

ENGLISH TITLE:

The Last Performance

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ORIGINAL TITLE:

Gilles de Rais

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*Of all the creatures Lucifer is the
one most like God Almighty.*

MICHEL TOURNIER

Gilles et Jeanne

I

The carpenter's hammer's short blows were the only things breaking the plain's heavy silence. The sun was half way along its path, you could even hear the light as you could feel nothing apart from the hammer's blows in the wood and except for a few orders I gave.

A blind man would have said we were putting a coffin together. But all of a sudden an incredible noise came out from the thick wood on the other side of the river, and the silence of the camp, too, was broken by screams and shouting.

Five or six soldiers with rifles on their backs were almost dragging two men across the bridge. Following behind them were two soldiers with their rifles ready for firing. The arrested men stumbled on between the sturdy soldiers; it was as if the exhaustion of the road was too much for them. As they were on the bridge over the river, soldiers from the camp came out to meet them and, shouting and clapping, they surrounded their brothers in arms and the two prisoners. They all went to the large marquee which, as well as being the dinning area, was also where they heard mass on Sundays, and where shows were given; the two men were taken to the nearby pen with barbed wire around it. There were a further three men there, with torn uniforms and unshaven faces; they could not have looked more haggard. They threw the two new detainees down next to them.

The carpenter looked at them for a while. From their clothes, which were quite destroyed, it was impossible to tell whether they were Liberals or Carlists. Whether one colour or another, they all looked like the same poisonous disease to me. The carpenter soon lost interest in the prisoners, and once again started hammering a wooden board onto what looked like a painted screen on the wall of a mansion. The board was something like a coat of arms, and you could see a tree on it in the shape of a cross.

At its base there was a Christogram:

IHS

A small sword-shaped cross split the H in two from top to bottom.

When the camp commander – a large-bodied general – had seen the Christogram a few days earlier, he had interpreted it aloud, proud of his clumsy Latin, and taking advantage of having high-ranking soldiers around him:

“Iesus Hominum Salvator!”

All of a sudden he frowned and pointed at the small cross splitting the H in two.

“What’s that sword doing there?”

With feigned humility, I told him that the sword splitting the H was, at the same time, a cross.

“Isn’t the cross the tree gives us enough? Why do we have to mix a sword up with a cross? That’s just what the Liberals would like; they’ll say we’re Holy Joes again”, he said angrily, as if what really mattered to him was impressing the people around him rather than the issue in itself.

I didn’t answer him. How was I going to tell the general that the original Christogram’s motto was not, even though everyone believed it to be, *Iesus*

Hominum Salvator, but, rather, *In Hoc Signo vinces*, which they'd come up with some centuries earlier? Under this sign you will triumph, with the cross that becomes a sword; you can't say it more clearly than that. How are you going to tell an ignorant general that the sword and the cross have come on a journey together? If I'd said that, I'd have been behind barbed wire myself within five minutes.

The carpenter climbed down the ladder with great care. He took two steps backwards and, half closing one eye, checked the board with the coat of arms on it using a spirit-level.

"Vincent!" he called out to me, mangling up my French name with his Basque pronunciation. "Does this look good?"

I was on one side of the stage working on some pieces of straw cloth I wanted to use as the curtain. I turned my head. I narrowed my eyes and frowned to look at the carpenter's work with greater concentration. I could feel him looking at the back of my neck. I read the words hidden behind the monogram, emphasising the initials:

"I, H, S. *In Hoc Signo vinces. D'accord, c'est bien.*"¹

"It's clearer now than it was before; you can read it better."

"Thank you", I said to him nasally, and I gave a short applause to approve the Christogram on the coat of arms.

Whether the large general liked it or not, the cross-shaped sword was still up there. A few days earlier, without those officers around him, he couldn't have cared less about a cross. In any case, I had been humble when those chubby soldiers had come to see him.

So, the cross and the sword together. The general knew that; it had been that way all his life. He couldn't have cared less about a Latin expression.

1 In French in the original: "Okay, that's good."

One way or the other. His consternation in front of the officers had been pure hypocrisy, keeping up appearances in front of the Holy Joes. In any case, they'd been heading off for the Tuteria camp soon, and leaving us to our own devices. There was a huge noise coming out from the marquee. While they waited for lunch, the soldiers were playing cards and smoking to celebrate arresting the two prisoners; and, better still, they were going to get drunk on one of the barrels of cider looted from a farmhouse.

