first plate, descending and reappearing with each new dish of exquisite food.

In this manner, I was becoming accustomed to such feats of magic, and by the end they scarcely drew my attention. Even so, I felt obliged to sing the praises of such a *sui generis* manner of serving, and I also spoke highly of the owner or founder of the establishment.

—In our country—replied 57-4 —there is no other owner than the state; everything belongs to it, given that everything belongs to everyone and nothing belongs to anyone in particular; thus, this feeder is the state's; houses, industries, businesses..., in short, *absolutely everything belongs to the state*; it charges and pays, produces and sells, inspects and directs...

—And, apparently, it also provides luxuries—I interrupted—judging by those that you have at your house.

—They are not exactly luxuries, so much as a means of preserving energy; the state needs all that it can get from of each of its subjects and economizes those efforts that do not supply a direct benefit, like those expended daily in getting up, showering, getting dressed, etc.; thanks to the automatic mechanisms, which you have seen, these operations are completed in just a few seconds and without organic waste.

—Are there similar set-ups in all households, even the most humble?

—What we have —declared 12-6—is precisely one of the most humble, because my father is only a modest chemist; if you, my dear, could only see the houses of the electricians or the metal workers!

Hearing such a beautiful young woman speak





## A Strange Country

so familiarly with me, so soon, I felt emboldened, and aware that I was overstepping, I exclaimed:

—What one would never see in these great houses is a woman as beautiful as... you, darling.

—No, really? I please you as well?

—*As well!*... What a delicious question!... I don't know what I said to her, because for me, being next to a beautiful young woman makes me flustered, in the Free County just the same as in Indochina; but I did not come up short. Flattered, she listened to me attentively, and when I interpreted her *as well* to mean that she had already had a happy favorite among her suitors, she merely responded:

—It is not time yet.

—But I think it won't be long—her mother added—and you will receive notice soon, because you should be about twenty years old already.

This was unheard of! A mother who is uncertain about the age of her daughter? Had I heard correctly?

—You say, Madam, that she *should be* about twenty years old?

—I suppose so.

—You don't remember the exact year and day when she came into the world?... Is that possible?

—Why would that matter to my mother?—contended 12-6.

—Miss..., honestly, surely one of us is crazy!

—Our families—57-4 explained—are not constituted like yours, because if they were it would be impossible for us to maintain the equality that sustains us. We all have the obligation to reproduce, marrying once we are twenty years old (not earlier, barring great penalty), in anticipation of which the state, which keeps the registry, duly notifies each person, reminding him or her to comply with their obligation; but the children who come of a marriage are not retained by their progenitors, as this would bring back with it the most detested protections and privileges; rather, children are immediately turned over to the Common House, where all

are mixed; and, there, the sick, the weak, the incapacitated, are eliminated.

—They are *eliminated*?

—Of course; They are individuals who are of no use to society and, naturally, they are destroyed, just as the deformed are destroyed, who could occasion the decline of our race; the useful are educated by analyzing their aptitudes and, in light of such, they are assigned a profession to which they should dedicate their lives; finally, when they are satisfactorily instructed and sufficiently developed, they are distributed, one, two, or more to each couple, as the Directive Council deems fit, and, in this way, the family is reconstituted, a grouping that was initially prohibited but has now been considered necessary to preserve.

—Incredible! ... I'll admit that, under these terms, I would be happy to not have children.

—Couples that, after eighteen months of life together, have not had them, are separated, and those interested should form new unions, because the duty to procreate is unavoidable and compulsory. Once age twenty, no one has the right to remain single or widowed.

—Likewise, can spouses separate just because they want to?

—Of course!—exclaimed 48-21. I was married five times before uniting with 57-4, and I am not among those who have changed the most; my first husband broke his nose after an accident. Should I have stayed with him all my life? Let others have a turn!... I had to leave my second because he snored; the third left me to marry someone that he liked more, and I separated from the fourth because an inventor claimed me.

