



THE
MAD
TOY

ROBERTO ARLT
FOREWORD BY COLM TÓIBÍN

The Mad Toy

Roberto Arlt

Translated by James Womack



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Foreword

There is a particular edge to the novels and stories written in countries which lacked a stable middle class or a clear sense of social continuity. It is as though the spirit of uncertainty in these countries made its way into the very structure of the fiction which writers produced. This fiction is filled with strange choices and odd chances; the way of handling incident is rich with risk and mystery. In his book on Nathaniel Hawthorne, written in 1879, Henry James attempted to identify what novelists in New England did not have at their disposal, thus making their fiction different from that being created in Europe. His famous list was as follows: 'No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentleman, no palaces, no castles, nor manor, nor old country houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages, nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools – not Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political societies, no sporting class – no Epsom nor Ascot.'

It is easy to imagine the Argentine novelist Robert Arlt (1900 –1942) looking at this list and smiling in full recognition. The Argentine writer had the city of Buenos Aires and the army, perhaps, but beyond that only a sense of isolation. The Argentine writer had the port and the pampas, but beyond them merely a heightened sense of desolation. Like Henry James, Arlt would have understood, however, that not having a thousand years of slow progress at your disposal, as the English and French novelist did, might be gift as much as an impediment. 'The American knows,' Henry James wrote, having given his list, 'that a good deal remains.' Seven years earlier in a letter to an American friend, James had suggested that the richness of Europe was something perhaps the American novelist did not even need: 'It's a complex fate being an American, and one of the responsibilities it entails is fighting against a superstitious valuation of Europe.'

In New England such a struggle against 'the superstitious valuation of Europe' gave us nineteenth-century novels with stark imagery and memorable drama such as Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Melville's *Moby Dick*, which attempted to create a world more vivid and filled with plenitude than the world outside its pages. In countries such as Ireland, Brazil and Argentina, places where poverty, social disruption and fragile institutions reigned, where form and continuity were sorely missing, the novel also took on a new and strange shape.

In an essay written in 1932 called 'The Argentine Writer and Tradition', Jorge Luis Borges suggested that this lack of social continuity and this sense of being on the periphery of literary culture could be seen as a gift, or a new way of nourishing that very culture. The South American writer, he wrote, by virtue of being close and distant to the centre of Western culture had more 'rights' to Western culture than anyone in any Western nation. He compared this enriching sense of proximity and distance with the position of Jewish and Irish writers. 'It was enough,' he wrote, 'the fact of feeling Irish, different, to become innovators within English culture. I believe that Argentine writers and South American writers in general, are in an analogous situation; we can handle all the European themes, handle them without superstition, but with an irreverence which can have, and does have, fortunate consequences.'

The years when Roberto Arlt was beginning to write were years of stress and change in Argentina.

society. A massive wave of Italian immigration had radically transformed the city of Buenos Aires and created a distance between the city and the pampa. Increased wealth also meant that books and ideas from outside began to matter to young Argentine writers, as the novels of Dostoevsky would matter to Roberto Arlt. Even as early as 1872 when Jose Fernandez published his great poem 'Martín Fierro', the theme of the solitary outsider became central to the Argentine imagination. The intensity of the immigration created a sense of rootlessness and dislocation, the sheer size of pampa and the teeming chaos of the city made their way into images of personal anguish and hostility to the social world. Images of the sad figure alone in Buenos Aires, a half-made man in a half-made place, with no society to distract him, and no possibility of any drama other than the dark, jagged drama that occurred within the alienated self, became central in Argentine literature.

In the fiction of Borges and Bioy Casares, in the novels of Arlt, in the later work of writers such as Ernesto Sabato and Julio Cortazar, the idea of playfulness was also central. These writers believed, like Machado de Assis in Brazil and James Joyce in Ireland, that the real world could not be reflected in the pages of a book, but rather it could be re-made there, or made more strangely real there. The real world could thus reflect the book. Their novels experimented with form and structure, played with ideas of character and tone. They did not dramatize moral questions, or deal with society and the individual. They did not allow domestic harmony to occur at any point in the stories they told. Their stories were fractured and irrational; their characters were happier on the street than at home, and happier, or more exquisitely unhappy, alone, than with families or associates; their narratives were more content if nothing in them could be easily tied into neat plots.

This did not mean that Borges (1899–1986), Bioy Casares (1914–1999) and Arlt operated as a group. In 'Borges', the massive volume, published after the death of Bioy Casares, in which Bioy wrote down all the conversations he had with Borges about writers and writing, there are many disparaging references to Arlt, as there are indeed to Ernesto Sabato (1911–2011). The fact that Arlt had very little formal education and that both of his parents were poor immigrants would not have been lost on Borges and Bioy, whose roots were deep in both cosmopolitan literary culture and nineteenth-century Argentina. Also, the literary world of Buenos Aires in the years when Arlt wrote and in the years after his early death, was one of factions where the divisions could be based on political allegiance as much as social class. None of Arlt's work, for example, appeared in the great Argentine literary magazine *Sur* – to which Borges and Bioy had close connections – which began publication in 1931.

Arlt's novels were published between 1926 and 1932. Although he continued to write short stories and pieces for the newspapers, between then and his death he mainly worked as a journalist and playwright. Because he was sent out to work when he was young, he developed an intimate outsider's knowledge of the centre of Buenos Aires, streets such as Florida and Lavalle, which were elegant in these years when Buenos Aires was one of the richest cities in the world. He invokes Lavalle in *The Mad Toy*: 'It was seven o'clock in the evening and Lavalle Street was showing off its most Babylonian splendour. Through the plate-glass windows you could see that cafés were crammed with customers; carefree dandies gathered in the entrances of the theatres and cinemas; and the windows of the clothing shops – which displayed legs in sheer stockings hanging from nickel-plate bars – and those jewellery stores and orthopaedic stores all showed by their opulence the cunning of the businessmen who used their spiffy goods to flatter the voluptuousness of the wealthy.'

Arlt also knew the more miserable suburbs where the newer immigrants lived. His relationship with his father was always difficult, his childhood was seriously unhappy. When he was fifteen, he found work in a bookshop in Calle Lavalle; soon he met a number of Argentine writers. The following

year he published his first story. When he was seventeen he left home for good and began to look after himself.

Although writers and intellectuals in Buenos Aires in the 1920s felt distant from both Europe and from South America itself, Buenos Aires was a cosmopolitan place where small magazines and new ideas flourished and where there was much debate about what sort of literature this new and hybrid country should produce. Although Arlt was never close to Borges, he did know another writer who came from a cultured family, the novelist Ricardo Güiraldes; he was published in Güiraldes's magazine *Proa*, as was Borges. Güiraldes (1886–1927) had travelled widely, especially in France, and was opposed to the use of stilted, literary language in novels and stories.

