

Cuentos ticos: short stories from Costa Rica

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UN HEROE.
(A HERO.)

We all knew, by the suggestive nickname of Cususa,* a poor shoemaker, whose small blue eyes were hidden under thick gray eyebrows, which, when he had shaved himself, produced the comical impression that his mustaches had ascended to his forehead; but, as he was not accustomed to coming in contact often with the barber, he was usually seen with his face covered with stiff hair that gave him an aspect of ferocity, tempered by the intense sweetness of his glance. The distinguishing characteristic of the shoemaker was his merriness, a wild, irresistibly catching merriness. If one, in passing some tavern heard shouts, laughter, music, and the sound of dancing, he did not need to inquire the cause. Only Cususa was capable of converting the inveterate sadness of the guaro drinkers into joy. He detested quarrels and was always ready to interfere in order to stop them, silencing by the force of good-humor the endless disputes between the drunkards. But if the dissensions continued and grew into a fight, the festive shoemaker changed his arguments and with a couple of well-directed blows re-established order, for he was a powerful man, and brave to rashness.

* Brandy.

They used to tell, among many other things, of an affair with a much feared desperado who had just been released from the prison of San Lucas. Cususa was dancing in a wine-shop to the music of a guitar, when the rascal, irritated doubtless by the merry uproar which the good fellow was making, pulled out a dagger and cut the strings of the instrument. There was a spark in the eyes of the shoemaker. With one leap he was at the side of the aggressor, and gripping him by the wrist with terrible force, he bent it back until he made him let go of the dagger. Then, looking him straight in the eyes with an expression of great disdain, he spit in his face, crying repeatedly: "Assassin! Coward!" The desperado abandoned the field, with many threats, but he was never seen again in the places which Cususa frequented.

The shoemaker's drunkenness was not continuous, as one might suppose. Two or three weeks used to pass without his taking a single glass, while he worked industriously in his shop, for he had plenty of customers and aside from his fondness for the bottle was a model workman. But once the thirst for brandy and the longing for dancing had come upon him, good-bye to awls and soles, for there was no one who could keep him in the house.

The difficulty was even greater when the civic festivals came, with their three days of bull fights and masquerading. Scarcely did he hear the first fire-cracker, when he would station himself in the street and would not return until he came home on a stretcher after the inevitable upset from the horns of some bull from Guanacaste. Other occasions for imbibing were the military ceremonies. Processions, reviews, funerals, every act in which -troops preceded by a band figured produced an irresistible itching for celebrating. He used to pass all Holy Week doing penance in the Vineyards of the Lord.

The libations commenced with Palm Sunday, very early in the morning, so that he could be present at the complicated ceremonies of the going out of the flag. Then he used to follow the procession at the side of the music, marking time, indifferent to everything but the drums, cornets and words of command. In his passion for military pomp he noticed nothing else, neither the image ridiculously bedecked, riding on a mule, nor the improvised avenues of bamboos which adorned the streets with their green feather-like plumes, nor even the groups of handsome country girls in their Sunday attire carrying blessed palm branches in their hands.

When the procession was over and the Lord of Triumph, seated in an arm-chair and wearing a violet colored hat, was reposing in an improvised garden of "uruca" branches, Cususa used to return behind the soldiers, leaping to the tune of a lively two-step, until he left them at the barracks. The carousal continued afterwards in the wine-shop, in company with numerous parasites who took advantage of his generous nature, with sonorous shouts of "Viva Costa Rica!" and much talk about the campaign against the filibusters. While his mother lived, a little old woman, blind from cataracts, whom he cared for with great solicitude, the intemperance of the shoemaker was confined within certain limits; but when he found himself alone in the world, for relations he had none, the days of rest grew more frequent. Often he was to be seen sprawled out in the taverns, or sleeping in the street in the beneficent shade of some tree. Soon the poor man became the object of ridicule and gibes from unkind persons, and especially from the boys who at the time were attending school. Again the unfortunate man he told us the history, which I am going to transcribe faithfully.

With the thoughtless cruelty of childhood, we used to take delight in tormenting poor Cususa, when on account of too much liquor he was unable to defend himself as he used to do in the good times when he dealt those famous blows which inspired respect and consideration.

