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PAVANE FOR A DEAD PICARO

by STORNOWAY

Four young seamen sprawled on the weldeck of the ship as she ploughed through the South Atlantic towards Buenos Aires. Irish Halligan was knitting a jumper and making heavy work of it. He was at the awkward part where he had to introduce the crossed flags of the company into the pattern. He dropped a stitch and swore. Jansen, a handsome blond Swede was silently punching out an intricate pattern on a leather belt. Sykes, a scruffy-looking Cockney was breathing heavily over some dirty photographs he had acquired in Recife, while the fourth, Gonzales, known also as Cobra, lay on his back smoking, but otherwise doing nothing. He had sleepy, heavy lidded eyes which were seldom more than half-open, but which, never-the-less, saw everything that went on around him.

«You ought to look at these pictures, Cobra,» Sykes giggled. «They're smashing.»

Languidly, Gonzales reached his hand out and took the photographs. His movements were usually slow, though there were times when he could move like lightning. That was another reason for the name by which he was generally known. He scanned the pictures casually, his handsome face giving no clue as to their effect on him. He was English, like Sykes, but some time back he had had a Spanish ancestor. How far back, he did not know. He was olive skinned, and his brows almost met in a straight line above his nose. His black, curly hair came low on his forehead. He was the most handsome man on the ship. He was also one of the least popular. It was not that anyone had anything against him; he was just naturally aloof and made no friends. He was known to be hot-tempered and to fly into a rage at slight provocation, and most of the men were content to regard him as eccentric and leave him alone. Only Sykes liked him, but Sykes liked everybody. Halligan respected him, but Halligan respected everybody clever enough to speak a foreign language as well as his own. Jansen actively disliked him. It was rumoured that Jansen had once made a pass at him, for which he had received a punch on the nose. They were all four on the same watch and shared the same accommodation, so they were always in each other's company, more or less.

Without a word he handed the pictures back to Sykes.

«Well? Don't you like them?» Sykes demanded.

«Juvenile,» Gonzales said briefly. «I never was a *voyeur*.»

«Never a what? Which position's that?»

«I mean I like to do things myself; not to watch other people doing them.»

«Can be fun though. I seen through a peephole one time in Marseilles. And what do you think I saw? One of the officers knocking it off. You wouldn't read about it.»

«Drooling over those things is just another way of masturbating, doing it in your head, as it were.»

«Cobra's one of those educated bastards, Alfie,» Halligan said to Sykes. «They got different words for the sort of things you like doing.»

«Me, I was never educated, but I have fun just the same, and I don't give a wank,» Sykes said cheerfully. «What do you when you go on the beach, Cobra? We see you in the bars but never in the sluthouses.»

Gonzales did not answer; he merely closed his eyes and lit another cigarette.

«I think Cobra goes round the peg houses,» Jansen said slyly.

Gonzales leaped to his feet and his hand went to the seamen's knife in the belt. He pulled himself up, as though recollecting something, and stood over Jansen with clenched fists.

«Take that back, you flickering Swede,» he said, with eyes now wide open and flashing with anger. «Take it back, or I'll flickering beat the crap out of you.»

Jansen also got to his feet, and so did Sykes. He got between the two men. «Calm down matey,» he said to Gonzales. «The Swede didn't mean nothing.»

«Then he should have said nothing.»

«Stop nattering, you lot,» came the plaintive voice of Halligan. «You have made me drop another flickering stitch.»

«Saw him coming out of a peg house in Cristobal,» Jansen muttered. «Flickering bloody Dago.»

«Yes, and I saw you going in,» Gonzales retorted. «The only difference is you flaming well knew where you were going. I didn't know where the taxi diver was taking me.»

«So you say, Gonzales.»

«Good for a giggle, anyhow,» Sykes said. «I been to that place myself. Makes a change it does, and what does it matter?»

«Everyone to his own taste,» Halligan said primly. «Me, I'm satisfied to stay on board and get on with my knitting, most of the time.»