This suited Arlt. He loved the streets of the city and its slang and had much to say about them in his novels and in the column he began writing for the newspaper *El Mundo* in 1928. In the 1930s he travelled widely as a journalist for *El Mundo*. His two best known books are the novels *The Mad Toy* (1926) and *The Seven Madmen* (1929). In these two books he attempted to find fictional form, using a mixture of the picaresque and a tone which was haunted and alienated, to capture his hero, a young man filled with a mixture of guilt and innocence, curiosity and knowingness, as he progresses from place to place.

It is possible that the first chapter of the book was written some years before the other ones, as Arlt sought to isolate his errant hero further, remove him from any group or circle, thus making his adventures all the more strange and alienating. The scene in the early pages of the book where Silvio and his companions 'imagine that we lived in Paris, or foggy London town. We would dream in silence, a smile balanced on our condescending lips' belongs to that world of literary young men feeling marooned in Buenos Aires, imagining the world of Europe as the real one, and locked in Argentina as though it were some kind of cage.

The only relief from life then was literature. In this world a book becomes a lethal weapon or a way of saving, or further staining, your soul which nothing else offered. Thus, even to this day, there is something holy about a bookshop in Buenos Aires; the browsers and those who work in the shop give the impression that they are involved in some sacred ritual. A bookshop, then, is a natural place for Silvio to find and unfind himself in *The Mad Toy*. Baudelaire will be invoked as much as books about science and mathematics. 'Sometimes at night I would think of the beauty with which poets made the world shake, and my heart would flood with pain, like a mouth filling with a scream.'

Arlt, the low priest of the modern, was fascinated by machinery as he was by literature and by magic and by sex. The scene with the man wearing women's clothes would have been dynamite in the Buenos Aires of the 1920, as it remains deeply powerful to this day.

In this world only the hero is sane; much else is weird or monstrous. The day is filled with cruelty and ugliness; there are useless tasks to perform and many irritations. As in the world created by Borges, the night is more real, as is the world of dreams. The night, as invoked by words, can take on a stunning beauty, playing here a great game between shadow and substance, whose tone is quintessential to the book and endemic to its spirit:

Sometimes, at night, there are faces that appear, faces of women who wound you with the sword of sweetness. We move apart, and our soul remains shadowy and alone, as happens after a party.

Unusual apparitions... they disappear and we never hear of them again, but even so they accompany us at night, their eyes fixed on our own fixed eyes.... and we are wounded with the sword of sweetness, and imagine how the love of these women will be, these faces that enter into your own flesh. An anguished desert of the spirit, a transient luxury that is both harsh and demanding.

Introduction

There's a point in the middle of the third chapter of *The Mad Toy* at which the reader is given for the first time the narrator's full name: Silvio Drodman Astier. When I first read the novel, my initial reaction was to wonder if it was an anagram of the author's real name. Of course it isn't (no 'B', for starters, which is a problem if the name you're looking for happens to be 'Roberto'), but the impulse was excusable: one of the most immediately appealing things about Arlt's novel is the sense it gives of being a record of events that we feel must actually have happened.

Where does this immediacy come from? In part it must derive from the way in which *The Mad Toy*, as is also the case with Arlt's other novels, pins itself down firmly to a particular time and a particular place. If you take the time to look up on a map of Buenos Aires the street names Arlt mentions, you will see that most of the action of the novel takes place in a fairly small segment of the large city, the central districts of Caballito, Flores and Vélez Sársfield (where Arlt himself was born) with a couple of brief excursions to the docks and the Colegio Militar in El Palomar. For all his dreams of escape to London or Paris, dreams that are eventually only fulfilled to the extent that Silvio is offered a post in Comodoro, about 1,000 miles to the south of Buenos Aires, *The Mad Toy* is a local novel, alert to the detail of Silvio's neighbourhood, the walls and alleyways, the cul-de-sacs, the milkbars, the green street lamps.

But the apparent realism of *The Mad Toy* serves to reveal the skill of the journalist, the professional observer of life. It is possible to be taken in by Arlt's artistry to the extent of believing that Silvio must be an *alter ego*, but it is to do Arlt a disservice to think that Silvio is simply copied from life: the seemingly shapeless, picaresque nature of *The Mad Toy* is a grimy mask for an extremely carefully developed and formally patterned novel, in which the superficial story of Silvio's adventures is also a detailed psychological portrait of Silvio himself. Of course, to a certain extent Silvio is inspired by Arlt: what first novel isn't autobiographical to at least some degree? But it is more correct to say that Arlt managed to dissociate himself from the adolescent he had been, and created, with the benefit of hindsight, a fantastic version of his youth.

Arlt was born in Buenos Aires in 1900. He was the son of immigrants: his father was a Prussian and so strict as to be perceived as unnecessarily cruel by his son; Arlt's mother was from Trieste. Arlt had two sisters: one of them died in infancy; the other in 1936; both from tuberculosis. At the age of eight, Arlt was expelled from school, and his formal education ended. He worked at a number of jobs: he was employed for a while in a bookshop, but he was also a housepainter, a mechanic, a dock worker, a factory hand... Eventually the newspaper *El Mundo* employed him to write a column: his so-called *Aguafuertes* ('Etchings') of contemporary Buenos Aires formed a witty commentary on the city's low-life. He also worked as secretary to the novelist Ricardo Güiraldes. His first novel, *El juguete rabioso* (*The Mad Toy*) was published in 1926, and was followed by *Los siete locos* (*The Seven Madmen*, 1929), *Los lanzallamas* (*The Flamethrowers*, 1931) and *El amor brujo* (*Bewitching Love*, 1932). In the 1930s Arlt began to write for the theatre, and by the end of his life was more or less exclusively a playwright. He died of a heart attack in 1942. Pieces of this biography crop up in *The Mad Toy*: Silvio's sister is also called Lila and Silvio works in a bookshop for a while, but direct connections between Silvio and Roberto Arlt are few. However, there are a great number of subtextual

connections, points at which Silvio can be seen as a projection of Arlt's desires. Perhaps more significantly, as an act of revenge against his sadistic father, Arlt chooses to have Silvio's father commit suicide: 'my father killed himself when I was very young.'

