

# THE DÉBUTANTE

*Leonora Carrington*

WHEN I was a débutante, I often went to the zoo. I used to go there so often that I knew the animals better than the girls of my own set. In fact, I went to the zoo every day in order to get away from society. The animal that I got to know best was a young hyena. She got to know me, too; I taught her French and she taught me her language in return. So we passed many a pleasant hour.

My mother arranged a ball in my honour for the first of May; the very thought kept me awake at night; I have always detested balls, above all those held in my own honour.

I paid a visit to the hyena very early in the morning on the first of May. 'What a bore!' I said to her. 'I must go to my ball this evening.'

'You're in luck,' she said. 'I'd love to go. I don't know how to dance but at least I could make conversation.'

'There's going to be lots to eat,' I said. 'I've seen trucks full of stuff driving up to the house.'

'And here you are complaining!' said the hyena disgustedly. 'I get just the one meal a day and it's pigshit.'

I had such a brilliant idea I almost burst out laughing. 'You could go instead of me.'

'We don't look enough like each other or I would, too,' said the hyena rather sadly.

'Listen,' I said, 'nobody sees well in the twilight; nobody will notice you in the crowd if you are a bit disguised. Anyway, you are about the same size as me. You are my only friend. I beg you.'

She thought about it, I knew she wanted to say yes.

'Done,' she announced suddenly.

As it was so early, there weren't many keepers there. I opened the cage quickly and a few seconds later we were in the street. I took a taxi and everybody was asleep at home. In my room, I took out the dress I was supposed to wear that evening. It was a bit long and the hyena had trouble walking on the high heels of my shoes. Her hands were too hairy to look like mine so I found her some gloves. When the sun arrived in my room she walked all round it several times more or less straight. We were so preoccupied that my mother, who came to say good morning, almost opened the door before the hyena hid under my bed. 'There is a bad smell in your room,' said my mother as she opened the window, 'take a bath perfumed with my new salts before this evening.'

'Yes, of course,' I said.

She did not stay long, I think the smell was too strong for her.

'Don't be late for breakfast,' said my mother as she left my room.

The most difficult thing was, how to disguise her face. We pondered for hours and hours; she rejected all my proposals. At last she said, 'I think I know the answer. Do you have a maid?'

'Yes,' I said, perplexed.

'Well, then, listen. Ring for the maid and when she comes in we'll pounce on her and tear off her face; I shall wear her face instead of mine this evening.'

'That isn't practical,' I said. 'She will probably die when she doesn't have a face any more; somebody is sure to find the body and we'll go to prison.'

'I'm hungry enough to eat her,' replied the hyena.

'What about the bones?'

'Those, too. Is it settled?'

'Only if you promise to kill her before you tear her face off, otherwise it will hurt her too much.'

'It's all the same to me.'

Rather nervously I rang for Marie, the maid. I would never have done it if I hadn't hated balls so much. When Marie came in, I turned my face to the wall so as not to see. I admit it was soon over. A brief cry and it was all done. While the hyena was eating, I looked out of the window.

After a few minutes, she said, 'I can't eat any more; there are still the two feet left but if you've got a little bag, I'll finish them off later.'

'You'll find a bag embroidered with fleur de lys in the chest-of-drawers. Empty out the handkerchiefs and take it.'

She did what I told her. Then she said, 'Turn around and see how pretty I am!'

The hyena was looking at herself in the mirror and admiring Marie's face. She had eaten all round the face very carefully so that only what she needed remained. 'You've been really neat,' I said. Towards evening, when the hyena was all dressed up, she announced, 'I feel I'm in very good form. I think I'm going to be a big hit this evening.'

When we'd been hearing the music from below for some time, I said to her: 'Go down now and remember not to go near my mother, she'd be sure to know it wasn't me. I don't know anybody apart from her. Good luck!' I gave her a kiss as she left but she smelled very strong. Night had fallen. Exhausted by the emotions of the day, I picked up a book and relaxed beside the open window. I remember I was reading *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift. After about an hour came the first sign of bad luck. A bat came in through the window uttering little cries. I am terribly frightened of bats. My teeth chattering, I hid behind a chair. Hardly was I on my knees before the beating of wings was drowned by a loud noise at my door. My mother came in, white with fury. She said, 'We had just sat down at table when the thing that was in your place leapt up and cried out; 'I smell a bit strong, eh? Well, as for me, I don't eat cakes!' Then she snatched off her face and ate it. One big jump and she vanished out of the window.'