

Divine Punishment

Also by Sergio Ramírez in English

FICTION

A Thousand Deaths Plus One
Margarita, How Beautiful the Sea
To Bury Our Fathers
Stories

NON-FICTION

Hatful of Tigers: Reflections
on Art, Culture and Politics
Adiós, Muchachos: A Memoir
of the Sandinista Revolution

Divine Punishment

a novel by

Sergio Ramírez

Translated from the Spanish
by Nick Caistor, with Hebe Powell

*With an afterword by the author
and a note by the translator*



McPherson & Company

Kingston, New York

2015

DIVINE PUNISHMENT

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Published by McPherson & Company
Box 1126, Kingston, NY 12402.
Book and jacket design by Bruce R. McPherson.
Typeset in Monotype Fournier.
Printed on pH neutral paper.
Manufactured in the United States of America.
First edition.
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2 2015 2016 2017

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Ramírez, Sergio, 1942-
[Castigo divino. English]
Divine punishment : a novel / by Sergio Ramírez ; translated from the
Spanish by Nick Caistor, with Hebe Powell ; with an afterword by the
author and a note by the translator.
pages cm
ISBN 978-1-62054-014-5 (alk. paper)
1. León (Nicaragua)--History--Fiction. 2. Trials (Murder)--Nicara-
gua--Fiction. I. Caistor, Nick, translator. II. Title.
PQ7519.2.R25C3713 2015
863'.64--dc23
2015005034

*To the combatants,
On all the war fronts,
Who have made this book possible.*

*To Gertrudis, who invented
the hours to write it.*

Divine Punishment

*Of human flesh
This smells to me,
You give me none,
So I'll eat thee.*

FEDERICO GARCIA LORCA
(The Billyclub Puppets)

Dramatis Personae

- Oliverio Castañeda: *Guatemalan expatriate, murder suspect*
Marta Jerez: *wife of Oliverio Castañeda*
Octavio Oviedo y Reyes: *friend and colleague of Castañeda*
Doctor Juan de Dios Darbshire: *prominent physician*
Doctor Atanasio Salmerón: *physician, protégé of Darbshire*
Don Carmen Contreras: *businessman*
Dona Flora de Contreras: *wife of Don Carmen Contreras*
Maria del Pilar Contreras: *daughter*
Matilde Contreras: *daughter*
Rosalío Usulutlán: *journalist*
Cosimo Manzo: *merchant*
Augustín Prío: *proprietor of Casa Prío bar*
Mariano Fiallos Gil: *presiding judge*
Captain Anastasio Ortiz: *police chief of León, commander of
National Guard garrison*

PART ONE

Presenting the Evidence

*Forget the one who forgets you,
Love not the one who loves you not;
Whoever fails to remember this
Places his life in danger.
From this mortal peril
Heart, you cannot be cured,
And are sure to die.*

Song
JUAN DE TAPIA
(*Stúñiga Songbook*)

A Howling of Dogs in the Night

AT APPROXIMATELY nine o'clock on the evening of 18 July 1932, Rosalío Usulutlán, aged forty-two, divorced, journalist by profession and employed in said capacity as editor-in-chief of the *El Cronista* newspaper, quit his seat at the end of the first screening of the MGM film *Payment Deferred*, starring Charles Laughton and Maureen O'Sullivan.

He made his way through the audience to the foyer. As he pushed through the red plush curtain weighed down by the accumulation of years of dust, he felt a playful tap on the shoulder. Turning round, he discovered it was his friend Cosme Manzo, aged fifty, bachelor, owner of a hardware store, whose broad grin revealed a glint of gold beneath his handlebar moustache.

Putting his arm around him, Manzo used his hat with its broad red band to steer a path through the crowd, and invited the journalist to the Casa Prío, which faced onto the Plaza Jerez only a block away from the Teatro González, to share a Xolotlán beer (the first beer brewed in Nicaragua, only recently put on sale and distributed in the city of León by the aforementioned Manzo, also the sole distributor of Scott Emulsion cod-liver oil). Replacing his own hat, Rosalío Usulutlán willingly accepted the invitation.

Once inside this establishment, which at that time of night was busy with its usual post-movie customers, the two men walked over to a corner table near the bar, where they were personally served by the owner, Agustín Prío, twenty-nine years of age, affectionately known to his regulars as 'The Captain'. Most of the city's gossip originated here, making it feared and earning it the nickname of 'the accursed table'. It was at this table that the circle of friends to which the two newcomers belonged held its sessions,

presided over by Doctor Anastasio Salmerón, surgeon and general medical practitioner. Although the doctor was absent on this occasion, we shall in due course become well acquainted with him.

All kinds of scurrilous stories were raised and assessed at this 'accursed table': tales of adultery, broken marriage promises, forced abortions, pregnancies resolved at gunpoint, clandestine cohabiting. A close scrutiny was kept on children born in dubious circumstances; widows who opened their doors on the stroke of midnight; acts performed in the vestry by lustful priests. A strict record was kept of other scandals involving the city's leading families: the fleecing of heirs, swindles, unpaid debts, forgeries, real estate fraud, fake bankruptcies.