Rather than being noticeable for its fidelity to real life, one of the most striking things about *The Mad Toy* is the occasional irruption of fantasy into the realist texture of Arlt's prose. This is visible on certain obvious occasions, for example the disturbing dream sequence in chapter three: Silvio pursues a woman across an asphalt plain by a gigantic bony arm. However, there is also an admixture of fantasy in supposedly realistic scenes. Following this nightmare, once Silvio wakes up, the prose deliberately treads the line between reality and fantasy. His encounter in the hotel room with the young man who tries to seduce him, although full of realistic details (the dirty clothing, the sordid environment of the hotel where the meeting takes place), is extremely oneiric: the description of the homosexual's neck with its 'triangle of black hair' is an obvious sexual metonymy, and the shouts of the invisible guests fighting outside add to the dreamlike nature of the meeting. During the night, Silvio observes the homosexual and feels 'a horror' that gradually turns into 'conformity'. One of the details Silvio notices about the homosexual is how a 'lock of his carefully-arranged hair fell down' when he turned his head. The next morning when Silvio wakes up, the bed where the homosexual had been is empty. More than that, 'there was no trace that anyone had even slept in his bed', and Silvio notices that his own hair is hanging down over his forehead.

It would be possible, and not too far-fetched, to read the whole sequence as a dream, a manifestation of Silvio's buried desires (see also his homoerotic relationship with Enrique Irzubeta in chapter one, a chapter which climaxes with a naked Silvio hugging Irzubeta as both of them hide from the police). What is beyond a doubt is that Arlt uses, as few Latin American writers before him have done, the fantastic and the dreamlike as keys to a heightened realism, ways to give us a fully-rounded portrait of Silvio Astier. Silvio, with his love/hate relationship with Europe, his conviction that he has cut out for great things, his essential confusion and his frustration, is one of the first iterations of the modern Buenos Aires archetype, but in *The Mad Toy* the archetype is new, and Silvio is an impressive individual.

Arlt is often celebrated as a writer who brought the language of the street into Argentinian letters, but this is not to suggest that he is an extremely colloquial writer: rather, he is a reporter who doesn't soften the edges of the events he observes. Perhaps the closest comparison in English is with the early work of William S. Burroughs (*Junkie, Queer*), which presents low-life scenes in neutral prose, and reserves its linguistic innovation for the direct reporting of dialogue. Arlt's dialogue is sparkling, accurate, and stands slightly at odds with the occasionally clumsy soul-searching of Silvio's conscience-stricken inner monologue. (The reader will have to decide if this clumsiness is authentically adolescent, or just... clumsy: I vote for the first option.)

One of the great things about Arlt's accuracy in transcribing dialogue is that he is able to give the flavour of a particular character without resorting to stereotype or linguistic cliché. Think for example of the long complaint by Rebeca Naidath, which manages to capture a particularly Jewish style of narration without resorting to clichéd interpolations of Yiddish: 'schleps' or 'schnozzes' or 'oy veys'. Of course, this makes Arlt tricky to translate: I should like to note here a major debt to my wife Marian Womack for going through the translation with me several times, on occasions word by word, always to its benefit. Mistakes and infelicities that remain are all mine, of course.

Finally, a note on the title. The original Spanish title of Arlt's novel is *El juguete rabioso*. 'Rabioso' normally means 'angry', or 'wild': my choice of 'mad' has here to be taken in the sense of 'that drives me mad', or 'don't it just make you mad?' – annoyance rather than insanity. I understand

Arlt's title as suggesting something of the dehumanising fatalism of Gloucester's 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods': one can be as angry as one wishes, but our lives are controlled by forces we are unable to dominate. Certainly, the description of Silvio's career, with its highs and lows, moments of great fortune and periods of despair, gives an overarching impression of an individual being shuttled helplessly from event to event.

– James Womack, 2011

The Mad Toy

Chapter 1

The Thieves

When I was fourteen an old Andalusian cobbler, who had his shop next to an ironmonger's with a green and white façade, in the archway of an old house in Avenida Rivadavia between South American and Bolivia Streets, initiated me into the delights and thrills of outlaw literature.

The front of the hovel was decorated with polychrome covers of pulp books that told the adventures of Montbars the Pirate and Wenongo the Mohican. On our way back from school, we kids took great pleasure in looking at the prints that hung, discoloured by the sun, on the door.

Sometimes we'd go in to buy half a pack of Barriletes, and the man would grumble about having to leave his bench to come and deal with us.

He was slump-shouldered, sunken-cheeked and bearded, and fairly lame as well, with a strange limp, his foot round like a mule's hoof, with the heel pointing outwards.

Whenever I saw him I would remember a proverb my mother used a lot: 'Beware the people marked by God.'

Normally he'd toss a few phrases my way; and as he looked for some particular half of a boot among the mess of shoetrees and rolls of leather, he would introduce me, with the bitterness of a bootmaker's failure, to the stories of the most famous bandits of Spain, or else would recite a eulogy for a lavish customer whose boots he had polished and who had given him twenty centavos as a tip.

As he was a covetous man, he smiled to recall this client, and his filthy smile that didn't succeed in filling out his cheeks would wrinkle his lip over his blackened teeth.

Although he was bearish he took a liking to me and for the odd five centavos he'd rent me out the serial novels he had collected over long subscriptions.

And so, as he gave me the story of Diego Corrientes, he'd say:

'Boy, thith guy... what a guy! He were more beautiful than a rothe and the milithia killed him...'

The artisan's voice trembled hoarsely:

'More beautiful than a rothe... but he wath born under an unlucky thtar...'

Then he would recapitulate:

'Jutht you imagine... he give the poor wha' he took from the rich... he had a woman at every farm in the mountaint... he were more beautiful than a rothe...'

In this lean-to that stank of paste and leather, his voice would awaken a dream of green mountains. There were gypsies dancing in the ravines... a mountainous and sensual land appeared before my eyes as he evoked it.

'He were more beautiful than a rothe,' and then this lame man would vent his sadness by tenderising a sole with his hammer, beating it against an iron plate which he supported on his knees.

Then, shrugging his shoulders as if to rid himself of an unwelcome idea, he would spit through his teeth into a corner, sharpening his awl on the whetstone with quick movements.

Later he would add:

'You'll thee, there'th a beautiful bit when you get to Doña Inethita and Uncle Clodfoot'th inn... and, seeing that I was taking the book with me, he'd shout a warning:

‘Careful, lad, it cothth money,’ and turning back to his work he’d lower his head, the mouse-coloured cap pulled down over his ears, rummage in a box with his fingers all dirty from glue and filling his mouth with nails, would carry on with his hammer, tap... tap... tap...

These books, which I would devour in their numerous ‘batches’, were stories of José María, the Lightning Bolt of Andalusia, or of the adventures of Don Jaime the Bearded and other rogues, more or less authentic and picturesque, as could be seen from the prints that showed them as follows:

Horsemen on stupendously saddled colts, with extra-black side burns on their ruddy faces, the bullfighter’s ponytail covered by an extremely shiny *cordobés* hat, and a blunderbuss mounted in the saddle-tree. They would usually be offering, with a magnanimous gesture, a yellow bag of money to a widow standing at the foot of a little green hill with a babe in her arms.