I could see the carpenter wanted to get back to his friends. They had detailed him to work with me since I had arrived at the camp, and he had stopped going to the front. His work with me was relaxed, but he used to spend days without seeing his soldier friends, and that was what he found hard to bear. At first he was grateful to me for the risk-free job I had given him, but I guess his comrades started to pull his leg about it and tell him off about it soon after, though. Wouldn't any soldier with dignity rather stomp from hill to hill firing shots rather than working to the orders of a man of the theatre like me? It was true that a carpenter stood no risk of being hit by a stray bullet, but, apart from that, and hot meals, there was nothing else that made up for being teased by his pals.

"*Allons-y!*"² The throne there, right in the middle of the stage. Have you put what I said... Those things..." And I left it at that, unable to remember the word.

"Pegs? No, I haven't put any pegs on, I've thought of something better", the carpenter answered." He wasn't a good speaker: his voice used to crack when he spoke loud, and fade away when he lowered it.

He walked to the side of the stage and, bending down, lifted a chair dressed up as a throne up onto the stage. He turned it upside down and showed me its legs. There were four thick, twenty-centimetre tall blocks attached to a platform as wide as the throne, and which raised it up.

He went to the middle of the stage and placed the throne there.

“Isn’t it too high?”

“Look at it yourself.”

He asked me to try it out. I checked to see if it wobbled, turned away from it and, standing on tiptoes, sat on it. My legs were in the air, not touching the stage.

“That’ll be enough, yes. And it seems safe”, I told the carpenter, turning round to look at him, and checking that my head was higher than his. Leaning back in the throne, I looked up at the sky. There was no mist, it was neither hot nor cold; it was pleasant weather. “*Pas d’excuse!*”³. I thought. “Today’s show has to go without a hitch.”

I got down from the throne and pointed at the sides of the curtain. The space on the stage was neither large nor comfortable, but I wanted to make it practical.

“The blue curtain has to reach both edges of the stage.”

With a light breeze blowing the curtain around a bit, it looked wider than the stage.

The carpenter looked towards the barracks. A soldier was making signs at him from over there. The carpenter shrugged and shook his head. He grimaced in regret at his soldier friend. Then, his hands back on the job and looking pensive, he joined things up and sawed others apart until the two curtains reached either side of the stage.

“Anything else?” he asked me looking like he couldn’t wait to get away.

“*Allez-y, allez-y!*”⁴ I said kindly. He was doing very good work for me, and I had nothing to complain about. “But I want you back here after lunch. I don’t want any last minute surprises”, I added.

3 French: “No excuses”

4 French: “Off you go!”

“You’ll have to do without me for a while.” The carpenter shrugged and looked towards the marquee. “We have to check the barbed wire pen. The more prisoners there are, the greater the risk of a mutiny and an escape.”

“Barbed wire pens!” I mumbled angrily.

The carpenter hadn’t been able to do his work properly for the last ten days, but I just had to put up with that; regular soldiers’ work always took priority over artistic tasks even though the art was helping them to get through the war.

I realised the carpenter was still there. He seemed to be waiting for me to say something. I didn’t have any authority, but he didn’t seem to have taken that in. Or he just wanted to get on with me: putting planks of wood together is always easier than carrying a rifle on your back.

“Go on, off you go”, I said and waved him away.

“You’ve had worse work than this for a long time now.”

He ran down the steps two at a time to the ground, and lifted his hand in farewell.

I didn’t answer; I was looking at the coat of arms-like Christogram again.

IHS

I thought about the anachronism again. *Iesus Hominum Salvator* or *In Hoc Signo vinces*? Which Christogram had Joan of Arc been familiar with? If she had ever seen either of them. I didn’t want to be anachronistic. I opened and closed the curtains a few times. They went smoothly along the rail. Feeling satisfied, I chuckled to myself. The Christogram’s historical accuracy, the blocks under the throne, the way the curtains were working... Who else at the camp was going to look at details only I cared about? What did they care about petty things like that in the middle of a war?

I shivered, but not because of the weather: there was still no sign of autumn beneath Lizarrusti mountain, and the curtains at the side of the stage moved in the sweet, sultry heat.

