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Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 16(2)

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Publication Date

2025-11-23

DOI

10.5070/T8.54062

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The Woman with the Red Tresses

SHORT STORY by ESTER DEL TORO
TRANSLATED by JOHN ALBA CUTLER,
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"But, don't you know her?" René said.

"I haven't had the pleasure," replied Guillermo to his interlocutor.

"Well, it just so happens, Guillermo, that tomorrow in Mr. Ianis Nicholaides's house there will be a concert. She will be singing. I'll introduce you to her."

"A thousand thanks. I wouldn't think of missing it."

René Latoni and Guillermo del Moral were taking refreshment on the terrace of the Condado Vanderbilt Hotel. It was four in the afternoon, a heavy hour. The sky was pale grey, opening up to a view of blue with white clouds stretched through, a quiet sky like a frozen lake in the winter, extending toward them its icy hands, a sky like a mind empty of ideas.

At that moment three beautiful ladies approached them, speaking boisterously.

René introduced them, after the "Good afternoon, gentlemen," of Teresita Dickle.

"Our Teresita, Poetess already consecrated by the divine laurel. Leonor Granados, a young woman of exceeding culture. And the most vivacious of all our ladies, Estebanía Ponce. Ladies, Don Guillermo del Moral, of Buenos Aires."

Introductions made, they all sat down and the conversation commenced.

"René," Leonor said, "look at that flock of bird crossing over the park. They aren't solemn like the sacred birds of twilight. They're as feckless as a woman who has a duck feather instead of a head."

"Señorita," Guillermo said, "since you are dedicated to the life of the mind and spirit, you are very hard on your sisters, especially those caught in golden cages."

Estebanía Ponce, who thought only of dancing and flirting, brainless but adorable, looked at Guillermo, a striking young man, with tender eyes.

"René, are you bringing del Moral to the concert tomorrow?" inquired Teresita.

"I believe so. We'll be the first to arrive."

"They say," Estebanía added, "that Doña Adriana Graxirene de Plaja will sing selections from *Tristan and Isolde*."

"Then I'm doubly pleased," said Guillermo. "I knew that Señora de Plaja was a famous beauty, but now I see she is also an artist."

"And from her heart, del Moral," Teresita continued. "Her art is serene harmony, as pure as the waters of the Venice canals, which show the treasures overthrown beneath. She is a peerless woman, Guillermo."

"When a woman of such exquisite sensibility, a poetess of such sonorous rhymes, as delicate and multicolored as butterflies, speaks to me of another woman this way, I admire the one speaking and respect the absent one."

"Yes," pursued Teresita, "such a woman carries her lyric virtue to an enthusiasm so great that we could say of her, as the poet Jean Aicard said:

"A murmur, a ray, behold what charms him,
a shadow moves him to tears …"

"Let's go, Teresita," Leonor said, "we still have to go visit Don Eugenio."

"Goodbye, René. Goodbye, del Moral. Don't forget to pass by the house on Saturday," Estebanía invited.

"A thousand thanks, divine Estebanía. We'll be there right on time," said Guillermo, smiling and raising his fedora.

The two friends remained alone. They didn't speak a word. They looked at the sea. They smoked. The smoke from their cigarettes assumed fantastic shapes. The setting was quiet, a silence without mystery, upsetting. It was an ugly hour. Vision focused on it without dreaming. The palm trees' glaucous crowns waved convulsively as if laughing at the weariness of the moment. The color of the sound was pale, without intensity or vibration; the music of the moment lacked soul. It was a music that failed to make the heart beat or to enliven the blood, the rhythmic music of the tambor, dry as a Franciscan, faint as a dragonfly that fails to show its true colors at hour of vespers, a moment without dignity, like the bare bones of poor people cast into the paupers' grave. The gardens were languid. Their nakedness gave off little light; the flowers' perfume was less enervating. The fecund bees slept their siesta.

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The salon shone regally. All the intellectuals and artists were gathered there. Ianis Nicholaides, the respected Greek writer, admired by all the intellectual "elite" of the Island, gathered together in his palacio of the Condado a chosen group of ladies and gentlemen.

By the time Guillermo del Moral made his entrance he was already late. A woman was seated at the piano. Her delicate fingers caressed keys no whiter than they. It

was a whiteness that radiated, competing with the light. She wore a purple overskirt with a royal corundum gem upon her right shoulder. Her Venuslike arms and her back were uncovered. Her skin was as soft as the petals of a Florentine lily. At that moment she was singing the divine Wagnerian opera, *Tristan and Isolde*. That voice, that lyrical throat, expressed the most intense happiness and the most profound pain any human voice has ever expressed. Silence reigned over the salon. Teresita Dickle let tears roll down her smooth, white cheeks. Nicholaides watched without seeing, all of his soul invested in that woman's voice. Melody erupted from that throat like a lyre, like the deepest symphonies of an orchestra. The voice paused, continued, the notes melting as if beneath the sun, grandiose, vast as a cathedral. A restless breeze seemed to pass through the music of the Master at that moment; her throat made a superhuman effort to arrive someplace inaccessible. The chromatic progressions were followed without piety, impetuous as alluvium; it was insanity to try and achieve the dream of happiness, which scoffed at the effort without allowing itself to be ensnared. The battle was intense. A succession of syncopated notes expressed the tortured desire to possess happiness. That woman appeared possessed. Guillermo, standing up and looking down over the pianist and the diva, was enthralled. The soul of Isolde was embodied in Doña Adriana. The desperate soul of Tristan's lover, under the effects of the magic potion, sighed, longing for that love that Jacopone da Todi sang of. Happiness approached close by, but like a fatal reflection, withdrew again. Cruelly persistent, the woman's throat modulated until arriving at the harmonic summit. The voice ceased.

