

Margarita Chorné y Salazar
The first graduate woman in Latin America

by
Martha Díaz de Kuri

1997-1998 DEMAC Awards



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PROLOGUE

Ten years after the publication of our Margarita Chorné y Salazar's biography, the personage has taken on greater relevance as instigator of the process incorporating women into Mexico's professional life. Unintentionally, she became the spearhead of the feminine gender struggle for obtaining professional equity. During the whole 19th century, 133 men and only 3 women obtained their dental surgeon degree. Moreover, Margarita Chorné y Salazar was the first woman who practiced a profession in Latin America (1886). Three years after her, Cleotilde Leonida Castañeda would also graduate, and likewise Mónica Correa in 1896, although their stories have not yet been retrieved.

Margarita Chorné experienced really significant political and social events. She was born during Maximilian's emperorship. As most of Mexico City's wealthy families, the Chornés were in favor of General Porfirio Díaz. Margarita saw with distrust the first years of hostilities. Later, when she married Antonio Dromundo, a lawyer close to the Zapatista movement, Margarita figured out the political process and social changes, and it is said—although we don't have evidence corroborating it—that as a dentist doctor Chorné took care of President Francisco I. Madero, as well as of several Generals of the Revolution. When she got divorced, and by now lacking her father's protection, Margarita had to overcome alone the Mexican Revolution subsequent economic crisis, but thanks to her professional career she was able to provide for her son, Baltasar Dromundo Chorné, who would later become one of the ideologists of the student movement that would ultimately achieve the university autonomy.

Since 1904, when the first dental school was created in our country, the state of affairs began to be more favorable for women wanting to devote themselves to this profession. Clara Rosas—a young woman from Tenosique, Tabasco, who had won a scholarship for obtaining the best average grade of her school—enrolled on the second generation (1907) of this school that over time would become the Faculty of Dentistry of the UNAM¹. Doctor Rosas would become the country's first female dentistry professor. During the 1920's, the number of female dentistry students increased, but, as in all the university careers, it remained being very low compared to that of men. Nonetheless, the female gender continued making its way in this profession, and during the 1940's it already attained slightly more than 30% of the student body.

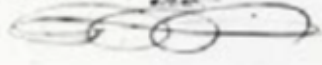
During the next decades, the number of female dental students kept on increasing, and during the 1970s, due to the creation of private dental schools and UNAM's Iztacala and Zaragoza campuses, finally the number of women exceeded that of men. Currently, women's share fluctuates between 60 and 70% in private and public dentistry schools of Mexico City and the other States of the Republic.

The female gender, which began its presence in dentistry with Margarita Chorné y Salazar's degree, has also been increasing its participation in the faculty, the public and private dental service department directions, the national health program planning, as well as in direction positions of dental associations. It is worth mention that several women dentists have been assigned relevant positions within the Federación de Mujeres Universitarias² (FEMU). Women participation is noteworthy within post-graduate and research programs, and several female dentists have occupied direction positions of dentistry schools in Mexico City and the other States of the Republic. Therefore it is vitally important to be acquainted with the beginnings of this important process through the life and circumstances of doctor Chorné,

MARTHA DÍAZ DE KURI
September 2009

¹ Initials of the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

² Federation of University Women

En el examen general de
Escuela que ha sustentado
el Sr. D. Juan de los Rios
del día 18 del presente mes la
Comunidad ha tenido a bien
aprobarlo por unanimidad.
Lo que comunico a Vd. para
su inteligencia.
Libertad y Constitución a todos
los días 18 de Mayo de 1816.
Juan de los Rios

Escuela de Margarita y
Chorné
a Puerto

THE FIRST ONE

Monday at 5:00 o'clock in the afternoon, at the Medical School of this capital was carried out the dentist-degree exam of the appreciated young woman Margarita Chorné, daughter of the well-known and well-respected dentist Mr. Agustín Chorné.

The examining board was integrated by the distinguished faculty doctors Mr. Rafael Lucio, Mr. Juan María Rodríguez and Mr. Luis Ruiz, who unanimously passed the young examinee, who showed her very broad and strong knowledge in that discipline by answering their questions with remarkable correctness. The audience attending the exam was very numerous, consisting largely of medical students. At the end of the exam, the young examinee received from the Secretary of the school the certificate in which she was communicated the unanimous approval of the examining board, and she was congratulated by a wave of applause from all those present.

Miss Choré's brilliant examination opens a wide area to important reflections regarding the progress that could be obtained by some young women who engage in a profession as remarkable as surgery. Miss Chorné is the first woman who has submitted herself to an examination of this kind, and we are convinced that her full-time dedication to her studies for many years, under the skilled guidance of her father, will have a substantial and worthy reward as a numerous and selected clientele.

The Chornés' dental laboratory, located at number 24 of Mesones Street, enjoys, justly indeed, a great reputation in Mexico, and since today it will also have the attractiveness that men will be able to place themselves in the hands of a skilled and intelligent young woman who will avoid them the mortification of having to accept being operated by masculine hands that, however skilled they may be, will never have the delicate finesse of the hands of women.

We most sincerely congratulate the young dentist and her honorable parents because they have seen crowned their efforts and we wish

that the Chornés' dental clinic keeps being, as until now, one of the busiest in the capital.

La voz de México, January 20, 1886.

Miss Chorné's professional graduation was a great impact event for the Porfirian society. In fact, unintentionally or even without conceiving it, that young woman was the first woman in Latin America to get a degree in a liberal profession. The image of a lady in charge of a dental clinic, with a forceps in her hand and ready to carry out a procedure in a patient's mouth, was unconceivable at that time.

This momentous event was followed by others no less relevant for the future of Mexican women. Here is a brief listing of the most noteworthy ones:

- The printing of the first national women's magazine, *Violetas del Anáhuac*, created and directed by the Mexican authoress Laureana Wright de Kleinhans whose purposes were, among others, to demand equal opportunities for both sexes and the suffrage for women.
- Months later, in 1887, doctor Matilde Montoya received her certificate as the first female doctor graduated at the National School of Medicine. Such an unusual event was celebrated with a bullfight.
- Similarly, great a sensation caused in 1898 the announcement that a female law student was going to defend an accused before the jury. The newspapers social articles reported that "the lawyer was properly wearing a brown formal dress" and that, at the end of her performance, she was applauded by the large group of onlookers who managed to enter to the hearing. For many years, Victoria Sandoval de Zarco would be the only Mexican lawyer; however, she restricted her practice to administrative charges, as her womanhood hindered her litigation.

These remarkable cases broke a centuries-long contained dam; the Mexican woman had initiated her awakening. Those pioneers would pave the way for generations of women who, during the first decades of the 20th century, would make incursions into activities previously practiced exclusively by men. This is the biography of

one of them, the first one: Margarita Chorné y Salazar.

It is worthy to recall which the developmental constraints were for women outside their homes, as well as the possible situations that Margarita and all women had to face for breaking the rules established.



WOMEN OF THE 19th CENTURY

From time immemorial, women's unpaid work has been used as a support for the economic development of this country. At the countryside communities, feminine hands have been working, at par with the male ones, to the tasks of sowing and harvesting, as well as of the sale of their products.

In non-rural towns and cities, the role of the vast majority of women was limited to household tasks; a lady practicing a profession was something virtually unthinkable.

When the new nation began to be defined, after the Independence struggle, the power structures conceived by men were not ready to legitimize the efforts and make official the participation of women.

The influence of the liberal philosophy and the European positivist model adopted in Mexico suggested the guidelines of a different society. The progresses in education and the improvement of the means of communication contributed by and large to boost the spirit of individual fulfillment and to leave the old collective models behind.

Fortunately, this progress also affected women's life. Soon it became impossible to ignore or stop women's urge to try out the new opportunities offered by the early modernity, as well as to climb up the professional hierarchies so far monopolized by men.

Neither should we overlook the fact that another major obstacle the pioneers of professions had to face was of a moral kind.

The fact that a woman practiced or just wanted to venture into a profession was deemed as a waiver of the unavoidable moral duties—both towards herself and towards her family—in order to cut

a path through unsuitable and risky terrains was not well seen by the 19th century society.

