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Captain Alatrisme

by Arturo Perez-Reverte

I. The Tavern of the Turk

He was not the most honest or pious of men, but he was courageous. His name was Diego Alatrisme y Tenorio, and he had fought in the ranks during the Flemish wars. When I met him he was barely making ends meet in Madrid, hiring himself out for four *maravedis* in employ of little glory, often as a swordsman for those who had neither the skill nor the daring to settle their own quarrels. You know the sort I mean: a cuckolded husband here, outstanding gambling debts there, a petty lawsuit or questionable inheritance, and more troubles of that kind. It is easy to criticize now, but in those days the capital of all the Spains was a place where a man had to fight for his life on a street corner lighted by the gleam of two blades.

In all this Diego Alatrisme played his part with panache. He showed great skill when swords were drawn, even more when with left-handed cunning he wielded the long, narrow dagger some call the *vizcaína*, a weapon from Biscay that professionals often used to help their cause along. If a knife will not do it, the *vizcaína* will, was the old saying. The adversary would be concentrating on attacking and parrying, and suddenly, quick as lightning, with one upward slash, his gut would be slit, so fast he would not have time to ask for confession. Oh yes, Your Mercies, those were indeed harsh times.

Captain Alatrisme, as I was saying, lived by his sword. Until I came into the picture, that "Captain" was more an honorary title than a true rank. His nickname originated one night when, serving as a soldier in the king's wars, he had to cross an icy river with twenty-nine companions and a true captain. Imagine, *Viva España* and all that, with his sword clenched between his teeth, and in his shirtsleeves to blend into the snow, all to surprise a Hollandish contingent. They were the enemy at the time because they were fighting for independence. In fact, they did win it in the end, but meanwhile we gave them a merry chase.

Getting back to the captain—the plan was to stay there on the riverbank, or dike, or whatever the devil it was, until dawn, when the troops of our lord and king would launch an attack and join them. To make a long story short, the heretics were duly dispatched without time for a last word. They were sleeping like marmots when our men emerged from the icy water, nearly frozen, shaking off the cold by speeding heretics to Hell, or wherever it is those accursed Lutherans go. What went wrong is that the dawn came, and the morning passed, and the expected Spanish attack did not materialize. A matter, they told later, of old jealousies among the generals and officers in the field. Fact is, thirty-one men were abandoned to their fate, amid curses and vows, surrounded by Low Dutch disposed to avenge the slashed throats of their comrades. With less chance than the Invincible Armada of the good King Philip the Second.

It was a long and very hard day. And in order that Your Mercies may picture what happened, only two of the Spanish made it back to the other bank of the river by the time night fell. Diego Alatrisme was one of them, and as all day long he had commanded the troops—the authentic captain having been rendered hors de combat in the first skirmish with two handspans of steel protruding from his

back—the title fell to him, though he had no opportunity to enjoy the honor. Captain-for-a-day of troops fated to die, and paying their way to Hell at the cost of their hides, one after another, with the river to their backs and blaspheming in good Castilian Spanish. But that is the way of war and the maelstrom. That is the way it goes with Spain.

Well, then. My father was the other Spanish soldier who returned that night. His name was Lope Balboa; he was from the province of Guipuzcoa, and he, too, was a courageous man. They say that Diego Alatraste and he were very good friends, almost like brothers, and it must be true, because later, on the bulwarks of Julich, where my father was killed by a ball from a arquebus—which was why Diego Velázquez did not include him in his painting of the Surrender of Breda, as he did his friend and fellow Diego, Alatraste, who is indeed there, behind the horse—he swore that he would look after me when I grew out of childhood. And that is why, when I turned thirteen, my mother supplied me with shirt and breeches, and a rosary and a crust of bread tied up in a kerchief, and sent me to live with the captain, taking advantage of a cousin who was traveling to Madrid. Thus it was that I came to enter the service, at a rank somewhere between servant and page, of my father's friend.

