

Four Valencian Fairy Tales
“The Mother of the Fishes”, “The Seamstress and the Locksmith”,
“Abella” and “The Love of the Oranges Three”

by ENRIC VALOR

translated by PAUL SCOTT DERRICK and MARIA-LLUÏSA GEA-VALOR
Introduction by JOAN DE DÉU MARTINES



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PUBLICATIONS OF



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Introduction¹

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Enric Valor i Vives (b. Castalla, 1911-d. València, 2000) is undoubtedly the most important Valencian novelist and short-story writer in Catalan letters in recent centuries and, in his facet as a grammarian, one of the most important figures in the recovery of Catalan/Valencian lexis and phraseology of the Iberian peninsula. During a very difficult period of Spanish history, the Civil War and post-war years, Valor worked doggedly to overcome the many literary obstacles and insufficiencies hindering the development of a “normal” Catalan literature. As did the brothers Grimm in 19th-century Germany, Charles Perrault in 19th-century France and Hans Christian Andersen in 19th-century Denmark, Valor wished to fill a literary void by collecting traditional folk tales in danger of being forgotten. His thirty-six *rondalles* (fairy tales) are, in effect, a literary retelling, or rewriting, of popular Valencian stories that had been passed down orally from generation to generation. They follow the traditional plot lines, but Valor adapted them freely to a more novelistic style.

Encouraged by intellectuals such as Sanchis Guarner and Joan Fuster,² he initiated this work in the decade of the 50s. A few years later, in the 60s, Valor was falsely accused of illicit economic dealings and was incarcerated in the Model Prison of Valencia for four years. The real reason for his imprisonment, however, was his dedication to the defense of the Valencian language and culture, which were being repressed by the Franco regime. This loss of liberty freed him to work on the *rondalles*. He wrote eighteen of them while in prison, most set in the mountainous landscapes of the central and southern parts of the region of Valencia. In this sense, his work on the fairy tales offered him a form of mental escape from imprisonment during that time.

But Valor wasn't interested only in collecting and rewriting popular tales; he also wanted to recover and record the disappearing words, terms and idioms of the Valencian variety of Catalan, above all from the rural areas, from those people who lived closer to the earth, and give them a literary status. In this sense, his narrative work is a significant tool in the preservation of the vocabulary of the Valencian form of Catalan and is a

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²Manuel Sanchis i Guarner (1911-1981) was a highly important Valencian philologist, historian and author. Like Valor, he was a central figure in the conservation and defense of the Catalan language during the middle decades of the 20th century. He wrote numerous studies on the history and speech of Valencia and provided significant collaboration in the preparation of the *Diccionari català-valencià-balear*. Joan Fuster i Ortells (1922-1992) is one of the most outstanding writers in Valencian of the 20th century and a central figure in the defense of the Valencian/Catalan language and culture. His best-known work is the essay *Nosaltres, els valencians* (We, the Valencians, 1962).

significant contribution to the present-day Catalan language. His fictional work³ has thus played an important role in the standardization of modern Catalan and has increased the emotional and psychological identification of Valencian speakers with their native tongue.

The natural world is a virtual character in Valor's fiction: landscape, flora and fauna, atmospheric phenomena are all much more than a mere backdrop for his narrative action. From a linguistic perspective, this constitutes the most important semantic field in his work and is, consequently, his most evident contribution to the preservation of the Catalan language. It is no exaggeration to say that the lexis and description of nature form the backbone of the Valorian model of language as well as, ultimately, reflecting the model of Valencian society he wished to see. For this reason he employs a vocabulary rife with synonyms and variations from a wide linguistic range, though preeminently derived from the Valencian forms he was most familiar with and aimed to add to the overall lexis of the Catalan language. His is a rich and varied verbal repertory, linked above all, as I have said, to the rural and agricultural world, and to native plants and animals. Valor's main objective is to present the country and the life of Valencians in the words and abundant idioms of the local variety of language, enriched with elements of general Catalan, as well as other languages.

The four tales translated here by Paul Scott Derrick and Maria-Lluïsa Gea-Valor, granddaughter of the author, offer a good preliminary sampling of Valor's Valencian Fairy Tales. They are set in the counties of Alcoià and Vall d'Albaida, as well as Valencia, Pego and on the Valencian coast. It is worth recalling that Valor was born in his mother's home village of Castalla (in Alcoià), and that his grandparents came from Dénia, while his father was born in Penàguila, located in the same region. He spent his summers at the Lloma Farmstead just outside of Penàguila and loved to roam the surrounding mountains, such as Aitana, Serella, and others. He was also intimately familiar with the Maigmó Mountains (the Sierra de Catí, the Guisop Heights, etc), where his family owned the Planisses Farmstead (which he called l'Almussai in his fiction).

Although the settings of these four fairy tales are real, they belong to the genre of the marvelous and are filled with fantastic characters: witches, fairies, imaginary animals. They treat of diverse themes such as family relations, envy and love. "The Seamstress and the Locksmith" and "Abella" are Valor's revisioning of other popular tales such as "Cinderella" and "Beauty and the Beast", respectively.

It is to be hoped that these excellent English translations by Derrick and Gea-Valor will serve to introduce Enric Valor's literary work to Anglophone readers and encourage the publication in English of the totality of the Valencian Fairy Tales, not to mention the rest of his narrative work, one of the finest examples of Valencian fiction in the Catalan language. This is a significant, even if lesser known, European voice.

³In addition to the *rondalles*, Valor wrote five novels: *L'Ambició d'Aleix* (The Ambition of Aleix, 1960), *La idea de l'emigrant* (The Idea of the Emigrant, 1983) and a trilogy known as the *Cicle de Cassana*, consisting of *Sense la terra promesa* (Without the Promised Land, 1980), *Temps de batuda* (Threshing Season, 1982) and *Enllà de l'horitzó* (Beyond the Horizon, 1991).

The Mother of the Fishes
(collected at Bèlgida)

Many many years ago, there lived a married couple close to Dénia, and the sea. Their names were Jaume and Jordina. Their little house looked onto a pebbly beach and behind it was a plot of land with lemon trees, and others, and a field for planting. They also had a bird dog, an old mare, and a new boat with sail and oars, not much bigger than a raft, that Jaume used for fishing – with or without his wife – launching it from the shore in front of the house. Like so many others in the territories of Valencia, they made their living both fishing and farming the land.

Their lives were modest, but comfortable. And yet, they weren't completely happy: still, after ten years of marriage, they had no children. Jaume dearly wanted a son who could help him with the laborious fishing he did, and another to help with the farming. How often he dreamed of owning two boats rather than one, and of adding on to the fields. But for that to happen, they had to have sons.

His wife was resigned. "Why keep nurturing these useless hopes? We have no children, and after all these years, it looks like God doesn't want us to," she said.

Jaume was an ugly fellow, but he was sturdy and had a broad, hairy chest – not the kind of man who is easily discouraged. He looked at his pretty, dark-haired wife and said, "What a pity! They'd probably take after you and come out looking like princes."

One calm January night, after a long day of fishing, Jaume was fast asleep. He had told Jordina to wake him up at five a.m. (he wanted to fish that day along the coast of Xàbia); but try as she might, she couldn't get him to open his eyes. She was perplexed: "He never sleeps as soundly as this," she thought. At last, though, he sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes.

"What's the matter, Jaume?"

He smiled. "Don't worry. I had the most marvelous dream."

"What? What did you dream?"

"I was heading to the capes in the boat and I saw a white lady. She was dressed in white, too. She took out a magic wand and touched the water and suddenly it was teeming with fish... anchovies, sea bream. 'Cast your net, Jaume,' she told me. I did as she said and very soon it began to feel heavy... I pulled it up and it was filled to the brim with fish. And when they fell out into the boat they turned into pretty little babies, with hair as blonde as gold. And that was when you woke me up. Drat! I didn't even have time to thank her."

"Oh, Jaume. You think the dream was real?"

"No, of course not. But even in your dreams you have to be polite."

He got up then and Jordina gave him a piece of bread and some roasted fish for breakfast, which he gulped down hungrily. And half an hour later he was on his way to the open sea.

The waters were calm when he came in sight of the peak of Montgó, towering against the still, clean blue of the sky. With the sail hanging loose, he slowly rowed the boat like a walnut shell in the sea, passing on his right the honey-colored cliffs of Cape Sant Antoni. All of a sudden, though, a troublesome wind came up from the east, raising

waves in the unnaturally still water. Jaume unfurled the sail and with the aid of the wind, quickly rounded the cape and came in view of the bay of Xàbia.

The sun came out and lit up the white façades of the houses, nestled against the gray hills behind them.

Heading south, Jaume spent the whole morning fishing along the coast of Cape Sant Martí, skirting the little island of Portitxol, and filling the boat with a shining silvery catch. He went farther south, past the forests surrounding the high, imposing cliffs of Cape Nau, where the wind from the east suddenly dropped off and the sea became smooth. Pushed along by a gentle breeze, the boat slowly approached the Granadella Cove, a deep, beautiful, silent and solitary inlet between two steep rock faces where hords of seagulls and sparrow hawks circled and screamed in the air.

It was around mid-day; the sun shone brightly; Jaume had been fishing all morning and his arms were feeling weak. And, on top of it all, the breeze had died down and he had to row the boat into the cove.

“All right,” he said to himself, “that’s enough with the seine. I’ll use the dip net now.”

He had made it himself – an exceedingly long handle with a hoop and net at the end that would hold more than twenty-five pounds of fish. It was just an impulse. He had no idea what he might catch with this contraption. The truth is, ever since the night before, that is, ever since the strange dream about that white lady, all of his actions had been thoughtless, almost automatic.

“I’ll catch something good here,” he said to himself.

And as he came closer to the underbrush on the rocky shore, he spied something shiny at the right of the cove, thick with pine trees and bluish agaves. It seemed to be bobbing in and out of the water. Something strange indeed!

“Sweet Mary, what an octopus!”

He came up close with four stout pulls at the oars. He took up the dip net and moved it around in the churning waters. In no time at all, surprised at how easy it had been, he had a catch. And what a catch it was! It had swum headfirst into the net, but part of its body was still sticking out behind.

“Pull, Jaume, pull!” he shouted to himself excitedly.

And finally, his leg braced against the gunwale, he began to lift the net with that long, odd-colored, shiny thing that was trapped inside.

That very unusual animal leapt onto the deck of the little boat, where it bounced and wriggled like any other kind of fish. Now this Jaume was a valiant sort, but when he saw it there he began to shake from head to foot. It might’ve been a sea serpent – it was much larger than a man, with brightly-colored stripes against a delicate silver background. Instead of one head, it had three, joined by a single neck to its trunk. They were broad and flat and had big, expressive eyes like a human’s. It had two tails that swept back and forth like fans.

When he saw those six eyes, Jaume’s hair stood on end. He took up the harpoon to defend himself.

“Who are you?” he demanded, as though the thing could understand human speech, or even more, were able to speak itself. But it did and was.

“Have no fear, fisherman,” the mysterious water-creature said with all three mouths. “Don’t be afraid of my three heads and double tail. I shall do you no harm. But you will do harm to me.”

Jaume was astonished. “Me? Oh no. I don’t kill fishes that talk like people.” Then, recalling his dream, “Are you... the Lady?”

“No,” the monster replied, “I’m not the Lady. I am the Mother of the Fishes... and I wish to know what you intend to do with me.”

“Well,” he said, “I’m a fisherman, so I’ll have to sell you at the marketers’ auction.”

“Oh no. Not that,” the monster exclaimed. “Do as I say instead and you won’t regret it. Cut off all my heads and my two tails. Throw my body back into the sea; there I’ll regenerate. Then go back home and give one of my heads to your wife, one to your bird dog and the other to the old mare you have. They have to eat every little bit. Then plant the two tails, as though they were seedlings, in the middle of your lemon tree orchard.”

Jaume was amazed that the fish knew so much about his life.

“Well, are you ready?” asked the Mother of the Fishes.

The fisherman’s eyes welled up with tears. “How am I going to kill you after I’ve heard you talk?” His voice was firm. “I just can’t do it.”

“Have no mercy, Jaume. Do as I say and it will be your salvation.”

So, he steeled himself, took up a knife and sliced up the Mother of the Fishes as she had told him to. The heads and the tails, covered with blood, remained in the boat, and the creature’s body was returned to the bitter sea.

When Jaume got home that night, his wife asked him as usual, “How many fish did you get today?”

“Today... I got our salvation,” he answered. And he recounted all of the mysterious events that had befallen him.

The thought of cooking those heads disgusted Jordina, but they did as the Mother of the Fishes had instructed. Jordina had the monster’s head for supper, prepared in a stew with tomatoes and peppers. The dog gulped his down raw, and found it sweet as honey. The horse had a hard time swallowing it, in small bits that they mixed with carobs and carrots and hay. Jaume went out to the orchard under the moonlight and dug two small holes in the ground with a hoe and set the two tails inside, with the ends pointing upward.

In due time the dog had two fine puppies, both of them pure-blooded pointers. They were chocolate-colored, with a white star-shaped mark on their foreheads and had chests as broad as barrels. A few months later, Jaume’s wife, whom we know was barren before, gave birth to twins. They were so good-looking that everyone clucked and pinched their cheeks when they saw them. In the middle of the orchard, where Jaume had planted the Mother of the Fishes’ tails, two swords sprouted up. People could see them flashing in the sun from miles away. And later, the mare brought two strong black colts into the world.

The years went by, and Jaume, encouraged by his wonderful luck, bought two big fishing boats for trawling and made his name as one of the best fishermen up and down the coast. The boys, Jaumet and Joan Batiste, had grown to adulthood. From childhood, Jaumet had been bold and adventurous, so Jaume brought him up to be a fisherman. Every day they went out to sea, each in one of the boats, along with a few hired crewmen. Their catches were famous in all of the auctions of the Duchy of Dénia.

Joan Batiste was tall and good-natured like his brother, but quieter and more serious. He acquired the noble and patient arts of farming.

They grew all manner of fruits and grains on the well-tended lands: limes, lemons, peaches, apples, wheat, corn, barley, alfalfa, as well as many kinds of vegetables for the family.

Needless to say, the young lasses of Dénia admired those two agile, well-built, hard-working lads.

And what about the dogs and horses? That was another strange case. The dogs grew very large indeed, with attractive, well-formed heads, eyes both noble and bold, and long nervous legs that permitted them to pursue and seize their prey with amazing celerity. The slender, refined horses had a beauty you couldn't imagine. They could have been the steeds of a duke, or a prince, or a king! And most marvelous of all, they didn't grow old! They remained just as young and hardy as their masters, Jaumet and Joan Batiste. The mare and the bitch, poor things, died when their time came.

With a comfortable life, two grown, well-mannered sons and a husband who loved his work as a fisherman, Jordina was the happiest woman in the world.

But nothing lasts forever in this life. When he turned twenty, Jaumet began to feel restless. The fisherman's life with his father was fine, but he wanted to know what else the world might hold. So one day he put it to his parents: "Mother, father, I want to travel the world and seek a fair lady for my wife."

"Ay, my son!"

Jordina sobbed, Jaume gave him some fatherly advice, his brother patted his back affectionately and they all resigned themselves to Jaumet's well-reasoned plan.

The next day everything was ready: horse and dog, some clothes and food in his saddlebags and a small purse of doubloons. He also carried a sword in a sheath. You see, they went to the orchard and ceremoniously removed one from its place in the earth (neither of them had been touched until then). The sword was perfect, without a single nick or the slightest bit of rust. It shone in the morning light and the blade was sharp enough to slice a floating hair in two.

It was ten o'clock in the morning. April flowers bloomed throughout the lands of Dénia. The music of buzzing insects filled the almost heavenly air. Outside the house, Jaume, Jordina and Joan Batiste gazed up at Jaumet. Mounted on his horse, with his sword at his side and the dog making leaps and bounds, he looked like a knight.

He bids them all farewell and says to Joan Batiste: "Have a look at the orchard every day. If the other sword starts to rust, it will mean that I'm in danger."

"How do you know?" his brother asks.

Jaumet pressed his lips together thoughtfully. "Well... I dreamt it last night."

"In that case it must be true. I'll do as you say. I give you my word."

Clap-clap! Clip-clop!... Jaumet rode away above a cloud of reddish dust that was raised by the horse's hooves and disappeared without a backward glance. His brother's final words were engraved in his memory: "I give you my word... Farewell, farewell!"

In those days, far from Dénia, in the high valleys to the west, there was a wealthy town in a very pretty region that was ruled by a duke named Frederic de les Dues Aigües. And it came to pass that in that town and territory, which had been flourishing and gay, the people for several months had suffered a fearful misfortune. No one knew

how or why, nor whether it was a punishment sent from heaven – or hell. The people were living in constant fear, and passions were running high. For a dragon with seven heads – no more nor less – had come there to stay: and it was devouring the local inhabitants. You can imagine how big and fierce it must have been!

In order to keep the dragon away from the town, not to mention of course the duke's high castle – where he lived with his family and guards and servants – they carried out a lottery every two weeks; and the person chosen was bound hand and foot and left in a place called the Penyeta de les Hortes for the monster to eat. And thus it refrained from attacking the town and wreaking even greater harm. This was decided, be it said, after numerous bloody and unsuccessful attempts to kill the beast.

Needless to say, this was bad for everyone. The misfortune of the lottery could fall on any family; and all of them were terrified. Many even thought that this lamentable situation could lead to the downfall of the duchy. Now that same April when young Jaumet left home, the name of the duke's daughter was chosen in the lottery and she was to be tied to the Penyeta del les Hortes and devoured by the dragon. This was proof for all to see that the lottery was fair. But the duke couldn't accept his daughter's fate! Up until then, Frederic de les Dues Aigües had borne it all with a dignified resignation. But now he burst into action and issued a proclamation throughout the land that whoever might succeed in slaying the dragon – be he rich or poor, old or young, nobleman or commoner – would marry his daughter (who was very pretty and quite a catch).

Now even though Jaumet had crossed the pasturelands to the west, he knew nothing of the duke's decree. In those days news travelled slowly: and Jaumet did little more than ride by day, eat of his own victuals in the open fields and rest by night in some small roadside inn. And thus, he came to the county of Cocentaina without having stopped in a single town. He had only spoken to the occasional shop-keeper when he needed to replenish his supplies.

From Cocentaina, still on the pasturelands, he skirted the Carrascar d'Alcoi Mountains, covered with forests that teemed with screaming birds and untamed beasts, and finally came to the Aigüeta Amarga mountain pass.

He halted his horse and saw to the south a wide, green, cultivated stretch of land surrounded by hazy mountains in the distance. There was also a large town – maybe three thousand souls – crowned by a castle on a hill. It was the castle of Frederic de les Dues Aigües.

Jaumet sat atop his horse to contemplate that cool, green valley and wondered if this might be the place to search for the woman of his dreams. The dog had lain down at the foot of a splendid juniper tree, but he suddenly leapt to his feet and started barking furiously. The noise brought Jaumet back to himself, and instead of dismounting to rest he turned around and saw that the dog was growling with its fur on end. And then he heard something else, coming from a copse of pine trees and oaks on the right side of the road, beneath the high ridges of the Biscoi Mountains. It sounded like something very big was being dragged along the ground, with a high, hoarse hissing sound that got louder and louder until it was deafening. All three of them stood stock still. Jaumet, the horse and the dog were motionless with fear. And what do you think it was? That's right. The fabulous seven-headed dragon came out to meet them.

Above the underbrush Jaumet could see the seven open mouths, the seven flaming tongues, the sturdy, muscular, scaly body and the forelegs with their powerful claws. The horse was so spooked it almost lost its footing: the dog began to howl and the monster attacked. The fisherman had no time to think. He jumped to the ground, brandished his sword and lunged at the dragon with all his might. The dragon, all seven

mouths prepared to bite him to bits, stops in surprise. Jaumet is whirling his sword. The rapidly spinning blade makes a sound like the wind. And all of a sudden, to Jaumet's amazement, the fearful steel weapon breaks free of his hand and slices through the reptile's seven necks as though they were tender carrots. The seven heads fall to the ground, the seven viper's tongues sticking out, and the monster begins to writhe and bounce about, its enormous tail uprooting tree trunks as thick as thighs. But there was nothing to be done, and in no time at all it lay down flat on the ground, and died.

Jaumet picked up the sword and looked it over. He was proud of himself, but also amazed at how calm he had been to carry out such a terrifying feat. Until that moment, the only battles he had fought had been with the wind and the waves. "It was all the work of the sword," he said to himself. "It must be magic."

And then, with the sharpened edge of the blade, he cut out the dragon's seven long tongues, that were hanging horribly from the seven half-opened mouths, as a souvenir of the event. He went to a spring of bitter waters beside the road and washed the blood from the sword and the tongues and packed the tongues away in his saddlebags. He dried the sweat from his horse, petted the dog, still nervous and tense from the sight and smell of that monstrous body, got back into the saddle and continued on his way. Without a backward glance, he trotted on toward the distant castle on a hill.

The Aigüeta Amarga mountain pass is very pretty indeed. Looking to the south, it lies between the Alcoi oak forest on the left and the Biscoi Heights on the right. It's pleasant to see and to be on when the sun, after the long winters of that region, brings a delicious springtime freshness into the air. The pine woods have three colors: there are Scots pines, Aleppo pines and Umbrella pines heavy with sweet pine nuts. The place is a true paradise for woodcutters and bakers, as the underbrush is thick with black thorny broom, silver broom, rosemary, lavender, thyme, rock rose, juniper and scrub oak... and larger firewood, as much as you'd like, with so many holm oaks, pine trees and the odd Portuguese oak mixed in.

