



(Ubach's manor, by Gustavo Contepomi)

Late nineteenth century. León de Ubach, a Catalan big factory owner, returns from England with a dazzling bride by his side. Inés is incredibly beautiful, educated and thirty years younger than him. Joining the newlyweds is Inés's sister Tessa, a veteran London suffragette. And Miss Lucy, the girls' much loved former governess.

The couple settles in León's family home, an over-elaborate (art nouveau) bourgeois villa. The house is not in Barcelona – the capital – but near a provincial town. The arrival of the three foreigners – a beautiful young lady, a suffragette and an older Protestant lady – will shake the foundations of this highly conservative and hypocritical Catholic town's polite society.

But presently life is sweet and agreeable. León is a tolerant, cultured man with progressive (socialist, bordering upon Fabian), though by no means revolutionary ideas. He adores Inés and indulges her as much as possible.

The family's oldest, closest friend, Doctor Samuel, visits the family nearly every day. He sees himself as a modern scientist. An atheist, forever fascinated by the female condition, he is a

follower of Darwin and a very convinced disciple of Charcot (the French doctor who studied female hysteria).

Although she visits her sister often, Tessa has actually settled in Barcelona, where she is fighting hard for her own freedom and independence. Not easy at all in a place where suffragism and women's freedom have hardly arrived. The two sisters love each other dearly, though they have made different choices in life: one has chosen the difficult path of freedom, the other, the comfort of an arranged marriage.

Inés gives birth to her first baby: a boy, who is always hungry.

A young wet nurse arrives to feed the baby and live with the family. She comes from a remote village. She's an enigmatic woman, very primitive and denaturalised. Apparently, she doesn't speak or understand Spanish, but it doesn't matter, since she never opens her mouth. She's no more than a cow, there to give milk when called upon to do so.

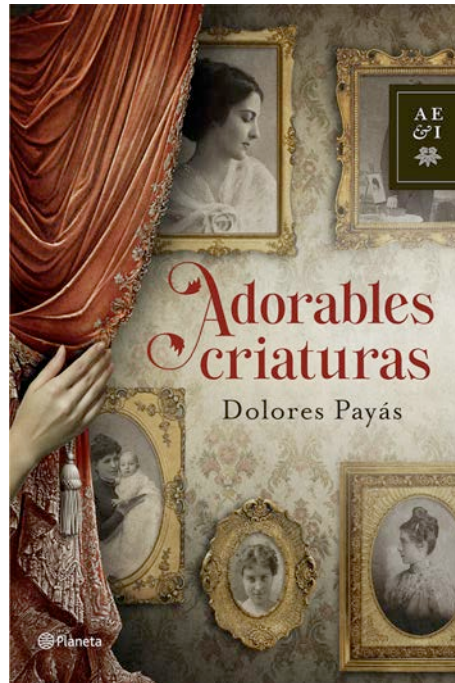
Inés immediately hates this woman who feeds her baby. She wants her to leave the house, but neither her husband or the doctor will listen to her. Troubled and anguished, she begins to develop a nervous sickness with amazing symptoms: onanism, sexual furores...which the doctor soon diagnoses as intense hysteria. The diagnosis being actually very exciting, the doctor seizes this wonderful opportunity to experiment upon the young lady and her body. The treatment, extremely hard and repressive, will almost kill Inés.

León cannot understand what's going on. More worried about his own business – there are general strikes everywhere – than about his wife's "nervous" sickness, he places her entirely in the hands of the doctor.

Meanwhile in the city, Tessa breaks down when her lover – an anarchist – leaves her to marry a conventional woman with a fortune. It is then that she discovers the dramatic contradictions between discourse and feelings. She is paralysed by the intense pain of loss, utterly unable to help her sister.

From very early on the wet nurse realises that she's powerful. She can have the best food and drink in the house, cannot be contradicted (otherwise she may cease to yield valuable milk...). She might be mute, but she has the slyness of a survivor. The servants fear her, they think she's a witch and don't dare refuse her anything. So she gradually takes control of the household, getting the better of the weak governess, who is not able to control her.