—What! Inventors have this right?

—He that invents something useful for society—interjected 57-4—is given great advantages of all sorts and can unite with the woman that he prefers.

—Even if she is already someone else's?

—No one belongs to anyone.

—And if she does not want to?



## A Strange Country

57-4 became silent, perplexed, for a moment, and responded:

—That has never happened.

—Fine... and the inventor, Madam?

—He died.

—How discreet! —I remarked. How many times do you think you will get married, 12-6, dear?

—Many..., many! It should be much fun...

—Quiet, please, my dear girl! Such cold and frivolous words offend me from your lips, designed as they were to speak phrases of love.

—What do you mean by “love”?

—Love —57-4 harshly interjected—is a terrible passion that binds people together, taking away their independence and freedom; fortunately, we were able to banish, at long last, even its very name.

—Oh, it’s not that, not at all! You don’t know it, 12-6, but I will explain it to you, and you will understand, you will feel it, because your beautiful eyes, full of light, reveal a pure soul, capable of every ideal, every affection, every illusion...

At that moment, I was sharply interrupted by a booming voice, which, with the tenor of a blaring gramophone, loudly shouted:

—Attention! News of the Day!

And it launched into a long and monotonous report.

—This is the daily communication that the Information Center transmits every day, at this time, to all of the feeders—12-6 murmured in my ear.

—But that doesn’t matter to you or to me just now, does it?

57-4 leaned in to me, whispering flatly:

—Silence: it is required to listen.

We were quiet; but I didn’t pay attention to the news, and I don’t think that she did either. I did not tire of contemplating her, captivated as I was by her splendid beauty. Was I victim to the mere intoxication of love, as my stern friend likely would have diagnosed? Was it the sculptor awak-

ening in me, the artist delighted with the idea of molding sublime impressions on the subtle block of her virgin soul? Was it, simply, the irresistible and mysterious fascination of her eyes, serenely interlocked with mine?... Her hand played distractedly with some crumbs of bread; mine, without asking permission, moved cautiously toward hers..., it grazed her hand..., it even had the audacity of clasping it for a moment...

I am absolutely unaware of what our hands said to each other in their brief moment of confidence; something pleasing, no doubt, as I saw her bewitching face redden slightly and light up with a sweet smile: the first smile that I saw in the Free Country!

Diverting her eyes, 12-6 abruptly pulled back her hand, and, feeling the somber gaze of 57-4 boring into me, I felt the sudden flush of my cheeks and tried to dissemble, pretending that I was listening attentively.

The resounding voice stopped short, shouting by way of conclusion:

—Health and freedom!

As if an agreed-upon signal, all of those present, hearing this, got ready to leave; I later found out that, in effect, it was required to complete an hour of moderate exercise before resuming daily work. 48-21 and 12-6, examined their respective scales, and put down in front of them, for the value of what they had consumed, various multi-colored papers, which at first I thought were banknotes, though they were just “work vouchers;” 57-4, after having checked his scale and mine own, did the same.

—How easy it would be to leave without paying—I insinuated, sly and roguishly.

—Let’s try that—he responded, removing the “vouchers” that he had placed in front of me.

The moving part of the table sank down and rose again, and my companions got up; I was unable to join them; as many times as I tried, the arms of my chair clamped down on my body, immobilizing me. To exorcize the ridiculous, I let out a stupid laugh.



## A Strange Country

—Everything is anticipated and avoided—I declared.

—The mechanism is simple but effective—57-4 said slowly, putting the “vouchers” that he had taken away in front of my place again.

He gave the slow taps, in notification; the middle portion of the table descended and reappeared one last time, and I was then able stand up without any difficulty.

—Were you laughing at me, 12-6? —I asked her confusedly, while we were leaving.

—Laughing?...; No; what you did was understandable for an “unredeemed.”

—Don’t call me that, I beg you; Call me Pablo, that is my name: Pablo Orellana, sculptor...

