

ONE

He was already the talk of the town when I first met him.

I remember it well. We were halfway through the course of '67 and he was studying to be an agricultural auditor to better manage his properties. I was studying civil law. Armengol, back then my closest friend, came as he did every evening to my lodgings to take a stroll after supper. There had been shots fired on the Rambla the night before and, such was the atmosphere in those days, there were likely to be more that night.

'You know where we could go this evening?' said Armengol as we walked down the street. 'The Cafè de les Delícies. Daniel Serrallonga is there, and I know you want to meet him. If you want, I'll introduce you both. All I ask is that should he say anything stupid, try not to laugh and leave him to me. He never gets angry with me. I charm him, as they say these days, and he doesn't even realise it.'

'Well, then, it's decided,' I said, happier even than if I had been invited to go to the Romea Theatre where, back then, the great Fontova would make me laugh so much that tears would roll down my face.

Off we went, not stopping until we got to the rotunda at the

back of the café, then one of Barcelona's finest. We paused to survey the scene from behind the partition screen in the entrance hall, but Serrallonga was nowhere to be seen.

'Damn him!' Armengol hissed. 'He's probably off gambling.'

'What? He gambles too?' I said.

'Ha! Like a villain. He loves it.'

'Look, look carefully,' I pleaded, desperate not to miss out on the entertainment I had been promised that evening.

We scoured the hallway in front of the columns that held up the mezzanine floor and systematically scrutinised every last person sitting at the tables there, arguing amongst themselves or reading the newspaper. It was just beginning to dawn on me that there was an abundance of men and a strange lack of women there that evening when Armengol let out a five-second-long, 'Well.' I looked over and saw that it was directed towards a fellow just off to the side who, sitting under the magnificent cut-crystal chandelier hanging in the middle of the room, had his head buried in a newspaper that he held out vertically just in front of his nose. The only thing I could make of him were his hands. Armengol went over to him and, greeting him in the most alarming way possible, gave the newspaper a sharp whack in front of his face. The poor recipient jumped out of his skin as if bitten by a snake. Those long, knotted hands I had been looking at quickly went rigid. The left one gripped the newspaper to one side while the other grabbed, mace-like, the closest glass bottle to hand. With the same movement the tall man reared up in a rage, his eyes popping out of his head and his glasses crooked on his nose, looking around for the insolent culprit.

What a devil! I thought as I rushed over to try to stop any trouble. How could he do such a thing? But before I had gone five paces, I saw the danger ebb away. Armengol, with but a flash of his

ever-friendly smile, had already excused himself. And Serrallonga, clearly disarmed by what he realised was nothing more than a friendly joke, calmed down, dropped the bottle and was happy to deal with the situation by threatening his friend with a slap across the face.

‘I’ll clobber you right this moment, simpleton!’ laughed Serrallonga. ‘I wasn’t expecting you. I thought it was some rude reactionary, perhaps some neo who was mortified to see me reading the *Gil Blas*.’

Armengol then introduced me and he and I sat down on either side of Serrallonga, clicking our fingers to get the waiter to serve us a coffee and a glass of something stronger.

Daniel Serrallonga was older than us and must have then been around twenty-five years old. But his pale, hollow face, thick, unruly beard and short, auburn hair made him look a lot older. His eyes, round and grey and hardly visible through the thick glass of his gold-rimmed pince-nez, ever balanced on the bridge of his hooked, flared and twisted nose, added years to him or, at least, provided him with an air of being of a somewhat undefinable age due to his clear lack of youth and the veil of sadness that they conferred on him. He had a big crown with a large, protruding forehead and bushy eyebrows. When listening or thinking his eyes would roll back into his head, hiding his pupils so that only the whites were showing, and the vein on his forehead and wrinkle between his eyebrows would swell and light up as if suddenly congested. He was a lanky man who dressed shabbily and was conspicuous for his terrible taste in ties, all of which were bright in colour and poorly knotted. Generally hot-blooded, he wore his hat pushed back on his head, wide open collars, and never wore gloves or any kind of coat, regardless of how cold it was. But in a surprising contradiction that was the result of ever feeling the need to harmonise his continuous internal agitation with the

untiring movement of his limbs, his trousers were always tight and his jacket buttoned-up to the collar so as carry handkerchiefs, books and newspapers in his pockets. He carried an iron-handled cane wherever he went and was never seen without a yellow-stained pipe sticking out of his mouth. If you ever saw him walking in the street, he was often alone with a worried look on his face and would be in such a rush that sweat would drip profusely from his forehead, neck and wrists. He was, in fact, the very person whose strange behaviour I had been told about from time to time by Armengol over the years.

