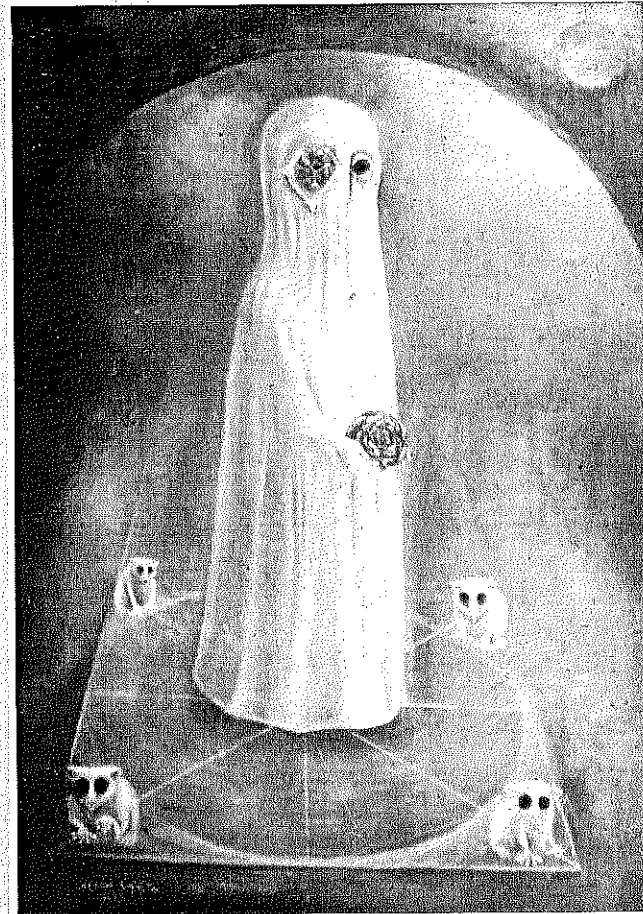


THE OVAL LADY



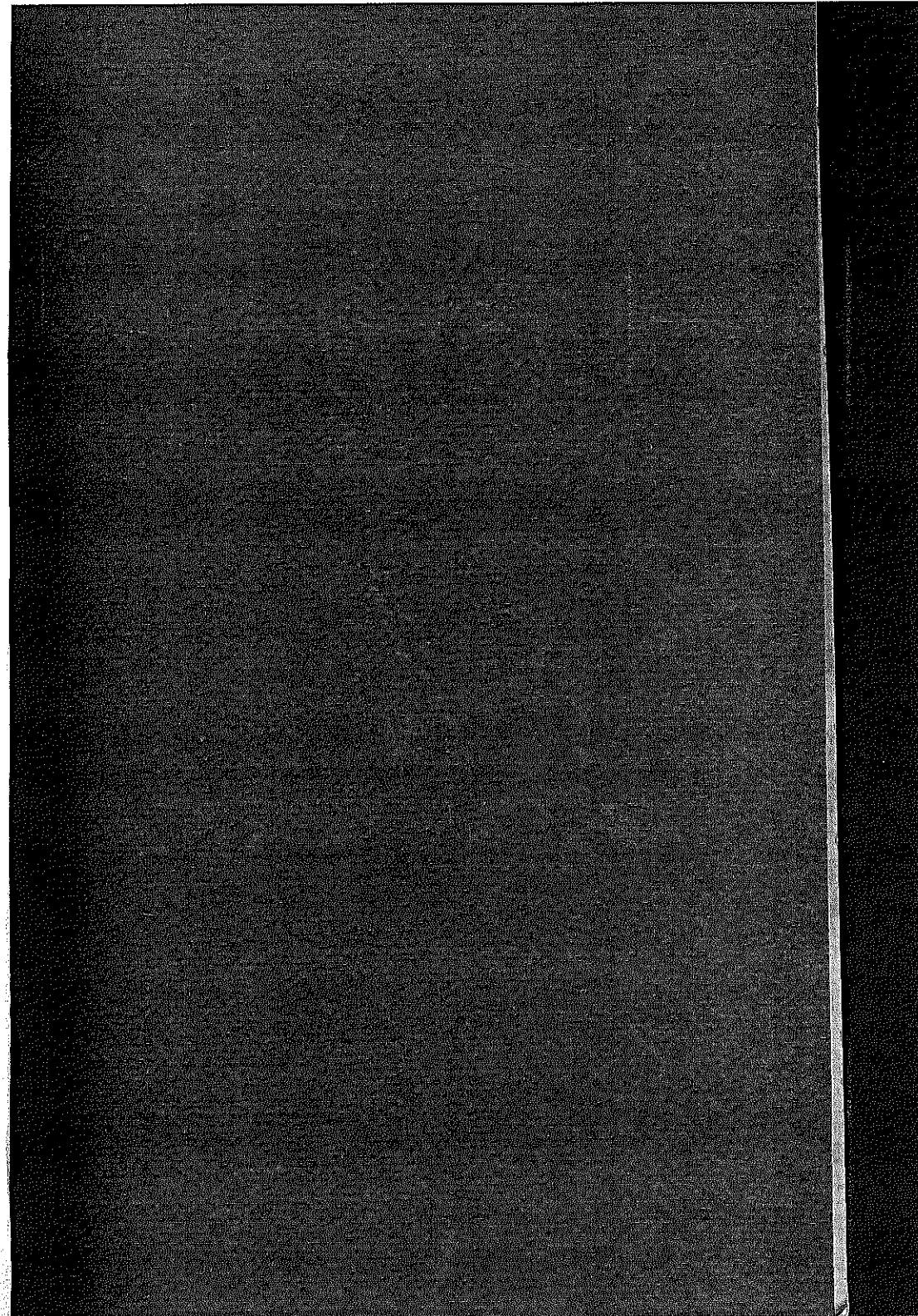
SURREAL STORIES BY

LEONORA CARRINGTON

TRANSLATED BY ROCHELLE HOLT

FOREWORD BY GLORIA ORENSTEIN

ILLUSTRATED BY PABLO WEISZ



THE
OVALS
LADY

SIX SURREAL STORIES BY
LEONORA CARRINGTON

//
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ROCHELLE HOLT

FOREWORD BY
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❖ CONTENTS ❖

Foreword by Gloria Orenstein	7
The Oval Lady	13
The Debutante	21
White Rabbits	27
The Beloved	35
The Royal Command	41
Uncle Sam Carrington	49

WHO IS THE OVAL LADY?
Foreword by Gloria Orenstein

THE OVAL LADY is a mystery. It is also a hieroglyphic. Leonora Carrington's art and writings express the mystery of being through occult parables whose true meaning becomes accessible to those who acquire initiation into the specific form of symbolism that her works display. These symbols are emblems deriving from a deep knowledge of Alchemy, Cabala, Magic, the Tarot, Witchcraft, and Mythology. Her literary works take place in a cosmic space-time continuum where beings from various dimensions meet for magical encounters in the vast domains of the planisphere. These parables are similar to alchemical allegories, for their symbols act like talismans and operate a transformation on the psyche of the reader.