Two bird-brained looking men dressed in military costume as if they were performing in a pantomime came to visit me. I had to stop myself from laughing. The elder of the two had a sword hanging from his waist, and he had a sprig of mint between his lips. His comrade had a file under his arm. I didn't know them. The man with the sword introduced himself, and then his comrade. Colonel Urbina. Aide-de-camp Lizartza. Carlist soldiers.

They showed me their identity documents.

I still didn't understand what those men were doing in my house, man of the theatre as I am.

Urbina spoke:

"We bring an offer from the Carlist leaders."

"An offer... for a man of the theatre?" I asked in astonishment at the extraordinary offer.

I took them to the sitting room. Dark rooms are hard to light on dark days, and I had to light the two oil lamps. Then I took the great Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* and a blanket from the only armchair in the room, and asked them to be seated. Colonel Urbina gave Aide-de-camp Lizartza his sword. Then, lifting and holding his cape from one side, he sat down in the only armchair in the room. I sat on a wicker chair. Lizartza stayed standing up.

It was cold in the room, and the colonel rubbed his hands together, and then rubbed them on his knees.

"You must have something to drink, gentlemen", I said, and they both looked toward the sideboard. "Some wine or some brandy; I must have something."

Lizartza spoke for the first time. His frog-like eyes were wide open:

“Actually, we are thirsty. This kennel is at the edge of beyond!” Lizartza blurted out. He made it very clear he hadn’t eaten and needed some refreshment by rubbing his stomach.

Urbina looked at him in a way that would have melted a stone. The aide-de-camp only held his look for a few seconds. Then he lowered his gaze and withdrew into himself like a drenched horse-fly.

“Well, what can you do about that?”, I thought. “Issues between soldiers always come down to this.”

And so I was quite sure who I had to pay homage to, and to whom I should show my respect.

I took a bottle of wine from the sideboard, and looked at Lizartza from the corner of my eye. There was fury in his gaze.

I started to pour some wine for Urbina:

“It isn’t claret, but these red wines from Languedoc aren’t at all bad.”

Urbina took the sprig of mint from between his teeth. I held a saucer out to him, and he rubbed the mint against it and left it there. Then he held the glass up to his lips, dampened them, and ran the tip of his tongue along them. He took a mouthful of wine and moved it around, filling his cheeks out, before he drank it down in one. Then he nodded in approval.

Seeing that, I offered the aide-de-camp some wine. He shook his head. My laughter almost showed in my eyes.

Urbina was talking about all sorts of things. In bursts. He told me again that they were Carlist soldiers, telling me some details about a dynastic war that I didn’t understand too well as if his mouth were an unstoppable fountain of words.

I didn't understand half of what he was telling me, and the other half I didn't want to understand. I was astonished that they had come from Bordeaux to Montpellier to visit me when I hardly knew anything about the Carlists or their war; and when I heard that they wanted to offer me a job I understood even less. If they had looked into me, they would have known that I had got out of doing military service thanks to the money of a capricious, rich lover of mine back then, that I liked night-life, and war not at all.

Urbina kept on saying all sorts of things, but hopping around like a bird from branch to branch, as if he had forgotten that he meant to make me a proposal. I was minding my own business, unable to guess what that might be or why they might have chosen me. Maybe that was what Urbina was looking for: he wanted to make me nervous by awakening my curiosity.

And then, all of a sudden, he stopped, and then went on as if he had read my mind:

“At this rate we’re never going to tell you why we’ve come to see you.”

He had another drink of wine with just as much ceremony as the first time: after moving the wine around in his mouth, he drank it down all in one.

“We want you for a theatrical tour”, said Urbina, making a sign to his aide-de-camp and pointing at the file under his arm. The latter loosened the pieces of string around it and gave the colonel a thick piece of card which was folded in half.

Urbina carefully unfolded in on the sitting-room table. His hands were weathered and the veins stood out; the expression on his lips and in his eyes was that of somebody used to giving orders.

He moved his index finger over the mountain contours on the piece of card.

“These are the places and towns where you’ll be working. They’re beautiful. Maybe a little too rural-smelling for an *homme du monde*⁵ such as yourself.”

I could hardly stop myself from smiling at his French pronunciation.

