CHAPTER 5

Veronica: Jane’s Revealing Bullfight Novel

The birth of Jane’s most unique book—her only novel, Veronica—can be traced to the social circle that gathered at the bar and grille of the Hotel Majestic in Quito, Ecuador. After returning from the Amazon at the end of 1956, she and Ken made the acquaintance of several Spanish matadors, among them Mario Carrion of Sevilla. Carrion remembers, “At our first meeting I found Jane to be a beautiful woman, very attractive and pleasant,” and in what he quickly recognized was “a May–December marriage.”¹ The couple struck Carrion as quite inexperienced with bullfighting: “Jane spoke no Spanish whatsoever, and I spoke no English. Ken spoke only very limited Spanish and there always seemed to be someone around who could interpret our conversations for us. Neither one of them had ever seen a bullfight, and it was Ken who asked all the questions, which were very superficial and none of them in-depth, while Jane merely observed and had no input.” Jane and Ken did have some rudimentary knowledge of Spanish, but certainly were not fluent enough to discuss bullfighting with a Spaniard. Being somewhat reticent in that situation, Jane simply observed and let Ken do the talking.

That they had never seen a bullfight is not strictly accurate. Jane had witnessed a bullfight on her first trip to Lima in 1953, and her first written account of the sport reveals that she had little stomach for it in the beginning. During the several weeks of preparing for their excursion in search of primitive man in the Gran Pajonal, she attended a bullfight as a guest of two of Ken’s friends, an American couple who worked for a U.S. company with offices in Lima. She became quick friends with them, and a bullfight was a natural choice for an outing together. The pageantry of the event impressed Jane, and she appreciated the “artistry of the fearless matadors.” However, she was shocked to
discover that the crowd generally favored the bulls and cheered when the matador was caught and thrown. Moreover, at a more basic level, she could not agree with the premise of the sport itself. “In spite of the fact that I am not, as a rule, squeamish I detected a basic cruelty in the exhibition which was completely foreign and against the sporting principles of the average American” (38).

During that first bullfight, Jane simply shrugged her shoulders, accepted the experience as part of the Latin character, and took in the sights and sounds of the fiesta brava. Taking up residence in Quito after the publication of The Jungle Is a Woman, however, Jane had not only become more openly adventurous, but also more cosmopolitan, less “American” than on her first visit. In one sense she was becoming more like Ken with his devil-may-care approach to life, but Jane was also discovering that she possessed her own lust for new experiences. While she would always defer to Ken’s greater experience, she now had a footing of her own among the adventurous, and she could exploit it in the Quito social world.

Now, the bullfights did not seem so foreign, and when Ken began to show an interest in them thanks to their new matador friends, Jane warmed up to the contest between human and bull with equal enthusiasm. For Ken, bullfights were a natural outlet for the high-energy thrill-seeking that, for example, had drawn him to stock car racing in Los Angeles even before he ventured to South America, and to hunting condors barehanded. In The Head with the Long Yellow Hair, Jane describes meeting the matadors much as Carrion remembers it, except that she expresses more enthusiasm and involvement than he noticed outwardly. She recalls meeting Mario Carrion, Victoriano Posada, and Jeronimo Pimental on their South American tour. Also among the group was the legendary Ecuadorian matador Fernando Traversari (“El Pando”), then an apprentice. She writes, “Not for one moment had I ever thought that I could have become so enamoured of a sport of this kind, but after seeing a dozen or more bullfights I quickly agreed with Ken that as soon as possible after our trip in Ecuador was concluded we should go to Spain, the Mecca of all bullfighters, and write a modern book on the subject” (37). Carrion remembers, “Upon meeting Victoriano and me they decided to alter their plans and stay a bit longer in Quito to write an article about bullfighting with us as central figures. We introduced them into our world of practice, impresarios, critics, breeders, etc. who joined us at one time or another in the hotel bar.”2 Carrion’s recollection of those weeks of friendship agrees well enough with Jane’s account to provide a solid basis for her