The Purity of Blood

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Published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

Extract

I. SEÑOR QUEVEDO'S DIFFICULT MOMENT

That day there were bullfights in the Plaza Mayor, but constable Martín Saldaña's festive fire had been doused. A woman had been found in a sedan chair in front of the church of San Ginés, strangled. In her hand was a pouch containing fifty *escudos* and a handwritten, unsigned note bearing the words, *For masses for your soul.*

A pious old woman on her way to early church had found the body. She advised the sacristan, and he had informed the parish priest who, after a hurried absolution, *sub conditione,* made a report to the authorities. By the time the chief constable showed up to make his token appearance in the small plaza of San Ginés, local residents and curious bystanders were milling around the sedan chair. The chair and its contents had become the object of a local pilgrimage, and a number of Saldaña's catchpoles were

needed to hold back the crowd while the judge and the scribe drew up their documents and Martín Saldaña made his cursory examination of the corpse.

The chief constable set about his task in the most leisurely fashion, as if he had time to burn. Perhaps it was because of his history as a former soldier—he had served in Flanders before his wife (at least it was said it had been she) obtained his present position for him. In any case, Madrid's chief constable went about his duties at a pace that a certain satiric poet—the gifted-in-wealth-as-well-as-talent Ruiz de Villaseca—had described in a poisonous *décima* as *paso de buey*, an ox's pace. It was a clear allusion to the lethargy with which the chief constable picked up his staff of office, or attempted to parry the staffs his wife welcomed.

In any case, if it is true that Martín Saldaña was slow in certain things, he was definitely not so when it came to drawing his sword, or dagger, or poniard, or the well-oiled pistols he was wont to wear in his waistband—all of which clanged like sounds issuing from a smithy. On the night of the third day after the aforementioned *décima* had circulated among the gossipers gathered at the *mentidero* of San Felipe, the most popular of Madrid's rumor mills, this same now-not-so-gifted Villaseca had been found at the very door to this house with three sword-tailored buttonholes in his body. He was now extremely well qualified—

whether from Purgatory, Hell, or wherever—to confirm exactly how swiftly the constable could move.

The fact is that from the calm and collected inspection the head constable made of the cadaver, almost nothing was learned. The dead woman was mature, nearer fifty than forty, dressed in a voluminous black gown and a headdress that lent her the look of a duenna, or a lady's companion. Her purse held a rosary, along with a key and a crumpled religious card depicting the Virgin of Atocha. Around the victim's neck was a gold chain bearing a medallion of Saint Águeda. Her own features suggested that in her younger days she had been well favored. There were no signs of violence other than the silk cord still cutting into her neck, and her mouth, frozen in the rictus of death. From her color, and the rigor, the constable concluded that she had been strangled the preceding night, in that same sedan chair, before being carried to church.

The detail of the pouch with money for masses for her soul indicated a twisted sense of humor—or, conversely, great Christian charity. After all, in the dark, violent, and contradictory Spain of our Catholic King Philip IV, in which dissolute wastrels and rough-living braggarts howled for confession at the top of their lungs after being shot or run through by a sword, it was not unusual to encounter a pious swordsman.

. . .

Martín Saldaña told us about the event late that afternoon. Or, to be more precise, told Captain Alatriste. We met him at the Guadalajara gate, returning among the crowd from the Plaza Mayor after he had completed his inquiries regarding the murdered woman. Her body had been laid out in Santa Cruz in one of the coffins for hanged prisoners, in hopes that someone might identify her. The constable merely mentioned the murder in passing, more interested in the performance of the afternoon's bulls; at that time in Madrid, street crimes were common, but afternoons of bulls and *cañas* were growing scarce.

Cañas, a kind of tourney on horseback between teams of fine gentlemen, in which our lord and king himself sometimes participated, had become very mannered—a contest between pretty-boys and fops, tending more toward flourishing and flirting and ladies than toward cracking heads, as God would have it. They were not in any way what they had been in days of the wars between the Moors and the Christians, or even in the lifetime of our young monarch's grandfather, the great Philip II. As for the bulls, they were still, in that first third of the century, a passion of the Spanish people. Of the more than seventy thousand residents of Madrid, two thirds flocked to the Plaza Mayor every time the bulls challenged the courage

and skill of the caballeros who confronted them. Because in those days, hidalgos, grandees of Spain, even men of royal blood, had no hesitation about riding out into the plaza on their finest steeds to bury the dagger-point of their *rejón*, the long wooden lance, in the withers of a fine Jarama bull. Or one of them might just as readily dismount and bring the bull down with his sword, amid the applause of the crowd that gathered either beneath the arches of the plaza—in the case of the common folk—or on balconies rented for as much as twenty-five or fifty *escudos* by courtiers and papal and foreign ambassadors.

These events were then celebrated in ballads and poems—either elegant, or comic and grotesque—events that Madrid's cleverest minds quickly seized upon to sharpen their wit. Such as the time a bull chased a constable, and the public took the side of the bull—officers of the law did not then, as they do not today, enjoy great popular favor; and:

The bull had good reason that day
to pursue the object of mirth,
for of the four horns in the fray
only two had been there at birth.