A title such as THE OVAL LADY has a precise occult and mythological significance, for it links the icon of the female deity with the symbol of the egg. The egg is an alternate appellation for the alchemist's oven in which brute matter was transformed into gold. This physical process is analogous to the spiritual process of psychic alchemy of which THE OVAL LADY becomes the symbol. Thus THE OVAL LADY is an alchemical allegory in mythological disguise. By alluding to a female Alchemist, the story creates a literary and symbolic context for the creation of Carrington's own myth—the rebirth of the Mother Goddess. The heroine of the tale, Lucrecia, is transformed into the white horse, Tartarus. The occult reading of the parable reveals that the horse, named for the Greek Underworld, symbolizes, in Carrington's mythological universe, the Otherworld. This is a sacred realm where the wisdom of the Celtic Horse Goddess, Epona, the "white" Goddess, would prevail. By becoming the white horse, Lucrecia becomes the Goddess through metempsychosis, and thereby gains entry to the Otherworld where she acquires the faculties and knowledge of those who achieve god-like states of being.

Lucrecia rebels against the Patriarchy in the figure of her authoritarian father, for he tells her that knowledge of the Other-world is not accessible to women. It is Matilda, a witch, who, through the ecstatic round dance, joins Lucrecia in the initiatory trance rites that invoke the presence of the Great Goddess. *PENELOPE*, Carrington's play based upon the story of *THE OVAL LADY*, ends with a vision of the winged couple of white colts passing silently through the window in a dazzling blaze of blinding light, indicating that spiritual release and flight into another dimension have been achieved by returning to the Mother Goddess and overthrowing androcentric culture.

Carrington's talismanic tales conceal a wealth of occult wisdom and speak in verbal hieroglyphs and ideograms of the powers of the plant world and of the zodiac, expressed through vegetal and astrological imagery. They intimate that the sun, the moon, and the planets affect our psyches and induce altered states of consciousness. These states of being are keys to unlocking the ancient mysteries of the universe.

The act of reading a Carrington parable is one which leads us to question why the fruit salesman incubates eggs, what it means to water one's deceased wife, what the significance is of a corpse that is not entirely dead, and how we are to interpret the language of the cypresses.

As a painter and writer Leonora Carrington's name has been closely associated with the Surrealist Movement in France and Mexico. She was born in England in 1917, but studied art in Italy, France, and later in London with Amédée Ozenfant. Through Ozenfant she met the painter Max Ernst and ultimately took up residence with him in the south of France where she participated in the activities of the Surrealist group until the Second World War. She exhibited in the International Surrealist Exhibition in 1938. Ernst, in fact, illustrated the original edition of *La Dame Ovale* which was published in Paris in 1939.

At the outbreak of World War II, Carrington fled to seek

refuge in Spain and suffered a mental breakdown en route which opened an inner universe of mythic and visionary imagery that was later recaptured in her narrative *Down Below*. In the early 1940's she made her way to the U.S. and joined the other self-exiled Surrealist artists and writers in New York where she contributed to the Surrealist reviews *View* and *VVV*. In 1942 she moved to Mexico where she has lived ever since. Her mural painting *El Mundo Mágico De Los Mayas* can be seen in the Chiapas exhibit of the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City. Her most important exhibitions to the present include her first American show at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York in 1948, a retrospective at the Museo Nacional de Arte Moderno de Cultura in June 1965. She also had an important exhibition at the IX Bienal de Sao in Brazil in 1967.

She is the author of many short stories and plays, and her work is included in André Breton's *Anthologie De L'Humour Noir*. Her novel *Le Cornet Acoustique* (*The Hearing Trumpet*) was published in Paris by Flammarion in 1974.

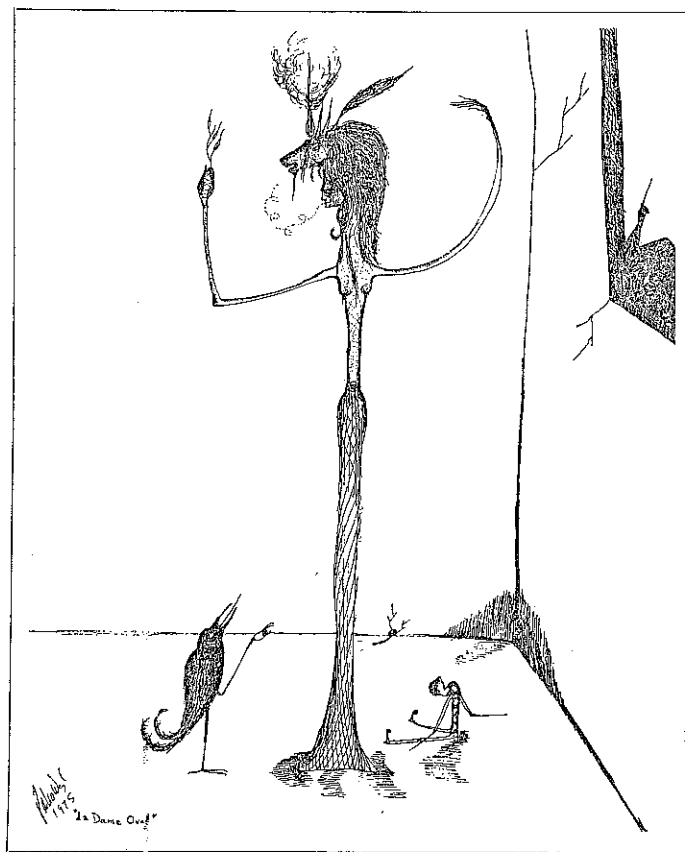
Carrington's exploration of our interior universe has never divorced her from the realities of being a woman, artist, wife and mother. In 1972 she helped inaugurate the Women's Liberation Movement in Mexico.

If Leonora Carrington has been well known as a Surrealist artist, it is precisely because she has fulfilled the highest mandate of The Second Manifesto of Surrealism as stated by André Breton: "I ASK FOR THE PROFOUND, THE VERITABLE OCCULTATION OF SURREALISM."^{*}

THE OVAL LADY is the new woman, the Goddess resurrected. She is the Alchemist, the Priestess, the Druidess of Old. She is also the visionary Artist, who, through the magic of art, reveals to us the higher ART, that of MAGIC.

^{*} Breton, André. *Manifestoes Of Surrealism*. The University of Michigan Press. Ann Arbor, 1972. p. 178.