—You are a sculptor? —she exclaimed admiringly and almost fearfully—How sad! But, you will get treated, right? We have very capable doctors that have cured other artists.

—I am not sick, 12-6; you disregard what is art, like you disregard what is love...; maybe that is why you don’t know love. I will tell you about art as well; I will teach you to dream...

—I don’t like to dream, it gives me a headache; I prefer to sleep peacefully.

—You will sleep peacefully, but you will dream awake; I will show you a marvelous and unfamiliar world, populated with magnificent creations, extraordinary monsters, intangible beings, incorporeal characters that, at your bidding, will spring forth, moving about as if they were alive, and they will live for you alone, conjured by the prodigious magic of your imagination.

—Yes, yes; tell me more about this world of which you speak. How beautiful!

During our hour of walking, so quickly spent that I supposed that it had barely started when the piercing howl of the imperious sirens ordering the resumption of individual work forced us to separate, I talked to her non-stop about my dreams, my visions of art, my ideals, my illusions...; she, her eyes half-shut, enthralled, listening to such descriptions for the first time, commented at every moment:

—How beautiful!... How beautiful!...

And my heart, beating wildly, echoed:

— How beautiful she is!... How beautiful!...

### III. New Life

I quickly became accustomed to the ways and customs of the Free Country.

I was no longer surprised, rather, it seemed very normal to be automatically undressed when I went to lie down and to see my clothes shut up within the glistening cylinder where I knew that they were disinfected. I became comfortable with using numbers instead of names to identify people. I spoke familiarly, without hesitating, no matter who I was talking to. I didn’t let slip, even by accident, a “good morning” instead of the solemn “freedom” as a greeting. I freely used the “telephonoscope,” a telephone with a speaker that, in connection with the panel of thick metal wiring that startled me so much at first, enabled one to both see and be seen by the person talking.

This contraption was highly curious and estimable, all that you could desire; but it also had its inconveniences, for me at least, since the Inspector Guard (a kind of police and vigilante organization) used it to accomplish its paternalistic ends, enabling inspectors, from their respective offices, to hear conversations and to see inside homes, such that not a single establishment or nook could escape its supervision; frankly, it was too much supervision! The idea of never being alone unsettles you, afflicts you like a terrible nightmare, and made me delirious for freedom, though 57-4 assured me that it should not be so, because one who does nothing wrong should not fear being seen and heard; for my part, I’ll admit that speaking too openly in the way of criticism or mockery regarding things there cost me quite a number of warnings and fines, forgetting about the cursed machine.

For the record, my life was not idle. At precise-



## A Strange Country

ly seven in the morning, a clanging bell, sounded from the General Inspectorate for Labor, woke us all; thanks to those automatic mechanisms, getting ready was a matter of just a few seconds; I sat up in my bed, which gently put me into an upright position; and almost without stopping I crossed into the next room, encountering the electric shower on my way, the subsequent hydraulics and friction, and, shortly, I was on my way to work.

My job, like that of the others in the house, began at eight, but I had to arrive at work by seven thirty; there, directed by the Council for Interior Regimentation (three employees, chosen by ourselves among the most capable, laborious, and judicious of our coworkers), we allocated half an hour to physical exercise, after which a light breakfast was distributed to us, and we began our daily labor. It was rare that we fell behind schedule; rather, it was in our best interest to be punctual, since every fifteen-minute delay meant the deduction of a quarter part of our daily wage; thus, whomever was an hour behind didn't earn anything, which didn't exempt him or her from work, above all else, because otherwise he or she would not receive the indispensable password to enter into the "feeders," which varied every day.

From eight to one, until the sirens sounded the signal to stop, I was *click-click-clacking*, typing away at the typewriter; it was not permitted to speak or to waste time for any reason; I could, certainly, work more slowly or more quickly, but it was in my self-interest to hurry, because, at the end, I got paid according to the amount of work completed, and the pay was never very high, because income was calculated with careful exactitude, such that, methodical and diligent work would result in being compensated only a little more than what was needed to cover basic necessities; only regular payments (much reduced, because of the taxes imposed by the many general burdens of the state) provided us with a small degree of comfort.