Back then I dreamt of being a bandit and of strangling libidinous senior magistrates; I would right wrongs and protect widows, and I would be loved by exceptional maidens.

I needed a comrade for my youthful adventures, and this comrade was Enrique Irzubeta.

Enrique was a layabout who was always known by the edifying nickname of ‘The Faker’.

His story shows how one can establish a reputation; and how fame, once won, can nurture all those who wish to study the laudable art of leading the ignorant up the garden path.

Enrique was fourteen when he cheated the owner of a sweet factory, which is clear proof that the gods had decided what the destiny of our friend Enrique would be. But because the gods are crafty of heart, I am not surprised, as I write my memoirs, to discover that Enrique is now being put up in one of those hotels that the State provides for hooligans and rascals.

The truth is this:

A certain factory owner, in order to stimulate the sale of his products, announced a competition with prizes for those who could put together a complete set of the flags of South America which he had had printed on the underside of each sweet wrapper.

The difficulty lay in finding the wrapper with the flag of Nicaragua, given its extreme scarcity.

These absurd contests, as you know, excite young boys, who, under the banner of a common interest, add up every day the results of their searches and the development of their patient investigations.

And so Enrique promised his neighbourhood friends, the carpenter’s apprentices and the dairyman’s sons, that he would fake the Nicaraguan flag if someone brought him a copy.

The lads were doubtful... they vacillated, knowing Irzubeta’s reputation, even though Enrique magnanimously offered as hostage two volumes of the *History of France*, written by M. Guizot, so that his probity would not be called into question.

And so the bargain was struck on the pavement in a cul-de-sac, with green-painted streetlights on the street corners, with few houses and tall brick walls. The blue curve of the sky sat atop the distant brushwood-topped walls, and the street was made all the more sad by the monotonous murmur of endless sawing and the cows mooing in the dairy.

Later I found out that Enrique, using Indian ink and blood, had reproduced the Nicaraguan flag so convincingly that it was impossible to tell the original from the copy.

A few days later Irzubeta showed off a brand new airgun that he later sold to a second-hand clothing dealer in Reconquista Street. This happened while brave Bonnot and valiant Valet were terrorising Paris.¹

I had already read the forty-odd volumes that the Viscount of Ponson du Terrail had written about Mother Fipart’s adopted son, the admirable Rocambole, and I aspired to become a bandit in the high style.

Well, one summer day, in the sordid neighbourhood grocery shop, I met Irzubeta.

The hot siesta hour weighed on the streets, and there was I, sitting on a cask of *yerba*,² chatting with Hipólito, who took advantage of his father's being asleep to make bamboo-framework aeroplanes. Hipólito wanted to be a pilot, 'but first he had to solve the problem of natural stability'. At other times he was preoccupied with perpetual motion and would ask me about the possible implications of his musing.

Hipólito, with his elbows on a lard-stained newspaper, between the cheese counter and the rice levers on the till, listened to my suggestions with the utmost attention:

'A clock mechanism is no use for the propeller. Give it a tiny little electric motor and put the dry batteries in the fuselage.'

'You mean like in submarines...'

'Submarines? What submarines? The only danger is that the current could burn out the motor, but the plane'll go much more smoothly and you'll have a while before the batteries die.'

'*Che*, couldn't we make the motor work via a wireless telegraph? You'll have to see how that might work. It'd be great, wouldn't it?'

At this moment Enrique came in.

'*Che*, Hipólito, my mum says do you want to give me half a kilo of sugar on tick.'

'I can't, *che*; the old man says that until you sort out your bill...'

Enrique frowned slightly.

'I'm surprised to hear it, Hipólito.'

Hipólito added, conciliatory:

'If it was down to me, you know... but it's the old man, *che*.' And he pointed at me, happy to be able to change the subject, and said to Enrique:

'*Che*, don't you know Silvio? He made the cannon.'

Irzubeta's face lit up respectfully.

'Oh, was that you? Well done. The guy who mucks out the dairy said it fired like a Krupp...'

While he was talking, I observed him.

He was tall and skinny. Over his rounded forehead, stippled with freckles, lustrous black hair waved in a lordly fashion. His eyes were the colour of tobacco, slightly slanted, and he wore a brown suit that had been fitted to his figure by hands unskilled in the couturier's art.

He leant on the edge of the counter, balancing his chin on the palm of his hand. He seemed to be reflecting on something.

The adventure of my cannon was a resonant one, and pleasant to remember.

I bought an iron tube and several pounds of lead from some workers at the electricity company. With these elements I fabricated what I called a *culverin* or 'bombard'. The manufacture went as follows:

Into a hexagonal wooden mould, lined on the inside with mud, I inserted the iron tube. The space between the two interior faces was filled with molten lead. After breaking the covering, I smoothed the underside with a thick file, and then used tin hoops to fix the cannon onto a carriage made out of the thickest planks from a box that had been used to store kerosene.

My *culverin* was a handsome object. It could be loaded with projectiles two inches in diameter, the charge for which I placed in powder-filled rough cotton bags.

As I stroked my little monster, I thought:

'This cannon can kill, this cannon can destroy.' And the conviction that I had created a danger both mortal and obedient filled me with a mad joy.

The neighbourhood kids examined it with admiration; it showed them my intellectual superiority which from that moment prevailed whenever we went on expeditions to steal fruit or else discover buried treasure in the abandoned territories beyond the Maldonado, the stream that divided us from the parish of San José de Flores.

The day we fired the cannon was legendary. It was in the middle of a clump of Jerusalem thorn itself in the middle of an enormous patch of waste ground in Avellaneda Street, before you got to San Eduardo, that we made the experiment. A circle of kids stood round me while I, my imagination much excited, loaded the mouth of the culverin. Then, in order to test its ballistic capacities, we aimed it at the zinc tank that was fixed to the wall of a nearby carpenter's and provided it with water.

Filled with emotion I touched a match to the fuse; a little dark flame leapt under the sun and suddenly a terrible report enveloped us in a nauseating cloud of white smoke. For an instant we were stricken dumb with wonder: it seemed that in that moment we had discovered a new continent, or had by sorcery been translated into the masters of the earth. Suddenly someone shouted:

‘Scram! The fuzz!’

There was not sufficient time to make a dignified retreat. Two policemen were coming towards us at full pelt, we hesitated... and suddenly with great leaps and bounds we fled, abandoning the bomb to the enemy.

Enrique's parting words:

‘Che, if you need any scientific data, then I've got a collection of *Around the World* magazine at home and I can lend them to you.’

