

THE DECAPITATED CHICKEN

Horacio Quiroga



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PUBLISHED: 1909

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THE DECAPITATED CHICKEN

All day long, the four idiot sons of the Mazzini-Ferraz couple sat on a bench in the yard. Their tongues hung between their lips, their eyes were stupid, and they turned their heads with their mouths open.

The yard was bare earth, closed off on the west by a brick wall. The bench stood parallel to it, five meters away, and there they remained motionless, their eyes fixed on the bricks. The sun set behind the wall, and as it sank the idiots would have their festival. The blinding light would catch their attention at first; little by little their eyes came alive; in the end they would laugh uproariously, flushed with the same eager hilarity, watching the sun with bestial joy, as if it were food.

At other times, lined up on the bench, they would buzz for hours on end, imitating the electric streetcar. Loud noises would likewise shake them out of their inertia, and then they would run around the yard, biting their tongues and bellowing. But most of the time they lay sunk in a somber lethargy of idiocy, and spent the whole day sitting on their bench, legs dangling and still, soaking their trousers with glutinous saliva.

The eldest was twelve, the youngest eight. Their whole dirty, helpless appearance betrayed the utter absence of even a little maternal care.

Those four idiots, however, had once been their parents' delight. Three months into their marriage, Mazzini and Berta had turned their narrow love as husband and wife, and wife and husband, toward a far more vital future: a child. What greater happiness could two people in love have than that honest consecration of their affection, freed at last from the vile selfishness

of a mutual love with no purpose at all and, worse still for love itself, with no possible hope of renewal?

So Mazzini and Berta felt it, and when the child came, fourteen months into their marriage, they believed their happiness fulfilled. The child grew up beautiful and radiant, until he was a year and a half old. But in the twentieth month, terrible convulsions shook him one night, and by the next morning he no longer knew his parents. The doctor examined him with that professional attentiveness that is visibly searching for the causes of the illness in the parents' own maladies.

After some days the paralyzed limbs recovered their movement; but intelligence, soul, even instinct, had gone entirely; he had been left profoundly idiotic, drooling, limp, dead forever upon his mother's knees.

"My son, my darling son!" she sobbed, over that appalling ruin of her firstborn.

The father, desolate, saw the doctor out.

"I can be frank with you: I believe it is a hopeless case. He may improve, be educated as far as his idiocy allows, but no further."

"Yes!... Yes!" Mazzini agreed. "But tell me: do you believe it is hereditary, that...?"

"As for paternal heredity, I already told you what I thought when I saw your son. As for the mother, there is a lung there that does not sound right. I see nothing more, but there is a somewhat harsh murmur. Have her thoroughly examined."

With his soul shattered by remorse, Mazzini redoubled his love for his son, the little idiot who was paying for his grandfather's excesses. He also had to console Berta, to support her without respite, wounded as she was to the very depths by that failure of her young motherhood.

Naturally, the couple placed all their love in the hope of another child. This one was born, and his health and the clarity of his laughter rekindled the extinguished future. But at eighteen months, the firstborn's convulsions recurred, and the next day he woke an idiot.

This time the parents fell into deep despair. So their blood, their love, were cursed! Their love, above all! He twenty-eight, she twenty-two, and all

their passionate tenderness could not manage to create one atom of normal life. They no longer asked for beauty and intelligence as with the firstborn; but a child—a child like any other!

From the new disaster sprang new flames of grieving love, a mad longing to redeem, once and for all, the sanctity of their tenderness. Twins followed, and point by point the process of the two elder children repeated itself.

Yet above their immense bitterness, Mazzini and Berta were still left with a great compassion for their four children. It had been necessary to drag out of the limbo of the deepest animality, not their souls any longer, but instinct itself, which had been abolished. They did not know how to swallow, to move from place to place, or even to sit up. They learned at last to walk, but they collided with everything, unable to perceive obstacles. When they were bathed they bellowed until their faces went dark with blood. They came alive only at mealtimes, or when they saw bright colors or heard thunder. They would laugh then, thrusting out their tongues and rivers of drool, radiant with bestial frenzy. They did possess, on the other hand, a certain gift for imitation; but nothing more could be obtained.

