



Hat Trick

by Tony Beckwith © 1998

IN THE LATE SIXTIES I lived in Madrid, in one of the older residential neighborhoods not far from the Avenida del Generalísimo. By day I worked at an advertising agency, wearing a coat and tie and a crisp white shirt. But at night I moved in the city's café society, dining late and gliding on to flamenco bars and cabarets in the wee small hours of the morning. I traveled in excellent company: my roommate, Juanín, shared my interest in the bright lights, and possessed impeccable credentials as a boulevardier and all-round bon vivant.

There was something a little surreal about the life of a foreigner in Franco's Spain of that period. As Juanín and I whiled away the evenings at sidewalk tables, we wondered aloud about expatriates in other places and times. We fantasized about Paris in the twenties, and wished we could have been there in those sepia-toned days, sipping absinthe and saying exquisitely witty things to adoring sycophants and generous art patrons. Perhaps we were too easily impressed by the presumed glamour of other places. We seemed to spend a good deal of time wishing we were somewhere else, or someone other than who we were.

One aimless, rainy afternoon as we waited at a traffic light in an unfamiliar part of town, we noticed a shop on the corner. The sign over the door said, "Blanca's Theatrical Costumes." In the window were

dozens of hats of every imaginable kind, and above them a handwritten sign that said, "Going Out of Business Sale. ¡Bargains! ¡Bargains!"

As we stepped over the threshold into the shop we felt as though we had gone backstage at the Teatro Calderón. There were costumes of every color and fabric, rows and rows of them hanging chaotically on racks against the walls. There were suits of armor, horse's heads, swords, wishing wells, and half moons hanging from the ceiling. And there was an all-pervasive fragrance of greasepaint, geraniums, and dust.

We were met by a very small woman of indeterminate age. Her hair was platinum blonde, cut in a pageboy style with bangs over her forehead. Her eyes and lips were heavily made up, and in her red-tipped fingers she carried a cigarette in an extremely long holder. "I am Blanca," she said in a deep, melodious voice. "How can I help you?"

We pointed to the hats in the window and she arched her eyebrows and blew out a long plume of smoke. "You like the hats?" she inquired. We nodded, yes. "Which ones you like?"

There were top hats and berets, bowlers, elegant felt homburgs, fedoras, jaunty straw hats, ladies' hats with veils, green ones with feathers, turbans, more than one fez, Stetsons, trim-looking derbies, sombreros, bonnets, sailor hats, shiny black tricorns, picador's hats, pillboxes,

splendid maroon velvet toques, a crimson cloche, and a marvelous mauve boa several feet long.

As we examined them one by one, Blanca smoked thoughtfully and watched us through half-closed lids. "Every hat is special, you know, like a costume, and much better than a mask" she told us. "With each one you can be whoever the hat makes you feel." We nodded again, exactly. She shrugged her tiny shoulders in a gesture of extraordinary eloquence and murmured, "Why not take them all?" So we did.

Two weeks later we threw a Hat Party that is still talked about by patrons of the Café Gijón. Hats of every description were scattered about the apartment, on the furniture in the hall and on coat hangers by the door. As guests arrived they chose a hat and put it on. Some wore the same hat all night; others exchanged hats with people they had never met and discovered things about each other that nobody had ever known before. Miraculous conversations took place as people came to see themselves as they could have been, should have been, and indeed would have been, if only they'd found the right hat. ★