

THE WHITE DOE

I

In a small town in Aragon during the early 1300s, a famous knight named Don Dionis had retired to the tower of his castle after joining the King in the war against the Infidels, and he was using the opportunity to hunt while he rested from the fatigue of battle.

Once, while he was enjoying his favorite pastime accompanied by his daughter, whose remarkable beauty had earned her the nickname of Lily, he spent the day searching for game in the woods of his feudal domain and then decided to take refuge, during the time of the siesta, in a little glade where a brook was rushing between the rocks with a soft and gentle sound.

Don Dionis spent several hours in that pleasant location resting on the soft, green grass in the shade of a poplar grove, while chatting amicably with the other hunters about the day's events. As they told each other about some of the unusual adventures they had while they were hunting, from the top of the steep hillside, between the intermittent gusts of wind that were rustling the leaves of the trees, they heard the sound of a little bell like that carried by the leader of a herd.

In fact, soon after they heard the sound of the bell, almost a hundred sheep as white as snow began to jump over the dense growth of lavender and thyme on the other side of the brook and, following them, wearing a pointed hood to protect him from the perpendicular rays of the sun, with a bag on the end of a pole placed over his shoulder, was the young shepherd who was herding them.

"Speaking of unusual adventures," said one of the hunters as he turned to his Lord, "here is Esteban, the shepherd who for some time has been acting like he is even more innocent than when he was born and who can always entertain you by telling you about the things that frighten him."

"So, what is the matter with that poor fellow," Don Dionis asked, indicating that his curiosity had been aroused.

"Oh, nothing much," the hunter added humorously. "Even though he wasn't born on Good Friday, or marked with a cross, or tempted by the Devil, he goes around acting like some Christian Saint, and though no one knows how or why it happened, it is said that he was given one of the most miraculous gifts anyone ever had, unless it was King Solomon who, according to what they say, even knew the language of birds!"

"And what is this marvelous gift?"

"According to what he says," the hunter continued, "and he swears it is true by all that is sacred, that all the deer around here have their eyes on him and will not leave him alone; and the strangest thing is that on more than one occasion he has come upon them when they are discussing ways in which they can play tricks on him and then, after they are carried out, he hears their raucous laughter as they celebrate what they have done."

While the hunter was speaking, Constanza (for this was the real name of Don Dionis' beautiful daughter) approached the group of hunters. When she showed her interest, one of them went to where the shepherd was letting his flock drink, and he brought Esteban to his Lord. In order to calm the shyness and the visible trepidation of the poor lad, he greeted him by his name and accompanied the greeting with a friendly smile.

Esteban was a stout young man of twenty-nine years, with a small head that was sunken into his shoulders, with blue eyes, and a doubtful and awkward gaze like that of an albino; he had a Roman nose, thick lips, a high forehead, and light-colored skin that had been bronzed by the sun; the reddish hair falling over his eyes and onto his shoulders seemed like the mane of a red horse.

This was a good description of Esteban's physical appearance. As for his character, one could say without fear of contradiction, by himself or by any of those who knew him, that he was rather naïve; however, he was also a little distrustful and crafty, like many country folk.

Once the shepherd had the opportunity to recover from his shyness, Don Dionis started speaking with him, and with a serious voice that showed his interest, he began to ask questions about the things his hunter had told him, to which Esteban responded somewhat evasively, as though he were trying to avoid talking about it.

However, pressed by the interrogations of his Lord, and by Constanza, who seemed to be especially interested in what the shepherd had said about his strange adventures, he eventually gave in and agreed to speak, but not without first casting a nervous glance around him, as though he were afraid that someone might be listening. Then, scratching his head, as if he were trying to gather his memories or organize his thoughts, he finally began to speak in the following way:

"The fact is, Lord, a short time ago I went to see a priest in Tarazona and when I spoke to him about what had happened to me, he told me: you don't play games with the Devil, you keep your mouth shut about it, say lots of prayers to Saint Bartholomew who knows all his tricks, and then let it go; because God is just, and He is there to help us and guide us in all things. Because of this, I had made the decision not to say anything about it to anyone else. But since you have insisted, I will do it to satisfy your curiosity, and then... well then, if the Devil learns of it and starts to punish me for my indiscretion, I have some holy gospels sewn into my cloak, and they should serve to protect me, as they have done on other occasions."