THE OVAL LADY



A VERY TALL and very thin lady happened to be standing in front of her window. The window was also very tall and very narrow. The face of that lady was pale and sad. She remained motionless, and nothing moved near the window, except a pheasant's feather which was stuck in her hair. That trembling feather caught my eye. It rocked back and forth so much in that window where nothing else moved! It was the seventh time that I passed in front of that certain window. The sad lady had not moved, and, in spite of how chilly it was that afternoon, I stopped. Perhaps the furniture was tall and as thin as she was next to her window, and perhaps the cat (if there was one) also matched such elegant proportions. I wanted to know; I was seized with curiosity and with an irresistible desire to enter the house to make sure. Before telling the story of what happened, I found myself at the entrance. The door opened noiselessly before me, and for the first time in my life I found myself in a real aristocratic mansion. It was frightening. First, the silence was so pronounced that I scarcely dared to breathe; then, the furniture and the adorning objects were of such noted elegance. Each chair was at least twice as tall as the generally acceptable chairs and much wider. For aristocrats, even the dishes were oval and not round like those which the rest of the world uses. In the living room where the Sad Lady happened to be, the fire sparkled in the fireplace and there was a table full of cups and little pastries. Close to the flames, a teakettle waited tranquilly for its contents to be poured.

Behind round-shoulders, the Lady appeared even taller: she was at least ten feet tall. The problem was this: How to speak to

her? To tell her about the weather which was fit for dogs? Too trivial. To speak of poetry? What poetry?

"Señora, do you like poetry?"

"No, I detest poetry," she answered me in an excessively critical voice, without turning towards me.

"You should drink a cup of tea; this will calm you."

"I don't drink, I don't eat. I do that as a protest against my father, that goat."

After a quarter of an hour and absolute silence, she turned, and I was astounded to notice her youthfulness. She was only about sixteen years old.

"You're very tall for your age, señorita. When I was sixteen, my height was half of yours."

"I don't give a care! Anyway, you may now serve me a little tea, but don't tell anyone. Perhaps I may eat some pastries too, but remember above all you shouldn't tell a soul."

She ate with a voracious appetite. Before devouring the twentieth tart, she told me:

"Although I may even die of hunger, he will never waver. Even now I can see the funeral cortege with its four fat and brilliant horses . . . , marching slowly, and my small white coffin, a white speck in the middle of red roses. And the people crying, crying. . ."

After a short pause, she continued, sobbing:

"Here is the small corpse of the beautiful Lucrecia. And, in one stroke, death, do you understand?, there is nothing that can be done. I want to starve myself to death, if only to annoy him. What a pig!"

These last words spoken, she left the living room, very slowly. I followed her.

Upon reaching the third floor, we entered an immense room intended for children, where spread all over the room could be seen hundreds of toys destroyed and broken. Lucrecia approached a wooden horse fixed in the attitude of galloping, that

in spite of its age, looked to be about 100 years old.

"Tartarus is my favorite," she said, caressing the horse's neck.

"He hates my father."

Tartarus was rocking pleasantly while I asked myself how he could move by himself.

"He will go very far this way," she said. "And when he returns he will tell me something interesting."

Upon looking outside I noticed that it was snowing. It was very cold, but Lucrecia didn't realize it. A little noise at the window called her attention.

"It's Matilda," she said. "I should have left the window open. On the other hand, it's suffocating in here."

After this she broke the windowpanes, and the snow came in together with a magpie which flew three times around the room.

"Matilda speaks like us, it has been ten years since I split her tongue in two. What a beautiful creature!"

"Beautiful creature," croaked Matilda, in a witch's voice. "Beauuuutiful creaturrrrrre!"

Matilda posed herself on the head of Tartarus who continued rocking sweetly, all covered with snow.

"Have you come to play with us?" Lucrecia asked. "I am happy because I'm very bored here. Let's imagine that we have all been changed into horses. I am going to transform myself into a horse of snow. This will be more plausible. You, Matilda, you also are a horse."

"Horse! Horse! Horse!" croaked Matilda, dancing hysterically on Tartarus' head.

Lucrecia threw herself into the snow which was already very thick, and she curled up inside of it shouting: "We are all horses!"

When she got up the effect was extraordinary. If I had not known that it was Lucrecia, I might have sworn that I was dealing with a real horse. She was so beautiful, her whiteness so blinding, with her four fine limbs like needles, and a mane that

fell around her face as if it were water. She laughed, happy, dancing crazily in the snow.

"Gallop, gallop, Tartarus! But I will be faster than you."

Tartarus didn't change his speed, but his eyes sparkled. Only his eyes were seen because he was covered with snow.

Matilda shrieked and struck her head against the walls. I danced a kind of polka so that the cold wind would not take possession of my body.

Suddenly, I noticed that the door was open and that in the shadow was an old lady. She had certainly been there for a long time but without my having noticed her. The old woman looked at Lucrecia with eyes fixed and perverse. Suddenly, trembling furiously, she shouted: "Stop it! What is this? Get out of here, girls. Lucrecia, don't you know that this game is strictly forbidden by your papa? Ridiculous game! You're no longer a little girl."

Lucrecia danced dangerously moving her four legs near the old lady, to the point of giving her some penetrating kicks.

"Stop it, Lucrecia!"

Lucrecia's voice was each time more piercing, breaking into laughter.

"Good," said the old lady. "You do not obey, little girl? Good. Then, you will regret it. I am going to take you to your father."

She had one hand hidden behind her back, but with unusual speed in a person so old, she leaped on Lucrecia and put the bit in her mouth. Lucrecia galloped through the air, neighing with rage, but the old lady did not dismount. She immediately seized both of us, me by the hair and Matilda by the neck, and the four of us saw ourselves thrown into a furious dance. In the hallway, Lucrecia began to resist and broke paintings, chairs, and porcelain jars. The old lady was stuck to Lucrecia's back like a mollusk to a rock. I was full of wounds; I thought Matilda was dead: she hung lamentably from the old woman's hand like a rag.

In the middle of a true orgy of noises, we reached the dining room. Seated at the end of a long table, an old gentleman, more near to a geometrical form than to any other thing, was finishing eating. Brusquely, an absolute calmness was established in the room. Lucrecia looked at her father with arrogant eyes.

"So, you return to your bad habits!" the old man said, cracking a nut. "The señorita of Rochefroide has done well to bring you here. It is exactly three years and three days since I prohibited your playing with the horses. This is the seventh time that I admonish you, and certainly you are aware that number seven is the last in our family. I see myself obliged, my beloved Lucrecia, to punish you very severely."

The girl, under her form of a horse, did not move, her nostrils quivered.

"What I am going to do is for your own good, little one," said the old man, in a deep voice. He then continued, "You are too big to be playing with Tartarus. Tartarus is for little boys. Therefore, I am going to burn it until there's nothing left of it."

Lucrecia let out a terrible howl and fell to her knees.

"Not that! Father, not that!"

The old man smiled with great sweetness and crunched another nut.

"It's the seventh time, little girl."

Tears fell from Lucrecia's large horse eyes and crossed down her snowy cheeks like two rivers. The girl was gathering a whiteness as resplendent as light itself.

