

DR. BRINKLEY'S TOWER

Also by Robert Hough

The Final Confession of Mabel Stark

The Stowaway

The Culprits

DR. BRINKLEY'S TOWER



ROBERT HOUGH



ANANSI

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As always, to Suzie, Sally and Ella

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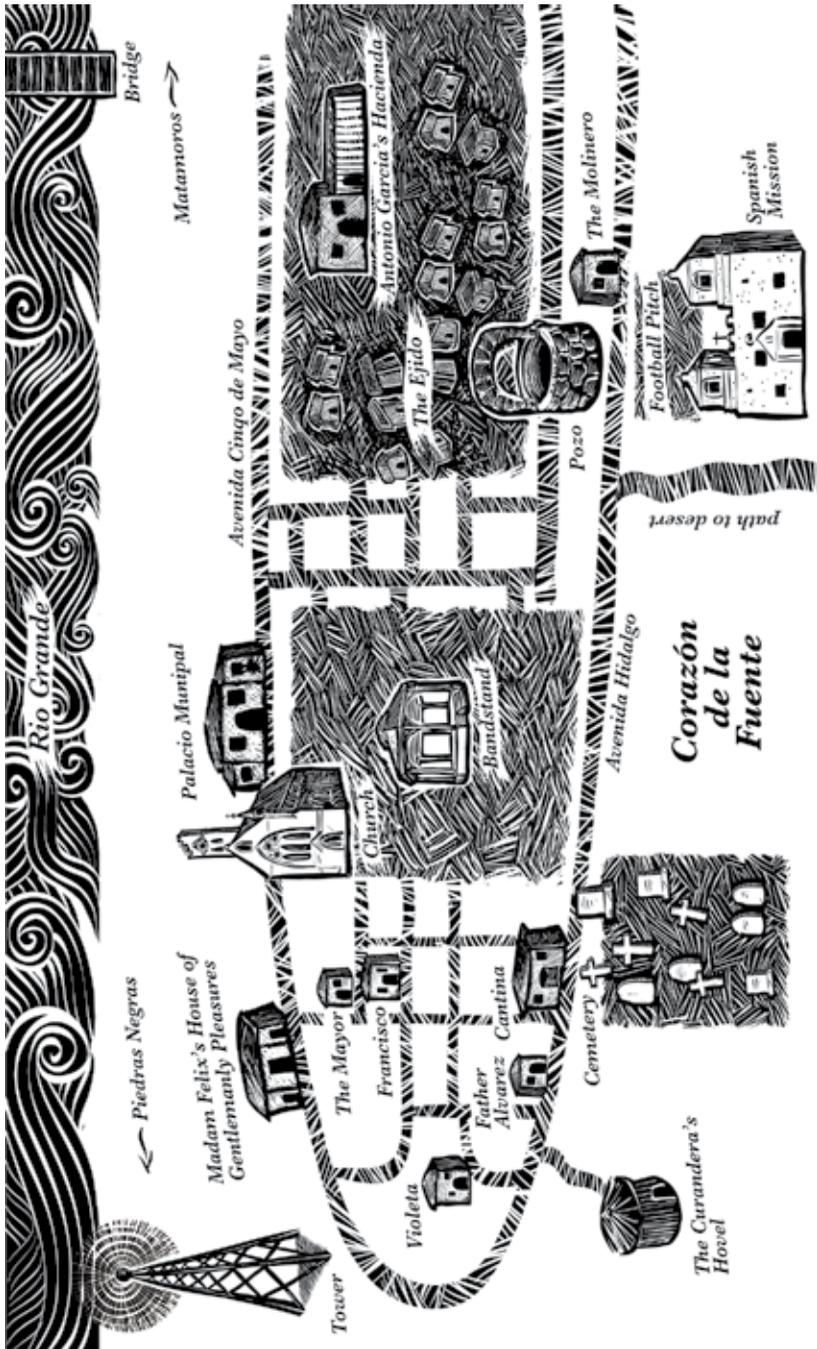
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FRANCISCO RAMIREZ STOOD FRETTING BEFORE AN antique full-length mirror framed in strips of shellacked mesquite. It was a fine piece of craftsmanship, hand-built and intricate with detail; if you looked closely, you could see deer heads carved into the frame, each one gazing bemusedly in a different direction. The mirror, one of the family's few notable possessions, had come to the Ramirez clan almost a century ago, when Francisco's great-great-great-grandfather presented it to his reddening fourteen-year-old bride on their wedding night. *Mi querida*, he'd reportedly told her, *you are growing lovelier each and every day. Now you can watch it happen as well.*

It was now 1931, the long, bloody years of the revolution still a fresh wound. The mirror, meanwhile, had been put to daily use by five generations of the family. While it had generally been well cared for, the passage of time had nevertheless taken a toll. There was a spidery hairline crack near the bottom, the result of its having been dropped during one of its

many relocations, and the surface was beginning to undulate slightly, not unlike the Coahuilan desert itself. The glass had also started to acquire a dull copper patina, such that it now cast reflections of a slightly seaweed hue. As a result, more than one Ramirez had looked at his or her reflection and erroneously concluded that the carne seca served at dinner had somehow been tainted.

