

THE LITTLE GIRL FROM SPAIN

The little girl spent most of her hours of leisure among the branches. When her family were looking for her, they would go to the trees, the tall beech to start with, the one that stood to the north above the outhouse, for that was where she liked to daydream while observing the activity on the farm; then it was the old lime tree in the priest's garden beyond the low wall of cool stone; and finally—most often in winter—among the oaks in the combe to the west of the adjacent field, a hollow planted with three of the most majestic specimens in all the region. The little girl would nestle in the trees, all the hours she could steal from the village life of book-learning, meals, and mass, and not infrequently she would invite a few friends to come along, and they would marvel at the airy spaces she had arranged there, and together they would spend glorious days in laughter and chat.

One evening as she sat on a lower branch of the middle oak, while the combe was filling with shadow, aware that they would soon be coming to take her back to the warmth, she decided for a change to cut across the meadow and pay a visit to the neighbour's sheep. She set out as the mist was rising. She knew every clump of grass in an area extending from

the foothills of her father's farm all the way to Marcelot's; she could have closed her eyes and known exactly where she was, as if guided by the stars, from the swelling of the field, the rushes in the stream, the stones on the pathways and the gentle incline of the slope; but instead, for a particular reason, she now opened her eyes wide. Someone was walking through the mist only slightly ahead of her, and this presence tugged strangely at her heart, as if the organ were coiling in upon itself and bringing curious images to her: in the bronze glow of undergrowth she saw a white horse, and a path paved with black stones gleaming under foliage.

Who was that child, on the day of this remarkable event? The six adults who lived on the farm—father, mother, two great-aunts and two grown-up cousins—adored her. There was an enchantment about her that was far from that found in children whose first hours have been mild, that sort of grace born of a careful mixture of ignorance and happiness; no, it was, instead, as if when she moved she carried with her an iridescent halo, which minds forged in pastures and woods would compare to the vibrations of the tallest trees. Only the eldest auntie, by virtue of an abiding penchant for anything that could not be explained, thought to herself that there was something magical about the little girl; but one thing was certain: for such a young child she bore herself in a most unusual way, incorporating some of the invisibility and trembling of the air, as a dragonfly would, or palms swaying in the wind.

Otherwise, she was very dark and very lively, rather thin, but with a great deal of elegance; two eyes of sparkling

obsidian; olive, almost swarthy skin; high Slavic-looking cheekbones flushed with a round rosiness; finally, well-defined lips, the colour of fresh blood. She was splendid. And what character! Always running through the fields or flinging herself onto the grass, where she would stay and stare at the too vast sky; or crossing the stream barefoot, even in winter, to feel the sweet chill or biting cold, and then with the solemnity of a bishop she would relate to all assembled the highlights and humdrum moments of her days spent out of doors. To all of this one must add the faint sadness of a soul whose intelligence surpassed her perception and who—from the handful of clues that, although weak, were to be found everywhere, even in those protected places, however poor, in which she had grown up—already had an intimation of the world's tragedies.

Thus, at five o'clock it was that glowing, secretive young sprig of a girl who sensed the nearby presence in the mist of an invisible creature, and she knew more surely than the existence of God proclaimed by the priest that this creature was both friendly and supernatural. Thus she was not afraid. Instead, she set off in the direction she had determined shortly before, towards the sheep.

Something took her by the hand. Something like a large fist wrapped in a soft warm weave, creating a gentle grip in which her own hand felt lost. But no man could have possessed a palm that, as she felt through the silky skein, had hollows and ridges that might belong to the hoof of a giant wild boar. Just then they made a turn to their left, almost at a right angle, and she understood that they were heading towards the little

woods, skirting round the sheep and Marcelot's farm. There was a fallow field, overgrown with sleek serried blades of grass, rising gently to meet the hill through a winding passage, until it reached a lovely copse of poplar trees rich with strawberries and a carpet of periwinkles where not so long ago every family had been permitted to gather wood, and would commence with the sawing by first snowfall; alas, that era is now gone, but it will not be spoken of today, be it due to sorrow or forgetfulness, or because at this hour the little girl is running to meet her destiny, holding tight to the boar's hoof.

And this on the mildest autumn evening anyone had seen for many a year. People had delayed putting their apples and pears to ripen on the wooden racks in the cellar, and all day long the air was streaked with insects inebriated with the finest orchard vintage. There was a languidness in the air, an indolent sigh, a quiet certainty that things would never end, and while people went about their work as usual, without pause and without complaint, they took secret delight in this endless autumn as it told them not to forget to love.

Now just as the little girl was heading towards the clearing in the east wood, another unexpected event occurred. It began to snow. It began to snow all of a sudden, and not those timid little snowflakes that bob about in the gloom and scarcely strive to settle, no, heavy snowflakes began to fall, as big as magnolia buds, and they fell thick on the ground, forming a thoroughly opaque screen. In the village, as it was nearing six o'clock, everyone was surprised; the father in his simple twill shirt, chopping wood, Marcelot warming up his dogs

over by the pond, Jeannette kneading her dough, and others who, on this late autumn day that was like a dream of lost happiness, were coming and going about their business, be it leather, flour or straw; yes, they had all been surprised and now they were closing the latches tightly on the stable doors, calling in the sheep and the dogs, and getting ready for something that brought them almost as much well-being as the sweet languor of autumn: the first evening they'd spend clustered around the fireside, when outside there was a raging snowstorm.

They were preparing, and thinking.

They were thinking—those who remembered—about an autumn day some ten years earlier, when the snow had suddenly begun to fall as if the sky were peeling away into immaculate white strips. And it was at the little girl's farm in particular that they were thinking about it, for her absence there had just been discovered, and the father was pulling on his fur cap and a hunting jacket that stank of mothballs from a hundred metres away.

"They'd better not come back for her," he muttered before disappearing into the night.

He knocked on the doors of the village houses where other farmers were to be found, along with the master saddler, the mayor (who was also the head roadmender), the forester, and a few others. Everywhere, he said the same thing: *the wee girl has gone missing*, before he set off to the next door, and behind him the man of the house would shout for his hunting jacket, or his thick overcoat, and he'd put on his gear and hurry into the tempest towards the next house. And eventually there were fifteen of them gathered at the home of