A confidence: I very much doubt whether, had she known him well, the mother who gave me birth would so gaily have sent me to his service. But I suppose that the title of captain, though apocryphal, added sheen to his character. Besides, my poor mother was not well and she had two daughters to feed. By sending me off she had one fewer mouth at table and at the same time was giving me the opportunity to seek my fortune at court. So, without bothering to ask further details, she packed me off with her cousin, together with a long letter written by the priest of our town, in which she reminded Diego Alatraste of his promise and his friendship with my deceased father.

I recall that when I attached myself to the captain, not much time had passed since his return from Flanders, because he carried an ugly wound in his side received at Fleurus, still fresh, and the source of great pain. Newly arrived, timid, and as easily frightened as a mouse, on my pallet at night I would listen to him pace back and forth in his room, unable to sleep. And at times I heard him softly singing little verses, interrupted by stabs of pain: Lope's verses, then a curse or a comment to himself, partly resigned and almost amused. That was typical of the captain: to face each of his ills and misfortunes as if they were a kind of inevitable joke that an old, perverse acquaintance found entertaining to subject him to from time to time. Perhaps that was the origin of his peculiar sense of harsh, unchanging, despairing humor.

That was a long time ago, and I am a bit muddled regarding dates. But the story I am going to tell you must have taken place around sixteen hundred and twenty-something. It is the adventure of masked men and two Englishmen, which caused not a little talk at court, and in which the captain not only came close to losing the patched-up hide he had managed to save in Flanders, and in battling Turkish and Barbary corsairs, but also made himself a pair of enemies who would harass him for the rest of his life. I am referring to the secretary of our lord and king, Luis de Alquézar, and to his sinister Italian assassin, the silent and dangerous swordsman named Gualterio Malatesta, a man so accustomed to killing his victims from behind that when by chance he faced them, he sank into deep depressions, imagining that he was losing his touch. It was also the year in which I fell in love like a bawling calf, then and forever, with Angélica de Alquézar, who was as perverse and wicked as only Evil in the form of a blonde eleven- or twelve-year-old girl can be. But we will tell everything in its time.

My name is Íñigo. And my name was the first word Captain Alatraste uttered the morning he was released from the ancient prison in the castle, where he had spent three weeks as a guest of the king for nonpayment of debts. That he was the king's "guest" is merely a manner of speaking, for in this

as in other prisons of the time, the only luxuries—and food was included as such—were those a prisoner paid for from his own purse. Fortunately, although the captain had been incarcerated nearly innocent of any funds, he had a goodly number of friends. So thanks to one and then another fellow who came to his aid during his imprisonment, his stay was made more tolerable by the stews that Caridad la Lebrijana, the mistress of the Tavern of the Turk, sometimes sent by way of me, and by the four *reales* sent by his companions don Francisco de Quevedo and Juan Vicuña, among others.

As for the rest of it, and here I am referring to the hardships of prison life itself, the captain knew better than any how to protect himself. The practice of relieving one's wretched companions-in-misfortune of their wealth, clothes, even their shoes, was notorious at that time. But Diego Alatriste was quite well known in Madrid, and any who did not know him soon found it was better for their health to approach him with caution. According to what I later learned, the first thing he did, once inside the walls, was to go straight to the most dangerous ruffian among the prisoners and, after greeting him politely, press the cold blade of that lethal *vizcaína*—which he had kept thanks to the transfer of a few *maravedís* to the jailer—to the thug's gullet. It worked like a sign from God. After this unmistakable declaration of principles, no one dared lift a hand against the captain, who from then on slept in peace, wrapped in his cape in a reasonably clean corner of the establishment and protected by his reputation as a man with steel in his spine.

Later, his generous sharing of La Lebrijana's stews, as well as bottles of wine bought from the warden with the assistance of friends, helped secure him solid loyalties, even from the lowlife of that first day, a man from Córdoba with the unfortunate name of Bartolo Cagafuego. Although carrying the burden of a name like Bartolo Shitfire was reason enough to get him into trouble as regularly as a pious old dame goes to mass—and though he had spent more than his share of time in the king's galleys—he was not a rancorous fellow. It was one of Diego Alatriste's virtues that he could make friends in Hell.

It seems unreal. I do not remember the exact year—it was the twenty-second or twenty-third year of the century—but what I am sure of is that the captain emerged from the prison on one of those blue, luminous Madrid mornings so cold that it takes your breath away. From that day—though neither of us yet knew it—our lives were going to change greatly.