‘What, are we all stone broke? Have you lost all your money? Is that why you’re here?’ said Armengol, pinching Serrallonga’s arm. Serrallonga flinched and his glasses wobbled.

‘Just you see what happens if you break them!’ exclaimed Serrallonga, setting the spectacles more firmly on his nose.

‘What ever do you mean?’ asked Armengol, insolently.

‘I mean, I’ll make you pay for them.’

‘What cheek! Would you really? What a *fantastic* friend you are!’ Serrallonga paused for a moment before smiling and quickly taking off his glasses, which he then handed over to my friend in a gesture of false dignity.

‘Here, have them, you fool! If you insist on taking me so seriously, then smash them yourself.’

Seeing that Armengol, in response, was going to put the glasses carefully back in their rightful place, Serrallonga grabbed them off him and, greatly exaggerating their deteriorating friendship, started to insist that he break them.

My eyes grew wide and I bit my lip, but I couldn’t stop myself from laughing out loud. Armengol, pretending to take the glasses and smash them on the floor, finally stood up and surprised Serrallonga with a hug before placing the glasses firmly on their owner’s nose.

‘So, tell me,’ he repeated. ‘Are you broke or what?’

Poor Daniel turned an embarrassed shade of red at the thought of having to talk about his vices in front of me. As if looking for some way to avoid the question, he bowed his head and stayed silent as he emptied his pipe onto the copy of *Gil Blas* that he had left on the table.

‘Come on old chap! This fellow’s one of us,’ said Armengol, trying to defuse the awkwardness. ‘You can tell us. Do you think he’s going to go off to your village and tell everyone? You’d know if he was from Vilaniu or not! And you’d better believe that you’re the first person from Vilaniu he’s ever met. Isn’t that right?’

‘Well,’ said Serrallonga, uncomfortably. ‘Why do you want to know if I have money or not? What should I want from you? What do you want from me?’

‘No, it’s rather what I could offer you,’ said Armengol.

‘Well thank you. But save your money for a rainy day.’

And as if expecting some kind of applause, he turned to face me and burst out laughing. The teaspoon that, at that moment, I had wedged between my lips meant I wasn’t able to humour him and, as I slyly observed him from over the metal handle, I saw in his grinning face that vague sadness that so often betrays the vanity of someone who, in trying to be funny and quick-witted, knows they have failed.

Serrallonga, according to Armengol, was quite the lunatic, shy and prone to the most inexplicable inconsistencies of character. Over the course of the last three years, Armengol had seen Serrallonga go from being a devoted intolerant to a furious rationalist; from an insatiable libertine to holier than a saint; from a hardworking, distrustful miser to the archetypal gambler; from a bookish, first class student to someone who had not read a single book or stepped foot in any classroom throughout the whole course. You wouldn’t

know him from one day to the next and because of all this his fellow students had given him the nickname *Bandereta*.

But it was when talking about politics that Serrallonga really got going. Back then, the disturbances that were to consume Spain the coming year were getting worse and the fights between the liberals and the conservatives had taken on a worrying animosity. The conservatives, supported by the military led by General Narváez, and the clericalism introduced into the Royal Palace in Madrid by Father Claret and Sister Patrocini, had taken on a certain dictatorial edge as they persecuted, imprisoned and summarily banished anyone and everyone who represented any kind of force or direction within the three Spanish liberal parties. The oppression fomented hatred and ignited a spirit of revolution in the supporters of those being persecuted. Instead of dissipating, the storm clouds grew larger and ever more charged until General Prim, back then the idol of the Catalan youth, found himself having to flee the country. This was despite his being a hero from the African War and a diplomat of such high standing that, in accordance with the wishes of the government and against his own council, he had led the Spanish expedition into Mexico.