MAIDS, WORKERS, EMPLOYEES OR SEAMSTRESSES

The *decent* options that urban women had to make a living during the 19th century were not many: the young women of the poorer social class could get a job as housemaids or as workers in factories, such as those of the thriving tobacco industry where the staff was mostly female. The middle-lower class young women could opt for sewing or nursing, empirical occupations in those years, or dare to venture into a job within the bureaucracy. Department stores selling luxury imported goods, such as El Puerto de Veracruz, La Francia Marítima and El Centro Mercantil, hired “young ladies with an excellent appearance and preferably with a foreign look”³ for their ladies’ wear and notions departments, as said the personnel requests published on the newspapers.

It goes without saying that in all those occupations the female salaries were lower than those collected by males in similar activities. The seamstresses earned at most three *reales*, but salaries of eighteen cents for tasks that lasted the whole day and part of the night were frequent. Studies were not required to perform those jobs: a positive attitude and a short training period were enough.

³ Daniel Cosío Villegas, *Historia moderna de México. El Porfiriato. Vida Social*, Mexico, Hermes, 1985, pp. 227-234.



Margarita Chorné y Salazar.

THE PANORAMA BROADENS

During the last two decades of the 19th century, education opened a vast panorama for women. Majors in pharmacy, nursing and obstetrics, empirical until then, began to be taken at the Santo Domingo School of Medicine. From the 1980s, a large number of young women dared to leave their chores for a few hours so as to learn a profession in the wiles of health.

In 1878, the curriculum of the Escuela Nacional Secundaria⁴ for girls was enriched with subjects such as physical and natural sciences, hygiene, medicine, home economics, pastry and pedagogy. The knowledge of these subjects prepared its students for teaching. This orientation would make possible this establishment to become a female normal school in 1888. From that date on, across the country began to proliferate schools for elementary female teachers. Due to the large number of young women graduating from all those establishments to devote themselves to teaching, the leader writers of the capital newspapers expressed that as the 18th century had given men freedom through education, before the end of the 19th century women were receiving that same privilege. During the years following the *porfiriato*⁵, the predominance of the female population in the classrooms of normal schools was already noticeable.

The foundation in Mexico City of the first Arts and Crafts school for women, in 1871, was another very important female achievement. At the new school, any young woman could get

⁴ National Junior High School

⁵ Term used to designate the 1874-1910 period of Porfirio Díaz's presidency.

trained in telegraphy, drawing, painting, fashion, embroidery, artificial flowers, gilding, printing, binding, upholstery and trimmings, among other subjects. Many men who saw with certain reservations that Mexican women could study any professional career, conversely approved the Arts and Crafts majors as they had the advantage that their students could sell their manufactures in the same school workshop, or devote themselves to develop products at home in the future, “without neglecting their household chores or exposing themselves to the dangers of the streets”⁶.

In several inland cities of the Republic, such as Puebla, Monterrey, San Luis Potosí, León, Guanajuato and Morelia, Arts and Crafts schools were also established, with programs like those of Mexico City schools. New subjects were added by 1883: knitting, dyeing, typing, bookkeeping and English; subjects that were beginning to be very useful and empowered the young women to get jobs in government offices and in thriving law firms.

There were many detractors who didn't want women to study and contribute to productivity. The subject raised great polemics. Until well into the 20th Century, there were still leader writers who mentioned the need to eliminate the studies for women in order to “avoid the total emancipation of women that would result in the disappearance of future mothers and wives and in the home destruction”⁷.

However, in all of the above mentioned jobs, women's work was always subservient to bosses of the opposite sex. Women had not yet made incursions into any independent profession, but they were about to do so.

⁶ Idem

⁷ Idem

THE CHORNÉ FAMILY

The Chornés always lived in San Miguel, one of the four districts constituting what is nowadays known as the historic center of Mexico City.

Mister Chorné descended from a French family of goldsmiths and jewelers. Heir of the craft and the instruments of his father, who would become the official goldsmith of the Metropolitan Cathedral, during his youth he engaged himself in that activity.

The great dexterity acquired by Agustín Chorné y Campos to die-cast, mold, polish and shape up small metal parts and his experience handling the delicate jeweler instruments enabled him to shift and devote himself to dentistry, a high demand profession at that time.

Doña Paz Salazar, Margarita's mother, like most of the ladies, used to leave her home only to go to mass and to the market of La Merced, always accompanied by a maid who carried the baskets brimful with the family provisions. Her greatest pleasure was to cook in her spacious kitchen with a red-congo-saturated brick floor and large pans hanging on the walls. Out of the coal stove came fried pork meatballs, turkey *capirotada*, stewed chicken, the best *moles* of the San Miguel district and, of course, chocolate grounded on a *metate*. Like any wealthy family, the Chornés had several maids who helped in the kitchen and carried out the usual household tasks. Thus, at lunch time there was always freshly *comal*-heated *tortillas* and freshly baked bread for the afternoon snack.

As a result of don Agustín Chorné y Campos and Doña Paz Salazar marriage were born one son, Rafael, and four daughters, Margarita, María, Virginia and Cecilia.



Margarita Chorné y Salazar (the tallest) with her parents, Agustín and Paz, her brother Rafael, and her sisters María, Virginia y Cecilia.

LITTLE MARGARITA

Margarita was born on February 22, 1864, in the house number 6 of Puente Quebrado street, which later would change its name to that of San Felipe Neri and eventually to the one it has nowadays: Republic of El Salvador.

Little Margarita inherited her mother's dark and shiny hair, and the grey eyes and the rosy complexion of the paternal family. When she was very little, don Agustín took her in his arms and from the balcony of their house pointed towards the Chapultepec castle, residence of Emperor Maximilian and his wife Charlotte, and he made mention of aunts Beatriz and María Elena who were two of the Empress's maids of honor. He also told her the Chornés' history, his pride to have a French ancestry and the reasons why his grandfather, some distant day, had landed in Veracruz off a ship that brought him from Marseilles. Margarita used to look at him patiently with her clear eyes and seemed to understand everything her father told her. Since that age a great empathy would develop between them.

Restless since she was very little, Margarita went to kindergarten with her sisters, where she learned the first letters and notions of music. Later, as almost all the well-off middle class girls of the capital, she attended a convent school where she learned the Catechism, arithmetic, geography, French, crochet and cross-stitch embroidery.

Doña Paz, her mother, tried in vain to teach her how to cook and all the tasks that a "decent young lady" should perform at home. Unlike her sisters, Margarita detested to enter the kitchen. Neither could she stand spend afternoons lace-making, unraveling

linen sheets, nor those boring female gatherings where they used to eat cakes and drink chocolate while talking about the previous Saturday wedding. It was much more fun to read books in her father's library, or go for a walk with her brother Rafa.

At age ten, Margarita became interested in horseback riding and, all week long, she insistently requested don Agustín to take her to ride at the Chapultepec park, as he did with her dear brother. The unending arguments of her parents were for that reason. Doña Paz was worried by the fact that her eldest daughter was so different from all the girls of her time: "What will Margarita become if you continue acceding to all of her whims? She hates to cook, she spends all day long in your library and she just expects Saturdays to arrive to go horseback riding."

Even before reaching adolescence, another of Margarita's passions turned up: music. Her father got one of the best piano teachers, and at age fourteen the young woman's repertoire included a large number of waltzes, mazurkas and *habaneras* dances, such as *No me mires así* and *Los ojos de Leonor*.

On Sunday afternoons, the family used to go for a walk to La Alameda square. One had to greet friends and enjoy the bands that played military marches, arias, and Strauss waltzes so in fashion in those years. Many decades later, Margarita would describe those unforgettable walks to her granddaughters.

HER PASTIMES

When Margarita turned thirteen years old, as a present she asked her father to take her to the opera. The chronicles about the season, published by the *Monitor Republicano*, had sparked her lively interest to go see and hear the great opera singer Adelina Patti. In fact, she baptized with that name her porcelain-face and natural hair long brown braids doll that she would keep all her life. She admired the singer because, as she would tell her father: “Although she’s a woman she’s important and famous and she’s the best.” Don Agustín gave in to her many arguments; the truth is that it was difficult to deny Margarita anything, because she didn’t keep quiet before the first denial, she always knew how to convince him.