Captain Prío took the Xolotlán beers from his Kelvinator refrigerator (which ran on kerosene burners) and, screwing up his eyes at the smoke from the cigarette dangling from his lips, snapped them open with the bottle-opener he always carried on his key ring. Then, as if to compensate for his small stature, he walked on tiptoe to take the beers to their table.

He sat down, hooking his feet comfortably round the chair strut, and congratulated Rosalío Usulutlán on the articles he had written in that evening's edition of *El Cronista*, all of them dealing with matters of great urgency.

The first of these was the main story on the front page of the four that made up the newspaper. It dealt with the city council's debate on the signing of a new contract with the Metropolitan Water Company, the suppliers of drinking water to the city of León. The company owners were pressing for a renewal of the contract solely in order to raise their rates, which would make them prohibitively expensive for many families, and so deprive the poorest households of this precious liquid. Rosalío had been fervent in his support for the group of councillors headed by the mayor, Doctor Onesifero Rizo, who condemned the increase as not only arbitrary and inappropriate, but grossly unjust, and had castigated the other members of the council, whose inexplicable lack of firmness in this matter he had condemned as incompatible with the interests of the community.

His two other articles also appeared on the front page. One referred to the proliferation of malaria-bearing mosquitoes follow-

ing an exceptionally wet winter, and went on to denounce the negligence of the public health authorities, who were surely to blame for the massive increase in the number of these noxious insects. They multiplied, he argued, in the fetid puddles and streams of filthy water that poured out of kitchens and laundries into even the busiest streets, in such numbers that if the insects had been hens, there would be a glut of eggs, and if they had been cows, the city would be overflowing with milk. Such an anomaly constituted a grave danger for the citizens of León, since mosquito bites had caused an outbreak of blackwater fever, an acute strain of malaria that had already claimed the lives of several people, especially children and adolescents.

The last of the three articles focused on the alarming number of stray dogs roaming freely on public highways and in other busy sites such as the city's markets, arcades, and squares. They pestered customers in the doorways to pharmacies and drapers' stores, wandered onto the platforms and disturbed passengers at the Pacific Railway station, and were a particular nuisance for both horse-carriage drivers and motorists. The yellow Bayer powders imported by the Argüello drugstore had proved ineffectual, in spite of which local residents persisted in sprinkling them round their front doors and on the sidewalks in the vain hope of scaring away the troublesome creatures, but succeeding only in making the city streets seem even more untidy.

As though this were not enough, the aforementioned canines had already caused several cases of rabies. In his article, Rosalío Usulutlán therefore called on the police chief, Captain Edward Wayne of the United States Marine Corps, to authorize (as his superiors had so commendably done in the past) the purchase of poison by citizens of good character to rid the city of this threat. In his view, strychnine was the most effective of the lethal alkaloids employed for this purpose.

By the time the two friends said good night, the Sagrario church clock was showing ten. Rosalío Usulutlán walked along the Calle Real on his way home to Calle la Española in the Laborio neighbourhood. In shirtsleeves because he considered a jacket was more trouble than it was worth, his collar done up with a copper stud, he whistled to himself as he strolled along the deserted sidewalk,

thinking about *Payment Deferred*. He definitely preferred the Spanish title: *Castigo Divino*, or *Divine Punishment*.

‘Clearly Unsuitable Film Ought To Be Banned’ was the title of the article he was planning to write the next morning. He intended to warn his readers of the dangers inherent in the film’s plot: merely by attending the cinema, unscrupulous persons would be able to learn how to prepare lethal poisons. In the film, the young aristocrat so memorably portrayed by Charles Laughton employed cunning and deceit to poison the most beautiful young women among Boston’s high society one after the other, all the while keeping a list of his innocent victims in a pocketbook that later fell into the hands of the police. Too late, for the cyanide had already done its deadly work, and the method was clearly shown on the screen. Rosalío further planned to express his strong distaste for the final scene: the murderer, before meeting his death in the electric chair, refused the prison chaplain’s offer of the comfort of religion, laughing a sinister laugh in his face.

Distant flashes of lightning lit up a sky heavy with dark clouds. The streetlights strung the length of the Calle Real were burning beneath their tin hoods, but their wan glow failed to penetrate the deep shadows engulfing the doorways, porches and closed-in balconies of the houses stretching from the Casa Prío to the San Francisco church: ‘inadequate public lighting, incapable of protecting honest citizens from assailants even on the city’s main thoroughfares. Tell me, councillors, precisely what use is made of the taxpayers’ money?’

His thoughts were interrupted by the howling of dogs. The loudest noise came from out in the street, but there was also loud barking from behind doors and walls, as if all the dogs in the darkened houses had been roused simultaneously in a sudden panic. A few steps further on, Rosalío came across a dog writhing on the pavement, retching. Further down the street he saw another one dragging itself into a doorway, its hind legs stiff and useless.

