

Víctor Català

Two Short Stories

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CARNIVAL

The Marquesa d'Artigues was all alone in her usual place, her eternal place, tucked into her armchair, behind the balcony windows, opposite a small table, fidgeting with her lorgnette, an astrakhan tippet draped over her thin, bony shoulders.

The young servant-girls had accompanied the doorman to watch people entering a high-society ball that had been much heralded, the administrator had gone out for some fresh air and Glòria, the old housemaid, after wheeling her mistress in, had quietly retired, taking the oil-lamp with her, so as not to disturb her senyora's daily devotions.

And confined to the chair by the paralysis rendering her immobile, the marquesa sat becalmed in the shadows of that large, unlit room.

The daily paper traced a hazy white blotch on the table, and the glow from the streetlights on La Rambla penetrated the half-open shutters, first settling on the marquesa's head, emphasizing her aging Roman senator's features, before proceeding to paint an area of ceiling and a stretch of wall the color of old gold. In the background, the shadowy, mysterious alcove resembled

the antechamber to a sepulcher, and sparse, severe furniture from an ancient mansion lined the sides like animals imprisoned by darkness.

Once she had completed her protracted daily prayers, the marquesa languidly dropped her rosary beads and hands on her skirt and stared absentmindedly outside. It was a time when few people were strolling along La Rambla, and all wore everyday clothes.

“Thanks be to God!” thought the senyora, and her face, à la Rembrandt, was lit up by contentment that glimmered against the gloom of the alcove. It was Carnival Tuesday, and she had been observing disguises parade by for three days nonstop, and the poor marquesa was sick, utterly sick of that tawdry spectacle.

On her long, solitary evenings, she spent there with no other source of distraction than a pious book or pages of newsprint, no more companionship than her servants, a parasitic gold-digger or a friend as old in years and full of aches and pains as herself, who always chattered about the same things in the same words, the poor, fretful woman longed for excitement and novelty and periodically looked forward to the Carnival that would pass beneath her balconies and cheer everything with its outrageous mirth. However, Carnival brought with it bawling, lunatic ribaldry, strings of scruffy rascals cracking dirty jokes or making lewd gestures... and, condemned to witness that stupid or libidinous debauchery straight out of a hysterical woman’s nightmare from dawn to dusk, she, a sad old dowager, finally decided it offended her prim, aristocratic taste, her long-suffering vestal virgin’s modesty and ailing spinster’s sullen staidness.

Then she would erupt impatiently and arrogantly like someone used to ruling the roost and order the shutters to be pulled down on that profane, offensive spectacle, and, seated in her

invalid's wheelchair, she asked to be pushed to the other end of the apartment, to the very back, far from the raucous din on the street. But the noise of revelry reached her even there, gave her ear-ache and interrupted her train of thoughts, and eventually she wearied of staring at the dull walls or silent servants around her, and again felt an urgent need for light, movement and life... and her chair rolled silently and meekly back over the carpets to her chamber. Shutters and blinds were lifted, the sunken arm-chair welcomed the return of her infirm body, the small table spread out like a bridge with four stanchions over her dead legs, and her ashen eyes now began to fret behind the lenses of her spectacles with a handle.

And that was how the marquesa prepared for the next onslaught of gloom or boredom.

That very same evening she had suffered a quite exceptional attack due to unforeseen consequences.

She had begun by saying that her lamp wasn't burning as it should and ordered all the candle-holders be carried to her, one after another, claiming they weren't positioned properly, and that everybody was conspiring to make her despair. She sent the administrator packing — an amateur archaeologist— who had attempted to soothe her, and told him that if he were as careful with his household duties as with his purchases of scrap iron and moth-eaten objects, what was happening would not happen; she reprimanded the cook for a salty broth she had cooked her a month ago, threatened to throw the young housemaid out on the street for being forward, and lambasted the old housemaid for being a whiner who only thought about herself.

“Oh, if I could only manage by myself...! If only God hadn't punished me so dreadfully...! I would send you all packing...” Frantic and exasperated, she banged her tortoise-shell specta-

cles nervously against the bones of her skinny legs. And trembling with pique and indignation, her voice turned hoarse as two tears rolled down her cheeks and filled her mouth with their bitter saltiness.

The irritable lady had shown no signs of quietening until she heard a low, sporadic mumble behind her that seemed to echo her own voice. She looked round: crouching in a corner of the alcove, face buried in her battered apron, her old housemaid was struggling to suppress a wave of violent sobs. As she gave her a troubled glance, the marquesa felt her limbs become paralyzed, her head sag, her arms stiffen, while her mouth gawped and her eyes stared... But that lasted only a few seconds. The marquesa swung round in a rage, as if she hadn't noticed a thing, and despotic pride flowed from every part of her authoritarian mien, as she confronted the administrator and young servants, who were all standing aghast opposite her, before she sourly bid them leave.

