

Juan Darien

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Here is told the story of a tiger who was reared and educated among men, and who was called Juan Darien. He went to school for four years dressed in pants and shirt, and he recited his lessons correctly, though he was a tiger of the jungles; but this was owing to the fact that he was in appearance a human being, as is told in the following lines.

Once upon a time, at the beginning of autumn, the smallpox visited a town in a far-off country and killed many people. Brothers lost their sisters, and little children just learning to walk were left without father or mother. Mothers in turn lost their children, and one poor mother, young and widow, herself carried out her little child, the only one she had in the world, to bury it. When she returned home, she sat and thought of her little one. And she murmured:

"God ought to have had pity on me, and he has taken my child.

There may be angels in heaven, but my child doesn't know them. The person whom he knows best is me. My poor child!"

And she looked off into the distance, for she was seated in back of her house by a gate that gave a view of the jungle.

In the jungle there were many fierce animals that would roar at nightfall and at dawn. And the poor woman, who was still sitting there, spied in the darkness a wobbly little thing that came in through the gate, like a kitten that hardly had the strength to walk. The woman bent down and picked up in her hands a little tiger that was only a few days old, for its eyes were still closed. And when the miserable cub felt the contact of her hands it purred from happiness, for it was no longer alone. For a long time the mother held suspended in the air that little enemy of man, that defenseless little wild beast that she could so easily have exterminated. But she hesitated pensive before the helpless cub that had come from who knows where and whose mother was undoubtedly dead. Without well considering what she was doing she brought the little cub to her breast and wrapped it in her big hands. And the little tiger, feeling the warmth of her bosom, snuggled down, purred peacefully, and went to sleep with its throat at the maternal breast.

The woman, still pensive, went into the house. And for the rest of the night, each time she heard the cub moan with hunger and saw how it sought her breast with its closed eyes, she felt in her wounded heart that, before the supreme law of the Universe, one life was the same as another...

And she gave suck to the little tiger.

The cub was rescued, and the mother had found an immense consolation. Her consolation was so great that she looked forward with terror to the time when the creature would be torn away from her, for if it became known in the town that she was sucking a wild animal they would certainly kill the little beast. What could she do? The cub, gentle and affectionate – for it would play with her at her breast – was now her own child.

Circumstances standing thus, a man who passed the woman's house at a run one rainy night heard a harsh moaning – the hoarse growl with which wild beasts, even

when newborn, frighten human beings. The man stopped abruptly and pounded on the door as he groped for his revolver. The mother had heard his footsteps and ran, mad with anguish, to hide the little tiger in the garden. But her good fortune willed that on opening the back door she found herself face to face with a gentle, old, and wise serpent who blocked her path. The unfortunate woman was about to scream in terror when the serpent spoke to her thus:

"Do not be afraid, woman," it said, "Your mother's heart has enabled you to save a life of the Universe, where all lives are of equal value. But men will not understand you and will want to kill your new child. Fear nothing, be at peace. From this moment on, your child will have human shape; they will never recognize him. Form his heart, teach him to be good like you, and he will never know that he is not human. Unless ... unless a human mother denounces him; unless a mother demands that he repay with his blood what you have given for him, your son will always be worthy of you. Be at peace, mother, and hurry, for the man is going to break the door down."

And the mother believed the serpent, for in all the religions of man the serpent knows the mystery of the lives that people the worlds. She ran, then, to open the door and the man, furious, came in with his revolver in his hand and searched everywhere without finding anything. When he left, the mother, trembling, opened the shawl under which she was hiding the little tiger at her breast, and in its place she saw a child sleeping peacefully. Full of happiness, she wept silently for a long time over her wild son turned human; tears of gratitude which twelve years later that same son was to repay with blood over her grave.

Time passed. The new child needed a name; he was named Juan Darien. He needed food, clothing, shoes: he was given all of them, for which purpose the mother worked day and night. She was still quite young and could have married again if she had wanted to; but she was satisfied with the tender love of her son, a love that she returned with all her heart.