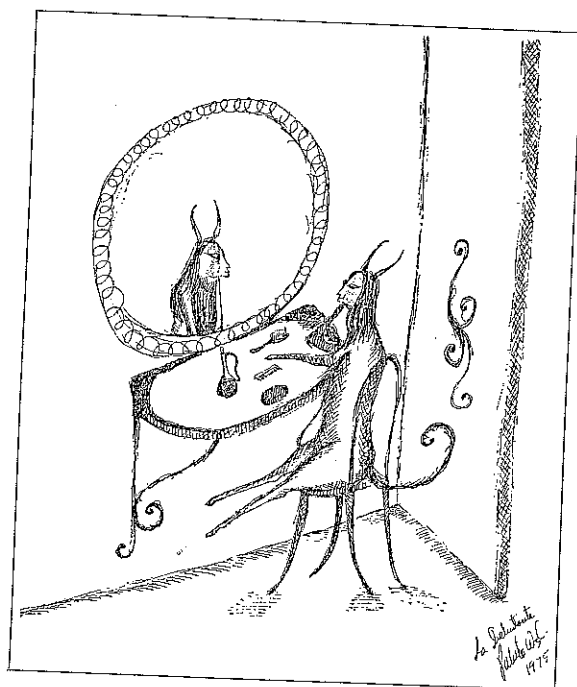
"Have pity, papa, pity! Don't burn Tartarus!"

Her sharp voice fell each time more weakly. Lucrecia was soon kneeling in a pool of water. I was seized with the terrible fear of seeing her drown.

"Señorita de la Rochefroide, help Señorita Lucrecia to leave," said the father, and the old lady took the poor creature out of there, now changed into a thin and trembling spirit.

I think that he had not noticed my presence. I hid myself behind the door and I heard the old man go up to the children's room. In a little while, I closed my ears with my hands: some frightening blows were heard upstairs, as if a beast were suffering unusual tortures. . .

THE DEBUTANTE



WHEN I was a debutante I often went to the zoological garden. I went so often that I was better acquainted with animals than with the young girls of my age. It was to escape from the world that I found myself each day at the zoo. The beast I knew best was a young hyena. She knew me too. She was extremely intelligent; I taught her French and in return she taught me her language. We spent many pleasant hours in this way.

For the first of May my mother had arranged a ball in my honor. For entire nights I suffered: I had always detested balls, above all those given in my own honor.

On the morning of May first, 1934, very early, I went to visit the hyena. "What a mess of shit," I told her. "I must go to my ball this evening."

"You're lucky," she said. "I would go happily. I do not know how to dance, but after all, I could engage in conversation."

"There will be many things to eat," said I. "I have seen wagons loaded entirely with food coming up to the house."

"And you complain!" replied the hyena with disgust. "As for me, I eat only once a day, and what rubbish they stick me with!"

I had a bold idea; I almost laughed. "You have only to go in my place."

"We do not look enough alike, otherwise I would gladly go," said the hyena, a little sad. "Listen," said I, "in the evening light one does not see very well. If you were disguised a little, no one would notice in the crowd. Besides, we are almost the same size. You are my only friend; I implore you."

She reflected upon this sentiment. I knew that she wanted to accept. "It is done," she said suddenly.

It was very early; not many keepers were about. Quickly I opened the cage and in a moment we were in the street. I took a taxi; at the house, everyone was in bed. In my room, I brought out the gown I was supposed to wear that evening. It was a little long, and the hyena walked with difficulty in my high-heeled shoes. I found some gloves to disguise her hands which were too hairy to resemble mine. When the sunlight entered, she strolled around the room several times—walking more or less correctly. We were so very occupied that my mother, who came to tell me good morning, almost opened the door before the hyena could hide herself under my bed. "There is a bad odor in the room," said my mother, opening the window. "Before this evening you must take a perfumed bath with my new salts."

"Agreed," said I. She did not stay long; I believe the odor was too strong for her. "Do not be late for breakfast," she said, as she left the room.

The greatest difficulty was to find a disguise for the hyena's face. For hours and hours we sought an answer: she rejected all of my proposals. At last she said, "I think I know a solution. You have a maid?"

"Yes," I said, perplexed.

"Well, that's it. You will ring for the maid and when she enters we will throw ourselves upon her and remove her face. I will wear her face this evening in place of my own."

"That's not practical," I said to her. "She will probably die when she has no more face; someone will surely find the corpse and we will go to prison."

"I am hungry enough to eat her," replied the hyena.

"And the bones?"

"Those too," she said. "Then it's settled?"

"Only if you agree to kill her before removing her face. It

would be too uncomfortable otherwise."

"Good; it's all right with me."

I rang for Marie, the maid, with a certain nervousness. I would not have done it if I did not detest dances so much. When Marie entered I turned to the wall so as not to see. I admit that it was done quickly. A brief cry and it was over. While the hyena ate, I looked out the window. A few minutes later, she said: "I cannot eat anymore; the two feet are left, but if you have a little bag I will eat them later in the day."

"You will find in the wardrobe a bag embroidered with *fleurs de lys*. Remove the handkerchiefs inside it and take it." She did as I indicated.

At last she said: "Turn around now and look, because I am beautiful!" Before the mirror, the hyena admired herself in Marie's face. She had eaten very carefully all around the face so that what was left was just what was needed. "Surely, it's properly done," said I.

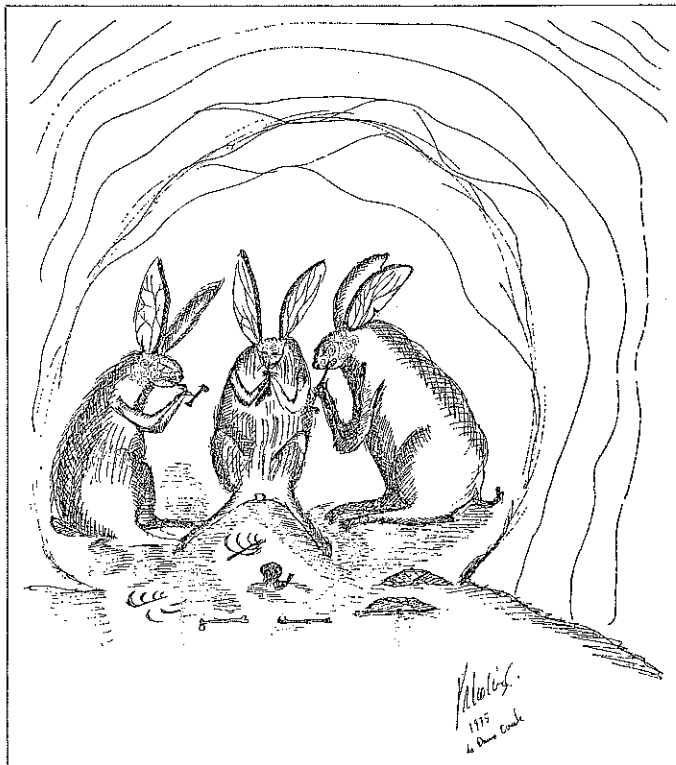
Toward evening, when the hyena was all dressed, she declared: "I am in a very good mood. I have the impression that I will be a great success this evening."