From that day forth up until the night of our greatest jeopardy, our friendship was like the friendship of Orestes and Pylades.³

Such a new picturesque world I discovered in the Irzubeta house!

Unforgettable people! Three men and two women, and the house governed by the mother, a woman the colour of salt and pepper, with small fish eyes and a large inquisitional nose, and the grandmother bent double, deaf, and blackened like a tree-trunk burnt in a fire.

With the exception of one absentee, who was the police officer, in that quiet cave everybody lay around unused, in sweet idleness, passing in their leisure time from the novels of Dumas to the comforting sleep of the siesta, and thence to amiable twilight gossip.

Their worries would spring up at the beginning of the month. At this point they would have to detest their creditors, sweet-talk the ‘Spanish bastards’,⁴ calming the excesses of the plebeians who tactlessly came right up to the outer door and shouted, asking to be paid for the goods which they had ingenuously handed over on credit.

The owner of the cave was a fat Alsatian, called Grenuillet. Rheumatic, neurasthenic and in his seventies, he eventually got used to the irregularities of the Irzubetas, who paid him his rent even now and then. Previously he had tried unsuccessfully to evict them, but the Irzubetas were related to long-established judges and other people of that type from the conservative party, which was how they knew themselves to be immovable.

The Alsatian eventually resigned himself to waiting for regime change, and the flagrant shamelessness of these idlers reached the point where they would send Enrique to ask the landlord for free tickets to the Casino; his son worked there as a porter.

Ah! And what well-spiced remarks, what Christian reflections could be heard from the local gossips, who held their conclave in the neighbourhood butcher's shop, and commented devoutly on their neighbours' lives.

This is what the mother of an extremely ugly girl said in reference to one of the young Irzubetas

who had, in a fit of lust, displayed his private parts to the maiden:

~~‘Just you wait, I hope I don’t ever get my hands on him, because it’d be worse for him than if a train ran him over.’~~

This is what Hipólito’s mother said, a fat woman with an extremely white face who was always pregnant, as she grasped the butcher’s arm:

‘I advise you, Don Segundo, not to trust them an inch. They’ve squeezed so much out of us I can’t tell you.’

‘Don’t worry, don’t worry,’ the brawny man would grumble sternly, fencing with his enormous knife in and out of a lung.

Ah! And how happy the Irzubetas were. Ask the baker who had the cheek to complain about how far his creditors were in arrears; ask him to say it isn’t so.

This baker was complaining to one of the girls when he had the bad luck to be overheard by the police officer, who happened to be passing by the house.

The police officer, accustomed to settle all problems by judicious blows and knocks, and irritated by the insolence displayed in the fact that the baker wanted to be paid what he was owed, beat the man out of the house with his own fists. This was a salutary lesson in manners, and many people preferred not to demand payment. And so, this family’s life was cheerier than a one-act farce.

The maidens of the family, past twenty-six and not a boyfriend between them, enjoyed themselves with Chateaubriand, sank back into Lamartine and Cherbuliez. This led them to entertain the conviction that they were part of an intellectual ‘elite’, and it was this that in its turn led them to refer to poor people as riffraff.

The grocer who tried to get payment for his beans was riffraff; the shopkeeper from whom they had beggingly coaxed a few metres of lace was riffraff; riffraff too was the butcher who lost it when the ladies unwillingly called through his shutters that ‘next month we’ll pay you for sure’.

The three brothers, hairy and thin, tramps in all their glory, sunbathed throughout the day and when it got dark put on their suits and went off to cultivate love affairs among the dissolute women in the slum districts of town.

The two blessed and discontented old women squabbled at any moment over trifles, or, sitting with their daughters in the ancient hall, would spy on people through the curtains, or else they gossiped; they were descended from an official who had served in Napoleon I’s army, I often heard them, from the penumbra that idealised those bloodless faces, dreaming their imperialist myths, evoking the splendours of nobility, while on the lonely pavement the lamplighter with his pole crowned by a violet flame lit the green gas lamp.

As they had no way to keep a maid, and also as no servant would have been able to support the goatish vigour of the three hairy louts and the bad humour of the irritable maidens and the whims of the toothy old witches, Enrique was the intermediary needed for the right functioning of that lousy economic machinery, and so accustomed was he to ask for credit that his shamelessness was both unheard-of and exemplary. One can say in his praise that a bronze statue would show embarrassment more easily than his refined features.

Irzubeta would spend his long hours of free time in sketching, a skill at which he did not lack either invention or delicacy, which is a fine argument to show that there have always been good-for-nothings with aesthetic ability. As I had nothing to do, I was often in his house, a circumstance that did not please the old women, about whom I didn’t give a damn.

From my union with Enrique, from the long conversations we had about bandits and thieves, we developed a strange predisposition to commit acts of mischief ourselves, and an infinite desire to go

immortality as delinquents.

Enrique once said to me, apropos of the expulsion of some bandits, some 'apaches' who had emigrated from France to Buenos Aires, and whose case had been reported by Soiza Reilly in an article accompanied by eloquent photographs:

'The President of the Republic has four "apaches" for his bodyguards.'

I laughed.

'Stop pulling my leg.'

'It's true, I'm telling you, and they're like *this*.' And he opened his arms like a crucified man to give me some idea of the thoracic capacity of these dyed-in-the-wool thugs.

I don't remember how, by what subtleties and casuistry, we managed to convince ourselves that robbery was a meritorious and beautiful act; but I do know that it was by mutual agreement that we decided to organise a gang of thieves, whose initial membership was ourselves alone.

Later we would see... And in order to kick off our activities in a befitting manner we decided to begin by ransacking abandoned houses. This is how we did it:

After lunch, when the streets were deserted, we would go out discreetly dressed to roam the streets of Flores or Caballito.

Our tools were:

A little monkey wrench, a screwdriver and some newspapers to wrap up the pickings.

Where a poster announced a property for rent, we would go and ask about it, with our manner perfect and our faces composed. We looked like Cacus's altar-boys.⁵

Once we'd got the keys, ostensibly so that we could find out whether the houses were habitable or not, we would spring into action.

I have not yet forgotten the joy we felt upon opening the doors. We would rush in violently; eager for booty, we would rush through the rooms assessing with rapid glances the amount of stealable material.

If there was electric light installed, we would tear out the cables, the light fittings and the doorbells, the bulbs and the switches, the chandeliers, the glass lampshades and the batteries; we took the taps from the bathroom because they were nickel-plated; we took the taps from the kitchen sink because they were made of bronze, and we only didn't take doors and windows to stop ourselves from looking like removal men.