Although it wasn’t too late, it was already dark when Rafa brought the rental cab that would take them to the Teatro Nacional⁸. The season had been such a success that the resellers had cornered the tickets sale, so don Agustín had to pay the outrageous amount of thirty pesos each, instead of the ten pesos usual price for an orchestra seat ticket at the box office. Doña Paz didn’t accompany them because she had to stay at home to watch over María and Cecilia, recovering from chicken pox. At lunch time a family discussion started on the usual issue. “Margarita should prefer go watch the Orrin circus, as all the girls of her age do,” said doña Paz to her husband. “Why this girl has to be always so different? And you always adhere to all her whims and wishes...”

Margarita walked into the theater joyful, arm in arm with her father. And, as in the last minute doña Paz had discovered that the

⁸ National Theater

girl already needed a “miss” outfit, she fixed, to make it look nice, her best dress, the one with a black lace and plumbago-blue taffeta. Such a performance would remain in Margarita’s memory for the rest of her life: Patti’s incredible sweet and melodious trills when performing the role of Violetta in *La Traviata* and the applauses that required the artist to come out seven times to the stage covered with flowers. Another event would contribute to make that night unforgettable: on the way out Margarita fulfilled one of her dreams, as she meet face-to-face Porfirio Díaz and Carmelita, his wife.

From that night on, Margarita would attend the opera each season, and she would be one of the few persons who understood Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*, performed in Mexico for the first time by the Napoleón Sieni troupe, in 1891. But that wouldn’t be the only premiere she went to, as she was lucky enough to also attend those of *The Flying Deutshman* and *The Walkirie* by that same author, and that of Beethoven’s *Fidelio*.

Angela Peralta would be another leading figure admired by Margarita, who was moved to tears by her performance of Verdi’s *Leonora*. That day of September 1883—when the press announced the death of the *Mexican Nightingale* due to a yellow fever epidemic—was so sad for the young woman that she kept a deep mourning a whole month and she attended the daily masses dedicated to her memory at the Cathedral.

The operetta and the zarzuela would also enrapture Margarita. One of the preferred places to enjoy this genre was the Hotel Iturbide’s coffee bar where the family could drink coffee, chocolate or eat an ice cream with cake, while enjoying a theater play or a zarzuela.

Although a little before graduating as dentist she had to abandon her piano lessons, she never ceased practicing it. Even during her hard-working periods she used to practice it at least one hour a day. Her Steinway piano, gift from her parents, was her most precious piece of furniture. Until her last days she would play her favorite waltzes: Felipe Villanueva’s *Poético*, Ricardo Castro’s *Capricho*, Campodonico’s *Club Verde*, and *Elodia*, Jorda’s beautiful mazurka.



THE DENTISTRY

The Chornés family plans didn't foresee that their daughters studied beyond elementary school, although perhaps a course in domestic economy, Christian doctrine, poetry, pastry and embroidery, usual subjects for someone destined to take care of a home. In fact, Virginia Chorné mastered the needle arts remarkably, using gold and silk threads, and beadwork, a skill that would motivate her to dedicate herself for many years to embroider bullfighter's costumes. Maria and Cecilia excelled in the kitchen, especially in confectionery. Off their hands came about pine nut custards, royal eggs, almond pastes and orange cupcakes that earned them a good number of suitors. But Margarita never had the same leanings of her sisters; in addition to hear and perform music she liked to read, and she insisted, until she succeeded, that her parents let her finish her secondary studies at the La Paz school, commonly known as Las Vizcaínas. Faced with such extended pleas, lady Chorné and her husband had no other choice but to accept, although they always looked with much distrust that new craze of Margarita since that institution was secular and, therefore, not suitable for such a Christian family. This major drawback was partly relieved with catechism classes that all the children of the Chorné couple attended twice a week at the capital's Sagrario.

At Las Vizcaínas, Margarita studied subjects that she considered fascinating: natural history, hygiene, physical sciences basics, mathematics, bookkeeping, English and chemistry. She applied herself so much in calligraphy that she managed to have a beautiful handwriting.

But things didn't stop there. Her restless and inquisitive nature

and her strong attachment to don Agustin and to her brother Rafael prompted Marguerite, as soon as she was back from school, to peek in the dental clinic where her help would ultimately be accepted. She began receiving the patients, writing down their names, washing and storing the dental instruments. Her interest in knowing the secrets of this profession would lead her to furtively read the French medicine texts that her father kept in that American oak desk, and also the magazines, such as *Dental Cosmos*, that Rafa, her brother, received from New York. In those publications, Margarita started learning the name of all the bones forming the face bulk, of the masticatory muscles, the dental tissues and the veins and arteries irrigating the face. She also learned lots of formulas to prepare the throat paints, rinses, syrups and mouthwashes necessary to cure all sorts of mouth diseases.

Three years had to pass before doctor Chorné allowed Margarita to approach patients. She had already demonstrated her great proficiency at the dental laboratory. Under the direction of don Agustín she had learned the secrets: wash, crush and calcine the plasters used to make the molds needed to pour the materials to manufacture the prostheses. She had also learned, step by step, how to make a pink-rubber complete denture. To work at the laboratory, she made herself long poplin aprons that covered her dress completely.

After several years of a daily contact with dentistry, Margarita was convinced that she wanted to practice it her entire life. If there was something that thrilled her it was the magic possibility of eliminating toothache, which is, undoubtedly, one of the most intense and frequent.

She also enjoyed when she could restore a mouth its ability to smile and chew, so every day she did her best fashioning to measure those beautiful dentures with dental porcelain pieces so similar to the natural ones. But, to remain in this profession, it was necessary to have a Doctor of Dental Surgery degree. Her most difficult undertaking consisted in convincing her relatives, one by one, to let her carry out the procedures for obtaining her degree. The first and easiest to persuade was her brother Rafael, and she started her persuading endeavor on the same day he graduated.

The tougher to convince was doña Paz who considered a foolishness that one of her daughters devoted herself to a job typical of

males: “No man will ever propose marriage to a young woman who spends hours making dental plates and who smells of clove essence.”

Twenty-two-year-old Margarita had a strong personality and a single-mindedness that could help her to get whatever was in her sights. For nearly two years she went to Doctor Ignacio Chacón’s dental clinic, who corroborated that Margarita had the knowledge and the practical experience required to apply for the exam, as he mentioned in the document he addressed to the appropriate authorities:

Ignacio Chacón, dental surgeon graduated from the Faculty of Medicine of Mexico, certifies:

That Miss Margarita Chorné and Salazar has the knowledge and the practical experience to take her dentist professional exam, because for a long time that she has been under my headship, accomplishing her theoretical and practical studies, she has shown ample dedication and a high level of scientific knowledge.

At her request and for any purpose suiting her, hereby I issue this document in Mexico on the tenth day of the month of December of the year one thousand eight hundred and eighty-five.

Ignacio Chacón
December 11, 1885.⁹

⁹ Ignacio Chacón, *Archivo Histórico de la Facultad de Odontología. Expediente de Margarita Chorné y Salazar*, Mexico, UNAM, 1885.

THE GUILD MATURES

The first dentists who practiced their profession in Mexico came from France and the United States during the third decade of the 19th century. In their countries of origin, the dental arts were booming and the Mexican society did not take too long to accept those much-needed services.

In order to legalize the dental professional practice of those foreigners, in 1841 was passed a decree stipulating that anyone wishing to engage in the dental profession had to pass an exam and obtain a degree at the School of Medicine. That same year, six foreign dentists fulfilled that regulation and received their degree: Eugenio Crombé, José María Magnin, George Gardiner, Antonio Labully, Francisco Lacoste and Eugenio del Cambré. Five of them were French citizens and one American; all of them were friends and colleagues of Professor Agustín Chorné.

As Mexico didn't yet had a dentistry school, the postulants to that profession had to learn the whole dental art at the dental clinic of a professional already having official recognition.

For thirteen years, the only dentists who got their degree in Mexico were all foreigners who had learned the profession in their countries of origin. These immigrants became the makers of the Mexican dentistry, because they taught the dental practice to the first Mexican dentists by means of the old system of tutorship.

By 1854, young Mexicans start receiving their degree; the first two were Mariano Chacón and Benito Acuña.

On December 3rd, 1881, Rafael Chorné, Margarita's brother, passed his professional examination; that same year, Margarita's tutor, Ignacio Chacón, son of the doyen of the Mexican dentists,

got his degree. As the name of don Agustín Chorné doesn't appear School of Medicine minute book, we assume that he practiced without a title, in the same way as a good number of practitioners of this profession used to work; self-taught persons who, for not meeting the requirements or for fear of failing the exam, never applied for it.