I remember how, on coming out of the class room one afternoon, a few of us little rascals came upon the shoemaker lying, helpless, close to an adobe wall. To see him and to feel ourselves thrill with joy was all one. Now we had before us the prospect of a good bit of diversion. After a consultation, in which we discussed the means of torment which were to be adopted for that day, the idea of painting him predominated. A box of blacking appeared, from nobody knew where, and the chief of the party took charge of the work. Soon Cususa was transformed into a guy, and at each new stroke of the artist's fancy we almost burst ourselves with laughing.

A vigorous and manly voice behind us made us turn with frightened faces, to find ourselves face to face with Captain Ramirez, an elderly retired officer, a veteran of the National War.* With gentle severity he reprimanded us for what we had just done, and to exhort us not to torment. At this point the Captain interrupted his narrative, and, opening the shoemaker's shirt, he showed us a deep scar in the region of the right lung. After a pause he proceeded:

*The war against the filibuster Walker. Costa Rica took the most prominent part in this war, and it is there regarded as a kind of Heroic Age. Walker was defeated by the Costa Ricans.

This had taken place on the 30th day of March, 1856. On the nth of April following I also fell wounded, in the streets of Rivas. Here in his turn Walker surprised us, but did not succeed in conquering us. He had rather to retire, abandoning his wounded. I returned to Liberia in a terrible

condition. There I found Joaquin also in the military hospital. ' By a rare chance we both escaped the epidemic of cholera, which broke out in the army, so weakened by the hot climate of Nicaragua and the terrible bloodshed of the battle of Rivas. We convalesced together in Puntarenas, where I had some relatives who took care of us as well as one could wish. Some months afterward, when there was talk of a new invasion of Nicaragua, we both requested to be taken back into the army in the field. The only thing we could gain was permission to be enrolled in the garrison of Puntarenas. On the second of November, our army which had been mobilized in Liberia, again set out on the march for the frontier under the command of General Canas. Joaquin and I were inconsolable, on account of our inability to go with it, when an unlooked for opportunity of returning to the campaign presented itself to us. The brigantine "Eleventh of April," so named in memory of the heroic fight of Rivas, was about to sail from the port, armed for war, to co-operate in the hostilities, and to put an end to the depredations of the filibuster bark Granada. At the last hour there were some losses in the crew so that we succeeded in enlisting on her. We set sail on the eleventh of November, carrying an abundance of provisions, arms, ammunition and money for the army. The brigantine had for defense four brass cannon. Her captain was Don Antonio Valleriestra, a young officer of the Peruvian navy, who had placed his sword at the service of our cause. From the time we set sail the sea was very tempestuous and the winds were contrary, so much so that we spent eleven days in navigating the short distance between Puntarenas and San Juan del Sur. Almost all of us were afloat for the first time, and we suffered greatly from seasickness; but in spite of this, and the battering of the storms which shook the vessel to her keel, we did not allow ourselves to be discouraged a single instant, for we had faith in our destiny and truly believed ourselves invincible. Scarcely did that stormy sea give us a short respite, when good-humor again appeared aboard the brigantine, and officers and soldiers were rivals in warlike enthusiasm.

Between rain squalls we managed to amuse ourselves, telling stories, playing cards, or chaffing each other. Some also used to sing the sad and monotonous songs of our country, which gave us a homesick longing for its green coffee plantations and swift running rivers. Stirred by the slowness of the rhythm we would silently call up visions of the distant fatherland; but each time that this happened a shrill and familiar cry would be heard, the cry of our mountains which no Costa Rican can hear without emotion, and Joaquin would break out into a rollicking clog-dance, accompanied by ridiculous and characteristic exclamations which instantly dispelled the melancholy of our thoughts.