And so, almost every day a certain baker from the picturesque village of Onil went out there for firewood. He was known by the nickname of *el Blanet* and he was as ugly as a toad. That very day, when *el Blanet* was coming down the slopes of Biscoi around mid-morning with a donkey loaded with wood for his oven, he overheard the furious hissing of the dragon in its brief battle with Jaumet. He hid beneath a juniper tree, as though he were a genet, and left the donkey to graze as it would. "Please let the dragon eat him, and not me," he thought. But fifteen minutes passed... a half an hour... and everything was quiet. It was frightening: only the rustle of the wind in the branches. "What could have happened?" he said to himself. So, both curious and afraid, he went to look for his ass and found it, close to the road to the port, sniffing the horrible, stinking and motionless carcass of the beast.

Days before, of course, the baker had heard the duke's desperate plea for help. So now he jumped for joy: "This is my chance!"

He walked up to the dragon and, without too much repugnance – for he was a brutish sort – he picked up the heads and stuffed them into a sack he was carrying. And he took all the heads, along with the firewood, to the duke's palace. But only after taking care to stain the blade of a little axe he had with the dragon's blood.

As he made his way, there was an outburst of joy in the region's largest town when the people heard he was going to the castle to give the duke the heads of the dragon he

had slain. They rushed to tell the mayor and the priest, who set off a ringing of church bells the likes of which had never been heard before: bong-bong, clang-clang, ring-ring, to the tinkling of the smallest one like a counterpoint of laughter. It was a tremendous commotion! Shouts of joy rang out in the streets as *el Blanet* from Onil, with his heavy sack before him, made his way up along the Carril Road and past the Hermitage de la Sang to Duke Frederic's castle.

When he arrives, they open the gates and he leaves his donkey in the care of the guards and demands to be taken to the duke. They usher him into the audience hall, where the duke, the duchess, their daughter and all of the courtiers are waiting. The duke and duchess are seated on a double throne and their beautiful daughter is standing at her mother's side.

El Blanet plants himself before them, clumsily bows, opens the sack, and out fall the seven frightful heads on the duke's spotless carpet. They're fatter than the head of a ram. He also produces the axe.

"Oooh!" A general outcry of horror and disgust.

The duke calls for two notaries, a veterinarian, three servants and a clerk. The servants place the heads on a table for the veterinarian to examine. He touches them gently all over and, blockhead that he was, doesn't even bother to look inside the mouths.

"It is true," he grandly states, "These are the dragon's heads."

The second notary agrees. "They're the dragon's heads all right."

"Your Highness," the first notary solemnly intones, "these are the seven heads of the dragon that has besieged your duchy."

Seated on a cushion on the floor, the clerk draws up the official minutes of the consultation on a sheet of parchment as yellow as his own skin.

So. There stood *el Blanet*, bow-legged, axe in hand, one shoulder higher than the other, a flattened nose and beady eyes under bushy brows as black as the inside of his oven. He didn't even notice the rising stench of dragon in the room; he only had eyes for that delicate milk-white rose, as fair as winter wheat, Elionor, the daughter of the duke, who had just turned seventeen.

The hall was as still as a frozen morning. All of the courtiers were dumbstruck: to think that this beautiful young creature they were all so proud of was to fall into the claws of a malformed baker was enough to dampen the high spirits caused by the slaying of the dragon, which had saved her and the rest of the territory. But at last Duke Frederic cleared his throat, took a deep breath and made the following short speech:

"It seems to be true that this man has slain the dragon. And since he has presented us with the seven heads in accordance with my decree, I, who am a duke, uphold my royal word and promise my daughter's hand in matrimony to . . ."

An understandable hesitation: no one had told him this subject's name. But the shameless baker spoke right up in a cloying voice, while making another servile and exaggerated bow: "Your Highness... to Tonet Cantó – family nickname *el Blanet*, baker of the village of Onil."

It was too much! On top of the disagreeable sight of the heads, this! Elionor fainted dead away in her mother's arms; the duchess burst into tears; and the duke commanded: "Everyone return to your duties! And have two servants convey my future son-in-law to the tower with the chamber for our guests."

El Blanet smiled slyly as they led him away. "Yes indeed! It was a good idea to cover the axe with blood."

When the uproar died down, the streets were filled with knots of chattering people celebrating their liberation from the dragon while, at the same time, exclaiming how ugly and malformed its slayer was and lamenting the sad fate of the duke's lovely daughter.

"Maybe it would've been better for the dragon to eat her," said one overly-zealous old housewife.

It was still daylight when Jaumet rode in, looking like a knight on his steed, the long, clean sword by his side and the pure-breed dog running and leaping behind. He had tarried most of the day from Aigüeta Amarga, stopping here for a bite to eat, there for a drink, and later taking a rest beneath a pine tree to admire the highland vistas.

Asking around, he found lodging at the Hostal de la Creu, located in a small plaza. And when he went out for a stroll around the prosperous village, he was amazed to hear the story on everyone's lips. The women, above all, hastened to give him every detail. And many of them added: "If that baker was at least a good-looking lad like you . . ."

They just couldn't stop eyeing Jaumet, whom we know turned out to be a first-class specimen. Especially the ones with marriageable daughters.

"This is the Town Hall, sir," they informed him.

"Thank-you."

He walks up to the entrance and says to the guard, "I would like to have a word with the mayor."

The guard respectfully leads him before that august personage who, on seeing the youth, rises from his chair and asks, "What may your business be, sir knight?"

Imagine the impression the young fisherman from Dénia must have made for the mayor to address him thus! And this was no fool – a clever and experienced man in his fifties.

"I wish to go to the castle of the duke," Jaumet answers, "as I have some information pertaining to a certain Toni *el Blanet* and the seven-headed dragon." He had picked up the name from the gossip running like wildfire through the town.

"I shall take you there," replies the mayor.

"Thank-you, sir. But first I need to return to the Hostal de la Creu to retrieve a gift for the duke."

The mayor and Jaumet went to the hostel, followed by the guard and a growing number of curious onlookers. From there, unspeaking, they ceremoniously climbed the hill to the fort overlooking the town. It wasn't far. By the time they reached the castle gates, the crowd was very large, and they were making all kinds of remarks.

"They say he said he'll make a statement."

"What kind of statement?"

"About the baker."

"Ahh!"

"And the dragon."

"Ohh! This sounds mysterious."

The mayor led the youth into the main hall, where the duke was still seated on his throne and surrounded by his court. The duchess and their daughter had retired to their chambers.

Just before Jaumet arrived, they had all been discussing Elionor's refusal to marry the hardly presentable baker, who was, what's more, already middle-aged. But the duke was adamant, "I will keep my word!"

One of the eldest of the courtiers dared to speak up, “But how, your highness?” and, employing a common phrase, “it would be the very death of milady Elionor – kill her deader than dead.”

And at that moment... the mayor and Jaumet requested an audience.

They are ushered in and stand before the duke, who signals the mayor to speak. “My lord, I bring you this knight, Jaumet de la Barca Nova, who wishes to give you truthful information concerning the death of the dragon.” (Obviously, he made up the part about de la Barca Nova.)

Everyone there could see that the young man carried an over-sized leather bag.

“More truthful information?” The great man was perplexed. “I assure you, Mayor, that we have heard the truth. We have the monster’s heads, and we have seen in the baker’s own hands the bloody axe with which he killed the beast.”

“All of that is well and good, your highness,” answered the mayor respectfully – and somewhat piqued. “I have only reported what the knight of la Barca Nova, standing here before you, requested me to say. I am sure he will enlighten you further, should you permit it.”

Jaumet, cap in hand, waited patiently.

The duke then said, “Speak up, young knight.”

He didn’t mince his words. “In truth, my lord, it was I who killed the dragon and I who should have the honor of marrying your most excellent daughter.”

A hush fell on the court. It was followed by scattered murmurs of satisfaction.

“Silence!” commands the duke, a stern and upright man with an air of the warrior. Then he continues, “I am sorry, Jaumet de la Barca Nova, but you seem to be mistaken. You cannot be the dragon-slayer, as much as I might wish that you were... I have in my possession the dragon’s seven heads, brought to me by a baker, which proves he was the author of the feat.”

Jaumet’s face lights up with a smile.

“Forgive me, highness, but that crafty baker has failed to bring you the seven heads complete. True you have the heads, but I have the seven tongues!”

“What!” a cry of amazement (and, it must be said, of joy) rang out in the hall.

The courtiers all applauded. “Huzzah for the Knight of la Barca Nova!”

So, they bring in the heads, the veterinarian pries open the mouths with an adze, and the duke and his court see that the tongues are missing. Jaumet opens his leather bag and the veterinarian takes out the tongues and lifts them on high for everyone to see.

“Bring me the baker!” cries the duke. He was mad.

They bring him in behind the two notaries, and everyone holds their breath to see what will happen next. Jaumet hardly moves. He only smiles, and doesn’t say a word.

“Did you bring me the seven heads complete?” the duke asks the baker. His voice was icy cold, with less than peaceable intentions.

“Yes, your highness,” answers the shameless varlet.

“You lie! The seven tongues are missing!”

Toni Cantó, alias *el Blanet*, still had enough gall to open every one of those disgusting mouths and look inside. But when he saw it was true, his whole body started to tremble with fright. Then they showed him the bag that Jaumet had brought.

And thus, the ruse was discovered.

“Do you know what I do with liars?” asked the duke sternly.

“No, your highness.”

“I have them hung from the highest tower.”

The baker fell to his knees. “Forgive me, my liege. My great devotion for milady Elionor made me do it.”

The duke was so glad to be relieved of this prospective son-in-law that he didn't mind forgiving the rascal, though he did impose one punishment. On pain of death *el Blanet* must henceforth keep to his oven, his flour and his firewood and never, ever do anything again to besmirch the good name of the noble and hard-working people of Onil.

A few days later, with pomp and ceremony and a duchy-wide outburst of joy, Jaumet and Elionor were married. The newly-weds were lodged in the Prima Tower, which had breath-taking views all round and received sweet-scented breezes from the grasses of the moors nearby. The public celebrations lasted for days and the well-matched couple spent several happy weeks there.

But Jaumet's adventurous spirit couldn't be quenched, and one day he took to his horse to explore the region, which, on the other hand, was logical and fitting, as it was his duty to know the people and lands that he would one day rule as the consort of the duke's daughter. He still had his sword, his dog and his horse. These last two had been well cared-for in the castle's kennel and stable and he always took them along on his jaunts.

One morning he decided to go to Onil, about a league away. He crossed the green plain between the towns at a leisurely pace, sitting straight and knightly on his horse, the dog gamboling happily fore and aft. It was a cool June day on the plain. The robust mountains of Onil rose up before him, sweeping the northern horizon. In the midst of the wetlands was the lake of Ullals, a small mirror reflecting gliding coots and kingfishers, and beyond that he could just make out the town. It looked lovely and mysterious at the end of those steep, imposing ravines.

When he was almost there, he was struck by the sight of a very strange building on the left at the entrance to the town. It was encircled by a large garden with greenish walls, above which could be seen the crowns of numerous trees that almost blocked the house from sight. Echoing in these trees were the distant, sweet songs of goldfinches and nightingales. The air from inside brought gentle whiffs of French roses, wild violets and opium poppies. It seemed to Jaumet like heaven on earth. But the truth is, a water witch lived in that place. She had come down over a hundred years ago from a deep pool filled with water and big as a pond in a wrinkle in the mountains. She passed herself off as a great lady who seldom went out, and no one knew who her servants were.

Jaumet stops his horse at the gated entrance and hears a sweet, lilting feminine voice from the garden: "Come in, sir knight, come in, and you shall hear the bird that speaks."

Trusting to his bravery, Jaumet rides in, the dog at his side. But the only feathery creatures he sees are the ones that were trilling and chirping in the rich foliage of the acacias, poplars and laurels.

He spurs the horse up to the house, dismounts, ties the bridle to a tree and the dog to the harness, goes to the door and knocks. And suddenly, from out of nowhere a flame surrounds him from head to foot. He had been bewitched! Then he heard a terrible, cackling laugh.

When the fisherman awoke, as though from a dream, he was in a great hall, surrounded by dozens of beautiful statues of damsels and knights. He tried to move, but he couldn't. And then he knew that he had also been turned into a statue. His heart, though now made of stone, felt a terrible sadness; and his marble brain thought bitterly

of his parents and his brother and more than anyone else, of course, his charming wife, who would soon be mourning his disappearance.

Meanwhile, back in Dénia, life had gone on as usual, just as Jaumet had left it – even if Jordina, like all mothers, had her worries. (With all of the distractions of his engagement and marriage, and his unquenchable thirst for adventure, Jaumet, as so often happens, had constantly put off writing home to let them know where he was and to share his good fortune.) Not too much time had passed, as we know, but Jordina would have liked to have some news of her son. They had never been apart before; and for her, each day seemed like a year.

One morning, as usual, Joan Batiste takes the mule out behind the house to break the soil in the lemon tree orchard. And, like every day, he checks the remaining sword. But today he gives a start. The blade has rusted!

“This means my brother is in trouble,” he says to himself, horrified.

He runs back home and tells Jordina – Jaume was out in the boat – and makes preparations to go without further ado in search of Jaumet.

“But we don’t know where he is,” cries Jordina.

“No, but we can find out. We have the dog, with its excellent nose for scents.”

He takes the dog to Jaumet’s room and has it sniff his brother’s bed and clothes. And then he commands: “Find the trail!”

Next he gets the rusted sword, packs some provisions and a blanket from Morella, mounts his horse and sets off to follow his brother’s trail. It was a treat to see that hunting dog. It sniffed the ground for a moment, lifted its nose in the air and took off in the direction of Pego. When they got there, around mid-morning, they took the road toward the Gallinera Valley.

He rode and rode, always following the dog, resting a while when he was hungry and staying the night at some small inn, or even under the stars, until, after four or five days he came in sight of the Aigüeta Amarga mountain pass. When he spied it in the distance, he stood as his brother had done in silent contemplation of the spacious valley.

Though they looked alike, Joan Batiste wasn’t as open and talkative as Jaumet. Like most good tillers of the soil, he was watchful and reserved and he only opened his mouth when he was sure he had something of value to say. And so, when he got to the town of Castalla (the very one that lay at the foot of the high castle), his plan was to listen to the townsfolk, every now and then asking the odd question that might lead him to his brother’s whereabouts. The dog’s unruly behavior indicated that he must be somewhere nearby.

After finding the rust on the sword Joan Batiste had been nervous and anxious, but now he was seeing that the more you need to hurry, the more you need to take care.

He came into town along a steep road leading to a small square on the left, from which could be seen, above the rooftops, the towering walls and turrets of the castle. But he was perplexed when he heard the people in the street saying among themselves, “Look! Knight Jaume has returned!”

And he heard a housewife standing in a doorway say to someone inside, “The duke’s son-in-law is riding by.”

He thought to himself, “Hmmm, this must mean that my brother is married – and he’s married up in the world! We’ll see where this all leads. The rust on the sword

won't lie, so Jaumet must be in great danger." Turning it all over in his mind, he rides to the castle, where the guards and the courtiers greet him.

"Welcome back, Sir Jaume," says one; and "Welcome home," another.

"I'm not Jaume," he declares, "I'm Joan Batiste, his twin brother."

And they all stood gawking, amazed.

The servants take his horse and dog and the knights lead him to the halls of the castle, where he introduces himself and recounts the story in his landsman's simple speech. In spite of the difference in clothing (he was clad in the raiment of a freeman farmer of the duchy), the duke, the duchess and his sister-in-law Elionor all found him so similar to Jaumet that they couldn't believe their eyes. Indeed, the new bride almost threw herself into his arms when he first appeared.

And when he explained the sinister meaning of the rust on the sword, there was a general consternation. They had had no news of Jaumet since he had ridden out to explore the countryside, and now they were fraught with anxiety.

"Yes," they repeated, "yes. He must be in great danger!"

"And for that reason," said Joan Batiste decisively, "I must not tarry here a moment longer. I'll follow his trail with my dog and find him as soon as I can."

Elionor, fearful for her husband, was glad to hear her brother-in-law's words. But the duchess, though also very concerned, insisted that the youth take some rest and refreshment first. "If not, you may pass out on the road, and that would be even worse," she said.

Later that day, Joan Batiste, with horse, sword and dog, took his leave and set out to find his brother. They had given the bird dog more of Jaumet's clothing to sniff, so he found the trail with little delay. Instead of going out through the main gate leading down to the village, he led them to a gateway behind the fortress that gave onto a path leading downhill to the wetlands that separated the two towns.

He crosses the marshes, arrives at Onil and stops before the garden gate of the big, mysterious house. Then Joan Batiste notices that lilting voice that invites him to hear the speaking bird. First the dog, that he orders to follow the trail, and then Joan Batiste go into the garden. But like Jaumet, he doesn't hear a talking bird – even though he could have done. For in that region there are two kinds, magpies and jays, that can be taught to speak.

This alarmed the youth and he was more cautious than his brother, expecting a surprise at any moment. He stayed on his horse, with the sword and dog by his side, and scrutinized the whole scene – grounds and gardens and the façade of the mansion – carefully. Nor did he approach the door. He stayed where he was and sent the dog to sniff out the surroundings.

Suddenly he heard a strange noise coming from some bushes up ahead. Like someone walking on tiptoe so as not to be heard. And what does Joan Batiste do?

"Go fetch!" he shouts.

In a flash, and without a single bark, the dog leaps into the bushes and drags out a witch by the nape of her neck. It happened so fast that the aged witch dropped her wand to the ground and had no magic powers. Thus, uncharmed, Joan Batiste leaned down from the saddle and sliced off her head with a single swipe of the sword. The wicked witch was dead. Then he dismounted and followed his yapping dog into the palace through a half-opened door. He discovered the room of the statues, and as they seemed to him to be asleep, something told him to pat their cheeks. And what do you think happened then? With every pat a statue turned into a living, breathing person. He patted Jaumet on the cheek and he too came back to life and gave his brother a hearty hug, which filled the newly-released souls with a surge of strong emotion.

All the statues are moving, living people now; more than twenty there were. Laughter, rejoicing and celebration: they all rush out through the doors and, after seeing the mysteriously shrinking dead body of the water witch, scatter over the orchards and fields, shaking with joy. They all thank their savior again and again and each one sets off for home.

When the two of them are finally alone, Joan Batiste says, “Brother, we have to find your horse and dog.”

No sooner had he spoken those words than his dog – what comprehension – runs out into the garden and leads back the horse by its bridle. The other dog, still tied to the harness, hadn’t eaten for days and was all skin and bones. The horse, though, had been eating grass and leaves and was fine.

They returned together to the duke’s palace, each one recounting to the other what had befallen him since they had parted, especially Jaumet.

“I was so surprised when they received me like some important figure,” said Joan Batiste. “And then my dog led me to the castle and the courtiers took me to meet the duke. But you know me; I kept my mouth shut. The only thing I wanted was to find out where you were.”

“Well, now you know the whole story,” answered Jaumet, “and you see how lucky I’ve been.”

Joan Batiste was truly happy for his brother and could not cease to congratulate him warmly. Jaumet asked about his mother and father and life in Dénia.

“It’s all the same back home as when you left. I’ll tell them of your good fortune.”

When they got back, the duke and his family were amazed to see the twins’ resemblance. Jaumet told them what had happened to him and they crossed themselves in thanks that it had ended well. The duke, as was his custom, ordered more celebrations, that lasted a full fortnight. When they ended, the duke and duchess, deeply moved by Joan Batiste’s courage and love for his brother, offered to make him a knight and find him a wife from among the ladies of the court. But he discreetly refused. He only wanted was to return to Dénia and lead a simple life with his parents, enjoying the sunshine and fresh air of his fields and orchards. And so he continued the family’s tradition of tilling the soil. Jaume, however, after capturing the Mother of the Fishes and receiving the marvelous bounty of her gifts, was the family’s last fisherman.

So Jaume, Jordina, Jaumet and Joan Batiste, who married a pretty and hard-working neighbor lass, all lived out peacefully the lives they had been destined for.

The Seamstress and the Locksmith
(collected at Bèlgida)

The story I'm going to tell you happened, they say, in the village of Atzeneta, located high on the wooded slopes of the Albaida valley. The green branches of the pine trees touch the rooftops there; and just behind the houses rise the tall hills that cradle the pass and, rising still farther as though they would caress the steel-blue sky of the region, form the rocky peaks of the Benicadell range.

Both the history and name of this quiet, well-hidden hamlet go back centuries. It was fought over by ancient warring tribes and possibly by the Roman centurions of Ontinius and Bucarius. And later, in the Middle Ages, by the cruel Muslim hosts of the Zenata. Many years ago, at last under Christian rule, there lived in this pretty little town of Atzeneta a very knowledgeable seamstress, who was also highly cunning and not particularly kind. Her name was Mistress Irene.

She lived in the upper storey of a sunny house on the main square, and on the ground floor there was large room where she taught needlework to the girls in town. Issuing from that classroom, for three hours in the mornings and three hours in the afternoons, you could hear a pleasing hubbub of diminutive voices, a familiar humming like a homely beehive. Under Mistress Irene's guidance, those "little bees" learned to sew clothing, to make dolls' dresses, to knit and also to read and write. Some of them, the most studious ones, even learned to embroider a complicated sheer lacework.