“Off you go to the kitchen... What do you think you are doing here? I trust supper will be ready on time... And as for you, Don Juan, send a letter this minute to my tenant- farmer and tell him those eggs he sent were rotten... Everyone is having fun at my expense...”

The servants withdrew as rapidly as they could, sighing in relief and recognizing that the whirlwind was subsiding. Their mistress waited a minute, and in a very different tone, summoned Glòria. Glòria's face was still hidden in her apron, and she didn't hear or want to respond.

“She's sulking!” thought the marquesa anxiously and spoke again, now more imperiously: “Glòria, dear! Are you deaf?”

“What can I do for you, senyora?” the housemaid's tear-ridden voice hastened to reply.

“Pick up the handkerchief that I just dropped.”

The housemaid emerged from the alcove, and, when the marquesa saw her holding back her tears and twisting her face so as to hide them, the marquesa felt her irritation melt away like a drop of water on blotting paper, and enquired with a seriousness that was entirely feigned: “Tell me now! Why are you crying? You’ve been acting so strangely, Glòria!”

The maid lost all self-restraint, and kneeling at her senyora’s feet, took her hand and showered it with tears and kisses.

“Forgive me, senyora... senyora meva!”

The marquesa suddenly flung her Roman senator’s head backwards, dodging a beam of light, and a voice, wracked by emotion, exclaimed from the darkness: “But... my child... what is this all about?”

“Forgive me, senyora! I would die rather than make you angry, and I always seem to be angering you...”

The marquesa tried to speak, to utter a few words. Her lips and chin trembled, her clouded eyes gleamed in their sunken sockets, but no words came. She recognized only too well the great humility that often, quite unawares, humbled her own self-esteem, by making her conscious of her unjust outbursts. On this occasion it made more impact than ever: she longed to cry tears of shame, to ask for forgiveness in turn, to press to her bosom that innocent head that rose towards her, imploringly, but... she dare not... On the one hand, caste pride tyrannized her, and on the other, the suffocating restraint of an old virgin who had never learned to love in her youth, gagged her mouth and killed the urge to hold out her arms. Nevertheless, the effort she made to repress herself was so immense, she became completely overwhelmed, and when she did finally speak, her voice sounded gruff and flat, like some men’s voices: a mysterious voice she

didn't know and that the housemaid was hard put to recognize.

The marquesa said: "Yes... you do make me angry... when... you do things... like this."

A fresh stream of kisses and tears fell on her hand.

"Because you know that you shouldn't upset yourself..."

"Senyora meva! Senyora meva!"

"What is the doctor going to say tomorrow when he finds you are ill?"

"Don't worry about me... As long as he doesn't find the senyora..."

The true sorrow in that sentiment sounded so sincere, it went straight to the heart, broke all protocols of restraint and prejudice, and the stern Marquesa d'Artigues, surprised by what was happening, suddenly seized her companion's head and pressed it hard against her bosom. They embraced for a while, one drowning in a frenzy of tenderness and the other half-swooning over her good fortune.

In all the years that they had lived together, it was the first time they had shown mutual affection so openly and unreservedly, and, as if that embrace had been a definitive revelation, when they separated out, each woman felt the other was now necessary to her life on this earth, as if all at once their two incomplete lives had fused and become complete in one sole life.

They didn't exchange another word. As on every evening, Glòria took her mistress her supper and served it on the small table, without daring to raise her eyes that were full of infinite, strange emotions, and the senyora, for her part, ate in silence, sensing that her heart was in the grip of an unknown force.

The other maids sensed their sweet harmony from afar and spoke to Glòria about going to see the carnival disguises parade by, and the administrator about going for a stroll and Glòria

brought them all permission from the senyora and shut the door to the stairs behind them. The two women now had the whole house to themselves, and in the secret peace of such privacy, they felt blissful without saying as much.

The maid brought the senyora her rosary beads so she could attend to her devotions, then quietly withdrew taking the candle with her, since the senyora usually prayed in the dark, her only light, illumination from La Rambla that reached her house and entered her bed-chamber, dimmed by distance, and Glòria went to the oratory, also to pray a long, wordless prayer, a long prayer redolent with amorous unction towards everything heavenly and earthly: a silent prayer of happiness.

The housemaid was forty-five and had been serving the senyora for thirty: she had started in service as a child, and serving her mistress, quite unawares she had become a woman, and serving her, and never noticing it, she had allowed her youth to pass her by unfruitfully until she reached, as one might say, the gates of old age without knowing love, freedom or the warmth of a home, without anything to call her own, apart from her great devotion, like a faithful dog's or a willing slave's, towards her senyora. The fetters that had manacled the wills and minds of her forebears, the brand of slavery the house of Artigues had burnt on the backs of generations of grown men, vassals, tenant-farmers and lackeys seemed to have been burnt into her soul, penetrating the inner being of the poor, humble child; she had no sense of self, and, just as her fate had been to annihilate herself and serve as a support to someone else's destiny, she surrendered to that sacrifice with the resignation of a woman fulfilling an unknown pledge or distant atonement.