We would work inspired by a certain kind of painful joy, a knot of anxiety held still in our throats and moving as fast as quick-change artists, laughing with no cause, shuddering at imagined sounds.

The cables hung in rags from the ceilings which were ripped up by the vigour of our efforts; chunks of plaster and mortar stained the dusty floors; in the kitchen the lead pipes would release an endless trickle of water, and in very few seconds we were able to get the house in good shape for a cost-free repair-job.

Then Irzubeta and I would hand back the keys and with rapid steps disappear.

The meeting-point was always the backroom of a plumber's shop; the plumber was like a collector's card version of Cacaseno:⁶ moonfaced, getting on in years, with a large gut and horns because it was well known that he tolerated the infidelities of his wife with the patience of a Franciscan friar.

Whenever his situation was indirectly hinted at, he would reply with lamblike meekness that his wife suffered from nerves, and in the face of such a solidly scientific argument there was no possible reply apart from silence.

However, he was an eagle where his own interests were concerned.

This knock-kneed man would meticulously examine our haul, weigh the cables, test the bulbs see if the filaments were burnt out, sniff the pipes and with an aggravating patience would calculate and recalculate his sums until he ended up offering us a tenth of the cost price of what we had stolen.

If we argued or got annoyed, this good man would lift up his cowlike eyes, his face would fill with an ironic smile, and, without letting us speak further, and giving us cheery slaps on the back, he would show us to the door with all the charm in the world and leave us with the money in our hands.

But don't think that we limited our exploits to uninhabited houses. Nobody could compare to us, snappers-up of unconsidered trifles.

We were constantly aware of other people's property. In our hands there was a fabulous dexterity in our eyes the speed of a bird of prey. Without hurrying, but with the speed of a gyrfalcon falling down on an innocent dove, we fell upon those things that did not belong to us.

If we went into a café and there was a piece of cutlery or a sugar bowl forgotten on a table and the waiter was distracted, then we would lift them both; we would find, in the kitchen display cabinets or any other hidey-hole, whatever we considered necessary for our common benefit.

We spared neither cup nor plate, knife nor billiard ball, and I remember well that on one rainy night, in a busy café, Enrique very neatly purloined an overcoat, and on another night I got a gold-headed cane.

Our eyes would spin in their orbits or open as wide as saucers while we were looking for things to turn to our advantage, and as soon as we saw what we wanted, there we were, smiling, care free and free-speaking, our fingers ready and our eyes alert for everything, so as not to blow it like minor league grafters.

In shops we would exercise this same pure art, and you had to see it to believe it how we took the kids who worked the counters while their bosses were sleeping their siesta.

Using some pretext, Enrique would take the kid outside to look at the shop window, so that I could get the price of certain objects, and if there was no one in the office then I would quickly open the display case and fill my pockets with boxes of pencils, artistic inkstands; once we were able to snaffle money out of a cashbox that had no alarm, and another time, in a gun shop, we got a box with a dozen penknives made of gold-plated steel with mother of pearl handles.

When we went through a day without being able to get our hands on anything we were crestfallen and sad at our incompetence, disappointed about our future.

Then we would go around in a bad mood until something came along to cheer us up.

However, when business was on the up and coins were replaced by delectable peso bills, we would wait for a rainy afternoon and go out for a ride in a hired car with a driver. How delicious then to be driven through curtains of rain along the city streets! We would lie back on the soft cushions, light a cigarette, leaving the busy people behind us in the rain, and imagine that we lived in Paris, or foggy London town. We would dream in silence, a smile balanced on our condescending lips.

Later, in a high-class cake shop, we would drink chocolate with vanilla, and go home sated on the afternoon train, our energies doubled by the satisfaction our blowout had given our voluptuous bodies by the dynamism in everything around us that shouted with its iron voices in our ears:

Forwards, forwards!

Said I to Enrique one fine day:

'We need to form a secret society, a real society, for smart kids.'

'The difficulty is that there aren't that many of us around,' Enrique argued.

'Yes, you're right; but there can't be none of them.'

A few weeks after saying this, Enrique's efforts turned up a certain Lucio who joined our group; he

was a fool, short in stature and livid from too much masturbation, with a face that was so shameful that it made anyone who saw it want to laugh.

He lived under the protection of some pious old women who cared little or nothing for him. The nincompoop had one favourite occupation, which was telling people the most ordinary things as if they were immense secrets. This he did by looking all around him and moving his arms like certain film actors did when they played petty suburban crooks.

‘This nutcase won’t be any use to us,’ I said to Enrique; but as he brought a newcomer’s enthusiasm to the recently formed brotherhood, his keen decisiveness, together with his bizarre air movements, gave us hope.

It was impossible for us to do without a meeting-point, and we called it, at Lucio’s suggestion and unanimously accepted, *The Club of the Midnight Gentlemen*.

The club held its meetings round the back of Enrique’s house, in a narrow room of dusty wood with large spider-webs hanging from the roof beams, facing a filthy-walled and decrepit latrine. There were lots of broken and faded puppets in the corners, the legacy of a failed puppeteer who had been a friend of the Irzubetas, as well as boxes filled with horrifically mutilated lead soldiers, rank bundles of dirty clothes and boxes overflowing with old newspapers and magazines.

The door to the hovel opened onto a dark patio covered in cracked bricks, which became muddy on rainy days.

‘Nobody here, *che?*’

Enrique closed the shabby casement through the broken panes of which were visible huge roiling tin clouds.

‘They’re inside, chatting.’

We made ourselves as comfortable as possible. Lucio offered us Egyptian cigarettes, a formidable novelty for us, and smoothly lit a match on the sole of his shoe. Then he said:

‘We are going to read the Minutes.’

So that there would be nothing lacking in this aforementioned club, there was a Book of Minutes where all the associates’ projects were entered, and there was also a stamp, a rectangular stamp that Enrique had made out of a cork and which displayed the emotive spectacle of a heart pierced by three daggers.

The Minutes were kept by each of us in turn; the end of each set of Minutes was signed; each new topic was given its stamp.

The Minutes contained such things as the following:

Lucio’s Proposal – In the future in order to rob without needing locksmith’s tools, we should make wax models of the keys of all the houses we visit.

Enrique’s Proposal – We should also make a plan of each house where we get the keys from. The plans will be kept secret with the documents of the Order and must be sure to mention all peculiarities of the building for the greater convenience of the person who will be sent to operate there.

General Agreement of the Order – Associate Enrique is hereby named the Club’s official forger and draughtsman.

Silvio’s Proposal – To introduce nitro-glycerine into a fortified zone, take an egg, empty it of the yolk and the white and inject the explosive using a syringe.

If the acids in the nitro-glycerine destroy the eggshell, make it a sheath out of gun cotton. Nobody will suspect that the harmless-looking sheath hides an explosive charge.