"Well, let's have it then," Don Dionis exclaimed impatiently, as though he feared that these digressions were threatening to continue; "stop beating around the bush, and get on with it."

"I was going to," Esteban answered calmly. Then, after directing a loud shout and a whistle to his sheep so they would not wander off and get lost in the forest, he scratched his head again and continued speaking.

"Because of your frequent hunting parties, as well as the activity of an occasional poacher who sets traps or hunts with his bow, these days there are hardly any animals left to hunt for miles around, so one is lucky if he ever sees deer any more. I was speaking of this in the village after Sunday Mass in the portico of the church with some peasants who are working the land around Veratón, when one of them said to me: "Well then, I don't know why you don't see any deer, since any of us can tell you that we never go out in our fields without seeing lots of tracks; for instance, three or four days ago there must have been a herd of more than twenty, judging by the number of hoof-prints, and they ate a whole field of wheat in the sanctuary of the Virgin of Romeral."

"And where were the tracks heading," I asked the peasants, hoping that I might be able to come across this herd. "Toward the poplar grove" they answered. "So, since I wasn't about to miss that chance, that same night I went to take up a position under one of the

poplar trees. All night long, sometimes nearby and sometimes farther away, I heard the sound of deer who were calling to each other. Once I heard the branches move behind me, but when I turned around, there was nothing to see. Nevertheless, early the next day when I took my goats to drink on the banks of the stream not far away from the place where I had been, in a dense grove of poplars where very little sunlight could penetrate, I found the recent tracks of deer, some broken branches, and in the stream the water was muddied. And the most peculiar thing was that among the deer tracks were the prints of some tiny feet about half the size of the palm of my hand, with no explanation.”

As he said this, the young man seemed to instinctively look around for something to compare it to, and his eyes came to rest on the foot of Constanza which was showing under her silk skirt, clad in a lovely slipper of yellow morocco leather. But when Dionis and some of the hunters also began to look at them, the beautiful young girl quickly hid her feet, and in a completely normal tone of voice she said:

“Oh, no! Unfortunately, mine are not nearly as small as that; a foot that small can only belong to one of the fairies that appear in the stories told by some troubadour.”

“But that is not all,” the shepherd continued, once she had spoken. “After I saw the footprints, I found a place to hide that was close to where the deer would have to travel on their way to the brook; there, when it was about midnight I got drowsy and fell asleep, but not so deeply that I didn’t open my eyes immediately when I heard the sound of branches moving. As I said, I opened me eyes, I stood up very quietly, and then I began to hear an indistinct murmur that was gradually coming closer. The wind was carrying the sound of voices and some strange singing that reminded me of the noise that the village girls make when they are laughing and joking on their way back from the spring, with their pitchers on their heads. From what I could tell by the sound of branches cracking as they were broken by the passage of those giddy young creatures, they were heading for a clearing in the trees that was not far from where I was hiding, when suddenly, close behind me, no farther away from me than you are now, I heard a new voice speaking (believe me, I would swear on my death bed that this is exactly what happened) and it said... it said very clearly these exact words:

“Over here, ladies, over here, because
this is where that idiot Esteban is hiding!”

When the young shepherd reached this part of his story, those who were listening with twinkling eyes could not contain themselves any longer, and they broke out in riotous laughter. One of the first to start laughing and the last to stop was Don Dionis, who in spite of his great interest, could not help but take part in the general hilarity; meanwhile, his daughter, Constanza, who had been listening to Esteban with a doubtful expression, now began laughing so hard that tears flowed out of her eyes.

