

José ZAHONERO

# *THE DEAD WOMAN*

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The legend is a genre of fiction that intends to present an event from the distant past as if it were historical, although it is usually the invention of an unknown author transmitted by oral tradition or, more frequently, the invention of some writer who concocts a story in order to pass it off as history. The most famous example of the latter is the legend of King Arthur, which was almost entirely invented by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*The History of the Kings of Britain*), while oral tradition seems to be in the origin of other legendary materials such as that of ancient Troy or the Nibelungs. In both cases, legends can be classified into two main groups: on the one hand, we have those lacking supernatural elements and, on the other, those in which phenomena contrary to the laws of nature do occur, such as miracles or working magic spells, or in which imaginary beings appear, such as dragons or giants. This second class of legends is what we might call 'legendary fantasies,' and versions of them abound in the European literatures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the revaluation of the marvellous and the traditional folklore inspired numerous writers. Some instances are widely known, such as the Arthurian poetry by Alfred Tennyson

(1809-1892) in Victorian England, or the revival of the Nibelung legends by Richard Wagner (1813-1883) and others in German-speaking countries. However, the rewriting of ancient pagan legends, in narrative or dramatic form, took place almost everywhere in Europe. For example, José Zorrilla (1817-1893) and Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (1836-1870), two of the greatest Spanish Romantic writers, are best known for their legendary tales in verse and prose, respectively. Many of their legends are legendary fantasies, as they usually narrate supernatural events, usually miracles having happened in different cities of Christian Spain.

Other Spanish authors of legends set them in ancient, even prehistoric times. In this latter case, they belong to speculative fiction since they rely on archaeology to provide a plausible scientific basis for their imagined events. One of the best-known prehistoric legends from Spain is "La deixa del geni grec" (*The Legacy of Greek Genius*, 1902), which is a poem in verse written in Catalan by the Balearic writer Miquel Costa i Llobera (1854-1922) about a supposed shipwreck of the young Homer in Mallorca and his tragic love affair with Nuredduna, a local priestess. This legend is an invention of the author and lacks any supernatural elements,

unlike another legend also set in prehistoric, or rather protohistoric times, near the current town of Segovia, in central Spain. This legend, which is usually presented as stemming from a local popular tradition, tells about the origin of a couple of mountains in the Guadarrama range. These mountains look from afar like a lying or dead woman. The causes of her death and transformation into a mountain are explained by the local legend in different ways, depending on the authors' invention. The most important literary version of this legend is probably the one written in Spanish by José Zahonero (1853-1931)<sup>1</sup> and titled "La mujer muerta" (The Dead Woman). It was first published in his collection of short stories *Cuentecillos al aire* (Little Tales in the Air, 1898) and finally in *Manojito de cuentos* (Little Bunch of Tales).<sup>2</sup>

"The Dead Woman" is a "leyenda dramática original" (original dramatic legend), according to its subtitle. Indeed, it uses a mixed kind of writing, half narrative and half dramatic. It is written in prose, showing the particular and

beautiful ornate style typical of the literature in the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Regarding its mode of fiction, it combines archaeological speculation and legendary fantasy. The archaeological predominates in the description of the pastoral life of the Arevaci, a pre-Roman people who lived in the central region of the Iberian Peninsula. Their calm and peaceful life does not suit Jermundo, the son of Paumieras, the leading patriarch of the tribe. The bellicose young man warns them about the danger that other tribes might attack them, but his only goal is to further his ambition to become a war chief among his people. However, his sister Eugadina opposes his warring policy and convinces the tribe not to believe in those external threats. Jermundo then decides to get rid of her in such a way that foreign attackers would be blamed, but the gods change both of them into geological features. This is how the symbolic dimension of the conflict between the (male) desire for war and the (female) desire for

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<sup>1</sup> Zahonero became famous in his time for his naturalistic and anti-clerical novels, such as *El señor obispo* (The Lord Bishop, 1915). However, his short stories are also getting some deserved fame nowadays. One of them, which was published fragmentarily under the title of "El doctor Hormiguillo" (Dr. Little Ant) in 1890-1891, and fully under the title of "El doctor Menudillo" (Dr. Tiny) in 1914, is probably the first science fiction story whose main character is a shrinking man.

<sup>2</sup> The English translation that follows is based on this edition: José de Calasanz Zahonero de Robles, "La mujer muerta", *Manojitos de cuentos*, Madrid, Voluntad, 1928, pp. 75-84.

peace is poetically rendered, endowing the local legend with universal value.

