

# The Man and a Man with His Mule

**Brian**Aldiss

My train was carrying me away from the ruins of Arroyo Alegre towards the West and civilization. The ruins had bored me; now I was eager to immerse myself in the novel I was reading, the classic Mexican novel "El Senor de la Costumbrista", published in the early years of the twentieth century. I had reached Chapter Five, and the passage where the heroine, Christina, standing with her adopted daughter, Hira, is confronting General Lopez in the deserted cattle station.

Opposite me in the carriage sat a bearded bronzed man of worn, stern countenance. He had an arm about the shoulders of a younger, rather stupid-looking woman, who writhed occasionally under the confinement of the other's naked arm. It seemed they were related. I took no notice of them beyond a cursory glance.

Unexpectedly, the man leaned forward and tapped me on my left knee.

"I suffer what it is humiliation to travel by this Hard Class," he said.

I told him stiffly that I had not noticed. But the exchange was not concluded.

"Once I travel always in First Class, in greatest luxury. Now see what is befallen me."

Saying nothing, I reflected that the man should have been grateful for his earlier good fortune. As I turned again to my novel the man said, "Okay, so I see you have no pity. You are one of the hard-heart men."

By agreeing, as I immediately did, I hoped the fellow would fall silent. Instead, he seemed to take my words as a challenge.

"My name is Vlasco Ibanez," he told me, staring at my face. "My family suffer more than their fair share of misfortune. When I am only a boy, my father falls by accident from a bridge and is kill. So I must to go immediately to work. I have no more than four years in age."

While I reflected that such things must always happen now to those who can master only the present tense, his talk flowed on.

"My mother is make insane by the disaster. Her sister also is mad many years. Both have the eye problems. When aged, she studies pataphysics. It's a sickness caused. My uncle also is crazy and short-sighted. He break his spectacle and never can he swim."

Interrupting Ibanez, I said, with more indignation than I had intended, "I cannot swim either."

To which he replied coldly, drawing himself up, "Some people do these things deliberately."

At this juncture, the woman by his side, who had not spoken and showed no sign of listening, decided

to take part in the conversation.

Her milky eyes indicated she was blind.

Waving her hand for emphasis, as if conducting a symphony, she said in a shrill voice, "This person to whom I sit next is my adopted guardian, Sr. Ibanez - a good man but often cruel. He is not educated like me. His history is strange. You should hear it. For years he worked without wages on a coffee plantation. That is a place where coffee is planted. Hence the name 'plantation', as you might for instance say 'tea plantation', a place where tea is planted, but Sr. Ibanez never worked on one of that kind. Do I make it clear?"

As her blind eyes stared at me, Ibanez said, angrily, "Let me tell this fool this story." As he spoke, he slapped the woman on the face. He called her Hora the Whore.

She hit him back. I stared out of the window at the passing scenery which, frankly, was not interesting. I shall not describe it.

"By the age of fifteen," Ibanez said, when the fight was over, "I reach puberty and desperation. They will not have me in the ranch house. The porridge is made with water. The beans of coffee are not selling more. Mr Charles Bush, the estate-owner, he is anxious. Things are now become so bad I must to pay them to work there.

"Then comes the miracle. One day I see a very fine film which is showing to us. It is an allegory -"

The woman butted in to explain to me what an allegory was. "It is like a story that means one thing but not another. Say for instance I say I am falling down a well, it can be just an image and what is not real is more important than -"

He smacked her across the mouth and continued with his tale. "This film it is called 'Tarzan of the Apes'. A brilliant film. By working among apes in the jungle, this man Tarzan, he discover he is really a distant lord. He stay naked.

"From this time, I invent the famous 'A Man with His Mule'. I take it to Mr Charles Bush. He cease to drink and is in delight with my idea. Oh yes, you may sneer, but what a success am I with 'A Man with His Mule'!" The train was going slowly now. I thought of throwing myself out of the window, though not, perhaps, before I had finished Chapter Five and found what happened between Christina and General Lopez.

Unfortunately, I could not resist asking Ibanez what exactly this "A Man with His Mule" was. Ibanez told me at length.

He had never invented anything before, he said, until the day it came to him that the sale of packaged coffee beans was impersonal. It was like remaining in Tarzan's jungle. How could there be personal contact between grower and customer, perhaps hundreds of miles distant? The answer was to have a short letter from a grower himself to the coffee-drinkers.

"I invent a man who is been a German but now he share our nationality. His mule I call him August, and the man himself I call him Sancho Panzer. It is a genius stroke." Ibanez struck his forehead to show where the genius lay.

"Sancho he will say in his short letter such like, 'Dear Faraway Coffee-Drinker, I am your friend and I long to see you drink and enjoy my coffee. But I must work here on the plantation with my mule August. It is a lonely life but we enjoy hard work. You must come and see to me by yourself one day. The mule is well, as I hope you are. Your firm friend, Sancho Panzer.' Each little letter went into each bag of coffee. That is the start for my brilliant success. Meanwhile, my demented relations they grow more bad."

He shot an angry look at his adopted daughter as he spoke. "Soon, what I never expect - the little letters of Sancho Panzer are answered. Coffee-drinkers everywhere, they fall in love with this clever nice man who loves them. So Sancho has to tell more about this place - which of course I make up to be nice - and also of his mule August - how many hands high he is and such details. If Sancho Panzer has a wife, they ask. So I make up a wife Carmen who is a mad thing and bitch. More letters are coming in with great sympathy for this poor man. I tell you my tears spring forth when I write his letters for him."

He paused to see if tears would spring forth on this occasion. Instead, he allowed his expression of perennial gloom to fade somewhat as he said, "How the sales of the coffee grow upward! Now I have fame. Well, some fame, because the distant coffee friends do not realise that Sancho Panzer is not real.