I looked at the map. I could hardly read the names on it, they were tongue-twisters for me: Murugarren, Uribarri, Zudaire, Arruazu, Lakuntza... Those names brought back the vague notions about that savage, retrograde war I had picked up in Paris bars: a royal pretender named Charles and his adolescent-like wounded pride, and his passionate followers; the inexcusable deeds of an armed priest which read like something from an adventure story; platoons of soldiers who were said to have a gun in one hand and a rosary in the other...

“These *illettré* and *débraillé*⁶ farmers want to use my art to bring some charm to their war! What an idea! They’d better go and ask somebody else!” I thought angrily.

“You’ve made a mistake. I’m not the person you’re looking for”, I told them coldly and with great courtesy.

Urbina took his white gloves off, tucked them under his chin, and brought out a small leather bag. Then he loosened the string at its top, and poured a few ounces of gold onto the table. Aide-de-camp Lizartza’s hand raced towards the table in a swift reflex action to make sure they wouldn’t fall onto the floor. It looked as if he had been afraid they’d get lost under some of the furniture. He was like a dog accustomed to obey his master: Whatever Urbina needed, Lizartza was there to make it happen to the best of his ability.

“Perhaps if I knew what you wanted...”, I said with a slight tremor in my voice. I wasn’t used to seeing so much money and, bearing in mind I was a man of the theatre, I was doing a very bad job at hiding my surprise.

Urbina took his gloves from under his chin and pointed at the ounces without any malice:

5 * French: *Man of the world*

6 * French: *uneducated; dishevelled*

“Count them. There are fifty”, he said, and looked at his aide-de-camp: “You, that’s what you’d do, isn’t it?”

The way they treated each other was both comical and insulting, and, at the same time, it made me feel uncomfortable.

“You, what are you waiting for?” he said while looking at the pile of ounces on the table.

His aide-de-camp, without saying a word, started counting the money and putting the ounces into piles of ten.

“Fifty”, he said, and the words sounded frozen as they came out. I looked from one of them to the other to gain time.

The colonel was looking at me. His aide-de-camp was looking at the ounces as if it was his job to guard them.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand... That money...” And, taking air into one side of my mouth, I puffed my cheeks out in the way that actors do to show bewilderment. I picked an ounce up and looked at the shiny metal without enthusiasm. “Can you guarantee that this money...?”

Urbina didn’t let me finish the question.

“You want to know whether it’s clean money, of course, that’s understandable”, and he tapped me on the knee. “It’s Spanish money, but money doesn’t take sides”, *mon ami*.⁷ But if you’d rather be paid with French money, just say so, and we’ll sort that out quickly.”

I still didn’t understand a thing. Why would those idiots from a war between two royal pretenders want to give a *metteur en scène*⁸ so much money? What type of work did they want to get me to do? Did they want me to be their pretender’s

7 French: “my friend”.

8 French: stage director

double? I'd heard his name for the first time fifteen minutes earlier, I'd heard that he was a pretender to the throne of Spain fifteen minutes earlier. What on earth did they want to ask me for in return for so much money?

I remembered the Polish actor Waczinsky. They had kidnapped him in Paris and taken him to Krakow to play the double of a soldier who took part in the 1861 uprising, but he had fallen into the hands of czar Alexander II's army executioners. They shot him, taking him to be the soldier in rebellion. Five or six months after that, shortly after the uprising had been put down, Alexander II declared an amnesty for several of the rebels, including Waczinsky, the executed actor, the substitute soldier. Urbina's astonishing words brought me out from my reflections:

"You'll get the same amount of ounces every month", he blurted out, enjoying the way what he said was going to affect me. His smile was now completely that of a winner, with the hurtful disdain of the powerful saying to the vanquished: "You've lost, you fool!"

No, I couldn't hide my joy. *Mon Dieu!*⁹ Six hundred ounces every year!

But looking at so much money with distrust, I tapped my foot on the floor and looked at Urbina. I looked at him, and tried to read something from his gestures. Calmness. Self-confidence. Control of the situation, like a stage director. But that calmness of his made me nervous. I could see a wall somewhere in the colonel's performance. And the thing was I didn't know what there was behind that wall.

"There's nothing for you to worry about, Vincent", Urbina said to me in a relaxed tone of voice.

I didn't know what there was behind the colonel's wall, but it seemed he was seeing all my thoughts one by one, as if he were looking on from a box at the theatre and smoking a cigar.