And what was she like, this Mistress Irene? Oh, the little girls admired her so much! Suffice it to tell you that they often imitated her majestic hair-dos for themselves. She had a lustrous jet-black mane, as dark as the coal the miners brought down from Covalta. Sometimes she skillfully wove thick pig-tails round her shapely head (and then her large, dark eyes seemed to give off lights, lights that were sweetly aggressive, glittering like a starling's feathers); other times she plaited fine rows of twined hair, like ropes of glory that formed two symmetrical, deep-black artichokes on her temples that lent her sculpted lips – I don't know why – a devious, picaresque air... The girls would go back home and say, "Oh, mother! Mistress Irene was so pretty today! Look... she was wearing her hair like this... and like this!"

"Ah yes," the occasional envious mother would say, "we know all about that!"

"Well maybe, if you're a good little girl," some other, less excitable ones might say, "you'll grow up to be as pretty as your teacher."

In addition, the mistress Irene made a great show for all of her young and promising Valencian maidens of going to mass on Sundays; for her dignified, lady-like and graceful figure must be seen and acknowledged!

Now among her childish needlework students was one who had hair as dark as the teacher's, was very charming and pretty, and whose name was Beatriu. And Beatriu shared a desk with the mistress Irene's daughter, Elvireta... Because I forgot to tell you that, among the enchanting qualities of the lovely seamstress of Atzeneta was the fact that she was one of those widows who are much more dangerously attractive than young unmarried girls.

Now to return to Beatriu, she was a studious and well-behaved girl of six and was the daughter of the village locksmith, who was a very good locksmith indeed. He was a widower, and his name was Marçal. Elvireta was fair (she probably took after her late

father), about the same age as Beatriu, and she was already proving to be haughty and headstrong, maybe because her mother was in charge of the school. Elvireta wasn't an ugly child; her big, blue eyes made her attractive. But her bad temper got in the way. She was sassy with everyone she met; she refused to do as she was told if she didn't like it; and she couldn't get on in her schoolwork or at play with the other girls.

The seamstress had lived in Atzeneta for several years (she came from somewhere far away). She met Beatriu's father when he took an Easter present to the school. She found him still young enough (he was ten years older than she), good-looking, strong and kind, and so an idea came into her head. Both of them being widowed, they ought to get married. And this idea turned into a definite plan when she learned from talking with Beatriu that he owned a farm in a fertile area of Albaida called Pansat.

"So what do you grow out there?" she asked one day, feigning indifference.

"Oh, all kinds of things, ma'am: wheat, olive oil, broad beans, almonds... and we have the nicest fruit in the summer!"

"Who does the work? Because your father must have enough to do here in town making locks and keys and kitchen utensils."

"Yes, it's true, Mistress Irene. His cousin, Uncle Jordi, takes care of it for us."

"Ah, so he's a real land-owner," the seamstress thought. Beatriu was a good little girl, but had a sadness. For, having lost her mother when she was only two, there was no one to say all those things that a loving mother tells her children. Now that her mother was gone, who would say things like "the sunshine of the house," "apple of your mother's eye" or "you dear, sweet angel"? For that reason Beatriu seemed older than her years and spoke with common sense.

The seamstress took the girl's serious confidences deeply to heart.

From that day on, the mistress Irene was very solicitous with her little disciple. Everything she did was laudable; the seamstress gave her special attention and, from time to time, and for no particular reason, when the girl was by her side, she gave her a quick kiss.

One day she said, "Beatriu, stay behind when the others leave. I want to have a word with you."

And when they were alone, the mistress Irene spoke thusly: "Beatriu, you're already a little lady; you'll soon be seven. And I'm very fond of you, because you're so studious and obedient. And since you're a little lady, I'm going to tell you something that I haven't told anyone else, and that could be good for everyone involved."

The little girl stared up, full of curiosity, at the seamstress' pretty, smiling face. "What is it, ma'am?"

"Well you see, as I'm all alone with my daughter and your father is all alone with you, wouldn't it be a good idea for us to marry?"

She paused and observed her disciple. Beatriu was dumbstruck.

"The four of us would be happy together, and that's for sure!" said the mistress Irene energetically.

Beatriu found her voice. "I bet we would!"

The seamstress gave her a good-bye kiss and warned her, "Don't say anything of this to your father! It will have to seem like his idea."

The truth is, Beatriu thought it would be nice.

When she got home, Mistress Irene's last words were still ringing in her ears. But she was so excited by her teacher's plan that for once in her life she didn't obey and very soon was saying to her father, "Why don't you marry the mistress Irene?"

"What are you talking about, girl?" the locksmith exclaimed. "How did you get that idea in your head?"

"She said it herself."

His face looked stern and his mood turned dark. "Well, you tell her we'll get married when it rains loaves of bread."

Beatriu hardly spoke a word during lunch, and soon it was time to go back to school. When the class was over, she stayed back after the others left. And Mistress Irene asked her, "What's the matter? You look so sad. I'll bet you paid me no heed and you said something to your father." She sounded happy.

"Yes, I did," confessed Beatriu.

The seamstress smiled. "Don't be so sad. What did he say?"

"Oh, ma'am . . ."

"Don't be afraid. You can tell me."

"You won't get angry?"

"No, I won't get angry."

"Well, he said he'd marry you when it rains loaves of bread."

Mistress Irene's silvery laughter rang out through the classroom. "Ha, ha, ha! That's a good one! So, when it rains loaves of bread . . ."

"Yes ma'am."

Beatriu's face brightened. The mistress Irene wasn't upset with her! "She's so nice," the girl thought. "Maybe she can figure out a way to make it rain bread . . ."

That was on a Monday.

On Tuesday, to call the locksmith's bluff, the seamstress baked up a heap of bread loaves, so when she got to the children's class, she was already tired out. That night she went to the widower Marçal's neighbors' house, where the parents of one of her schoolgirls lived. She knew them well enough to say, "My friends, I need a favor."

"Whatever you want, Mistress Irene."

"I need to take a sack full of bread to your attic at midnight tonight. And tomorrow morning I'll come back to take care of something I have to do."

The request was surprising, but as she was a friend, they agreed. "It's just a little prank," she explained, to allay their doubts, and would say no more.

At midnight, when the streets were empty, she knocked at their door with the loaves of bread in a large sack. She took it up to the attic and set it down beside a window. The following day she went to the classroom, as usual, and around the middle of the morning she walked to the neighbors' house, making sure that neither Marçal nor Beatriu saw her, went upstairs and got the loaves ready. She timed it carefully, and when father and daughter were having lunch together in the dining room, that had a large window looking out onto the street, they heard something strange: pom-pom, pom...

And they both saw loaves and loaves of bread falling from the sky!

"What is it, father?"

"Look," Marçal was laughing. "It's raining loaves of bread, like I said yesterday."

The loaves fell to the street, some of them bouncing in the air and others breaking up into bits and pieces. Beatriu was amazed.

“It’s true, Papa! And now what? Are you going to marry Mistress Irene?”

He was moved by his pretty little daughter’s innocence and candor.

“No, Beatriu.”

“But father, it’s raining bread. And you said . . .”

Marçal turned serious again. “Listen, my girl. No matter how many loaves of bread it rains – and it has to be one of your teacher’s tricks – I don’t want to give you a step-mother. You see, I fear she may treat you badly, because all step-mothers (you’ve read about it in fairy tales) all step-mothers mistreat their step-daughters.”

But Beatriu loved the mistress Irene, who had cunningly gained her affection, and said in all innocence, “I’m the one the teacher cares for most!”

“No, Beatriu. It will not be,” he said, sweetly but firmly.

And with that, it stopped raining bread.

Mistress Irene gathered what Marçal had said from her disciple’s half-veiled words, but she judged it to be a temporary setback. At a quarter to eleven on Sunday morning, when everyone was waiting in the square in front of the church for the bells to ring announcing mass, she showed up wearing an extremely daring dress that she had just acquired.

It was too much! She was delectable, so beautiful that all the men stepped out of her way and watched her walk by in speechless admiration. They followed her into the church; and after the mass, you can just imagine what they said to one another. Gradually though, talk of the mistress Irene’s dress died down.

But that afternoon, the locksmith was feeling restless. And that night, in his widower’s lonely bed, he thought, “She’s a very fine lady, and pretty to boot, with that happy smile. And she seems to love me (if not, why all that bread?). I don’t think she’d turn out to be like the step-mothers in those fairy tales.”

He tossed and turned all night, mulling over the pros and cons of the case. By early morning, with a pounding headache, he finally managed get a little sleep, though nothing like the sound slumber he was used to.

And at breakfast, when Beatriu was about to go off to school and he to go downstairs to his workshop, he told his daughter, “Beatriu, your Papa has had second thoughts. If you love the mistress Irene so much... you may be right. The two of us have been lonely since your mother went to heaven . . .”

As soon as she heard these words, Beatriu broke in, “Oh, Papa! Shall I tell her yes?”

“Tell her yes.”

Fifteen days later, the seamstress and the locksmith were married.

The seamstress and her daughter Elvireta left their house and went to live with the locksmith, as is natural. And that was a different life! A new jug makes the water fresh! (How true it is!) At first the four of them were happy together... The table was lively, meals were always ready on time, their clothes were cleaner than ever. Everything was flowers and music and laughter. And what love the newly-weds felt! It was bliss! The mistress Irene could hardly contain herself, from so much satisfaction.

But the human heart always wants more than it has. Though she had her husband's love (true, he was something of a simpleton), she wanted more. It wasn't enough that Marçal lavished her with all manner of proofs of his affection; Irene wanted him to love her, his wife, as much as he did his daughter Beatriu. Her envy of the girl grew stronger every day. On the other hand, she spoiled and pampered her own unpleasant, short-tempered daughter Elvireta more and more; and Elvireta grew, as a consequence, to be demanding, selfish and impertinent.

After a couple of years, the seamstress saw that her step-daughter was prettier than her daughter, for the beauty of Beatriu's spirit was reflected as she grew in her face and her shapely form. "She'll be tall, and maybe as pretty as I!" thought the mistress Irene, full of spite and incomprehensible hatred.

In sum, she despised the child.

At school, she paid poor Beatriu less and less attention, and the girl was falling behind in her studies. And at home, Beatriu was saddled with all of the heavy housework.

And so Beatriu became a kind of Cinderella of the household. In the end, her step-mother kept her out of school, and the poor thing became little more than a domestic workhorse.

The years went by. Beatriu was fourteen and Elvireta one year older. Elvireta got more and more ill-mannered and conceited; there was no stopping her. When she felt happy she made sure everyone knew it. Beatriu was always sad, even though she was acquiring her father's strong nature as she grew and was going to be a lovely woman, a woman to be reckoned with! Mistress Irene was beginning to show her age, and she knew it, and she felt a growing resentment of her step-daughter.

But Marçal, completely blinded by his beautiful, clever and flattering wife, never noticed what was going on.

Until one day when Beatriu couldn't find anything to wear to church because all of her dresses were old and worn out, while Elvireta couldn't decide on which of the two brand-new elegant frocks her mother had just made for her to wear. And Beatriu said to her father, "I want to leave this house."

It came as such a shock he didn't know what to say.

"Where did that come from?"

She told him, as though he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, that over the years she had turned into a Cinderella and that he, her father, only had eyes for his wife, and that she was completely fed up!

It was a Saturday afternoon and the two of them were alone because Elvireta and Irene had gone out shopping.

"I told you so!" he said in self-defense. "Remember that your father didn't want you to have a step-mother. But it's too late now... Mistress Irene is my wife... and I love her... and... Oh, this puts me between the devil and the deep blue sea."

Beatriu was almost fifteen now and understood a lot, for a sad life brings empathy and common sense.

"I'll wait until summer comes," she decided. "If my step-mother doesn't change her ways by then... I'll find myself a job. One way or another, I'll leave this house."

Now the locksmith was a man of little self-control, and he had no idea of whom he was dealing with. So that night, as he and Irene were going to bed, he was foolish enough to tell her what had happened.

“Your daughter is such an ingrate,” responded his wife. “I’m the one who does all the housework, as well as teaching school, and if I just ask her to do a few small chores, like washing up, mopping the floor, cleaning the fireplace and such, it’s to teach her how to be a good wife some day. And what’s more,” she added, “she does it all so badly, always moping about, that I have to redo everything after her. Ahh... the only one who really helps me around here is Elvireta!”

That blockhead of a locksmith, who spent all of his time downstairs in the workshop and hadn’t seen a thing, swallowed it all, hook, line and sinker. Whenever it was necessary, his beautiful wife would turn on her charm, put her arms around his neck... and he was eating out of her hand!

“You know I love Beatriu like my own daughter,” the demonic woman would sometimes proclaim, brushing away an imaginary tear, “but these youngsters today are so ungrateful!”

That summer things came to a head. The house was a mess: Beatriu in tears, the step-mother spewing slanders against her and Marçal in a tizzy of confusion... and the toxic Elvireta as pleased as punch. Mother and daughter were constantly having private confabs in the bedroom or the kitchen... Beatriu knew they were plotting something.

And so, one night in bed, the seamstress says, “I think I know what Beatriu should do.”

“What?”

“Haven’t you seen how pale she’s become?”

“Yes, she does look down in the mouth,” agreed Marçal, little suspecting where this was headed.

“I think this town isn’t good for her,” continued the seamstress, “and she and Elvireta don’t get along at all... I’m worried about my step-daughter. If anything bad happened to her, what would the neighbors say about me?”

“So what do you think we should do?”

“Don’t you have a small house in the woods, up near the Albaida mountain pass?”

“Yes, as you well know. But it’s very lonely out there.”

“Are the windows barred?”

“Yes.”

“And the door sturdy?”

“Yes.”

“And hasn’t she told you she wants to leave home?”

“Yes, she’s been saying so for months.”

“Well then, let’s take her there.”

“What?”

“Listen. It’s a healthy place and it’ll be good for her. You take her food to eat every week, and you’ll see how the peace and quiet, the fresh air and the pure well water will do wonders and turn her into a real woman.”

“She loves her so much,” thought Marçal. And so he agreed to her cruel and unreasonable proposition. For the place where the house was located was dangerous indeed. There were wolves in that forest, hundreds of foxes and terrifying wildcats, so big that, when infuriated, they could tear out a lion’s eyes. The locksmith had the cabin – it was hardly a house – for the occasional hunting trip out in the wild with his friends.

Once she had pried out his consent, that devious seamstress slept like an innocent lamb.

But the next day, after the locksmith had gone down to his workshop, she called Elvireta and they had the following sinister conversation:

“At last we’re going to get rid of that Beatriu. She’s such a pain; she’ll never leave us in peace.”

“How, mother?”

“Well, tomorrow,” she explained, “your step-father will take her to the house in the mountains, where she’s going to stay for a time. Those woods are full of wolves and foxes and wildcats; but the house has a good door and the windows are barred. However,” and here the seamstress laughed, “I was there for a few hours with your step-father and I know there’s a window upstairs that’s unprotected. What’s more, behind the house there’s a high bank. If she leaves that window open some night, a wild animal could easily jump in from the top of it. And of course, with the smell of her food, it’s bound to happen one night or another. The rest,” concluded that wicked woman, “is a matter for... the devil.”

“Oh wouldn’t that be fine!” was the only thing Elvireta said.

The seamstress didn’t go on. She didn’t want to mention it to her daughter, but she knew that the locksmith owned a farm on fertile land in Pansat. When he died, if Beatriu was out of the picture, it would all go to her and Elvireta. And in the natural course of events, Marçal would die before the mistress Irene.

One cold day in late November, when the crest of Mount Benicadell had a fine, sugary coating of new snow, father and daughter set off for the cabin in the woods. It was mid-afternoon, and the town was empty, as almost everyone was out sowing the fields or harvesting olives; so no one saw them leave. Marçal walked ahead, carrying a sack over his shoulder with tender meat, cheese, figs, raisins, almonds, potatoes, some rice and salt. Beatriu carried a smaller one with chick peas, flour and clothing. According to the locksmith, there were some provisions in the cabin, like olive oil, walnuts, some bunches of grapes, as well as beds with sheets and blankets, firewood and a few other things that he and his friends used when they went hunting.

Beatriu was so happy to be getting away from her hateful step-mother and the mean and ill-tempered Elvireta that her bundle almost felt as light as a feather. She was looking forward to being away and on her own. No more being a servant for her; the washing up, sewing and mopping were done with... So the melancholy autumn afternoon seemed cheerful to her.

On the left of their trail were hillsides and mountain slopes covered with pines; on the right stretched orchards planted with old, thick-trunked olive trees and almond trees whose leafless arms were bare and dramatic. The recent rains had made the wildflowers in the underbrush bloom with humble, muted colors. That lovely young maiden found it all so beautiful!

“Look, Father!”

“Oh yes. Those are thyme and rosemary plants. They blossom when it rains, for they’ve been thirsty all summer.”

“And those big blue flowers?”

“Those are rock rose... Ah, if you could see this meadow in May!” said her father, seeming distracted. A feeling of remorse had been gnawing away at him and he was glad to see her looking more cheerful.

“Oh, I will! I’d much rather stay up here than be my step-mother’s Cinderella.”

(Just think... how unlike a young girl's nature to want to hide away from the world in a cabin in the mountains!)

The locksmith didn't answer; but he sighed a deep sigh.

Then they turned left to take the road to the pass. They walked uphill through a thick forest of thousand-year-old pines until they came to a little house in a clearing, set between two enormous poplar trees.

With winter coming on, you can just imagine how imposing this wild and solitary place must have been. Before going in, while Marçal was taking the key from his pocket, they looked all around. On one side birds of prey were swooping, the howl of an unseen wolf or fox issued from the woods, and before them the impressive barrier of the Covalta Mountain was crowned by the last rays of the setting sun.

They open the door and step into a space that was both entrance and kitchen. In one corner there was a cistern with a lid. Farther inside was a small, dark room; by the weak light of the half-open door and a window, it seemed to have a stone floor, some of the flagstones cracked and broken. From the kitchen itself, a poor stairway with blackish plaster steps led up to an attic that occupied the whole floor, with a bed in one corner. Every room in the house had a barred window, except for the one upstairs. It was quite dim, and had a small window with no grating, as the seamstress knew. Through it, you could see the tall embankment behind the length of the house, which almost reached the level of the roof, as the building was set into the slope of the hill.

Marçal and Beatriu looked over the whole house.

"During the day," he said, "keep a window or two open to freshen the air. But be sure to close them all at night. You don't want some wild animal coming in."

"Yes, Father."

"Here, downstairs," he continued, "there's a cupboard you can use as a pantry. Store the meat there; with the cold it should last. And if not, fry it all. And here beside it, you see, is the sink."

Beatriu, very obedient, said yes to everything.

"Here's a little table where you can eat, and a poker and a small bellows for the fire."

Then they stored her provisions in the cupboard.

"And if anyone knocks at the door," continued the guilt-ridden locksmith, "don't you open it. It could be a thief!"

Beatriu told him she'd do everything just as he said.

And at last he was ready to go back to town.

"Take the key and be sure to lock the door."

"I will, Father."

Marçal hugged her several times, and then took his leave with tears in his eyes. His wife, that step-mother, seamstress and gentlewoman, had him bewitched. It was amazing that he would leave his daughter, one of the most precious things he had, out there alone in a cabin in the woods.

And thus the young girl began her solitary life.

Night fell soon after her father had left. She lit a lamp, poured in more oil and then saw that there was a good stack of firewood beside the hearth. She skillfully took a few dry pine twigs as kindling and made a fire with branches and resinous woodchips.

When it had burned down to glowing embers, she spread them out with the iron poker and roasted herself some meat.

"Oh, this is going to be good!" she said in a low voice.

And then she supped. She had a two-handled clay jug full of well-water to drink. She accompanied the meat with a thick slice of heavy bread from the bakery in town.

After some dessert she went, lamp in hand, to the adjoining room, which would be her bedroom. She hung the oil lamp from a nail in the wall close to the bed. It was quite big, with two good blankets, clean sheets and a pillow. There were also three wicker chairs and a chest of drawers against another wall. The bed was on the left side of the room, and on the right was the window at the front of the house. Beatriu felt afraid and kept this closed, even though she would've liked to see the evening sky up here in the mountains, with its mystery of nocturnal sounds and stars.

For two or three days she didn't leave the house. But one day she heard voices and, looking out through a window, saw some men in the fields at the other end of the ravine working among the olive trees. This calmed her fears. She turned the key in the lock, opened the door and stepped a little timidly out into the sunlight at the front of the house. And as there was a good bit of underbrush, some holm oaks and small pines, the men in the fields, who were far away, couldn't see her. Nor did she wish them to.

At that altitude, the weather was getting chillier, and one night it was really cold. As always, Beatriu lit a fire, but she had to put on loads of wood in order to heat the house. Still, one thing was bothering her; the northern wind had shifted and, rushing down from the top of Mount Atzeneta, it pushed down the chimney and blew smoke into the cabin.

"What should I do?"

She thought about opening a window: but the one in the bedroom would leave it too cold; and the one in the kitchen was close to the fire and would freeze her directly.

"I know. I'll open the one upstairs."

The cold air would come down the stairway and blow into the fireplace on the other side from where she was sitting.

She went upstairs, opened the small window (the only one without a grating, as we well know) and as soon as she did so she gave a spine-chilling scream. For an enormous cat, an aggressive-looking wildcat, leapt right into the room.

What could she do? She ran to the kitchen, with the feline close behind her. It was panting and growling with a fierce, strong voice; but it didn't attack her.