As he reached the corner by the San Francisco church, he spotted two shadowy figures struggling outside Doctor Juan de Dios Darbishire’s surgery. He flattened himself against the wall. He recognized one of the men as none other than Doctor Darbishire, whom he had seen leaving the cinema an hour earlier. His crim-

son-lined cape whirled as he lambasted a portly individual with his cane, heaping breathless curses on the unfortunate man. Rosalío Usulutlán was astounded to hear the elderly man of science, always so affable and courteous, cursing in this manner.

The fat man playfully tried to snatch the cane from the doctor, but slipped and fell to the ground. As he struggled to his knees, Doctor Darbshire seized the opportunity to rain blows on his back, which brought cries of real pain from his victim. At this point, as the journalist was later to testify, he heard a mocking laugh from the shadows, and on turning round caught a glimpse of a figure, dressed in strict mourning, beside one of the tall cypresses in front of the church. Both hands resting on the top of his own cane, the stranger was observing the beating with obvious pleasure.

Doctor Darbshire stopped flailing for a moment to point his cane with disgust at a dog trying to haul itself up the surgery steps. The fat man took advantage to escape by crawling away with amazing agility for someone of his girth. Snatching his straw boater from the ground, he stood up and ran after a horse-drawn carriage that was slowly moving down the streets, reins dangling. He succeeded in catching it up, checked the horses, and clambered quickly on board. Safely installed in the driver's seat, he signalled to the man in mourning, who quit his observation post in leisurely fashion, and sauntered over to the waiting carriage. As he passed by Doctor Darbshire, he greeted him nonchalantly with a wave of his cane.

On 19 October 1933, the aforementioned Doctor Juan de Dios Darbshire, sixty-three years of age, twice a widower, by profession a medical doctor, declared to the court that he had been unaware of anyone going past him or greeting him because at that moment he was bending over one of his dogs, by name Esculapius, in order to wrap him in his cloak and carry him into the surgery, where he subsequently administered emergency treatment in the hope of counteracting the effects of the poison his pet had swallowed. Unfortunately, his efforts were to no avail, as Esculapius passed away soon afterwards.

In his testimony under oath of 17 October 1933, the witness Rosalío Usulutlán, whose age, profession and other characteristics are already known to us, gave a detailed description of that

night's events. In response to the judge's questions, he affirmed that to the best of his knowledge and ability, the portly individual being beaten by a cane in the street was Octavio Oviedo y Reyes, a native of the city of León, at that date an articulated law clerk and now an attorney and public notary, someone he knew personally and met socially. He further declared that the person observing the incident from in front of the church was Oliverio Castañeda, a native of Guatemala, who at that time was an articulated clerk in the legal profession and was now also an attorney and public notary, and was known to him personally.

To lend further weight to his testimony, the witness stated that he had had the opportunity to relate the entire incident to Alí Vanegas that same night, as he sat studying in the doorway of his room a block further down Calle Real, next to the house where Rubén Darío had once lived, and where the mad poet Alfonso Cortes was kept locked up. The court had only to ask Vanegas if it were true that he, Rosalío Usulutlán, had informed him, as he now averred, that the dog poisoners were none other than Oviedo and Castañeda.

Vanegas, present in court in his capacity as clerk, made no comment at this point since it was forbidden for him to intervene in the proceedings. He limited himself to copying the statement into the official record of the case, but when on 18 October 1933 it was his turn to take the stand, he corroborated Rosalío Usulutlán's statement in all particulars.

Pressed by the judge to elaborate on the identity of the man in mourning watching the scene from the church, the witness Rosalío Usulutlán asserted that he was convinced it was Oliverio Castañeda, because although it was true that the night was dark and the street lamps gave off inadequate light, he had been able to make out the man's features thanks to one of the constant flashes of lightning. He further stated that the man's gait and general appearance were equally unmistakable when he saw him walk off down the Calle Real, greeting Doctor Darbishire as he passed by with a wave of the mother-of-pearl topped cane he always carried with him.

The Search for the Deadly Poison

FESCULAPIUS, Doctor Juan de Dios Darbshire's dog, was the final victim of a lethal campaign started on the afternoon of 18 June 1932 by the two legal clerks, Oliverio Castañeda and Octavio Oviedo y Reyes, who used chunks of cooked meat laced with strychnine for this deadly purpose. This is borne out by the testimonies to the judge appointed by the León Regional Criminal Court.