Serrallonga, politically indifferent up to then, was so incensed by the scandal that he became a firm supporter of the revolution.

'I read newspapers and more newspapers and get angry: that's all I do these days!'

'Don't get so worked up, old chap,' said Armengol in his own shrewd way, while at the same time flashing me a glance that said: Here we go, he's hooked. Listen up.

'Ye Gods! Do you think I have no blood in my veins? Have you not heard about the shots fired on the Rambla yesterday? Was this why the Mossos de l'Esquadra was created? To shoot at people

in the streets? What sly dogs! Honest to God, they don't consider us human beings! I mean, are we going to let them treat us like pariahs, like slaves? Can't you see that this can't be tolerated? What a child you are!

'So, what do you suggest? As if we could do anything ourselves!'

Serrallonga stopped talking and stared at Armengol, his eyes yellow with concentrated rage and a look of disdain on his lips.

'You'll see what we'll do when we're united,' he said in a low, trembling voice.

Armengol and I struggled to keep our faces straight. What with both of us being quite indifferent to the whole thing, the entire conspiracy seemed rather pointless.

'Oh! Don't laugh, no, at this whole palace business. We'll end up having to beat her out of there with broomsticks and, if not ... then we'll man the cannons!'

'It's all the clergy's fault,' I said in parody of a phrase that until then had been fashionable with the lower-class revolutionaries.

'And still they argue!' cried Serrallonga as he stared at me in such a threatening way that it almost scared me. 'The clergy seems to want round two of what happened in '35. They most likely don't remember what happened to the priests. If you keep squeezing, squeezing ... once the majority have taken up arms, then we'll see. Prim conspires. You'll see what happens when the people are armed! A line needs to be drawn in the sand! A line! The coup is coming!'

Despite coming from Vilaniu, well-known as a town of shouters, Serrallonga usually spoke in a low voice. But in this particular case he found himself raising his voice higher and higher until he reached a point that, in light of the times, started to get rather imprudent, especially considering what he was talking about and the fact that we were surrounded by people we didn't know. In view of this,

Armengol and I started to regret having teased him into his tirade. We glanced around at the faces of the people who, in the middle of the hustle and bustle of the conversations around the room, were closest to us and therefore best able to pick up what our friend was saying. It was then I noticed that the noise in the room was growing in a strange crescendo until suddenly all eyes converged on the entrance and the room fell silent. We looked over and saw the Commander of the Mossos, a tall, large, well-built man with an air of such calmness about him that he looked like someone who had just come to drink a coffee in his favourite bar. He appeared at the entrance dressed, as ever, in an austere turquoise-blue uniform with silver buttons. Walking immediately over to the table in the middle of room, he hadn't yet taken his chair when everybody at the table, without hesitation and as if obeying some mysterious order, suddenly stood up in unison. He stopped where he was and cast an accusing eye around the room in surprise, soon seeing that wherever his gaze fell, the people who met it stood up. Bemused he sat down in defiance of his audience.

'Ah! Not you,' simmered the crowd in silence. 'We won't drink coffee with you, or even in the same room as you, murderer of the people!'

And again, that mysterious common impulse drove everybody away from the tables and upstairs into the round gallery. The ground floor was left deserted except for the Commander and the waiter who, with clenched teeth, quickly served him his coffee. Once alone, the Commander placed his spoon in his cup and, calmly stirring, looked up with disdainful eyes and a disgusting smile on his face to the crowd of people who were now looking down on him. An almighty cry went up.

'Viva la llibertat!'

‘Death to the murderer!’

‘You’re not welcome here, bully!’

‘Snake!’

‘Brute!’

‘Traitor!’

‘Go to hell!’

Women at the back of the group fainted or ran out screaming while the men, fired up by the tremendous outburst, shouted and cheered and brandished their canes. They continued to threaten the Commander, shaking their clenched fists at him until, having calmly finished his coffee, he got up and shouted towards the crowd:

‘Cowards! If any of you want a piece of me, then come on down!’

‘I’ll have a piece of you!’ shouted Serrallonga in a hoarse voice. ‘I’ll eat your damn liver!’

But just as he tried to barge and elbow his way through the crowd, a worrying looking whirlpool of people started to make its way towards us, gaining in strength. The decorative handrail started shaking dangerously, the women’s screams got louder, the sound of firearms filled the air and four pairs of vigorous *Guàrdia Civil* hands pushed through the crowd of people.