On one occasion the Admiral of Castile, while fighting, on horseback, an unusually large bull, accidentally wounded

the Conde de Cabra instead of the beast. That was cause for the following famous lines—turning on the pun of the name Cabra, which means "goat"—to race through the most busily buzzing *mentideros* of Madrid.

A thousand and more have won fame,
but only the Admiral, abra-cadabra,
is the first, with his trusty lance,
to turn a bull into a Cabra.

It is understandable, then, returning to that Sunday of the murdered woman, that Martín Saldaña would bring Diego Alatriste up-to-date on what had kept him away from the afternoon's sport. The captain, in turn, recounted the details of the bullfights, which Their Majesties, the king and queen, had witnessed from the balcony of the Casa de la Panadería—and the captain and I standing among the ordinary public, eating piñon nuts and lupin seeds in the shade of the Pañeros arch.

There had been four bulls, all fiery; and both the Conde de Puñoenrostro and the Conde de Guadalmedina had been outstanding in placing their *rejones*. A Jarama bull had killed the latter count's horse, and he, very brave, very much the cavalier, had jumped to the ground, slashed the animal's tendons, and dispatched it with two good thrusts of his sword. That feat had earned a fluttering of

ladies' fans, the approval of the king, and a smile from the queen—who, as word later had it, scarcely had taken her eyes off him, for Guadalmedina was a fine figure of a man.

The final bull added a last colorful note when it attacked the royal guard. As you may know, Your Mercies, three units of guardsmen—Spanish, German, and one of harquebusiers—always stood in formation below the royal box, lined up shoulder to shoulder and with halberds at the ready. They were forbidden to break rank, even should a bull charge them with all the animus of a Turk. That afternoon the snorting animal had made straight for the guards, bothered not a whit by the halberds, and had taken with him on a tour of the ring, impaled upon a wicked horn, one of the large blond Germans. The hapless guard found himself being separated from his innards amidst a chorus of *Himmel*s and *Mein Gott*s. Sacraments were administered there in the plaza.

"He was slipping around on his own guts, like that lieutenant in Ostend," Diego Alatriste concluded. "You remember him? The one in our fifth assault on the del Caballo redoubt . . . Ortiz was his name. Or Ruiz. Something like that."

Martín Saldaña nodded, stroking his graying beard, which he wore partly to hide the scar he had received twenty years before, around the third or fourth year of the century, during that same attack on the walls of Ostend.

They had poured out of the trenches at the break of dawn—Saldaña, Alatriste, and five hundred other men, among them my father, Lope Balboa. They'd swarmed the terreplein, with Captain Tomás de la Cuesta in the lead, followed closely by that lieutenant Ortiz, or Ruiz—oh, what the devil was he called?—carrying the flag bearing the cross of Saint Andrew.

Before climbing over the parapet, they had taken the first line of the Dutchmen's trenches with nothing but small arms, under constant enemy fire from above. They had spent half an hour in hand-to-hand fighting as musket fire whizzed around them. That was where Martín Saldaña had received the slash across his face and Diego Alatriste the one above his left eyebrow. Lieutenant Ortiz-Ruiz was hit by a musket ball fired at point-blank range, blowing away half his belly. His intestines spilled out and dragged on the ground and he struggled to hold them in with both hands as he ran to escape the battle. He did not have the chance, because almost immediately he was killed by a shot to the head.

Finally, Captain de la Cuesta, himself as bloody as an Ecce Homo, had said, "Caballeros, we have done all we can; let any man who can save his hide." My father and another short, tough soldier from Aragon, one Sebastián Copons, had helped Saldaña and Diego Alatriste get back to the Spanish trenches, with every Dutchman in the

world firing at them from the walls. As they ran, they cursed God and the Virgin, or commended themselves to them, which in such cases was one and the same thing. And still someone had the time and fortitude to pick up poor Ortiz-Ruiz's banner rather than leave it on the bulwarks of the heretics, along with his corpse and those of two hundred comrades who were not going on into Ostend, or back to the trenches—or anywhere at all.

"Ortiz, I think it was," Saldaña concluded finally.

They had, a good year later, avenged the lieutenant and the two hundred other men, as well as those who left their hides in earlier, or later, assaults upon the Dutch del Caballo redoubt. Finally, after the eighth or ninth attempt, Saldaña, Alatriste, Copons, my father, and the other veterans of the Tercio Viejo de Cartagena, succeeded in battling their way inside the walls on the strength of nothing but bollocks. The Dutch began shouting *Srinden, srinden,* which I think means "friends," or "comrades," and then something that sounded like *Veijiven ons over*: "We surrender." And that was when Captain de la Cuesta, who was deaf to any foreign tongue but who had a stupendous memory, said, "We do not understand your *srinden* or *veijiven*—or anything your whoring mothers taught you—but we will show no mercy, you hear that? Not one heretic left alive." And when Diego Alatriste and the others at last raised the shredded, battle-worn cross of Saint Andrew

above the bulwarks—the very same one poor Ortiz had carried before departing this world tangled in his own guts—they were drenched in the Dutch blood dripping from the blades of their daggers and swords.

"Someone told me you are going back," Saldaña said, after he had brought us up-to-date.