The first affidavit was from Señor Alejandro Pereyra, sixty-two years of age, married, a former member of the Nicaraguan armed forces, at that time a secretary in the city police headquarters under the command of Captain Morris Wayne, USMC. Confined to bed due to his disability, the witness declared that:

At approximately ten a.m. on a day he believes must have been in June 1932, the legal clerks Oliverio Castañeda Palacios and Octavio Oviedo y Reyes made their appearance in Captain Wayne's office. The witness knew them to be a pair of pranksters, inclined to practical jokes and rowdy behaviour, but who nevertheless followed the correct procedures in all the legal business that frequently brought them to the police headquarters. While waiting for Captain Wayne to arrive, the visitors struck up a conversation with the witness. Among other topics, their talk concerned the steep rise in the price of domestic drinking water, which was causing quite a stir among the residents of the city, and the proliferation of stray dogs. The witness declared himself to be in favour of the call by *El Cronista* newspaper for trustworthy members of the pub-

lic to be permitted to administer poison to rid the town of these animals. It was at this point that the two young men took the opportunity to disclose the reason for their visit. This was to request Captain Wayne's written permission for the purchase of a bottle of strychnine from one of the city's pharmacies so that they could personally start to dispose of the dogs.

Since the pair were known to be honest and reliable, the witness considered that it was within his authority to grant their request without waiting for Captain Wayne. Accordingly, he proceeded to give them an almost full bottle of the poison, identical in size and appearance to those dispensed in the city pharmacies, kept in a drawer in the office by his commanding officer. As a result, there was no need to issue them with any authorization.

For his part, Señor David Argüello, by profession a pharmacist, married, fifty-two years of age, owner and manager of the Argüello Pharmacy on the Calle de Comercio, León, domiciled at the same address, declared in his written testimony of 19 October 1933 that on receipt of a signed document from the Chief of Police, said document being kept in his files and being available for inspection, he supplied Oviedo and Castañeda with a full, unopened one ounce bottle containing 30 grams of strychnine. This was sufficient for the preparation of twenty chunks of meat each containing one-and-a-half grams of the poison, enough to cause the death of an equivalent number of canines. Señor Argüello described the bottle as being identical to those used for Doctor Ross's pink laxative pills.

Puzzled by the discrepancy between these two accounts, and determined to discover whether the dog poisoners had in fact been supplied with strychnine on two separate occasions, the judge proceeded to question Octavio Oviedo y Reyes (a married man, twenty-seven years of age, by profession a lawyer, domiciled in the San Juan district of the city of León).

The witness, commonly known as 'Oviedo the Balloon', informed the judge in a lengthy deposition dated 17 October 1933 that it had only been on 18 June 1932, when Señor Pereyra issued

them with the permit signed by Captain Wayne that they had obtained strychnine. There had been no other occasion when they were given a bottle of poison directly from a desk drawer. He therefore attributed Señor Pereyra's statement, when it was read out to him, to a lapse of memory.

The signed permit, subsequently handed over to the court by the pharmacist Argüello and added to the case files, did as stated bear the date 18 June 1932.

On the evening of 26 September 1933, prior to the opening of the legal proceedings in which he was to figure as a witness, Oviedo the Balloon was summoned by Cosme Manzo to appear before the 'accursed table'. This he did almost immediately after the end of the performance at the Teatro González, which he attended whenever he could, whatever the movie.

In his role as chairman of the table, Doctor Atanasio Salmerón wished to question Oviedo about what exactly had happened the day when he and his friend had set about poisoning the stray dogs in the streets. For reasons which will later become clear, he carefully wrote all this information down in his notebook (supplied courtesy of the Casa Squibb). After imbibing several glasses of Campeón Rum (mixed with Kola Shaler—the perfect pick-me-up for convalescents) Oviedo the Balloon regaled them by recapping all the details of the adventure, oblivious to the motive behind the questioning.

On the morning of 18 June 1932, clad only in nightshirt and socks, Oviedo the Balloon lay sprawled over the bare kitchen table littered with the remains of his abundant breakfast, reading the previous afternoon's edition of *El Cronista*. As every morning, his wife Yelba was shouting at him for being a pig while she watered the plants on their patio.

Also, just like every other morning, Oviedo drank a glass of Picot grape juice to help relieve his chronic heartburn. He put the glass down and returned to the article about the stray dogs. He could not get the thought of the pack of Alsatians kept by Doctor Darbishire out of his head. Since the death of his second wife, these animals had been the elderly Sorbonne graduate's only companions in his Calle Real surgery. The desire to poison them stuck like a burr in the Balloon's mind.

At nine o'clock he left home. He was wearing his tan linen suit, a green polka dot bow tie, and wore a straw boater perched jauntily over his thick curls, smoothed down with brilliantine. He headed for the Metropolitan Hotel, where he was to meet Oliverio Castañeda so that the pair could begin revising for their final law exam. The hotel stood several blocks away from his house, but that morning the Balloon was in the mood for a walk. Although surprised not to come across as many stray dogs as the alarmist article in *El Cronista* had led him to expect, he was still toying with the idea of wreaking havoc among Doctor Darbishire's canine companions.

Dressed in strict mourning and with cane in hand, Oliverio Castañeda was already waiting for him at the door to the room that he and his wife had occupied ever since their arrival in León. The two men set off across the road and up a block to the University Library, where they counted on finding the volumes of the penal code and other reference books they needed for their studies. Their walk took them past the Contreras family home.