Intent on grabbing our friend, they moved towards us in the midst of a maelstrom of shouts, whistles and threats, mixed in with the jeers aimed at the Mossos Commander as he walked triumphantly out of the ground floor hall, parting the crowd that had barred the entrance.

‘Cowards!’ shouted Serrallonga, still with the Commander in view and furiously pushing away a truncheon. ‘Grab him! Kill him!’

‘Kill him! Kill him!’ came the useless cry echoing from various other voices.

‘Hey! Enough! Enough now!’ shouted a towering *Guàrdia Civil*

sergeant next to me as he stretched out his arm towards our friend and practically dislocated my ribs with the weight of his body.

‘Get out, man! Get out while you still can!’ came the shouts from all around.

‘No! Why should I?’ shouted Serrallonga, realising that the raised hands and voices were meant for him. ‘Why? Because of the Guàrdia Civil? If they want to arrest me, then they can arrest me! Here I am!’

‘No, no, no!’ responded the crowd.

‘Yes! I’m telling you! Yes! Or are we all chicken?’ yelled Serrallonga, bravely sticking out his chest and pushing himself towards the sergeant. ‘Sergeant, I’m here, arrest me!’

They arrested him there and then, and that’s how Serrallonga found himself imprisoned in the old tower of the Ciutadella. But so preoccupied was he by his rôle as martyr that he wasn’t able to comprehend the quite natural distress that led his father, Ignasi, to leave Vilaniu as fast as he could and head off to Madrid in the hope of pulling the few strings he still had in order to get his poor boy out of jail.

We visited him almost every afternoon. He was radiant, brimming with joy at his good fortune and more than happy to tell us, along with an air of commiseration, all about the joys of captivity for those who hate tyranny as much as he did. There within that damp, moss-covered dungeon, lit only by a few rays of light that squeezed in through a slit of only five hand widths high up in the ceiling, Serrallonga would strain his eyes in the semi-dark and write down in pencil manifestos, verses and revolutionary articles on pieces of paper that we would pass him when the guards were distracted. The next day he would pass the papers back to us through the bars so that we could publish them. Armengol and I would take great

amusement from reading his puerile exaggerations and not for one moment did it cross our minds to take these snippets and formally present them to a newspaper. So as not to deprive him of the joy that these pieces of paper gave him, however, we told him that they were all being published under varying degrees of cover, and that they were gaining a great deal of attention. At first, the news simply made him happy; later it led him to greater delusions of grandeur.

‘What a pity,’ he said one day. ‘That such caution is required of us (even though it wasn’t at all necessary). Because of the jailer’s vigilance these papers must be published without my signature! What greater prestige they would have if only the people knew that they came from this prisoner! The man who got revenge for the victims of the Mossos de l’Esquadra!’

He seemed to me to be genuinely shocked. His face, pressed up and quartered against the prison bars, seemed so swollen and sad that I was rather disgusted by the sight of him. Though this feeling was most probably caused by my pained reaction to his inconceivable pretensions.

‘Well,’ said Armengol, never willing to let up, ‘you could always sign them under a pseudonym. And then on your day of triumph you could cast it off as if it were a mask. That way it would be the same as if you had signed your own name from the very beginning.’

Serrallonga, drawing on all of the ideas that he had picked up from the magazines he read at that time, replied to Armengol in a bombastic tone.

‘Oh, come on! That would be like belittling a saint at the altar. Popular fanaticism is always moved more by personalities than by arguments, something that people will never understand. The anonymous hero has never awoken any idolatry, without idolatry there are no fanatics, and without fanatics there are no revolutions. Reasons,

reasons... for the people! Someone, I can't remember who, once said: "Reason is a two-handed saucepan that each person picks up as they see fit". The people look for which handle their idols have grabbed, they obsess after that one and care not for anything else. I'm telling you, if my publications so far have made ten converts, they would have made ten million if the people knew from whom and where they came.'

Armengol urged him to speak in hushed tones for a while longer, ridiculing the jailer who was supposedly listening closely to us but who was really keeping as far away from the prisoner as he could.