When the music below had been heard for some time, I said to her: "Go now, and remember not to place yourself at my mother's side: she will surely know that it is not I. Otherwise I know no one. Good luck." I embraced her as we parted but she smelled very strong.

Night had fallen. Exhausted by the emotions of the day, I took a book and sat down by the open window. I remember that I was reading *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift. It was perhaps an hour later that the first sign of misfortune announced itself. A bat entered through the window, emitting little cries. I am terribly afraid of bats. I hid behind a chair, my teeth chattering. Scarcely was I on my knees when the beating of the wings was drowned out by a great commotion at my door. My mother entered, pale with rage. "We were coming to seat our-

selves at the table," she said, "when the thing who was in your place rose and cried: 'I smell a little strong, eh? Well, as for me, I do not eat cake.' With these words she removed her face and ate it. A great leap and she disappeared out the window."

WHITE RABBITS



THE TIME has come that I must tell the events which began in 40 Pest St. The houses which were reddish-black looked as if they had survived mysteriously from the fire of London. The house in front of my window, covered with an occasional wisp of creeper, was as blank and empty looking as any plague-ridden residence subsequently licked by flames and saliv'd with smoke. This is not the way that I had imagined New York.

It was so hot that I got palpitations when I ventured out into the streets—so I sat and considered the house opposite and occasionally bathed my sweating face.

The light was never very strong in Pest Street. There was always a reminiscence of smoke which made visibility troubled and hazy—still it was possible to study the house opposite carefully, even precisely; besides my eyes have always been excellent.

I spent several days watching for some sort of movement opposite but there was none and I finally took to undressing quite freely before my open window and doing breathing exercises optimistically in the thick Pest Street air. This must have blackened my lungs as dark as the houses. One afternoon I washed my hair and sat out on the diminutive stone crescent which served as a balcony to dry it. I hung my head between my knees and watched a blue-bottle suck the dry corpse of a spider between my feet. I looked up through my lank hair and saw something black in the sky, ominously quiet for an airplane. Parting my hair I was in time to see a large raven alight on the balcony of the house opposite. It sat on the balustrade and seemed to peer into the empty window, then poked its head un-

der its wing apparently searching for lice. A few minutes later I was not unduly surprised to see the double windows open and admit a woman onto the balcony—she carried a large dish full of bones which she emptied onto the floor. With a short appreciative squawk, the raven hopped down and picked about amongst its unpleasant repast.

The woman, who had hemp-long black hair, wiped out the dish, using her hair for this purpose.

Then she looked straight at me and smiled in a friendly fashion. I smiled back and waved a towel. This seemed to encourage her for she tossed her head coquettishly and gave me a very elegant salute after the fashion of a queen.

"Do you happen to have any bad meat over there that you don't need?" she called.

"Any what?" I called back, wondering if my ears had deceived me.

"Any stinking meat? Decomposed flesh . . . meat?"

"Not at the moment," I replied, wondering if she was trying to be funny.

"Won't you have any towards the end of the week? If so, I would be very grateful if you would bring it over."

Then she stepped back into the empty window and disappeared. The raven flew away.

My curiosity about the house and its occupant prompted me to buy a large lump of meat the following day. I set it on the balcony on a bit of newspaper and awaited developments. In a comparatively short time the smell was so strong that I was obliged to pursue my daily activities with a paper clip on the end of my nose—occasionally, I descended into the street to breathe.

Towards Thursday evening I noticed that the meat was changing colour, so waving aside a flight of numerous bluebottles, I scooped it into my sponge bag and set out for the house opposite. I noticed, descending the stairs, that the landlady seemed to

avoid me. It took me some time to find the front door of the house opposite. It turned out to be hidden under a cascade of smutty ivy, giving the impression that nobody had been either in or out of this house for years. The bell was of the old-fashioned kind that you pull, and, pulling it harder than I intended, it came right off in my hand. I gave the door an angry push and it caved inwards emitting a ghastly smell of putrid woodwork.

The woman herself came rustling down the stairs carrying a torch.

"How do you do? How do you do?" she murmured ceremoniously, and I was surprised to notice that she wore an ancient and beautiful dress of green silk. But as she approached me I saw that her skin was dead white and glittered as though speckled with thousands of minute stars.

"Isn't that kind of you?" she went on, taking my arm with her sparkling hand. "Won't my poor little rabbits be pleased."

We mounted the stairs and my companion walked so carefully that I thought she was frightened.

The top flight of stairs opened into a boudoir decorated with dark baroque furniture and red plush. The floor was littered with gnawed bones and animals' skulls.

"It is so seldom that we get a visit," smiled the woman, "so they all scuttle off into their little corners."

She uttered a low whistle, and, transfixed, I saw about a hundred snow-white rabbits emerge cautiously from every nook, their large pink eyes fixed unwinkingly upon the woman.

"Come, pretty ones—come, pretty ones," she cooed, diving her hand into my sponge bag and pulling out a handful of rotting meat.

With a sensation of deep disgust I backed into a corner and saw her throwing the carrion amongst the rabbits which fought like wolves for it.

"One becomes very fond of them," the woman went on, "they each have their little ways. You would be surprised how very

individual rabbits are."

The rabbits in question were tearing at the meat with their sharp buck teeth.

"We eat them, of course, occasionally. My husband makes a very tasty stew every Saturday night."

Then a movement in the corner caught my attention and I realized that there was a third person in the room. As the woman's torch light touched his face I saw he had glittering skin like tinsel on a Christmas tree. He was dressed in a red gown and sat very rigidly with his profile turned towards us.

He seemed to be as unconscious of our presence as that of a large buck rabbit which sat masticating a chunk of meat on his knee.

The woman followed my gaze and chuckled, "That is my husband, the boys used to call him Lazarus."

At the sound of this familiar name he turned his face towards us and I saw that he wore a bandage over his eyes.

"Ethel?" he enquired in a rather thin voice. "I won't have any visitors here. You know quite well that I have forbidden it strictly."

"Now Laz, don't start carrying on." Her voice was plaintive. "You can't grudge me a little bit of company. It's twenty-odd years since I've seen a new face. Besides she's brought meat for the rabbits."

She turned and beckoned me to her side. "You want to stay with us, do you not, my dear?"

I was suddenly clutched by fear and I wanted to get out and away from those terrible silver people and the white carnivorous rabbits.

"I think I must be going. It is supper time."