Enrique’s Proposal – The Club should have a library of scientific works in order for its associates

to be certain that they are robbing and killing according to the most modern industrial procedure. Also, after being a member of the Club for three months, each associate will be obliged to own a Browning pistol, a pair of rubber gloves and 100 grams of chloroform. The Club's official chemist will be Associate Silvio.

Lucio's Proposal – All bullets should be poisoned with prussic acid and its toxic power should be tested by shooting a dog's tail off with a single shot. The dog has to die in ten minutes.

'*Che*, Silvio.'

'What?' Enrique said.

'I was just thinking. We should organise clubs in every town in the Republic.'

'No, the important thing,' I interrupted, 'is to practise for what we're doing tomorrow. There's no point concerning ourselves with trifles now.'

Lucio pulled up a bundle of dirty clothes that he was using as an ottoman. I continued:

'Training as thieves has one key advantage: it makes you cold-blooded, which is the most important thing for the job. Also, experiencing danger makes you prudent.'

Enrique said:

'Let's cut all this speechifying and get down to something interesting. Here in the alley behind the butcher's shop – the wall of Irzubeta's house gave onto this alley – there's a gringo who parks his car every night and then goes off to sleep in a room he rents in one of those big old houses in Zamud Street. What about it Silvio, if we make his magneto and his horn... disappear?'

'You know that's a serious job?'

'There's no danger, *che*. We jump over the wall. The butcher sleeps like the dead. Yeah, we'll have to wear gloves, I guess.'

'And the dog?'

'And why should I care? I'm friends with the dog.'

'I just think he's going to go off on one.'

'What do you think, Silvio?'

'And don't forget that we'll make more than a hundred for the magneto.'

'It's a good job, but slippery.'

'Lucio, are you up for it?'

'Trying to strong-arm me?... sure... I'll put on my old trousers so I don't rip my Sunday best...'

'And you, Silvio?'

'I'll get out as soon as the old lady's asleep.'

'When should we meet up?'

'Look, *che*, Enrique. I don't like the job.'

'Why not?'

'I don't like it. They're going to suspect us. The alley... The dog that didn't bark in the night time... if we can get there so easily we're bound to leave traces... I don't like it. You know I'm up for anything, but I don't like it. It's too close and the pigs are too nosy.'

'Well we won't do it then.'

We smiled as if we had just escaped from danger.

And so we lived days of unparalleled emotion, enjoying the money we had made from our robberies. The money had a special value for us and even seemed to speak to us in its own lively idiom.

The banknotes with their coloured pictures seemed to us to be the most meaningful, the nickels and coins jangled merrily as we juggled them in our palms. Yes, money that we acquired through our

scams seemed much more worthy and subtle, seemed to have some kind of maximum value, seemed to whisper in our ears with smiling praise and enticing mischief. It wasn't the vile and odious money that is hated because it needs to be earned by hard work, but rather it was supple money, a silver sphere with two goblin legs and a dwarfish beard, jocular money, dancing money whose smell, like good wine, intoxicated us.

Our eyes were untroubled; I would dare say that our foreheads were haloed with a nimbus of pride and daring. Pride in knowing that if our actions had become public we would have been taken before a judge.

Sitting round a café table, we sometimes spoke about this:

'What would you do with the Judge in the Criminal Court?'

'I,' Enrique replied, 'I would speak to him about Darwin and Le Dantec.' (Enrique was an atheist.)

'And you, Silvio?'

'I wouldn't tell them anything, even if they cut my throat.'

'And what about the rubber?'

We would look at each other in fright. We were terrified of the 'rubber', that truncheon that left no visible marks on its victim's flesh; the rubber truncheon that is used to punish the bodies of thieves in the Police Department when they are slow in confessing their crimes.

With scarcely repressed rage, I replied:

'They will never break me. They'll have to kill me first.'

Whenever one of us would say this word, *kill*, the nerves in our faces would quiver, our eyes would remain fixed and open, looking at an illusory and distant scene of butchery, and our nostrils would flare as we breathed in the smell of gunpowder and blood.

'That's why we need to poison the bullets,' Lucio insisted.

'And make bombs,' I continued. 'No mercy. We have to blow them up, terrorize the fuzz. When their guard is down, bullets... send bombs to the judges through the post.'

This was how we spoke around the café table, solemn and enjoying our impunity before all other people, all the people who did not know that we were thieves, and a delicious fear gripped our hearts as we thought about the way in which these unknown girls who were passing by would look at us when they only knew that we, so young and so well-dressed, were thieves... Thieves!

A few days later, I met with Enrique and Lucio in a café at midnight to finalise the details of a robbery we were planning to commit.

Choosing the most solitary corner, we sat down at a table next to the window.

A thin rain tapped on the glass as the orchestra unleashed the dying climax of a jailhouse tango.

'Are you sure, Lucio, that there are no guards?'

'Positive. It's holiday time and everyone's gone away.'

We were discussing nothing less than taking down a school library.

Enrique, thoughtful, supported his cheek with one hand. The peak of his cap shaded his eyes.

I was worried.

Lucio was looking around with the satisfaction of someone on whom life smiles. In order to convince me that there was no danger he screwed up his forehead and spoke to me confidentially for the tenth time:

'I know the route. What are you worried about? All you have to do is jump over the fence that goes from the street to the patio. The porters sleep in a separate room on the third floor. The library is on the second floor on the other side of the building.'

‘It’s an easy job, it’s in the bag,’ Enrique said. ‘It’d be a great job if we could get away with the Encyclopaedic Dictionary.’

‘And how are we going to carry twenty-eight volumes? You’re mad... unless you order a removal van.’

Some cars drove past with their tops down and the brightness of their arc lights, falling on the trees, threw long trembling stains on the ground. The waiter brought us coffee. The tables around us were still empty, up on the stage the musicians were chatting, and the sound of heels stamping on the ground came from the billiard room, where enthusiasts were applauding a particularly complicated cannon.

‘Shall we play some three-hand *tute*?’⁷

‘Lay off your *tute*, man.’

‘It looks like it’s raining.’

‘All the better,’ said Enrique. ‘This is the sort of night that Montparnasse and Thénardier like. Thénardier said: “Jean Jacques Rousseau did worse than me.” He was a *ranún*, Thénardier was; I love that gypsy word.’⁸

‘Is it still raining?’

I looked out onto the small square.

The water was falling at a slant, and between two rows of trees the wind moved it in a grey curtain.

Looking at the greenness of the branches and foliage lit up in the silver clarity of the arc lamps, I had a vision of parks shaken on a summer night by the noise of popular festivals, and the red rockets exploding in the blue sky. This unconscious evocation made me sad.