Now downstairs in front of the fire, Beatriu turned around and looked, and the wildcat stood stock still. It was almost as big as a dog, with dark grey stripes and a tail that ended in silky black fur. Oh, it was pretty! And graceful in form and movement! "What if it's only hungry?" she thought. So she took a piece of meat from the pantry and gave it to him. She was a kind-hearted girl, and she very much enjoyed the company of cats.

The wildcat set in tamely to eat the meat, with a purr of satisfaction that filled her with wonder. And when it finished, she set down a bowl of water that it lapped up thirstily. Then, she dared to stroke its back with her hand. The animal allowed itself to be petted for a minute, but it suddenly gave a leap and disappeared up the stairs.

The next day Beatriu couldn't stop thinking about her strange encounter with the wildcat. It had been so docile. "And they say they're very dangerous!" she thought. That night, so the fireplace wouldn't fill the house with smoke, she left the upstairs window open again. Maybe, without admitting it to herself, she had liked the beast's company. And of course, at suppertime, she received the same guest as the night before. And so it went, three nights in a row.

On the third night, as she stroked its back and it purred as all cats do when they feel pleased, she said, as though it could understand, "I'm all alone, wildcat, and I want you to come and keep me company every night. So you have to promise you will."

And then something marvelous happened. The feline backed up, farther and farther, till it reached the bedroom door and went in. There was a loud bang and a flash of light

and after that an elegant gentleman, of around twenty-five years of age, stepped out smiling.

“Who are you?”

“I am the Lord of Benicadell, Beatriu, and I know all about you. You needn’t fear, for I have come to protect you. Because you have such a kind heart, I am going to give you these powers: every time you speak, your breath will fill the air with a perfume of roses, which people will find enchanting; and with every word you say, a gold coin will appear in your pocket, unless you say *enough!*”

And then, without even giving her time to say *thanks*, he vanished.

Three days after the events I’ve just described, Marçal went to see his daughter and take her more provisions: sausages, cheese, lamb chops, bread dough ready for baking...

He knocked and called her name (it was ten in the morning) and she opened the door.

“Oh, Father,” she said, and right away she felt a slight weight in her pocket. (Two coins had appeared.)

“What a nice smell of roses!” the locksmith observed as he stepped inside and closed the door.

“Have a seat, Father, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

(A handful more of coins in her pocket.)

Then Beatriu sits down in the corner by the fire and says mysteriously, “Enough.” For she didn’t wish to keep on accruing more and more gold coins in her nice little pocket. We’ll see what happens later.

“So Beatriu, tell me how things are going up here,” says her father, taking a seat.

“Father, I’ve seen a saint... or, I don’t know what kind of person he was.”

And she tells him everything that had happened, down to the last detail.

“Our Lord must have sent him, Beatriu. You deserve it, the kind of life you’ve chosen, in spite of my weak will and my wife’s bad intentions.”

(He was something, this locksmith. He admitted everything, but he wouldn’t – or couldn’t – change.)

“I don’t know how to talk to him, father. He’s young; he has a beard; he’s dressed in the finest clothes, with the hat and cape of a gentleman.”

It was a very mild morning, so after a while father and daughter went for a stroll along a path that snaked through the leafy woods, chatting pleasantly all the while. She picked some pretty little flowers, though they were somewhat dried out by the advancing winter. She also picked thyme for her morning infusions, and a few sprigs of rosemary for her drinking water... and meanwhile Marçal collected a large bunch of dried twigs and bramble that he tied with a strong cord and took back to the cabin so she’d have more firewood. He also collected some rock rose, broom and wild hay which would be good tinder.

When they got back they had lunch, and later that afternoon Marçal returned to town feeling encouraged by Beatriu’s healthy color and good spirits. He was somewhat disconcerted by those marvelous powers she had been given. But you see how his wife had him under her thumb. He didn’t dare to bring Beatriu home again without consulting first with that tigress, Mistress Irene! When he got home they had supper and went to bed. And that was when Marçal told his wife about the miracle in the cabin. Oh,

you should've seen that seamstress!... Always so pretty, you couldn't believe the horrible faces she made! It was like she'd been possessed by the devil.

She started in to pace from one side of the room to the other.

"This can't be!" she exclaimed, coming unhinged. "Whoever gave me the bad idea to send my step-daughter to the house in the mountains? It could have been my daughter Elvireta, and she'd be sweet-smelling and rich for her whole life! She could've married a prince!"

"Don't be angry, Irene." Marçal said to soothe her. "It's all for the best. If you love us as much as you say you do, you should be happy for my daughter's good fortune."

But she wouldn't listen to reason.

"Look here," she said, still somewhat beside herself, "wake up Elvireta right away, both of you get dressed and muffle up real good, hire a mule wherever you can and take my daughter up there to the cabin. Now! Don't waste a minute! Leave Elvireta there and bring back Beatriu."

"But woman... at this time of night . . ."

It was hard to explain. Marçal, who had once been brave and intrepid, had now turned wimpish. He went to the balcony, opened the window and looked out.

"Listen, Irene. It's not a fit night out for man nor beast. I think it's even starting to snow!"

"All right. But tomorrow, without fail!"

They went to bed.

The following day the sun was out, but there were six inches of snow on the ground. In spite of that, Marçal managed to find a mule and took Elvireta up to the mountains to exchange her for Beatriu.

The seamstress' daughter had also grown, of course, for time is indifferent to none; and she wasn't bad-looking either: quite tall, well-formed, with large, expressive eyes... But what they expressed was precisely what marred her looks. She was jealous, as we know, and her mistaken pride was getting stronger and... her temper was as hot as blazes.

Marçal and Elvireta knocked (it was mid-afternoon) at the cabin door.

"Who is it?" asked Beatriu from inside.

"It's us."

She recognizes the voice and opens the door. Marçal and Elvireta's nostrils are instantly filled with the fresh perfume of roses.

"Wow, what a smell of flowers!" drily comments Elvireta.

"Don't you like it?" asks her step-father.

"I like the smell of roasted lamb chops more," replies the fool of a girl.

They go in, close the door and walk over to the fire to warm themselves, as they were both chilled through and through from the cold wind blowing over the snow. They had left the mule in the sun outside, tied to one of the window gratings.

"Beatriu," says Marçal, "you're to come back home with me, and Elvireta will stay here in your place."

"Oh, how nice!" With the special powers she now had, she looked forward to returning to town.

They gathered her things and loaded them on the mule. Then Beatriu got on and Marçal, on foot, led the mule back to Atzeneta. Elvireta was happy to stay behind,

because her mother – though wary to break the enchantment with an indiscretion – had told her on leaving: “Listen well, my girl. You’re going to stay all alone for a few days in the house in the mountains. But it’s for your own good. Beatriu has been there a while. I think, if you go too, and you behave as you should, God will reward you with something that will make it possible for you marry, at the very least, a baronet.”

As was normal in those times, Elvireta also knew how to cook, make the bed and wash and iron her clothes. Before going back to Atzeneta, Marçal had shown her everything just as he had done before with Beatriu: kitchen, firewood, cistern, pantry, pots and pans, flint stone and striker, bedroom, bed, chest of drawers, and all the rest. So she lit a fire and let it burn down to a good layer of embers, roasted some sausages, fried a pair of eggs and cut two nice slices of bread, peeled an apple and an orange and had herself a proper supper. And after that, straight to bed.

That night nothing unusual happened.

But the following night the smoke from the fire started filling the house.

“Oooh, I’ll open a window.”

And she opened one downstairs.

“Now the house is freezing cold. What to do?”

She wasn’t a fool, not by a long shot. So she looked all over the house and decided that if she left the upstairs window open just a crack, that would be best. She did so and went back downstairs to have her supper at the small table by the fire. Suddenly though, she heard a bump upstairs and the threatening wildcat came down to the kitchen.

“Ayy, get away, get away you horrible beast!” cries the irascible Elvireta. And she picks up a good branch from the firewood.

The cat, all docile and soft, goes, “Meoww, meoww!”

And it looks toward the food on the table

Elvireta didn’t waste a second. She raised the branch and gave the cat a lashing. In no time the whole kitchen was lit with a burst of blue flame and the Lord of Benicadell appeared. But he wasn’t smiling and happy like before. This time, he was pale as a sheet, with his hand on his back. I don’t know how his kidneys didn’t explode from the beating.

“Ayyy,” he howled. “I didn’t expect this from a well brought-up girl!”

A man so fine, with his aristocratic air, and he looked so offended and angry.

Elvireta stood still, flabbergasted, before that imposing personage, with her mouth wide open like a scarecrow.

“As your heart is so mean,” he continued, “I shall punish you. Every time you speak, smoke will come out of your mouth and everyone will flee from your presence. And for every word you speak, a pebble will appear in your pocket.”

Then he vanished.

When she had recovered from the shock, Elvireta sat down, lost in thought. As she wasn’t much of a talker and was all alone, she didn’t pronounce a single solitary word in all the evening. She finished her supper, did the washing up, turned down the sheets on the bed and went to sleep.

After Beatriu had been home for three days, Mistress Irene was feeling desperate. All of the rooms had a subtle smell of roses and, what’s more, they had accumulated fifty gold coins, for the step-daughter gave them all to her parents. Even so, Beatriu was constantly saying, “Enough” to avoid amassing an embarrassment of riches.

“Father,” she said in confidence to Marçal, “I think it’s better not to tempt God. I’ll let the gold coins appear when we really need them or for charity. Too much money would be scandalous.”

Her father, surprised to see how sensible a girl of just fifteen could be, assented to all she said.

The mistress Irene went to her classroom, helped Beatriu with the housework, and couldn’t stop turning things over in her mind. Ever since she’d found out about her step-daughter’s powers, she gave her more respect and, because of the business with the coins, tried to regain her sympathy and make Beatriu forget her former unwarranted antipathy. For her part, Beatriu kept her mouth closed and went on doing the duties of a daughter and step-daughter. She wasn’t extremely talkative and so produced only three or four coins a day.

At mid-afternoon of that third day after Beatriu’s return, when the mistress Irene came back from her class, she said to Marçal, “I can’t stand it any longer! Tomorrow morning you’re going for Elvireta.”

“All right.”

He hired a mule, as always, and off he went.

He got to the cabin and when the door opened, out came Elvireta. “Oh, Father!” she exclaimed, and a puff of smoke came out of her mouth.

(Though it should’ve been step-father, she called him father on her mother’s orders.)

“Oh my Lord!” he blurted out. “Mary, Mother of God! What kind of devilry is this?”

“Ayy, Father. I’ll tell you all about it outside. If we stay indoors we’ll choke to death. Oh, I won’t be able to talk to my mother inside at home.”

As she had said so much, the entrance was filled with smoke.

“The weather’s nice. You step outside, and don’t say a thing. You can tell me later,” suggested Marçal.

He collected her things and loaded them into the saddle bags. Then he locked the door, helped Elvireta up onto the saddle and, taking the reins, led them back down to Atzeneta (all the while, and on the sly, Elvireta was throwing pebbles onto the road from her pocket.)

Then, emitting smoke with every word, she told him as best she could what had happened. And he told her what had happened to Beatriu.

“Who ever taught you to be so naughty, girl?” he reproached her. “The cat also appeared to Beatriu, and the Lord of Benicadell gave her the nicest blessings you can imagine!”

The poor girl broke down in tears.

“I’ll never do it again,” she promised sadly, at the same time emitting exactly five puffs of smoke. (Five pebbles appeared in her pocket.)

And lucky it was that the smoke, since it was produced in the forests around the Albaida pass, had a hint of thyme and rosemary that just made it bearable. But obviously, that would be no way to live.

No one knew quite how, but the news of Beatriu’s powers spread through the town, and it finally reached the court. And so, a month later, two or three nobles showed up to ask for her hand in marriage.

Meanwhile, poor Elvireta could hardly utter a word. And what's more, she always had a pocket full of rocks, which she had to get rid of wherever she could. Both she and her mother were frightened and distraught. The mistress Irene repented of her stupid ill will, which had been rightly punished. But it seemed to be too late.

At last, Marçal gave his permission for Beatriu to marry a charming aristocratic youth, who was called the Master of Alforins and hailed from the populous town of Ontinyent. During the next three or four months the whole family, especially the females, worked full throttle to prepare the wedding ceremonies.

Elvireta was talking as little as she could, due to the smoke and the stones. But words are a strange thing; they reach out like the branches of a tree, and folks say more than they think, even when they hardly speak. Mistress Irene, deeply affected by what she had done, was losing the grace and beauty that had distinguished her; and it was going fast! Marçal saw it all, and was gnawed by remorse and sorrow. "It's all my fault!" he thought bitterly. But it certainly wasn't all his fault, not even the half of it. He was so downhearted that he even forgot to go out to check on his plot of land at Pansat. Nothing could lift his spirits.

The day before the wedding, Irene called her daughter. "Elvireta, it pains me to tell you this, but it has to be said. You mustn't leave the house in your condition, not even to attend the wedding dinner. When all of the celebrations are done, we'll call a priest and explain everything to him. If necessary, we'll go to Rome and pray that our sins of pride and envy be forgiven and maybe God will relieve you of this punishment the mysterious Lord of Benicadell has cast on you."

All this time, the townsfolk had been intrigued. Obviously, the mistress Irene and Marçal had kept mum about the gift of powers and the punishment. Sometimes their neighbors saw smoke coming out of the windows or from the balcony of the locksmith's house; but since there was a forge in his workshop downstairs, no one thought it was odd. What did make them talk, though, was the fact that every afternoon he hired a cart and mule to carry off large baskets full of loose pebbles and rocks from his house.

"Where are you taking all those rocks?" they asked him one day.

"I'm doing some renovations in the chicken coop," he answered, without missing a beat. For he had already prepared the excuse in his mind.

The day of Beatriu's wedding came. She looked ravishing, and always gave off that finely perfumed air, an added attraction that had charmed her fiancé during their courtship.

Marçal and Irene had many friends – he from his work as a locksmith and she from her teaching – so a considerable number of people from all ranks of the local society were in attendance. Beatriu's coins had been coming on like wildfire, as the saying goes, so the house was brimming with gold and the street was hung gaily with myrtle boughs, poplar leaves and sprigs of basil. The church bells rang so much that some good citizens were dazed. It was spring: when the newly-weds walked out of the church, white doves were released and fireworks set off. Oh, it was a memorable celebration. After the ceremony, the big reception! It was held in the workshop, which had been well swept, the anvils and benches and tools removed and a very big table brought in, where everyone sat. And after the meal, the dance.

Meanwhile, Elvireta was upstairs, closed in under lock and key so she couldn't get out and cause some kind of commotion. Her parents put it out that she was indisposed... nothing to worry about, just a little headache. It wasn't serious, so no need to dampen the day's festivities. "Tomorrow she'll be just fine and can eat the left-over pastries!" Thus they gained some time; soon though, they would have to figure out what to say and how to proceed.

Elvireta was seething. She didn't understand at all; for her the need and the desire for company and fun were overpowering. The poor thing heard the musicians playing a dance downstairs, the *Tiratitaina*, one that she loved to distraction!... She tries to force the door open, but she hears a noise in the street that stops her. She goes to the balcony and sees, through a slightly opened window, a luxurious carriage with two elegant coachmen in the drivers' seat, harnessed to four white steeds. And at that moment the newly-weds climb in. Then the shouting: "Good-bye, good-bye! Long live the bride and groom!" The horses start in motion – clip, clop – and the carriage disappears from her quite limited view.

Elvireta goes back to the door, gives it a hearty shove, and it opens. Charging like a little bull – but never saying a word – she runs down to the workshop where the dance was continuing.

O my Lord and Savior! Her parents were horrified! The Valencian dance went on.

*Taina, taina,
tíruti,
tirutitaina!
Taina, taina . . .*

They didn't say a thing. (She had come down looking very pretty, in a nice dress, her hair glossed with acorn oil and combed and tied with a colorful ribbon.) She went to a corner, still keeping her mouth shut, and a young man from Atzeneta, who had had a crush on her when they were kids, asked her to dance. Without another thought, she stepped out onto the dance floor.

"Having fun?"

"Yes."

(A puff of smoke.)

Turn, half-turn, forward, back.

"What's wrong? You're not saying anything."

"Nothing."

(A puff of smoke.)

"What's that? Are you smoking?"

Elvireta felt a fit of rage coming on... She just couldn't hold it back any longer.

"Why you cheeky little devil!"

And she gave off smoke like a chimney.

"Elvireta!"

"All right! OK! OK!" she shouted. "Yes, it's true. Smoke comes out of my mouth, and I'll breathe out as much as I please! Out of my house! All of you, out! Get out!"

And she produced a thick cloud that almost choked the lot of them.

The locksmith and his wife rush up to her. "Elvireta, Elvireta. Think about us! For God's sake, please shut up!"

But she had started now, and she went on saying thousands of idiotic things on purpose and repeating it all, just for the pleasure of making so much smoke and choking, if she could, everyone in the room.

“Open the door!” somebody shouted.

“The windows!”

“Let’s get out of here!”

It was like an earthquake. Everyone fled that place as fast as their legs could carry them. Only Elvireta and her parents remained.

At first, the smoke was so thick they could hardly see each other. In the ensuing silence, the young lady was taking from her pocket the pebbles corresponding with all of the words she’d pronounced during that ill-fated dance and throwing them onto the floor.

Terrified, embracing, Marçal and Irene waited for the smoke to clear. But the truth is, they didn’t know what to do. Copious tears flowed down their cheeks, scalding them as though they were sparks from the locksmith’s forge. Little by little, the smoke floated out through the windows and the door and then, screwing up his courage, Marçal went over to the door and closed it. He walked back to the two women, who were standing as wordless as statues at the other end of the workshop by the door leading into the house.

Irene was distraught. “What should we do, Marçal?”

“First of all, I think we should beg forgiveness for our deeds.”

“You’re right,” the seamstress admitted. “We were happy and we tempted God, especially me. I always wanted more and more for myself.”

They fell to their knees in repentance, and then began to pray.

At that very moment they saw a gentleman standing in the middle of the workshop, looking on them with a smile. At first they thought it was one of the wedding guests.

But Elvireta recognized him

“The Lord of Benidacell!”

She saw that no smoke came from her mouth when she spoke and burst into a fit of laughter.

“All of you are forgiven,” said the Lord of Benidacell in a deep voice. “But mark ye well, with the end of the punishment goes the end of the gifts... And now, you will never see me again.”

And he vanished.

After a few moments the three of them (they had all been kneeling) stood up and embraced, laughing and sighing sighs of relief. They were saved.

But that Elvireta... she was incorrigible!

“Oh Mother,” she said, all disingenuous, “I did so want to go to Rome . . .”

Abella
(collected at Castalla)

Once upon a time there was a married couple who lived in the village of Banyeres, high up in the Mariola Mountains, and they had three daughters. The husband was called Jaumet de la Barcella and he was a textile merchant, but not the kind you think... because all of this happened one or two hundred years ago, or more... That is, he was an old-fashioned merchant, with an old-fashioned shop in town. He had done well, through scrimping and saving and a lot of hard work; and now he had a buggy to go to Alcoi and to Ontinyent to buy clothes and bolts of cloth, and sometimes he went even farther – as far away as the city of Valencia... But that happened only rarely in a lifetime.

Jaumet's wife, Roseta, was a widow when they married and had two daughters from her first husband. Their names were Girgolaina and Murgulina. And then Jaumet and Roseta had a third daughter, named Abella, who was born with blond hair and had skin as smooth as cream and a little delicate figure... like you could hardly believe. The clear blue tints of the tall mountains seemed to be concentrated in her sweet, serene eyes.

Her step-sisters weren't nearly as pretty as Abella. Not by a long shot. Girgolaina had fair skin, but her hair was as red as a hunter's face. And it didn't favor her at all. Murgulina was tall and slender and her skin healthy, but she was covered with freckles; and this displeased her very much. And so, as Abella grew more and more lovely and graceful, her step-sisters grew more and more jealous of her, and especially so as they believed she was Jaumet's favorite.

But their father was a good-hearted man. If they thought he loved Abella more, it was because they were consumed by their envy. True, Abella was the apple of his eye, but it is also true that he loved Roseta's daughters as though they were his own. In fact, he treated them all the same; and if anything, he favored the elder two, because they weren't his and also because Girgolaina and Murgulina were extremely demanding.

Abella had a winning personality; as lively as she was, she was even more kind-hearted and accepting. She was always willing to do all she could to please.

And it came to pass that when Abella had turned fifteen, Jaumet found that he had a very strong competitor in Banyeres. A terribly active businessman installed a new fabric shop just across the street from Jaumet's.

Roseta rushed into the house one morning, all flustered, and said to her husband, "Jaumet, go out and see with your own eyes what very fine fabrics Genís has on display at the door of his shop. It's marvelous... And you... nothing of the sort. We've had this out-dated merchandise for years. Everybody's going to buy their cloth from that devil, Genís."

Jaumet went out and stood in front of Genís' door; and he stood there a long time, dumbstruck by the fabrics he saw. Roseta was right; there were velvet sheens, magnificent colors, complicated weaves that shifted their tones with every slightest breath of air, one second forming shades as blue as a heron's wings, and another shooting out rays of light like when the sun peeps over the crest of Mount Mariola.

It made him mad. "We can't have this!" he complained when he went back into his shop.

Now Roseta was a clever and strong-willed woman. That night, she didn't let him get a wink of sleep, making all manner of plans to improve the family business. At

sometime around three, she managed to convince him: without further ado he would travel to Valencia to buy new stock – fabrics of silk and velvet – which were at that time considered to be among the finest in the world.