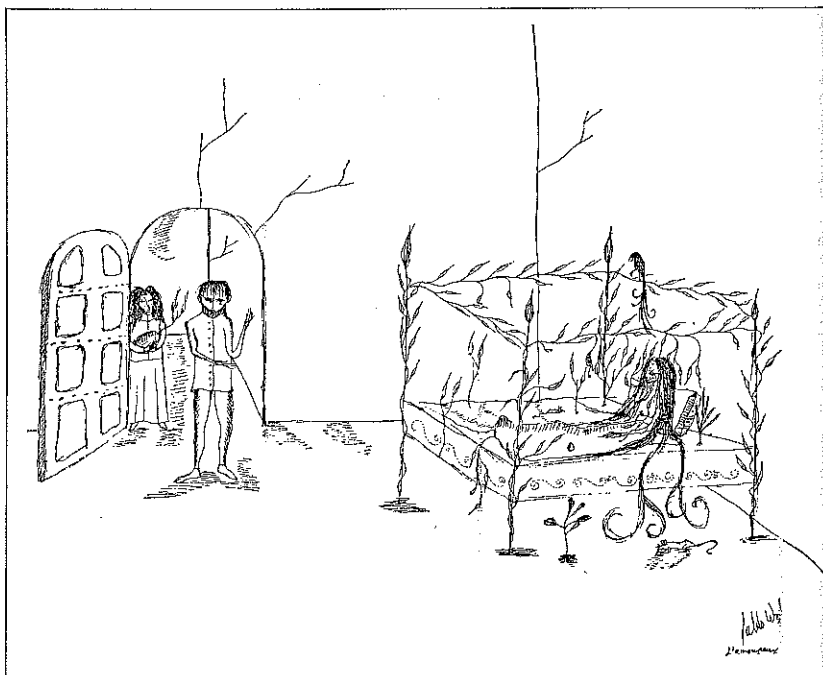
The man on the chair gave a shrill peal of laughter, terrifying the rabbit on his knee, which sprang to the floor and disappeared.

The woman thrust her face so near to mine that her sickly breath seemed to anaesthetize me. "Do you not want to stay

and become like us?"

I stumbled and ran, choking with horror, some unholy curiosity made me look over my shoulder as I reached the front door and I saw her waving her hand over the bannister, and as she waved, her fingers fell off and dropped to the ground like shooting stars.

THE BELOVED



ONE LATE afternoon, passing through a narrow street, I stole a melon. The fruit man who was hidden behind his fruits seized me by the arm and said to me: "Señorita, I've been waiting for an occasion like this for forty years. I have spent forty years hidden behind this pile of oranges with the hope that someone would steal a fruit from me. I will tell you why, I need to talk, I need to tell my story. If you don't listen, I will hand you over to the police."

"I'll listen," I said.

Without letting me go, he took me to the inside of the store, among fruits and vegetables. We shut a door at the far end, and we reached a room where there was a bed on which an immovable and probably dead woman lay. It appeared to me that she had been there for a long time since the bed was covered with weeds.

"I water her every day," said the fruitman with a pensive air. "In 40 years I have not succeeded in knowing whether she is dead or not. She has never moved, nor spoken, nor eaten during that time. But the curious thing is that she remains warm. If you don't believe me, look."

The man lifted a corner of the cover, which permitted me to see many eggs and some little chicks recently hatched.

"As you notice," he said, "I incubate eggs here. I also sell fresh eggs."

We each sat down on one side of the bed and the fruit man began to tell his story.

"Believe me, I love her so much! I have always loved her! She

was so sweet! She had little agile white feet. Would you like to see them?

"No," I answered.

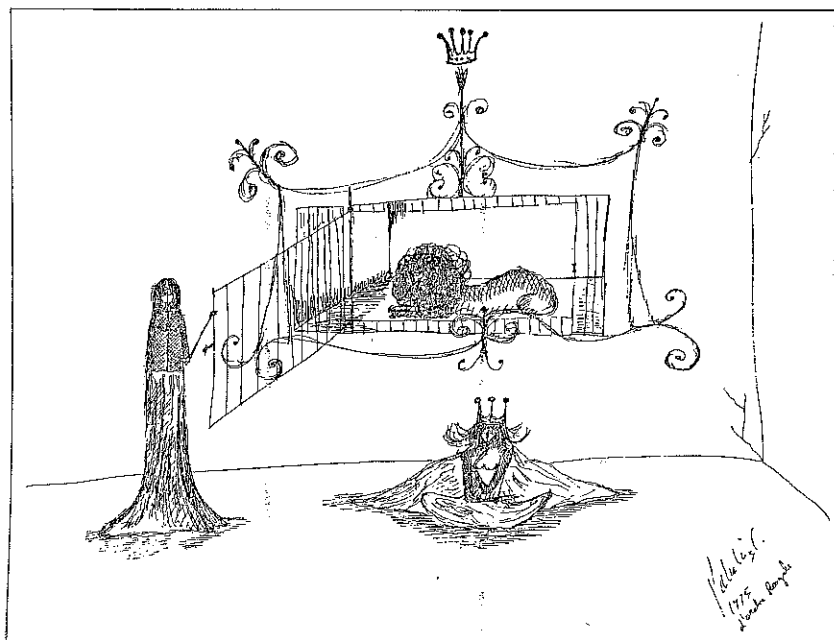
"Finally," he continued, after exhaling a deep breath, "she was so beautiful! My hair was blonde; hers, magnificently black! Now, both of us have white hair. Her father was an extraordinary man. He had a mansion in the country. He was a collector of lamb chops. For that we came to know each other. I have a certain skill in drying meat with a glance. Mr. Pushfoot (so he was called) heard about me. He invited me to his house in order to dry his ribs to keep them from rotting. Agnes was his daughter. We loved each other from the first moment. We departed in a boat by way of the Seine. I rowed. Agnes said to me: 'I love you so much that I only live for you.' I answered her with the same words. I believe that it is my love which keeps her warm, perhaps she is dead, but the warmth persists."

After a short pause, with an absent look, he continued: "Next year I will grow some tomatoes; it wouldn't surprise me if they would grow well there inside . . . It became night, and I didn't know where we would spend our wedding night. Agnes had become very pale, because of fatigue. Finally we had scarcely left Paris behind when I saw an inn that faced the river. I moored the boat and we walked toward an obscure and sinister terrace. There were two wolves there and a fox, who began to walk around us. There was nobody else . . . I knocked and knocked at the door, on the other side of which a terrible silence prevailed. 'Agnes is tired! Agnes is very tired!' I shouted with as much force as I could. Finally, an old lady's head appeared at the window and said: 'I don't know anything. The landlord here is the fox. Let me sleep. You are bothering me.' Agnes began to cry. There was no other remedy than to direct ourselves to the fox. 'Have you beds?' I asked several times. Nobody responded: he didn't know how to speak. And again the head, older than the other, but which now descended slowly through the window

tied to the end of a little cord. 'Direct yourself to the wolves; I am not the landlord here. Let me sleep! please!' I understood that that head was crazy and I did not have the heart to continue. Agnes kept crying. I walked around the house a few times and finally, I was able to open a window, through which we entered. Then we found ourselves in a kitchen with a high ceiling; over a large oven made hot by fire were some vegetables that were cooking and they jumped in the boiling water, a thing that much amused us. We ate well and then we laid ourselves down on the floor. I had Agnes in my arms. We did not sleep. That terrible kitchen contained all kinds of things. Many rats had stuck their heads out of their holes and then sang with screeching and disagreeable little voices. Filthy odors expanded and diminished one after the other, and there were air drafts. I believe that it was the air drafts that finished my poor Agnes. She never recovered. From that day, each time she spoke less . . ."