At that very moment, Don Carmen Contreras appeared at the corner door leading directly into his living room, carrying a copy of *El Cronista*. The two students greeted him, without intending to stop, but he called them over with a wave of the newspaper.

They crossed the street and waited for him to join them on the sidewalk outside La Fama store. The three of them struck up a conversation beneath the huge wooden sign of a bottle of Vichy-Celestins medicinal water hanging on two chains from the store roof.

'Are these powders,' asked Oliverio Castañeda, pointing to the yellow dust on the sole of his shoe, 'any use at all?'

'None, I'm afraid,' said Don Carmen, shaking his head ruefully.

'Like it says there, poison's the only answer,' Oviedo the Balloon insisted, pursing his lips at the newspaper Don Carmen was holding.

'In this rag? It publishes nothing but lies,' sighed Don Carmen. 'Now it's me they're attacking. Do they want the Water Company to go bust, and have us all die of thirst? I can't make a living with the rates as low as they are now.'

'Don't worry, I'll help you out there.' Switching his cane to his other hand, Oliverio Castañeda put his arm round Don Carmen's shoulder. 'I'll have a word with Rosalío like I promised. He's a good sort.'

Not having read the article criticizing the rise in water rates, Oviedo had nothing to add. His mind was still on the stray dogs and the best way of getting rid of them, 'considering the constant nuisance they are to defenceless citizens, who are not only pestered by unruly packs of mongrels roaming the public highways, but also run the risk of an unfortunate bite.'

'Instead of these powders, Don Carmen,' said Oviedo, scraping his boot clean on the curb, 'why don't you, as a law-abiding citizen, ask for permission to put down poison? That way, the dogs wouldn't upset your customers anymore.'

'You're right, my friends,' sighed Don Carmen. 'And you should see what a pest they are when the engineer and I go to inspect the pumps at the water tanks.'

'Much more of a nuisance than Chalió Usulutlán in *El Cronista*,' laughed Castañeda, clapping his hands in delight.

Don Carmen gave a hollow laugh. The newspaper looked strangely out of place in his hand.

'We could take care of the dogs at the water tank,' said Oviedo, fanning himself with his straw boater. 'If we got hold of some poison, that is.'

Don Carmen looked at him with renewed interest. Oviedo later remembered the ironic gleam in Don Carmen's beady eyes beneath the bushy eyebrows, the quick flare of his aquiline nostrils as though he were about to make a sarcastic riposte, his thin lips apparently on the point of making some cutting remark, but which eventually parted only to utter a few hasty words. A mouse of a man despite all his money, Oviedo the Balloon told the members of the accursed table, his face grimacing contemptuously as if rolling a mouthful of Campeón rum round his tongue.

'If you get the poison, I'll supply the meat,' muttered Don Carmen, staring down at the ground. 'And we could cook the portions at my house.'

'They don't need to be cooked,' said Oliverio Castañeda. He was so offhand about it, taking out his pocket watch as he spoke, that Oviedo was worried the idea no longer interested him. 'In Guatemala we call bits of poisoned meat for dogs "snacks". But we give them to them raw.'

'Here in Nicaragua we usually cook the meat,' stammered Don

Carmen, obviously distressed at not being able to explain this huge difference in national customs.

‘Meat is meat, raw or cooked,’ Castañeda said in a whisper, inviting the other two to draw closer to share his joke. ‘How do you like your “meat”, Don Carmen? The “heavenly meat” as Rubén Darío used to call it.’

‘Go and get permission from the Yank for the poison. Here’s the money for the meat,’ said Don Carmen, pretending not to have heard Castañeda’s last remark, and fumbling for his wallet. Flustered, he took out a five-cordoba note. ‘Tell Wayne I sent you.’

Oviedo didn’t hesitate for a second, almost snatching the money out of his hand. His double chin quivered with mirth as he recalled the expression of disgust on Oliverio’s face as he took the note.

‘Once you’ve got the strychnine, I’d like to go with you to deal with the dogs at the water tank,’ said Don Carmen, putting away the wallet.

Oliverio Castañeda bowed ceremoniously and touched his hat brim in farewell. He didn’t say a word to Oviedo as they walked along, but when they reached the street corner he pointed to the police headquarters in Plaza Jerez. They made their way there.

As we have already seen, Oviedo the Balloon was called to appear before the examining judge on 17 October 1933. His statement ranged over many different matters. These will be outlined in due course; at present we are concerned only with the dog poisoning of 18 June 1932. The crowd completely filling the courtroom pressed against him in his chair in front of the judge’s dais. They passed on the details of his testimony to all those forced to stand in the corridors outside the room. Oviedo was sweating as profusely as if he had just had a bath with all his clothes on, and was so nervous he had lost all the breezy swagger he had shown when relating these events to his friends at the accursed table some weeks earlier.