As soon as she entered the service of the senyora — who at the time wasn't yet the marquesa but the daughter of the mar-

quès — she thought only of her and lived only for her. At the time the mistress was twenty years older than her young maid and a strong, stalwart, courageous young woman like a warrior Amazon. Haughty and rebarbative, full of self-esteem but never vain, realizing she wasn't suited to the joys or servitude of marriage or the religious life, she had refused to marry or enter a convent, remaining a spinster in the heart of her family while she had any, and, after losing her mother, for many years she toured Europe with her father and brothers, showing a passion for travel that was a characteristic of her stock. In Paris she watched a big brother die after falling off a horse; in Geneva, her father die of pleurisy; in Valencia her young brother from another common illness, and when she found she was alone on this earth, her soul fortified like a man's by sorrow and solitude, an atavistic instinct venomously pursued her, inspired the idea of escaping from the cemetery of memories that the Old World represented for her, and going off to the New World rather than wait for a not too distant old age to solemnly arrive. But an unforeseen mishap, a white tumor that formed in her knee, wreaked havoc with her plans and forced her to reside in Barcelona, from where she could never now depart to take her bones to any remote ancestral home. From then on, her character, once so firm and resolute, apparently taking revenge on her previous wasteful rounds of activity, was now stricken by a proliferation of illnesses, the cruellest being the paralysis that affected her legs and curbed her tremendous energy. In that time of pain, disintegration and unchecked despair, she finally perceived her housemaid's devotion. Her arrogant outbursts and innate despotism tried everyone's patience, driving from her side doctors, servants, administrators and friends, every living thing, except for her faithful dog and willing slave, poor Glòria, who always stayed by her side,

helping her with humility, watching over her with a sweet gaze brimming with tenderness, meekly forgiving her every whim and outrage and by dint of her affection and concern, soothing her senyora's niggling aches and disappointments. And, though almost mummified and hardened in her caste prejudices and contempt, the marquesa finally softened and was re-invigorated by the magical virtue of such profound affection. As a result of her silent, unselfish heroism, Glòria gradually grew in the eyes of her mistress, from insignificant little animal to useful servant, from her favorite to her indispensable companion, before finally becoming someone ineffable who gripped and, secretly and unconsciously, dominated her soul. Instinctive egotism told the marquesa that her peace of mind was now subject to the mercy of that housemaid, but one day, without ignoring her egotism, her noble, fair-minded spirit, liberated from all meanness, allowed her to feel the company and excellency of a kindred spirit. That was when the marquesa, long hounded by pain and sorrow, began to bow her haughty head before divine will and accept her destiny with bitter resignation. But then, as she seemed calmer and more serene when looking outside of herself, she noticed that her maid, worn down by secretly suffering her senyora's sorrows, became, like her, adept at hiding her pain. The marquesa spoke to her doctor who whispered that her faithful dog would die by virtue of a faithfulness that had damaged her heart. When would that be? When God willed... Lives can miraculously endure for years or be snuffed out all of a sudden by a twist of fortune. When the former warrior maiden, the proud descendent of the proud lords of Artigues, heard that horrendous prognosis, she was petrified, felt a violent stab of pain and became defenseless and overwhelmed in the presence of the humble, younger woman. From then on, that woman, with the unconscious guile

of a sick child, ruled over servants, household and everything, because she ruled over her senyora's heart.

"Don't contradict her, let her do whatever she wants!" had said the doctor.

"I just want her to live!" the marquesa told herself.

But the designs of humans reside in their wills, and beyond that, in the passions that break them.

As previously mentioned, the marquesa was sitting in her usual place behind the balcony windows, looking absentmindedly out. Vague memories of other times were flitting through her restless brain, dark clouds lit up by distant rays of sunset from her youth, and now her heart was finally freed from ancient fetters, she experienced streams of warmth, surges of fulfilment that made her see everything in the world differently to how she had seen it hitherto.

She, her Ladyship the Marquesa d'Artigues, no longer felt she was the woman she had always thought she would become, and the demise of a personality she had believed to be strong and enduring, rather than causing the pain all her other disappointments brought, rather than diminishing her life as they all had, allowed a bliss and a strength of mind to flower she had never known before.