Little by little the peaceful household becomes a hellish space inhabited by disturbed characters. What starts out as a light waltz decays and disintegrates until it becomes an insidious nightmare bordering on horror.



### Author's Notes

#### *On dramatics*

“Adorables Criaturas” is the story of a cultural and tragic clash between two young, modern girls educated in London and the old-fashioned society in provincial Spain during the late nineteenth century.

From a dramatic point of view, “Adorables Criaturas” unfolds in two very clearly distinct parts. The first is nearly anthropological, focusing on the *moeurs*, depicting day to day events in a good, bourgeois family. Barring a few “troubling” episodes, everything is nice and pleasant, almost happy. At times bubbly like champagne. Some daily events are funny. Quick, sharp, ironic, witty dialogues. The visual treatment in this part is colourful and bright, in keeping with the lightness of the narrative.

After the departure of Tessa, the suffragette, the household closes in on itself and its characters. The story becomes slower, acquiring a heavier, more sombre and oppressive tone. The characters become crude, now devoid of those forms that had served to keep them in a state of such tranquillity. The beautiful, frivolous woman begins a process of acute, uncontrollable hysteria. The wet nurse turns out to be a denaturalised animal, who gradually takes over the household. The suffragist goes to pieces, showing her great fragility; the great contradictions between feelings and ideals. The doctor, until then an almost comic figure of enlightenment, becomes a dangerous, lethal man. And the husband, so removed from the danger, is his bosom pal... This second part, which is closer to the real thread of the story, is a melodramatic fable with rather fantastic overtones; it is almost “gothic”. With a visual treatment and atmosphere that are highly dramatised.

### *On gender history as a source of inspiration*

The French Revolution had granted women – for the first time in history – an entity within the civil code. It made them into “citizens”. Once the revolutionary fervour had blown over however, the inevitable counter-revolution came. Throughout the nineteenth century, bourgeois ideology tried to place woman back in the home, and keep her there. The virtuous woman was, above everything else, a wife and a mother, the angel of the household. Hence the devotion for interior spaces. The ideal of feminine beauty became a sickly, delicate, ghostly image; a pale skin, avoiding the sun, a languid attitude, heightened nervous sensitivity.

Sex, as an element of liberation and subversive pleasure, landed in decent society. The Catholic Church – as opportune as ever – proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Chastity, purity. The worship of the Virgin Mary was all the rage. Women were snow-white, virginal lilies, flowering with holy splendour in the month of May, which, from then on, became the month of Mary.

But female emancipation was well under way, and women refused to go back to their previous state of holy infantilism. She began to look for any opening to give vent to her fantasies of freedom. To study, travel, live on her own. She began to read, speak foreign languages, do social reform work, form women’s associations. The historical context favoured this new *prise de conscience*. Socialist utopia, industrial revolution, the birth of a well co-ordinated feminist movement. All those things led to change.

Men, incapable of dealing with this new, real image of woman, preferred to invent their own; wrap her in a veil of myth and poetry. Hence the gallery of fantastic and unreal heroines that constitute the images so prevalent in that century. Naná, the unearthly, ferocious beast. Salomé, the man-eater. Violeta, the tubercular, sickly sinner become saint, by the work and grace of La Traviatta. Saints or whores, but always figments of the imagination.

In the meantime, woman, in the face of the false image that society had decided to feed itself, was having enormous inner contradictions of her own. See-sawing. Taking two steps forward, and one step back. The end of the nineteenth century is a crucial turning point. It is the moment in which real change is begun. The historical moment in which the new woman is born. But the old woman wasn't going to change overnight. For several years, the old woman and the new one coincide in time.

The wet nurse "in situ", living in the house of so many bourgeois families, the greatest symbol of the woman as a "thing", is a direct contemporary of the woman who is trying to emancipate herself, the activist.

And if they coincided in time, they could also have coincided in space...

"Adorables Criaturas" is the story of a symbolic meeting. The meeting of the old woman, doomed to disappearance. And the new one, fighting to exist and carry on.