

Excerpt from *La Sombra del Tricornio* by Francisco Gutiérrez Müller

THE DEBUT

The drums rolled, the audience held its breath and all eyes were fixed upon the silver canon at the back of the big top. Suddenly, a thunderous roar was heard and out of an explosion of confetti came catapulted the greatest human bullet in the world. A human projectile that flew across the ring with its arms open in the form of a cross, like a flying Christ, contorting its body through the air in acrobatic pirouettes so as to finally land in the net in a most graceful way.

The celebrated rocket was none other than Fulgencio Cabrales, native to Jerez de la Frontera, who had toured the most prestigious European circus rings of the inter-war period with outstanding success. Wherever this Andalucian went, great expectations followed him and the entrance tickets were always sold out. He never let his admirers down and unfailingly managed to raise the audience from their seats and cause a standing ovation.

He was the star of the company and had his name and a photograph of one of his famous flights at the top of the bill. It was not strange, then, that his number would always close the show.

“Witness clowns and beasts, trapeze artists and acrobats and the amazing climax of the Flight of the Angel!”

Such was the scene. After perfecting a difficult fall, Fulgencio Cabrales untied himself from the net in an elegant manner, went to the centre of the ring, bowed slightly in recognition of the crowd and disappeared behind the backdrop.

The great circus convoy toured the world creating happiness and illusion. The company was triumphant and gained fame and recognition. Without a shadow of doubt, it was a prosperous time. What a shame that a small misfortune would come to change the favourable course of events. As a result of so many detonations, the human bullet began losing his hearing and the signs of deafness became rather worrisome. The Ringmaster reluctantly found himself forced to change the number and Fulgencio Cabrales moved to the trapeze.

He did not disappoint. However, he soon discovered that his forte was not such oscillating swinging but rather strict balance. He proved himself to be a genius in the art of the balancing act. In a general rehearsal one afternoon, he mounted a small bicycle and, at first attempt, rode along the course of a fine metal wire between two posts. A short while later, he entered the world of juggling and learnt some truly sensational tricks. He ended up combining tightrope walking with the manipulation of coloured rings, becoming a true master of the tightrope. Suspended at fifty feet high and at the limit of precarious stability, he moved forward at a slow but firm pace whilst throwing and catching five sponge balls. Suddenly, he froze in mid-air and his whole body was shaken by an imperceptible rocking. In that moment, the heart of the circus beat distressingly and only the applause of the audience could keep Fulgencio Cabrales up there.

One day, he received an official letter from the Ministry of War. He was called upon for compulsory military service. He said his goodbyes to the peculiar group and hugged the clowns and jugglers, the giant and the dwarves. He kissed the dancers and contortionists. He wished the best of luck to the trapeze artists and knife throwers and on outstretching his hand to the Ringmaster, promised he would return. The rather saddened master of ceremonies answered that the show must go on.

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For Fulgencio, military service felt like an eternity. The military manoeuvres seemed absurd and denigrating to him and since he was accustomed to acrobatics at the highest level, crawling through bushes made him depressed. He had been born to wear costumes from which adamantine rays of light would shine and not smear on a uniform in the mire. It was indeed very hard for him. He could not bare the thought of never again living to spark the laughter of children but rather fulfilling the orders of his superiors.

One morning, while forming ranks, a commander weighed down by stripes appeared to give a violent and apocalyptic speech. He insulted traitors and communists. He appealed to the pride and patriotism of the Spanish identity and ended by mentioning something about a “crusade” against the red threat, a far away Russian front and a newly formed “Blue Brigade”... Fulgencio Cabrales was taken away by the impetus of the orator and he let his imagination get away with him, not being able to avoid fantasizing about exotic journeys and untold adventures. Then, straight away, he thought of the ill-fated future of nine months of quartering. He found the contrast devastating – and so it was that when the moment came, the human bullet took a step forward onto the battlefield.

Dressed in khaki trousers and a blue shirt and crowned in a rather comic red beret, Fulgencio Cabrales left for Germany on a train full of enthusiastic young men. It was July 14th of 1941 and a splendid summer's day. In the end wagon, he joked with the other recruits and played his money on a Spanish card game not overly different to bridge. Little did he know then that his cards had already been dealt.

He was consequently a month on an intensive military training course in Grafenwöhr, Bavaria, in which he showed signs, as did his other colleagues in the Brigade, of an absolute incapability of adapting himself to the strict Prussian discipline. The German superiors furiously shouted their heads off giving orders in an unknown and discordant language. The Spanish recruits just looked on perplexed, agreeing with their mouths wide open.