At one, I met up with 57-4 and his family at the "feeder"; we ate quickly, listened to the "News of the Day," and we all left together to complete the required walking until, a couple of minutes before three, the sirens blared out, calling us to back work.

I took up my work again and gave myself up to the constant clacking until six; at this hour, the daily work was over, we were given instructions for the following day, our labor was most scrupulously examined and quantified by the Council of Regimentation, and we each received our corresponding "work vouchers."

At six thirty I was already outside, excused from my responsibilities, and able to do what I wanted..., besides going to a café or going to the movies, because there were neither cafes nor shows; at eight, I went to my usual "feeder," had a light dinner in the company of friends, and we walked about for a little while after or we went home, according to the weather; there was no staying up late nor reason to attempt it, because at ten the lights were turned off and there was no recourse but to go to bed.

Every week I also had a day off, leaving me to my own devices once every seven days; that is, relatively free, because on this day I'd have to go to the doctor to endure a weekly examination and to pay painstaking attention to his prescriptions, promising to heed them most carefully; for this service, the doctor received a small fee, with the notable particularity that he was only paid inasmuch as a patient was perfectly healthy, and, in turn, he was not paid in the event of illness. Besides this, which only took a couple of minutes, I spent two hours receiving military instruction; there was no standing army, but until the entire world was a "free country," every man *and woman* was required to practice military drills and tactics to be prepared to repel any possible act of aggression, were one to happen.

The afternoon, at least, was completely free, and it remains to say if I made good use of it.



## A Strange Country

These leisure-filled hours were precious to us; and by “us” I am clearly referring to 12-6 and me. I had chosen the same day off as her and her parents, and we liked to spend those afternoons in the country, where, though there was no shortage of guards and vigilantes, there were no, thank God, telephonoscopes, and I raved at will, sometimes in general conversation, enjoying myself when, while discussing certain topics, 48-21 was scandalized, protesting energetically against what was called the slavery of the unredeemed woman; other times, chatting amiably with 57-4, and many, many times more, conversing privately with 12-6, more beautiful every day, more charming, more alluringly candid... What a devil of a woman!

—Look, 12-6 —I said to her one day—when you come of age let’s get married, don’t you want to?

—If your “aptitudinal coefficient” matches with mine...

—And what is that?

—A number that the Social Registry will determine from your intellectual ability, your work ethic, your temperament, your age... Ask to see it.

—I will. What other documents are needed?

—We have to send a formal request to the local council, “signed” with both our fingerprints, asking to be united.

—I said “get married”; I think it sounds better. And after?

—Afterward a petition will be published, and if, at the end of the month, no one else has come forward claiming right of preference, we will be united.

—Married. Just like that?

—Just like that.

—Listen, 12-6; if “someone else” came forward, would you leave me for him, even if he had all the rights imaginable?

—I wouldn’t have a choice—she answered deliberately, with bitterness in her voice; and, seeing my vexed expression, she added, to console me—but then I would separate from him and go with you.

—It upsets me that you speak this way —I cut her off harshly—these ideas are unworthy of you...; and I was sure that you were learning to love!... Were you lying, then?... Such lies, deceit!

She looked at me, stunned, sincerely and deeply shocked... She then broke into tears, sobbing with infinite affliction.

Hearing her sobs, her parents came to her.

—What did you do? —57-4 scolded me—She had never cried until today; your words have caused her to know pain.

It wasn’t pain, no!... 12-6 was already smiling, and feeling my hand, conciliatory and trembling with emotion, she gently pressed hers to mine, though her tears kept flowing.

Dumbfounded, they surveyed the inaudible scene, new and incomprehensible, of laughter and tears at the same time.

—We should tell the doctor —advised 48-21, turning to her husband.

He silently indicated his assent.