What she had never been able to admit, she now admitted to herself with no false or absurd sense of shame; the great wonder denied her by an austere, obsidian youth had been granted her in abundance by old age. She loved! She loved generously and passionately. Whom? What did that matter? A human creature, another being like herself. The most poignant, beguiling aspect of that miracle wasn't the object of love, but love itself, the huge warmth of serene affection that bound her to someone living and saved her from the dark void, the moldering isolation where she

had existed to that point. Because what binds and enhances is not what comes from others to ourselves, but what goes generously from us to everyone else; what we give, not what we are given...

Obviously the Marquesa d'Artigues didn't think that through, but she felt it with the imperious force of something extremely real, and willingly let herself be swept away by that sentiment, never hesitating to reflect or analyze; she was simply happy to feel herself being cradled in that way by random semi-consciousness.

Her attention was suddenly caught by a great din and bustle approaching down La Rambla. She stared out. A group of performers in disguise was passing by: a dozen men walking in pairs, laughing and gesticulating, behind a large, stunningly colorful float. Half were dressed as Harlequin and half as Pierrot, the first all red, shaking bells at each step, the second in white satin, with yellow wheels for buttons, glittering from head to foot as if they were covered in tiny mirrors.

The marquesa followed them with interest through the tortoise-shell spectacles perched on her nose. Their manner and dress sense revealed that they were no rabble; they must be a band of gentlemen celebrating Carnival in style, as was fitting, unsullied by the grossness usual on those days. They walked past leaving a bevy of young lads and onlookers cheering in their wake, and the lady scrutinized them closely, saw them reach the grand open doorway of a mansion and climb carpeted stairs bedecked with green plants and golden lights, before entering the magnificent salon in a swirl of gaiety, surrounded by women clad in exquisite, exotic attire, and then she saw them gallantly weaving and unweaving pavaues, minuets and other seigneurial dances from times past...

The marquesa's patrician spirit was blissfully revived by that graceful vision. That was the beautiful Carnival, the cultured

Carnival, and not the unworthy charade that poured into the street, for all to see, impurities of taste and instinct, ugly, shameful things only to be expected from abject inferiors! And once more caught in the claws of atavistic prejudice, the marquesa thought how there were castes preferred by God and nature, and that only those beings should rule the world, subjecting the other, disinherited castes to their will, obliging them to be silent and obedient...

It was right then, while she was reflecting on all that, that something unexpected suddenly interrupted her flow of thought. A small sitting-room led into the marquesa's chamber, and beyond the sitting-room was the dining-room. She had just heard an anguished moan from the dining-room. That moan was repeated, now more muted.

The marquesa turned round and scrutinized in alarm the darkness through the spectacles on her nose

"Glòria!" shouted the senyora, giving a start.

The maid's weak, shocked voice replied falteringly from the sitting-room: "Se... nyora..."

"What's wrong?"

"Ay...! I don't know... I'm choking..."

The Roman senator's face suddenly turned the greenish yellow of a bronze bust, and the marquesa's blood, diluted by old age, raced through her thick veins.

"My dear, don't be afraid... It can't be serious..." the lady answered, her own voice trembling.

The maid's hazy silhouette crossed the threshold of the bedroom.

"Come here, come to me!" the senyora cried affectionately.

But the silhouette didn't take a single step more.

"What are you doing, Glòria, why don't you come?"

Another dull moan echoed sinisterly around the bed-chamber, like a bird of the night, and a quiet thud on the carpet signaled that a body had just collapsed.

Terrified, the senyora screamed.

“Glòria...! Glòria...! Glòria...!!!: And that desperate cry, sounding more like a roar of the elements than a human voice, was only answered from the other end of the room by a hoarse sigh, as if from a toy gramophone.

Her maid was dying. The senyora was totally convinced of that by the chill now turning her heart to ice. Her fingers sunk like old ivory claws into the small wooden table, her bosom stiffened sprightly and, summoning all her strength, she managed to raise herself a few inches from her chair.

“My child...! I’m coming...!” she shouted to the dying woman, as if to encourage her. But that very same moment her strength betrayed her and she fell back heavily onto her chair. Only then did she fully realize how impotent she was.

The person she loved was dying only a few feet away, but she was unable to help her or give her a farewell kiss!

The Marquesa d’Artigues held out her arms and desperately clasped together her contorted hands, as a huge sob issued from her throat. However, that sob ceased immediately, she lowered her arms and beat her knuckles hard on the table. The marquesa had just realized that not another drop of bile would fit in the glass of her life that was already over-brimming. Her proud spirit reacted against that latest, most terrible blow from cruel destiny. She lifted her haughty head in a gesture of reproach, confronted the divinity and appeared to call him to account. What was the answer her silent questions received from beyond...? I only know that all of a sudden, as if those eyes riveted above, on the unknown, in a savage insight, had found some hor-

rendous proof, the Marquesa d'Artigues's tragically convulsed face expressed utmost stupor: the desolate fear of someone who has stopped believing.