# THE DEAD WOMAN

## *(Original dramatic legend)*

### I

#### CHARACTERS

Paumieras, old patriarch of an Arevaci tribe of nomad shepherds, master of the house in Maple Valley. He is bowed and slimmed, like an aged holm oak. His head is square, his brow bony. He has a thick, white, curly mane, and long beard. His eyes shimmer, like fireflies in dark bushes. He dons a cloak of bear hide over his already rawboned back. He looks grim and severe. His voice, though soft, is commanding.

Jermundo, his son, looks tough like an oak: a straight and smooth trunk. He too has a square head. His mane and beard are red, and his eyes are fierce. He walks resolutely. When he moves his sturdy and straight body, the muscles show like the hardened pieces of a steel armour. He leaps like a buck and is brave and spirited like a lion, strong like a bull. He rules his servants through violence and breaks the untamed cattle in.

Eugadina, his sister, who came on the arms of a servant, together with Paumieras and Jermundo from the western mountains, is fair and fresh like the verbena hidden by Bermuda grass and showered by dew. She is tall and her head moves in a gracious and delicate manner when she swings her beautiful neck, flexible like a swan's. Her abundant mane of fine golden hair falls gently on her soft shoulders and smooth back. She wears a white gown on

her virginal torso, clung to her short waist and covering her abdomen and half of her round snow-white thighs, which file down to make tiny feet as beautiful as her hands. Eugadina's gaze varies from still and vague to demure and fearful, under the silky eyelids. Her eyes are blue as the sky. Her brow is flat and her nose is straight, with thin nostrils that flare with joy when breathing in the delightful scents of the valley. Her mouth is carmine, moist, and fresh. When all others sleep, Eugadina wakes, dreams or sings. She is a prophetess: she reads into what is to come.

The scene takes place in old Maple Valley, on the prairies that today are a huge mountain annexed to the gigantic links of the Carpetovetonic mountain chain, in the time some wizards named 'Golden Age' and some sages 'Times of Fable:' back then man took the staff during peace and the maze and the sword during war.

### II

#### *First scene: Paumieras and Jermundo*

Paumieras sleeps on the soft grass, his head resting on his right arm, which is perched on a rock. Jermundo returns from hunting. He carries a snow leopard; his hands and chest are splashed with blood. He bites a sour but juicy apple from a wild apple tree to refresh his mouth

and he throws it far from him as he approaches Paumieras. His reddish hair is all dishevelled and his eyes shine fiercely. His eyebrows are furrowed and his face looks dreadful. He stares for a moment at his father and then, touching his shoulder with the hand, says:

JERMUNDO

'Father, wake up. There are men of war on the other side of the hill. I heard the horns and bugles and neighing of their horses. I have seen men of war, seen them like you see a thousand ants shine on the grass. Thus, I have seen their armours shine in the dark of the forest.'

PAUMIERAS

'Let me sleep. Those men of war shall follow the other direction towards the meadows far down.'

JERMUNDO

'Do not sleep! Believe they may come, believe they will make of me, your son, a slave, they will curb my rage by gagging my hard canines, they will flail my back with gnarled and dry cords, and I will have to live debased like a lassoed beast.'

PAUMIERAS

'Lad, respect my slumber. I will know how to defend myself.'

JERMUNDO

'Are you not stirred by this? Well then: think of your daughter, our white Eugadina, supple like a reed, tender like a shy violet, like a leveret. They will make her captive and will use her to satisfy their brutal desire, until they are glutted. She will no longer be our Eugadina, who charms our ears with her sweet voice, who tells us of the gods, nor will she lovingly flatter your old age. They will taint your blood with

the blood of a hatred race, and in her insides, they will leave the seed from monsters.'

PAUMIERAS

*(stands up tense and agitated)*

'Eugadina, Eugadina! Where is my daughter? Jermundo, go wake up the boys on the hills. Send word to the youngsters by the mares and gather the cowboys. Bring together all the servants and arm them as if for a formidable battle. Let's march towards the countries where the sun shines and warms more. And if we cannot leave, we will resist till our death. Call for Eugadina, let us hide her.'

Eugadina comes with her head bent down on her breast, her pensive eyes fixed on the ground. She walks to her father and her brother and says harmoniously:

EUGADINA

'Oh, Jermundo, will your thirst for blood ever be quenched? Hunting beasts is not enough for you? My brother, do you want that our tribe, once nomadic and combatant, goes into war and that the old, the women and the children follow your furious lurch for plunder, fettering slaves, clear-cutting fields, and setting fire to villages?

I swear to you no peril threatens us. On all the land our eyes can encompass there is no single man of war. The shepherds are getting ready to shear, there are beautiful calves in the herds of cows, and the foals of the last birthing season run wildly. The Moon will shine in placid nights. Flowers will cover the meadows and benign stars will fill the sky. I tell you this on behalf of the gods.'