### IV. *Usque Ad Mortem*

That day the last two hours of work seemed two eternities, and only on account of great effort was I able to contain my impatience.

It goes without saying, that as soon as I was free, as quickly as my legs could carry me there, I ran to meet 12-6, to tell her the great news.

Just imagine!... Among the documents that were given to me to be typed out, there was, by happy coincidence, a communication notifying 12-6 that she was twenty years old and that, accordingly, she should marry, within six months.

I don’t know..., nor do I want to transcribe what our hearts felt in those sweet moments of indescribable emotion, not the words that crossed our lips, nor the dreams that enlivened our souls; would I even be able to describe them if I wanted to?... I will only tell you that, without losing a moment, we filled out the marriage request,



## A Strange Country

properly sealed with our fingerprints as signatures, and we hurried to deposit it in the local council offices; from that moment on, the right of priority was inarguably mine, and just a month from then we could marry... if there was no one else that...; but I didn't even want to think about that.

During our stroll after lunch and later in the "feeder," we didn't talk of anything else, consumed as we were by the happiness we felt, not paying attention to the grimaces of 48-21, who did not understand such fervor, nor the silent recriminations of 57-4, who, as he heard us, sternly shook his head in disapproval.

When we returned home that night, the blessed communication was already there, together with one addressed to 48-21; just as if she were hearing the news for the first time, 12-6, exhibited the most feverish happiness while reading hers; in contrast, 48-21, as she read hers, turned slightly pale.

—Is it the notice? —57-4 calmly asked his wife.

— Yes, it's the notice.

—And by when?

—Tomorrow at this time.

Intrigued by the brief exchange, and brimming with happiness, I asked in turn:

—A notice... of what? Of a new marriage, perhaps?

—No; a notice of death—48-21 calmly responded.

—What do you mean "of death"? Why?

—Because it's her turn—57-4 explained with unaffected sincerity—; Thanks to our rigorous hygiene and constant and scrupulous disinfection, illnesses have been so reduced, and the number of deceased is so scarce that, to avoid a disproportionate spike in population, the Directive Council periodically designates, in line with certain rules and based on statistical data and the age and particular conditions of people nominated by the local councils, those that should disappear.

—It's terrible!... And is there no way to avoid it?

—A deferral is only extended to those who have a project of great and general utility under study or in process, and not even they typically ask for it. Why would one want more days of work?

—That's how it is—added 57-4.

—In any event, it was certain—she continued—that a notice for the one or the other of us would come soon, something I had taken for granted; so much, that when I spoke with 49-77 a little while ago, who became separated last month, we decided to unite ourselves if you received your notice before I did.

I was astonished that the conversation followed its usual turn in such circumstances. I'll admit that I couldn't sleep that night, and I could hardly eat anything the next day; 12-6, on the other hand, announced that she had slept well, she ate and dined per usual, and her conversation in the "feeder," during our walk, and during our return home was just the same as always. She remained totally unaltered, which sparked my admiration, but also unsettled me, because it was impossible for me to even feign calm, and I felt my anguish growing by the minute.

Indeed, when we returned home that fateful night, I could not even talk, overwhelmed as I was by emotion; I deeply envied and admired the composure shown by 48-21, seated placidly among us, chatting with everyone, as if she had completely forgotten about the terrible notice; her features scarcely changed when two workers presently appeared at the door of the room, carrying shining copper devices; they said without preamble:

—48-21, it is time.

—I am ready—she responded.

She stood to follow them, and as she was leaving, turned toward us, her color slightly faded but her face calm, and, without a quaver or a tremor in her voice, uttered the customary salutation:

—Freedom!

—Peace!—answered 57-4 and 12-6.



## A Strange Country

I could no longer say a word, and I covered my face with my hands, overcome with anguish.

Eager to calm my fears, 57-4 leaned toward me and told me in halting phrases:

—It is by electricity... over there, in her bathroom... She won't suffer...