THE TINE OF THE HAYRAKE

After removing her baking from the oven, the lass-in-line to inherit the farm breakfasted on mint soup and toast rubbed with garlic and then dressed before setting out to Suriola early that morning. Spruce and tidy, she took a corn-coloured napkin – smelling of bleach and green apples - out of the wardrobe and wrapped it around the glistening coca. Whenever she baked, she'd cook a sweet one almost the length of her palm. People said she was a dab hand at making her family's favourite pudding, and she made sure they had good reason to say so, though last night she had been more particular than usual, because that coca was for her aunt in Suriola whom she loved dearly, because she had been a mother to her after her own died when she was four. And it had turned out a treat: yellow as spun gold, not too thin, not too thick, light and fluffy (her uncle and aunt had wobbly teeth that couldn't cope with crusts), topped with melted sugar, dotted with pine-nuts and garnished with anchovies and diced quince preserve. If it hadn't been for the small burnt patch under its thick edge, a real pastry cook could have called it her own. She couldn't allow that blemish to stay, so she dipped her finger in a drop of liquor, wiped it away and sprinkled some flour on. Then

she glowed with pride at her handiwork, and carefully wrapped it in the napkin.

It was past six-thirty when she unbarred the small gate to the shortcut.

She bid farewell to her father who emerged from the mares' stable to ask: "I hope you remembered the tine of the hayrake?"

"I put it in my basket last night."

He meant the one the clumsy farmhand had managed to break the last day he stacked alfalfa.

"If they can't fix it, bring it back, and it'll do to get the muck out of the sewer."

"All right, father... Bye, may God..."

"On your way, lass. Regards to your aunt and uncle."

And she left holding the big basket in one hand, and a thick scarf neatly folded over her arm, while the dogs scampered up and down, making an infernal racket.

The light of dawn had just broken through and tarnished grey, the world looked like a pewter goblet. The morning breeze tickled her skin like a baby's fingernails and hoar frost made the ground slippery under foot.

A huge pile of manure steaming in front of the house like an open oven stank the air out, its hot incense forcing her to shut her eyes.

The lass-in-line walked nimbly down the steps through the vegetable plots. The cabbages up top and the herbs on each side of the path sparkled, as if they too had been dusted with melted sugar, and a few scratch marks on the low hummock signalled that rabbit paws were starting to levy their tithe of chickpeas. The raucous holm-oak was one twittering bevy of birds...

Before penetrating the dark shadows in the woods, the young woman surveyed all about her, as if re-visiting a lesson

she had learned long ago, and her heart leapt, overjoyed by the blissful tranquillity suffusing her yet again. Had she dared, she'd have cavorted and barked like the dogs simply because another day was dawning...

In the twenty-four hours every sunrise heralds, changes must be quick if the whole repertoire is get a look in.

So when the lass-in-line left the woods and started down the main road, the world was no more the pewter goblet of a few hours ago. Twinkling with dew and a web of iridescent and transparent patches, it was now rather a glass that had just been rinsed...

She had always heard nothing but complaints about that endless stretch of road that she happened to like for some reason or other. Tripping daintily along like a little partridge, she let herself be swept along by the stream of impressions pleasantly rushing past her eyes and the company of cheerful passers-by, never worried she might stumble on bumps and potholes or be caught by the claws of the hawthorns or brambles that stubbornly grasped her skirt like marauding bandits on the paths through the wood. And what a sight she had of the length and breadth of the plain! Farmhouses, hamlets, hollows, spinneys, ridges, ponds, hermitages, rocky fords, gullies, inclines, dry-stone boundary markers, sharp bends, meadows, rocky spurs, sandy banks, wooden bridges, ditches... like a crib, a crib dotted with flocks of sheep, farmers toiling, horses ploughing, ox-carts, gypsy caravans, not forgetting the honeysuckle and rosemary, the colts neighing, hens clucking, whips cracking, water cascading, larks hovering, magpies swooping, blue chimney-smoke trailing, turtles squeaking, lizards zig-zagging, hunters shooting, hounds barking... till she lost track!

Now the sun was peeping above the ridge, blushing as if it had been up to mischief, with a surly ray glowering on the win-

dows of Nespleda and the bulk of the farmhouse still hazy at the top of the hill, like a bus with its headlights on... Further along, in the distance, Curriol Castle soared from the mists cloaking the skirts of the mountain, apparently suspended between heaven and earth...

She passed the coopers of Gambí, all in a row, hoes and withered shoots over their shoulders.

“Where you heading, lass-in-line? Off to Suriola...?”

“To Suriola, if you’d like to come...”

“They say your aunt’s not well?”

“They’ve had to drain her...”

“Bad business at her age! Water to flush the pipes, fodder in the belly...”