«Purl two and drop half a dozen, and a bit of plain sewing when you get tired. That's enough for you, ain't it, Halligan old dear?» Sykes said, but without malice.

«I've seen you getting hot in your bunk too, Alfie Sykes,» Halligan retorted. «More than several times.»

«Never mind,» Sykes said. «All good clean fun. You want to see my pictures, Halligan?»

Peace was restored, and the men resumed their position on the deck.

«I've already seen your pictures six times, Alfie,» Halligan said.

«You know something?» Sykes went on. «I'd like to be in some pictures like these. Then I could use them as a reference, sort of.»

«I'll take some, if you like,» Jansen said. «I'll take some of you and Halligan. Or you and Cobra if you'd like that better.»

«Jesus!» Gonzales said contemptuously. «The bull you guys talk!» He got up from the deck and walked away.

The eyes of the other three followed him.

«Funny bastard,» Jansen said. «What makes him tick?»

«Cobra's okay,» Sykes said. «He's educated. They tell me he's got a third officer's ticket.»

«It's true,» Halligan said. «They offered him an officer's berth on a ship to Sydney, but he turned it down because he wanted to come to Buenos Aires. I was there when the Shipping Master talked to him about it. They couldn't give him an officer's berth on this ship, so he signed on as able seaman.»

«Why would he do that?» Sykes asked.

«Can't understand it. He must have a reason for wanting to come to B.A.»

«I wouldn't know,» Jansen remarked, «but when he's signed on as able seaman, why does he act full of crap like an officer?»

«He don't act full of crap. He just wants to be left alone,» Halligan said. «I'll never get these bloody flags right,» he added disgustedly, as he rolled up his knitting and put it into a small bag.

Sykes put his photographs carefully away in an envelope which he put in his pocket and Jansen gathered up the tools he had been using. It was time to go on watch.

*

In Buenos Aires the ship berthed at La Boca. Passenger ships went to Puerto Nuevo, but tankers and tramps went to the less savoury part of the dock area. They docked late in the afternoon. There would be no cargo handling until the following day. By early evening the whole crew except the nightwatchman and the officer on watch was ready to go ashore.

«You've been here before, Cobra,» Sykes said. «I never have. Where do we go?»

«Take a bus to the city. Make for Florida; that's one of the main drags. Take any of the streets leading down to the new port. You'll find what you want there, and the further you go, the cheaper it gets.»

«You coming?»

«No. Not right away. I might fetch up there later.»

«What you going to do?»

«I want to find a friend. Someone I know.»

«Hope you find her. Anyhow, we'll keep a lookout for you. I guess Jansen knows where to go.»

«Keep enough cash for a taxi back. Don't try to walk it if the buses have stopped, and don't get a boat back either.»

«Like that, is it?»

«Yes, and don't forget.»

It was easy in those days for a seaman to get rolled and sometimes knifed in the back if he made his way back to La Boca alone, unsteady under the influence of the raw alcohol of the Argentine. Gonzales knew enough Spanish to be useful and he knew the part of Buenos Aires that was not safe for strangers after midnight. He waited a few minutes until his companions were safely on the bus, and then went his own way, on foot. He walked up many dark and narrow streets and turned many corners until he found the house he wanted. It was a drab house in a drab street. A woman answered his knock.

«*Buenas tardes, señor,*» she said, unsmiling.

«*Buenas tardes, senora.*» Gonzales spoke in Spanish. «I'm looking for Rico Cajal. Does he still live here?»

«No, señor,» the woman said, and made to close the door.

«Then where is he? Do you know where I'll find him?»

«No, señor.»

Gonzales put his foot inside the door to prevent it from closing. A look of fear came into the woman's eyes. She was middle-aged, and had once been pretty.

«He was taken . . . He's gone away, señor. We do not know where he is, señor. He will not be coming back, señor.» The words spilled out breathlessly.

«But when? How long ago? You said he was taken away?»

From behind the door a man spoke. «Go away, whoever you are. Cajal has gone. We cannot help you.» The man came to the door. He was a big man, aggressive and threatening. «Who are you?» he demanded.