Paying no attention to the effect his story had produced on his listeners, the shepherd seemed to be nervous or worried, and while they were laughing, he turned and began to look here and there, as though he were expecting something to emerge from between the trunks of the trees.

“What’s the matter, Esteban? What is bothering you?” one of the hunters asked him, as he noticed the growing uneasiness of the poor lad, who was staring at the daughter of Don Dionis and looking around with an expression of trepidation and fear.

“Something strange happened then,” Esteban declared. “After I heard those words, I stood up and turned around, expecting to see the person who spoke them, when I saw a doe as white as snow come out of the thicket where I was hiding and, leaping over the nearby bushes, she ran away through the trees, followed by a herd of deer with the color that deer normally have and, like the white one who was leading them, they were not making the sounds that deer usually make, but hooting with a sound of gleeful laughter that is still echoing in my ears right now.”

“Oh come now, Esteban,” Don Dionis teased; “follow the advice of the Priest from Tarazona. Don’t talk about an encounter with deer that scream with laughter, and don’t let the Devil take away the common sense you still have. Since you already have those gospels and you know the prayers to Saint Bartholomew, go and take care of your flock that is beginning to wander all over the grove. And if evil spirits bother you, you know the remedy: say a paternoster and use your staff to defend yourself.

So, after putting a half loaf of white bread and a slice of beef jerky in his shoulder bag, and after taking a generous swallow of wine that one of Don Dionis’ grooms offered him, the young shepherd said goodbye to the Lord and his daughter, and he had scarcely taken four steps when he began to use his sling to cast stones at his sheep in order to make them gather again.

Since by that time Don Dionis noticed it had begun to cool off and there was a light afternoon breeze that was rustling the leaves of the poplars, he gave the order to his men to gather their horses that had been left to graze in the nearby clearing, and when they were ready, he gave the signal to unleash the hounds and blow their horns and, galloping out of the grove, they continued their hunt.

II

Among the hunters of Don Dionis, there was one called Garcés, who was the son of a former servant and who was much loved by his Lords. Garcés was more or less the same age as Constanza, and ever since he was a young boy he had been accustomed to making an effort to anticipate her desires and satisfy her whims.

During moments of leisure he would use the time to sharpen the bolts of her crossbow. He would break in the horses that his lady would ride, he would train her favorite hounds so that they knew the tricks of the hunt, and he would take charge of the falcons that she bought during the feria in Castile.

For the other hunters, the pages, and common folk, who were members of Don Dionis’ retinue, the great appreciation showered on Garcés by the Lords had caused them to have a feeling of envy and, according to them, all of the attention he paid to the whims of his lady were typical of his fawning and servile character. However, there were also some who, better informed, or perhaps more malicious, came to see the attention he paid to his mistress as the sign of a poorly disguised infatuation.

If in fact the hidden affection of Garcés was real, it was understandable, in view of the incomparable beauty of Costanza. It would have been necessary to have a heart of stone, as well as a spirit of steel, to withstand the power of her singular attraction and her phenomenal beauty.

Everyone in the region had grown accustomed to calling her *The Lily of Moncayo*, and this name suited her, since she was so elegant, so blonde, and so white that it seemed God had created her, like lilies, out of gold and out of snow.

However, there were a few suspicious people who had spread the rumor that the lovely lady of Veratón was not as pure blooded as she was beautiful, and that in spite of her blonde hair and her alabaster skin, her mother had been a gypsy. No one was able to say whether these rumors were valid or not, but it was a fact that Don Dionis had led a rather undisciplined life when he was young and, after serving for a long time in the army of the King of Aragon for which he was bequeathed, among other things, the fief of Moncayo, he went to Palestine and then traveled around for several years until he finally returned to his castle in Veratón with a young daughter who was undoubtedly born in one of those foreign countries. Other than Don Dionis, the only person who might have been able to say something about the mysterious origin of Constanza was the father of Garcés, who had accompanied the Lord during his travels through distant lands; however, he had died some time ago without saying anything to his son, who had asked him about it with great interest on more than one occasion.