9 *French: My God*

After a moment, the colonel started speaking again in his relaxed tone of voice.

“This is a chance you’ll never have again. Don’t miss it.” He paused, but without looking away from me. The need I felt to control all my gestures was making me nervous. “We’re not going to ask you to do anything that’s beyond your ability. Say yes, and you won’t regret it. We Basques are known for keeping our word.”

I raised my voice to make a show of my dignity, but, instead of protesting, I sounded like a nervous chicken:

“I have to say yes without knowing what you want me for? What an idea! As if I had anything to do with or anything to gain in that *vulgaire* war of yours!”

“You obviously have something to do with it, and, above all, something to gain!”, and he pointed at the ounces with his white gloves. “But don’t worry: we aren’t going to make you defend any god other than those ounces. We’ll take care of that defence work ourselves.”

Urbina raised his eyes and gloves towards the ceiling in a theatrical gesture.

I’ve never liked Holy Joes, but the words of the Carlist soldiers opposite me sounded of the clink of gold, without having the perfume of incense. I opened my arms and started to make a reverence in the way that actors accept the spectators’ applause.

“*Alors* ¹⁰, maybe I’m as mad as you gentlemen are, but let me hear that proposal of yours once and for all.”

Urbina’s way of speaking changed completely, and he started speaking as if he were giving some soldiers their orders, in full control of his own strength and judgement:

10 French: *Well*

“We want you to direct a *pièce de théâtre*¹¹ to entertain our troops”, Urbina said clearly, pronouncing the French expression without a foreign accent. “You will choose your actors from among the soldiers, along with everything else you need: extras and tailors, a carpenter, musicians...”

I looked at the ounces on the table. I looked at all those ounces stacked in five shiny piles. All I had to do was stretch my hand out.

I could feel something pinching inside me, and I started speaking as if they’d put pepper on my tongue:

“*Allez au diable!*”¹² I ground my teeth, swore and stood up. “I’m prepared to listen to any sort of idiocy. I’d be ready to dance for the devil himself for that money. I don’t have that many scruples, and I’m well aware those ounces aren’t going to freeze in winter or melt in summer. But please: *Pas de blagues!*”¹³ The door’s over there.”

Lizartza stuck his neck out and, closing his fists, took two steps towards me. He looked at Urbina as if to ask him for permission to beat me up:

“I told you we’d manage, colonel. What do we need some Frenchman’s dumb stories for? I could make up better ones!”

“Silence, you buzzard! Has the devil given you verbal diarrhoea?”, Urbina said furiously.

Lizartza stood to attention immediately. His teeth were firmly closed, his eyes on fire, and his nostrils ablaze. It was hard, but he quickly reined in his inner anger: he was like a dog who had seen a piece of bone but which, having just been beaten, cowered.

Urbina, too, stood up. Straight as a rod, and with his chest out, he did up the buttons on his cape. He made as if to leave, without any irritation, as if nobody

11 French: *play*

12 French: *Go to hell!*

13 French: *Don’t pull my leg*

was kicking him out of the house. Lizartza gave him his sword back. Then he picked the map up, folded it, and put it back in the file.

The ounces of gold were still on the table. He would pack those up soon too.

Seeing how my fortune was fading away, I felt a chill on my soul, as if a cold wind were seeking refuge in my bones.

I went up to Urbina and took hold of his elbow: I knew I was about to do something mad, but my heart was dreaming of those ounces of gold. But there are some junctures in life in which words of gold are more important than those ounces there on the table. That was one such moment, and, fool that I was, my behaviour was more innocent than that of some dumb animal.

Armed with humility, I did all I could to show some dignity on my lips. If I wanted to own the ounces, I was going to have to use golden words.

I spoke to him with humility:

“These are hard times for all of us, sir... Really difficult times. If money and honour are worth anything, it is after doing good work. Which is why, sir, I would like to know what guarantee you offer me, and I’m not talking about those ounces on the table but, rather, about the helpers I will need in order to carry my artistic work out properly”, I said measuring out my every word.

Although his lips were trembling, his words burst out with the strength of a sudden summer storm:

“The guarantee given by a Carlist!”

There was a deep silence in the room, and the light of the lamps grew heavier between us.

I felt as if I was at a wake.