

HIPÓLITA'S INNER LIFE

What dreams had filled her head!

Some days she fantasized a meeting with a man who would talk about jungles and have a tame lion at home. He would never grow tired of embracing her and she would love him like a slave; then she would find it a joy to shave under her arms and apply makeup to her breasts, all for him. Disguised as a boy, she would traverse with him those ruins where centipedes sleep and villages where blacks build their huts in the forks of trees. But nowhere did she find lions, only flea-bitten dogs, and the most adventurous gentlemen brandished a quick fork and kept their gaze ever upon the gleaming stewpot. She fled these stupid little lives in disgust.

As time went on, it turned out the strange novelistic characters she met were not as interesting as in the novel; in fact, that what seemed best about them in the novel was exactly the odious bits that made them so repulsive in life. But still, she had given herself to them.

Once they were sated they turned away from her as if ashamed to have offered her a look at their weak sides. Now she sank into the sterility of her life like some well-explored sand basin.

Just as it was impossible to transform lead into gold, it was impossible to transform the soul of man.

How often had she fallen naked into the arms of a stranger and said to him: "Wouldn't you like to go to Africa?" The man would react as though he were in bed with a rattlesnake. And then she would feel that those bodies made out of bones with muscles stretched over them were weaker than those of tender infants, more fearful than children in the woods.

She found women odious. She watched them give in to the sensuality of males and then offer the whole world the sight of their bloated bellies. All they knew how to do was suffer, this was a world of tired people, half-waking ghosts that infested the earth with their gravid sleepiness, like the gigantic lazy monsters at the dawn of time. Thus her soul, attempting to soar, was smashed to earth by the overwhelming pointlessness of those who lived around her.

Because Hipólita would have liked to live in a universe of lesser density, a world as light as a soap bubble where matter was not subject to gravity, and she imagined the surge of joy she would have running hither and thither over the planet, metamorphosing at will and imparting to her every day the reality of a game that would compensate for the games she had never played as a child.

Everything had been denied her as a child. She remembered how one of the fantasies of her childhood was to dream she would be the happiest creature on earth if only she could live in a room with wallpaper.

She had seen in shop windows paper printed with patterns that to her limited imagination seemed ready to make a dream of the life of whoever lived surrounded by them, printed papers that were like transplanting the enchanted forest into a house, with arbitrary flowers of various blues twining away across gilded backgrounds, and that seven-year-old's dream was as intense in her as her later idea when she was a maid about the pleasure she would feel if she could have a Rolls-Royce, whose leather upholstery was as precious in her imagination as the impossible patterned papers that really only cost sixty centavos a roll.

She had wandered off into the past. She remembered now, with the man's head on her knees, those Sundays when suddenly at dusk the weather changed and the cold breeze drove her employers out of the garden and back to the parlor. The rain pattered on the panes, and she took refuge in the shiny clean kitchen, and one could hear the voices of guests through the rooms, the women conversed while the girls leafed through magazines, pausing over the photographs of weddings, or played the piano.

And she, sitting at the table, twisting one corner of her apron in her fingers, leaning forward a little, let the sounds wash over her, always melancholy to her ears, even when they spoke of happy things. She felt isolated like a leper, cut off from happiness. The music wafted to her a vision of new places, mountain resorts, and she would never be that new bride who lilted down to the dining room on the arm of her handsome husband, while the silverware and china tinkled softly and the birds fluttered around the windows, and a waterfall sent forth crystal sounds.

She twisted the corner of her apron slowly between her fingers, her head bowed over, her legs crossed.

She would never have a husband like the dashing gallant who sweeps the heroine off her feet in novels, nor would she festoon a mantilla across the velvet railing of her box at the opera, while diamonds glittered in the ears of duchesses and violins poured sweet strains from the orchestra pit.

Nor would she be a young matron, a lady of the house like women she had served, with husbands who tenderly placed solicitous palms to feel the stretching and swelling of their gravid abdomens. And her sorrow swelled up gently like the darkness coming on at the close of day.