The mirror's real dissolution had occurred during the revolution, when government soldiers were continually requisitioning goods for the war effort, only to spend the proceeds in houses of ill repute. In an attempt to save the mirror, Francisco's father had placed it in an old municipal grain hopper, where it was hidden beneath a mound of wheat that had been deliberately left to ferment, thus repelling tax collectors with its ammonia reek. When the family finally retrieved their cherished artifact, the wood had permanently absorbed the aroma. No amount of scrubbing, they soon discovered, could stop it from emitting the sour, vinegary odour of a gringo scouring product.

Given these shortcomings, the mirror had been relegated to the bedroom used by Francisco, who was now assessing himself in the turbulent, hypercritical way of all adolescents. It was mid-afternoon, and the thin chambray curtains over his bedroom window, drawn to keep out the brutalizing heat, glowed orange.

The problem, as he saw it, was his nose. Three years ago, in a game played on the municipal pitch out by the old Spanish mission, Francisco had inadvertently used it to stop a drive by a muchacho known for the lethality of his right foot. While doubled over in a pained, breathless silence, Francisco

had grabbed the appendage, which now extended laterally from his face, and instinctively pushed it back into place. The other players looked on, amazed that he was still on his feet.

The accident had rendered the bridge of his nose somewhat lumpy in appearance, not unlike the backbone of a spiny armadillo. It was the mildest of disfigurements, and one that had not bothered him in the ensuing years. (In fact, if you asked the majority of the town's chicas, they would tell you that the accident had only added to Francisco's rugged appeal.) In recent months, however, the equanimity with which he regarded his appearance had vanished, along with his ability to concentrate, sleep soundly, or generate anything resembling an appetite.

Ay, he thought to himself. *You need the help of an expert.*

He took a deep breath, crossed the room, and left the dank, crumbling row house in which he lived with his father, his grandmother, and his two young brothers. Walking with his head down, a means of avoiding the many pits and chasms in the street, he moved along Avenida Hidalgo, which formed the southern border of his native town, Corazón de la Fuente. He then bisected the town's arid main plaza, causing several neighbouring busybodies to wonder where Francisco Ramirez might be heading. Upon reaching the east side of the plaza, just beyond the town's pitiful church, he entered a narrow side street that led to Corazón's second, smaller plaza. Little more than a mounding of dry, sun-baked earth, it was surrounded by a traffic circle that serviced a trio of similarly dry and sun-baked laneways.

Facing this plazita was the home and business of an eighty-eight-year-old Casanova named Roberto Pántelas. For

decades he had made his living by grinding corn, wheat, and coffee beans, and for this reason was referred to by most as the molinero. Yet he was best-known for his understanding of the fairer sex, having bedded somewhere between seven and eight thousand specimens during his long, virile life. Francisco found him sitting on a low wooden bench. Feeling the cool thrown by Francisco's shadow, the molinero lifted his craggy, age-weathered face.

— Francisco Ramirez, he croaked. — My young compadre. You startled me.

— Hola, Señor Pántelas.

— Please, sit down. Keep an old man company.

Francisco lowered himself, a comfortable silence settling between the two. Finally, Francisco felt compelled to speak.

— Señor . . . I was wondering if you might help me.

The molinero slowly looked in the teenager's direction.

— Help you? How?

— Could you tell me . . . How do I . . . win the affection of a young woman? A young woman who is showing no signs of interest?

The old man thought for a moment. — By any chance, are we talking about the lovely and serious-minded Violeta Cruz?

Francisco nodded, for some reason feeling foolish. In a town with only eight hundred or so residents, all it had taken was a few indiscreet glances, along with an ill-timed blush or two at the mention of her name, and the understanding that Francisco Ramirez was yet another young man who had fallen for Violeta Cruz now followed him wherever he went.

— Sí, he answered dejectedly.

The molinero chuckled warmly. — Nothing like setting your sights high. She'll be a tough nut to crack, that one. Of course, if my old eyes are still working as they should, it'll be worth the effort.

Francisco couldn't help himself. He grinned and nodded.

The molinero pondered, his milky eyes gazing into the middle distance, his spotted hands quivering in his lap. His breath slowed so considerably that Francisco feared the old man had chosen that moment to enjoy one of his several daily siestas. Yet just as Francisco was about to touch the molinero on the shoulder, he turned slightly and began to speak.

— Why not invite her to tomorrow's festivities?

— I was thinking of that. You think she might accept?

The molinero shrugged his shoulders and grinned. — Ay, Francisco, she's a woman. How would I know? They're as unpredictable as desert fire. If they weren't, they wouldn't be worth the bother.

Francisco chuckled, thanked the old man, and prepared to take his leave. Just as he was rising to his feet, the molinero spoke up.

— There is one other thing you could try.

— And what is that?

— A little prayer wouldn't hurt.