'Always... scoundrels! Always!' exclaimed the poor prisoner.

We went back to what we were talking about before and agreed that all of our revolutionary's political venting would from then on be published under the rather brilliant pseudonym *El Barricadero*, a name of Armengol's creation.

As we were leaving, I admitted to being quite scandalised by Serrallonga's high opinion of himself and how he was elevating his childish prank from Café de les Delícies to heroics. Armengol laughed.

'He's a visionary, man! He's a special case! And he'll always see himself like that. Look at how easily he thinks that we'll publish his nonsense!'

'And don't you think it's rather terrible of us to let him believe we would? What if tomorrow he's released, and he sees we've been lying?'

'Oh, come on, man! Meanwhile he's happy and we keep him busy. This is why I'm doing it in the first place. Perhaps this time in prison and the disappointment that it brings will cure him of his innate silliness.'

'He thinks he's some kind of celebrated avenger and focus of

popular idolatry! Oh, of course, of course!

And so, instead of sharing a deep sense of compassion with our imprisoned comrade as we should have done, we went home laughing like the two boys we were. Things carried on in this way until early one afternoon Armengol appeared on my doorstep with a larger than normal smile on his face.

'You will never guess who came to visit me just three hours ago!' he exclaimed. 'The *Bandereta, El Barricadero*, our very own Daniel Serrallonga!'

'What do you mean?' I replied sleepily, watching the hailstorm clouds that had been gathering in the sky above us for the last few hours.

Armengol collapsed into my rocking chair and, rolling the cane he had on his lap between his palms, told me in fits of laughter about the meeting he and Serrallonga had just had. Apparently, Serrallonga had come running up the stairs unaware of the natural stiffness that legs suffer from after two months under lock and key and had reached Armengol's flat on the fourth floor in a terrible state of near exhaustion. Armengol, seeing his friend in that way and taking it for emotion, got emotional himself and, with tears in his eyes, reached out his arms and embraced him. Serrallonga, however, pushed him away and sat down to catch his breath. He wiped the sweat off his brow, neck and wrists and, once he had cooled down, asked with anxious, impatient eyes for the scraps of paper with his writings and the newspapers in which they had been published. Ever untroubled by these sorts of things, Armengol had been putting off inventing an excuse until the announcement of Serrallonga's release and so was rather stuck for words. He chewed it over briefly, biting down hard on his bottom lip and all the while staring at the new cane that the ex-prisoner had bought and was now shoving up against his ribs.

Serrallonga started to lose his patience at the dithering and demanded again to see the beloved papers he had been dreaming about and which he had come to collect.

‘So, where are they? Didn’t you tell me you were saving them? Come on, get them out.’

‘Yes, but... yes, but...’, stammered Armengol.

‘But what?’ replied Serrallonga, tersely.

‘But should you really be taking them, considering the atmosphere these days?’

‘Oh, come on! Don’t worry about that, you invertebrate! Look, give them to me. In fifteen minutes I have to be at the inn to meet my father. Listen to this: he says that he has promised the general to keep me at his side at all times and that I have to go back to Vilaniu!’

‘Ah!’ said Armengol, feeling a little more relaxed. ‘I’ve got it! I’ve got it! Thank God!’ He turned to face Serrallonga. ‘I mean, you’re going? I’m so sorry to hear that! But I’ll be sure to send them to you.’

‘What?’ said Serrallonga. ‘Why? Give them to me now, man! This is why I’ve come. I’ll take them myself. They won’t find them because they won’t search me, I assure you. But at least let me see them. I understand why you wouldn’t bring them to the prison, but don’t deny me them now. Come on!’

‘No, no. I won’t deny you them.’

‘So?’

‘It’s just that I don’t have them here on me. The truth is that so as to afford them the greatest possible diffusion, I left them with a friend.’

‘As God is my witness! And if he loses them?’

‘No, old chap! Of course not. Just you relax. I’ll be sure to send them to you.’

‘It’d be easier to go and get them now. Let’s go. I’ll accompany you.’

Armengol told me that he had to spend another fifteen minutes inventing excuses and subterfuge so as to worm his way out of the situation and drop poor Daniel off at the inn, instilled with the hope of receiving in Vilaniu something that did not exist.