On the 20th August, the Blue Division began its expedition towards the Russian front and, step by step, they covered the 1000 kilometres between Suwalki (Poland) and Vitebsk (Russia) in record time. It was an exhaustive pace. It was a real odyssey in which the most unbearable thing for the Spanish was not the gruelling march but rather having to watch as the German soldiers made their way comfortably on their trucks.

Nevertheless, what most worried Fulgencio Cabrales was not the discrimination employed for the march ahead but the fact that they had been forced to change the colourful uniform of the Brigade for the bleak grey uniform of the Nazi army.

Devoid of his red beret, which had been changed for the rather awkward German helmet, the human bullet fought on the northern front. He did so in a noble and valiant way. He heroically overcame the hamlets of Otenski and Posad, defended the occupied territory against the fierce attacks of the Soviet artillery at 40 degrees below zero and in Poselok, he was the only survivor when his company became the victim of a trap that ended the lives of all his colleagues in the blink of an eye. It was a tragic ambush from which he could only escape due to his exceptional physical qualities. So it was that when the bursts of machine gun fire swept the lower hills, he climbed up onto a fir tree, ascending the trunk with a cat-like agility and did not stop climbing the tree until he reached the last branch. From the top of the conifer and at twenty metres high, the ex-tightrope walker swayed gently as he observed the Russian crossfire tearing his colleagues to pieces.

That winter he strayed like a soul in purgatory across the snowy steppe in search of his army. He did not find it, although he did come across a German regiment to which he became aligned so as to never walk alone again. He could, of course, not give an update as to the situation of his company since no one understood Castilian.

His uniqueness made way to his becoming immediately well-known. He became incorporated into a battalion from Hamburg made up of tall, strong, blonde and beardless Germans. That hairy, short, dark Spaniard stuck out from the first day.

Fulgencio Cabrales did, however, cope very well among those elegant Teutons and did not allow for ethnic difference to put out the fire of his vivacious self to such an extent that he was always jovial and bustling, talking to everyone without his spirits waning due to the cold Russian tundra or because of the apathy of the Russian troops.

He took advantage of the tedious marches to learn basic German vocabulary as well as one and another complex tongue twister that the men from Hamburg made him repeat again and again. His lack of pronunciation produced attacks of hysteria among the German soldiers and Fulgencio was clearly embarrassed by all this. It was in that moment of humiliation that the human bullet put on a happy face. But let us not be confused; the man from Jerez was not really bothered by being made the butt of the jokes because, deep down, all he wanted was to feel useful to some degree and, above all, receive some form of human warmth.

For that very reason, he began to demonstrate all his abilities so as to gain the comradeship of the troops. When the troops stopped for a rest, he would climb the trees and walk along the fragile branches and even hurl himself from steep heights (but only if the ground was full of snow at least one and a half metres deep. If such requirements were fulfilled, the human bullet would fling himself from great heights marking out incredible twists and turns to finish with the most acrobatic of perfect landings. Up to his waist in snow, he would wave to the acknowledgement of the Teutonic mass who applauded enthusiastically.

However, pirouettes aside, the military conflict continued and that spring, the German regiment reached the Neva River to reinforce the front at Leningrad. In the midst of a desolate landscape where the melting snow had filled the land with quagmires, there were trenches constructed everywhere, full of soldiers prepared to dance with death in the next attack.

Fulgencio Cabrales contemplated that desolated swamp and the panorama was indeed disheartening. As he looked on at the men wandering along the last patches of snow, he inspiringly imagined two visionary thoughts:

One: When the struggle finished and the armies withdrew, spring would come. The mires would become fertile meadows and the deer would return and graze freely.

Two: When the snow melted, where did the white go?

It was just then when someone patted his shoulder. On turning, he identified a short man with dark eyes, a thick beard and an open smile. There was no room for doubt, he was another survivor of the Blue Division.

Julian Hernandez, from Albalat de la Rivera, province of Valencia, informed him of the principle objective. This was to blow up the bridge across the River Neva across which the Russians provided arms and supplies for their line of resistance. Once the bridge was destroyed, the Russian trenches would be isolated and their surrender would be just a question of time. It was for that reason, said the Valencian whilst pointing out a spot in the distance, that the German infantry were preparing to fire the cannons. Fulgencio Cabrales followed the index finger of Julian Hernandez and saw how half a dozen gigantic canons were being placed at the rear guard.