Time has gone by and water has flowed beneath the bridges of the Manzanares, but I can still see Diego Alatriste, thin and unshaven, stepping across the threshold with the heavy iron-studded door closing behind him. I recall him perfectly, squinting in the blinding light, thick mustache covering his upper lip, slim silhouette wrapped in his cape, and beneath the shadow of his wide-brimmed hat, bedazzled eyes that seemed to smile when he glimpsed me sitting on a bench in the plaza. There was something very unusual about the captain's gaze; on the one hand, his eyes were very clear and very cold, a greenish-gray like the water in puddles on a winter morning. On the other, they could suddenly break into a warm and welcoming smile, like a blast of heat melting a skim of ice, while the rest of his face remained serious, inexpressive, or grave. He had another, more disturbing, smile that he reserved for moments of danger or sadness: a kind of grimace that twisted his mustache down slightly toward the left corner of his mouth, a smile as threatening as cold steel—which nearly always followed—or as funereal as an omen of death when it was strung at the end of several bottles of wine, those the captain dispatched alone in his days of silence. The first one or two downed without taking a breath, then that gesture of wiping his mustache with the back of his hand while staring at the wall before him. Bottles to kill the ghosts, he always said, although he was never able to kill them completely.

The smile he directed at me that morning when he found me waiting belonged to the first category: the one that lighted his eyes, refuting the imperturbable gravity of his face and the harshness he often

intentionally gave to his words, even when he was far from feeling it. He looked up and down the street, appeared to be satisfied when he did not see any new creditor lurking about, walked toward me, removed his cape, despite the cold, and tossed it to me, wadded into a ball.

"Íñigo," he said. "Boil this. It is crawling with bedbugs."

The cape stunk, as did he. His clothing held enough bugs to chew the ear off a bull, but all that was resolved less than an hour later in Mendo el Toscano's bathhouse. A native of Tuscany, the barber had been a soldier in Naples when only a lad, and he admired Diego Alatriste greatly, and trusted him. When I arrived with a change of clothing, the only other full outfit the captain kept in the battered old cupboard that served us as a clothespress, I found him standing in a wood tub overflowing with dirty water, drying himself. El Toscano had trimmed his beard for him, and the short, wet chestnut hair combed back and parted in the middle revealed a broad forehead tanned by the sun of the prison courtyard but marred by a small scar that ran down to his left eyebrow. As he finished drying and putting on the clean breeches and shirt, I observed other scars I was already familiar with. One in the shape of a half-moon between his navel and his left nipple. A long one that zigzagged down a thigh. Both had been made by a cutting blade, a sword or dagger, unlike a fourth on his back, which had formed the telltale star left by a musket ball. The fifth was the most recent, still not completely healed, the one that kept him from sleeping well every night: a violet gash almost a hand's breadth wide on his left side, a souvenir of the battle of Fleurus. It was months old, and at times it opened and oozed pus, although that day as its owner stepped out of the tub it did not look too bad.

I helped him as he dressed, slowly and carelessly: dark gray doublet and knee breeches of the same color, tight at the knees over the buskins that hid the ladders in his hose. Then he buckled on the leather belt that I had carefully oiled during his absence, and into it thrust the sword with the large quillons, whose blade and guard showed the nicks, knocks, and scratches of other days and other blades. It was a good sword, long, intimidating, and of the best Toledo steel, and as it was drawn or sheathed it gave off a long metallic *sssssss* that would give you gooseflesh. He studied his reflection in a dim half-length mirror for a moment, and smiled a weary smile.

"Sblood," he muttered, "I feel thirsty."

Without another word he preceded me down the stairs and along Calle Toledo toward the Tavern of the Turk. As he had no cloak, he walked along the sunny side, head high, with the frazzled red plume in the band of his hat dipping and waving. He touched his hand to the wide brim to greet some acquaintance, or swept the hat off as he passed a lady of a certain status. I followed, distracted, taking in everything: the urchins playing in the street, the vegetable vendors in the arcades, and the groups of gossiping idlers sitting in the sun beside the Jesuit church. Although I had never been overly innocent, and the months I had been living in the neighborhood had had the virtue of opening my eyes, I was still a young and curious pup who looked at the world with an astonished gaze, trying not to miss a single detail.

