

Marcelle Michelin

The

Shadow



of the brujo

Witchcraft in Venezuela

Caracas
MARÍA IS PURE Indian, small and slim, with skin the color of smooth cocoa butter. She drifted to Caracas from San Fernando de Apure, her village in the plains, over two years ago. A thatched hut of whitewashed clay, a hammock to sleep in . . . flat, sandy stretches under water more than four months of the year, and one sick cow . . . that was what she left behind her for the bright lights of the city. The city frightened her at first, but

within a week after taking a magic herb bath she found a job with us. Within a month, she was more like a member of the family than a servant.

At first I didn't know much about María beyond the fact that she could make anything she wanted to out of ground corn, and that she was a warm and friendly person. I knew she couldn't read or write, but she had an uncanny knack for always doing the right thing. Like any shrewd woman of the llanos, she could predict the sex of an unborn child several months in advance, and accurately forecast the weather. In the tropics, this is nothing short of a miracle; since there are no definite warm or cold fronts, the weather is so freakish that even

Marcelle Michelin, who has lived in Venezuela for three years now, is a woman of many talents. She has published fiction in French, her mother tongue, she has written for newspapers, and holds a Bachelor of Science degree.

meteorologists don't like to commit themselves.

But I did not begin to see into that fascinating mind of hers until the night she had a headache. She told me that someone must be putting a "*daño*," or a hex, on her. (The hex, which is known in Africa as an *embós*, in Cuba as a *bilongo*, in Haiti and Jamaica as an *ouanga*, is referred to in Venezuela as a *daño*.)

"This pain won't go away. Someone must be after me. Have you ever seen anyone die of a *lámpara enterrada*, señora?" she whispered softly. "I have. It's horrible. It's a lighted wick floating in oil that your enemy buries in the ground. As long as the flame burns you live, but when it goes out you stop breathing."

"Have you ever had anyone hexed, María?" I said.

"No, señora, never," she shuddered, "to put a *daño* on anyone is not Christian. But someone must be cursing me, for this pain won't go away."

"How else would your enemies go about it, if they are hexing you secretly?" I asked.

Listening to her was like hearing a heartbeat as raw and primitive as the jungle beneath the cosmopolitan glamor, the stream-lined finish that was the ultra-modern city of Caracas.

"By sticking pins in a wax figurine, señora, or into a picture of me," she said.

(I remembered reading that in Maracaibo, the week before, a man named Rodríguez had gone straight to the police and accused his wife, Lina, of attempted murder after finding a snapshot of himself in her closet. It was bristling with pins, and a lighted candle flickered in front of it. He, too, had been complaining of headaches the doctors couldn't explain away, but he felt fine as soon as he rescued that mutilated photograph of his. A warrant was sworn out for his wife's arrest.)

"If you have an enemy, señora," María warned me, "beware whenever you open your front door. Sometimes he wants you to know openly what he is doing to you. If you see what looks like a bundle of leaves or rubbish at your feet, whatever you do, don't touch it! It is a *bojote*."

"Isn't there anything you can do to protect yourself from it?" I asked.

"You can carry an alligator's tooth. It is a charm against evil. Or you can grow a *zambite* plant in your window, but you must not forget to sprinkle it with myrrh, incense, and holy water every Friday."

(I found out later that anyone who has lived in Venezuela any length of time knows the sinister meaning of the *bojote*. A few years ago, an old woman accidentally stepped on one that was meant for someone else, and immediately felt

such a pain in her foot that her family summoned the local *curandero* — healer — in a hurry. He rubbed it with some greenish oil which he carried in a small flask around his neck, but the pain played hide-and-seek with him, always keeping one jump ahead, first in the heart, then in the back, then in the foot again. Another healer, who specialized in de-hexing, had to be called in, and since it was clearly a case of self-induced hysteria, he soon massaged it away.)