The servants, who have just arrived answering to the mustering calls of the horns, revel in the prophesising of peace and acclaim

with joy the name of Eugadina, the prophetess. Paumieras smiles and lays his trembling hand on the head of her daughter and kisses her brow.

#### PAUMIERAS

'Let good fortune forever be your companion, harbinger of peace. I know well that, though men of war will come, you would know how to enchant them with your voice and enrapture them with the delightful scent that emanates from you. I would pay the levy and they would let us live in our valley. Get out of here, Jermundo. Do you really want to kindle our rage and have us thrown into a wandering existence ridden with rough combats of blood and fire?'

#### III

Night: Jermundo slithers through the thickets. His eyes are baleful, and his heart is poisoned. He follows his sister, the seer, who wanders the fields by moonlight, invoking for her inspiration the errant spirits that report to the prophetesses. Like the dishevelled Druidesses, she too loves solitude and silence.

#### JERMUNDO

'Oh, but what is your worth compared to the existence of a race? I want to carry our babies hanging from our fangs, like the lion with his cubs. I do not want them to be in the sheepfold like tethered lamb doomed to be slaughtered. Eugadina, because you rule around here our tribe has stagnated in the deep of the valley. It is forgetting its old history of war and plunder due to your ingratiating singing. I need to march through plains and deserts, dominate peoples, be like a hurricane that tramples everything with its impulse and speed. I need to be a commander; I do not want to be a shepherd. I want to be a conqueror, to turn

the staff for the sword, and the sword for the sceptre. While you are alive, Eugadina, you will keep the men and servants of the tribe dormant and idle. If you die, I will soon have them claim vengeance furiously. What is a deranged woman's worth compared to a man with thirst for riches and yearning to subdue the land.'

Jermundo walks towards Eugadina, tackles her violently and brings her down. If he could have seen his own face, he would have seen it more yellow than wax. An odd twitch shakes his muscles. He strangles Eugadina's neck with his hands, driving his knee on to the maiden's chest. At last, his victim proffers a weak moan and the final breath. Eugadina has been murdered.

Then, with that sinister and most atrocious laughter, which evidences the traces of envy through the sinister spasms in the offender's face, the fratricide starts digging on the ground and labours to open a pit in which to hide his sister. The dead Eugadina appears to him as a beauty full of a sombre majesty by the moonlight.

'Hide her, hide her!' The fratricide says to himself in the delirium of his frenzy. 'Tomorrow I will explain they have stolen her from us, and all the tribe will roar claiming for vengeance. We will forsake the calm prairie in search of the endless lands we will soak with blood. Soon the sounds of war, deep like bellowing and high-pitched like neighing, will please my ears.'

At last, the pit is finished. Jermundo lays there the corpse of his sister and covers it with soil until the ground is flat. Afterwards he flees terrified to hide away, but he then involuntarily turns back his head and loses all motion, full of horror. The ground begins to rise on the spot where Jermundo has buried Eugadina: it rises particularly along the figure of her corpse. Jermundo runs back to dig her out. He takes out the body, makes an even deeper pit and puts

her body back in. Jermundo reattempts to flee, only to stop again a few steps away as he starts to notice that the ground is rising once more. Now the mound has the distinctive shape of Eugadina's body. Jermundo feels fear from the gods, realising his crime will not go unnoticed. Before the break of dawn, the fratricide goes to stir up to revolt the people of the tribe, explaining that the men of war have cunningly taken Eugadina, to drive them into a vengeful chase.

It was then that that an admirable reaction of plutonic forces began to happen, raising the erect folds of the prairie, among dreadful subterranean noises, under the blinding and ominous glow of lightning, the ground shaking in continuous earthquake while howling winds blow ceaselessly. The valley kept becoming narrower and narrower, and the ground went up so as to form a jagged elevation. Upon its

crest there could still be seen the outline of the dead woman. The cattle and the servants fled. The old patriarch, maddened, found out the pit where she was buried and, hugging the earth, he cried himself till his last breath. The further away Jermundo runs not to see the outcome of his crime, the higher the hill rises... because the gods had turned the fratricide into a furious torrent and made him fall off the cliff of the mountain and run through the valley, without ever losing sight of the giant sculpture of "The Dead Woman", of Eugadina, symbol of peace, felled by ambitions and envy.

So, it is true what a poet said:

'There is no hidden crime in the world, even if the whole earth buries it.'

This is the dream or nightmare that inspires, seen from Segovia and clasped to the chains of the world, the huge mountain called 'The Dead Woman.'