«A friend of his, from England.»

«Leave honest people alone, señor. We know nothing. We cannot help you. We would not, if we could. Now go.»

Gonzales wanted to argue, but he could see that no help was to be gained from this quarter. At the same time, he was puzzled. That Rico should have changed his address was to be expected. That the people with whom he had lived should be unfriendly, even obviously afraid, was completely unexpected. Not that it mattered. A visit to some of Rico's old haunts would find him. He retraced his steps until he was halfway back to the docks, and then branched off into another area. He found a small cafe and entered.

Ma Grady's bar was well known to seamen, especially to those down on their luck. No one knew how old Ma was, but it was rumoured that she had been a young girl when she had gone out to the Argentine from Ireland over sixty years ago. She had a soft spot for English speaking seamen and sometimes allowed them credit when they were short of cash, and even though the debt might not be paid until the seaman's next voyage, Ma seldom lost out on the deal. She was always ready to listen to a hard-luck story and to give comfort and advice, though much of the comfort usually came from Dolores in the back room and the advice was sometimes a bit screwed up.

«If you're going to be robbed in Buenos Aires, you might as well come to me, for I'll rob you for less than anyone else,» she was fond of saying.

The bar was small and unpretentious. There were a few wooden tables with hard wooden chairs. The bar never appeared to have much stock, though whatever you wanted, Ma was always able to get it from somewhere, and her prices were the cheapest in the city. There was no sign of Ma when Gonzales entered. He knew that she was so old she could now be dead. Dolores was behind the bar-counter. She was usually in a small back room behind the bar, in which one could spend fifty pesos for fifteen minutes of her time. Gonzales sat at one of the tables. Dolores let him wait a few minutes, studying him from behind the bar counter, and then she ambled lazily across to his table. Dolores was about thirty years old, too old for the smarter bars round Puerto Nuevo. She hadn't

been much good as an entertainer, from what Gonzales remembered, but it was not Ma Grady's habit to discard an old employee.

«*Que desea Usted, señor?*» she asked.

«*Cerveza.*»

She shambled off, dragging her worn slippers, and returned with an opened bottle of beer and a glass. Meanwhile Gonzales studied the few other men in the room. They appeared to be mostly Argentinians; probably all were merchant seamen. She put the beer on the table but did not pour it.

«*Hable Usted Ingles, Dolores? You speak English, don't you?*»

«A little. Why you ask? You speak Spanish.»

«Yes, but I want to speak English: Where's Ma Grady tonight?»

«You know my name. I no remember you.»

«About a year ago I was here. I was with you back there.» He pointed in the direction of the back room.

«Is possible. I no remember. You come back now?»

«Not now. Another time. I want to see Ma.»

«She away. What you want with her?»

«When will she be back?»

«Maybe tomorrow. Maybe many days. She sick.» Dolores went back to the bar. A man from one of the other tables approached her, and together they went through the door leading to the back room. The man's companion went behind the bar and served himself another drink. You could do that at Ma Grady's if you were known. Gonzales did the same. Ma's was the type of place you went to only if you had been there before, or if you were taken by someone who was accepted.

Gonzales was ready to leave when Dolores and the man returned to the room. He showed his wallet and Dolores went over to his table.

«How much beer you have?» she asked.

«Two.» He put the money with a substantial tip on the table. «Have you seen Rico lately?» he asked.

«There are many named Rico. You not coming back room?»

«Not tonight, Dolores. I want to see Ma, and I want to find Rico Cajal.»

Dolores' face was impassive. She picked up the money without comment.

«You must remember Rico,» Gonzales insisted. «He was with me a lot. He was tall and thin and dark and always laughing. He had a Lambretta that made a lot of noise.»

Dolores froze. «I no remember you, señor, nor the other man. Some men are best not remembered.»

Her last statement told Gonzales that she remembered all right, but her attitude made it clear that she was not talking. He took out another twenty-peso note and left it on the table. «Don't forget to tell Ma I was here. The name is Cobra Gonzales, and I want to find Rico Cajal. You understand, Rico Cajal.»