And although they didn't sleep much that night, they got up early and set about preparing the buggy, collecting provisions for the road, and feeding the mare three large sacks of hay, which would have to keep her going until they got down the mountain to the Xúquer River.

That done, Jaumet said good-bye to his daughter and step-daughters with the following words: "Behave yourselves like good girls, listen to your mother, and tell me what you want me to bring you back from Valencia."

Girgolaina and Murgulina giggled and clapped. "Hooray, hooray!" They loved nothing better than presents and fun.

"I want a cape made of soft white fur," said Girgolaina.

"I want a brocade dress covered in gold sequins," specified Murgulina.

Abella, sad that her father was going away, looked down at the ground and didn't say a thing.

"Just look at her," said Roseta, "standing there like a knot on a log. Come on! Tell your father what you want so he can be on his way!"

"What do you want me to ask for?"

They all took her for a dummy – all except her father. Jaumet didn't say a word, but he felt a lump in his throat and a tear welling up in his eye.

Then: "I'm afraid I have to go, dear daughter. And you must have some souvenir from Valencia too. It's a long journey, you know, and I will only make it three or four times in my life."

At that very moment Roseta grew impatient. "All right, you two. No more shilly-shallying. Off you go, Jaumet!"

Jaumet went outside, loaded his paraphernalia in the buggy, climbed up into the driver's seat, took up the reins... and just when he was about to say *giddy-up*, he heard Abella's voice:

"Daddy, bring me a rose."

"That I will, my dear... So, giddy-up old girl... I won't forget – a rose from Valencia. So long... good-bye."

Some of the townsfolk saw him leave, including the shopkeeper opposite.

"Where is Jaumet off to?" asked one who thought he heard the name of the capital.

"Oh, not Valencia," Roseta hastened to reply. "He's going to Alcoi for cotton fabrics."

Then all four of them went back inside.

"Don't tell anybody where your father is going."

Meanwhile Jaumet is on his way to the capital of the realm along the narrow roads that led in those days through the forests of Banyeres and Bocairent.

"To Valencia's fair city, where the skies are blue and the women are pretty!" said Jaumet, repeating the old saying of the mountains. He was filled with joy to be going there again. He remembered it from his youth, surrounded by fertile orchards and fields beneath an open sky, echoing with the music of a hundred church bells and, in the distance, the whispering sea... And there in the middle of the mysterious pure woods of the Mariola Mountains, he imagined the three hundred bell towers of Valencia, with the glorious Miquelet of the cathedral presiding over the city for leagues around... the crowded streets, the wonderful shops, the warehouses stocked with all kinds of cloth, the silk works, where the working girls sang the most delightful tunes in chorus, and the

noisy, bustling markets... in short, the happy, splendid life of a rich land, so different from the quiet, peaceful and poetic life of Banyeres in the mountains.

And after several days on the road, Jaumet came to the city at around eleven o'clock on a morning in May. Entering through the imposing gates of the city walls, he made his way straight to the Sant Vicent Inn, where he left the buggy and the mare and ordered a lunch fit for a prince, for he felt that he had earned it.

He then went up to his room and fell out exhausted on the bed, and had a good long nap. After that he went downstairs for lunch and, in the afternoon, out for shopping. He visited the shops and stores and warehouses of the Trenc and Bosseria districts, in search of rare and valuable fabrics the likes of which his competitor in Banyeres could never even have dreamt of.

All of this research, decision-making and buying took about a week. The purseful of coins he had brought leaked like a sieve; but his room at the inn had filled up with marvelous fabrics and clothes. There were silks, as sheer and shimmering as the snows of Mount Mariola, the sunlight of Elx and the moons of Valencia. There were lustrous velvets as soft and smooth as the wings of a bird or the fuzz of a peach, brocades as sumptuous as an Oriental tapestry . . .

Jaumet de la Barcella was satisfied and proud. "Now," he said to himself, "I'll take a whole day's rest and see the sights of the city; then I'll buy the girls' presents and straightway back to Banyeres, my quiet, cold Banyeres in the mountains... Let's see if my wife is happy now and I can get my customers back from that pesky Genís."

No sooner said than done. He went to the very same store where the great ladies of the royal palace – the Carosses, the Jordanes, the Viques, the Cervellones, the Vilaragudes and the Centelles – did their shopping and, after a careful selection, bought the fur cape for Girgolaina and the dress for Murgulina.

"What fair lady is this for?" asked the curious clerk, with eyes as round as plates.

"This," answered Jaumet proudly, "is for Miss Girgolaina."

"And this dress, that looks like a starry night?"

"Ah, that one is for Miss Murgulina."

Then the shop-owner spoke up, "Girgolaina... Murgulina... Those ladies you serve have the names of princesses!"

That ignorant city-dweller didn't know that *girgoles* and *mírgules* are types of tasty mushrooms that grow in the shady spots of pine woods! Obviously, he had never had the pleasure of eating them, exquisite as they are, nor had gone up into the real mountains in his life!

Jaumet paid for his presents, returned to the inn, loaded all of his baggage in the buggy and early next morning, in the many-colored light of the dawn, he left the city through the somber Sant Vicent gates.

On the road to Catarroja he was surrounded by the rich greenery of the grape vines and fertile fields and orchards. He took it all in admiringly: the tall, thick cornstalks covered with pearls of dew; here and there a leafy orange tree in the midst of a field of wheat, waving in the breeze like a young girl's hair; and above it all, the tenuous glowing blue of a mild sky so different from the burnished and dry atmosphere of the high lands of Banyeres . . .

And suddenly, he remembered with a start that rattled his innards and made him gnash his teeth. "Abella!" he exclaimed. "I forgot your rose! But how? What's the matter with me? You're the one I love the most."

He was beside himself with anger. Oh my Lord, how did he get so carried away in that blessed Valencia?

"Whoa, mare!"

The buggy stopped. He had to go back and search for a rose – one of those extraordinary roses from the famous gardens of the capital of the kingdom. No matter what it took!

But he looked back toward the city and saw that it was far away – far away indeed. The turrets, the bell-towers, the walls, the proud and colossal Miquelet, they were all shrouded beneath the soft, bluish morning mist.

“I’ve gone too far!” he thought sadly.

He got down from the buggy. And there, not far away (he hadn’t noticed before!) was a man dressed in country breeches digging a small garden, and totally absorbed in his work beneath the beating sun.

“Listen, my good man. Do you know where I could find a rose, a big, sweet-smelling rose with nice red petals?”

The laborer slowly straightened himself; beads of perspiration ran down his face.

“A rose? Around here?... Ah, yes. Look!” he said at last.

He lifted his arm and pointed to some red roofs, with toy-like battlements, shining in the distance like ceramic tiles from Manises. They belonged to a mysterious-looking mansion with balustrades and surrounded by a thick growth of trees set in the midst of the cultivated fields to the west, about a quarter of an hour from where Jaumet was standing.

“What is that?”

“That... we call it the Can’t-See-Me Palace. There you will find many gardens with rose bushes and red, pink and white roses. I’ve seen them when I walked by the gates. You won’t find better or more sweet-smelling roses than the ones that are there.”

Jaumet, somewhat scatter-brained, asked no more questions as to how to get a rose, or from whom. Instead, he hurriedly tied the mare to the trunk of a mulberry tree growing nearby and without another thought set off along a wide, white pathway that began at that very spot and clearly led straight to the mysterious mansion.

And now, here’s the first odd thing that happened. When he turned around to say thank-you to the laborer, he had vanished into thin air. Jaumet was surprised, but he was also in a hurry and didn’t want to spend another second finding out where the man had gone. Walking quickly, he soon reached the entrance to the mansion’s grounds. The gates were very large, and made of wrought iron. Through them he could see broad, shady gardens and parks that seemed to have no end. But what surprised him most – for he was clearly in for one surprise after another – was that the gates were partially open and no one was there to guard them.

Jaumet shouted, “Ave Maria!”

Nothing: silence.

“Is anybody there?” he asked as loud as he could.

Nothing: as though he were speaking in a graveyard.

Then, somewhat fearfully, he pushed on one of the gates and went in.

He started to walk along a sandy path. Everywhere he looked there were colossal trees and very strange plants with exotic flowers.

“But I don’t see any roses,” he said to himself.

And he went on deeper into the gardens.

The trees had so many leaves, the honeysuckle vines were so dense, the plants of all kinds so abundant that he couldn’t see the mansion, or anything else, and lost his bearings completely, not knowing how to get back to the entrance.

“I think I’m lost,” he said, beginning to feel frightened. “And there’s no one here, no birds, no people, not a living soul.”

And it was true. The silence was almost deafening. No birds singing, not a single sparrow twittered among the leaves, not a distant voice reached his ears. He had walked a good fifteen minutes without getting anywhere, going in circles along the shadowy, confusing paths. The only thing that kept him searching was the hope of finding the rose his daughter had asked for.

But then he came across a clearing in the park that was planted with more than a hundred different kinds of rose bushes. Oh, a hundred, five hundred, a thousand marvelous roses swaying on their thorny stems! He stepped in among them.

Which one should he pick? They were all so beautiful! But it didn't take him long to decide, for soon he spied an especially lovely one, so deeply red it seemed to shoot out crimson beams of light.

"Abella's rose!" he blurted out, but her name was strangely muffled.

He approached the bush and a magic breeze seemed to move the flowers as he reached out his hand. Jaumet's feet sank into a soft carpet of green; the thorns lightly scratched his arms... but he pulled on the blossom and it came free.

There was a sudden frightening bang; a strong wind shook the branches of the trees, violently bending all of the plants and almost knocking Jaumet off of his feet. And then he heard a terrible voice in his ears, a deep voice like a ram: "Oh you fool! You've picked my best rose!"

He spun around. And what do you think he saw? Before him was a very big black man, tall and strong, maybe two feet taller than Jaumet. The man looked at him darkly and took his arm with an iron grip. "You cur!" he said. "This thieving will cost you your life!"

"But... I," Jaumet stammered, almost dead from the fright.

"Speak up!" ordered that big man, shaking him like a doll. "Why do you want this rose?"

"You see," stuttered the merchant, "I wanted it for my daughter, Abella."

"Abella," said the man in his deep voice. "What does your daughter look like?"

Though still in that firm grip, Jaumet was heartened.

"Oh, sir. If only you could see her... She's as pretty as a picture... Golden locks, fair skin, as slender as a reed and so sweet and affectionate you could never deny her anything . . ."

Jaumet couldn't believe he was brave enough to say so much... but his fatherly love came to the fore.

"Good," thundered the black man, "good. If she is as you say, I will pardon your life... But in exchange you must bring me this daughter of yours."

Jaumet was dumbstruck.

"I can't do that!" he finally managed to say.

"You will bring her to me!"

Now we know that Jaumet was especially fond of Abella; but he was cowardly... timid and weak-willed. He had just imagined himself dead so far from his beloved Banyeres... And now it turns out that this black man would pardon his life. So he agreed and swore by God and all the saints in heaven that if he could go free he would bring the man his daughter.

Then a bright flash like lightning filled the whole garden and the black man disappeared.

Jaumet was left all alone, holding the damned rose in his hand. After a while he began to walk back in search of the exit from that frightful garden.

But now an invisible force seemed to guide him, for he quickly found himself on the wide path leading to the entrance; and he soon saw the large wrought-iron gates, which

were partially open as before. So he hurried through them and took the white pathway and in little time arrived at the road to Catarroja and his waiting buggy.

After five days on the road, with no appetite, feeling sad and spiritless, chilled by the terrible thoughts coursing through his mind, Jaumet finally arrived at the village of Banyeres.

His wife and daughters ran happily out of the shop when they heard the sound of the approaching buggy and there were hugs and kisses and laughter all around. It was early afternoon.

They unloaded the marvelous fabrics and clothes; and his step-daughters, happy as they could be, tried on the cape and the dress Jaumet had brought them. Then, last of all, he gave Abella the rose we know about, which had miraculously stayed as fresh and sweet-smelling as when he first picked it.

Pretty and grateful as ever, Abella couldn't contain her joy and gave her father another hug and a kiss. But Jaumet was overcome with sadness and burst out in a storm of tears and sobs that affected them all.

Abella was perplexed. "What's the matter, father?"

"What's got into him now?" wondered her step-sisters.

"So what is it this time?" asked his disparaging wife. "Why all the waterworks?"

Jaumet fought his tears as well as he could, but he didn't say a thing. The women set about decorating the shop with all of the new purchases from Valencia; and that night, feeling content, they sat down at table for supper and to hear all about Jaumet's grand journey to the capital. They were full of questions, but the poor fellow was sad and upset and only managed to answer with a curt and dry "yes" or "no."

Jaumet's sadness was contagious, and the supper ended in an atmosphere of silent preoccupation.

That night, alone in their bedroom, his wife blurted out, "Jaumet, I know something important is on your mind. Tell me what it is and may God have mercy on us."

With tears in his eyes and a voice that broke like fragile glass, he told her the whole story: the adventure of the rose, the fearful appearance of the black man and the promise he had given him.

"What kind of promise is that?" screamed Roseta. "So we're going to give our daughter away, like she was something we found behind the door!"

"I gave my word," answered Jaumet. "It was a solemn oath. What's more, this whole thing makes me scared. It's all mysterious and terrible. I think we've got ourselves mixed up with some kind of occult power."

Roseta was adamant. It was impossible. Abella wasn't going anywhere – to see a black man or to see a black widow! Maybe to sewing class to learn how to sew, and nothing more! "Not another word!"

"Something bad is going to happen to us," said poor Jaumet. "Abella might disappear in the middle of the night. And that would be worse. If we do as he says, maybe nothing will go wrong."

The next day they rose and everyone went about their daily tasks.

But there was no joy in that house. Yes, they sold a lot; the new fabrics were a resounding success. The days went by and the shop-keeper across the street was at his wits' end. All day long the buying public of Banyeres flocked to Jaumet de la Barcella's door, and his stocks were selling like hot cakes.

But his sadness didn't go away. He had no appetite for food; he couldn't sleep at night; and finally one day he felt so bad he couldn't get out of bed. The girls asked their mother what was wrong, and she ended up telling them everything. All the truth, and nothing but the truth.

"This is awful," said Girgolaina and Murgulina. "We can't let our father die because of our little sister. Let the black man have her!"

"Oh no!" answered Roseta. "You must be mad! Not my sweet little girl. No, Abella won't go to that black man's house. It would surely be the death of her."

But Abella had already made up her mind. "No, mother. We mustn't let our father die because of a broken promise. I'll go to Valencia and talk with this man and nothing bad will happen to me."

And so, little by little, Roseta relented. The four of them went into the room where Jaumet lay in bed, weak and listless and exhausted.

"What is he like, this black man?" asked the intrepid Abella.

"He's very tall. Maybe two feet taller than a normal man; his hair is black and full of curls; his eyes are as big as walnuts and flash like lightning. His big hands have a strong grip. He wears a short tunic and carries a very big spade, as wide and long as a meat cleaver."

They were shuddering at this description... all except Abella.

"Are his teeth white?" she asked her father.

"Yes."

"Is his skin clean and shiny?"

"Yes, and very black."

"Is his voice nice, though he's as big and strong as you say?"

"Yes, dear girl."

And so she decided: "Father, I like this black fellow! Have no fear. I'll go to his mansion and God will watch over me."

The step-sisters, who couldn't stand the sight of Abella, clapped their hands in joy. Oh yes. Let her go to Valencia to see the black man. At last they'd be rid of her. The shop, the dresses, the money... it would all be for them, they thought to themselves. But of course they didn't let on that that was what was going through their minds.

Jaumet and Roseta cried and cried, but they agreed to let her make the journey when her father's health got better. And as if by means of some diabolic art, Jaumet's health started to improve by the hour. He was glad to feel better, but sad to think it meant that Abella would soon be leaving him for Valencia. And in a week's time he was well enough to make the journey.

So now we have Abella, having said good-bye to her mother and step-sisters, sitting in the buggy with her father and travelling through forests and along ravines, crossing valleys and plains and marveling at all of those wonderful things she had never seen before.

It was early morning when they passed through Catarroja. Off in the distance they could make out the cathedral towers, the Miquelet, made soft by the mist rising from artichokes and corn stalks in the fields. And to their left they saw a darker clump of trees, among which was the half-hidden form of a large house. They knew they were getting close to the mysterious mansion that was their destination.

"Is that the black man's house?" asked Abella.

"Oh my goodness," wailed Jaumet, "it is."

But Abella only clapped her hands. As though she were going to a wedding! "How nice! We're here."

Her father was surprised. "You don't want to go to Valencia first?"

“No, no. First I want to see this black man and walk through the gardens and pick roses.”

Jaumet left the buggy in the same place as before. There were lots of people planting vegetables close by. When father and daughter stepped down, they all marveled to see such a lovely girl, with her close-fitting bodice, her brightly-striped summery skirt, her graceful walk and fine figure topped by those golden locks that gently swayed with every step.

“She looks like a princess!” said the women, dropping their hoes to the ground.

“What a nice waist!” said the younger men admiringly as they raised their eyes from the furrows.

But when they saw that they were headed for the Can’t-See-Me Palace, they all seemed apprehensive.

“Do not go to that place, good people.”

“Just what the ghosts in the palace would like – a sweet young girl like her.”

“Turn back! Turn back!”

They thanked them kindly but continued on their way to the mansion. And soon they were standing at the gates.

“Thank God they’re closed and locked,” said a relieved Jaumet. He figured he had done his part now and could take Abella back, calm and contented, to Banyeres.

But Abella stared in through the bars and was enchanted by the woods and gardens inside. There was a soft, perfumed breeze, the sun filtered down through the leaves in shifting shapes and colors; strange birds sang melodies as they fluttered from branch to branch in the acacias and willows.

“I thought you said you couldn’t hear a thing in there, not even the sound of a single bird,” said Abella.

“And so it was,” answered Jaumet, marveling. “I remember quite well. Everything was sad and silent then. Now there’s more movement and happy sounds.”

“Father, I want to stay here.”

“No, let’s go back now. We’ve done our best,” said Jaumet, taking her by the hand. “Back to Banyeres. There’s no one here!”

“But there must be somebody. Isn’t it called the Can’t-See-Me Palace?”

At that moment they felt a slight movement of the air, like the weak beating of the wings of a dove, and they saw two very dark hands floating toward them about three feet above the broad pathway. Father and daughter were astonished. The little hands approached the gate, turned a key in its lock and opened it, with much squeaking of the unused hinges.

Jaumet embraced Abella. “Don’t go in!”

“Yes, Father, I must! Good-bye, and don’t you fret about me.”

Seeing how brave she was made him feel better. They parted, and Abella stepped into the pathway. The floating hands closed the gates behind her and followed. Left behind, Jaumet watched until she disappeared, far away, up the steps to the palace.

Abella screwed up her courage; she nonchalantly walked up the marble stairs and went to the doors of the palace. They were magnificent, with encrustations of the finest woods; and the black hands opened them for her.

“Black man, where are you?” Abella asked.

But no one answered, only the murmurs of the wind in the immense trees in the park and the melodious chirping of birds.

“Are you here, Mr. Black Man?”

Nothing. The hands led her through a pair of half-opened doors made of ivory and ebony and aloe and okoumé. Then the hands closed them carefully behind her.

Inside the great entrance hall, Abella said in a louder voice, “Is anybody here?”

It was an enormous room with four symmetrical doors, including the one leading to the stairway. The floor was red marble with veins of brighter red; the walls had artistic reliefs depicting scenes of war, hunts and banquets, and tapestries woven with silk or gold thread, other adornments, columns and cornices. In sum, it was a grand reception hall. And the truth is, Abella found it all grandiose and lovely, but also quite natural – as though she had expected it.

She went through the door in the opposite wall into another very spacious hall; and from there she hurried through the large number of chambers that led off in all directions, each one more sumptuous and harmonious than the last. Needless to say, the floating hands opened all the doors for her. There were halls that looked out onto the gardens through large stained-glass windows; others, interior ones, were lit by magnificent bronze candelabras encrusted with precious gems. Their numerous candles emitted no smoke.

And finally, the black hands opened a door into a dining hall with many large windows that were wide open to the beauties of the park, allowing its delicate odors to perfume the air. There were green cypresses everywhere, leafy plants and swaying flowers of all the colors of the rainbow. It was as though the park were a part of the building itself. In the middle of the dining hall was a table set with thirteen places and all manner of the most exquisite food and drink: smoking stews, fresh fruits, glasses of wine and liqueurs, foaming as though they had just been poured.

Those mysterious hands pulled out a chair at the head of the table, where Abella took a seat without the slightest hesitation.

“Will no one be dining with me?” she asked with a silvery laugh.

Nothing. The only answer was silence.

But she was feeling quite peckish and so, served by the floating hands, she had a delicious, satisfying meal. Afterwards the hands led her to a shaded corner of the hall where there was a comfortable armchair upholstered in orange velvet and she had a peaceful nap, punctuated at times by sweet dreams. An hour later she was awakened by the chiming of a clock on the wall above the head of the table: eleven o’clock.

The hands had disappeared, as they always would after serving her. But when Abella said, “I think I’ll take a walk through the gardens,” they popped up instantly and led her to a room nearby with a door leading to the park by way of a carved stone stairway with bronze nosings.

She walked and walked and walked along those shaded paths lined with cedars, pines, oaks, cypresses and many other varieties of ornamental trees. She came across clearings where there were beautiful rose beds; and in one of these she recognized the red roses like the one her father had taken her. After some time she came upon a place with orchards: lemon, lime, orange, prune, pear and pomegranate trees, and who knows how many more that she’d never even seen in her life.