As for the carriage, all I noticed at first were the hoofbeats of a team of mules and the sound of wheels approaching behind us. I scarcely paid attention; seeing coaches and carriages was a normal occurrence, because the street was the principal route to the Plaza Mayor and the castle, the Alcázar Real. But when I looked up for an instant as the carriage caught up to us, I saw a door without a shield and, in the small window, the face of a girl with blond hair combed into corkscrew curls, and the bluest, clearest, and most unsettling eyes I have ever seen. Those eyes met mine for an instant, and then the enchanting creature was borne off down the street.

I shuddered, not knowing why. But my shudder would have been even stronger had I known that I had just been gazed upon by the Devil.

"We have no choice but to fight," said don Francisco de Quevedo.

The table was littered with empty bottles, and every time that don Francisco was a little too liberal with the wine of San Martín de Valdeiglesias—which happened frequently—he was ready to call out Christ himself. Quevedo was slightly lame, a poet, a fancier of whores, nearsighted, and a Caballero de Santiago. He was as quick with his wit and his tongue as with his sword, and he was famous at court for his good poems and bad temper. The latter was, all too often, the cause for his wandering from exile to exile and prison to prison. It is well known that though, like all of Madrid, our good lord and king, Philip the Fourth, and his favored Conde de Olivares appreciated the poet's satiric verses, the king liked much less being the subject of them. So from time to time, after the appearance of some sonnet or anonymous poem in which everyone recognized the poet's hand, the magistrate's bailiffs and constables would swarm into the tavern, or Quevedo's domicile, or a place where friends met to exchange gossip, to invite him, respectfully, to accompany them, taking him out of circulation for a few days or months. As he was stubborn and proud, and never learned his lesson, these occurrences were numerous, and served to embitter him.

Quevedo was, nevertheless, an excellent table companion and a good friend to his friends, among whom he included Captain Alatríste. Both went often to the Tavern of the Turk, where they would gather their friends around one of the best tables, which Caridad la Lebrijana—who had been a whore and still was occasionally for the captain, though free of charge—usually reserved for them. That morning, along with don Francisco and the captain, the group was completed by habitués: Licenciado Calzas, Juan Vicuña, Dómine Pérez, and El Tuerto Fadrique, the one-eyed apothecary at the Puerta Cerrada.

"No choice but to fight," the poet insisted.

He was, as I have said, visibly "illuminated" by a bottle or two of Valdeiglesias. He had jumped to his feet, overturning a taboret, and with his hand resting on the pommel of his sword, was sending blazing glances toward the occupants of a nearby table. There, two strangers, whose long swords and capes were hanging on the wall, had just congratulated the poet on a few verses. Unfortunately, those lines actually had been written by Luis de Góngora, Quevedo's most despised adversary in the Republic of Letters—a rival whom, among other insults, he accused of being a sodomite, a dog, and a Jew. The newcomers had spoken in good faith, or at least it seemed so, but don Francisco was not disposed to overlook their words.

"I shall grease my poems with the fat of the pig

So that gnat Góngora cannot chew off a piece. . . ."

He began to improvise there on the spot, weaving a little, hand still clutching the hilt of his sword, while the strangers tried to apologize and the captain and his table companions held on to don Francisco to keep him from drawing his sword and going for the offenders.

"But by God, that is an insult," the poet cried, trying to loose the right hand his friends were gripping so tightly, while with his free hand he adjusted his twisted eyeglasses. "A bit of steel will make things, *hic*, right."

"That is too much steel to squander so early in the day, don Francisco," Diego Alatraste sensibly interceded.

"It seems very little to me." Without taking his eyes off his perceived tormentors, the poet ferociously smoothed his mustache. "But we will be generous: one hand's breadth of steel for each of these *hijosdalgo*, who are sons of something, no doubt, but very certainly not sons of hidalgos."

