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From *Inglaterra. A fable*

## The Trap

1.

In mid 1914, when Waichai was still a child without a name, the Countess of Broadback, owner and master of ceremonies of the famous English circus *The Great Will*, was invited to work in the heart of the Americas to direct her celebrated show. During its hundred years or more of financial difficulties and tribulations, the sizeable Company had hoped for such a stroke of luck, which would make it possible to conquer the respect of other lands, respect no longer conferred upon it in England; for almost as long, since that day the Countess thought of as 'The Day of Revelation, had she wanted to cross the Atlantic in order to fulfill a dream so curious that she had never dared to tell anyone, and to which she had given an exotic name: Patagonia. Yet a mere enumeration of these fantasies is not sufficient to explain their later tragic course, one of the most curious episodes recorded in the history of the Southern seas. First of all, it is necessary to at least establish the chronicle of an historical event, and of a trap.

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The event, which was the initial reason for the voyage of *The Great Will*, as well as of hundreds of other international missions, was the inauguration of the Panama Canal, rightly considered the threshold of a new era. For centuries, countless human lives had been lost in attempts to cross the New Continent overland or to travel around it, sailing through the terrible seas of Tierra del Fuego, or to find a Northern passage between the murderous icebergs of Terranova and Greenland. Conceited as he was, engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps, having bequeathed the wonder of the Suez Canal to civilization, finally conceived this new sea-arm, which would bore through the Central American mountains; France's most nutrient-rich capitalists had followed him, as if trying to demonstrate that it is intelligence rather than perseverance that moves the world forward. And now, after a series of mammoth works that caused the deaths of more than

thirty thousand natives, protests by thousands of humanitarian souls, and even the very imprisonment of Lesseps; now that the North Americans had taken over the nearly bankrupted enterprise, and now that a worker had finally seen the Pacific for the first time, the new powers that be had considered the occasion to be appropriate to organize a party without precedent; “not so much in order to obscure,” it was then said, “the prior misery, but rather to prove to Lesseps that intelligence and money can do nothing without going hand in hand with blind and relentless lack of pity.”

For an entire year a committee of dignitaries, drunk on the taste of cosmopolitanism and classification, had been organizing a series of performances aiming to make spectators believe that their very minds were the Canal proper, and that the entire universe was crossing through their minds. It was a group of English artists who, following a tradition initiated by Queen Victoria’s husband, planned two International Exhibitions and thirteen Ambulatory Museums that sowed the pacifying prestige of scientific knowledge across the Panamanian territory; but it was a North American novelist who eventually suggested that the Circus be invited since, as he said rather enigmatically, “everything can be bought, except tradition,” and since “*The Great Will* has succeeded in naturally gathering every facet of the British spirit.” It is said that his proposal was much criticized among the English establishment, given that the unquestionable diversity of its show was not the result of thorough knowledge but rather the effect of mere fortune or, in other words, “the remains of a shipwreck brought back to the beach by ten centuries of waves.” It is said that the only reason *The Great Will* was brought over was the advanced age of the venerable Henry James, and because of the necessity of entertaining the “base passions” of visitors to other kinds of shows.

And even at departure from Southampton, many of the troupe’s members mistrusted the enterprise, fearing above all that the ship, *Almighty Word*, a war galleon in which the Company had traveled since the past centuries, would not succeed in achieving that maritime feat. Only the Countess of Broadback, whose secret links with spiritualism would have been enough to cause her to be excluded from the project, had seen in the trip a *correspondence*, the beginning of a new phase. Finally, it should be mentioned that for spiritualists a correspondence between the present and the past does not necessarily imply good fortune; it is simply the confirmation of fate. And in fact, that fate was, again, among the most tragic we may have heard of.

## 2.

According to the chronicles, the first performance of the Circus on American soil took place in the harbor of the city of Colón, at the very gates of the Canal. It was not a complete event as we would understand it,

but rather only a few publicity numbers with which *The Great Will* generally announced its arrival in a strange port; numbers that were so much less impressive than its usual display that we do not even properly know which ones they exactly were; and despite the fact that its audience was not the public for which the celebration had been conceived, but rather only a multitude of skilled workers about to return to the United States, it is said that it generated such admiration that after it was all over and the Company's members had gone up on deck, disembarking eventually dressed up as Shakespearean characters and handing out leaflets inviting for their first true performance, each worker saw in them the carriers of a prize coming from the depths of history to alleviate their sorrow... causing them to immediately request, beg, supplicate to their bosses that their departure, a moment for which they had so long clamored, be delayed by just one day. At first, the General Administration of the Port, fed up with trade union difficulties and overwhelmed by the work of trying to accommodate so many foreign ships in their minute berths inlet, rejected the request. But the management of the Canal, eager that their employees should have something good to tell upon their return to New York, not only acceded to their demand, but also paid from its own pocket five hundred tickets and made an appointment with the Countess for that very evening, as soon as the function was over –which, by the way, excluded another five hundred people.

A picture published in every English newspaper renders the climax of the interview in the luxurious local office of the *Darien Company Ltd.*: under a huge US flag, the Countess, still dressed in her lion tamer-suit and a starred tiara, is signing a contract for an incredible fifty-six performances all along the Canal as well as at various ports and islands near the Canal's mouths. A dozen men with monocles, handlebar-mustache and vest-covered bellies smile as if they were pleased to have succeeded in gaining the sympathy of the proletariat despite the union leaders' barking. The Countess meanwhile frowns, showing extreme tension, as if seized with concerns difficult to explain.