“True enough!”

“A good cure if ever there was one!”

“God willing!”

“Goodbye, lass-in-line...”

“Goodbye, dear ladies.”

She heard them chat and titter behind her back; then she was alone again for the whole length of the road from where the landscape stole her eyes and heart.

What was that white haze like a cloud of dust to the right by the wall? Hey! What if it were Mata-rodona, her uncle’s home! That she then saw past the belfry tower, like a cone of aniseed balls turned upside down... She wondered why it always caught her by surprise. No doubt because the village changed shape according to the light of day. To see it now, wouldn’t anyone have thought it was a pool of milk? Yet she knew it wasn’t home to a single white-washed house; all were the hue of home-made bread...

She fingered her right cheek as the sun blistered down, stinging like old-man’s beard. As it scorched and she walked, the

blood coursed round her body and the more she moved, the more pleasurable her movements became; her legs walked of their own accord, she couldn't feel them and the path melted beneath her feet. She had now passed Birell, down below the roadside, with its scattering of haystacks, snow-white gaggles of cackling geese and the ford over the stream, where she stopped and rested when she was a child on her way, twice a week, to Suriola, to learn to read and write with a proper teacher. Then she was within sight of Puntís, the ancient fortified farmhouse battered and broken by the last Carlist War, crumbling stone by stone in its solitude, like a ripe pomegranate fallen from the branch.

Near the plaster-coloured tower, a gang of roadworkers was preparing its nine o'clock bite to eat on a fire of kindling. The inland breeze blew wisps of smoke and whiffs of fried food across the crops and the sun glimmered on the metal badge of the regulation cap.

“Good day, road...”

“A good 'un to you, lass, nice of you to say... Want a spot of breakfast?”

“No, you'll be needing it...”

The world was a pewter goblet or iridescent glass no longer but a golden tankard, all warm glows and reflections. The air shimmered as her temples pulsed, apparently a-flow with imaginary sheaves of yellow broom, like a Corpus way before time. Marrow, orange and sulphur hues mingled, hiding gashes on hillsides and splashing over the first fields... In their midst, dappled by the dark shadows of vagabond birds, the mother-of-pearl road snaked and twisted, lethargic and summery, towards the pale amethyst mountains on the horizon.

As she watched Suriola turn yellow ahead, as if two handfuls of wheat had spilt over a plain enamelled by broad brush-

strokes of soft green, the lass-in-line encountered yet another man walking along. It was a dirty, ragged tramp with a bloated wineskin over his shoulder. He was in front and she was alerted by the acrid stink of red wine, re-heated tobacco and filth that upset the young woman's nose much more than the smell of the manure heap on her farm in the Rambla.

“Good day, Roget...”

“Hu...” grunted the man hoarsely, by way of reply, looking her out of the corner of his eye, without blinking.

The lass-in-line knew him well enough, because she'd cut him a slice of bread more than once when he'd come begging to their house. The son of a well-to-do Mata-rodona family, he'd turned out lazy and fond of the booze, and had run away from home very young to live as a ne'er-do-well.

His family had cut all ties with him...

What loving greetings from men and women, practically from animals and implements too, as she walked up the empty slope to the hamlet! And her aunt was so happy to welcome her niece and her tasty present! She didn't know where to start, fired question after question, never giving her time to reply, wanting to show her three dozen new things at a time: goslings and male mallards, two carnations in a worse state than the petals of the pinks she'd pruned on her last visit, the felt pillow she'd bought for the bed, the selvage the doctor had obliged to add to the bottom of her eiderdown so her feet didn't get cold...

Heaving her dropsical belly awkwardly this way and that, she wouldn't sit still until the lass-in-line laughed, took her arm and, ignoring her protests, forced her to sit on the bench by the fireplace.

“I'm so glad you came today, my love... Your uncle has gone to market and I'd have been by myself the whole blessed day...”

“Is that so? We’re on our own! Let’s have a party and punish him for not being here when I was going to come!”

And bidding her to stay put, because she wasn’t going to allow her to lift a finger, as if she’d hired a maid for the day, she rolled up her sleeves and grabbed the broom. Flitting from bedroom to cellar, from pantry to porch, laughing and chatting the while, she soon tidied the house that was in quite a mess because of the lady of the house’s illness. Then she cleaned out the chicken coop and fetched enough water for two or three days, and while the stew bubbled in the pot on the range, she made an omelette with eggs and bacon she’d brought from the Rambla and finally they sat at table. Her aunt was overwhelmed, wept tears of gratitude, ever more delighted by a niece she’d brought up who was worth more than her weight in gold. After lunch she washed up, let her aunt rinse the spoons, and put the dinner she’d already prepared in the oven to heat while they sewed in the conservatory. Gossiping away, she darned clothes, hemmed a skirt and then supported her invalid aunt with her arm as they made their way slowly to the vegetable garden. When uncle returned from the market at around four, they felt the day had gone by in a flash, and she had almost forgotten the tine of the hay-rake.

