

The Witch Deer

By Charles F. Lummis

“Tchu! ’stá-te!” cried Josefa, straightening up from her work and looking severely at a small brown rogue who had climbed up to the little shelf over the corner fireplace. The adobe floor was spattered with big drops of water, to lay the dust; and Josefa, bent half double to reach it with the short wisp of broom corn which serves in New Mexican homes, was sweeping toward the door the fine gray powder that works up daily from the compact clay.

“Give me that little stone, *nana*,” begged the boy. “The one *tata* carries in his pouch when he goes to hunt.”

“Get away, quick, for that is the charm of the Magic Deer! Much care! For if ever thou touch that, thy grandfather will see to thee!”

Anastácio clambered down reluctantly from the old chair, and went outside to play with the burro. But the stone weighed on his mind. It was a very ordinary-looking pebble, gray, light, porous, and without any particular shape—looking, in fact, like one of the pieces of pumice which were so common in the mountains. But somehow it had a fascination for Anastácio. And that evening, when we all sat by the crackling fire, he climbed on his grandfather’s knee and said:

“Go, *tata*, tell me what is this stone of the Magic Deer, that I may not play with it.”

“To play with *that*?” exclaimed Don José, in a tone of horror. “Child! That little stone is very precious. For no other hunter in New Mexico has the like; and if it were lost or broken, we should be ruined, since only with it is it possible to kill the deer which are enchanted, as are many. And to get that stone I passed a sad time.”

“How? Where? When? With the Enchanted Deer? Tell me, *tatita*!”

“Yes, with the *Venado Encantado*, and in many ways.” And Don José, the luckiest hunter in Rio Arriba, a gray-headed but sharp-eyed Mexican—whom I count a staunch friend and a brave man, even if he does believe some things I do not—nodded to me, as if for permission to tell the story. I had often heard of the Witch Deer, and knew that a very large proportion of the natives of New Mexico believe firmly in this and in many other forms of witchcraft. I knew, too, that Don José was a scrupulously truthful man. The years of our acquaintance had proved that beyond doubt whatever in his story might be supernatural would have to be charged to his faith, and not to any intention of deceiving.

“You must know, Don Carlos,” said he, “that while there are many witches here, there is one kind that delights most to vex hunters. Without doubt you also will have seen the Enchanted Deer, as much as you hunt.”

“No,” I answered. “I have never seen one, but I have heard of them all over New Mexico these five years.”

“Sure! For there are many; and many have lost their lives thereby, for the Witch Deer is more dangerous than bear or mountain lion. Only when one has the stone which they wear in the first fork of their horns is it possible to conquer them, for that makes one not to be seen.”

“But I can see you, Don José,” I interrupted, smiling, as he held up the magic stone.

“But, friend, that is different! For it is only in its use. Now I *want* you to see me; but when I carry this no deer in the sierra has eyes for me, and I could walk even up to them, taking care only that they scented me not.”

It is worse than useless to argue against these beliefs. Don José would never be convinced, and the incredulity of a friend could only hurt his feelings, and, besides being ill-mannered, further caviling would lose me a story, so I said, simply:

“All right, *compadre*, tell us all about it.”

“Well, then, thus it was, and you shall see I am right. It makes many years now, for it was long before I married me with Josefa, in the year of '67. Her father was Alcalde of Abiquiu; and there lived my parents also. When I was a young man, already grown, strong—as you may yet see—and well taught in the ways of hunting, I came often to these mountains for game; and our house was never without dried meat in plenty. There was one that hunted with me, and they always called him *Cabezudo*, because of his strong head; but in truth he was Luís Delgado, a cousin of me. In heart we were as brothers, and either would give his life for the other. Often the old men of Abiquiu told us of the Witch Deer, which could never be killed unless by a hunter unseen; and Luís answered always: ‘Aha! When there is a deer too strong for this rifle, let him eat me.’ For, you see, he believed not in witches. This was the only thing we ever quarreled about—that he was without faith.

“It came that in October of the year '60 we were together camped in the Valles, and with much care, since the Navajos were bad. We had a house of logs, very strong, and in it already was a wonder of dried meat of deer and bear. We went forth always together, for fear of the Indians, but by good luck they molested us not. As for game, I think there was never such a year.

“One day, when the first snow was three hours old, we came to a round *mesa* that stood on the plateau, and near the foot of it were tracks of a deer. But alas! I knew then that it was no true deer, for its footprints were great as those of a horse. ‘It will be the Venado Encantado,’ said I to Luís. ‘Let us go the other way!’ But he said: ‘*What* Enchanted Deer, nor yet what mouse-traps? Get out! I thought thee a man! Thou that only yesterday didst kill, with dagger alone, the great she-bear, and now wouldst run from a deer track!’ And it was true; for since the bear, well wounded, was upon us before there was room to reload, I had the luck to compose her with my hunting-knife.

“Wrong of me it was, but I had shame at the words of Luis, and followed him. ‘Truly this is grandfather of all the deer!’ he cried. ‘For never have I seen such tracks. And his horns we will take to Abiquiu, though they shall weigh like a tree. Come on!’

“With that we pursued the tracks, wondering always at their greatness. They went a little around the foot of the mesa, and then up a steep way to its top. When we came to the top, where was a cleft in the rocks, so that one could get up, we found a large level place, round, and with a rim of cliffs below, so that nowhere else was it possible to reach the summit. The trail went away among the junipers, and we followed it cautiously, knowing that the deer must be here, since no tracks led down. And of a sudden, crawling around a clump of trees, we stood before him. Ay, señor! How great he was! Great as a tall horse, and upon his head the keys [horns] were as the branches of a blasted cedar. There he stood, a thing of fifty yards away, looking at us with his head high, as if mocking. My heart forgot its count; for truly he was no thing of this earth—that beast with a look so cunning and so terrible.