Juan Darien was in fact worthy of being loved: more noble, good, and generous than anyone. For his mother, in particular, he had a profound veneration. He never lied. Perhaps because he was at bottom a wild creature? It is possible; for it is not yet known what influence the purity of a soul drunk with the milk at the breast of a holy woman may have on a newborn animal.¹

Such was Juan Darien. And he went to school with the boys of his age, who often made fun of him for his rough hair and his shyness.

Juan Darien was not very intelligent, but he made up for this with his great love for study.

Matters standing thus, when the child was about to turn ten years old his mother died. Juan Darien suffered unspeakably until time assuaged his pain. But from then on he was a sorrowful boy whose only desire was to learn.

There is one thing that we must confess: Juan Darien was not liked in the town. The people of towns closed in by the jungle do not care for boys who are too generous and who devote themselves to their studies with all their soul. He was, moreover, the

best pupil in the school. And these facts together precipitated the denouement with an event that verified the serpent's prophecy.

The town was preparing to celebrate a great festival and fireworks had been ordered from the distant city. In the school there was a general review of the students, for an inspector was to come and observe the classes. When the inspector arrived, the teacher had the best of them all recite – Juan Darien. Juan Darien was the most outstanding pupil, but his emotions under the circumstances caused him to stammer; his tongue got tangled and he made a strange sound.

The inspector watched the student carefully for a long while, then spoke in an undertone to the teacher.

"Who is that boy, he asked. "Where does he come from?"

"His name is Juan Darien," answered the teacher. "He was brought up by a woman who is now dead; nobody knows where he came from."

"He is strange, very strange," murmured the inspector, noticing the rough hair of Juan Darien and the greenish reflections in his eyes when he was in shadow.

The inspector knew that there are things in the world stranger than anything that anyone can invent, and he knew at the same time that he would never be able to find out by asking questions of Juan Darien whether the student had once been what the inspector feared; that is, a wild animal. But just as there are men who, in an abnormal state, can remember things that have happened to their grandfathers, so it was possible that, under the influence of hypnotic suggestion, Juan Darien might remember his life as a wild beast. And any children who may read this and not understand what we are talking about can ask grown-ups about it.²

For this reason the inspector stepped up the platform and spoke thusly:

"Very well, children. Now I want one of you to describe the jungle to us. You have been brought up almost in the jungle and know it well. What is the jungle like? What goes on there? that is what I want to know. Let's see ... you," he added, choosing a student at random, "Come up to the platform and tell us about anything that you may have seen."

The boy came up and, though he was nervous, he spoke for a while.

He said that in the forest there are gigantic trees, vines, and little flowers. When he finished, another boy came to the platform, and then another. And though all of them knew the jungle well, they all answered in the same way, for boys and many men report not what they see, but what they have read, even about things that they have just seen. And at last the inspector said:

"Now it is Juan Darien's turn."

Juan Darien said more or less the same things as the others.

But the inspector, putting his hand on the boy's shoulder, exclaimed: "No, no. I want you to remember well what you have seen.

Close your eyes."

Juan Darien closed his eyes.

"Good," continued the inspector. "Tell me what you see in the jungle."

Juan Darien, his eyes still closed, hesitated a moment before answering.

"I see nothing," he said at last.

"You will see soon. Let us imagine that it is three o'clock in the morning, a little before dawn. We have just finished eating, for example ... We are in the jungle, in the darkness ... Before us is a stream ... What do you see?"

Juan Darien was quiet for a moment. And in the class and in the nearby forest it was very quiet also. Suddenly Juan Darien shuddered, and speaking slowly, as if in a dream, he said:

"I see the stones that I pass and the boughs that bend before me ... and the ground ... and I see the dry leaves that are flattened against the stones ..."

