

A Set of Six

by

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Les petites marionnettes
Font, font, font,
Trois petits tours
Et puis s'en vont.
--NURSERY RHYME

TO MISS M. H. M. CAPES

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE six stories in this volume are the result of some three or four years of occasional work. The dates of their writing are far apart, their origins are various. None of them are connected directly with personal experiences. In all of them the facts are inherently true, by which I mean that they are not only possible but that they have actually happened. For instance, the last story in the volume, the one I call Pathetic, whose first title is Il Conde (misspelt by-the-by) is an almost verbatim transcript of the tale told me by a very charming old gentleman whom I met in Italy. I don't mean to say it is only that. Anybody can see that it is something more than a verbatim report, but where he left off and where I began must be left to the acute discrimination of the reader who may be interested in the problem. I don't mean to say that the problem is worth the trouble. What I am certain of, however, is that it is not to be solved, for I am not at all clear about it myself by this time. All I can say is that the personality of the narrator was extremely suggestive quite apart from the story he was telling me. I heard a few years ago that he had died far away from his beloved Naples where that "abominable adventure" did really happen to him.

Thus the genealogy of Il Conde is simple. It is not the case with the other stories. Various strains contributed to their composition, and the nature of many of those I have forgotten, not having the habit of making notes either before or after the fact. I mean the fact of writing a story. What I remember best about Gaspar Ruiz is that it was written, or at any rate begun, within a month of finishing Nostromo; but apart from the locality, and that a pretty wide one (all the South American Continent), the novel and the story have nothing in common, neither mood, nor intention and, certainly, not the style. The manner for the most part is that of General Santierra, and that old warrior, I note with satisfaction, is very true to himself all through. Looking now dispassionately at the various ways in which this story could have been presented I can't honestly think the General superfluous. It is he, an old man talking of the days of his youth, who characterizes the whole narrative and gives it an air of actuality which I doubt whether I could have achieved without his help. In the mere writing his existence of course was of no help at all, because the whole thing had to be carefully kept within the frame of his simple mind. But all this is but a laborious searching of memories. My present feeling is that the story could not have been told otherwise. The hint for Gaspar Ruiz the man I found in a book by Captain Basil Hall, R.N., who was for some time, between the years 1824 and 1828, senior officer

of a small British Squadron on the West Coast of South America. His book published in the thirties obtained a certain celebrity and I suppose is to be found still in some libraries. The curious who may be mistrusting my imagination are referred to that printed document, Vol. II, I forget the page, but it is somewhere not far from the end. Another document connected with this story is a letter of a biting and ironic kind from a friend then in Burma, passing certain strictures upon "the gentleman with the gun on his back" which I do not intend to make accessible to the public. Yet the gun episode did really happen, or at least I am bound to believe it because I remember it, described in an extremely matter-of-fact tone, in some book I read in my boyhood; and I am not going to discard the beliefs of my boyhood for anybody on earth.

The Brute, which is the only sea-story in the volume, is, like *Il Conde*, associated with a direct narrative and based on a suggestion gathered on warm human lips. I will not disclose the real name of the criminal ship but the first I heard of her homicidal habits was from the late Captain Blake, commanding a London ship in which I served in 1884 as Second Officer. Captain Blake was, of all my commanders, the one I remember with the greatest affection. I have sketched in his personality, without however mentioning his name, in the first paper of *The Mirror of the Sea*. In his young days he had had a personal experience of the brute and it is perhaps for that reason that I have put the story into the mouth of a young man and made of it what the reader will see. The existence of the brute was a fact. The end of the brute as related in the story is also a fact, well-known at the time though it really happened to another ship, of great beauty of form and of blameless character, which certainly deserved a better fate. I have unscrupulously adapted it to the needs of my story thinking that I had there something in the nature of poetical justice. I hope that little villainy will not cast a shadow upon the general honesty of my proceedings as a writer of tales.

Of *The Informer* and *An Anarchist* I will say next to nothing. The pedigree of these tales is hopelessly complicated and not worth disentangling at this distance of time. I found them and here they are. The discriminating reader will guess that I have found them within my mind; but how they or their elements came in there I have forgotten for the most part; and for the rest I really don't see why I should give myself away more than I have done already.