It is unlikely that –in contrast to other members of the troupe who supported social revolution and anarchism– she felt as if she were an accomplice of these “imperial agents,” rather, being a descendant of shepherds and prophets, she may have considered any excess of fortune as an obscenity. Perhaps, already fearing the coming tragedy, she was lost in her own memory, trying to find another *correspondence* that would allow her to interpret such a unexpected present.

The fact is that, as the Panamanian newspapers of the day calculated, just half of the anticipated takings would have been enough for the Circus to repair its overtaxed structures, renew its stock of wonders and ensure for at least five years the subsistence of its artists, already resigned to living in

an almost constant state of anxiety. But there was more. Drunk with the certainty that a future of wonders was opening in front of them along with the Canal's locks, princes and presidents, nobles and millionaires, tycoons and even silent movie stars succumbed to the vice of prodigality, a vice that led to *The Great Will* being showered with unexpected presents and fabulous rewards much like the countless streams flowing down the mountains into the Canal's waters.

As soon as the *Almighty Word* crossed the first few locks, several Argentine ranchers were so captivated by the grace with which Mlle. Francinet, the *écuyère*, leaped from one zebra's back to another that they gave the Circus a gift of four wonderful sorrel colts valued at circa one thousand dollars each, in exchange for the promise that the circus would one day visit Buenos Aires. Already in the Gatún Lake, an ancient Canadian millionaire, who had, from the distance of her yacht, watched Orso the Brawny rehearse, sent to the ship a check for an enormous amount, nearly worth her entire inheritance: she had seen in the fellow the features of the *Québécois* aboriginals, and wanted through him to pay tribute to her own childhood and desire.. Once in the city of Panama, a Palestine sheikh, so arrogant that he was not ashamed to piss down from his box into the parterre conceived such an obsessive passion for the Countess that for a full week he would leave a diamond at the ticket office during each performance. As it is well known, misery and failure can put an end to even the deepest love; since the day the Countess took over the management of the circus, these misfortunes had embittered the artists' mood to such extent that even now, when everything seemed to be going swimmingly, most of the members were not on speaking terms; and yet the profound familiarity that kept them together, the tie that none of them could have put into words, made them agree on putting all these treasures into the ship's safe, thus turning them into collective property; the foundations of the future glory that was only confirmed by the final and greatest gift.

It was not that money, or at least its prospect, did not interest them. Not long before their last stop, the *Almighty Word* had met the clipper of King George V who, tired 'of the un-English,' invited them to perform fragments of Shakespeare plays before the Court. After the performance, during which even the infant princes were moved to tears, the Danish Queen, whose voice sounded as if she had just woken up from an ancient mistake, apologized on behalf of the royal family for having forgotten *The Great Will* for such a long time, and promised to take them under her patronage as soon as they disembarked in Liverpool. Thus, having completed the last performance according to contract, most artists were peacefully quiet, as if reconciled with their fate, having seen that the Countess had been right in coming to the Americas, and that the circus was now back in the orbit its oldest glories. All, that is , except the

Countess, who, steered by a profound sense of storytelling, knew in her heart that the ending was as yet missing from this sequence. And indeed, no sooner did the *Almighty Word* enter the first chamber of the locks, the ones which would return them to the Atlantic, that their gates slammed shut, something that happened with such force that each and every piece of wood on the ship shook, she realized that they were locked next to a cargo vessel of a huge and sinister silhouette sailing in from the opposite direction.

The Countess, who had been leaning on the starboard rail for hours, contemplating the wharf packed with cranes and hydraulic engines, mooring ropes and tugs, suddenly read the name of the ship on the sharp prow, *Patagonia*, and let her cigarette fall into the water with the ambivalent emotion of surprise and recognition. And in fact, before she could even react, two male shapes dressed entirely in white, wearing panama hats, carrying mahogany sticks, and with shining stones on many of their fingers went up on deck of the cargo ship, crossed over the breakwater that separated the lanes in the lock chamber, and, smiling, boarded the *Almighty Word*. The two were Malayan twins of indefinable age and an everlasting smile, who belonged, so they said, to a shipping company in San Francisco, which had carried gold prospectors from one coast of the United States to the other for over one hundred years. Having been delayed by the endless bureaucratic formalities needed to close deals in South America, they were arriving only now, late, for the inauguration celebrations; and, given that since their arrival they had heard of nothing else but the Circus and its wonders, they now decided to beg them to perform *just for the two of them* an unscheduled show. After the event, they added, they would be very pleased to offer to the artists the dinner they had prepared for King George. The Countess, scandalized, was about to reject the proposal, when one of the twins put down on the starboard rail a small, dirty handkerchief with its four corners tied; sickened, she did not dare to untie it, but she instructed Orso to do so, and when e Brawny succeeded with some effort, seven gold nuggets rolled onto the planks..

Visibly troubled, the Countess, clapped her hands. The Company performed a show filled with joy and unprecedented glow –free at last from fear of poverty, and secure, as never before, in their own value-- while the channel in which the *Almighty Word* floated was being drained of all water, and while, in lane next to it, the Malay battleship progressively rose, projecting a sharp and ominous shadow onto the Circus.. Extremely nervous, the Countess incessantly paced from the starboard to the prow: she knew that in the course of the dinner party, and in a way that she could not fathom, the destiny of the *Great Will* was to be at stake. While they watched the show, the twins seemed to be truly excited by the lions, as if they too belonged to their species, even while at the same time appearing pleased with their domestication; and as they watched the pride of Mr.

Hoffmaster, who made a myriad of trained tigers jump through nine planet-shaped rings, or that of fakir Elishama, who drew a long serpent out of a rose, the faces of the Malayans showed the expression of certain unknown beasts, to whom God or destiny, had finally permitted to set a trap for this plead of tamers, and perhaps for all of the human race. A fatal trap.

*Translated from the Spanish by Andrea Oelsner*