Dolores picked up the note and shrugged her shoulders. «You no find him here,» she said, and walked away. «*Muchas gracias, señor.*»

Gonzales went out and made way his back to the ship. He did not feel like the bright lights of Florida. Back on board he stayed for some time

on deck, gazing at the oily waters of the river and the lights beyond. Something was wrong. The attitude of the people at the house could have been due to a personal reason, but Dolores' attitude suggested that Rico was not wanted in Ma Grady's bar either.

His meeting with Rico Cajal during his last visit to Buenos Aires had been the most significant event ever in Gonzales' life, though he had not realised it at the time. For twenty-four years, his life had conformed to a not very exciting pattern. Like so many of his type he had gone to sea to escape from an unsatisfactory home life; he had been sixteen years old then. His father was a drunk and his mother a whore. He had been born in a slum and had come up the hard way. He had an innate sense of decency and refinement that he had not inherited from either of his parents. To a boy in his position, raised in the dock area of London, the most usual way of escape was to go to sea. He had worked as ship's boy, ordinary seaman, and then able seaman, and the life suited him. A keen brain, a flair for mathematics and navigation had impressed a second officer with whom he had sailed for a couple of years, and he had acquired a Third Mate's ticket by hard study and perseverance, but it was a ticket he had not yet used. What Halligan had said was true. He had refused a berth on a ship to Sydney. Only Gonzales himself knew why. He wanted to return to Buenos Aires to find Rico Cajal.

During his years at sea, Gonzales had had the same squalid adventures that all seamen have. Until he met Rico he had not bothered to ask himself why a night in a brothel was no more exciting than a night in a seaman's club. He had gone with the other men, and accepted the women as casually as he would accept a hamburger, the only difference being was that every time he had a woman he thought of his mother and felt sick. He had known loneliness too, though he had not realised this until after he had met Rico, and left him.

The meeting had taken place about a year previously in a coffee bar. Gonzales had given him a cigarette and they had got into conversation. Rico had offered to show him the town on his Lambretta and Gonzales had accepted. It had been a strange night, starting by visiting a number of bars in quick succession. In each bar Rico had excused himself in order to go on some mysterious errand of his own to the rear area of the bar. They had had drinks, but had not talked with any of the women. Then they had gone back to the small room where Rico lived. Rico was handsome, light-hearted, and generous to a fault. They drank and talked late into the night, until Rico pulled Gonzales down on to the bed and seduced him without preliminaries, and violently. It was his first homosexual experience ever, and it had not occurred to him to resist. He had met Rico nightly during the ship's stay in Buenos Aires, and every night they had returned to Rico's room. At no time did it ever occur to him to question the morality of his association with Rico. All he knew was that the association made him happier than he had ever been before. It was as simple as all that, and not for him to question why. When he left Buenos Aires on the homeward voyage to England, he realised that something essential to him was missing.

He now wanted to find Rico for two reasons: he wanted to know whether Rico still had the same magnetic attraction for him as previously,

and he also wanted to know whether the thing he felt for Rico was something he might feel for other men in the future. It was true as Jansen had said, that he did go to a pighthouse in Cristobal, driven by an urge he did not try to explain, though when he had got there, he had done nothing to satisfy the urge that had sent him. The thought of Rico had stopped him. Jansen on the other hand, had gone with a definite object in view, and he made no secret of the fact. The point of difference so far as Gonzales was concerned was that he did not want lust without affection.

He went back to Ma Grady's bar the next night, but the old woman was still ill. Dolores had a message for him. He was to return to the bar in three days time, when Ma hoped to be back. In the meantime he was to try to find a girl called Carnacion who worked in one of the downtown bars. Dolores did not know Carnacion's other name, or the name of the bar in which she worked. There could be a thousand girls named Carnacion in Buenos Aires, with a hundred of them working in bars. Rico had once introduced him to a girl with such a name, and Gonzales had had a terrible fear at the time that Rico might have been her lover. It was probably the same girl. Gay, laughing Rico had given all his affection to Gonzales when they knew each other, but Gonzales had suspected that Rico distributed his favours lavishly, and even sold them at times. The suspicion had tormented him, more so because Rico had merely laughed when Gonzales had accused him.