Constanza showed signs of being withdrawn and melancholy, as well as jovial and happy; she sometimes expressed extravagant ideas and strange whims, and the peculiar fact that she had black eyebrows and eyes, while her skin was white and her hair was blonde, had contributed to the gossip that was spread by the villagers, and also by Garcés himself, who had come to think that his lady was something special in comparison to all other women.

And among the hunters, Garcés was the only one who listened to the strange story of Esteban with a desire to learn more about his incredible adventure and, although he could not help but smile when the shepherd repeated the words of the white doe, ever since he left the grove where he had rested during the siesta, his mind was filled with all sorts of fanciful thoughts.

“There is no doubt that this talk of deer who speak is just a foolish idea of Esteban who is a stupid idiot,” the young hunter thought, while his horse was following closely after the palfrey of Constanza, who appeared distracted and silent and was not taking part in the celebration of the hunters. “But who knows if there cannot be some truth in what this simpleton is saying,” the young man continued. “We have seen many strange things in this world, and a white deer might be an example, since according to one of our songs, Saint Huberto, who is the patron of hunters, was said to have one. Oh, if only I were able to find a white doe, and then offer her to my lady!”

Garcés spent the rest of the afternoon thinking and reflecting on these things, and when the sun began to sink behind the nearby hills and Don Dionis gave the order to stop hunting and return to the castle, he slipped away from the others without being noticed and went back into the forest to search for the shepherd.

It was almost completely dark by the time Don Dionis arrived at the doors of his castle. Shortly after that, his servants brought them a light meal, and he sat down to eat with his daughter.

“And where is Garcés?” said Constanza when she noticed that her hunter was not there to wait on her as he usually did. “We don’t know,” the other hunters answered. “He left us near the poplar grove, and we haven’t seen him since then.”

But just then, breathless and covered with sweat, Garcés appeared with an expression of joy and satisfaction painted on his face. “Forgive me, lady” he said turning to Constanza. “Forgive me if for a moment I have failed to fulfill my duty, but I was riding back as fast as my horse could run, because my only desire is to serve you.”

“To serve me?” Constanza repeated. “I don’t understand what you mean by that.”

“Yes, lady to serve you,” Garcés insisted. “Because I have found it is true, that there actually is a white doe. In addition to Esteban, there are several other shepherds who are certain they have seen it on more than one occasion; and with God’s help as well as that of my patron Saint Huberto, within two or three days, dead or alive, I will bring her to you here in the castle.”

“Oh come now,” Constanza exclaimed with a teasing tone of voice, while those who were listening tried to contain their laughter. “Forget about nocturnal hunting parties and mysterious white does. Remember that the Devil likes to tempt fools, and if you let him, you’re going to make others laugh at you even more than they laugh at poor Esteban.”

“But lady,” Garcés interrupted, his voice faltering as he tried to hide the anger caused by the mockery of his companions, “I have had absolutely nothing to do with the Devil and, therefore, I don’t know how he acts. But I swear that no matter how hard he tries, he will never cause me to be laughable, because you are the only person to whom I would allow that privilege.”

Constanza was aware of the effect her teasing had produced on the enamored young man, but still wanting to try his patience, she continued taunting him:

“Yes, and what if he makes you have the same fantastic experience that Esteban had, or what if he laughs in your face, and on hearing his supernatural laughter, your crossbow falls out of your hand, and before you can get over your fright, the white doe runs away faster than a bolt of lightening?”

“Oh, that would never happen,” Garcés declared; “if I ever point my crossbow at her, even though she made more funny faces than a clown, or even though she spoke to me, not in Spanish, but in Latin like the Abbot of Munilla, she will not get away without a bolt in her body.”