Many of them had fruit, which she tasted to moisten her lips and tongue. And there she spent the rest of the morning, until the sun had climbed high in the sky and she was hungry for lunch. After a good rest on a bench in the shade, she made her way back to the mansion.

Entering the dining hall, she found the table, as in the morning, set with thirteen places and loaded with food. It was not the same as before, but no less succulent and appealing: meats, sauces, soups, baked potatoes, sweets, marmalades, fresh and dried fruits, stews, lamb chops, hard-boiled eggs, omelettes, fish and many more delicacies and desserts.

She had a good appetite now as well, and the black hands hurried to and fro to serve her a small – or large – amount of whatever struck her fancy.

A little calmer now, she was able to look more closely at the other twelve settings, as if there were really invisible guests at each one as well as invisible waiters. “It’s true,” she said to herself, “this really is the Can’t-See-Me Palace.”

I can’t deny that she felt a bit apprehensive. What frightened her most was the sepulchral silence everywhere. But at those moments when she felt most afraid, she said a short, fervent prayer and went on eating as before.

After lunch, the same routine: a short nap in the dining hall, a walk through the park and, toward nightfall, when the birds hid away among the leaves, back to the palace. The weather was delightful, neither too hot nor too cold. It was all like a peaceful paradise, and Abella’s heart was filled with a vague but firm hope. She felt no fear of the black man, only curiosity to see him. But she had no idea where he could be found. If she called out for him, only silence enveloped her. But still, she had been there for just a few hours; all would come in due time. She was sure that one day or another – one moment or another – he would finally make himself known.

Supper passed off the same as lunch. To occupy the time she explored the upper floor, where there were many luxurious bedrooms, a music room, a painting studio, a study and a play room full of toys for children and games for grown-ups. At eleven o’clock, when she was feeling tired, the floating hands, as usual, made their appearance.

Clocks in a number of different rooms struck eleven. And when the echoes died down, Abella said, “It’s time for me to go to bed.”

So the mysterious hands led her to a small chamber hidden away on the second floor with two windows looking toward the east and through which, now, she could see the twinkling stars. It was a lovely room with a high, soft bed and a few quite elegant pieces of furniture. She looked at herself in a large mirror and saw that she had a healthy color. She felt fine. So, she closed the windows, undressed and climbed into bed.

She was peacefully sleeping at twelve o’clock, and it was exactly then when she thought she dreamed she was on a big wooden ship, like the ones her schoolmistress told her sailed the high seas, and that the sailors threw a thick chain onto the deck. Ring, ring, ring! The noise woke her up. She sat up in bed, suddenly wide awake, and rubbed her eyes. But she could make out nothing in the darkness that surrounded her. She was certain that she was no longer dreaming. The sound of the chain was real and it was getting louder and louder. It was in the palace, on the very same floor, and coming closer to her room. No, it wasn’t a dream. Ring, ring, ring!... Closer and closer. Abella was trembling with fear.

“Hands!” she cried, terrified. “Hands, turn on the light!”

And the lantern was lit. At the same time, the noise of the chains came into the room. It was the black man! He came toward her, dragging a long chain that bound his ankles. He was very big, very black, very strong and very ugly.

But when he was standing before her, Abella cheered up. She smiled.

Then he asked, “Abella, are you not afraid of me?”

“Me? Why should I be afraid? Have a seat and keep me company.”

A gleam of contentment crossed his dark face.

“I shall do you no harm, Abella. I am shackled and all alone. I suffer greatly. Your company would give me joy.”

Abella was pleased to hear this and glad to see that he sat on a chair not far from the bed.

“Listen, sir,” she proposed affectionately, “why don’t you come to see me every day and have your meals with me and come along on my walks in the gardens? I also feel lonely, now that I’m separated from my parents and step-sisters.”

“That I cannot do, Abella. It is a terrible secret.” Two big tears welled up in his eyes. “But if you can be patient with me, and kind, great things will come to pass. For now, though, I can only see you at night.”

They talked for quite a while. Abella told him all about Banyeres, about her father’s shop, about how fond her teachers were of her, about the beauty of the mountains and forests where she lived, about the nice dances they held at the village festivals... The hour the black man was permitted to spend with her seemed to fly by. And at one o’clock he stood up and gave a heart-rending sigh. The lamp went out and the sound of the dragging chains diminished slowly as they wound through the corridors, punctuated now and then by another deep and moving sigh. And then, silence once more.

Abella felt sad and upset and had a hard time getting back to sleep. She finally dozed off around four a.m. and woke up at nine.

Then she began her routine: get dressed, brush her hair, go downstairs to the dining hall... and it was all the same as the day before.

Thus went by the days and weeks. Mysteriously melancholy, the black man showed up every night at exactly twelve; they chatted amiably for an hour; and then he would suddenly disappear without a farewell, but sighing as though some invisible power pulled him away. In the end, Abella grew accustomed to seeing his dark face, his very big eyes and his large strong hands, and to hearing his deep voice which, though frightening, had at times a note of tenderness. She grew fond of him, as though he harbored a completely different personality inside, kind and sensitive, covered over by that body with such rough manners and a wild and threatening appearance.

And certain it is, he did her no harm. On the contrary, his visits turned out to be very pleasant and she didn’t fear him at all.

Nevertheless her days, which were all the same, became monotonous. Abella thought more and more about her home and family. But in the midst of her long, boring days, she realized that the only thing she had to look forward to was the stroke of midnight and the sound of those chains and the giant’s visit to her room.

She had been living in that mysterious palace for six weeks when she woke up one morning feeling terribly homesick, much more than during the past few days. She was on edge all that day, waiting for the evening to come so she could shut herself up in her room. And when at last she went to bed, she couldn’t close her eyes and, in the darkness of her alcove, only slightly lit by the glow of the starry sky coming in through her open windows – for Valencian nights are warm that time of the year – she thought about her parents’ and her step-sisters’ faces, how cozy life at home had been, childhood memories and other such things that filled her with a sad, though somehow pleasant longing for times gone by.

Ring, ring, ring!... The sound of the chains in the hallways. In a few moments the lamp was lit and the black man stood before her.

“You are sad, Abella.”

“Yes, my friend. I’ve been thinking about my family in Banyeres and how much I’d like to see them.”

“You are a good person, Abella. I believe I can trust you.”

“Then you’ll let me go?” her face lit up with joy.

“Yes. But you must swear that you’ll come back in thirteen days. If not, something terrible will happen to me.”

Abella swore that she would return in thirteen days.

“Here then, take this,” he said, offering her a beautiful gold ring with a diamond the size of a pea. “When I leave here at one, place it on that chest where you keep your clothes. Go back to sleep and you’ll wake up in the morning in your bed in Banyeres. But you must not say a word of this to anyone.”

When the clock struck one and the black man disappeared as always, Abella put the ring he had given her on the chest. Then she lay down in bed and went right to sleep.

A few hours later and still half asleep, she heard the cackling of hens and the familiar sharp crowing of a rooster. Could it be? There were no fowls at the palace.

“Girgolaina, open the door!”

It was her father’s voice.

“Murgulina, go out and feed the animals!”

It was her mother’s voice.

“We’re going!”

Her sisters’ voices.

She opened her eyes; the room was small and poor; a reddish ray of light came in through a chink in the window frame. Her bedroom in Banyeres! She was lying in her own old bed.

“Mommy, daddy!” she shouted. “I’m here, in my bed!”

You can just imagine what a hubbub there was in that house! Her parents ran in and were dumbstruck. Her mother opened the window and they both rushed over to the bed – there were floods of tears and sighs and joy and laughter.

“How did you get here, sweetheart?”

They couldn’t stop looking at her, so pretty and tanned and healthy, sitting there in the bed with her lovely, sleepy eyes, a smile of contentment on her lips and her flowing locks of hair falling on her bare shoulders.

“Tell us all about it!” said Roseta.

“Will you have to go back?” asked Jaumet.

“Yes, I have to go back,” she answered. “But don’t cry. I think the mysterious Can’t-See-Me Palace is somehow my destiny.”

She told them everything that had happened, everything except how she had gotten there. The black man, she said, visited her every night and behaved well. She wasn’t afraid of him at all. She strolled through the parks and gardens in complete freedom. The floating hands served her and she had all she needed. But she could only stay with them for twelve days. On the night of the twelfth day she would go back the same way she had come, to get to the Can’t-See-Me Palace on the thirteenth day.

“And how did you get here?”

Abella was almost going to tell them, but she remembered just in time. The black man, as we know, had made her promise to keep mum about that. She was afraid that something bad would happen and she didn’t say a word.

“Father, mother, please forgive me, but I can’t tell you that.”

But Jaumet and Roseta wouldn’t take no for an answer. And they pressed her so much, saying they’d be upset and sad if she hid something from them, that she finally relented and told them the secret of the ring.

At that moment Girgolaina and Murgulina came in and, with forced smiles, covered her with kisses and compliments.

“What did you bring us from Valencia?” they both asked.

“Open the chest,” said Abella, on a sudden whim of inspiration. The sisters didn’t need to be asked twice and, to everyone’s surprise – including Abella – they found two small packages inside. One said, “for Girgolaina” and the other, “for Murgulina”.

“What is this?” they asked, curious and excited.

Then they opened them.

“What a beautiful diamond tiara!” exclaimed Girgolaina.

“And this pearl necklace!” exclaimed Murgulina.

It was very fine jewelry indeed.

They kissed their step-sister with strong, feigned affection. Abella got out of bed and without thinking said, “Oh, you might have dropped my ring.”

She went to the chest and saw that, in effect, the mysterious ring had fallen to the floor behind it. It had to have been when they raised the lid. Abella picked it up and put it away in a safe place.

Her step-sisters didn’t seem to pay heed. They praised the magnificence of the gifts she had brought, and it appeared that everyone forgot about the ring.

Girgolaina and Murgulina may have seemed to be pleased, but deep down in their dried up hearts their resentment and envy of Abella only grew stronger. They thought: “She thinks she’s a princess now, because her gifts are so princely.”

They left the room when Abella started to get dressed and went outside to the garden wall where no one would hear them and had the following exchange:

“Did you hear the story of that ring from behind the door?”

“You better believe I did!”

“And did you see the nightgown Abella was wearing?”

“Of course I saw it – the stuck-up minx. It’s made of silk embroidered with gold threads.”

“Did you see the hairpins she has?”

“Yes indeed. Silver encrusted with rubies and pearls.”

“Yes, that little schemer must be a princess... And what does she bring us? A couple of worthless baubles.”

“I swear by the demon of Blasca,” said Girgolaina, “that I won’t give up until I’ve brought her to her destruction. And what about you?”

“I swear the same,” agreed Murgulina. “I’ll help you cut that haughty hypocrite down to size.”

And so it was. When they went back inside, there was spittle on the corners of their mouths.

The days went by. Abella was a good girl and unsuspecting. She helped her mother, fed the animals, arranged the fabrics and clothes in the shop, went out for walks with her friends... and for the time being, nothing bad seemed to happen. Nevertheless the demon of Blasca, up there on its high cliff, continued to pour poison into her step-sisters’ hearts.

The twelfth day came, that is, the day on whose evening she would have to return to the Can’t-See-Me Palace. Her step-sisters were nicer to her than ever and very happy, though Abella didn’t know why. That morning she started to pack her clothes in the chest, and her mother was helping. They put in everything: scarves, dresses, combs and hairpins, and even her little book of hours. In a corner of the chest, Abella saw the ring, just where she had left it; and she felt secure.

The rest of the day went by as usual. Jaumet and Roseta were reconciled to her decision to go back, seeing how happy she looked at the prospect of returning. When night came, Abella said farewell to them all and retired to her room. She opened the

chest and took out the magic ring and placed it on top, as she was supposed to do. Then she went to bed.

In her comfortable slumber, the hours of the night floated by. In the early morning she awoke with a smile, expecting to be in her sumptuous chamber in the palace. But no! What an ugly surprise! She was still in her little bedroom in Banyeres!

Paralyzed with fear, she lay still for a while in her bed. A cold sweat bathed her limbs. Something had gone wrong! God only knows what could have happened!

The sun came up and small rays of light came in through the chinks in the window frame. Then she leapt out of bed and went to the chest, dreading what she might find. And just as she feared, the ring was gone.

She sat down on the bed and began to sob disconsolately.

Her mother heard the sounds and rushed in. She was amazed. "How come you're still here, darling?"

"Oh mother, everything's gone awry! I didn't go back and I won't get to the palace on the thirteenth day as I promised. The black man will kill me!"

"What do you mean, he'll kill you? Didn't you say he was kind and good?"

"Yes, he was. But I've betrayed him, talking about the ring."

"Your father and I haven't said a word of that to anyone."

"And now I've let it be stolen. Somebody must've come in while I was sleeping and taken it away."

And so, lamenting all the while, mother and daughter searched through everything in the room, but the ill-fated ring was nowhere to be found.

From that moment on, the days crept by very slowly indeed, and everything looked bleak. Abella lost weight, as though it were August, and she seemed to be wasting away. Her parents were sad to see her in such a languid state. For their part, Girgolaina and Murgulina were eating like there was no tomorrow and, when they were alone together they broke out in peals of suspicious laughter. At table, however, they pretended to be concerned and cynically commiserated with Abella, even, at times, shedding the odd crocodile tear.

Melancholy days and weeks went by for Abella. In spite of all their searches, the ring never showed up. And since she and Roseta had looked everywhere, each hiding-place and cranny of the house and all the shelves and drawers in the shop, they finally decided it must have vanished into thin air, as the saying goes. They gave it up for gone.

Every night before she went to bed Abella said a prayer, as she always had since childhood; but now she added a plea for God to help her get out of this dilemma in which found herself.

Now of course it was Girgolaina and Murgulina who had snuck in and stolen the ring while Abella was sleeping. Every day they would go for a walk early in the morning to the forest on the *Penya de la Blasca*, and there they would kneel down under an enormous thorn bush growing on a small hillside and pronounce all manner of curses:

"Demon of *Blasca*, please don't let Abella find the ring."

But it just so happened that one morning before sunrise, Abella was wide awake worrying about what could have happened at the *Can't-See-Me Palace*. "What must the black man have done when he didn't find me there at midnight on the thirteenth day?" she wondered.

And at that moment, she heard the very strange cackling of a hen and the even stranger answer of a rooster coming through the window. What she heard was a marvel! Just listen to this!

The hen said:

Cack, cack, cack!
Kook, kook, kook!
Abella at her rest
And one of my legs like this!

The rooster didn't seem to pay much attention and only answered:

Clack, clack, clack!

Abella tiptoed to the window and opened it very slowly, without making the slightest bit of noise, wide enough to look outside. She saw the rooster standing on the barnyard wall, master of his court, and next to him a hen, the best layer and proudest of them all.

Plonk, plonk, plonk
I haven't got a shoe . . .

said the hen, with an excess of drama. To which the rooster replied:

I'm no cobbler
What am I to do?

"I want you to put a ring like this one here on my other leg," explained the hen.

Abella's blond curls stood up straight as arrows on her head. Who'd ever heard of it? Hens and roosters talking! Just what she needed! They were talking about her ring, no doubt about it!

"I can't give you another," said the rooster, "because Girgolaina only threw one into the manure."

So it had been her step-sisters! They must have heard it all, probably from behind the door that day when she told her parents, and they played this dirty trick on her. But in any case, the talking hen and rooster had to be done by magic, and that was working in her favor.

She very softly closed the window, got dressed in a hurry, went downstairs and got a handful of bran, as she did every day, and took it out to the barnyard. And while the hens were eating, she closely examined all of their legs until she finally found the one that was wearing her ring like a bracelet. She hastily grabbed it up and took off the ring in a flash. And then, still holding the fowl in her hand, she said, "Since you've been a good little hen I'm going to give you three more handfuls of wheat."

She did so, and also treated the rooster. Then she tiptoed quietly back up to her room and said not a word, as though nothing unusual had happened.

"Mommy, daddy," she said to them that night, after her step-sisters had gone to bed, "tonight I'll return to the palace, because I have the ring at last."

Around eight in the morning, she noticed a bright light shining on her closed eyelids. She made an effort to open them, fully expecting to see her room in the palace at last. But what was her surprise to find herself before the large iron gates at the entrance, which were open. She slowly stepped through them, and the first thing she noticed, with growing apprehension, was the terrible silence that hung heavy over the parks and gardens. The black hands hadn't come out to open the gates of course, for they were already opened. But they didn't come to close them either, and open the gates remained. She made her way along the wide avenue that led, as we know, to the front of the mansion. Like everything else, the palace had a more desolate and mysterious air than ever before. All of the doors were closed and barred; she didn't hear the murmur of a breeze or the song of a bird. It seemed to be the silence of the tomb!

"Oh Mother of God!" she exclaimed. "What could have happened here?"

She dared not touch the palace doors nor call for the floating hands. It was all so frightening. But she couldn't just stand there doing nothing. So she chose a path through the gardens, toward the rose bushes she so adored, as though the key to this mystery would be there. When she got to them she found the plants withered and dry and rose petals lying all over the ground, like an immense swarm of dead butterflies.

She shed bitter tears.

"Oh, what could have happened to the black man?" She called out to him. "Oh, where are you, Mr. Black Man?"

Her voice echoed strangely through the trees and broad, silent gardens.

"Black man! Where are you?"

The echoes came back from the thick foliage of the trees: "Where are you?"

Abella ran along paths past flower beds and gardens, hardly knowing where she went because of the tears in her eyes. And she came to that place that was so nice in earlier times, where the fruit trees grew that she loved to visit.

Oh God in heaven! Coming from a thick clump of trees was a deafening buzz of flies, hornets and bumblebees. Her heart was beating wildly. She rushed in and what she found there left her dumbstruck and horrified. Beneath a withering pomegranate tree in the midst of a crowd of fallen pomegranates, split open and worm-eaten, lay a large body. It was the black man! And he was... dead!

"Oh you poor thing! You kind-hearted man!" she cried, wracked with pity.

She knelt down beside him. His clothes were muddy and torn; his eyes were closed; and the flies, hornets and bees, as well as troops of ants, covered his cheeks, his hair, his hands . . .

But Abella quickly pulled herself together. She was a brave and determined girl! She stood up and ran toward the palace, where she found a door that yielded to her push. And soon she returned with a flask full of rose water and a towel, with which she rinsed his face, arms and hands.

"You kind, good man," she said again and again. "I'll wash you and take care of you! I'll repay your kindness, keeping me company all those nights!"

She took up the flask and poured a large amount of rose water on his still, discolored face and then, Boom! There was a loud crack of thunder, followed by a burst of laughter, music and loud song. The black man had vanished in bright flame and in his stead, slender, smiling pleasantly and full of manly beauty, stood a gallant prince. He took her hand and said these beautiful words with a strong, firm voice, though also kind and mild, "Abella, my darling! Your kind heart, your courage, your tender spirit have broken the spell. I was the ugly and fearful black man you had pity and affection for, I,

the prince of the Kingdom of Valencia. I was the victim of an evil fairy who hated me – my step-mother. But now the bewitchment is over, thanks to you.”

Musicians, courtiers and ladies of the court began to arrive and they all formed a great procession that headed toward the palace. The breeze murmured through the trees and a thousand odors of flowers and perfume filled the air. The sun shone over the gigantic crowns of the cypresses and cedars and acacias; the gardens took on their wonted colors again, the trees suddenly came back to life and had all their leaves that had fallen; the greenfinches, goldfinches, herons and golden orioles trilled their happiest songs in the thick foliage. Yes, all was joy and contentment. They came to the palace, where dozens of silver bells rang like laughter in the small bell towers.

And all of the doors and windows opened at the sound, and everywhere ladies and gentlemen and butlers and housekeepers and liveried servants and luxurious carriages with horses gave proof with this coming and going that life was starting again.

“Abella, if you please, will you be my wife?” asked the prince when they got to the great throne room.

Abella leaned gracefully on his arm and said yes, she was already his and was overwhelmed with happiness. But first of all, good daughter that she was, she wished to tell her parents in Banyeres.

“In Banyeres?” coyly asked the prince. He pointed to Jaumet and Roseta, who were walking toward them from the opposite side of the hall, dressed to the teeth, laughing and blushing, accompanied by ladies and courtiers who competed with one another for the honor of walking by their side.

Her parents kissed Abella, greeted the prince and gave their permission for the marriage with all their hearts.

“And what about my step-sisters?” asked Abella.

The prince’s face clouded over like a winter’s day.

Her parents broke down in tears. “Our darling daughters! We don’t know where they are.”

Then the prince spoke up. “They were wicked.”

He explained the whole story. It was they who had thrown the ring into the manure, so that Abella wouldn’t be able to keep her promise to return; they had been the cause of the prince’s death in the form of the black man – from which Abella had miraculously saved him by washing his face with rose water, unwittingly fulfilling the prophecy... No, no. It was impossible. Girgolaina and Murgulina must pay with their lives. And now they had been turned into marble statues standing at the entrance to the park.

They all went to see. Jaumet and Roseta were very sad to find them turned into statues, one at each side of the large iron gates.

Abella appealed to the prince to have mercy. “Forgive them, as I have done. In the end, my dear, you and I have found happiness!”

The prince was a strong man, and just. He thought over her words.

“This cruel act could affect our lives,” she argued.

He reconsidered. Then he closed his eyes, concentrated, whispered a few words in request to a magic power that protected him and finally exclaimed: “All right. I shall also forgive them!”