After saying goodbye to her aunt and uncle, she rushed to the blacksmith’s.

“Lass-in-line, that’s not the kind of work I do... If you like, I’ll see if I can get it done in Figueres, when I next go...”

“I’ll ask father... Good afternoon, smithy, I’ll be back soon...”

“Why go to the Rambla so late? You’ll get there in the pitch dark...”

“I know! I’ll go at a trot, if needs be... When the stable-door’s open, the lame mare always hurries...”

“That’s you to a T, lass...”

“Lucky your wife’s not around, or she’d give me a piece of her mind...”

And with a kind smile she set off down the slope at speed, driven, if not by a stable-door, by the energy of her twenty years.

Even so, the blacksmith was right... She had tarried too long... She would have to look lively.

Pewter goblet, iridescent glass, golden tankard had become a polished copper krater. Its depths transformed into a polychrome fantasy, a warm, colourful, autumn symphony, as fire tinged the silhouettes of the blue mountains and dark green copses. A mewling flock of alpine swifts, scattered like drops of ink across the sky, swooped through the embers smouldering behind the belfry; returning from their watering-hole cows slavered and rolled the whites of their eyes at the long shadows on the ground; the firmament hollowed out with mauve swaths of pristine, gleaming porcelain; like a skein of off-white flax, the road vanished into the far countryside; drowsy flocks of sheep draped it in pinkish fleeces... It was wondrous...

On the first stretch of path, the lass-in-line tired of meeting people she knew returning from their daily labours; men and animals slowly thinned out, as the volume and relief of the gullies shrunk... The wooden stanchions of fords no longer seemed the right size, but loomed like a line of military sentinels; a little tump seemed as imposing as a mountain; a brook roared like a torrent...

Past Puntís, a whiplash of light pierced the smooth sky; the Shepherd’s Star...

Alarmed by the rapid nightfall, the lass-in-line quickened her pace. Her father didn’t like her crossing the woods in the dark and she was afraid he would scold her.

An owl began to hoot, calming her, an unexpected companion. She cheered up too when, walking past the Birell hollow, an

invisible dog, shut up in a yard, smelt her and barked fiercely, as if she were an enemy.

Bursts of light glowered behind Curriol Castle: flashes of brightness in space, splashes of blood on the peak and other summits, and then the sun set in the flicker of an eye-lash. Fine ashen dust chilled earth and sky, distant horizons misted like glasses covered in steam and there was a minute of absolute silence, as if the world were collecting itself together, stunned by the advent of such mystery.

The young woman still had a third of the way to go, and quickened her step yet again, though last night's baking and today's walking and housework had taken their toll.

Ten minutes later, a wondrous, new transformation. An invisible fan blew fiery embers away; a deceptive, semi-impenetrable diaphanous glow softened the landscape's jagged lines, shrunk massive mounds, sucked their substance from them, made all around vague and phantasmagorical...

A handful of stars suddenly twinkled, a small toad whined, a frog croaked, in the distant murk a screech like a saw, and two silent crows, one after the other, etched an evanescent black line across the opal sky... A small light glimmered and went out behind a window, or perhaps on a plateau half way to the mountain.

Fragile and sharp like a virginal smile, a breeze skimmed by, on its way to the infinite...

The world was now the palest silvery chalice, overlooked by the white host of the moon, a huge pearl... All as the lass-in-line was about to go deep into the woods. Another ten minutes and the Rambla's dogs would herald her arrival to her father... But what was that stench of carrion hitting her nostrils?

As she smelt the fetid odour, the undergrowth shook and a wild man leapt out in front of her. Fear deadened the scream on

her lips... It's him, of course; she can't see him, but smells the acrid stench of red wine, re-heated tobacco and filth more pungent than in the morning... and her brain is seared, as if by an electric current, by the memory of that poor servant-girl who swore and swore again that she was innocent, that she had no suitor, that a total stranger had jumped out at her... and another, even more painful memory, of the death, at such a young age, of her own mother struck down by a mysterious illness inexplicable to everyone in the household, that, however, she secretly explained, on her death-bed, to her aunt in Suriola...

Those memories release frantic energy as she flees from danger, but, before she can make her escape, a lump of lead falls on her, forces her onto her back and struggles fiercely to pin down her arms and cover her mouth... She straightens like a snake transfixed by a stake, grapples, as, in a tight bundle, they tangle, tumble, him on her, her on him... She senses he is weak, that a supreme effort can save her, and bites, scratches, and kicks furiously. When least expecting it, she hears a stifled whelp and the iron ring pinioning her ribs slackens imperceptibly... she twists violently, and writhing one last time, manages to climb on top of the monster... he is hers now! Instinct guides her, like a young boy, the blindman... She feels her face must be horrible to behold... When he's cowering limply between her legs, she jumps to her feet...