I have a clear memory of that last eventful night.

The musicians set free another song, one that on the blackboard was given the English name *Kiss-me*.

In this downbeat atmosphere, the melody swayed in a distant and tragic rhythm. I would have sworn that it was the voice of a chorus of poor emigrants on the deck of a transatlantic ferry, singing as the sun drowned in the heavy green waters.

I remember how my attention was drawn to the head of a violinist, Socratic and resplendently bald. There were smoked-glass spectacles balanced on his nose and you could tell how much his covered eyes had to work by the way in which his neck stuck out over the music stand.

Lucio asked me:

‘Are you still with Eleonora?’

‘No, we broke up already. She didn’t want to be my girlfriend any more.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because.’

Her image, united with the long sobs of the violins, penetrated me violently. It was a summons from my other voice, to look on her serene and sweet face. Oh! How her now distant smile had filled me with a painful ecstasy, and from the table, in words of the spirit, I spoke to her as follows, while I enjoyed a bitterness that had more savour than any voluptuous pleasure:

‘Ah! If only I could have told you how much I loved you, with the music of *Kiss-me* as accompaniment... to use this song to keep you from going... then perhaps... but she had loved me too... is it not true that you loved me, Eleonora?’

‘It’s stopped raining... Let’s go.’

‘Let’s go.’

Enrique threw a few coins on the table. He asked me:

‘Do you have the revolver?’

‘Yes.’

‘It won’t get stuck?’

‘I tried it out the other day. The bullet went through two builders’ planks.’

Irzubeta added:

‘If this goes well I’ll buy myself a Browning; but just in case I’ve brought my knuckle-dusters.’

‘Are they sharpened?’

‘Pointy as anything.’

A policeman walked towards us across the lawn in the middle of the square.

Lucio called out in a loud voice, loud enough for the cop to hear him:

‘The geography teacher’s out to get me, *che*, really has it in for me!’

Once we’d crossed the square diagonally, we found ourselves in front of the school walls, and when we got there we noticed that it was beginning to rain again.

There was a line of bushy plane trees around the corner of the building, which made the darkness that triangle extremely thick. The rain made its own music on the foliage.

A tall fence bared its sharp teeth as it tied the two tall and sombre school buildings together.

Walking slowly we scrutinised the darkness; then without saying a word I climbed up the bars, put a foot in one of the rings that linked every pair of railings and jumped right down into the patio, staying for a few seconds in the position I had fallen into, that is, crouching down, my eyes immobile, touching the wet tiles with my fingertips.

‘No one’s here, *che*,’ whispered Enrique, who had just followed me down.

‘It doesn’t look like it, but why’s Lucio not coming?’

We heard the regular beat of horseshoes on the cobbles in the street, and then another horse passing by, and the noise gradually died away in the shadows.

Lucio stuck his head over the iron lances. He put his foot into a crosspiece and then fell with such skill that the tiles scarcely crunched under the sole of his shoe.

‘Who was it, *che*?’

‘A policeman and then a watchman. I made it look like I was waiting for the *bondi*.’⁹

‘Let’s put our gloves on, *che*.’

‘Sure, I forgot in the excitement.’

‘And now where do we go? It’s darker than...’

‘This way.’

Lucio was our guide; I unholstered my revolver and the three of us headed towards the patio that was covered by the second-floor terrace.

In the darkness it was possible almost to make out a colonnade.

Suddenly I became bitingly conscious of such superiority over my fellow humans that I grasped Enrique’s arm in a brotherly fashion and said:

‘We’re going very slowly.’

And I incautiously abandoned my measured slow pace and made the noise of my steps ring out.

From the edge of the buildings the footsteps came back multiplied.

The certainty of our absolute impunity infected my comrades with an absolute optimism, and we laughed with such strident guffaws that from the dark street a stray dog barked at us three times.

Happy that we could slap danger in the face with such courage, we would have liked to have been accompanied by the bright sounds of a fanfare and the joyful clatter of a drum-band, we would have liked to wake everyone up, to show them the joy that fills one’s soul when you tear up the lawbook.

and head smiling into sin.

Lucio, who was at our head, turned round:

‘I move that we attack the National Bank in a few days. Silvio, you can open the strongboxes with your arclamps.’

‘Bonnot must be applauding us from hell,’ Enrique said.

‘Long live the apaches Lacombe¹⁰ and Valet,’ I exclaimed.

‘Eureka,’ Lucio shouted.

‘What’s up?’

The young man replied:

‘That’s it... didn’t I tell you, Lucio? They’ll have to put up a statue to you... that’s it, you know what?’

We gathered round him.

‘Have you noticed? Did you notice, Enrique, that there’s a jewellery shop next to the Electric Cinema...? I’m serious, *che*, don’t laugh. There’s no roof on the cinema toilet... I remember that we can get onto the jewellery shop roof from there. We buy some tickets and we’re in and out before the show’s over. We can put chloroform through the keyhole with an eye dropper.’

‘Sure, you know what, Lucio? It would be a great score. And who’d suspect a bunch of kids. It’s really worth thinking about.’

He lit a cigarette, and the glow of the match revealed a marble staircase.

We headed up.

When we got to the hallway Lucio lit up the space with his electric lantern, a tight parallelogram with a dark little passage running off one side. Nailed to the wooden doorframe was an enamelled plate that said, devoutly, ‘Library’.

We went to have a closer look. The door was old and its tall panels, painted green, left a space of about an inch between the jambs and the floor.

You could lift the door off its hinges with a crowbar.

‘Let’s go to the terrace first,’ Enrique said. ‘The cornices are full of light bulbs.’

We found a door in the corridor that led to the second-floor terrace. We went out. The water was splashing on the tiles on the patio, and next to a tall tarred wall, a bright flash of lightning revealed a little wooden shack, its door half open.

From time to time the sudden clarity of a lightning flash would show us a distant uneven violet sky filled with bell towers and roofs. In its sinister way the tall tarred wall, looking like something out of a prison, cut strips out of the horizon.

We went into the shed. Lucio turned his lantern on again.

There were bags of sawdust piled up in the corners of the little room, and rags, and brushes and new brooms. The centre of the room was occupied by a large wicker basket.

‘What have we here?’ Lucio lifted the lid.

‘Light bulbs.’

‘Let’s have a look.’

We moved, covetous, into the wheel of light that the lantern projected. In the sawdust lay the crystalline spheres of filament light bulbs.

‘They’re not blown?’

‘No, they’d have thrown them away,’ but in order to be sure I examined the setting of the filaments. They were intact.

We were robbing avidly in silence, filling our pockets, and when that didn’t seem enough for us we

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