But then one day is coming a phone call from people in the city who are rulers of television. This is after the revolution. I am so please. Here something is I do not expect.

"The television people wish to make a series of the man Sancho Panzer and the Mule August, a kind of comedy, they say. I tell he does not exist ever. They say they will find both of these people, also Carmen, the mad wife. I must write what they call the scripts."

Ibanez looked down at his hands which dangled between his knees. In a reflective tone, he said, "Once, I am rich to have a shirt to my backside. I even hire a blackman -servant to wash the shirt. This boy, he does a lot what he calls 'strokin' de black mamba', but he is otherwise useful to me."

Listening, I realised my finger had gone dead. I had stuck it into my novel to mark the beginning of Chapter Five of "El Senor de la Costumbrista ". Sucking my finger, I say as best I can, "Well, what good fortune for you. Congratulations! Now I must get on with my book."

As I bent my head to it, Ibanez shouted in a loud voice, "At that very day of success, when I give party and boast so much, my insane mother-in-law, Monika, she jump from her bedroom window. The panes of glass are shatter. The zinnias below are crush. But Monika has only a broken leg. I am furious. I go to her bed in the hospital and I hit her. Because now it is in the news that the great celebrity Vlasco Ibanez, triumphant author and inventor of 'A Man with His Mule', is of a relation with a mad woman who throws herself always from windows.

"I kick out the blackman -servant with his mamba. I am broken man. I take this silly woman here and go to live in a drain pipe. Many people say I am mad. The friends, they hurl the stones."

The train stopped with such a sudden jerk that I was thrown forward, my face burying itself in Hora's lap.

"Raise yourself at once!", called Ibanez. "You pig dog!"

"Let him be!", shrieked Hora .

"She's mine!" shouted Ibanez.

As they began a quarrel, I jumped out of the train.

We had stopped at a small wayside halt called Erasmoso . I bought an ice cream and stuck my nose into Chapter Five of "El Senor de la Costumbrista ". Although I stood at the end of the platform, a whining voice soon told me I had been discovered by Hora . She seized my arm, declaring she would always be true.

I perceived that she was in love with me.

"This was a brief love affair, already over," I told her.

"I know my way around, mister."

"What? Although you are blind?"

"I am not virgin, mister. Sex is not of the eyes only."

"Sorry, I am trying to read."

"Why you don't have sex?"

"Because I edit a small literary magazine, 'The New Impostor'," I explained. "I don't suppose you people have ever seen an issue."

"I read every issue. Is my favourite ."

"Rubbish! You're lying. You're blind."

Again I turned to that tempting Chapter Five, eager to see what the General Lopez would say to poor Christina in that desolate room.

Ibanez came up. Seeing the girl so close to me, he said, grabbing my bicep, "I give her to you. One hundred dollar only!"

"I don't want her."

"Fifty dollar, then."

"I told you, I don't want her."

"She good girl. She virgin. Thirty-five and she yours."

I pointed to a printed notice on the side of the shelter. It read in rather contorted language, **THE HABIT OF SOLDING PEOPLE ON THIS PLATFORM IS TO BE PROSECUTED .**

"It was before the Revolution," Ibanez explained. "Now we are all capitalists. Thirty dollars."

At that moment, the train began slowly to pull out of the platform. Ibanez screamed. "Run! Or we spend our lives all in Erasmoso!" Plainly, he exaggerated: yet I ran. We piled together into the last carriage, gasping.

Really at that moment I had lost patience with the entire country. Indeed, I had nearly lost my novel.

"Why did the train not even toot?" I asked furiously.

"I know well the driver. He is a bastard."

We lapsed into silence, breathing heavily. For five minutes I enjoyed the peace. Then the woman, Hora, said, "So, once more, eternally and for ever-lasting and all the future of this bad world, the train carries me into more misery and humiliation and my wretched life of a dog."

"I'm sorry to hear it, Hora."

"No, you are not, or you would not go to a hotel where capitalists live."

"Are you disappointed that I would not marry you?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no. Who can tell? But I do not like you. Rather, I hate you, maybe. And also I hate your lousy language."

"Always she complains," said Ibanez. "Is no gratitude. A bad woman, probably crazy. Is why I hither. My suffering is much greater. My father he fall from the bridge and get kill because he drink. He should not be at all on the bridge. My mother go insane by this disaster but she already is much distable in her mind, like her crazy sister. My uncle is much a dope fiend. He is born missing a tooth. That's why he can not swim although he has job as a swimming instructor. All have the eye-problems and whole family is crazy like my grandmother."

At last we arrived in the city. I at once took a taxi to the Hilton Hotel. In my comfortable suite I enjoyed a shower, washing away the idiot company of Sr. Vlasco Ibanez and his unattractive charge, Hora. Downstairs, I sat in the comfortable lounge, ordered a waiter to bring me a glass of Chardonnay, and settled down to read Chapter Five of "El Senor de la Costumbrista".

It was fascinating. General Lopez holstered his revolver. He revealed to the fair Christina that he came from a mad family. His father had died when he was young, his mother became crazed by grief and never spoke again. Both his aunt and uncle were on drugs. There was also a form of inherited blindness in the family. He had been forced to join the military in order to support his unfortunate relations.

As the general confessed, tears ran down his bronzed cheeks. Christina, listening, also shed tears. It was all most affecting to read. One could empathise with their sorrow, conveyed in faultless prose. He fell against a counter, weeping uncontrollably. Christina put an arm about his shoulders. I could tell she would fall in love with him in Chapter Six. It is well there is a distance between life and art.