I think it was a matter of a minute, or less, it seemed to me; it appeared that 48-21 had only just left, and already the workers from before had returned.

—We have finished: Should we take her now?

—Yes, take her.

They left again and, just a moment later, their heavy footsteps sounded.

57-4 turned toward the door and, gripping the doorframe, he could make out the funereal procession; filled with gloom, 12-6 and I went to him. I silently clasped his hand; it was cold, icy; I thought I saw a deep sigh fighting to escape from his chest, but it was contained by the imperial force of his will, and when the macabre procession disappeared, my good friend, very pale, looked at me and tried to smile.

V .....!

This last chapter of my time in the Free Country has so cruelly devastated my soul that I can't bring myself to recount it. I have tried it some twenty times and as many times I have ripped out the tear-soaked pages in desperation.

I want, however, to make a final effort: to put everything in a few words; if they seem disjointed, confused, incoherent, you, who know the cause, will forgive me...

There were five days before the end of the month-long waiting period, at the end of which 12-6 and I would be married. That afternoon she did not go to the "feeder" or to our walk, and when 57-4 and I returned home we did not we find her there. I was anxious, restless, nervous, and, in spite of the reassuring news that both the Infor-

mation Center and the Inspector Guard transmitted to us, at every moment I would have gone to look for her, if 57-4 would not have forcefully dissuaded me from doing so.

I lay down ill at ease, and spent an hour or two... or maybe only minutes, I don't know, wracked by horrible thoughts, when I could make out, muted but unmistakable, sobbing, so full of bitterness that it struck me like a dagger to my heart.

I threw myself out of bed just as soon as I heard it; I flew to 12-6's room and, by the dim light that entered through the window, I saw her kneeling, her beautiful tear-streaked face turned toward the heavens, pressing her handkerchief to her lips to avoid dispelling her sorrows into agonizing moans.

Seeing that I was there, she clung to me, frantic, trembling, overcome by the enormity of her grief. It took a long time for her to calm down enough to be able to talk; finally, the crisis over and comforted by my words, she began to regain her composure, and she explained to me what had happened.

Overwhelmed with sorrow, she had roamed the streets and the countryside, ever since she found out the fatal news, alone in her despair, resisting her desires to find me and tell me and to seek help and comfort, scared that I'd react in a way that would lead to me being severely punished and would unleash disastrous consequences for the both of us.

—We can't get married, did you know?... They called me from the local council this afternoon to tell me; there is another application in which an inventor has asked for me...; he has priority...; besides, they consider the affection that we profess for each other harmful to our individual freedom...

I proposed that we flee right way, that we immediately abandon that strange country; return to my homeland, where she would have a beautiful name instead of an inexpressive number, and we



## A Strange Country

would be eternally and indescribably happy, because God himself would bless our marriage and our home.

—Yes, yes, let's go; I also thought of this. My father knows the secret road that will lead us away from here, past the deadly, high-voltage barbed-wire fences that guard the border; we will beg him to show us... I cut the cables of the telephonoscope so that they can't thwart our plan...

The angry voice of 57-4, who had come after hearing us talk, made us shudder.

—What have you done, you ungrateful girl? When has a child of the Free Country ever thought of leaving?...

We explained our terrible circumstances to him; we desperately pleaded with him that he would take compassion on us..., that he would help us..., even that he would run away with us.

He listened in silence, his arms crossed over his chest, looking alternately at the two of us; but, when we proposed the latter, he protested vehemently.

—Never! Never! —he exclaimed. My place and my duty are here.

—There you will also find a place to occupy and a mission to fulfill—I replied—and, also, you will have pleasures and joys unknown in this country of yours, where, on account of glorifying and exalting freedoms, you have killed them, because you have made yourselves slaves to the same; even as admirable, as exceptional, and as expertly organized as you are, or, perhaps, it's because of this, you are automatons that move robotically, as if controlled by a fate that compels you to walk always, to walk without respite; your life is dreary, cold, unappealing...