But this was not an easy task, the Valencian began once more. Firstly it was necessary to gain territory over the Russians in the battlefield. Their trench lines must be fought back because if not, the German canons would find it impossible to reach their target; that is, the bridge. For this reason, that very night would see the first offensive with the aid of reinforcements: a suicide attack in which the Blue Division would form, as was customary, the front line. As his compatriot pointed out, in this war the Spanish were canon fodder.

The human bullet was horrified to hear the term “canon fodder”. He turned his head away from his colleague and looked once again upon those contraptions. Soldiers swarmed around the canons and the assembly was quite a spectacle. Technicians watched over the operation from scaffolding and cranes were being used to put the pieces together. In that very moment, a massive tube of untold dimensions was raised up.

Fulgencio Cabrales wondered if perhaps they were going to construct an aquaduct. The Valencian smiled and replied that the cylinder was not part of some form of pipe but rather a piece of “Gustav”, the largest canon in the entire world. It measured 42.97 metres long and 7 wide. It was a height of 11.6 metres and had a calibre of 82 centimetres. The convoy on which it had been transported was made up of a total of four platform wagons and was moved by two locomotives. It was accompanied by three trains with about three thousand specialists. Gustav’s range was 35 to 45 kilometres.

Fulgencio Cabrales shuddered at the thought of the trajectory of the projectile and remarked upon his lack of understanding as to why it was necessary to push back the Russian line of defense while in possession of such long range canons.

Julian Hernandez cleared up the issue by mentioning that the problem was not the distance but rather the precision of the shot. To aim correctly, many aspects common to artillery had to be studied, such as the wind speed and direction and its temperature. Moreover, only a few shots could be made since the projectiles weighed more than a ton and no more than a hundred were able to have been transported.

The cranes lowered the canon onto its carriage and Gustav stood erect on the horizon, grandiose, solemn and threatening. As he gazed upon the titan, the human bullet was truly fascinated.

That evening, Fulgencio Cabrales went to inform his Teutonic commander of his return to the Blue Brigade so as to take part in the nocturnal offense. To his surprise, his superior took this as an offense and disallowed his departure from the German regiment under the threat of arrest for desertion. Although the help the Spaniard could give to the Nazi army on the battlefield was much less than useless, especially since in direct combat he was no more than an inexperienced recruit, he served another, perhaps more important, role. According to the commander, he was in fact a consolidated symbol of distraction and entertainment for the entire regiment on their long marches. If he were to be lost in combat, the morale of all twelve battalions would come crashing down.

Totally vexed by this, Fulgencio Cabrales set off for the trench where the Spanish division was finalizing their preparations for the assault, so as to wish the best of luck to his compatriots. Julian Hernandez, showing his gratitude for such a show of solidarity, took a packet out of his backpack and trustingly gave it to our man. He warned him that it should never fall into enemy hands.

“What is it?” asked Fulgencio.

“It’s a talisman. Light, slender and impermeable... don’t ever lose it. Do you promise?”

“I promise”.

Six hours after the attack, when it was quite clear that not a single member of the Blue Division had survived, Fulgencio Cabrales tore the packet open to find that it was none other than a three cornered hat used as part of the uniform of the Spanish Civil Guard.

Pushing back the Russian’s position turned out to be exceptionally difficult. Offenses were launched during three months and 24,000 men died. However, the precision canons of Thor and Karl had at last achieved prime positions to reach the bridge by the end of June although the target was not easy and the majority of the projectiles had been used in the various bombardments to move back the Russian trenches.

The last three shots at the bridge were executed by one Hans von Blöderfeld and only one of them managed to lightly scrape a buttress, leaving an insignificant crack behind. Without any munition left for the canons, the Germans had only two choices; to hold true to patience and faith in waiting for very unlikely reinforcements or, confront another hand to hand combat each in their respective trenches. The first option was not

advisable due to the lack of supplies and the second implied the sacrifice of thousands of soldiers.

Desolation overcame the German army in spite of the incredible acrobatic numbers performed by Fulgencio Cabrales. It was indeed a critical moment in which no superior officer even attempted to make a decision. That is, in the light of the orders from Berlin: attack until death should stop you.

It was on the night of the 22nd July 1942 when heroism made its mark forever onto history. Fulgencio Cabrales presented himself in the tent of his battalion's commander and explained, in broken German, the eccentricities of his past. The superior officer did not understand but the Spaniard insisted, through waving his arms and all sorts, that his audience understood the unbelievable. The commander pulled back his shoulders and arched his eyebrows. With a gesture of his hand, Fulgencio Cabrales insisted he follow him and, although without an urge to do so, the German commander, accompanied by his numerous entourage, crossed the military camp and listened to the Spanish recruit. Fulgencio Cabrales began his retinue by making nervous and exaggerated displays of emotion and spluttering out words with no relation whatsoever. The soldiers found great reason to comment upon his speech, whispering among themselves that it was not the right time for the acrobatics of the Spanish tightrope walker.