At the beginning of the 1880s, dentistry was a well-regarded activity booming. Nearly a hundred dentists offered their services in the most important cities of the Mexican Republic. Guadalajara, Monterrey, Puebla, Mérida, León, Veracruz, Jalapa, San Luis Potosí and Toluca already had two or three dental clinics. Of course, most of these professionals started up in Mexico City.

The growing demand for dental care brought about an expansion of the guild. In 1864, when Margarita was born, there were only eleven registered professional dentists practicing in Mexico City; by 1886 that number had increased to forty-three.

The persons devoted to the dental art used to place ads in the local newspapers. These ads were illustrated with full dentures, beautiful imported dentist's chairs, or smiling young people revealing a healthy mouth. Their text included promises of everything the advertiser dentist could do: painless extractions, silver and gold fillings, dental cleaning and replacement of missing teeth. They frequently published their list of professional fees and highlighted that their dental clinic, besides being the best, offered the lowest prices.

In the absence of national publications, dentists learned about the latest advances in their profession in foreign magazines to which it was easy to subscribe to. Most of those publications came to Mexico from the dental schools in Baltimore, New York, Cincinnati and Philadelphia. In addition to articles of scientific diffusion, those magazines were colorful catalogues promoting instruments, medicines and dental equipment from manufacturers and distributors that delivered their products abroad.

Books indispensable for every candidate to the exam were, of course, those of the first three years of the medical major, such as: *Descriptive Anatomy* by Veau and Bouchard; *Topographic*, by Trillaux; *Physiology* by Kuss and Duval, and *Operations* by Malgaigne. Those who could not buy them could consult them in the library of the School of Medicine and write down their own notes.

For anyone it was obvious that any person who could handle these books with accuracy would not have difficulties to answer the exam. Margarita had applied herself so much that she memorized the most important chapters which, by the way, were in French.

The members of the dental guild of the 1880s didn't imagine that quite soon a woman would receive her dentist degree and that a century later the number of women with a dentist degree would exceed that of males.

THE LONG-AWAITED DAY

Margarita fulfilled by far the indispensable requirements to apply for the exam: the endorsement of a teacher, a letter addressed to the School of Medicine director asking him for the examination, three letters from persons of recognized integrity certifying that Margarita was a decent and Christian person, and the payment of one hundred pesos. By the way, such amount was a very high one if we consider that any renowned dentist charged one peso for a tooth extraction, and that one peso was also the cost of a hundred pastries from El Globo, one of the best patisseries in Mexico City.

Once the requirements were satisfied, the examining board selected a jury, as well as the day and the time for the exam to take place.

If Margarita was nervous the day of her graduation, no one noticed it. Her determination helped her to get ready well in advance. Her brother Rafael, *Rafa*, as she called him, had kept awoken several nights prior to the graduation day, reviewing with her the face and neck anatomy, the names of the dental tissues and a thousand more points of the themes learned in French books and American dental magazines.

Margarita's bedroom pink-porcelain oil lamp was never put out before eleven or twelve at night during a whole month. She was aware that her great commitment consisted in proving that women are endowed with the same learning capacity as men.

Since December of the previous year, Doña Paz had been tailoring the dress that Margarita would wear the day of her professional graduation. She had bought the French imported pongee as well as the Belgian lace frills at El Puerto Mercantil department

store.

It was also necessary to make her a grey-cloth cape because January evenings could be very cold. The hat was not a new one: Doña Paz fixed quite well one of hers, a black velvet and tulle hat that looked very well on her daughter.

The full attire, which included perfectly polished black boots from the El Borceguí shoe store, was waiting the clock to strike three, time when Margarita would dress herself to go to her professional exam. Before leaving home, Doña Paz prepared her daughter eggnog with sweet Sherry, burnt sugar and milk, so that, well nourished, the young woman could answer better.

At four in the afternoon, Margarita started walking towards the School of Medicine. The streets were narrow, cobbled and quite dirty: El Rastro de Jesús, Balvanera and Meleros until she reached the National Palace; she crossed the Zócalo square and continued through the Empedradillo Street, next to the Cathedral, and from there some more steps to the corner of Santo Domingo and La Encarnación, where is the famous Casa Chata that for so many years housed the School of Medicine. Before going in, Margarita prayed a few minutes before the Virgin of the Pilar at the Church of Santo Domingo. Her father and her siblings Rafael and Virginia went with her. At home would wait for them her two younger sisters, who, along with her mother, were preparing a big cake and a simple supper.

The auditorium of the School of Medicine, with its splendid set of chairs, was the perfect setting for such a solemn act. Miss Chorné impressed since her arrival, first due to her almost six feet height, and also due to her warm and firm voice. In addition to the Chorné doctors, a good number of colleagues attended the act. The first to arrive were doctors Mariano and Ignacio Chacón, father and son who, by the way, had their dental clinic in the same building as the Chornés. Also were present doctors Manuel Carmona and Valle, Benito Acuña, Manuel Higareda, Alfonso María Brito, Adolfo Morales, Juan Falero and Rafael Sevilla, these last two graduated in Philadelphia. Half an hour before the beginning a lot of skeptical and curious medical students had already filled the hall. Rarely so many people had been present at a professional exam. The expectancy was great.

The jury was made up by three of the most prestigious professors of the School of Medicine: Dr. Rafael Lucio, famous for having attended Maximilian of Habsburg of his colitis ailment, and Doctors Juan María Rodríguez and Luis Ruiz who completed the jury that so courteously welcomed Margarita.

During the questioning, they treated the female candidate with greater rigor than the usual applied to males, as if they wanted to prove her and the audience that that was not the proper place for a lady.

With great composure, Margarita displayed a good memory, and there were questions that she answered in French and immediately translated into Spanish. After an hour of having begun to be examined, the young woman requested a break to drink some water and dry her sweating hands with a white linen handkerchief. The exam ended a few minutes later, when Margarita ended the explanation of the techniques for using ether as the elective anesthetic in dental extractions.

At the end she was widely congratulated by the stunned jury and by the attendees. The audience's applause moved to tears the young woman who until that moment had controlled her emotion.

All the city newspapers, *El Tiempo*, *La Prensa*, *El Pabellón Español*, *La Voz de España* and *El Partido Liberal*, among others, would review such an important event.

But not everything was compliments. During the following days, some columnists expressed in their press articles their fear that many young women could feel motivated to follow in Margarita's footsteps, thus threatening the stability of Mexican households that needed "more women who take care of their homes instead of ladies venturing into male jobs".¹⁰

¹⁰ Daniel Cosío Villegas, op. cit., pp. 227-234.

MARGARITA'S DENTAL CLINIC

After what seemed an unbelievable achievement—her professional graduation—Margarita continued practicing in her father's, Agustín Chorné, dental clinic, located at number 24 of Mesones Street. Years later, they would move to number 6 of San Agustín Street. Once alone, without her mentor, she settled in Regina Street, then in the old house of Hernán Cortés at number 16 of Seminario Street; from there she moved to number 99 of San Jerónimo Street and, eventually, to San Miguel dead end, always in the neighborhood where she was born.

During the happy years when she worked next to her father and her brother, the Chorné doctors used to advertise their prestigious dental clinic, La Casa Dental Mexicana (The Mexican Dental House), announcing that they performed painless extractions of teeth and roots using general anesthesia. They also pointed out the specialties of the house: “gold fillings, placement of teeth and dentures by the latest procedures.” For more than two decades, the dental clinic of doctors Chorné was one of the most famous and renowned in the city, which would bring about economic prosperity for the whole family.

The dental clinic opened at eight in the morning to take care, during the first hour, of the “solemnly poor” who waited in line outside, sometimes since dawn. Many dentists used to offer one or two hours of their work to the needy population, and Margarita never was the exception. She enjoyed healing so many children with toothache, so many toothless poor and with huge abscesses requiring to be drained and disinfected with iodine and permanganate solutions.