Forever, forever and ever to be a servant!

Then anger tinged her grief, her forehead felt heavy and her red-rimmed lids drooped in resignation.

And the parlor piano sent foreign lands streaming through her fantasies, and she thought how the painstaking effort of turning out young ladies must make their souls lovelier and sweeter for the suitor's desiring, and her head was heavy as if the cranium had gotten turned into a helmet of lead bones.

Everything around her, pots, stove burners, the clean wood of the kitchen cupboards, and the bathroom mirrors and red lampshades, seemed to have some substance in it so that it was beyond her reach, as if the dishcloth, the carpet, the children's tricycle were all made to bring happiness to beings not even made out of the same stuff she was.

The very clothes the misses wore, the fine light fabrics with which they adorned their pretty bodies, the embroidery and ribbons, all struck her as basically unlike any such she might buy for herself with the same money. This feeling of being set down among people who inhabited a different realm from the one she belonged to upset her, so much so that despair showed on her face plain as a stigma.

How could she ever be anything but a servant, forever a serving-girl!

A half-smothered no welled up in her throat, in answer to the invisible presence that gave it no rest. Her life seemed to pit itself against such servitude. She did not know how she might escape from the evil fate that bound her like fetters, but she kept repeating to herself that it was only a temporary state of things, although she had no notion what might materialize to free her. And she was always watching the misses' deportment, how they carried their heads, how they said their goodbyes in the doorway, later reproducing in front of a mirror the phrases and gestures from memory. And these motions she went through alone in her cramped quarters left her with a sensation of high birth and delicacy on her lips and in her soul for several hours, during which her old clumsy ways seemed to her a betrayal of her genuine persona, now recaptured: a lady.

For a few hours her life was aglow with a delicacy as soft and penetrating as the fragrance of a scented cream, a waft of vanilla, and it seemed as though it was her throat that peeled forth those mellifluous yesses and noes, and finally she imagined herself in conversation with a beautiful partner who wore a blue fox wrapped about her neck.

Her serving-girl's quarters held a host of nuance-laden figures of fantasy, and sitting in an armchair lined in alligator silk, she received friends who were just dashing off to Paris and chatted about engagements. "Her mother won't let her go to X for the summer because they'd run into S—that fellow who made a play for her before." Or she'd sail the seas, seas as calm as the Palermo Lakes or some other playground of the rich, perched on a wicker basket, just as she'd seen ladies in photographs of luxury liners, or on her way through the streets to the market to shop. She would have a Kodak lying carelessly in her lap while a young man, cap in hand and inclined toward her, spoke to her timidly.

Her housemaid's soul was flooded with happiness. She knew it was all so fine that if she ever came to live her dream, she'd be Lady Bountiful. And she could see herself in the wintry dusk, hurrying down mean streets in a coat of costly weave, seeking out an orphan child, the blind man's girl. She would save her, adopt her as her own child, and one day the orphan girl would make her debut; she would have blossomed into a lovely young woman; bare shoulders from amid clouds of

tulle and, above the chiseled forehead, a lock of golden hair would set off the delicacy of her almond eyes.

And all at once a voice would call her:

“Hipólita...serve the tea.”

A CRIME

Erdosain suddenly looked up, and Hipólita, as though she had been thinking of him, said:

“You, too...you’ve been through a lot, too.”

Erdosain took the woman’s cold hand and brought it to his lips She went on, slowly:

“Sometimes this life seems to me a bad dream. Now that I feel yours, the pain of times gone by comes back to me. Always, everywhere, life was cruel.”

Then she said:

“What must you do not to suffer like that?”

“The thing is, we’re carriers of suffering. One time I thought it floated airborne...it was a silly idea; really we’re the carriers of our own sickness.”

They fell silent. Hipólita slowly stroked his hair, then suddenly she took her hand from his head and Erdosain felt her pressing her hand against his lips.

Erdosain, sitting beside her, murmured:

“Tell me, what have I done for you that you should make me so happy? Don’t you see you’re my heaven on earth? Never had I hit such depths.”