The human bullet took them to the canon area and did not stop until they were at the feet of Gustav and for once and all together under that monstrous canon, there were the highest officials of the German army. In a moment of tension, the Nazis expectantly circled the man from Jerez, and the commander asked for an explanation.

Fulgencio Cabrales climbed up onto the gun carriage, walked along the barrel with outstanding skill and sat at the mouth of the canon. From up there, he looked down at them challengingly and pointed at his chest with his index finger.

The canon shot was to be fired during the night, so as to confuse the Russians. The human projectile would fly pass unseen, like another unexploded bomb. But in truth, Fulgencio Cabrales would emerge from the waters of the River Neva and stealthily swim to the bank where he would move along it and blow the bridge to pieces. The plan seemed simple. The only difficulty was that up to then, the world record of distance reached by a human bullet, which the man from Jerez proudly held, was of 35 metres high and 85 far and that now a much longer distance had to be covered; that of 2,900 metres. It was to be a marvellous jump which included flying over enemy trenches and landing in a river whose waters were famous for their strong currents.

Fulgencio watched over the manouvre personally. Firstly, they placed some cushions at the end of the canon so as to soften the detonation and then the human bullet was put inside equipped with twelve hand grenades and crowned with the three pointed hat of the Civil Guard.

Eins, zwei, drei... Then a thunderous roar and a blast occurred and could be heard 15 kilometres away. The greatest human bullet of all time was spectacularly catapulted into the air. He flew over the Russian army with his arms open in the form of a flying Christ and withdrew his limbs at the last instance so as to plunge into the River Neva in

a fetal position. Momentarily disorientated by the impact, he felt a strong pain in his head and his limbs became paralysed. For a second, he believed to have been sunk forever yet his body loosened up in a sudden spasm. He clung on to the survival instinct and quickly rose to the surface.

He appeared from the depths with the inertia of a killer whale and stretched his mouth wide open for a mouthful of air. Then, he allowed for his body to be taken by the current so as to gradually gain ground along the river bank. He walked cautiously up stream and although he was slightly dizzy, he otherwise felt fine. It was then he knew the mission was fulfilled.

He reached the bridge half an hour later. The sight before him caused reverence. It was a solid structure with squared feet and with a walkway three metres wide. Two buttresses held the structure in firm stead.

It was deserted. Nobody was guarding that part of the trench. He crossed the bridge. It was then that he noticed the Soviet army on the other side of the riverbank. One by one, he wrenched out the pins from the hand grenades and began throwing them. The first one opened a small hole in the bridge, the second blew apart a buttress while the third hit a pillar (which gave way) and, as such, a part of the bridge collapsed. After the fourth, he began to throw at a distance and began widening a hole. Finally, he stood as witness to having demolished a 15 metre section of the bridge which meant a quick repair would have been impossible.

Fulgencio Cabrales stayed by the riverbank's side, breathing the cool night air. He soon entered a deeply reflexive state and, going over the events, he realized he had not heard the explosions. Confirming his suspicions, he began shouting only to find he could not hear his own voice. The human bullet was deaf.

Nevertheless, the irreparable loss of one of his senses did not matter to him in the slightest. What concerned him most was the fact that he had not kept his promise. Absolutely devastated, he ran his hand through his wet hair, acknowledging in every moment that as the River Neva followed its course down towards the Baltic sea it took with it the noble three pointed hat of the Spanish Civil Guard.

Without resistance, Fulgencio Cabrales was captured the next morning and later deported to Siberia. He was able to distract the Russian guards in the concentration camp by performing a balancing act upon the cornices of the large cabins and he earned the friendship of the communists.

Twelve years later, in 1954, he was repatriated. He returned home in a Greek boat named "Seminaris" along with 218 men of the Blue Division, 7 of the Spanish Legion, 21 of the SS and a pilot. It was without a shadow of a doubt the epilogue of the defeat of a heroic act that nobody really cared about.

Fulgencio Cabrales went back to the circus, but the Ringmaster had long since died and the number the human bullet had performed all that time back had been censored due to the number of fatal accidents it had produced. Apart from everything, many of the old members of the company were still active and did not doubt for one instant in supporting Fulgencio Cabrales before the new Ringmaster so that he could gain a newly found position in the company.

On February 23rd 1957, at his 38 years of age, Fulgencio Cabrales made his debut as a clown.

Translated by Matthew Hounsome