Gonzales made his way towards Puerto Nuevo. The only thing to do was systematically to investigate every bar he possibly could. He started in the street known as Sarmiento. The first place he went in was both exclusive and expensive. Gonzales perched himself on a high stool at the bar. A floor show was in progress. A girl was singing on a small stage with a chorus in the background. Castanets were clicking like mad and it was all very Spanish and very noisy. The customers were all men, all well dressed, some young, but most middle-aged. The girls present were all entertainers. It looked too expensive to attract sailors, and he felt he had made a mistake in coming here.

He ordered beer, for which he paid eight times the price he would have paid at Ma Grady's. A man approached him.

«You like our girls, senor?» — — — «Yes. Oh yes, very much.»

«You want to meet one?»

«I'm looking for a particular one. Her name is Carnacion.»

«Carnacion? There are many of that name. We have two. Have you been here before?»

«No. Never.»

«That is Carnacion there, with the fat man at the table, and there is another Carnacion on the stage.»

«The one I want is small, and dark, and pretty. But I don't see her here.»

The man laughed. «Our girls are nearly all small and dark, and they're all pretty. I'll send you one who will be nice to you.» He went away. Gonzales finished his beer and went out before the man could return.

The next bar was even more noisy though less exclusive than the first. Making enquiries seemed pointless. All he could do was look the girls

over in the various places and hope he could recognise the one he was looking for.

He went from bar to bar, and by four o'clock he must have covered twenty of them. Tired, and more than a little drunk, he ran into Sykes and Jansen in the last bar he visited, and returned with them to the ship in time to catch a couple of hours sleep before starting work. The day dragged, and at the end of it he was glad to turn into his bunk again to get a little more sleep before starting the same routine at ten o'clock, when the night life was just starting to warm up. He had no success that night, nor on the following one, so the third night he went back to Ma Grady's. He felt dispirited and depressed. All his enquiries had got him nowhere. Ma Grady had returned to her bar. She looked very old and very pale. She remembered him.

«Darlin'» she screamed in her shrill old voice. «You've come back to me. How are you, me darlin'?»

«Hello Ma,» he said. «I'm fine. Nice to see you again.»

«And wonderful to see you too, me darlin'. They sail the seven seas and they all come back to Ma. The first drink's on the house me darlin'. What'll it be?» Sentimental tears were running down the aged cheeks.

«Beer thanks, Ma. Listen Ma. I've got to find Rico Cajal. Do you know where he is?» Gonzales asked, urgency in his voice.

Ma's face became grave. «Rico? Now he was a darlin' one, wasn't he now? I don't know where he is. I've not seen him in a long time.»

«Is he away, then?»

Ma glanced furtively around her own bar, as though afraid of being overheard. «He's away,» she whispered. «He was arrested and sent to gaol, but he may be dead.»

«In gaol? Or maybe dead?» Gonzales repeated slowly. «What do you mean, Ma?»

«He disappeared, like people do sometimes. I think it was politics.»

«Rico wasn't interested in politics, Ma.»

«I know. Rico was gay and loved music and singing. He loved life. But something was said, that he was in the pay of the Peronistas, as a spy.»

«I don't believe it, Ma.»

«Neither do I, me darlin'.»

Gonzales felt as though he had received a body blow. That Rico might be in gaol he could understand. That he might be dead had not occurred to him.

«How could I find out for definitely, Ma?» he asked.

«In Buenos Aires you can't find out many things for definite. Yesterday I went to a police chief I know. I've done him favours in the past. He told me little. He said Rico was bad, that he lived on the earnings of prostitutes. He said he did not know where Rico was. Many men live on the earnings of prostitutes. Here, it is not really a crime. The police chief was angry and told me not to meddle, so I do not believe him when he says he does not know where Rico is.»

«This girl Carnacion. Du you know where I can find her? I've looked all over.»

To be continued

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