“Nobody ever loved you?”

“I don’t know; but love was never shown me in all its terrible strength. When I got married I was twenty and I believed in love as something spiritual.”

He hesitated an instant, but then he got up quickly and after turning out the light, sat on the sofa next to Hipólita. Then he said:

“Maybe I was just a pathetic dolt. But when I got married I had never kissed my wife. It’s true, I’d never felt any need to do it because I took her lack of warmth for great purity and besides...because I believed a lady was above all that kissing.”

She was smiling in the dark. He was sitting on the edge of the sofa, his elbows on his knees and his cheeks buried in the palms of his hands.

The room was flooded with violet lighting.

He continued slowly:

“I had this idea of a lady, the utmost expression of purity. Besides—don’t laugh—I was bashful...and on our wedding night, when she got undressed naturally with the light on, I turned my head not to see...and then I went to bed with my pants on.”

“You did?” Indignation vibrated in the woman’s voice.

Erdosain burst out laughing, now all wound up:

“Why not?” as he watched the *Lame Whore* sidelong and wrung his hands. “I’ve done things a lot stranger, too. And some, I haven’t yet done. ‘The times have come,’ as your husband used to say. I believe he’s right. But all this happened way back, when I used to live like an idiot. I’m telling you that so you won’t think if I were to go to bed with you now I’d keep my pants on.”

Hipólita felt afraid for a moment. Erdosain kept his sidelong gaze trained on her, and wrung his hands, but nothing more. Prudently, she added: “No doubt it was all a kind of sickness with you. Like what I had when I was a servant. You never touch down to the earth.”

“Yes, you never touch down. That’s just how I was. Yes, I remember when they’d call me an idiot.”

“That, too?”

“Yes, to my face...I stood looking at the man who’d insulted me, and my muscle tone went slack, leaving me like a dishrag. I wondered how I’d taken so many humiliations and intimidations. I’d been through a lot—so much—that more than once I felt like hiring myself out as a servant in a wealthy household— How much could I grovel? Then I felt the terror, the blackest fear, of having a life with

no noble object, no great dream, and now finally I've got one...I've condemned a man to death...No, stay where you are, listen, tomorrow, because I let it happen, a man will be murdered."

"No!"

"Yes, it's true. The man with the beautiful lies, the one I was telling you about before, needed money to carry out his plan. So it will be carried out, because I want it to happen. Tomorrow he'll give me a check to cash. When I come back he'll be executed."

"No...it can't be like that."

"Yes, and if I don't come back they won't kill him, because without the money there's no point to the crime...fifteen thousand pesos—I could run away on that...to hell with them and society—each man for himself. You see? It all depends on my being an honorable criminal."

"My God!"

"I want the experiment to be carried out. You see, there are ways a man can become a god. For a long time I've been set on killing myself. If when I asked you, before, you'd said for me to, I'd have killed myself. If you just could know how great and beautiful I feel! Don't talk to me about that other business—it's all set to go; in fact, I like to think about the black hole I'm throwing myself into. You know?...And any day now—no, it won't be daytime—any night, when I've had enough of this crazy-quilt excuse for a life, just like that, I'll be gone."

A wrinkle shot down the middle of Hipólita's forehead. No doubt remained. The man was mad. She was already, with an adventuress's wisdom, plotting out the future. "This imbecile calls for some very careful, cautious handling." And so, crossing her arms over her wrapper, she asked, as if in doubt: "You'd have the guts to kill yourself?"

"It's not that kind of thing. There's no more courage-versus-cowardice at suicide point. I intuitively know that committing suicide is really like extracting a tooth. And thinking that makes me feel easy about the whole thing. Sure, I've thought of travels I might go on, other places, another life. Part of me wants everything delicate and beautiful. I've often thought that—say those fifteen thousand pesos I'll get tomorrow—I could go to the Philippines...to Ecuador, start a new life, marry a refined millionaire's daughter...we'd spend the siesta hour cuddled together in a hammock, underneath the coconut palms, while blacks offered us orange sections. And I'd gaze sadly out to sea—you know? I'm sure wherever I'd be I'd end up gazing sadly out to sea—and I'd know I'd still never be happy...at first thinking about it drove me wild...and now I'm resigned to it."