"I may."

Although I was still dazzled by the bulls, my eyes were filled with the people pouring out of the plaza and along Calle Mayor: Fine ladies and gentlemen rapped out "Fetch my coach" and then climbed into their carriages and rode away, and caballeros on horseback, and elegant courtiers headed toward San Felipe or the flagstone courtyard of the palace. At the time, I listened very carefully to the chief constable's words. In that year of 1623, the second in the reign of our young King Philip, the war in Flanders had resumed, creating the need for more money, more *tercios,* and more men. General Ambrosio Spínola was recruiting soldiers throughout Europe, and hundreds of veterans were hurrying to enlist under their old flags. The Tercio de Cartagena, decimated at Julich at the time my father was killed, and totally annihilated a year later in Fleurus, was being re-formed. Soon it would be following the Camino Español, a familiar route to the Low Countries, to play a part in the siege of the stronghold of Breda—or

Bredá, as we called it then. Although the wound Diego Alatriste had received in Fleurus had not completely healed, I was aware that he had been in contact with old comrades, with the intent of returning to its ranks. In recent days, the captain had made his living as a sword for hire, and despite that—or precisely because of it—he had made some powerful enemies at court. It would not be a bad idea to put some distance between them and him for a time.

"It might be for the best." Saldaña looked at Alatriste meaningfully. "Madrid has become dangerous. Will you take the boy?"

We were walking among a crowd of people just passing the closed silver shops, heading in the direction of the Puerta del Sol. The captain looked at me quickly, and made an ambiguous gesture.

"He may be too young," he said.

Beneath the chief constable's thick mustache I could make out a smile. As I admired the butts of his gleaming pistols, the dagger, and the sword with the wide guard, all of which hung from the waist of his buffcoat—a padded defense against knifings received in the course of his duties—he had laid his broad, hard hand on my head. *That hand*, I thought, *might once have shaken my father's.*

"Not too young for some things, I believe." Saldaña's smile stretched wider, partly amused and partly devilish.

For he knew what I had done the night of the adventure of the two Englishmen. "And anyway, you were his age when you enlisted."

This was true. Nearly a long quarter of a century before, the second son of an old family, with no standing in the world, thirteen years old and barely in command of writing, the four skills of arithmetic, and a taste of Latin, Diego Alatriste had run away from both school and home. In those desperate straits he reached Madrid, and by lying about his age was able to enlist as a drummer boy in one of the *tercios* leaving for Flanders under the command of King Philip's heir, the infante Alberto.

"Those were different times," the captain protested.

He had stepped aside to allow two señoritas with the air of high-priced harlots to pass, escorted by their gallants. Saldaña, who seemed to know them, tipped his hat, not without obvious sarcasm, which triggered an irate look from one of the dandies. It was a look that vanished like magic when he saw all the iron the head constable was toting.

"You are right about that," said Saldaña provocatively. "Those were different times, and different men."

"And different kings."

The head constable, whose eyes were still on the women, turned to Alatriste with a slight start, and then shot a sideways glance at me.

"Come, Diego, do not say such things before the boy." He looked around, uneasy. "And do not compromise me, by Christ. Remember, I am the Law."

"I am not compromising you. I have never failed in my duty to my king, whoever he may be. But I have served three, and I tell you that there are kings, and there are kings."

Saldaña stroked his beard. "God help us."

"God or whoever your draw your comfort from."

The head constable gave me another uneasy glance before turning back to Alatriste. I observed that he had unconsciously rested one hand on the pommel of his sword.

"You wouldn't be looking for a quarrel, would you, Diego?" The constable, heavyset and strong but slightly shorter than the captain, stood a little straighter and stepped in front of Alatriste.

The captain did not answer. His gray-green eyes locked with Saldaña's, expressionless beneath the broad brim of his hat. The two men stared at each other, nose to nose, their old soldier's faces crisscrossed with fine wrinkles and scars. Some passersby stared at them with curiosity. In that turbulent, ruined, but still proud Spain—in truth, pride was all we had left in our pockets—no one took back a word lightly spoken, and even close friends were capable of knifing each other over an ill-timed comment or denial.

He spoke, he walked by, he looked,
rash, unguarded words resound,
once spoken, too late, in a trice
the meadow is a dueling ground.

Only three days before, right in the middle of Rúa Prado, the Marqués de Novoa's coachman had knifed his master six times because he had called him a lout, and fights over a "Move out of my way" were commonplace. So for an instant, I thought that the two of them might go at each other there in the street. But they did not. For if it is true that the constable was entirely capable—and he had proved it before—of putting a friend in prison, even blow off his head in the exercise of his authority, it is no less true that he had never raised the specter of the law against Diego Alatriste over personal differences. That twisted ethic was very typical of the era among belligerent men, and I myself, who lived in that world in my youth, as well as the rest of my life, can testify that in the most soulless scoundrels, rogues, soldiers, and hired swords, I had found more respect for certain codes and unwritten rules than in people of supposedly honorable condition. Martín Saldaña was such a man, and his quarrels and squabbles were settled with a sword, man to man, without hiding behind the authority of the king or any of his underlings.