With the twins, the terrifying lineage seemed to have come to an end. But three years later they again ardently longed for another child, trusting that the long time that had passed would have appeased fate.

Their hopes were not fulfilled. And in that ardent longing, exasperated by its own fruitlessness, they turned sour. Up to that moment each had taken upon themselves the share that fell to them in their children's wretchedness; but the hopelessness of redemption before the four beasts born of them drove out that imperious need to blame the other, which is the peculiar birthright of inferior hearts.

It began with the change of pronouns: *your* children. And since malice now came along with the insult, the air grew charged.

"It seems to me," said Mazzini one night—he had just come in and was washing his hands—"that you could keep the boys cleaner."

Berta went on reading as if she hadn't heard.

"That's the first time," she replied after a moment, "that I've seen you worried about the state of your children."

Mazzini turned his face toward her a little, with a forced smile:

"Our children, it seems to me?"

"Fine—our children. Does that suit you?" She raised her eyes.

This time Mazzini spoke plainly:

"I don't suppose you're going to say it's my fault, are you?"

"Oh, no!" Berta smiled, very pale. "But not mine either, surely!... That'd be the last straw!..." she murmured.

"What would be the last straw?"

"That if someone's to blame, it isn't me—get that straight! That's what I wanted to tell you."

Her husband looked at her for a moment, with a brutal urge to insult her.

"Let's drop it!" he got out, drying his hands at last.

"As you like; but if you mean to say..."

"Berta!"

"As you like!"

This was the first clash, and others followed it. But in the inevitable reconciliations, their souls came together in a redoubled rapture and madness for another child.

Thus a girl was born. They lived two years with anguish close to the surface of their souls, always waiting for another disaster. Nothing happened, however, and the parents lavished on her all their indulgence, which the little girl carried to the utmost extremes of spoiling and bad upbringing.

If, even in recent times, Berta had still looked after her children, once Bertita was born she forgot the others almost entirely. Their very memory horrified her, like some atrocity she had been forced to commit. It was the same with Mazzini, though to a lesser degree.

Even so, peace had not come to their souls. The slightest illness in their daughter now brought out, along with the terror of losing her, the rancor bred by their rotten line of children. They had been storing up gall too long for the vessel not to be swollen with it, and at the slightest touch the poison

spilled out. Since the first envenomed quarrel they had lost all respect for one another; and if there is one thing toward which a man feels himself drawn with cruel relish, it is — once he has begun — to humiliate another person utterly. Before, they had restrained themselves out of their shared lack of success; now that success had come, each of them, crediting it to themselves, felt all the more keenly the infamy of the four monstrosities the other had forced them to create.

With such feelings, no affection was any longer possible for the four elder children. The maid dressed them, fed them, put them to bed, with visible brutality. They were almost never washed. They spent nearly the whole day sitting in front of the wall, abandoned by even the remotest caress.

In this way Bertita turned four, and that night, as a result of the sweets her parents found it utterly impossible to refuse her, the child came down with a touch of chill and fever. And the fear of seeing her die, or left an idiot, reopened the eternal wound once more.

They had not spoken for three hours, and the cause, as almost always, was Mazzini's heavy footsteps.

"My God! Can't you walk more quietly? How many times...?"

"Well, I forget, that's all! I don't do it on purpose."

She smiled, scornful.

"No, I don't believe that for a second!"

"Nor would I ever have believed that of you... you little consumptive!"

"What! What did you say?..."

"Nothing!"

"Yes, I heard something! Look: I don't know what you said, but I swear I'd rather have anything at all than a father like the one you had!"

Mazzini turned pale.

"At last!" he murmured through clenched teeth. "At last, viper, you've said what you wanted to say!"

"Yes, viper, yes! But I had healthy parents, do you hear? Healthy! My father didn't die of delirium! I would have had children like everyone else's!

Those are your children, all four of them yours!"

Mazzini exploded in turn.

"You consumptive viper! That's what I told you, that's what I mean to tell you! Ask him, ask the doctor which is more to blame for your children's meningitis—my father, or your rotted lung, viper!"