The dental clinic moved from one house to another, but it didn't change its atmosphere. The golden mirror, the showcase with a large number of vials containing odorous substances: alcohol, chloroform, ether, mint water, tincture from benzoin, rose essence, iodine, arsenic sulfide, creosote, eugenol and camphor. The shelf looked like a huge jewelry box where, in small little drawers, they stored all kinds of clamps, mirrors and forceps. All these instruments, golden and glistening, had been gilded. Margarita, very fussy with cleaning, believed that this metal was easier to be kept aseptic. Inside that piece of furniture they also stored gold foils, silver filings and sets of imported porcelain teeth to manufacture the whole dental plates that made Margarita famous.

Another important piece of the dental clinic was the elegant fluffy-back armchair that was submitted to a reupholstering at each change of address; and next to it, the spittoon shining due to so much brush and bleach wash. On the wall, in a carved-wood frame, was Margarita's certificate. Two armchairs smelling of camphor and a coffee table with a daily-renewed copy of *El Imparcial* newspaper, were part of the waiting room.

Margarita's good manners aided her enjoy an abundant clientele, consisting mainly of women and children. Her male patients included don Francisco. I. Madero and his family, well-known political figures, French diplomats and the Spanish owners of the grocery stores copious in the neighborhood.

Dr. Chorné's greatest pleasure was always to take care of so many poor children who lived near her dental clinic. Her skilled hands restored hundreds of toothless mouths enabling them to eat, speak and smile once again.

Margarita used to work alone; she never employed assistants, secretaries or nurses, as did the large number of dentists who already were graduating from the dental school, next to the School of Medicine that, by the way, was close to her home. Those modern dentists used X-rays and innovative devices which were imported from the United States by the *Compañía Dental Consolidada de Nueva York*, located at number 8 of Vergara Street on the corner with San Francisco Street, and by some new distributors established in Gante and Palma Streets.

Margarita never felt the need to change her practice: why

would she update her treatments if they were successful? She continued practicing with precision and great skill the dentistry learned from her father until she turned sixty. She didn't attend either those professional study groups, so restricted, that used to meet one night a week; she never asked for it, and surely they would have not accepted her for being a woman.

Dr. Chorné mastered the Pharmacology required by her profession. She used to prepare her own drugs based on the notebook that she kept until her death and on which she had recorded all the remedies used by her father and brother had scored: boric acid, sodium chlorate, lignum vitae powder, magnesium carbonate and essence of roses or mint, to prepare very good dentifrices; borax, tincture of benzoin, distilled water and simple syrup for the foot- and-mouth stomatitis; potassium chlorate, distilled water and glycerin for the same cases but in critical condition; red quinine and distilled water gargling for the diphtheritic stomatitis; and to wash abscesses, nothing better than a zinc chloride, alcohol, China cinnamon essence and filtered water solution. The local anesthesia used by Margarita was, predominantly, a cocaine solution that she prepared based on the old formula of 20 grams of distilled water, 0.20 grams of cocaine hydrochloride and 0.01 grams of salicylic acid. Dr. Chorné purchased all those supplies at the pharmacy El Elefante where she used to go once a week.

His nephew-grandson Antonio Villagra Chorné recalls the extraction that, with so much ability, his aunt Margarita made him:

Then I was about ten years old and I had spent the night with a terrible toothache. It was 1920 and as my grandfather Rafael was already dead, my older brother took me to my aunt Margarita's dental clinic. We went on horseback. We passed close to what is now the Revolution Monument but that at that time was only the structure of what had been devised to be the Legislative Palace; the street was cobbled. We arrived at Regina Street. The office was on the first floor. We tied the horse very well and we climbed a steep staircase; we had to pass in front of the doors of other dwellings. At the end of the corridor was my aunt's dental clinic. We had to wait for another patient to go out; I think it was a boy, of my same age, accompanied by his parents. I don't remember having been afraid; I felt calm because I knew my aunt and she inspired me lot of confidence. When she asked us to enter the consulting room she was washing her hands in a white-porcelain ewer she had placed in a corner. She signaled me to sit

down on the armchair and, wearing an impeccable white coat, she approached me and asked me which tooth ached. After reviewing me, she explained to me that she had to remove. She worked alone, no one helped her, and she didn't use an injection. Against the aching tooth she placed a cotton ball soaked in, what I later knew, was cocaine hydrochloride. Minutes later, with a great skill and a pair of tweezers, she pulled out the tooth. I don't recall the procedure hurt me one bit. Finally she placed on the space of the extraction a cotton ball soaked in some substance. Then, through the backdoor of the room, I went into the house where my cousin Baltasar was doing his homework.¹¹

¹¹ Antonio Villagra Chorné, interview with the author, August-September 1997, Mexico City.



Doctor Agustín Chorné's and Sons advertisement



Doctor Rafael Chorné's advertisement

LOVES AND HEARTBREAKS

Her graduation first and afterwards her professional practice, in addition to her musical pastimes, filled Margarita's life to such extent that, to the great concern of her parents, she hadn't shown any interest in forming her own family. The males who used to hang around the places frequented by the Chorné family felt some fear to get romantically involved with an independent woman. It wasn't easy for the majority of the handsome men of that time to think of marrying a self-sufficient young woman who was scarcely interested in house chores. Her sister Cecilia was the first to get married; at age seventeen she married a gentleman whose surname was Belle Cisneros and who was thirty years older than her. Virginia and María had also got married very young. After a long engagement with Velina García, Rafa had formed his own family: the youngsters Velina and Francisco were Margarita's dearest nephews.

One day Margarita met Alfonso Trillanes and, as any young woman, she lived a love story. Alfonso was her first boyfriend, who she would remember until the day of her death, and who she always referred to as "her one great love".

Coincidentally, the only time that she agreed to go to the musical gathering at the Vera's she met Alfonso. He was the ideal man for Margarita: he wasn't intimidated by the interests of his future girlfriend; he knew about music, literature, philosophy and medicine; he was some inches taller than the doctor and, like her, he had green eyes.

One Saturday they organized an outing to the Hacienda de La Castañeda, where there was music, dancing and lots of *tamales* for

lunch; the group was also formed by Rafa, Velina his wife, and her sisters. There Alfonso proposed to her and promised that he would never ask her to abandon her profession, as long as she agreed to install her dental clinic at home. Margarita felt that she was deeply loved and understood.

For several years, Alfonso visited her at home after six o'clock, when Margarita ended her work, and he left before nine o'clock in the evening, in keeping with her home rules. With him she used to go, after the Sunday mass, to the Café de La Concordia, on the corner of San José el Real Street and Plateros Street, to eat some pastries with chocolate. They also attended the festivals and bazaars at El Tívoli of the Eliseo where were celebrated all the national holidays, as well as those of La Covadonga and the 14 of July. These gatherings were very joyful. At three o'clock the Chief of Staff band or the Vega orchestra started to play and the dancing party began. Alfonso took her in his arms, always at a prudent distance to avoid giving cause for gossips among friends. With Alfonso she shared the unforgettable emotion of witnessing Joaquín de la Cantolla rise in his hot-air balloon *Vulcano*. Alfonso recited her the poems of Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, such as this one that she confined forever in her memory:

What rosy country do you come from?
Where, oh goddess! did you lift off?
In your beauty there's a bit of Olympus
and a lot of sky in your exalted virtue.
In vain man tries to portray you;
if you want to see your beauty described,
open the immortal "Faust", and put your name
where Goethe wrote Margarita.¹²

Her courtship years with Alfonso would be the happiest of her life. During one of their evening meetings, Alfonso told her that he was leaving to San Francisco, California, where part of his family was living, because he wanted to try his luck. He asked her to wait for him and he promised to write her often. The precise year of Alfonso's departure would end being erased from Margarita's memory: Was it 1892, 93, or perhaps 94?

¹² Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, "El duque Job", "A Isabel", in *Sus mejores pasos. Antología*, Mexico, El libro español, p. 225.

For quite a while, for Margarita it was enough to receive letters from her beloved that she answered immediately. But two or three years after, the correspondence ceased and never again she got news from the absent.

The years passed and Alfonso never came back. All Margarita's siblings had formed their own families, and the same had happened to her old schoolmates and friends who she stopped visiting.