"Sometimes you hear a knock, señora," María went on, "and you find that you have let in the Devil. There are evil men and women who knock at your door and ask you for a cup of coffee, and if after drinking it they tell you that there is a curse on your head, you must bring them a lighted candle, a cross, and a glass of water. Then you must give them all the money you have, or they will bring the curse back."

(There is a milder *daño*, conducive to insomnia, in which you wake up in the dark to feel yourself cruelly horsewhipped. It is, said María, some vengeful *bruja*, or witch, beating against the floor or wall with a special broom made out of the wood of the foul-smelling *mapurite* tree.)

"You must never give someone who hates you your true name, señora," she warned me. "Your name is part of you. It might be used against you. In my village, if some-

one faints or has a fit, only the god-mother who held him in her arms at baptism can rouse him."

THERE WAS A spectacular storm raging that night, and I'll always remember how the rain, lashing in torrents against the banging shutters, gave eerie emphasis to María's fears. That was the night I found out that a shadow haunted her — the shadow of the all-powerful *brujo*, the dreaded witch doctor, whose thoughts, she was convinced, could either heal or destroy her.

Belief in *brujeria* is as natural to María as breathing. There is a witch hunt going on right now, but the police are simply forcing this evil to go underground; you can feel it everywhere, lying all around you, beneath the surface of ordinary living, not only in the low-lying llanos and along the coast, where the demon tom-toms thunder in the darkness above the booming of the surf, but in the big cities, in the very streets of Caracas. I have seen talismans and printed incantations being sold either secretly or publicly in the plazas. A *brujo* was accused only last week of making women dance nude by threatening to convert them into animals. Another *brujo* named José Chacin has been driving away demons for a fat fee by reciting the apostle's creed backwards. A *bruja*, Antonia Hernandez, was arrested for selling love-philters to all the lonely girls in the neighborhood.

The police are throwing out huge dragnets, but for every fish caught, a hundred get away. There is no indignant outcry, no burning at the stake. The offenders are jailed like vagrants being picked off a park bench. Their crimes are considered no more serious than driving without a license. After doing a hitch at El Dorado, the big penal colony down south, they quietly go back to brewing their potions.

But these *brujos* and *brujas* are not simply harmless mental cases like the medieval sorcerers, or the New England witches. They have dangerous strangleholds over girls like María, who believe that they owe their jobs to herb baths taken while they were looking for work. María believes, for example, that if a patient, after quarreling with a neighbor, complains of an unbearable stomach ache, the healer must pay a surprise visit to the suspect. He will then exhibit a dead toad to the victim, who immediately feels much better. By killing the toad, the healer explains, the patient's pain has been relieved, because his neighbor has been feeding the creature scraps of food thrown away by the victim, and every bite it took had been knifing into his intestines.

I once made the mistake of trying to reason with María about this "dead toad" cure. "Look at all the fakers and the emotional blackmailers who have been falling into the hands of the police! Their

elaborate mumbo-jumbo is intended to fleece the gullible. Most of their clients are nothing but emotional women!"

María was indignant. "In my village, señora, a real *brujo* practices in good faith. He has a mission to perform. He never takes our money, never!"

"Surely you don't believe in their three-day-old milk, their stuffed bats, their white doves' blood, their elm leaves gathered at midnight!"

"Señora, no one is ever as right as he thinks he is, even you."

"Look at the sadists," I went on, "who strip the insane naked and beat them into a bloody mess. Look at the shams who treat sick cattle with nothing but a fistful of sand and some glib hocus-pocus!"

I might as well have been whistling at the wind. All she did was smile at me.

I BEGAN to wonder. I began to see her side of it. I began to ask questions. And this is what I was told by many of the educated Venezuelans I met:

"To understand someone as close to nature as María you have to believe a little in magic. Do you know what magic is? It is primitive man's attempt to bend nature to his will. It obeys two laws: that the same causes automatically produce the same effects. Hence incantations, hexes, exorcisms, tabus, all always according to a strict formula. Sec-

ond, that two objects once in contact will continue to interact on one another even at a distance."