They went on with ever greater violence, until a moan from Bertita instantly sealed their mouths. By one in the morning the slight indigestion had passed, and as happens inevitably with all young married couples who have loved each other intensely at least once, reconciliation came, the more effusive for how wounding the insults had been.

A splendid day dawned, and as Berta was getting up she spat blood. The emotions and the bad night just past were no doubt largely to blame. Mazzini held her in his arms a long while, and she wept desperately, but neither of them dared say a word.

At ten they decided to go out after lunch. Since they scarcely had any time, they ordered the maid to kill a chicken.

The radiant day had drawn the idiots from their bench. So it was that while the maid was slitting the animal's throat in the kitchen, bleeding it out unhurriedly (Berta had learned from her mother this good method for keeping the meat fresh), she thought she felt something like breathing behind her. She turned, and saw the four idiots, shoulder pressed to shoulder, watching the operation in stupefaction... Red... red...

"Ma'am! The children are here, in the kitchen."

Berta came; she never wanted them to set foot there. And not even in those hours of full forgiveness, forgetting, and reconquered happiness could that horrible sight be avoided! For naturally, the more intense her raptures of love for her husband and daughter, the more irritated her mood grew toward the monsters.

"Get them out, María! Drive them out! Drive them out, I tell you!"

The four poor beasts, shaken, brutally shoved, ended up back at their bench.

After lunch, they all went out. The maid went to Buenos Aires, and the couple went walking among the country houses. As the sun was going down they returned, but Berta wanted to greet her neighbors across the way for a moment. Her daughter slipped off home at once.

Meanwhile the idiots had not moved from their bench all day long. The sun had already passed beyond the wall, it was beginning to sink, and they went on staring at the bricks, more inert than ever.

Suddenly something came between their gaze and the wall. Their sister, tired of five hours of her parents, wanted to look for herself. Stopped at the foot of the wall, she stared thoughtfully at its top. She meant to climb it, there was no doubt of that. In the end she settled on a chair with its seat gone, but it still wasn't enough. She resorted then to a kerosene box, and her topographical instinct made her stand the piece of furniture on end, and with that she triumphed.

The four idiots, their gaze indifferent, watched their sister patiently master her balance, and how, up on tiptoe, she rested her throat on the top of the wall, between her straining hands. They saw her look all around, and search with her foot for a foothold to raise herself higher.

But the idiots' gaze had come alive; the same insistent light was fixed in their eyes. They did not take their eyes off their sister, while a mounting sensation of bestial gluttony kept changing every line of their faces. Slowly they advanced toward the wall. The little girl, who, having managed to get her foot up, was about to swing astride and, surely, tumble down the other side, felt herself seized by the leg. Below her, the eight eyes fastened on her own filled her with fear.

"Let me go! Let go of me!" she cried, shaking her leg. But she was drawn toward them.

"Mama! Oh, Mama! Mama, Papa!" she wailed imperiously. She still tried to hold onto the edge, but felt herself torn loose, and fell.

"Mama, oh! Ma—" She could scream no more. One of them gripped her neck, pushing the curls aside as if they were feathers, and the others dragged her by a single leg to the kitchen, where that morning the chicken had been bled, held fast, its life torn from it second by second.

Mazzini, in the house across the way, thought he heard his daughter's voice.

"I think she's calling you," he said to Berta.

They listened, uneasy, but heard nothing more. All the same, a moment later they said their goodbyes, and while Berta went to put away her hat, Mazzini walked out into the yard.

"Bertita!"

No one answered.

"Bertita!" He raised his voice further, already unsettled.

And the silence was so funereal to his ever-fearful heart that his back turned to ice with a horrible foreboding.

"My daughter, my daughter!" He ran now, desperate, toward the back. But as he passed in front of the kitchen he saw on the floor a sea of blood. He shoved the half-open door violently, and let out a cry of horror.

Berta, who on hearing the father's anguished call had already set off running herself, heard the cry and answered it with another. But as she rushed into the kitchen, Mazzini, white as death, stepped in front of her, holding her back:

"Don't go in! Don't go in!"

Berta managed to glimpse the floor flooded with blood. She could only fling her arms over her head and slide down the length of him with a hoarse sigh.



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