It remains for me only now to mention *The Duel*, the longest story in the book. That story attained the dignity of publication all by itself in a small illustrated volume, under the title, "*The Point of Honour*." That was many years ago. It has been since reinstated in its proper place, which is the place it occupies in this volume, in all the subsequent editions of my work. Its pedigree is extremely simple. It springs from a ten-line paragraph in a small provincial paper published in the South of France. That paragraph, occasioned by a duel with a fatal ending between two well-known Parisian personalities, referred for some reason or other to the "well-known fact" of two officers in Napoleon's Grand Army having fought a series of duels in the midst of great wars and on some futile pretext. The pretext was never disclosed. I had therefore to invent it; and I think that, given the character of the two officers which I had to invent, too, I have made it sufficiently convincing by the mere force of its absurdity. The truth is that in my mind the story is

nothing but a serious and even earnest attempt at a bit of historical fiction. I had heard in my boyhood a good deal of the great Napoleonic legend. I had a genuine feeling that I would find myself at home in it, and *The Duel* is the result of that feeling, or, if the reader prefers, of that presumption. Personally I have no qualms of conscience about this piece of work. The story might have been better told of course. All one's work might have been better done; but this is the sort of reflection a worker must put aside courageously if he doesn't mean every one of his conceptions to remain for ever a private vision, an evanescent reverie. How many of those visions have I seen vanish in my time! This one, however, has remained, a testimony, if you like, to my courage or a proof of my rashness. What I care to remember best is the testimony of some French readers who volunteered the opinion that in those hundred pages or so I had managed to render "wonderfully" the spirit of the whole epoch. Exaggeration of kindness no doubt; but even so I hug it still to my breast, because in truth that is exactly what I was trying to capture in my small net: the Spirit of the Epoch--never purely militarist in the long clash of arms, youthful, almost childlike in its exaltation of sentiment--naively heroic in its faith.

1920. J. C.

GASPAR RUIZ

I

A revolutionary war raises many strange characters out of the obscurity which is the common lot of humble lives in an undisturbed state of society.

Certain individualities grow into fame through their vices and their virtues, or simply by their actions, which may have a temporary importance; and then they become forgotten. The names of a few leaders alone survive the end of armed strife and are further preserved in history; so that, vanishing from men's active memories, they still exist in books.

The name of General Santierra attained that cold paper-and-ink immortality. He was a South American of good family, and the books published in his lifetime numbered him amongst the liberators of that continent from the oppressive rule of Spain.

That long contest, waged for independence on one side and for dominion on the other, developed in the course of years and the vicissitudes of changing fortune the fierceness and inhumanity of a struggle for life. All feelings of pity and compassion disappeared in the growth of political hatred. And, as is usual in war, the mass of the people, who had the least to gain by the issue, suffered most in their obscure persons and their humble fortunes.

General Santierra began his service as lieutenant in the patriot army raised and commanded by the famous San Martin, afterwards conqueror of Lima and liberator of Peru. A great battle had just been fought on the banks of the river Bio-Bio. Amongst the prisoners made upon the routed Royalist troops there was a soldier called Gaspar Ruiz. His powerful build and his big head rendered him remarkable amongst his fellow-captives. The personality of the man was unmistakable. Some months before he had been missed from the ranks of Republican troops after one of the many skirmishes which preceded the great battle. And now, having been captured arms in hand amongst Royalists, he could expect no other fate but to be shot as a deserter.

Gaspar Ruiz, however, was not a deserter; his mind was hardly active enough to take a discriminating view of the advantages or perils of treachery. Why should he change sides? He had really been made a prisoner, had suffered ill-usage and many privations. Neither side showed tenderness to its adversaries. There came a day when he was ordered, together with some other captured rebels, to march in the front rank of the Royal troops. A musket had been thrust into his hands. He had taken it. He had marched. He did not want to be killed with circumstances of peculiar atrocity for refusing to march. He did not understand heroism but it was his intention to throw his musket away at the first opportunity. Meantime he had gone on loading and firing, from fear of having his brains blown out at the first sign of unwillingness, by some non-commissioned officer of the King of Spain. He tried to set forth these elementary considerations before the sergeant of

the guard set over him and some twenty other such deserters, who had been condemned summarily to be shot.

It was in the quadrangle of the fort at the back of the batteries which command the roadstead of Valparaiso. The officer who had identified him had gone on without listening to his protestations. His doom was sealed; his hands were tied very tightly together behind his back; his body was sore all over from the many blows with sticks and butts of muskets which had hurried him along on the painful road from the place of his capture to the gate of the fort. This was the only kind of systematic attention the prisoners had received from their escort during a four days' journey across a scantily watered tract of country. At the crossings of rare streams they were permitted to quench their thirst by lapping hurriedly like dogs. In the evening a few scraps of meat were thrown amongst them as they dropped down dead-beat upon the stony ground of the halting-place.