Those years, waiting for news from Alfonso, had left their mark on Margarita, who threw herself into her profession. She stopped attending concerts or the opera; she only gave vent to her feelings on the piano, her eternal companion. Her appearance changed; it became that of a lady with an austere appearance and a serious character. She started eating all kinds of desserts; her favorite place was the Celaya candy store on the street that had just been renamed 5 de Mayo. She walked to that store to buy and bring back home packs of *jamoncillos de pepita*¹³, coconut-stuffed lemons and custard. Her until then slender waist, accentuated by the corset, began to swell, and her upsweep hair left behind its blackness.

Margarita used to go for a walk when she ended her workday; that helped her clear her mind and evoke better times. During one of those walks she came up to the *Teatro Nacional*¹⁴. The scene that she saw was appalling: the beautiful building was being demolished because in its place they were going to build the *Palacio de Bellas Artes*¹⁵, that President Díaz would inaugurate during the celebrations of the first one hundred years of independence or *Centenario de la Independencia*. A very important part of her life was being destroyed by the pick. Dust filled the surroundings. Margarita couldn't control her feelings and cried before the ruins of the building where she had enjoyed so many times. She never knew if those tears were due to the theatre vision or to her memories of Alfonso, who she would never see again.

She never mentioned where she met Antonio Dromundo, an unmarried lawyer a few years younger than her; she disclosed very little about their brief courtship. One morning, in May 1905, during

¹³ Bars made with a paste of pumpkin-seeds and sugar.

¹⁴ National Theatre

¹⁵ Palace of Fine Arts

breakfast, Margarita surprised the family with the news of her wedding. That same night, accompanied by his mother Doña Refugio Martínez widow Dromundo, the future groom came to the Chornés' and asked for the hand of their doctor daughter. The mere announcement of the wedding a forty years old lady was considered extremely far-fetched by her parents and siblings who had already become accustomed to Margarita's spinsterhood.

The mere wedding announcement of a forty years old lady was considered extremely harebrained by her parents and siblings who had already become accustomed to Margarita's spinsterhood. But Margarita didn't hear their advices and she just notified them the place and day of the ceremony. As almost usual, Dr. Margarita Chorné broke the rules and got married at an age when all spinsters are usually resigned to their fate.

In only two days were distributed the wedding invitations that were ordered to El Escritorio print shop, on number 15 of Coliseo Viejo Street. The wedding took place in the parish of San José, very close to the market of San Juan. The Chornés did their best to hide their displeasure and, in a ceremony without the relevance of customary family weddings, don Agustín gave the most beloved of his daughters in marriage to an almost unknown man.

Margarita's relationship with her family saw itself severely impaired. Although she established her new home with her dental clinic very close to the paternal home, she felt very distant... She missed her mother's meals, the after-dinner conversations, her old piano, but above all, the coexistence with don Agustín during the working hours. It wasn't easy to do without his funny and appreciative comments when she proudly showed him a newly made complete dental plate. From then on, each of the Chornés would look after his own dental clinic, given that, since his wedding, Rafael had settled on his own on Tacuba Street.

Against all odds, Margarita had the immense joy of getting pregnant just a few months after her wedding. But her marriage was as fleeting as her courtship. Margarita decided to separate from her husband when she confirmed that he hadn't ended an old affair with a woman who he maintained. Deeply wounded to the core, Margarita didn't mind to face motherhood alone. She would say that she was neither the first nor the last woman who would raise her child without the presence of a father.

Dad Agustín's pleas—advising her to carry on with her marriage—were useless: “Do it for your child, at least until he grows up, maybe your husband will mend his ways over time.” “For God's sake, my child, think about it; a single mother is neither well seen nor respected,” Doña Paz begged her. The separation further damaged Margarita's relationship with her parents and siblings; there was no family history of a divorce. After consulting the issue with her confessor, she packed Antonio Dromundo's belongings and, backed by her great pride, she placed them outside the entrance door. Remain attached to a cheating husband had never been among her plans.

But she wasn't alone: Martina, the young Puebla native who helped her with the household chores, promised her to take care of the child while she was working at the dental clinic.



Wedding card

AN EPIPHANY'S DAY PRESENT

Margarita awaited the birth of her son as the most important event in her life. Once again she turned a deaf ear to the thousand comments from family members and friends who, in one way or another, expressed how dangerous it was to give birth at “such an advanced age”. Margarita’s religious faith made her believe that God would send her a healthy child, and so it was. She had many months to prepare her baby everything that would be needed: a wicker bassinet lined with Swiss embroidered strip, four dozen birdseye-cloth diapers with crocheted edges, that same number of cheese-cloth diapers, very smooth cotton baby-shirts that she lovingly shadow-embroidered with blue silk thread, pastel-colored baby-sweaters and a whole collection of blankets that would protect the baby against cold. Everything was ready: the blue-painted room, the baby-clothes and linen, the loving mother and nanny Martina.

In fact, Margarita worked at her dental clinic until the last days of November. Her high stature and her loose white coats had concealed her pregnancy to such extent that very few of her patients were able to uncover which was the real cause of her announced two months holiday. The last work that she carried out was a dental plate for don Nemesio, owner of the grocery at the corner of her house. Martina and Margarita devoted the whole month of December to get ready for the birth.

Since dawn of January 5, 1906, she started feeling the typical discomforts of childbirth and, as it was customary at that time, a lady specialized in those duties turned up at her home when the baby’s birth became imminent. Before noon, on January 6, the boy

who would be baptized with the name of one of the three wise men, Baltasar, came into the world. In response to Doña Paz pleas, Margarita had consented that the birth took place at her parents'.

Balta, as she called him, was a chubby child with black and curly eyelashes, legacy of his father, and a very white skin, like that of his mother. In the future, the child would fully fill Margarita's life. Although Antonio Dromundo used to go visit his son, for the mother her husband, who she never divorced, had ceased to exist as such.

After Baltasar's birth, family relations improved and, forced by circumstances, Margarita returned to live with her parents.

The news of the terrible damages caused by San Francisco's earthquake that day April 18, 1906, brought nostalgic thoughts to the doctor who couldn't forget Alfonso. What if he had died in that disaster? Nonetheless, motherhood had changed her affective life. Her heart would never shelter any other man except little Baltasar and, of course, her family.

Baltasar was growing up surrounded by his mother's love and his grandparents' affection. He also enjoyed his father's visits, especially because Antonio came to pick and take him to ride on his sorrel horse *Consentido*. The last memory that Baltasar kept of his father was that of a Thursday in 1914 when, after a ride, he saw him leave on horseback across Regina Square. The next day, Antonio Dromundo would join the revolutionary forces against dictator Huerta and in that crusade he would lose his life.



Medal and recognition granted by the French *Institut du Midi* to Margarita Chorné y Salazar

THE RECOGNITION

One morning of 1908, the mail brought Margarita an excellent news, something that would fill her with pride. In a short time, at the Embassy of France she would receive recognition for being the first woman in Latin America to obtain a degree in an independent profession. Margarita read several times the letter before running to show it to her brother Rafael. The news was incredible. She had to contact the Embassy staff to set the day and time of the ceremony.

She was delivered the award during a simple ceremony at the Embassy of France in El Havre Street. It was the diplomatic representative himself, his Excellency Mr. Paul Lefaivre, who handed over to Margarita the diploma and the medal. In his speech, Mr. Lefaivre said that, for being the center of the modern scientific movement, France wanted to honor the first woman who had dare to dabble in a profession until then exclusively practiced by males, thus clearing the way for the whole female population with scientific interest.

Fifty years after this brilliant event, the son of the female doctor would write in *Mi barrio de San Miguel*:

The *Diplôme d'Honneur* was a revered pride at home, as the emblematic colors of its border that today I spot altered by the passage of time, and the communication signed in Toulouse on the diploma of honor.

How deep her emotion was when she remembered those two events: the unsurpassable afternoon of her professional exam, which put an end to the purely males' tradition of university studies in Mexico, and the day when she received the honorable distinction

from France! From that silk ribbon, displaying the talent and knowledge assigned colors, hung a crown topped by a tiny sphere and this in turn by a little cross, and below the crown, looking like a pointed arch, were braided two delicate green-stoned garlands which in turn enclosed and highlighted a four arms cross, each arm formed by red-stoned angles, and at the center of the cross a circle that, over a purple background, displayed a miniature coat of arms of the Institute dedicated to literature, philanthropy and science...¹⁶

¹⁶ Baltasar Dromundo, *Mi barrio de San Miguel*, México, Antigua Librería Robredo, 1951, pp. 37-42.