At this point in the dialogue, Don Dionis intervened, and with exaggerated severity, so that one could see the irony in his words, he began to give the frustrated young man some extravagant advice about what he should do if he should ever encounter the Devil in the form of a white doe. With each ironic remark of her father, Constanza fixed her eyes on Garcés and broke into laughter, while the others looked on with expressions of mockery and ill-disguised glee.

While they were eating, the others continued to make fun of the naïve credulity of the young hunter. Then, when they finally finished and the servants had cleared the table, Don Dionis and Constanza retired to their rooms and the other hunters also left to take their rest. However, Garcés remained for a while, still undecided, after the mockery of his companions, as to whether he should remain firm in his purpose, or if he should abandon it completely.

“The heck with it,” he said, finally emerging from his uncertainty. “It wouldn’t make things any worse than what has already happened, and if what Esteban told us turns out to be true... Oh, how I would then savor my triumph!”

Saying this, he took up his crossbow and, making the sign of the cross, slung it over his back and headed toward the gate of the castle where he took the trail into the forest.

When he reached the brook which, according to Esteban, was the best place to wait for the arrival of the deer, the moon had already begun to rise over the nearby mountaintops. Following the practice of a good hunter who knew the best way to stalk the game, he first walked back and forth examining the paths and the trails, the location of the trees, the unevenness of the terrain, the bends in the stream, and the depth of the water. Then, after finishing the careful inspection of his surroundings, he crouched down in a gap between the trees whose branches cast a shadow over the bushes which were tall enough to hide a man kneeling on the ground.

The brook flowed out of the moss-covered rocks and followed the twists and turns of the slopes of Moncayo, until it entered a ravine where it bathed the feet of the poplar trees and fell into a hollow that was near the place where the hunter was hiding. The silvery leaves of the poplar trees waved in the breeze with a pleasing sound, and the willows that leaned over the stream moistened the tips of their branches in the clear water. Some evergreen oaks were surrounded by honeysuckle and bluebells and they formed a thick wall of foliage around a bend in the stream.

Hidden in the bushes and listening for the slightest sound, his eyes fixed on the place where, by his calculations, the deer ought to appear. Garcés waited in vain for some time, while everything around him was quiet. Little by little, perhaps it was the weight of the night which was now more than half gone, he began to become less and less attentive. The murmur of the water, the penetrating aroma of the wildflowers, and the caress of the wind, all filled his senses with a pleasant drowsiness that seemed to spread through the night around him, and the love-sick young man who, until that point, had spent the time imagining all sorts of flattering fantasies, began to feel that everything was moving more slowly. After a few moments he sank into a vague lethargy between wakefulness and sleep, his eyelids began to droop, his crossbow dropped from his hands, and he finally fell profoundly asleep.

Two or three hours must have passed while the young hunter slept soundly and was enjoying one of the most pleasant dreams of his life, when he suddenly opened his eyes and tried to stand, as he struggled with the lack of control that one feels on awakening from a profound slumber.

Over the whisper of the wind and the gentle sounds of the night, Garcés seemed to hear the strange murmur of voices that were speaking, laughing, and singing, each one in its own way, making a chatter as noisy and confusing as that made by the birds when the first rays of sunlight touch the tips of the trees.

This strange noise lasted for only a moment and then everything was silent again.

“I must have been dreaming about that nonsense the shepherd was telling us,” Garcés declared, rubbing his eyes with an effort to achieve composure, as he tried to persuade himself it was nothing more than the remnant of a dream that was still in his mind when he woke up. And again he was overcome by a powerful feeling of languor that slowed his thoughts, and he was about to rest his head on the ground when, once more, he heard the sound of those mysterious voices that were accompanied by the murmur of the wind, the noise of the water, and the rustling of leaves. And this time, the voices were singing these words:

VOICES

The archer who was watching from the top of the tower rested his weary head on the edge of the wall.

The stealthy hunter who was waiting to surprise the animal has succeeded in capturing it during his dream.