As he stood in the courtyard of the castle in the early morning, after having been driven hard all night, Gaspar Ruiz's throat was parched, and his tongue felt very large and dry in his mouth.

And Gaspar Ruiz, besides being very thirsty, was stirred by a feeling of sluggish anger, which he could not very well express, as though the vigour of his spirit were by no means equal to the strength of his body.

The other prisoners in the batch of the condemned hung their heads, looking obstinately on the ground. But Gaspar Ruiz kept on repeating: "What should I desert for to the Royalists? Why should I desert? Tell me, Estaban!"

He addressed himself to the sergeant, who happened to belong to the same part of the country as himself. But the sergeant, after shrugging his meagre shoulders once, paid no further attention to the deep murmuring voice at his back. It was indeed strange that Gaspar Ruiz should desert. His people were in too humble a station to feel much the disadvantages of any form of government. There was no reason why Gaspar Ruiz should wish to uphold in his own person the rule of the King of Spain. Neither had he been anxious to exert himself for its subversion. He had joined the side of Independence in an extremely reasonable and natural manner. A band of patriots appeared one morning early, surrounding his father's ranche, spearing the watch-dogs and ham-stringing a fat cow all in the twinkling of an eye, to the cries of "Viva la Libertad!" Their officer discoursed of Liberty with enthusiasm and eloquence after a long and refreshing sleep. When they left in the evening, taking with them some of Ruiz, the father's, best horses to replace their own lamed animals, Gaspar Ruiz went away with them, having been invited pressingly to do so by the eloquent officer.

Shortly afterwards a detachment of Royalist troops coming to pacify the district, burnt the ranche, carried off the remaining horses and cattle, and having thus deprived the old people of all their worldly possessions, left them sitting under a bush in the enjoyment of the inestimable boon of life.

II

Gaspar Ruiz, condemned to death as a deserter, was not thinking either of his native place or of his parents, to whom he had been a good son on account of the mildness of his character and the great strength of his limbs. The practical advantage of this last was made still more valuable to his father by his obedient disposition. Gaspar Ruiz had an acquiescent soul.

But it was stirred now to a sort of dim revolt by his dislike to die the death of a traitor. He was not a traitor. He said again to the sergeant: "You know I did not desert, Estaban. You know I remained behind amongst the trees with three others to keep the enemy back while the detachment was running away!"

Lieutenant Santierra, little more than a boy at the time, and unused as yet to the sanguinary imbecilities of a state of war, had lingered near by, as if fascinated by the sight of these men who were to be shot presently--"for an example"--as the Commandante had said.

The sergeant, without deigning to look at the prisoner, addressed himself to the young officer with a superior smile.

"Ten men would not have been enough to make him a prisoner, mi teniente. Moreover, the other three rejoined the detachment after dark. Why should he, unwounded and the strongest of them all, have failed to do so?"

"My strength is as nothing against a mounted man with a lasso," Gaspar Ruiz protested, eagerly. "He dragged me behind his horse for half a mile."

At this excellent reason the sergeant only laughed contemptuously. The young officer hurried away after the Commandante.

Presently the adjutant of the castle came by. He was a truculent, raw-boned man in a ragged uniform. His spluttering voice issued out of a flat yellow face. The sergeant learned from him that the condemned men would not be shot till sunset. He begged then to know what he was to do with them meantime.

The adjutant looked savagely round the courtyard and, pointing to the door of a small dungeon-like guardroom, receiving light and air through one heavily barred window, said: "Drive the scoundrels in there."

The sergeant, tightening his grip upon the stick he carried in virtue of his rank, executed this order with alacrity and zeal. He hit Gaspar Ruiz, whose movements were slow, over his head and shoulders. Gaspar Ruiz stood still for a moment under the shower of blows, biting his lip thoughtfully as if absorbed by a perplexing mental process--then followed the others without haste. The door was locked, and the adjutant carried off the key.

By noon the heat of that vaulted place crammed to suffocation had become unbearable. The prisoners crowded towards the window, begging their guards for a drop of water; but the soldiers remained lying in indolent attitudes wherever there was a little shade under a wall, while the sentry sat with his back against the door smoking a cigarette, and raising his eyebrows philosophically from time to time. Gaspar Ruiz had pushed his way to the window with irresistible force. His capacious chest needed more air than the others; his big face, resting with its chin on the ledge, pressed close to the bars, seemed to support the other faces crowding up for breath. From moaned entreaties they had passed to desperate cries, and the tumultuous howling of those thirsty men obliged a young officer who was just then crossing the courtyard to shout in order to make himself heard.