Holding onto a smidgen of good sense, she picks up her basket and smooths her hair...

She doesn't know how she ran the hundreds of meters still to go, but sees it isn't as late as she thought, because they're waiting to have supper with her, all congregated in the farmhouse kitchen.

"I'm so sorry !" she exclaims. "I had dinner with auntie, to keep them company, you know? And I cleaned and toiled so hard

there, I'm exhausted. I'll go straight to bed, if you don't mind..."

She says that from the half-dark, her face hidden, in an listless tone the others blame on her tiredness.

"Off you go, dear, off you go... You always overdo it when you go to Suriola... Next time I'll tell your aunt not to..." her father responds benignly.

"Wait, I'll light the lamp," says the old servant.

"I've got matches and a candle on my bedside table... Good night!"

And not waiting on anyone, she goes upstairs in the dark.

A day goes by, two days, seven, then ten...

The lass-in-line is a bit off-colour, like a rose too long in the vase, and complains of headaches; apart from that, nothing betrays anything untoward or raises suspicions about what might have happened.

A month or so later, the ox-herd from Mas Mitjà, who had set some rabbit traps, is on the watch, crouching in a hideout, and smells a stink that makes him run in a daze... When he hurries past the Forat de la Rambla, the stink gets much stronger.

The Forat de la Rambla is a cave in the rocks to the west, three hundred metres from the farmhouse, but on the opposite side of the hill. The ox-herd peers inside and sees a man lying on the ground, long as God made him. He looks dead, well and truly dead. As if being chased, the father of the herd runs frantically towards the Rambla and shouts out his news, runs to Mas Mitjà and does likewise, goes by Rellissos, what's a tongue for, after all...? In a quarter of an hour, the news spreads like wildfire... People come from all over...

There's a good crowd by the time the magistrate from Suriola and the doctor from Molleda arrive.

Roget is lying crossways, in the entrance to the cave, on level ground broken by a step; his head lolls down over the step, lower than his body; his mouth sags and his curled lip enacts a momentary snarl death had set in stone. Fair and stiff like spikes of dry stubble, his beard is two inches wide; glinting metallically, black flies cluster like ticks on his nostrils and the whites of his eyes...

The father of the lass-in-line has provided a hand-barrow to carry the body and, despite the horrible stench, along with many others, he accompanies the cortege to the cemetery in Molleda, and witnesses the body being stripped and the rough-and-ready autopsy.

After a brief examination, the doctor states the cause of Roget's death. A purple blotch on his left mesentery shows it was penetrated by a sharp instrument, and the stab wound, left untreated, brought on peritonitis. Hunger and thirst did the rest.

When they start their enquiries, many remember how, something like a month ago, Roget had visited the hamlets roundabout with a gang of tramps, that it came to fisticuffs near the Birell hollow for some reason or other and he was seen walking the byways all alone. The most obvious motive seemed to be revenge by his old mates and the order went out to arrest them wherever they might be. But God knows where that was, and, as Roget was no loss to the world, and, besides, his family didn't want to get involved in the case, the judge shrugged his shoulders and told them to bury the body...

On his way back home, the lass-in-line's father looked down as he walked along. He saw her on the steps to the lower vegetable patches, stopped and sat down beside her. The lass-in-line noticed

how pale and haggard he looked, as if he'd not slept the whole night.

"Do you feel unwell, father?"

"What did you do with the tine, my love?"

The blood of the lass-in-line ran cold...

"Don't be scared and tell me the truth..."

"I buried it in the spinney..."

"Buried it deep?"

"Yes, father."

"Are you sure nobody will ever find it?"

"Yes, father."

That's all right then. Tonight I'll dismantle the hayrake and soon as I can, I'll trade it in for a new one..."

The poor man didn't dare ask any more questions.

When they bring us into this life, they tie us to our fate, and that means to a series of fated acts.

The lass-in-line has daughters; they are cheerful and pretty as rosebuds, and go to Suriola to learn to read, write and sew. Whenever they set off, their mother feels her heart beat fit to burst, and she doesn't breathe easily again until she sees them back by her side... But she is the lass-in-line to inherit the Rambla, and through her forebears has been rooted to that glebe for three hundred years, and the farm is the apple of everybody's eye and the property of those here today and those to come tomorrow. Even the wood seems sacred and on no account would they cut down a single holm-oak.

One of these days her daughters will suffer a scare like their mother, like their grandmother, like their great-grandmother, perhaps... But who can stop such a thing? Fate is implacable.