And the fruitman was so blinded by tears that I could escape with my melon.

**THE ROYAL
COMMAND**



I HAD received a royal command to visit the rulers of my country.

The invitation, in gold letters in relief and adorned with roses and swallows, was bordered in lace.

I went to look for my car, but the chauffeur, who lacks practical sense, had buried it.

"It's to grow mushrooms," he told me. "Nothing better for mushrooms."

"Brady," I said to him, "you are an imbecile of the first degree. You have ruined my car."

Actually, since the car was completely ruined, I had to rent a horse-pulled buggy.

Upon reaching the palace, an impossible servant, dressed in red and gold, said to me: "The queen went crazy yesterday; she is in her bathtub."

"How unfortunate!" I exclaimed. "How did that happen?"

"It's the heat."

"Can I see her in any event?" (I hoped I hadn't made the long voyage for nothing.)

"Yes," the servant answered. "You can see her in any event."

We walked through corridors adorned in false marble (the imitation was admirable), Greek bas relief with Medici style ceilings and wax fruits everywhere.

When I entered, the queen was bathing. I observed that she bathed in goat's milk.

"Enter," she said to me. "As you can see, I only use live sponges; it has a more healthful result."

The sponges swam in the milk; the queen trapped them with

a certain difficulty. A servant helped her from time to time, with a large drag-hook.

"Soon I will be done with my bath," the queen said. "I have a proposition to make you. I want you to take over the government instead of me; I am very tired. They are all imbecils; you will not be prejudiced."

"I agree to that."

The main administration room was situated at the other end of the palace. The ministers were seated before a very long and glistening table.

As representative of the queen, I occupied the head of the table. The prime minister got up and struck the table with a little gavel. The table split in two. The servants brought another table. The prime minister exchanged his wooden gavel for a rubber one. He struck again. He said:

"Representative of the Queen, fellow ministers, my friends: our beloved ruler went mad yesterday and we need another. But before this there must be an assassination of the old queen."

The ministers spoke among themselves in a low voice for some time. The oldest got up and said to the group: "Then a plan is necessary; not only a plan, but a decision; the assassin must be elected."

All the hands went up at the same time. I didn't know exactly what to do as representative of Her Majesty.

Perplexed, the prime minister looked at the assistants. "We cannot all do it," he said. "But a good idea occurs to me. We will play a game of checkers and he who wins will have the right to assassinate the queen," and, turning towards me, he continued: "Do you play checkers, ma'am?"

I was filled with confusion. I didn't have the least desire of assassinating the queen, and I foresaw the grave consequences which such an act might occasion. Besides, I have no talent for checkers. As I could not see any danger in this for me, I accepted: "It makes no difference to me," I answered.

"Then we're in accord," said the prime minister. "I have the plan that he who wins must follow. He will take the queen for a walk through the House of Royal Wild Beasts. Upon reaching the lions' cage (it's the second on the left), he will push the queen inside. I will advise the guardian not to give the lions anything to eat until morning."

The queen called me to attend to some matters. She ordered the flowers woven into the sofa to be watered. "Then, have you done that well?" she asked.

"Very thoroughly," I answered, confused.

"Don't you want a little bit of soup?"

"You're very kind," I said.

"It's a broth of artificial ox; I make it myself," the queen said. "Only there are a few potatoes inside."

While we ate the soup, the queen's orchestra played popular and classical music. The queen enjoyed music with madness.

When the meal was ended, the queen went away to rest. I directed myself to the terrace where the checkers game was being played. I was nervous, but I had inherited the sporting spirit of my father. I had given my word to be there, and there I would be.

The immense terrace offered an impressive aspect. In front of the garden, full of the shadows of twilight and of cypress trees, the ministers had gathered. There were about twenty little tables there, with two chairs of thin and fragile legs for each table. When he saw me enter, the prime minister shouted:

"Each to his place!" and all moved toward the little tables and began the game with ferocity.

It was played without rest during the entire night; the only noises that interrupted the game from time to time were the furious stomach rumblings of some minister. At the crack of dawn, a trumpet's sound brusquely ended the game. A voice, that came out of nowhere, shouted: "She has won! She is the only one who has not cheated."

Horror nailed me to my place.

"Who? I?" I said.

"Yes, you," the voice answered.

I noticed that it was the tallest cypress which spoke. "One must flee from her," I thought, beginning to run towards the avenue. But the cypress tore its roots out of the earth throwing garbage around and began to follow me. "It's stronger than I am," I thought, and I stopped. The cypress did the same, shaking all its branches forcefully since obviously it had not run for a long time.

"I accept," I said.

And the cypress returned slowly to its hole.

I found the queen stretched out in her huge bed.

"I invite you to take a stroll through the House of Wild Beasts," I said, very grieved.

"It's too early," the queen answered, "it's not even five o'clock. I never get up before 10."

"It's magnificent weather outside."

"Well, if you insist . . ."

We went down to the quiet garden. In the dawn nothing breathed; it was the peaceful hour, all petrified, only light itself existed. In order to give myself courage, I sang from time to time. What a chill had invaded my bones! The queen had begun to tell me she fed all her creatures sweets.

"This keeps them from being mean."

"You would have to give sweets to the lions," I said to myself.

A long avenue, surrounded with fruit trees, led to the House of Beasts. From time to time, a heavy fruit fell to the ground. Plop!

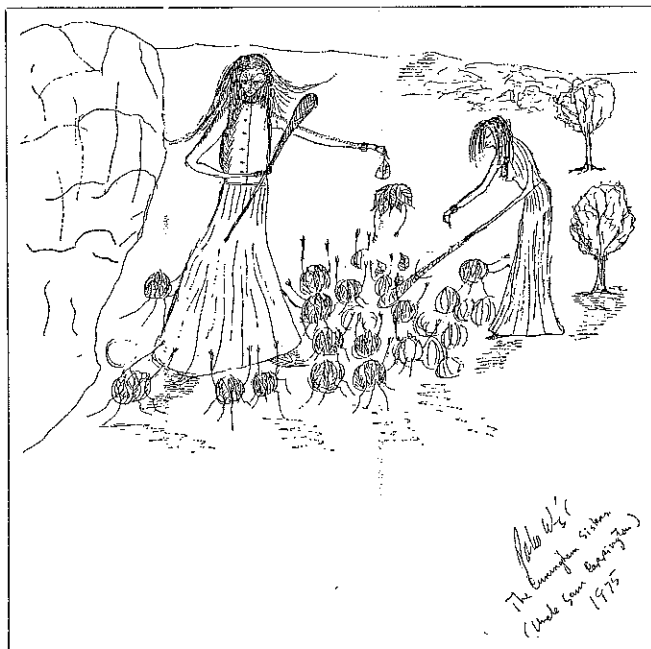
"Colds" said the queen "can be cured easily if you have faith. I take nuts and ox dressed with olive oil. I put them inside the nose, and the following day the cold has disappeared. Or better yet, treated the same way, cold noodles with liver juice (from lamb preferably) acts miraculously to alleviate a headache."