—All of our needs are provided for and taken care of; we don't want anything.

—But you do! You don't have..., you tell him, 12-6; you who have learned it already.

—Father dear—she whispered with the utmost tenderness—you don't have love, which is the

most beautiful, the most wonderful, the most precious thing in life.

—Quiet!... You don't know what you are saying; this terrible passion will destroy our organization, bringing hierarchies and inequalities back to us, rivalries, fighting. Quiet!... Quiet!...

—Should we reject the sun just because there is shade, my friend?... You profess freedom as a cult so extreme and, above all, so exclusive, one that sets aside and negates the purest feelings, that nearly negates one's own personality! This is why you resent love, you erase it, it terrifies you to think that this social magnum opus could collapse. And what if it did? Love "makes all that is heavy light and all that is unequal bearable": it will resurge in spite of you, conquering your hearts, and if your magnificent society is destroyed, you will have, in turn, ideals that enliven the soul, dreams that make the pathway smooth, faith that sustains and encourages, fine emotions that nourish the spirit, blessed desires that ennoble, because "there is nothing..."

—Let me say it—interrupted 12-6. I love it so!...

And embracing her father, and speaking with a tender and trembling intonation that I will never forget, she began to recite the verses of "Kempis," learned from my lips:

—"There is nothing sweeter than love; nothing stronger, nothing higher, nothing wider, nothing happier, nothing fuller or better in heaven or in earth, because love is born of God and cannot rest with all that he has created, but only with God."

The enchantment that she emanated was so irresistible; there was such affection in her voice and in her eyes, that 57-4, was moved in spite of himself, and he held her tenderly in his arms and gave her a lingering kiss on the forehead.

He was quiet for a few moments, and, finally, sighing, he spoke:

—As you will; Come, I will show you the road, and then I will return, aware of the responsibility that I hold and ready to suffer my just condemnation...





## A Strange Country

12-6's piercing scream made us stop still; mute with terror, she pointed to the screen of the telephonoscope, in which she could make out a faint phosphorescence, indicating to us that it was working again, that the flaw had been fixed; they had been watching us; they were listening to us, we were doomed!

—Halt! —the odious contraption ordered with imperious severity, at the same time that the lights suddenly switched on.

I refused to comply, furious at the inexorable command; I talked of fighting, of defending ourselves... 57-4, impassive, refused, and he kissed his daughter once more without saying a word.

It was not a long wait: just a few minutes.... A group of five or six men arrived, and, the leader of the group, while the others brought in two chairs from the next room and set up outlets and electric transformers, coldly informed us of his orders. 12-6, for the double crime of having cut the cables and having tried to run away, and 57-4, for having consented to the escape, were to die; as for me, I would be banished immediately.

Enraged, I wanted to throw myself at them with desperate abandon, but 57-4 firmly held me back, and I vaguely remember that, while I was fighting with all my strength to free myself from the two herculean young men that quickly held me down, I saw him sit down, calm and unafraid, and put on with his own two hands the fateful copper helmet.

Panting and exhausted by my futile struggle, I looked anxiously at 12-6... She, baring her entire soul in her eyes, looked back at me, already seated...

Forgive me!... My heart is undone... I can't go on!...

\* \* \*

I longed to die as well in those cruel moments, and I experienced intimate solace when I felt a searing pain in my head, and falling, fad-

ing, as if the same blow had injured us both simultaneously.

But God did not let it happen!... I returned to life; I found myself spread out on the operating table; the practitioner's hands moving back and forth, bandaging me, and, at my side, a doctor, solemn and serious, was speaking with his associates; he kept repeating the word "trepanation"... They didn't know anything about 12-6 or about 57-4, or they pretended not to.

I have encountered the same negative response as many times as I have told of my travails... Some pity me, like a sick child; others laugh; all are taken aback as they listen to me... Do they think I am mad?... Is it that they don't believe me?

There are reasons to despair!

However, all that I have recounted is true... I swear to you that it is true!...