THE DIFFICULT YEARS

When Margarita returned to her parents', just after her son's birth, the family lived in the mezzanine at number 2 of Tiburcio Street, later called San Agustín, and eventually named Uruguay. Years later, they moved to a more modest home in the building at 100 Bolívar Street that once had been the Jeronimas convent. At the entrance of the carpenter's shop that was on the ground floor one could still read on a plaque that there had lived Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

Restless as all the children of his age, little Baltasar toured the rooms of his house on a quiet velocipede with rubber wheels, perfectly unaware of the difficulties the nation was going through.

The fall of the 35-years-old Pofirio Díaz regime had repercussions in all areas and, of course, one of the hardest pounded was the economy. All doctors Chornés clientele decreased and the scarce patients only appeared to complain about the tough economic situation. Another significant problem they had to face was the unstoppable rise of prices of dental equipment and materials.

Since his marriage, Rafael Chorné had opened his own dental clinic, and the decrease in the number of patients had forced him to order a beautiful advertisement in the political newspaper *El Mañana* (edited by a patient of his, don Jesús Rábago). For his part, doctor Agustín had stopped practicing because his old age and an incipient arthritis had kept him away from the dental clinic that now Margarita started to manage alone.

The house domestic staff—numerous in previous years—was reduced to nanny Martina. Baltasar was growing with the affection of his mother and his grandparents. He listened with great interest

to don Agustín's anecdotes, who told him proudly that his older brothers, Joaquín and José, had fought next to general Díaz at the battle of *La Carbonera*, and a thousand stories more about historical episodes that he had lived in person. The child also enjoyed the delicacies prepared by his grandmother Paz in the kitchen.

It was odd, admitted Margarita, that after the great devotion she had felt towards President Díaz, now she felt so much sympathy for Francisco. I. Madero, to such an extent that the day of his triumphal entrance into the capital, she dressed Baltasar as a soldier and together they went to cheer him on the street. The child had memorized a few words of congratulation that his mother wrote him, and when don Francisco was walking by them, he shouted them loudly at him. The child's message didn't go unnoticed for the next President who smiling lifted him up in his arms. That would be the first step of the future great orator.

This unforgettable event would be the last happy moment the Chornés would enjoy for many years. On Christmas Eve 1913, Doña Paz died after a long series of ailments. Just two years later, Rafael Chorné, Margarita's beloved brother, died of a heart disease.

As if these misfortunes were too scarce for the family, one morning, some months later, Baltasar woke up very sick. The symptoms were those of Spanish influenza, a disease that many people suffered that winter. Margarita took care of the child, tried to keep him in bed, and rubbed him with camphorated alcohol to reduce fever. Two days later, the symptoms worsened: the child started with diarrhea and discomfort throughout his body. The troubled mother asked the family doctor to come home and he prescribed a bland diet and constant peppermint and chamomile infusions. But Baltasar didn't show signs of improvement. Four or five days later the disease exhibited its whole gravity: the child woke up unable to move his right leg, as if it were a rag. So Margarita began her pilgrimage through the offices of the most prominent doctors in Mexico. The diagnosis was not easy: the opinions just kept adding up: malignant erysipelas, rheumatic fever, coxalgia, and some more names without any meaning for the mother.

Several painful months passed before Baltasar's disease came to an end. Margarita spent hours close to the boy, encouraging him

with affectionate words, reading him passages from the life of Jesus Christ, and reviewing the school lessons. The quarters of the recent and miraculous aspirin pills relieved him of the pain on his immobile leg. All the known and to be known physicians paraded through the Chornés' until a good day Baltasar improved, although his right leg did not recover its whole mobility and lost its ability to grow. During those months, Margarita had neglected the dental clinic and thus her decreasing financial resources dried up completely.

When she ran out of money, she had to sell some pieces of furniture. The Victorian walnut desk and the dresser with the mirror that had reflected Margarita's figure since she was a girl were purchased by an antique dealer who used to pay little, but in cash. A doctor friend of the family bought the art-nouveau gold-plated clock that for so many decades had decorated the Chornés fireplace. The jewels, some of them inheritance of the paternal grandmother, took a little longer to be sold off.

Finally, the doctor found herself in the difficult position of having to sell part of her dental instruments.

Soon after, being in the harshest poverty, the family moved to a small dwelling at 113 San Jeronimo Street. There would die don Agustín; his departure would be another blow for Margarita.

Thus, in just a few years had died her parents, her husband and even her brother, who, had he lived, would have helped her a lot during the painful trance of her son Baltasar's illness. Since the death of doña Paz, Margarita didn't have the time to come out of mourning.

As soon as her son convalesced, Margarita worked tirelessly at her dental clinic to pay for Baltasar's treatments and to recover as much as possible the lost heritage. On the other hand, it was a relief to practice her profession only a door away from her place, where the boy was studying his school lessons.

When the disease got under control, Margarita hadn't one single black hair left in her impeccable bun. Baltasar had received all kinds of medical treatments, including massages with a modern electrical device that Margarita ordered from a clinic in the United States.

Baltasar was a very hard-working teenager, following the example of his mother, and his physical problem would never be an

impediment to get the best grades at school and even to practice his vocation as a student leader.

Margarita used to dye her white hair with a dye that she prepared burning a *sapote* seed and then crushing it until it was converted into a thin black powder to which she added a few drops of alcohol and a portion of sweet almond oil. She imagined that her patients wouldn't like to be attended by an old woman, and they would surely look for a younger dentist. Thus she had to keep on working so that Baltasar could finish his high school studies at the Preparatory #1 and then enroll, as it was his dream, in the school of jurisprudence.

THE RETIREMENT

María Luisa Denison—who later would become Margarita’s best friend—had come to visit them invited by Baltasar. The young woman, petite and with a cheerful mood, was courted by the young man when he was starting his law studies and she was finishing her major as a teacher. Although their relationship didn’t prosper, María Luisa and the doctor would start a long friendship.

Baltasar changed girlfriends very often; at that time he even tried to break free from his mother. He rented a room in a student residence and got a job. To offset his absence, Margarita suggested María Luisa to leave the boarding house where she was staying, and she invited her to live in the space formerly occupied by Baltasar. That way, Dr. Chorné would have someone who could listen to her music and with whom she could talk about her readings, and María Luisa would have someone who could provide her maternal care and also read her poems. Nanny Martina stayed at the house and she prepared Baltasar’s preferred meals when he came to visit them.

Although he had recently graduated from the law school, Baltasar Dromundo began a successful career as a writer. His sharp criticism and ease of verbal expression earned him the publication of his articles in some major newspapers. Afterwards, he wrote several books of poems: *Negra Caiyou* and *13 Romances*; political cut essays: *Los oradores de México*, *A quince años de Emiliano Zapata*, *Elogio de la lealtad*, *Tomás Garrido*, *Un hombre*, *Los oradores del 29* and *Mi barrio de San Miguel* where he eloquently portrays the streets, houses, buildings and characters that filled his childhood and his youth.

In her mature years, as during the rest of her life, Margarita was a lady with much vigor. But the Mexico of that time had great differences in contrast with that of the end of the century in which she had begun practicing her profession. In addition, each year several dozens of dentists graduated from the Dental Faculty and made the guild increasingly competitive. Of course, there were already a good number of female dentists practicing dentistry. Margarita recalled the names of some of them: Cleotilde Leonilda Castañeda and Mónica Correa graduated in the last decade of the 19th century. Clara Rosas, María Luisa Rojo and Angélica Avilés were part of the first generations coming out of the Consultorio Nacional de Enseñanza Dental, and, in 1912, also Anita Leal. Subsequently, each generation of graduates would include more enthusiastic and well-prepared women. Margarita felt herself very proud about the progress of her profession, especially of the good work her female colleagues were performing.

Obviously, it was already time to retire. Her son, who had struggled to achieve a financially stable position, begged her to do so. It took Baltasar several years before he could convince her to accept her retirement.

For Margarita it was distressing to shut down her dental clinic. Each object that she put or gave away could tell her story. María Luisa Denison helped her with this awkward task, and Baltasar, with his sense of humor, alleviated somehow those moments. The beautiful American oak bookshelf that had endured so many relocations was half-wrecked.