The shepherd who was waiting for daylight as he counted the stars is now sleeping, and he will sleep until dawn.

Queen of the water nymphs, come follow our steps.

Come and wrap yourself in the branches of the willows that hang over the water.

Come and beguile yourself with the pleasant aroma of violets that are blossoming in the shadows.

Come and enjoy the night, which is daytime for the spirits.

While the soft notes of that enchanting music floated in the air, Garcés was motionless. After it stopped, with great precaution he spread the branches and, to his great surprise, and with considerable apprehension, he saw a herd of deer appear, sometimes leaping with incredible agility over the bushes, sometimes stopping to listen to each other before they disappeared in the thicket and then came out again, as they finally descended toward the bank of the stream.

Leading the herd of deer, more agile, more beautiful, more joyful, and happy than the others, running and jumping so quickly that her feet didn't seem to touch the ground, was the white doe whose odd color stood out with an unreal light against the dark background of the forest.

Although the young hunter was prepared to see something marvelous and supernatural in this scene, the fact was that, other than the momentary hallucination that clouded his senses with the sound of words and music, there was nothing in the deer—not in their movements nor bleating—that was different from what any hunter could expect to see during one of his nightly hunting expeditions.

Once he began to disregard his first impression, Garcés started to think that it was all a mistake and he laughed at his innocence and his fear, and from that moment on he only thought about following the direction in which the deer had gone, so that he could find them once more.

Calculating the direction they had followed, he placed his crossbow between his teeth and began to crawl like a snake through the undergrowth until he was approximately forty paces from the spot where he had been. Once he was ensconced in his new hiding place, he waited until he was sure that the deer had had time to enter the stream so that he would be able to make an accurate shot. Then, as soon as he began to hear the distinctive sound of water splashing repeatedly, he began to rise up very cautiously, first on the point of his fingers, and then on his knees.

Once he was on his feet, he checked to see that his crossbow was ready, he took a step forward and lifted his head above the bushes so that he could see the riverbank; he raised his crossbow, but as he looked for the place he was going to shoot, an involuntary cry of astonishment escaped from his lips.

The moon had risen slowly over the horizon and seemed to have become motionless in the center of the sky; its soft light inundated the grove and was reflected on the smooth surface of the water so that objects seemed to be seen through a gentle mist of blue.

The deer had disappeared. And in their place Garcés saw a group of beautiful women, some of whom were splashing in the water, while others were taking off the thin tunics which had hidden their agile, lovely bodies from greedy eyes. During all the time he had been coming to the forest, in his most fantastic dreams, Garcés would never have imagined that he would see a scene as beautiful and as voluptuous as he now saw, to his utter astonishment.

Now, without the cover of their tunics, which were either hanging from the branches or had been tossed carelessly on the ground, the girls were dashing through the poplar grove in picturesque groups, sometimes entering the water and then coming out again, leaving behind them sparkling drops of water that fell over the flowers like tiny drops of dew.

Here one, as white as the fleece of a lamb, raised her blonde head between the floating leaves of an aquatic plant like a flower that had just opened and whose thin stem was still trembling beneath the waves. There another, with her hair falling over her shoulders, was hanging from a willow branch, while her pink feet made silvery splashes on the surface of the water. A few were resting on the edge of the stream with their blue eyes closed, enjoying the voluptuous aroma of the flowers that were waving slowly in the breeze, while others were clasping their hands and dancing in a dizzying circle, as they threw their heads back with delicious abandon and stomped their feet with a rhythmic beat on the ground.

While all this was happening, it was impossible to follow all of the agile movements, impossible to include in a glance all the details of the scene made by the joyful women, some running, frolicking, and following each other with laughter, others with their breast raised, cutting through the water like a swan, and still more sinking under the surface of the water where they remained for a long time before surfacing again, holding in their hands one of the strange flowers that grows only in the hidden depths of the stream.