Taking constant sips from a glass of water that members of the public keep refilled for him, Oviedo replied as follows to the judge’s questions:

The witness declares that once they had obtained the bottle of poison at the Argüello drugstore, he and Oliverio Castañeda did not as planned spend their time revising for

the law exam, but instead returned to his house in the San Juan neighbourhood to prepare the poisoned bait, Castañeda absenting himself just long enough to go to the Contreras family home and fetch the meat Don Carmen had promised them.

After emptying the contents of the bottle onto a piece of glass removed from a portrait frame in his living room, the witness states that he cut the poison up into twenty doses with his pocket knife. He then spread these on to the chunks of meat at the bottom end of the yard, as far away from the kitchen as possible to avoid any risk of contaminating food. The two men then tied a piece of thread round each portion so that they could handle them without touching the poison (the thread having been obtained from a bobbin in his wife's sewing machine drawer). Once the twenty chunks of poisoned meat were ready, the witness can state with absolute certainty that no strychnine remained in the bottle, and that he personally threw the empty container down the toilet in order to be sure that his children, who were always up to some mischief or other, would not get hold of it.

He had wanted to embark on their hunt immediately, but Castañeda persuaded him to wait, arguing that if people in the city saw them poisoning dogs in broad daylight they would take them for suspicious characters, even if *El Cronista* had said that only responsible citizens should undertake the task. His wife, who was joking with him all the time as they prepared the meat, agreed with Castañeda, and refused to have anything to do with the affair.

Castañeda had returned with the news that Don Carmen insisted on accompanying them. This surprised and annoyed Oviedo, because he had not taken seriously what the latter had said that morning, and the fact that he would be going with them meant his plans might be upset.

Castañeda reassured him, stressing that Don Carmen would only go to help them kill the animals near the water tank, as he had indicated that morning. He also jokingly added that as *El Cronista* recommended that the poison only be administered by people of good repute, what bet-

ter than to have Don Carmen accompany them at the start of their mission? This elicited a further remark from Oviedo's wife, to the effect that it was not Don Carmen who would fail his exams if they were caught skulking around the streets when they should have been studying.

Don Carmen arrived in his black Packard at about six in the evening. The three men set off to lay poison around the water tank. Don Carmen drove, and on this occasion seemed especially light-hearted and talkative: whenever he saw a dog taking the poisoned bait they had thrown, he let go of the wheel, rubbed his hands together gleefully, and chuckled to himself.

After they had finished at the water tank, and before he dropped them back at Oviedo's door, Don Carmen asked the two men not to forget to save one portion of the meat for Don Macario Carrillo's dog. Don Macario was a music-lover who lived four doors from Don Carmen, and whose pet had the unfortunate habit of shitting on the sidewalk outside La Fama store, with the result that Don Carmen was constantly having to spread sawdust over the offending droppings. That dog was in fact the first to be poisoned, at approximately a quarter past eight that evening, after they had enticed it into the doorway to Don Macario's property.

Oviedo further stated that it was about eight o'clock when they hitched up the horses to the carriage for their final trip. They took with them the fifteen or so remaining portions of meat, in a small pinewood box of the kind used to contain La Estrella soap. They trotted around the streets as if out for an evening ride, while surreptitiously throwing the bait to any dogs they came across along the way. Most of the dogs were killed in the Calle Real, towards the end of their expedition.

They left Doctor Darbshire's surgery to last, calculating they would arrive at San Francisco church around ten, when the doctor would already be in bed. By then they had only one portion left, which they gave to the only Alsatian they saw outside the surgery, although usually several of the said Doctor Darbshire's many dogs stood guard there all night.

Oviedo stated that he climbed down from the carriage holding the piece of poisoned meat by its thread. Knowing Alsations to be a very fierce breed, he took every precaution to avoid the dog biting him. Eventually, using all manner of coaxing and cajolery, he managed to lure the animal towards him, and it took the fatal meat and gobbled it up.

He was preparing to go back to the carriage when Doctor Darbshire, whom they had thought was safely in bed, suddenly appeared in the middle of the street. No sooner had the doctor spotted Oviedo acting suspiciously outside his house, and seen his dog eating the meat, than he immediately realized what was going on, and reacted with unaccustomed violence.

‘I stumbled, and that old sonofabitch started beating the living daylights out of me with his stick,’ Oviedo told the members of the accursed table. He flailed around as though he were wielding a cane, then threw himself to the floor, clutching his head theatrically.

‘And did Oliverio Castañeda defend you?’ Doctor Salmerón wanted to know, loudly cracking the knuckles of each hand.

‘The coward jumped down from the carriage and ran to hide behind a cypress in front of the church,’ moaned Oviedo, still curled up on the floor, warding off the blows.

‘And you say you poisoned twenty dogs?’ Doctor Salmerón licked his finger and leafed through the pages of his Casa Squibb notebook.