"Why don't you give some water to these prisoners?"

The sergeant, with an air of surprised innocence, excused himself by the remark that all those men were condemned to die in a very few hours.

Lieutenant Santierra stamped his foot. "They are condemned to death, not to torture," he shouted. "Give them some water at once."

Impressed by this appearance of anger, the soldiers bestirred themselves, and the sentry, snatching up his musket, stood to attention.

But when a couple of buckets were found and filled from the well, it was discovered that they could not be passed through the bars, which were set too close. At the prospect of quenching their thirst, the shrieks of those trampled down in the struggle to get near the opening became very heartrending. But when the soldiers who had lifted the buckets towards the window put them to the ground again helplessly, the yell of disappointment was still more terrible.

The soldiers of the army of Independence were not equipped with canteens. A small tin cup was found, but its approach to the opening caused such a commotion, such yells of rage and pain in the vague mass of limbs behind the straining faces at the window, that Lieutenant Santierra cried out hurriedly, "No, no--you must open the door, sergeant."

The sergeant, shrugging his shoulders, explained that he had no right to open the door even if he had had the key. But he had not the key. The adjutant of the garrison kept the key. Those men were giving much unnecessary trouble, since they had to die at sunset in any case. Why they had not been shot at once early in the morning he could not understand.

Lieutenant Santierra kept his back studiously to the window. It was at his earnest solicitations that the Commandante had delayed the execution. This favour had been granted to him in consideration of his distinguished family and of his father's high position amongst the chiefs of the Republican party. Lieutenant Santierra believed that the General commanding would visit the fort some time in the afternoon, and he ingenuously hoped that his naive intercession would induce that severe man to pardon

some, at least, of those criminals. In the revulsion of his feeling his interference stood revealed now as guilty and futile meddling. It appeared to him obvious that the general would never even consent to listen to his petition. He could never save those men, and he had only made himself responsible for the sufferings added to the cruelty of their fate.

"Then go at once and get the key from the adjutant," said Lieutenant Santierra.

The sergeant shook his head with a sort of bashful smile, while his eyes glanced sideways at Gaspar Ruiz's face, motionless and silent, staring through the bars at the bottom of a heap of other haggard, distorted, yelling faces.

His worship the adjutant de Plaza, the sergeant murmured, was having his siesta; and supposing that he, the sergeant, would be allowed access to him, the only result he expected would be to have his soul flogged out of his body for presuming to disturb his worship's repose. He made a deprecatory movement with his hands, and stood stock-still, looking down modestly upon his brown toes.

Lieutenant Santierra glared with indignation, but hesitated. His handsome oval face, as smooth as a girl's, flushed with the shame of his perplexity. Its nature humiliated his spirit. His hairless upper lip trembled; he seemed on the point of either bursting into a fit of rage or into tears of dismay.

Fifty years later, General Santierra, the venerable relic of revolutionary times, was well able to remember the feelings of the young lieutenant. Since he had given up riding altogether, and found it difficult to walk beyond the limits of his garden, the general's greatest delight was to entertain in his house the officers of the foreign men-of-war visiting the harbour. For Englishmen he had a preference, as for old companions in arms. English naval men of all ranks accepted his hospitality with curiosity, because he had known Lord Cochrane and had taken part, on board the patriot squadron commanded by that marvellous seaman, in the cutting out and blockading operations before Callao--an episode of unalloyed glory in the wars of Independence and of endless honour in the fighting tradition of Englishmen. He was a fair linguist, this ancient survivor of the Liberating armies. A trick of smoothing his long white beard whenever he was short of a word in French or English imparted an air of leisurely dignity to the tone of his reminiscences.

III

"Yes, my friends," he used to say to his guests, "what would you have? A youth of seventeen summers, without worldly experience, and owing my rank only to the glorious patriotism of my father, may God rest his soul. I suffered immense humiliation, not so much from the disobedience of that subordinate, who, after all, was responsible for those prisoners; but I suffered because, like the boy I was, I myself dreaded going to the adjutant for the key. I had felt, before, his rough and cutting tongue. Being quite a common fellow, with no merit except his savage valour, he made me feel his contempt and dislike from the first day I joined my battalion in garrison at the fort. It was only a

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