We all adored him for his goodness of character and his constant jovialness. The gallantry of his conduct at Santa Rosa and the almost mortal wound he had received there, were equally potent means of gaining the sympathy and affection of all. At other times, seated in a circle on deck, we talked of the war, and my comrades were never weary of making me repeat the story of the battles of Santa Rosa and Rivas, and particularly the details of the glorious death of Juan Santa Maria, the drummer boy of Alajuela, a sacristan.* With the greatest attention they listened to my words, full of admiration for the lad marching serenely to certain death. I told them how he had returned the first time safe and sound to our ranks, when in a storm of bullets he had set fire to the ranch house which served the enemy as a fort; the sublime audacity of the hero trying again the hazardous undertaking, as the enemy had succeeded in putting out the fire; how he returned a second time unscathed to the walls of the house and again sprinkled them with petroleum and applied the torch which he carried in his right hand; the despairing cry which broke from our lips

on seeing his avenging arm fall helpless, broken by the well-aimed bullet of a Yankee; then the indescribable enthusiasm, the great pride, which the sight aroused in us of the drummer boy picking up the torch again, brandishing it with his unhurt arm, until the destroying flames arose again; finally the hero's fall riddled with bullets at the foot of the fire kindled by his valiant hand.

*He was the hero of the battle of Santa Rosa, setting fire, at the cost of his own life, to the ranch house in which Walker's men had taken their stand. There is a bronze statue of him in the town of Alajuela.

"That was a man! Viva Costa Rica!" Joaquin invariably exclaimed, as the narrative was finished; and all, stirred by the sincerity of his enthusiasm would join in the shout. "Viva Costa Rica!" we would answer, and the noise of our voices was lost in the roaring of the waves.

The "Eleventh of April," buffeted by the storms, began to leak considerably and we had to take to the pumps. In this condition we arrived in front of the bay of San Juan del Sur, on the afternoon of November 22nd. Captain Vallerriestra inspected the coast carefully with a telescope, then we saw him conferring with the military commanders. When the council was over he ordered the bow turned toward the shore.

Not much time passed before we sighted a sail, which came out from the port and steered toward us. The captain, who was continuing his inspection, suddenly said a few words to Major Maheigt at his side, and immediately gave the order to clear for action. A gust of enthusiasm swept over the vessel. At last we were going to meet the enemy. At about six o'clock we hoisted our flag. The sight of the fluttering tricolored stripes inflamed our hearts; we saluted it with delirious enthusiasm.

The enemy's vessel was now quite close and on her quarter deck we could see the blue and white ensign of the old Central American Federation, capped by the red star of the usurper. A few minutes afterward the air was rent by a thunderous report, and we heard the enemy's first broadside pass over our heads. Then the combat started with unspeakable fury, the Yankees determined to avenge the drubbing our arms had given them at Santa Rosa and Rivas. Our men, most of whom were smelling powder for the first time, fought with unsurpassed courage, even though the ordinary hazards of a sea fight were increased for us by the inexperience of our gunners and the great danger we were in from the leaks of the "Eleventh of April," through which water was pouring in torrents; and as if this were not enough, a fire broke out in the bow one hour after the beginning of the fight. But what could water, fire and the enemy's bullets do against the fever of patriotism which had turned us mad? Dauntlessly the twenty-four year old captain directed the maneuvers with the calmness of a sea-wolf grown gray in warfare. With quiet daring he went to the places of greatest danger, directing, amid the flying missiles, the putting out of the fire, the management of the pumps and the aiming of with thickened tongue: "Present, my captain." With a great effort the veteran made him get up, and giving him his arm led him, staggering, away.

Childish minds are very impressionable and the tale of the captain sank deep into ours. From that day Cususa took on colossal proportions for us, and we began to look on him as almost a legendary being, capable of the greatest deeds of heroism. We never again tormented him, we

rather undertook to defend him with great zeal whenever any other little rascals tried to molest him.

A few months after the veteran's intervention in favor of the shoemaker, we were coming out of school one afternoon, when we met a modest funeral. Four men were carrying the cheap coffin and behind them marched Captain Ramirez, with red eyes. Our noisy shouts made him turn his head and look at us a moment. He recognized us, and doubtless remembering the tale he had told us, exclaimed in a sorrowful voice: "It is he,—Joaquin!" We looked at each other, and with tacit agreement born spontaneously of one of those generous impulses so common to youth, we added ourselves to the cortege of the hero.