And at that very moment the statues turned into Girgolaina and Murgulina again. They stepped down from their pedestals and embraced their parents, their sister, the prince and whomever else happened to be in the vicinity. Needless to say, they were now much nicer than before; they had the attractive faces of those who have seen the light of truth.

The next day Abella and the prince were married and from that moment on, they lived in that marvelous mansion and grew old together during many years of peace and tranquility.

The Love of the Oranges Three
(collected at Bèlgida)

Once upon a time there was a widowed king with an only son, whose name was Dalmau. He was always sickly and sad and wanted nothing more than to keep to his bed.

This was a double misfortune for the prince, for it prevented him enjoying both his youth and his realm, which, though small, was a happy, pleasant place, located among great mountains with a mild, inviting clime.

Dalmau was twenty years old at the time of our tale, handsome and slim. But his mysterious malady, which no doctor had been able to diagnose, left him worn and pale, with a melancholy air.

The king – a prudent man who loved his son and his subjects – was at a loss as to how to relieve his son’s dark thoughts. He ordered that a shallow reservoir be built in the palace gardens and filled with the rich olive oil produced in those lands. When it was completed, he decreed that all of the poor who so desired could come and fill up one jar or cruet per person from the pool. He hoped that, apart from its being an act of charity, the noise and movement of all the folks who came – above all the women, with their inevitable, frequent spats – would serve to cheer up the delicate youth. And so it was.

The sumptuous, cozy chamber where the prince Dalmau spent his days had large windows looking over the gardens and he could see the reservoir as he lay in his bed. It was so big it seemed more like a washing tray for wheat in a mill.

One morning, when everything was ready, the guards opened the wrought-iron gates and in streamed a procession of the poor with cruets and jars. Most of them were women dressed in rags, who were prone to raise a ruckus at the slightest of causes.

“I was here first!”

“Get behind me, you!”

“No shoving!”

“...”

At first the prince paid them little heed; but he gradually began to appreciate the humor and spontaneity of the common folk and soon, more than once, he was struck with fits of laughter.

He became quite curious to see the most humble of his subjects at such close range, and he found them so entertaining that in a few days his health was much improved. He frequently got out of bed and sat before the window, always accompanied by his servant Baldiri, from where he could observe the folksy spectacle through the leafy crowns of the acacia trees without being seen himself. The spring sun bathed him in warmth and he breathed in the perfume of the flowering branches.

Day by day the level of the olive oil decreased, until the day came when only a small puddle was left at the bottom of the reservoir. There was hardly enough for a taste. The king had ordered: “Fill the reservoir with oil and let them take it all. Depending on how it goes, I’ll decide what to do next.”

But he had not yet ordered that it be refilled.

The king’s son was getting stronger every day, and now only lay abed to sleep. One morning he got up at around ten, and Baldiri opened the large window so Dalmau could sit and look at the reservoir. Since everyone knew there was no more oil, no one had shown up. The prince passed the time listening to the lilting song of the greenfinches, the sweet violin tones of the goldfinches and the joyful piping of the swallows. When Baldiri left the room to attend to some duties, Dalmau saw a very old woman enter the

garden, though her movements seemed quite agile. Her dark dress, which must have been quite elegant in other days, was in tatters; and on her head she wore an ancient, worn satin mob-cap. She was clearly a lady who had fallen on hard times and hadn't wanted to show up with her cruet and her ragged clothes among the noisy crowd of unwashed indigents and so had waited till the very end. In short, she must have been ashamed of her poverty.

Dalmau was intrigued. "Why is she coming now," he thought, "when there's no oil left to be had?" And he watched in amazement as she approached the reservoir, produced a white rag, bent over and began to rub the floor and squeeze out the last remaining oil, drop by drop, into the cruet.

He contemplated the grotesque figure of that poor old lady wiping up the drops and then meticulously squeezing them out, and he had a sudden fit of laughter... like a child. It was hilarious to see that ridiculous effort. But then it occurred to him that out of pride this aged lady looked down on all the rest of the penniless poor who shouted and laughed and were happy for a spell as they took advantage of the king's self-interested charity.

The thought of it darkened his mood and he felt a sudden resentment for the destitute old woman. In the meantime, she had finished scouring the bottom of the reservoir and, casting glances from left to right as though she were afraid, walked toward the exit. And what does that spoiled and self-centered Dalmau do? Well, he searches the room for some ivory marbles he played with as a child and shoots them at her with a slingshot. The first one misses. He fires another and holds his breath... That one misses too. Oblivious of what is happening, the lady walks on toward the gate, and Dalmau moves closer to the window. This time he hits his mark and a loud cliink! is heard.

"Oh Mary Mother of God!" the woman screams.

The cruet had broken into three pieces and the precious liquid, like transparent gold, streamed down her hands and arms, staining her tattered dress, and onto the ground.

"Who did this?"

Her eyes were flaming with indignation. She heard someone laugh and looked up to see the prince staring down from the window through the branches of the acacias. Then she spoke up with a sharp, broken voice in a threatening tone that struck some fear into the prince's heart.

And do you know what that old woman said, what curse she flung at him? It was this:

*You may be the son of the king
and king you may someday be...
But never will you ever win
the Love of the Oranges Three.*

The greenfinches, goldfinches and other birds... all fell silent when this spell was pronounced. Suddenly feeling repentant, the prince cried out in that strange silence:

"My good woman... Do not go! I shall give you a jug of oil!"

At that moment Baldiri returned.

"What is it, your highness?"

"Go down to the garden and fetch her here to me," Dalmau ordered, pointing to the woman through the window.

All that time the poor old lady stood unmoving between the reservoir and the garden gate, still holding the neck of the broken cruet in her hand.

Baldiri went downstairs and took her courteously by the hand and led her through grand entranceways, dark passages, highly adorned marble halls and solemn stairways to Dalmau's chamber.

"Come in, good woman, come in," said the youth sweetly. "I beg your forgiveness for the ugly pranks I have played on you. My faithful Baldiri will take a jug of oil to your home."

The lady's demeanor changed in a flash.

"May God repay you, fair prince," she said, happy now. "And as for the pranks, seeing you so young and polite, all is forgiven."

Baldiri went to fetch the olive oil. The prince took a seat and signaled her to be seated before him.

"Now that we are friends," he said, "I pray you to tell me what I must do to attain the Love of the Oranges Three; for my heart tells me that when I find it, I shall shake off my strange malady."

At that moment Baldiri came back with the olive oil. He showed it to the old woman and left to take it to the address she gave him.

Dalmau insisted: "Speak to me of the Love of the Oranges Three. I feel that I deeply need it."

"Forsooth, you speak truly," she replied, "for I am certain that your malady is nothing more than a terrible thirst for love. A woman's love, be it mother or wife; and it came from the death of your mother, the queen, may she rest in peace."

"So what can I do?"

"Take heed," continued the old woman, "and I shall tell you how to find the Love of the Oranges Three... Be warned; it lies in a distant country, far from your father's realm. And long before you, the finest knights of neighboring kingdoms, and kingdoms even more remote, have journeyed to win it and failed to return. That is, they died in the attempt."

Dalmau's heart was inflamed, and the prospect of danger only served to strengthen his resolve to undertake the daring feat. More than anything in the world he wished to find that mysterious Love rather than succumb to the languorous life he was now leading. So he said excitedly, "Nothing will stop me! Please go on!"

"You will have to prepare your best horse for a very long journey; and then make ready a jug of milk, a lamb from the royal livestock and three good brooms with strong, slender broomsticks."

She stopped to take a breath.

"And what else should I take?"

"Nothing more. It's not enough?" The lady smiled. "Of course you'll also need your provisions, a purse full of doubloons, just in case, and this." She reached into an opening in her apron and brought forth a small box and a ball of fine woolen thread, about the size of a fist.

"The box contains a powder you must put into the milk so it won't go bad, and the thread, that I'll explain later."

Dalmau placed the objects in a drawer and returned to his seat.

"You will have to ride toward the south," she explained, "along the course of the Moliner River. After about three days' travel you will find an oddly-shaped boulder, like a thin bell tower, on the right bank of the river. There you must turn right and cross a broad valley full of woods and meadows. Let the lamb and horse graze well on the rich grass there and fill your canteens at one of the hundreds of springs you'll find all around, for that is the last of the vegetated lands in your father's realm; and beyond it are cold and arid plains and hills. After two more days you will descend to a broad

desert lowland. Then, when you have gone through some impressive red clay gorges, a rocky and uninhabited plain will open before your eyes. Look closely at the line of the horizon and you will make out a dark stain, which is, in fact, a shady oasis with more than twenty thousand palm trees. At the very center of that oasis lies the palace of the Orange Tree of Love.

Dalmau, hanging on every word, smiled broadly. “In all, a week’s journey,” he remarked.

“Yes, at a good horse’s pace. But as you’ll be hampered by the lamb and all the rest... better to count on eight days.”

“All right. And why will I need the milk, the lamb and the three brooms?”

“Here’s the explanation. As you head toward the oasis you will come to a place with three paths. Take the middle one, which leads directly to the palace. When you get close you’ll see a large wall that encircles the gardens; it has wrought-iron gates. Do not go near. Wait, instead, until you hear the clock in the mansion’s tower strike twelve (very slowly) at mid-day. The gates will open then. Go through them as quickly as you can; you’ll have five minutes to do the deed, for the clock strikes again at 12.05 and the gates will close. If you remain trapped inside you will surely die.”

Dalmau didn’t miss a thing.

“As soon as you’re inside, you’ll hear the roar of a lion. When it rushes out to devour you, give it the lamb and it will let you pass. After that, from beneath a mass of green vines at the front of the palace a horrid long serpent as big around as your thigh will slither out. Jump off of your horse, open the jug of milk and give it to him. The serpent will let you pass by too. Remount and go on. Next a witch will come out of the building – very ugly and very evil. Do not look at her for anything in the world, for if you do you will be turned to stone. Instead, looking down at the ground, throw the three brooms at her feet. She’ll pick them up and go back into the palace. That’s when you must go around the mansion to a small courtyard where you’ll find the famous Orange Tree of Love.

“At last!” Dalmau sighed.

“At the foot of the tree,” the lady continued, “you’ll see a gigantic African resting against the roots. Look at him carefully! If his eyes are open, he’s asleep. If they’re closed, he’s awake. If he’s sleeping, pick the three oranges hanging from the boughs; and if not, run away, for he would kill you in a flash with his huge scimitar. Hurry back to the gates!”

The prince looked upset. “So I would have to give up the quest?”

“No! You could go back the following day to try again, because the lion, the serpent and the witch would recognize you as a friend.”

“And what about the ball of thread?”

“If you manage to pick the oranges and get through the gates and the African comes after you to kill you, throw it, partially unraveled, onto the ground. It will form a web on all of the trunks of the palms and a thick fog will fill up the woods and make it impossible for him to catch you.”

Now, visibly tired, the lady fell silent, staring straight into Dalmau’s eyes.

“And then, what should I do with the three oranges?” he asked. (That was the most important thing!)

But she didn’t reply.

“Tell me, good woman,” insisted the prince.

Silence.

“What must I do to find Love?”

To Dalmau's great astonishment, the lady started to change colors as he sat there. Her dark dress gradually turned almost white, her hands and face became transparent and then she simply vanished!

"What... my good woman!" cried the youth, rubbing his eyes.

Baldiri came in.

"What do you see?"

"Nothing, my lord. You're alone."

And it was true. The other seat was empty.

Amazed by this wonder, but also reflecting – and rightly so – that it meant occult forces must be behind the Love of the Oranges Three, Dalmau didn't lose heart. Early next morning he felt better than he had in months. So he prepared his horse, the jug of milk with the powders mixed in, the lamb and the three brooms. His servants helped to saddle and load the horse in the royal stables.

The contraption they came up with was original indeed. The animal was given a magnificent saddle with stirrups and behind that, tied to the hind bow with cords that formed a kind of carrier, they placed a game bag on its haunches with the lamb inside, so that only its head stuck out. The three brooms were also tied crossways behind the saddle. The food and canteens were packed in a satin bag hanging from the horse's neck, the ball of thread was under his shirt and his sword hung in its scabbard from his belt.

The night before, Dalmau had told his father everything. The king was perplexed, but also happy to see the change that had come over his previously melancholy son. Now, with the horse all ready he went upstairs to his father's chambers to take his leave and receive his blessing. And then he rode out with all of that outlandish paraphernalia. It was the middle of a magnificent May morning.

Now what can I tell you about his journey? The horse was carrying so many things; he wasted so much time pasturing the lamb, stopping to rest at inns along the way where the horse had to eat abundant fodder, and even going into a few of the scant towns he encountered, that the trip took ten days instead of seven or eight! Dalmau certainly followed the mysterious lady's instructions to a T: he rode down the Moliner River; on the third day, in the midst of a rugged gorge, he came upon the boulder that resembled a bell tower. After that he passed by the long, cool fell bordering his kingdom and the one to the south; and there he let the horse and lamb graze on the wild alfalfa and luxuriant clover that carpeted the soil and he filled two canteens with water from a gurgling spring.

It all came to pass as the woman had said. He crossed the arid flatlands and, after passing through the red clay gullies, the immense desert appeared before him. In some places it was rocky, in others dusty, and it was all being scorched by a blinding sun in the implacably cloudless sky. But he was relieved to discover, far away on the line of the horizon, the stain that was the oasis.

He rode slowly down to the enormous plain through lonely, barren ravines, along rocky chasms where large, screaming birds circled and the wind whistled menacingly. Then night fell and he was forced to take shelter beneath a rocky outcrop that protected him from the damp and cold.

He was awakened early the next morning by a bright sun. He took a drink of water, rinsed the sleep out of his eyes, breakfasted on bread and beef jerky and mounted his

horse. Till now, neither it nor the lamb had lacked green grass to graze on. That was when Dalmau noticed, about a league away on his right, a small town. There was no need to go there now, but it could come in handy on the return trip.

It took the prince another day and half to get to the oasis. The first thing he did on arriving was dismount in the shade of some palm trees to let his horse graze on the small, juicy herbs that grew there like a gift of that island of verdant life. Dalmau also collected a handful himself and gave it to the lamb, still in its carrier. It was ten o'clock in the morning.

Next he looked over the terrain and spotted, not far away, the three paths that led into the palm grove. Rested now, he hopped into the saddle and took the middle path, in strict accord with the mysterious lady's instructions. After an hour and a half on horseback, the wall surrounding the palace gardens came into view. Without dismounting, he waited nervously for the clock to strike twelve. Through the wrought-iron bars of the gate, directly before him, he could see the gardens, with their fruit trees and flower beds, as well as one wing of the building, which seemed to be made of honey-colored stonework.

Even though he was expecting them, the first strokes of twelve surprised him. They were long and sonorous, echoing all through the grove of palm trees. It was a wonder! The gates began to move at the first stroke and they gradually opened. Dalmau brought his horse up close and, before all twelve had struck, was well within the gardens.

In no time at all the lion appeared. It was terrifying: roaring ferociously, with sharp claws, enormous head, a mouth full of dangerous teeth... Feeling much remorse, the prince threw it the unfortunate lamb; the lion took it up between its fearful jaws and disappeared among the tree trunks.

Ten paces further on, the serpent! Dalmau gave a start! He got down from the horse, set the jug of milk on the ground, removed the lid and took a step back. The disgusting reptile stuck its scaly snout in the milk and made a rapid slurping sound. (The prince wasn't at all surprised that it was still fresh after so many days, as he remembered the powders he'd added before setting out.)

"They must be magic," he murmured as he got back into the saddle.

He watched the serpent, content and satisfied, slither back into the underbrush and then went on. Now it was the devilish witch's turn; she came out of the mansion and rushed toward Dalmau like a bat out of hell.

"Ahh-hahh!" brayed the long, bony thing. "Brigand! You dare to invade our paradise! . . ."

His eyes averted, Dalmau threw the three brooms onto the ground at her feet. And just in time, too! Because she was going to spit out a fiendish curse. Instead, she gathered them up, changed her expression and said with a smile, "Thank-you, good knight. Now I have broomsticks for three Saturdays."

And she shot like a rocket back into the sumptuous, silent mansion.

"I must have lost at least a minute with all of this," he thought, and hurried on to the back of the palace, where he came upon a small clearing surrounded by honeysuckle vines. And there in its midst he saw the legendary orange tree at last.

It was a noble thing, with a high, pompous crown and shiny, deep-green leaves. Only three perfectly round oranges hung solemnly from its boughs. But at the foot of that tree was the most gigantic and ferocious-looking African you could imagine. He was naked from the waist up and rested against the lower trunk, his legs stretched out on the ground. On his dark-red trousers lay a huge scimitar that must have weighed at least twenty-five pounds. A cold shiver ran down Dalmau's spine!

But he wouldn't be cowed. Keeping calm, he examines the giant's eyes. What good luck, my God! They were open! "He's asleep," thinks the prince; and he goes up to the tree, picks the three oranges from his saddle, stores them under his shirt along with the ball of thread, turns the horse around and starts his get-away, his heart beating like a hammer with apprehension. And at that moment – dong, dong, dong – the deep, slow ringing of the bells begins. Time to gallop!

Would he make it? It was a close place. If he hadn't galloped off, the African wouldn't have woken up... So, one way or another, things looked bleak.

"Witch, turn him to stone!" rang out the African's voice.

"No. He gave me three brooms!" answered the diabolical creature.

"Serpent, squeeze him to death!"

"No. He filled me up with milk!" hissed that hellish being.

"Lion, tear him to bits with your claws!"

"No. He fed me a tender lamb!" roared the king of all beasts.

Dalmau just managed to ride through the gates with the last chime of the clock, and the horse's tail got stuck as they closed. But it was only a few loose hairs. The prince cut through them with his sword and galloped away at a frenetic pace.

Then though, the gate opened again and out ran the giant, now as awake and alert as a fox, braying and huffing like a dragon. It was enough to strike fear in the calmest heart in the world.

Knowing that he carried the Three Oranges of Love next to his breast – that is, the Love of the Oranges Three – the prince felt a supreme confidence in his luck and in his life. It was as though he could glimpse a strong light, or hear a secret music, like a current of joy that would never end.

But the giant, with his very long legs, was coming dangerously close. The prince looked over his shoulder and saw him about a hundred paces behind. He commended himself to God and his luck as the conqueror of the Three Oranges of Love; he took out the ball of thread, loosened it a bit with light and agile fingers and cast it back toward the giant. In the batting of an eyelid the air became turgid as the ball leapt from tree trunk to tree trunk, rapidly weaving a thick, firm web. In a few minutes' time all of the palm trees within a considerable radius around the giant were connected with a dense film of very strong fibers that the guardian struggled in vain to break. Then Dalmau could see no more, as a heavy fog seeped out of the web behind him and blocked it all from his view.

He wasted no more time. Riding on at a quick pace, he was soon outside of the beautiful and now fog-laden oasis. In the rocky, uneven expanse of the desert, the sun beat down and the air felt like the inside of an oven. The stones looked hot enough to explode. Then Dalmau noticed that he was drenched in sweat from the dangerous ride and the recent wrenching emotions. He tried a canteen and found it as light as a feather; not a drop of water was left. And in the other one? It did have a few scant drops, which he drank down carefully. Where would he be able to refill them?

For the time being the prince's thirst was allayed, but what about the horse? It really needed to drink as well, and that wasn't possible at the moment. Horses however, especially young and hearty thoroughbreds like this one, are highly resistant; and its master had to count on that for now.

So they went on at a moderate speed, trotting instead of galloping like before. And it must have been around three o'clock when the prince spotted ahead of them a patch of leafy palm trees. "We'll stop and rest there," he murmured.

He reckoned there would likely be a spring somewhere nearby, as the trees were located at the foot of a long hill, on its shaded side. But he was disappointed when he got there. Shade there was, yes, as well as a scattering of half-dried grass, left over from the short springtime season of the desert. It wasn't much, but it provided some temporary refreshment for the horse, which he gave free rein to graze at its ease.

The prince rested against the trunk of a palm tree and soon dozed off; but only for a few minutes, because he suddenly started to wonder what he should do with the three mysterious oranges he had beneath his shirt. His heart told him that they would help him to find true love and good health some day. But he couldn't imagine how. When he got back to the palace he would seek the advice of his father's counselors. They would call on the wisest man in the kingdom to decide how best to proceed.

All of these thoughts made him feel jumpy; he was suddenly squirming from side to side.

He ate the small amount of food that was left, while the arid breeze burned his lips and throat. It didn't take long for the horse to nibble down all of the sparse sprigs of grass and now it pawed the ground impatiently. The sun was getting lower in the sky and in the distance he could see the reddened earth and the hills and vales that led to the high dry flatlands between the desert and his kingdom. "How far I am from my own land!" he said to himself. Then he got to his feet, mounted the horse and set off again. He had rested a bit, but was still thirsty and weak.

"There's a long way yet to go, at least another hard day in the desert. I hope my horse can make it... Without water I'll be the one that won't make it. And what if . . ."

Talking to himself like this made him feel better.

The thought came into his mind like a bolt of lightning. Should he eat one of the oranges? In any case, Nature made oranges to be eaten, no matter how mysterious they may be. That way he'd see if eating it was a part of the mystery... and it would quench his thirst – which was no small matter.

He could already taste that rich juice of the queen of all the fruits... But, not quite knowing how, he conjured up the willpower to resist the temptation.