The eyes of the astonished hunter moved from one place to another without knowing where to stop, until, seated under a pavilion of greenery that served as her canopy, and surrounded by a group of beautiful women who were helping her remove her garments, his eyes finally found the object of his secret adoration, the daughter of Lord Don Dionís, the beautiful Constanza.

After experiencing one surprise after another, the enamored young man hardly dared to believe the evidence of his senses, and he was starting to feel like he was caught in an impossible dream.

He tried in vain to persuade himself that all of this was the product of his imagination, because the more he looked at her, the more he became convinced that this woman was, in fact, Constanza.

No, there was no doubt; those were her dark eyes under the long eyelashes that shaded the light of her pupils; that was her thick blonde hair which, after crowning her forehead, fell over her white bosom and her rounded shoulders like a golden cascade; that, finally, was her graceful neck that sustained her languid head which was slightly inclined, like a flower that is weighed down by drops of dew; those were her hands like a bouquet of jasmynes, and those were her diminutive feet that could only be compared to two white chunks of snow that the morning sun had not been able to melt.

At the moment when Constanza emerged from the trees without anything to hide the treasures of her loveliness from the eyes of her lover, her companions began to sing the words of another beautiful song:

VOICES

Spirits of the air, luminous inhabitants of the ether, come to me wrapped in a cloud of silver mist.

Invisible sylphs, come out of the partially opened calyx of the lilies, and come in your silver chariots to those of us who fly with the butterflies.

Larvae of the fountain, abandon your bed of moss and fall over us like a tiny rain of pearls.

Emerald beetles, twinkling glow-worms, black butterflies, all of you, come as well!

Come all of you, all you spirits of the night; come like a flying swarm of insects of light and of gold.

Come, because the protecting star of mysteries is now shining in the fullness of its glorious beauty.

Come, the time for marvelous transformations has finally arrived. Come now, because those who love you are waiting impatiently.

Garcés, who had remained motionless while listening to those mysterious words, felt as though he had been stung by the viper of jealousy and, obeying an impulse which made him want to break out of the spell that was controlling his senses, with an abrupt, convulsive move of his hand tore aside the branches that were hiding him and, in a single bound, jumped to the side of the stream. The enchantment was immediately broken, and everything vanished like a cloud of smoke; as he looked around, all he could see and hear was a herd of frightened deer who had been surprised in their nocturnal revelry and were now hastening to flee into the heart of the forest.

“Yes, I was right when I said all this was nothing more than an illusion of the Devil,” exclaimed the young hunter; “but fortunately, he has been a little careless this time, because he has left me the best prey.”

And in fact, that was what had happened: as she was trying to escape through the trees, the white doe had become entangled in a network of vines and was struggling in vain to extricate herself. Garcés aimed his crossbow, but at the moment when he was about to shoot, the doe turned toward the hunter and with a sharp, clear voice that made him stop, she shouted:

“Garcés, what are you doing?”

The young man hesitated, and after a moment of doubt, he lowered his weapon, frightened at the thought that he might have killed his beloved. But then, a strident burst of laughter filled his ears, bringing him out of his stupor. The white doe had taken advantage of that short moment to break out of the vines and run away, while laughing at the trick she had played on the hunter.

“Why, you damned spawn of Satan!” he shouted with fury, as he picked up his crossbow again. “You bragged too soon about your victory! You were too quick to think you were out of my range.”

As he said this, he let a crossbow bolt fly through the trees of the dark forest until he heard a sharp cry, followed by a few muffled moans.

“My God!” Garcés exclaimed as he listened to the anguished cries of pain. “Could it all have been true?”

Beside himself, he raced madly in the direction in which the bolt had disappeared, which was also the place where he heard the moaning. When he finally got there, his hair stood on end in horror, the words choked in his throat, and he had to hold on to a tree to keep from collapsing.

On the ground in front of him was Constanza who had been wounded by his hand and was now dying, as she lay there surrounded by a pool of blood among the sharp brambles of the forest.