“ ‘What a beast!’ Luís whispered. ‘At the throat, to break his neck. But save thou thy fire, for in case’—and putting his rifle firm as a rock, he fired. But as the smoke blew by, there stood the deer, wagging himself the head scornfully, for the bullet had rebounded from him. So it is with these beasts that are witches, for when they see you, no ball will enter their hide. And then, putting down his head till that the horns lacked but a foot from the ground, he came like a large rock leaping down the mountain.

“Now I knew well that he was no mortal thing, and that I had no right to shoot. But for sake of Luis, who was pouring new powder in his rifle, I cared not even if I should be accursed; and when the beast was very close I sprang to one side and gave him the ball, of an ounce weight, squarely upon the side. But it could not enter him. Luis jumped, too, and the brute passed between us like a strong wind. In, a moment he turned and charged us again, and I am sure I saw smoke come from his nose. As for his eyes, they were pure fire. ‘Run for yourself!’ cried Luis, and he made for the tree, while I took the other way. Turning a juniper, I ran for the edge of the cliff; but just as I came there, there was a scream, and looking across my shoulder, I saw the deer making with his horns as one does with his spade upon hard ground.

“After that I could go no more to our camp, but came straightway to Abiquiu. When they heard what had been, all the town mourned—for Luís was well beloved. But none were surprised, for they said: ‘Always we told him of the Venado Encantado, but he would not believe. And now it has come true. Poor headstrong Luís!’

“As for me, I sickened, and was much time in bed. And always I saw the deer leaping upon Luis and tearing him, until it was not to be borne. When at last I was cured, I could think only to kill the Witch Deer, and avenge my poor *compañero*. I asked of all the old men if there was how to do it; but all said, ‘Beware, lest he trample thee also!’ And Josefa prayed me to think no more of it, for she would never marry one who put himself against the witches. I know not how, Don Carlos, for I too feared, but Luís would not let me rest.

“Twice I went alone to the mesa, for no one would companion me. *There* was always the deer; but I kept under the rocks, where he could not reach me, and waited my turn. Once, when my aim was true upon his heart, the rifle only snapped; and when I went to prime with double care, the flint was all in cracks, so that it would not strike a spark. And again, when I shot him between the very eyes, from near, it did him nothing. So I saw it was useless.

“From then all went ill. Even the wild turkeys had no fear of me, for I could shoot nothing. And in Abiquiu I was mocked, for the young men had been jealous that formerly I had killed more game than any, and now they taunted me for the starved hunter.’

“At the last I thought me of one who lived in the cañon of Juan Tafoya—a witch, they say, very wise in such things—and to him I went. When he had heard my story, he said: ‘But, man! knowest thou not that this is the Venado Encantado? How dost thou think to kill him? For he has in his horns a stone of great power, having the which he cannot be harmed. There is only one way in which it could be done, and that is to shoot him when he sees thee not. But that, even the best hunter cannot do, for the animal is very wise and of sharp sight. Only having an invisible stone could one do it.’

“ ‘And have other deer this stone?’ I asked; and he replied: ‘There are some, for this is not the only Witch Deer. But none of them canst thou kill if they see thee.’

“After that they saw me little in Abiquiu, for I was always hunting. For many months I pursued the trail of every buck deer, killing many. And at last, shooting from ambush one that passed me unsuspecting, I found in the first fork of its horns a stone like this, but not the half of it in size. This I proved in many ways, and clear it was that now my luck had changed.

“Being satisfied of this, then, I loaded my rifle with great pains, and went one evening in search of the Venado Encantado. Coming to the mesa by night, I camped among the rocks, without a fire, and in the morning, before the sun, climbed up without a little noise. In my pouch was the stone, and my rifle was well ready. When I came through the cleft at the top, there stood the deer, looking straight at me, not twenty yards distant, and I threw my rifle to my shoulder, giving myself up for lost. But he moved not, and watching him, I perceived that he did not see

me at all—the which is proof that the stone makes one to be invisible. At this I took heart, and with a true aim on his throat, fired. He leaped *thus* high in the air and fell dead; and coming to him, I found that the ball had broken his neck.

“His meat I did not touch, for besides being accursed, he had killed my Luís, whose bones I brought away to Christian ground in Abiquiu. But in the first fork of the horns, which were taller than my head, I found this stone which you see. Since I have that, I kill whatsoever deer with ease, because they cannot see me. What think you, then?”

We sat for a few moments silent, watching the flames that licked and twisted about the cedar sticks in the fireplace. Anastácio was voiceless, with an awe too strong even for his boyish excitement; and as for me, the story of Luís’s death had brought back some vivid and uncanny memories. But Don José, who really cared enough for me to wish to lead me out of the darkness of error, followed the matter up.

“Do you not see, Don Carlos, that there *are* Witch Deer? For look at his fierceness, and that he could not be hurt until I had a charm-stone like his own. And you know that I tell you truth.”

“Yes, old fellow, I know you tell me the truth as you see it. But it is nothing strange for a buck to be *bravo* in the fall—*that* I myself have suffered by. And I fancy you *could* have killed him before, if you had not felt so sure that you couldn’t.” Then I was rather ashamed to have said even so much, and as gently as it could be said, for I do not admire the always-superior person. But the old man understood, and was not offended; only he shook his head with real sadness, and said:

“Ah, that way was Luís. God keep you from being taught as he was!”