These were fighting words, so the strangers made as if to claim their swords and go outside. The captain and the other friends, helpless to prevent the confrontation, asked them please to make allowances for the poet's alcoholic state and simply quit the field, adding that there was no glory in fighting a drunk opponent, or shame in withdrawing prudently to prevent greater harm.

"Bella gerant alii," suggested Dómine Pérez, trying to temporize.

Dómine Pérez was a Jesuit priest who tended his flock in the nearby church of San Pedro y San Pablo. His kindly nature and his Latin phrases tended to have a soothing effect, for he spoke them in a tone of unquestionable good sense. The two strangers, however, knew no Latin, and the insult of being called *sonsofsomethingorother* was difficult to brush off. Besides, the cleric's mediation was undercut by the scoffing banter of Licenciado Calzas, a clever, cynical rascal who haunted the courts, a specialist in defending causes he could convert into endless trials that bled his clients of their last *maravedís*. The *licenciado* loved to stir things up, and he was always goading every Juan, José, and Tomasillo.

"You do not want to lose face, don Francisco," he said in a low voice. "They will pay the court costs, defend your honor."

So all those gathered round prepared to witness an event that would appear the next day in the sheets of *Avisos y noticias*, the city's purveyor of notices and news. And Captain Alatraste, failing in his efforts to calm his friend, but knowing he would not leave don Francisco alone in the fray, began to accept as inevitable that he would be crossing swords with these strangers.

"Aio te vincere posse," Dómine Pérez concluded with resignation, as Licenciado Calzas hid his laughter by snorting into his jug of wine. With a deep sigh, the captain started to get up from the table. Don Francisco, who already had drawn four fingers of his sword from its scabbard, shot him a comradely look of thanks, and even had the brass to direct a couplet to him.

"You, Diego, whose sword so nobly defends

The name and honor of your family . . ."

"Do not fuck with me, don Francisco," the captain replied ill-humoredly. "We will have our fight with whom we must, but do not fuck with me."

"That is how a true, *hic*, man talks," said the poet, visibly grateful for the friend who had just sworn his support. The rest of the gatherers unanimously urged him on, like Dómine Pérez, abandoning any conciliatory efforts and in truth delightedly anticipating the spectacle. For if don Francisco de Quevedo, particularly in his cups, turned out to be a terrible swordsman, the intervention of Diego Alatraste as his partner at the ball left no shred of doubt regarding the results. Bets flew about the number of thrusts the strangers would pay for .

So. The captain gulped a swallow of wine and, already on his feet, looked over toward the strangers as if to apologize that things had gone so far. He motioned with his head for them to step outside, in order not to destroy the tavern of Caridad la Lebrijana, who was always fretting about the furniture.

"Whenever Your Mercies please."

The men buckled on their weapons and started outside amid high expectation, taking care not to leave their backs unguarded—just in case—for Jesus may have said something about brothers, but he made no mention of cousins. That was the situation, with all swords still sheathed, when, to the disappointment of the onlookers and relief of Diego Alatríste, the unmistakable silhouette of the high constable, Martín Saldaña, appeared in the doorway.

"That throws the blanket over our fiesta," said don Francisco de Quevedo.

And shrugging, he adjusted his eyeglasses, glanced out of the corner of his eye, went back to his table, and uncorked another bottle, with no further ado.

"I have a mission for you."

The high constable, Martín Saldaña, was hard and tan as a brick. Over his doublet, he wore an old-fashioned buffcoat, quilted inside, that was very practical in warding off knives. With his sword, dagger, poniard, and pistols, he carried more iron than was to be found in all Biscay. He had been a soldier in the Flemish wars, like Diego Alatríste and my deceased father, and in close camaraderie with them had spent long years of pain and worry, although in the end with better fortune. While my progenitor pushed up daisies in a land of heretics, and the captain earned his living as a hired swordsman, Saldaña made his way in Madrid upon his discharge in Flanders—after our deceased king, Philip the Third, signed a treaty with the Dutch—with the help of a brother-in-law who was a majordomo in the palace, and a mature but still-beautiful wife. I cannot prove the story of the wife—I was too young to know the details—but there were rumors that a certain magistrate was free to have his way with the aforementioned señora, and that that was the reason for her husband's being appointed high constable, a position equal to that of the night watchmen who made their rounds in the barrios of Madrid, which at that time were still called *cuarteles*.