"Just a minute," interrupted the inspector. "The stones and the leaves that you pass – at what height do you see them?"

The inspector asked this because if Juan Darien were in fact

"seeing" what he used to do in the jungle when he was a wild animal and went to drink after having eaten, he would also see that when a tiger or panther, crouching low, approaches the river, the stones that he passes are at eye level. And the inspector repeated:

"At what height do you see the stones?"

And Juan Darien, always with his eyes closed, answered:

"They are on the ground ... my ears brush against them ... and the fallen leaves are moved by my breath ... and I feel the moisture of the mud ..."

Juan Darien's voice broke off.

"Where?" the inspector asked in a firm voice. "Where do you feel the moisture of the water?"

"On my whiskers!" said Juan Darien in a harsh voice, opening his eyes in fright.

Dusk was falling, and through the window the jungle was seen close, already gloomy. The pupils did not understand how terrible was the evocation; but neither did they laugh at those extraordinary whiskers of Juan Darien, who had no whiskers at all. And they did not laugh, because the child's face was pale and anxious.

Class was over. The inspector was not a bad man; but, like all men who live very close to the jungle, he had a blind hatred for tigers; for which reason he said in a low voice to the teacher:

"Juan Darien must be killed. He is a wild beast of the forest, possibly a tiger. We must kill him, for if we do not do so, then sooner or later he will kill all of us. So far his bestial evil has not been aroused; but one day or another it will explode and then he will devour us all, since we let him live with us. We have, then, to kill him. The problem is that we cannot do so as long as he has human form, because we would not be able to prove to the world that he is a tiger. He looks like a man, and with men one must proceed carefully. I know of a lion-tamer in the city. Let us send for him, and he will find some way of making Juan Darien resume his tiger form.

And even if he cannot turn him into a tiger, people will believe us, and we will be able to cast the boy out into the jungle. Let us send for the lion-tamer immediately, before Juan Darien escapes.”

But escape was the last thing that Juan Darien was thinking of, for he had no idea of what was going on. How could he have believed that he was not a human being, when he never felt anything but love for everyone and did not even hate noxious animals?

But the words ran from mouth to mouth, and Juan Darien began to feel their effects. People refused to answer him, they hastily got out of his path, and they followed him at a distance by night.

”What is wrong with me? Why do they treat me this way?” wondered Juan Darien.

And now they no longer merely avoided him. The boys would shout at him:

”Get out of here! Go back where you came from! Get out!”

The grown-ups too were no less enraged than the boys. Who knows what would have happened if on the very afternoon of the festival the anxiously-awaited lion-tamer had not arrived at last. Juan Darien was at home preparing the meager soup to which he was accustomed when he heard the shouting of the crowd that was advancing precipitately on his house. He hardly had time to go out and see what was happening: They grabbed him and dragged him to the house where the lion-tamer was.

”Here he is!” they cried, shaking him. ”This is the one! He is a tiger! We’ll have nothing to do with tigers! Take away his human form and we’ll kill him!”

And the boys, his schoolmates whom he most loved, and even old people, were shouting:

”He is a tiger! Juan Darien is going to devour us! Let him die!”

Juan Darien protected and cried because blows were raining on him and he was a child of twelve years. But at that moment the crowd parted, and the lion-tamer, with big patent-leather boots, a red frock-coat, and a whip in his hand, appeared before Juan Darien.

The lion-tamer stared at him fixedly and clenched his fingers hard on the handle of the whip.

”Aha!” he exclaimed, ”I recognize you well! You can fool anyone else, but not me! I see you, son of tigers! Under your shirt I can see the stripes of a tiger! Off with the shirt, and bring the hunting dogs! We’ll see now whether the dogs recognize you as a human being or as a tiger!”

In a trice they tore off all of Juan Darien’s clothing and threw him into a cage for wild animals.

”Let loose the dogs! Now!” cried the lion-tamer. ”And commend yourself to the gods of your jungle, Juan Darien!”