The sun still beat down pitilessly, and after about a half an hour he felt exhausted again. He made another halt in the shade of some tall boulders, dismounted and tied his horse to a large aloe plant and dropped headlong onto the ground. He could fight the desire no longer: he sat up, took out an orange, cut it with his sword, began to remove the peel and cloof! The orange burst open... And out of it came a woman of about twenty years of age; she was very pretty and had an elegant figure. A kind of light mist surrounded her, but it soon drifted away.

Astonished, Dalmau hastily stood up and made a deep bow. And then she asked him unabashedly: "Sir Knight, have you water for me to wash with?"

"No, my lady. How could I?" he stuttered.

"Have you a comb for me to comb my hair?"

"I have not."

"Have you powder for me to powder my face?"

"No."

"In that case, I shall go back to my orange tree!" she haughtily exclaimed. And, with a look of disgust, she vanished.

Dalmau stared at the desolate land all around him. Everything was still and sad: the dark spot of the oasis was almost indistinguishable in the distance; no birds sang; and

the shadows of the oddly-shaped boulder that sheltered him were lengthening like an omen of darkness. At his feet lay the two dusty half spheres of the peel of the first Orange of Love.

“Who was that beautiful young damsel? How could she have come from such a tiny hiding-place? How did she vanish into thin air?” Three questions that hammered at his brain and filled him with sadness.

“Oh well . . .” he sighed.

So, steeling his heart, he started off again.

At nightfall he found another place to shelter among the rocks, took a few bites of food with little appetite and a dry mouth and went to sleep. The horse, hungry and thirsty, tied to the stump of a vine, was restless all night.

The next day, they set off dully again.

After a few dreadful hours on the move, he came to a bare, rock-strewn hill; and from its brow he could see, off to the left, that village or small town he had noticed before not far from the desert. Without thinking twice he changed directions and headed that way. He could purchase provisions there, refill his canteens, give his worn-out horse a much-needed rest and, most important of all, acquire at any price a comb made of ivory or mother-of-pearl and a box of fine, perfumed powder fit for a reigning queen.

Just the thought of it all lifted his spirits, and when he arrived he found a place with the neat appearance of a city. It wasn't very big and it had grown up around a smallish Roman castle. He learned from the townsfolk that its lord in olden times was one Augustus.

Dalmau was directed to an inn where there were other desert travelers. He left the horse safely tethered in a roomy stable and went straight to a cool dining room where he renewed his strength with tasty drinks and an abundance of excellent foods. Then he went to a local bazaar and bought an ivory comb and a box of sweet-smelling oriental powders.

Back at the inn, he slept the whole night through, keeping the two remaining oranges close within his grasp.

The following day he was a new man. He bathed, had breakfast, bought provisions for the road and filled his canteens with water and rode at a good trot out of town. He made his way through the red gorges and reached the arid highlands. Much calmer and relaxed than on the journey out, he rested along the way and stopped over at inns, and in a few days came to the fell that marked the beginning of his kingdom.

He reflected now that there was still water in his canteens, but what he didn't have left was any patience concerning the mystery of the two remaining oranges. What could there be inside? Was there another lady, young or old, in each one? Or had the first orange been unique, in accord with the many enigmas of this singular adventure?

So he decided! Without commending himself to either God or the devil, he gets down from the horse and goes to the side of the road, sits down and takes out an orange and – pom! – he slices into it with his sword. Cloof! Just as he suspected... a young woman comes out, if possible even more refined and attractive than the first, and poor Dalmau is astounded. However, he hastily remarks:

“My lady, I didn't know you were inside the orange.”

Just as touchy as beautiful, she asks him hurriedly:

“Have you a comb for my hair?”

“Yes. Here,” replies Dalmau, self-satisfied.

“Have you powders so I can powder my face?”

“Take these,” and he offers her the blessed box.

“Have you water I can wash with?”

The prince shook the two canteens... and they were both empty! What a mistake!

“No... but I can bring you some in a jiffy.”

“Hah!” Petulant as could be, she hardly lets him finish.

“I’m going back to my orange tree!”

And she disappeared like a mist when it’s touched by the sun.

That night, in a foul mood, Dalmau left the road he was following and took a path that seemed to lead toward a dim light he saw through the branches of the olive trees. It was a highland village, which he reached in about fifteen minutes. He had an unpleasant supper there in a greasy little inn and went early to bed. He only slept because of the exhaustion he felt in his bones, and the next day he woke up sleepy still and still discouraged by the two failed apparitions. He dared not touch the third orange.

He talked to himself as he rode. “Should I open it?... Maybe, maybe so, one of these days before I get to the palace. Or afterwards, when we can take all the necessary precautions.”

And so, all of these thoughts running through his mind, Dalmau completed most of his journey home. When he had ridden past the wide fell he knew he was in the pleasant and familiar land of his own kingdom. Feeling nervous and restless, he put his hand on the orange and murmured, “I’d like to open it now and find out once and for all.”

He hadn’t the slightest doubt that a third wonder would occur; the apparition of another marvelous young damsel to whom he could offer, with no hemming or hawing, those three things he now knew they would always ask for – that is, water, comb, powders... or comb, powders and water, no matter the order.

In a couple of days, riding through his homeland, he came to the strange boulder, within earshot of the sonorous Moliner River. Looking all around again and again, he rejoiced in one thing: “This is my cool, fertile country, lying among great mountains, with forests, greenery, fields of waving grain and the sweet perfume of flowering apple groves.”

When he was only a few hours out from his father’s house, the capital in sight in the distance, he sat a while to rest beside a bubbling spring that formed a pool surrounded by pine trees, cypresses and white poplars. It was a delightful spot: nightingales sang on the boughs, bees buzzed from flower to flower, a soft breeze gently touched the bending plants as it moved the morning air.

“So, what if I open it here?” he was almost shouting.

Without another thought he draws his sword, takes out the orange and makes a long cut in its shiny, aromatic peel. And of course, there was a cloof! as before and a princess appeared... yes, she was a real princess – no doubt about it. And a beautiful one to boot! Her gown, with a discrete pattern of flowers, was encrusted with tiny jewels that broke the sunlight into thousands of minuscule sparks. Her hair was wavy and fair, and slightly disheveled. Her cheeks were like the just-opened petals of a rose. Her large, expressive eyes were as blue as the sky... Everything about her was tremendously attractive.

This time Dalmau didn’t act as before; this time it was worse. He was speechless, and he could feel his heart pounding like a hammer. She smiled, and the prince was emboldened to respond with a delicate bow.

“Have you water that I can wash with?” she asks, for she had appeared with her back to the pool.

“Behind you is all you could wish for,” says Dalmau happily.

“Have you a comb for my hair?”

“I have kept this ivory comb for you,” he answers; and it was true.

“Have you powders so I can powder my face?”

“Yes, my lady; here they are,” offering her the box.

The damsel very diligently rinses her lovely face in the babbling water of the spring; using the pool as a mirror, she carefully combs her abundant, lustrous hair; and after that she turns her back to the prince and pats her velvety cheeks with those perfumed powders. It seemed impossible, but the astounded prince found her even more beautiful than before.

And what does he do then? Oh yes, he could be bold at times! He places one knee on the ground and introduces himself: “I am Dalmau, prince of the kingdom of the High Mountains... And with this clear blue sky, this pure spring water, this shining sun and the eternal beauty of these mountains as my witness, I request your hand, whoever you may be, in marriage.”

His voice rang with a moving sincerity.

It took the lady some seconds to respond – seconds that seemed an eternity to Dalmau. Then, she looks into his eyes and says: “I am the princess Silvana, of the kingdom of Quiet Waters. I was kidnapped by the wizard of the Palace of the Oranges of Love, as were other ladies before me. It was written that a gallant youth would come from the lands to the north to free me... and that I would marry him!”

If she had waited any longer... the prince was on tenterhooks. “You will take me then, as your spouse?”

“It is my destiny... a fate that also pleases me,” Silvana modestly answered.

She said no more – and that was enough – but gave a broad smile and permitted the prince, bursting with joy, to kiss her proffered hands.

He then suggested that it wouldn't be at all fitting for a princess of her status to enter the capital of the kingdom on foot like a common traveler, nor on horseback like an adventuress; so he would go on ahead and explain the circumstances to his father and then return for her in a sumptuous carriage laden with flowers and drawn by four white steeds. Two more ceremonial carriages with courtiers and ladies would follow behind.

Silvana of the Quiet Waters found this to be a fine idea.

“My kingdom,” said the smiling prince, “is calm and peaceful. No one will say anything unworthy of you. Wait here and rest assured that I shall return in no time at all.”

He then leapt into the saddle and galloped off at a furious pace.

Things almost never turn out as we plan, especially when the plans are not well thought out. In fact, Dalmau reached his father's palace after an hour's gallop and rushed into the king's chambers to tell him of all that had happened. But the homecoming of a prince from a perilous journey is no everyday occurrence, and the hubbub it raised in the palace among the court was a sight to see... Ringing of bells, music, congratulations... The king shed copious tears of joy and embraced his doubly recovered son again and again.

“I have to tell you something,” urged Dalmau.

“Long live the prince!” cried the faithful Baldiri, running through halls and corridors.

And the noisy reply rang throughout the palace: “Long live the prince!”
“This is wasting so much time,” lamented Dalmau, “while Silvana must be out there by the spring twiddling her fingers.”

And meanwhile, what was happening out there?

Well, the sun had passed mid-day and Silvana, all alone, was feeling bored and sad. Each hour seemed to her like a day. She wished one of Dalmau’s father’s subjects would walk by so she could strike up a conversation, both for distraction and to find out something about that magnificent land she would, in time to come, reign over as queen. But the hours passed and not a living soul came by.

She felt so dreary and alone that she decided to take a walk – not too far from the spot, of course, only enough to freshen her body and lighten her mind. So she rises and follows the stream coming from the spring to find its source. It took her through a narrow, shady little ravine, covered with wild violets and honeysuckle vines and thick underbrush. And after five minutes she came to the source.

The water bubbled out of a small grotto, taller than a man’s height and about six feet in width. There were stalactites and stalagmites everywhere and fresh garlands of maidenhair fern hung from the moist, mossy walls, adding to that nook’s enchantment.

So much sudden, hidden beauty made a strong impression on Silvana. With her new-found freedom and the blessing of love, her heart was well disposed to appreciate the beauties of Nature. But her contemplation of the place was short-lived for, to the left of the bubbling spring she saw a strange old woman sitting on a ledge of rock and almost covered over by the thick maidenhair fern rising up from the ground. The woman stared at her in silence.

“Oh,” exclaimed Silvana, “excuse me. I didn’t see you there... God be with you.”

“And with you, lovely lady,” the old woman said in a very pleasant voice.

Then she rose and gave a reverential bow.

“I bow thus,” she explained, “for I can see from your carriage, your great beauty and the very fine dress you wear that you are a veritable princess.”

Silvana of the Quiet Waters, truly kind and affectionate, bade her be seated and replied, “You judge rightly. I am a princess and, what’s more, the fiancé of the prince Dalmau, of whom you have surely heard.”

“Oh yes! And I have seen him, too. Young and handsome he is... What a fine king he will make!... And you? I’ll warrant you will make a fine queen as well.”

They traded a few more compliments, Silvana thanking her each time and the old woman always replying.

Then she asked, “Pardon my curiosity, but what is a high-blooded lady like you doing here alone?” Without going into details, Silvana explained that she was waiting for the retinue to come and take her to the palace, where she was to be presented to the court.

The old woman, grey-haired, sad-eyed, skinny and tall as a bean-post, stood up and observed, “In that case, my lady, your hair is a bit unkempt for such an important occasion!”

“What?” The princess was surprised. “Why, I just . . .”

“No need to worry,” interrupted the cunning old woman, who was, in truth, a dangerous witch. “I’m sure you combed your hair yourself, and very conscientiously, too. But the plants along the side of the path and this playful breeze, that never lets up

for a second, have mussed that wonderful head of hair you have... If you wish, I can comb it again for you. And to keep the regal waves I'll give in place, I'll slip in these mother-of-pearl hairpins I've got and have no use for at all... at my age."

She let out a laugh.

Silvana, silly girl, agreed, feeling quite grateful.

So the witch asked her to sit on the ledge and she handed the old woman the ivory comb Dalmau had given her. Standing at her back, that old crone began to carefully comb her hair, as though luxuriating in the princess's fair, silken curls. Then suddenly she drew a long golden needle from her wicked skirts and stuck it viciously into Silvana's ear, as deep as it would go. The girl screamed shrilly... but only once – the first and the last. For in an instant she was turned into a soft butterfly, as large as the palm of a hand and as white as snow; and it fluttered off into the air. Her lovely, expensive gown fell empty onto the dewy grass.

"Good! It's done!" cried the witch triumphantly.

And she gave such a loud, sarcastic guffaw that it almost could have stabbed into the stone walls of the grotto. Then she collected some dry leaves and twigs and made a pile on the ground, poured onto it some drops from a small bottle she produced and lit a fire. A tenuous smoke rose up into the bright afternoon air. Next she knelt down and recited a diabolical litany, repeating over and over, "I am the devil's spawn. I am the devil's spawn." Little by little her white hair darkened and went blonde; her narrow, bony shoulders filled out, her skinny legs and arms took on firm, young flesh and in a few minutes she turned into a twenty-year-old woman, more or less the same size as the ill-fated princess.

But oh! It wasn't in her power to imitate Silvana's form exactly. Yes, she copied her long hair, but it was reddish like an ear of corn; yes, she imitated her tone of voice, but with an unpleasant rasp, hardly celestial; yes, she took on her big, blue eyes, but it was the blue of a bitter sea, not of a splendid pure sky... Nevertheless she leapt to her feet and went down to the edge of the pool to see herself in the mirror of its deep, still waters.

"I'm not bad-looking at all," she whispered. "If Dalmau's memory isn't too good, as he's only seen Silvana for a few minutes, he'll probably believe I'm her."

Meanwhile, the butterfly that had been the princess stayed close to the witch, fluttering about the spring, over the little stream of water and around the pool. And the counterfeit princess, a large reed in her hand, tried to shoo it away with furious swipes through the light, sweet-smelling air of the place.

Having looked and looked at herself and contemplated her new physiognomy with pleasure, the witch went back to the grotto, took off her coarse clothing and put on Silvana's lovely dress. And thus, although she was no great beauty like the princess, she turned out to be a good-looking girl.

The afternoon sun was moving down toward the high mountaintops to the west, and at last there was a persistent ringing of silver bells. The false Silvana, who had been sitting at the edge of the pool awaiting Dalmau, stood up in anticipation, ready to run any and all risks, of which there would be many. Shortly the sound of bells was joined by the crisp and elegant hoof beats of galloping horses and three shining carriages appeared around a bend in the road, with four armed horsemen riding before them.

The procession quickly reached the pool.

From the first carriage, drawn by four prancing steeds as white as ermine, steps the prince, accompanied by two serious-looking courtiers with white beards and wearing official-looking uniforms. At the same time various ladies and knights step out of the other two carriages. The king's son comes forward, all excited, takes the simulated princess's hand and says in a loud, tremulous voice:

"My friends, I here present my wife-to-be, the princess Silvana of the kingdom of Quiet Waters!... My Princess, here before you stand part of my father's brilliant court."

Greetings, bows, offerings... while the prince stares unobserved at the make-believe Silvana as she smiles as sweetly as her dark soul will permit. For that smile, though courteous, was more devilish than sweet.

And Dalmau looks and looks!

Then she, as cunning as a hungry fox, says lovingly:

"My Prince, what do you see in me now, to make you regard me so? Or is it only because of the love you feel?"

"I do not know... I do not know," stammered Dalmau. For she looked like Silvana, though with a lackluster beauty – strange and diminished.

"Well, I know what it is," laughed the usurper. "You find my face flushed by the sun and the wind... You've taken so long to come back, my love, that you've allowed the harsh light of this ravine to mistreat me as it wished."

The courtiers held their tongues, rather surprised by the cheekiness of this forward daughter of the kingdom of Quiet Waters (a kingdom none had ever seen, though they had heard it described as a distant, desert-like land in the South).

"Yes, my Silvana, I have tarried," Dalmau humbly confessed, "and I beg you to forgive me."

The courtiers then began to converse merrily.

"And now, everyone to the carriages!" ordered the prince.

They were soon under way, Dalmau and the princess-witch in the main carriage, the one with the white horses, along with two oldish and obsequious ladies who said to the pretender, "Now, your highness, in the shaded air of the palace you will recover the fair complexion that the prince observed with so much pleasure this morning."

That witch in the guise of a princess was in a rush. Settled into the palace and introduced to the king, she requested that he arrange the nuptials as soon as possible in order to avoid gossip. It would be better, she alleged, not to await the arrival of her parents, the king and queen of Quiet Waters, as they lived far, far away and would take months to arrive; for although a messenger had been sent, he would have to cross the wide desert.

The king found this reasonable and within a week's time the festive occasion began.

The early summer weather was radiant; the cathedral shook with the ringing of bells; firecrackers and Roman candles were let off in squares and streets; balconies were garlanded with ribbons and paper lanterns, arcs made of myrtle and pine boughs, pennants and streamers; kiddies ran and shouted, joyful music filled the air; carriages and important folks in formal attire were all about; officers in handsome uniforms marched here and there, polished leather straps, shining halberds and sabers and regulation boots that gave out a rhythmic metallic sound as they struck against the cobblestones in the castle square . . .

And the ceremony was performed with all of the pomp and luxury typical of royal weddings: a long religious act with a great deal of incense, moving organ music, chasubles, dalmatics and stunningly sumptuous robes. The king, in the seat of honor, was bursting with joy and the townsfolk pressed into the church, filling it from top to bottom.

“That Dalmau is a real prince . . .”

“And he seemed to be such a cream puff!”

They say he killed a lion . . .”

“And a great big snake . . .”

“And he fooled a giant!”

“Now her... yes, she’s pretty, but she looks like a bad seed.”

And other similar mutterings.

Then the priest spoke up: “Do you take this woman as your lawfully wedded wife?”

“I do!”

And a happy “oooh!” broke out all around. At that moment a large butterfly appeared above the altar and fluttered about the princely couple’s heads.

The onlookers were amazed. “What a beautiful creature!”

There was an angry cry. It was the bride, lashing out at the thing with the folds of her veil and flowers and assorted adornments – for it had settled upon Dalmau’s shoulder.

“Kill it!” she says, in that rasping voice of hers.

What a commotion!

The mysterious winged creature then takes flight and exits the cathedral.

Not long after, the ceremony ended.

But half-way into the wedding reception, in the sumptuous palace dining hall... the butterfly... returns; and the newly-wed bride had another badly-concealed fit of pique.

The little thing flitted in between the couple; the princess-witch hurled a plate at it in fury; the plate missed and crashed into the profusely decorated chest of a fat and solemn courtier. Oh, oh!

Everyone rose to their feet. The king shouted hoarsely, “Calm down, daughter-in-law, calm down! No need to be afraid of a little moth. It’s a harmless, pretty insect!”

Some said under their breath: “Afraid of moths!”

And others: “What a hot temper this princess has!”

Once again the beautiful snow-white animal settled on Dalmau’s shoulder.

“Kill it! Kill it! Kill it!” shouted the maddened witch.

The prince, however, carefully took the over-sized butterfly in his hand and said, “This poor thing? How could I kill something so lovely, Silvana?”

But his bride was enraged, spittle on her lips! Oh, if she had had a magic wand in her hand or a fire in which to toss some magic powders... that pesky butterfly wouldn’t have had a chance!

“If you truly love me, my husband, crush it to dust right now!” she urged.

At that very moment the prince, caressing the insect, shouted: “This butterfly has a needle in its head!”

“Nooo!” the counterfeit princess brayed.

To everyone’s amazement, the bridegroom takes the tiny head of the needle between his fingernails and, while the butterfly kept perfectly still, gently pulls it out. And then, wonder of wonders! There is a “cloof” as when he had opened the magic oranges, a vivid light breaks out and the real Silvana appears, with all of her majesty and charm and wearing her own gown, in Dalmau’s arms.

At the same time the imitation Silvana turned back into the witch of the spring, wearing her tattered clothes. And everyone there, horrified, started to shout:

“Don’t let her escape!”

“Catch her!”

“She’s getting away!”

She gave a sudden start and ran behind the seats of the guests toward the open balcony.

“She’s a witch!” thundered Dalmau. “Don’t let her get her hands on a broom or she could fly away.”

Many of the courtiers and guards drew their swords and gave pursuit. The old woman was close to the balcony and, shaking with fear, looked desperately for some worn-out broom that the servants may have left in a corner. But there was none to be found and she knew she was done for, since without magic artifacts or spells, or a broomstick between her legs, she was powerless. And so, she rushed to the balcony, climbed onto the railing and leapt into the abyss, calling on Satan to come to her aid.

But when God isn’t willing, even saints strive in vain. So what could the devil do?... That witch plummeted down just the same as anyone else in the town would have done, and she crashed like a melon into the unforgiving cobblestones of the castle square.

As soon as her fate was known, everyone rushed out and covered her body with firewood and set the pile alight.

Hours later, as evening was falling and the bonfire had died out, not the slightest trace of the witch was left among the ashes.

Three months later, Silvana’s parents arrived from their distant kingdom of Quiet Waters with grand pomp and ostentation; and Dalmau’s nuptials were celebrated again. For the first time around he had ended up neither married nor single nor widower and the marriage had been annulled. But this time he wed a paragon of princesses and of women for all his life.

No one recalled his time of melancholy distemper, nor did he himself. And so the happy couple had many beautiful children and lived long lives. And when the venerable king died in his old age, Dalmau came to the throne and ruled with prudence, and a firm hand and a kind and generous heart.