Silence! It was the crown of glory for Doña Adriana. Applause would have been disastrous at that moment. The soul of music had been made prisoner!

The lady didn't move. Guillermo noted then as an echo of all the society, **a forest of red hair**, with Titian's shades and the shifting tones of the lion's skin.

Her hair was loose. It descended to her knees. The golden hair of Freya. Finally, she stood upright. She was tall, "svelte," like the Parthian Athena, majestic, her face with a young and delicate expression. She cast a sybil's gaze at her audience. Teresita's expression was ecstatic. Her husband, Ernesto Plaja, radiated happy calm at his wife's triumph. Adrián Tornabells, his close friend, of distinguished bearing, was filled with pure joy. Finally, the audience escaped the thrall of Doña Adriana's privileged voice. The ladies gathered around her and the gentlemen too. The vivacious Estebanía embraced her, weeping lively tears. Teresita had a knot in her throat and for the first time in her life could not speak. Don Ernesto sneaked kisses to the adored and prided forest of hair. Only Teresita saw him do this, and she smiled kindly.

Señora de Nicholaides approached. "Doña Adriana, I have no words. Thank you, my friend," she said, totally moved.

"**What beautiful hair, Doña Adriana, it's pure silk! What an exquisite shade of red!** I wish I had hair like that," said Estebanía, passing her hand through the golden tresses.

"Young lady, you have no idea what you're asking for. This hair that you so candidly admire causes me so many headaches!"

"Then why don't you cut it, Doña Adriana?" said the impetuous Estebanía.

"Because my husband adores it." Teresita's eyes shone more brightly. She knew it.

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Florinda Suau was born a villager. She was so beautiful that in a moment of drunken passion Ernesto Plaja made her his beneath the ceiba of his country house, "Adriana." He could never forgive himself for robbing the poor village girl of her distinct beauty at such a young age, just fifteen divine years old. Thus, he gave Florinda an exquisite education that the girl appreciated. She lived like a queen. Don Ernesto remained enchanted with Florinda's cultural progress whenever he saw her, which was rarely. He loved her like a daughter.

One day Adrián Tornabells, Ernesto's close friend, saw her. His gaze pursued that Antigone, as haughty as Minerva, as beautiful as Helen, as cultured as Cleopatra.

They met one another. They fell in love. Tragedy was born. When Adrián learned that Ernesto was responsible for Florinda's fall from grace, he felt as if his eyes were flooded with blood. To deceive two such women. He went insane!

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On the terrace of the Condado Vanderbilt Hotel, Ernesto Plaja conversed with Nicholaides, del Moral, and Latoni. Teresita was also there with her mother. Adrián Tornabells approached them. Everyone had a friendly smile for him.

"I have to speak with you, Ernesto. Excuse us …" They withdrew a little.

"What's going on, Adrián? You look different, as pale as death."

"What did you do to Florinda? What will you do to Adriana? Infamy! Die, coward!"

A shot was heard. When the friends arrived, Ernesto was dead. Adrián, with the revolver still hot in his hand, looked like a demented man. His wide eyes gave him the sinister appearance of an insane person … He began to laugh. He laughed … and laughed … and he died three days later in an asylum, still laughing.

Doña Adriana was left a widow. Desolate, she asked why Orestes had murdered Pylades.

"My daughter," pled her still-weeping mother, Leila de Graxirene, "why insist on knowing?"

"But mother, don't you see that I need to forgive the memory of Adrián, and I can't? What motive could have been so powerful to impel him? I'm going crazy, Mama. I have to know why … ah, what agony!"

Estebanía went to see Adriana two months after the poignant tragedy of the two dead friends.

"How awful, Doña Adriana, to think that Don Ernesto could be capable of deceiving two women!" said the imprudent woman.

Doña Adriana went pale. She raised her lilywhite hands, her sharp fingers, to her heart to calm its beating.

"He was very bad, Don Ernesto. You and Florinda Suau. Impossible! You are so noble, and you were so in love with him, so blinded by your faith in him … "

Doña Adriana gave a shout. Startled, Estebanía ran after her. The unhappy woman made horrible efforts to calm her agitation.

"It's nothing. I pricked myself with a pin." She tried to smile, a smile that ended in a bitter rictus.

A few days later Adriana appeared in public without her mourning clothes. **Her red tresses, which he had loved so much and she had worn despite her frequent migraines, disappeared with the loss of her faith.**

She wore her hair like a boy, a "garçon."

Notes

This translation's source text, titled "La Mujer de la Cabellera Roja," by Ester del Toro, appeared in *Gráfico* on September 14, 1929, pages 9 and 17.