"Such as the West Indian superstition that possession of any part of the body, even the hair, will give control over its owner?" I asked.

"Yes, that's it. But we'd like to make it clear that Venezuelan *brujeria* should not be confused with West Indian witchcraft."

"I thought belief in the supernatural was the same the world over. Aren't there any *brujos* in the West Indies too?" I asked.

"Yes, but not at all like ours," I was told. "*Brujeria* here has nothing to do with Cuba's ferocious Yoruba religion, which worships the great god Olorún, with whom the faithful can communicate only through little wooden dolls representing the Orishas or saints. No one down here carries around those small black idols known in Cuba as the all-powerful *jimaguas*, or twins. Nor does it have anything to do with voodoo or the cult of the serpent as it is practiced in Haiti and in the southern United States. About the only vestige of Haitian influence that we can think of offhand is to be found along the northern coast; it's the dance of the serpent performed to the beat of drums by our Negro villagers of Curiepe. Curiepe was once our big slave market."

"Why is it," I asked, "that Venezuela's Negroes forgot most of their African superstitions?"

"Probably because in the West Indies the Negro was so abjectly segregated that he retreated into his secret rites and kept them pure as a sort of defense reaction. There the *brujo* officiates as a member of a fanatic sect, as a sort of priest dedicated to placating the gods of an organized religion. Somehow or other, the barriers fell away very early in Venezuela, and Indian, White, and Negro have fused so completely into a social whole that there are no outsiders. Our *brujo* hasn't felt the need to organize; he operates individually."

I POINTED OUT that Cuba's and Haiti's repulsive ghouls seemed to wallow in gore.

"*Gracias a Dios*," I was told, "our *brujo* does not rob graves, feed on corpses, rape virgins, eat hearts, or drink human blood. He contents himself with sacrificing small animals, using their entrails to foretell the future. In fact, the only brutal murder in Venezuelan police files involving a *brujo* occurred in 1928, when a horribly mutilated man was found by the side of the road. The imprint of a bloody hand on a nearby tree trunk eventually led to the murderer. He turned out to be a big West Indian Negro who confessed he needed seven victims in order to gain magic powers. The only native ceremony down here involving any blood shed at all is the *descabezamiento de pollos*, or behead-

ing of chickens, which takes place along the northern coast during the dancing and feasting in honor of San Pablo and San Pedro. Several dozen chickens are buried to the neck in the center of the street, and the villagers gather around a blindfolded boy or girl. The executioner dances forward, striking three blows with a machete in time to the music. As far as the laughing participants are concerned, we are sure this sacrifice has no religious significance other than that of filling their bellies with *arroz con pollo*.

ONE ANTHROPOLOGIST SAID: "María's thinking goes back long before the first white man came up to Caracas along the old Spanish trail. It is the silent, evil *brujería* of the Indian, and its theme is vengeance. Although the medicine man's prayers gave his community plentiful rains and abundant harvests, he was much feared. His power was a two-edged sword, for if he knew how to cure, he also specialized in 'revenge by poison,' the dreaded *veneno de Yervas*. There was revenge by poison, revenge by violence, revenge by hex, and the deadliest revenge of all, the *kanaima*, or patient stalking of a murderer for years by the victim's friends or relatives. *Kanaima* is still very much with us, although under another name, *morir por matar* (kill and die). You have seen some of the Guajiro Indians swarming around in Maracaibo's market place with their

colorful skirts and painted faces? You remember those big headlines of a few weeks back screaming about the young Guajiro murderer, Luis Velasquez, who was hunted down and stabbed in his hammock by his victim's two nephews? That was *morir por matar*.

He went on, "Naturally, the Spanish conquerors contributed their own superstitions, among them the evil eye. Then, with the arrival of tough Negro slave labor along the coast to take over the back-breaking chores of the exhausted Indian, Africa and its magic formulas was welcomed by the people as a means of defense against the deadly *veneno de Yervas*. If the Indian could hex, the Negro knew how to de-hex."