"You'll not have any more colds," I thought.

"But bronchitis is more complicated. My poor husband died in his last bronchitis attack, in spite of the fact that I knit him a jacket. But it didn't work out."

The House of Beasts drew nearer each moment. I now heard the beasts agitating in their morning sleep. I had wanted to turn back, but I was frightened of the cypress tree, of all that it could do with its black and hairy branches. And the more I perceived the scent of the lion, the more strongly I sang, to give me courage.

UNCLE SAM
CARRINGTON



WHEN Uncle Sam Carrington saw the full moon he was never able to stop laughing. A sunset had the same effect on Aunt Edgeworth. These two events created much suffering for my mother who took pleasure in a certain social prestige.

At the age of eight I was considered the most serious person in the family. My mother confided in me. She said that it was shameful that nobody would invite her out, that Lady Cholmendley-Bottame did not say Good Afternoon to her in the street. I was deeply upset.

Uncle Sam Carrington and Aunt Edgeworth lived in the house. They occupied the first floor. Thus, nothing could be done to hide this lamentable state of affairs. During the daytime I asked myself how I could free the family of this shame. Finally, it was impossible for me to bear the tension and my mother's tears, things that made me suffer greatly. I decided to search for the solution. One afternoon when the sun had become very red and Aunt Edgeworth rejoiced in an especially repugnant manner, I took a jar of sweets, a loaf of bread and took to the road. In order to frighten the bats, I sang "O come into the garden, Maude, and hear the blackbirds sing!" (*O, van al jardin, Maude, y escucha el canto de los miries!*)

My father sang this song when he wasn't going to church, and another that began so: "It cost me seven shillings and sixpence." (*Esto me costo siete chelines y seis peniques.*) I sang both songs with the same emotion.

"Good—" I thought, the trip has begun. Night certainly will bring me a solution. If I count the trees up to the place where I

am going, I will not lose my way. Upon returning I will remember the number of trees." But I forgot that I only knew how to count up to ten, and even then I made mistakes. So, in a little while I counted up to 10 several times until I became completely lost. Trees surrounded me everywhere.

"I am in the forest," I said to myself. I was right.

The full moon diffused its clarity among the trees which permitted me to see some meters in front of me and the reason for a disquieting noise. Two cabbages that were fighting terribly made the disturbance. They tore off each other's leaves with such ferocity that soon there were only a few sad leaves everywhere, and nothing of the cabbages.

"It doesn't matter," I said to myself. "It's nothing more than a nightmare." But suddenly I remembered that that night I had not gone to bed and, therefore, I could not treat it as a nightmare.

"It's horrible," I thought.

After that, I picked up the cadavers and continued my walk. In a little while, I came across a friend: the horse that, years later, would play an important part in my life.

"Hello!" he said to me. "Are you looking for something?"

I explained to him the object of my excursion at such an advanced hour in the evening.

"Evidently," he said, "from the social point of view it's most complicated. Around here live two ladies who are occupied with similar questions. Your pursued goal consists in the eradication of your family shame. They are two very wise ladies. If you want, I will take you to them."

The Señoritas Cunningham-Jones had a house surrounded discretely by uncultivated weeds and moss of another era. They were found in the garden about to play a game of checkers. The horse stuck out his head between the legs of some 1890 knickers and directed the word to the señoritas Cunningham-Jones.

"Let your little friend enter," said the señorita who was seated

at the right in a very distinct accent. "We are always ready to help in the matter of respectability."

The other señorita bent her head benevolently. She was wearing a huge hat adorned with all kinds of horticultural specimens.

"Your family, señorita," she said to me, offering me a Louis XV style chair, "does it continue the line of our beloved and lamented Duke of Wellington or that of Sir Walter Scott, that noble aristocrat of fine literature?"

I was a bit confused. There were no aristocrats in my family. Taking notice of my fright, she said to me with the most enchanting smile: "Dear girl, you must realize that here we only arrange matters of the oldest and most noble families of England."

A sudden inspiration illuminated my face.

"In the dining room, at home . . ." I said.

The horse gave me a strong kick in the backseat.

"Don't ever speak of anything so vulgar as food," he said to me in a low voice.

Luckily, the señoritas were a little deaf. Correcting myself, I continued, perplexed.

"In the living room there is a table upon which, it is said, a duchess left her glasses in 1700."

"In that case," the señorita answered, "Perhaps we can come to an agreement, but naturally, señorita, we will see ourselves obliged to ask for a somewhat steep reward."

We easily understood each other. The señoritas got up saying: "Wait here some minutes, we will give you what you need. Meanwhile you can look at the illustrations in this book. It's instructive and interesting. No library is complete without this volume. My sister and I always have lived by that admirable example."

The book was titled: *The Secrets of the Flowers of Distinction and the Coarseness of Food*. When the two women had left, the horse asked: "Do you know how to walk without making a sound?"

"Certainly," I answered.

"Then let's see the señoritas devoted to their work," he said. "But if your life matters to you, don't make a sound."

The señoritas were in their orchard which extended behind the house, surrounded by a wide wall. I mounted the horse and a surprising scene offered itself to my eyes: the señoritas Cunningham-Jones, each armed with an immense whip, were striking the vegetables, and shouting: "It's necessary to suffer in order to go to heaven. Those who do not wear corsets will never arrive."

The vegetables, on their part, fought among themselves, and the older ones threw the smaller ones at the señoritas with angry screams.

"Each time it happens so," murmured the horse. "They are the vegetables that suffer on behalf of humanity. Soon you will see how they pick one for you, one that will die for the cause."

The vegetables did not have an enthusiastic air over dying an honorable death. But the señoritas were stronger. Soon two carrots and a little cabbage fell between their hands.

"Quickly!" exclaimed the horse. "Back."

Scarcely had we again sat down in front of THE COARSENESS OF FOOD, when the señoritas entered with the exact appearance as before. They gave me a little package that contained the vegetables, and in exchange for this I paid them with the jar of sweets and the little fritters.



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ROCHELLE HOLT, a native of Chicago, Illinois, is a graduate of the Writers Workshop of the University of Iowa in Iowa City. As a member of the modern Anais Nin circle, she writes poetic prose and believes in the novel of the future. Rochelle has been living in Holly Springs, Mississippi for the past two years and recently received a National Endowment for the Arts grant in recognition of her almost six years private press printing with her own Ragnarok Press. She is also a painter and a dancer who feels that her multi-dimensional personality is nourished by the interdisciplinary arts. In the fall she will be transferring to Daniel Payne, a private Black college in Birmingham, Alabama where she will continue to teach as Assistant Professor of English and Art. Although she has published translations of Spanish poems in *Quinto Lingo* and other poetry magazines, *La dama oval* is her first prose translation.