‘Yes, twenty, I’ve already given you the list,’ Oviedo the Balloon nodded, panting as if still recovering from the run he made to the carriage in order to escape more blows. ‘We used up all but one of the pieces before we got to Doctor Darbshire’s. But there was only one dog there anyway. It ate the last bit.’

‘So there was no poison left at all.’ Doctor Salmerón put down his pencil and unscrewed the top of a fountain pen. He began to write hastily, as if making out a prescription.

‘Not a spoonful. Twenty doses, twenty dogs out K.O.,’ yelled Oviedo the Balloon, rattling his chair and howling like a poisoned canine.

CHAPTER THREE

'I am Innocent,' the Cry from the Dungeons

*Exclusive interview granted by Doctor Oliverio Castañeda
to our Reporter, Rosalío Usulután*

THE DOORS OF THE XXI PRECINCT JAIL OPEN WIDE FOR EL CRONISTA — A DESCRIPTION AND SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF THE PRISONER — WHAT HE THINKS OF HIS PREDICAMENT — EVENTS SURROUNDING THE SUDDEN DEATH OF RAFAEL UBICO IN COSTA RICA — SWEARS HIS WIFE SUFFERED FROM CHRONIC ILLNESS — HIS RELATIONS WITH THE CONTRERAS FAMILY — 'I NEVER GAVE FOOD OR MEDICINE TO DON CARMEN OR MATILDE' — NOT CONVINCED BY THE UNIVERSITY LABORATORY TESTS — HIS THOUGHTS ON THE POSSIBLE EXHUMATION OF THE BODIES — HIS REASONS FOR RETURNING TO NICARAGUA — SPEAKS OF JEALOUSY AND POLITICAL PERSECUTION — WILL CONDUCT HIS OWN DEFENSE —

DAY draws to a close. It is six o'clock in the evening of 15 October 1933; filled with compassion, the noble city kneels at its Angelus prayers. To the distant sound of bells on the basilica tower, I mount the steps to the jail. Captain Anastasio Ortiz politely leads the way inside. When we reach the far end of the dark, dank corridor he tells me: 'This is the cell.' The silence here is overwhelming, comparable only to that found in deserted temples or lonely cemeteries. I pause to take in the sight of a single window through which filters the dim, checkered twilight; a tidy cot, a thoughtful-looking prisoner sitting, arms folded, at a small unscrubbed pine table that serves as desk and dining-table; a few books and magazines, a china mug and a bottle of water. Nothing else.

All at once, he looks up. Pale-skinned, of medium height, beard and moustache shaven, oval face with a pronounced lower jaw; black, straight hair, eyes tranquil but vague behind his spectacle lenses. Small mouth and thin lips, sunken frontal sinuses, average forehead, base of the nostrils also sunken, straight nose. A physiognomy revealing a mixture of determination, cunning, and shrewdness that could serve as a test case for those criminologists to prove their much talked-of theories concerning inherited traits leading to crime. Yet beyond any such scientific considerations, we are obliged to admit we find ourselves in the presence of an attractive male specimen, whom the fair sex in León's high society came almost without exception to regard as irresistible. Irresistible, and cruel? Does the one necessarily mask the other?

He is wearing a fine black cashmere suit with a black tie. Even in the isolation of his cell he adheres strictly to the mourning attire that has always been his trademark, something which for friends and strangers alike adds a touch of mystery to the young foreigner's personality. Apparently, he always wears black in honor of his mother, who died when he was still a child. It is said that this tragic event—the boy witnessed his mother pass away in fits of indescribable agony—not only prompted him to adopt mourning clothes ever after, but over the years came to have a profound effect on his behavior.

Seeing me standing at the cell door, he raises his eyebrows quizzically, then invites me in. I greet him. He returns my greeting, visibly affected. Can this sad, lonely prisoner be the same gentleman who so dazzled the salons of León's smartest set, the beau of all its young ladies? Can this be the smooth talker always ready with a quip, so witty and intelligent, so seductive in all his gestures? Yes, it is the very same, though cast down by the bitter blows of fortune.

Our interview begins.

Doctor Castañeda, the national and international press is full of speculation about the tragedy that has shaken the whole of León; you yourself are the subject of lively debates and the center of a web of conjecture. Would you be willing to answer a few questions for the benefit of the avid readers of El Cronista?

He considers my request, moves his head in thought, then replies: 'With pleasure, Mr. Usulutlán.' (A short pause).

He clasps his head in his hands, leaning on the table with obvi-

ous distress as he peers up at me. His gaze betrays weariness and despair. He removes his glasses.

How old are you? What is your family background?

'I was born in Zacapa, in the Republic of Guatemala, on 18 January 1908 (a slight frown creases his forehead). My father's name is Ricardo Castañeda Paz. He's a retired army officer, who has been suffering terribly from rheumatism these past six months. My younger brother Gustavo is seventeen, and is about to take his third year exams at the Faculty of Medicine in Guatemala. My other brother, Ricardo Castañeda, is currently finishing his studies as a surgeon at Munich University in Germany.'

And what studies did you pursue?