In any case, no one ever dared make the least insinuation in Martín Saldaña's presence. Cuckolded or not, there was no doubt that he was brave, albeit very thin-skinned. He had been a good soldier; his many wounds had been stitched up like a crazy quilt, and he knew how to command respect with his fists or with a Toledo sword. He was, in fact, as honorable as could be expected in a high constable of the time. He, too, admired Diego Alatríste, and he tried to favor him whenever possible. Theirs was an old professional friendship—rough, as befitting men of their nature—but real and sincere.

"A mission," the captain repeated. They had gone outside and were leaning against a wall in the sun, each with his jug in his hand, watching people and carriages pass by on Calle Toledo. Saldaña looked at him a moment, stroking the thick beard sprinkled with the gray of an old soldier, grown to hide a slash that went from his mouth to his left ear.

"You have been out of prison only a few hours and you haven't a coin in your purse," he said.

"Before two days pass, you will have accepted some paltry employ, escorting some conceited young peacock to prevent his beloved's brother from running him through on a street corner or slicing off a man's ears on behalf of a creditor. Or you will start hanging around in bawdy and gaming houses to see what you can extract from strangers or a priest who's come to wager San Eufrasio's

knucklebone. Before you know it, you will be in trouble: a bad wound, a quarrel, a charge against you. And then it will start all over again." He took a small sip from his jar and half closed his eyes, though he never took them off the captain. "Do you call that living?"

Diego Alatríste shrugged. "Can you think of something better?" He stared directly into the eyes of his old comrade from Flanders. The look said, *We do not all have the good fortune to be a high constable.*

Saldaña picked his teeth with a fingernail and nodded a couple of times. They both knew that were it not for the twists and turns of fate, Saldaña could easily be in the same situation as the captain. Madrid was filled with former soldiers scraping a living in the streets and plazas, their belts stuffed with tin tubes in which they carried their wrinkled recommendations and petitions, and the useless service records that no one gave a fig about. Waiting for a stroke of luck that never came.

"That is why I have come, Diego. There is someone who needs you."

"Me? Or my sword?" He twisted his mustache with that grimace that passed as a smile.

Saldaña burst out laughing. "What an idiotic question," he said. "There are women who are interesting for their charms, priests for their absolutions, old men for their money. . . . As for men like you and me, it is only our swords." He paused to look in both directions, took another swallow of wine, and spoke more quietly. "These are people of quality. An easy evening's work, with no risks but the usual ones. And for doing it, there is a handsome purse."

The captain observed his friend with interest. At that moment, the word "purse" would have roused him from the deepest sleep or the most excruciating hangover.

"How 'handsome'?"

"Some sixty *escudos*. In good four-doubloon coins."

"Not bad." The pupils narrowed in Diego Alatríste's light eyes. "Is killing involved?"

Saldaña made an evasive gesture, looking furtively toward the door of the tavern.

"Perhaps, but I do not know the details. And I do not want to know, if you get my meaning. All I know is that it is to be an ambush. Something discreet, at night, with your face covered and all that. 'Greetings and godspeed, señores!'"

"Alone, or will I have company?"

"Company, I surmise. There are two to be dispatched. Or perhaps only given a good fright. Or maybe you can use your blade to leave the sign of the cross on their faces, or something of the kind. You will know what to do."

"Who are they?"

Now Saldaña shook his head, as if he had said more than he wanted. "Everything in its time. Besides, my only role is to act as messenger."

The captain drained his jug, thinking hard. In those days, fifteen four-doubloon pieces, in gold, came

to more than seven hundred *reales*. Enough to get him out of difficulty, buy new linens and a suit of clothes, pay off his debts . . . set his life in order a little. Spruce up the two rented rooms where he and I lived on the upper floor of a courtyard behind the tavern, facing the Calle del Arcabuz. Eat hot food without depending on the generous thighs of Caridad la Lebrijana.

"And also," Saldaña added, seeming to follow the thread of the captain's thoughts, "this job will put you in contact with important people. Good for the future."

"My future," the captain echoed, absorbed in his thoughts.

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