“You should thank the moths for their help; in exchange for such a wreck I bought you that sofa-bed at El Pulman Elegante,” Baltasar told her the day he loaded that piece of furniture on the garbage truck. Jars and bottles, some of them with already outdated medicines, had the same outcome as the bookshelf.

The doctor placed a set of six forceps in a grey cloth bag and she bequeathed them to a young dentist who was installing his clinic very near. Maria Luisa took them with an anonymous card whose message said: “These are the only things still useful from my dental clinic. Good luck, doctor.”

The last thing to disappear was the worn-out dental chair; a rag-and-bone-man took it in exchange for a dozen of small Chinese

porcelain saucers. For a long time, Baltasar joked asking Margarita: “Mom, give me some rice pudding in what’s left of your dental chair.” To which she replied, trying to sound serious: “What else do you think I could get for it if the springs stuck out everywhere: it wasn’t even useful as a village barber chair.”

Inside a big marquetry chest smelling of mahogany, she packed away her treasures of two centuries: her professional title, the Medical School documents, the diploma and the medal that came from France, as well as some of her father’s documents and many family photographs. There was also a yellow envelope with Baltasar’s birth certificate and several poems that he had written as a child. Next she moved to another area of the city, to start a new stage of her life and with lighter luggage.

The relocation was to a large house full of light in the Santa Julia district. The place was quiet and soon both women got used to their new environment. After her retirement, Margarita ceased going out much. At home she had everything she needed to have a good time: the piano, a record player her son gave her, a lot of piano scores and records of her favorite music, books, many books, a hallway with flowerpots and canaries... and her memories. María Luisa went out in the mornings to give classes and she returned to be with Margarita in the afternoons. Baltasar used to visit them almost every day; for him it was crucial to discuss with his mother his work issues, his academic achievements, and in general all his concerns.

Other visits very cherished by Margarita were those of her siblings’ children and grandchildren. For the adults she always had eggnog and anisette, whereas she offered the children cupcakes and chocolates of El Globo, as a courtesy of María Luisa’s aunt.

The unavoidable conversation topics were the anecdotes lived with *Rafa*: the picnic when both fell from a Mexican hawthorn tree for refusing to drop a bag full of fruit, and when they reach majority and they went riding together to Taxco, the so-called “city of silver” some 90 miles from Mexico City. She could spend hours talking about her brother; she laughed recalling his hint of mustache which caused him a scolding by doña Paz who thought he hadn’t clean up the traces of a cup of chocolate.

What she never liked to tell them in detail was the death of the doctor at such an early age. “He had just turned fifty, but his heart

failed...” there ended the story, with a shaky handkerchief drying her tears. Fortunately, most of those visits were made up of happy moments: she felt very pleased that Rafaelito, his brother’s eldest grandson, would dedicate himself to jewelry, as did the first Chornés; and that Toño Villagra, Velina’s son, after completing his studies founded a so well-known pharmacy with the name of her most venerated image: Sacred Heart.

Eleven years went by this way. Margarita’s professional life had been left behind and she had reached a peaceful stage. At last, Baltasar had a courtship that was more than a short episode. Miss Rosa Rodríguez was the only young woman able to inspire him to take her to the altar. When Baltasar married her, he decided to invite his mother to live with them, and Margarita really came to love Rosa as a daughter.

Almost at the same time, María Luisa also got married, and although they didn’t share the same roof, they never cut off contact.

The Dromundo family lived several years in a small house on Quintana Roo street, in the Roma district. There arrived a new member: a baby girl who was baptized with the name of the doctor.

The grandmother used to tell *Mar*, as she always called her, stories which were the scripts of her favorite operas adapted as children’s stories. Years later, the Dromundo-Rodríguez couple would have another daughter who they called Maravilla. Margarita enjoyed enormously to look after both girls and to see them grow up.

Margarita Dromundo Rodríguez recalls her grandmother with her utterly white hair gathered into a bun, her green and melancholic glance and her eternal black skirts almost trailing on the floor. Rosita, her daughter-in-law, convinced her to use less austere clothes, and so she made her clear-shaded blouses and dresses with colors less harsh than black. Nonetheless, it was impossible to make her accept to slightly take up her skirts. Margarita considered scandalous “those dresses so short that they don’t even cover the knees”. She neither liked the excess of makeup and, in this respect, she mentioned her granddaughters that young women of her time did not need so many artifices to be beautiful: “I always used water, soap and a slight brushstroke of rice powder, in addition to my violet-scented perfume. I never needed to paint my eyes or smear my face.”

She took an active part in organizing her granddaughters' weddings. In due time, inside a nicely wrapped box she gave each of them one piece of her family treasures: a Missal, gold bracelets and earrings made by her grandfather, a set of covers crocheted by doña Paz, and her dolls with porcelain faces.

Margarita's last years were very calm; she lived them at her son's, receiving and lavishing him with proofs of her great love. She enjoyed, as always, chatting with Baltasar's friends who very often visited the new home at Tecamachalco: Andrés Henestrosa, José María de los Reyes, Carlos Román Celis, Darío Vasconcelos, Olga and Rufino Tamayo, among others.

On Epiphany's day of 1959—Baltasar's birthday—she surprised the family when, being ninety-five years old, she walked towards the piano, she decisively took off the green cloth cover, sat on the bench and played several melodies, as in the old days. She finished performing Agustín Lara's *Farolito*.

Since that year she began to lose her sight and hearing; nonetheless she continued reading newspapers, magazines and books to discuss them with her son, her granddaughters and her dear friend María Luisa.

Until her last days she kept up to date with all the international politics and, of course, with the national occurrences. Her conversation continued to be solid and fluid, and her memory, exceptional.

Sometimes she told Margarita and Maravilla, her granddaughters, that she was already tired of living, but when her health displayed some decay then she clung to life once again.

When she was ninety-seven years old, she told her granddaughters: "How can I not be tired if I was born during the Empire of Maximilian, I was a teenager during the Porfirio Díaz regime, very young I saw the advent of the electric light, I was already working as a dentist when I changed of century, and I dressed my son Baltasar as a soldier to welcome Madero? By the time I boasted my gray-hair bun, I put dentures to several Obregón and Carranza's revolutionary generals; I heard my son pronounce the speeches promoting the university autonomy; I gave my set of turquoises as my share for the petroleum expropriation. How can I not be tired, dear girls, if I have lived a century of Mexican history, the Revolution and two World Wars?"

On February 22, 1962, she celebrated, in high spirits, her birthday ninety-eight, having lunch at her granddaughter Maravilla's. The following days she began to lose appetite and she became dehydrated. Distressed, her son called Doctor Guillermo Guevara who warned the family about the impending outcome.

On March 19—Saint Joseph's day—her confessor visited her. Margarita, with her body already very weak, but in full possession of her mental faculties, confessed, took communion, asked for and was anointed the Holy Oil. The next day, she demanded to be taken to her son's bedside, who was recovering from a pelvis surgery: she had to give him her final blessing.

The following days, Baltasar, making a real effort—in a wheelchair and aided by two nurses—went from his room to that of Margarita to caress her and try to cheer her up with love messages. But the dentist's life was slipping away slowly.

On April 2, 1962, surrounded by the love of her son, her granddaughters and María Luisa, Margarita Chorné y Salazar closed her eyes forever, holding her rosary between her hands.

On the nightstand remained her everyday items: the handkerchief embroidered with a large M, a bottle of alcohol, the box with scented powders, and the Ibáñez almond milk she used to soften her hands.

Months after his mother's death, full of nostalgia, Mr. Baltasar Dromundo wrote:

I recall her sitting at the piano. Her long white fingers played or seemed to play on the keyboard. Her body was wrapped in a crisp silk black dress which showed in garlands, creating the discreet gracious wave in which the skirt fell and died. Her face, her sweet face, absorbed by the music. I listened absentmindedly to the sentimental swings of *Elodia*, her favorite piece. Some other times it was Villanueva's *Poetic Waltz*, or Ricardo Castro's *Capricho*. It was her delicate musical taste, the finesse of her Mexican sensibility which even so captured the European influence, her loving predilection for canaries and flowers, which bestowed the house that hint of discreet elegance, between melancholic and cheerful...¹⁷

¹⁷ Baltasar Dromundo (Ed.), *Margarita Chorné y Salazar*, Mexico, 1962, p. 27.

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