'I attended primary school at the Colegio de Infantes in Guatemala. I finished high school at the Eastern National Institute in Chiquimula, then went on to study Law at the University of San Carlos Borromeo, and subsequently here at the University of León, from where I graduated on February twenty-first of this year.'

What official posts have you occupied?

'In 1926 I worked in the Department of Education in Guatemala, and in that same year became the under-secretary for education.'

Are you saying that, at the age of eighteen, you were a member of the government of Guatemala?

He looks at me in surprise, as if this were a foolish question, but quickly smiles indulgently, and replies:

'Yes, that is so. And a few years later I entered the diplomatic corps. In 1929 I was appointed as an attaché to the Guatemalan legation in Costa Rica, and at the end of that year I was appointed first secretary to the Guatemalan legation in Nicaragua. That was the start of the great affection I have for this country.'

In Costa Rica, did you know someone by the name of Rafael Ubico?

His face clouds over with keen mistrust. His fingers begin to drum on the rough table-top.

'Of course. He died on 22 November 1929 in San José. He was the secretary in the legation there, when I was an attaché. We became close friends.'

What was the cause of his death?

Castañeda looks even more disturbed. His gestures become irritated and impatient.

‘The unanimous opinion of the doctors who attended him was renal failure brought on by alcoholic intoxication. My friend Ubico lived in the Alemana boarding-house, close to the Central Post Office on Plaza de la Artillería. I lived in another boarding-house, the Niza, on the far side of the Edificio Metálico, near Parque Morazán.

‘On the evening before Ubico’s death, the wedding of Miss Lily Rohrmoser (Castañeda politely helps me spell her last name in my notebook) to Don Guillermo Vargas Facio was celebrated in San José. The splendour of this event was unprecedented in the Costa Rican capital.’

Did you personally attend the wedding reception?

‘No, but Rafael did, and drank copiously, as was his custom. At about three in the morning, after having rested for an hour or so in one of the drawing-rooms of the bride’s house, where the celebrations were taking place, several of his friends carried him back to his room in the Pensión Alemana. He was given medication there and then to try to reduce the effects of his drunkenness.’

Did you come to his aid?

A dark shadow flits across his face. He tries to brush it away as if it were a troublesome fly.

‘I went to help him about nine the next morning. I got a phone call from a chambermaid at the Pensión Alemana asking me to go to his bedside. When I saw how ill he was, I first telephoned to the Guatemalan doctor Pedro Hurtado Peña, and then went in search of our ambassador, Alfredo Skinner Klee. He came to the boarding-house, and in his presence the doctor diagnosed Ubico’s state as critical. Another doctor, Mariano Figueres, who had been summoned by his landlady, concurred in this opinion.’

Forgive my question, but did you administer any kind of medicine to Ubico?

‘Whenever he was suffering from the effects of alcohol, my friend used to take a patented medicine known as Licor Zeller, a salt preparation. When this brought no relief, and since Doctor Peña had not yet arrived, Ubico asked me to go to the pharmacy to fetch him some sodium bicarbonate. At the pharmacist’s suggestion, I took him some Bromo-Seltzer. That also proved ineffective. The doctors gave him injections and enemas. But to no avail.’

And following Señor Ubico’s death?

‘Ambassador Skinner Klee called for an autopsy. He also ordered tests on all the medicines given to the deceased.’

Why did he take all these measures? Was there a suspicion that Ubico had not died of natural causes?

The young lawyer slips his spectacles back on, and looks at me pityingly.

‘Because that was the procedure stipulated in the Guatemalan Diplomatic Code in cases of this kind.’

And what were the results of the tests?

‘Señor Gastón Michaud, head of the Costa Rican national laboratory, drew up an official report, which is on file. Following the most careful analysis, no trace of any toxic substance was found in his bowels or liquids. The same was true of the medicines examined.’

The shadows of night have fallen. In the cell roof, a single bulb shines on the end of its cord. A few moments earlier, the prisoner had risen to switch it on.

Is this the first interview you have given the Press?

‘Yes. It is only now, after a week of being held incommunicado, that I am able to talk. Meanwhile, however, the newspapers have been free to say whatever they like about me, without the slightest proof. I am extremely grateful to you, Señor Usulutlán, for giving me the opportunity to present my version of events. I trust this will bring some comfort to my friends, who must know that my conscience is crystal clear.’

Are you aware of the reasons for your arrest?

The prisoner strides indignantly up and down the tiny room.

‘I was arrested on the orders of the director of the National Guard, General Anastasio Somoza. But it was only today that the relevant judicial authorities informed me of the arrest warrant, a fact which only serves to underline the illegality of this whole procedure.’

This is not a direct answer to my question. I have no wish to force him, but my duty as a journalist obliges me to press him further.

Have you heard anything of the rumours circulating about the death of your wife, Marta?

He stops pacing, and collapses onto his chair, overwhelmed with grief.

‘Yes I have, the more’s the pity. My wife’s health was always