

THE FEATHER PILLOW

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THE FEATHER PILLOW

Her honeymoon was one long shudder. Fair-haired, angelic, and shy, she found the girlish fancies she had dreamed of as a bride frozen by her husband's hard nature. She loved him very much all the same, though at times with a slight shiver when, walking home together at night along the street, she would steal a furtive glance at Jordán's tall figure, silent for the past hour. He, for his part, loved her profoundly, without ever letting it show.

For three months—they had married in April—they knew a happiness of a particular kind. No doubt she would have wished for less severity in that rigid heaven of love, for a more open, unguarded tenderness; but her husband's impassive face always held her in check.

The house they lived in contributed a little to her shivers. The whiteness of the silent courtyard—friezes, columns, and marble statues—gave an autumnal impression of an enchanted palace. Inside, the glacial sheen of the stucco, without the faintest scratch on the high walls, confirmed that sense of bleak cold. Footsteps crossing from one room to another found an echo throughout the house, as though long abandonment had sharpened its resonance.

In that strange love nest, Alicia spent the whole autumn. Even so, she had ended by drawing a veil over her old dreams, and still went about the hostile house half-asleep, unwilling to think of anything until her husband came home.

No wonder she grew thin. She had a mild bout of influenza that dragged on insidiously for days on end; Alicia never recovered. At last one afternoon

she managed to go out into the garden, leaning on his arm. She looked indifferently from one side to the other. Suddenly Jordán, with deep tenderness, passed his hand over her head, and Alicia at once broke into sobs, throwing her arms around his neck. She wept out at length all her silent terror, her weeping redoubling at the slightest attempt at a caress. Then the sobs came further and further apart, and she stayed a long while longer hidden against his neck, without moving or saying a word.

That was the last day Alicia was up and about. The next day she woke in a faint. Jordán's doctor examined her with the greatest care, ordering absolute calm and rest.

"I don't know," he told Jordán at the street door, his voice still low. "She has a great weakness I cannot account for, and no vomiting, nothing... If she wakes tomorrow as she did today, call me at once."

The next day Alicia was worse. There was a consultation. An acutely progressive anemia was found, entirely inexplicable. Alicia had no more fainting spells, but she was visibly dying. All day the bedroom lay with its lights burning, in utter silence. Hours would pass without the least sound. Alicia dozed. Jordán lived almost entirely in the drawing room, also with every light burning. He paced without stopping from one end to the other, with tireless obstinacy. The carpet muffled his steps. From time to time he would go into the bedroom and continue his silent pacing along the length of the bed, looking at his wife each time he walked toward her.

Soon Alicia began to have hallucinations, confused and floating at first, which later sank down to floor level. The young woman, her eyes stretched unnaturally wide, did nothing but stare at the carpet on either side of the headboard. One night she suddenly fell to staring fixedly. After a while she opened her mouth to scream, and her nostrils and lips beaded with sweat.

"Jordán! Jordán!" she cried out, rigid with terror, never taking her eyes from the carpet.

Jordán ran to the bedroom, and when she saw him appear, Alicia let out a shriek of horror.

"It's me, Alicia, it's me!"

Alicia looked at him wildly, looked at the carpet, looked back at him, and after a long while of stunned confrontation, she grew calm. She smiled and

took her husband's hand between her own, stroking it as she trembled.

Among her most persistent hallucinations was an anthropoid, propped on its fingers on the carpet, its eyes fixed on her.

The doctors came again, to no avail. There before them was a life running out, bleeding away day by day, hour by hour, with absolutely no way of telling how. At the last consultation Alicia lay in a stupor while they took her pulse, passing the limp wrist from one to another. They watched her a long while in silence, then went on into the dining room.

"Pff..." his doctor shrugged, discouraged. "It's a serious case... there is little to be done..."

"That's all I needed!" Jordán snorted. And he drummed his fingers abruptly on the table.

Alicia went on fading away in a subdelirium of anemia, worse toward evening, though it always eased off in the early hours. During the day her illness made no progress, but every morning she woke ashen, all but in syncope. It seemed that only at night did her life drain away in fresh waves of blood. On waking she always had the sensation of lying collapsed in the bed with a million kilos on top of her.

From the third day on, this sense of collapse never left her. She could scarcely move her head. She would not allow the bed to be touched, nor even the pillow to be straightened. Her twilight terrors advanced now in the shape of monsters that crawled up to the bed and climbed with difficulty over the bedspread.

She then lost consciousness. For the last two days she raved without stopping, under her breath. The lights went on burning funereally in the bedroom and the drawing room. In the agonized silence of the house, nothing could be heard but the monotonous delirium coming from the bed, and the muffled sound of Jordán's endless pacing.

She died, at last. The maid, who came in afterward to strip the bed, alone now, stood for a while looking at the pillow, puzzled.

"Sir!" she called to Jordán in a low voice. "There are stains on the pillow that look like blood."

Jordán came over quickly and bent down in turn. Sure enough, on the pillowcase, on both sides of the hollow left by Alicia's head, small dark stains could be seen.

"They look like bites," the maid murmured, after a while of motionless observation.

"Hold it up to the light," Jordán told her.

The maid lifted it, but at once let it fall, and stood staring at it, ashen and trembling. Without knowing why, Jordán felt his hair stand on end.

"What is it?" he murmured hoarsely.

"It's very heavy," the maid managed, still trembling.

Jordán lifted it; it was extraordinarily heavy. They went out with it, and on the dining room table Jordán cut case and ticking open with a single stroke. The top feathers flew up, and the maid let out a cry of horror, her mouth wide open, her clenched hands going to the bands of her hair: there, at the bottom, among the feathers, slowly moving its hairy legs, was a monstrous animal, a living, viscous ball. It was so bloated that its mouth barely showed.

Night after night, ever since Alicia had taken to her bed, it had stealthily applied its mouth—its proboscis, rather—to her temples, sucking her blood. The bite was almost imperceptible. The daily shifting of the pillow had no doubt kept it from developing, but from the moment the young woman could no longer move, the sucking became headlong. In five days, in five nights, it had emptied Alicia.

These parasites of birds, minute in their ordinary habitat, can attain enormous proportions under certain conditions. Human blood seems to be particularly favorable to them, and it is not uncommon to find them in feather pillows.



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