I also talked it over with an American-educated Venezuelan doctor, one of the country's foremost specialists in tropical diseases. "Your María," he said, "has some of the same baffling inner strength as Juan Vicente Gómez, the illiterate mountaineer, who became dictator."

"Then there is something to all this?"

"The theatrical trappings, the sleight-of-hand," he said, "are just so much window-dressing, but the power is there. I've seen it at work many times. It's a problem, no doubt about it; in some rural areas it's emptying our free clinics. I remember that when I was twelve years old, a farmhand on my father's hacienda was bitten by a rattler. We

did what we could for him, but there was no serum in those days. The man was obviously dying. He pleaded with us to send for the local *brujo*. Well, the *brujo* was busy, but he sent a handkerchief with instructions to throw it over the patient's face. As soon as this was done, the swelling and all other symptoms subsided and the man was normal by morning."

HE WENT ON TO TELL ME about the backwoods hunter whose magnetism was so great that he could hypnotize animals and influence others at a distance. (Some people can kill a snake with their eyes.) He would hunt on assignment, never failing to turn up with whatever he had been sent out to get. One afternoon, his hounds returned without the expected game. It had been stolen. The hunter began beating the dogs with the branch of a certain tree, and two hours later one of the local farmers staggered in with the stolen venison, his own back a raw mass of welts.

"You explain it," I challenged.

"I will," he said, "on a scientific

basis. Nothing supernatural about it. Memory. Concentration. Will power. You've heard about the incredible mental gymnastics of Raja Yoga? You've heard about Alexis Carrel and the power of prayer? Of Duke University and telepathy? Of electro-encephalography? All variations on the same theme. Mind over matter. All our *brujos*, of course, are superb psychologists, probing subtly for human weaknesses. They practice a brand of shock-therapy and auto-suggestion more effective on our harassed poor who consult them than long sessions on an analyst's couch could ever be. Psychosomatic medicine, or short-cut psychiatry, you might call it." He chuckled, "I'm afraid that, what with television, the radio, and the movies, we civilized moderns are just too mentally lazy to practice that kind of thought control. We are functioning with only a small part of our mind."

"The dark, unexplored worlds of the mind . . . maybe they are tomorrow's horizons," I suggested.

"To the Venezuelan *brujo*," the doctor said, "they are an old, old story."



JULIANA DUBUQUE

The IOWA Centennials

Communique from the Corn Country

THE IOWA STATE Fair Board, brim-full of grease and rectitude, pushed back from its off-basement, administration dining room table, belched with some belligerence, and took up the phone and slapped down the un-beautiful head of Republican politics in Iowa for half a year or more. So that the head is upping itself just now — months later — instead of doing it on August 30, when former President Herbert Hoover spoke in Iowa, receiving the state's especially-created-for-him Iowa Award.

"What we want to know," said the Iowa State Fair Board into the

Juliana Dubuque is a niece of the famous "old lady" of the town in Iowa whose name the family proudly bears. With some fear and not a little trembling she and we are wondering what Auntie will say — just in case she reads this.

phone, "is whether President Hoover, in this speech, is going to call a spade a spade."

The Iowa State Fair Board had on the phone the Iowa Centennial Memorial Commission. The Iowa Centennial Memorial Commission replied that it understood that when President Hoover spoke a spade would be referred to as a spade, "and," the Iowa Centennial Memorial Commission murmured, "he will do it doubled in spades. Ha ha! If you know what we mean."

The Iowa State Fair Board knew what the Iowa Centennial Memorial Commission meant, and said:

"We were afraid of that."

The Iowa State Fair Board was managing the great Iowa State Fair, and the Iowa Centennial Memorial Commission had arranged for President Hoover to receive the Iowa Award — and make the speech at