"Then why go through with the experiment?"

"You know? I still haven't plumbed my own depths, but this crime thing is my last hope—and the Astrologer knows, because when I asked him if he wasn't afraid I'd make off with the money, he answered: 'No, not at the moment, no. You're the one who needs the society to get going because you don't know what to do with yourself...'. So you see how deeply I'm into it."

"I'd never have imagined anything like it. So they'll kill him out in Temperley?"

"Yes. But still.... What's really going on? All this anguish. Do you know what anguish is? To have anguish boring right down into your bones like syphilis? Look, four months before this: I was waiting for a train at a country depot. It was going to be forty-five minutes late—and then I went over to an open square out in front. A few minutes after I'd sat down on a bench, a girl—she must have been about nine, she came and sat by my side. We began to talk—she had a white apron on—she lived in one of the houses across the square— Slowly, unable to stop myself, I started to introduce obscene bits into the conversation—but prudently—watching her reaction carefully. An atrocious curiosity had taken me in its grip. The child, hypnotized by her half-awakened instinct, listened to me, trembling...and I, slowly, must have had it written all over my face, because a couple of clerks from the switchman's station kept a watch on me.... I revealed to her the mysteries of sex, encouraging her to corrupt her little friends, too—"

Hipólita squeezed her forehead between her fingers.

"But you're a monster!"

"Now I've come to the end. My life is horrible. I need to create terrible complications for myself...commit sins. Don't look at me. Possibly...look...people don't know what sin means anymore—"

sin's not just a failing, an error. I've come to see how sin is an act that lets man break the slender thread that kept him linked to God. I'm going to break that slender thread that tied me to divine charity. I feel it. From tomorrow on I'll be a monster on the face of the earth—imagine a creature...a fetus...a fetus able to live outside its mother's womb—it never grows...hairy...small...without fingernails or toenails it goes among men without being a man...its fragility horrifies everyone around it, but there's no way of returning it to its womb again. That's what will happen to me tomorrow. I'll cut myself off permanently from God. I'll be alone on earth. My soul and me, just the two of us. And infinity in front of us. Always alone. And night and day—and always a yellow sun. You see? The infinite will grow—a yellow sun hanging overhead and the soul cut off from divine love will wander alone and blind under that yellow sun."

Something thumped onto the floor, and all at once something extraordinary happened. Erdosain fell silent in amazement. Hipólita was kneeling at his feet. She took his hand and covered it with kisses. In the darkness the woman exclaimed:

"Let me...let me kiss your poor hands. You're the most unfortunate man on earth."

"Get up, Hipólita."

"No, I want to kiss your feet." He felt her arms hugging his legs. "You're the most unfortunate man on earth! What you haven't been through, my God! How great you are. What a great soul you have!"*

Erdosain made her rise with infinite gentleness. He felt the softening effect of an infinite pity, he drew her to him, he smoothed back the hair over her forehead and said:

"If you knew how easy it will be to die. Like a game."

"What a soul you have!"

"Are you feverish?"

"My poor boy!"

"But why? If we've become like gods.... Sit down next to me. Are you fine like that? Look, little sister, everything I've been through is all made up to me now, with what you've just said. We'll live a little longer—"

"Yes, like an engaged couple—"

"On the great day only will you become my wife."

"I love you so much! What a soul you have!"*

"And then we'll go away."

They said no more. Hipólita's head had fallen forward onto her chest. It was nearly dawn. Then Erdosain eased that tired body onto the sofa. She smiled ex-haustedly, then Remo sat on the carpet, leaned his head on the edge of the sofa, and curled up like that went to sleep.

*Commentator's note: Hipólita was to tell the Astrologer: "I kneeled to Erdosain exactly when it occurred to me to blackmail you, taking advantage of his having told me all about the murder plan."