And four ferocious tiger-hunting dogs were let loose in the cage.

The lion-tamer did this because dogs always recognize the scent of the tiger, and [he thought that] as soon as they sniffed Juan Darien without his clothes they would tear him to pieces, for they would be able to see with their hunting-dogs’ eyes the stripes of the tiger hidden beneath the human skin.

But the dogs saw nothing in Juan Darien other than the kind boy who loved even noxious animals. And on smelling him they wagged their tails pacifically.

"Devour him! He is a tiger! Sic him! Sic him!" they shouted at the dogs. And the dogs barked and bounded around the cage, maddened, without knowing what to attack.

The test had given no result.

"Very well!" exclaimed the lion-tamer. "These are bastard dogs, of the tiger breed. They do not recognize you. But I recognize you, Juan Darien, and now we are going to have it out with one another.⁴"

And on saying this he entered the cage and raised his whip.

"Tiger!" he shouted, "You have a man before you, and you are a tiger. I see there, under your stolen human skin, the stripes of a tiger. Show your stripes!"

And he gave Juan Darien a fierce lash across the body. The poor naked child screamed with pain, while the infuriated people repeated:

"Show your tiger's stripes!"

The atrocious torture went on for some time; and I would not want any of the children who hear me ever to see any living being martyred in such a way.

"Please! I'm dying!" cried Juan Darien.

"Show your stripes!" they answered.

Finally the torture ended. All that was left was the bloody little body of a child that had been Juan Darien, broken down in a corner at the back of the cage. He was still alive, and he was even able to walk when they took him out, but full of such agony as no one will ever feel.

They took him out of the cage and, pushing him down the middle of the street, drove him out of the town. He kept stumbling at every moment, and behind him came the boys, the women, and the grown men of the town, pushing him.

"Get out of here, Juan Darien! Go back to the jungle, son of a tiger, tiger-heart! Get out, Juan Darien!"

And those who were not close enough to strike him threw stones at him.

At last Juan Darien fell down altogether, stretching out his poor child's hands in search of support. And his cruel destiny would have it that a woman, who was standing at the door of her house holding in her arms an innocent little child, put an evil interpretation on this gesture of supplication.

"He wants to take away my child!" screamed the woman. "He stretched out his hands to kill it! He's a tiger! Let's kill him now before he kills our children!"

So said the woman. And in this way the serpent's prophecy was fulfilled: that Juan Darien would die when a human mother should demand the human heart and human life that another mother had given him at her breast.

No other accusation was necessary to convince the maddened people. And twenty arms were already raising stones to crush Juan Darien when the lion-tamer ordered from behind in his harsh voice:

"Let us mark him with stripes of fire! Let us burn him with the fireworks!"

It was already getting dark, and by the time they arrived at the plaza night had fallen. In the plaza had been erected a castle of fireworks, with wheels, wreaths, and bengal lights. They tied

Juan Darien on top of it in the center, and lit the fuse at one end. The thread of fire ran swiftly up and down and ignited the whole castle. And among the stationary stars and the gigantic wheels of all colors, Juan Darien was seen on top, sacrificed.

"This is your last day as a man, Juan Darien," they all shouted, "Show us your stripes!"

"Pardon, pardon!" screamed Juan Darien, writhing among the sparks and the clouds of smoke. The yellow, red, and green wheels spun dizzily, some to the right and some to the left. The tangent jets of fire traced out great circles; and in the middle, burned by the streams of fire that crossed his body, Juan Darien writhed.

"Show your stripes!" they still roared from below.

"No, pardon! I am human!" the unfortunate creature still had time to cry. And behind a new furrow of fire it could be seen that his body was shaking convulsively, that his groans were acquiring a deep and hoarse tone, and that the form of his body was changing little by little. And the mob, with a savage scream of triumph, at last saw arising beneath the human skin the black, fatal, parallel stripes of the tiger.

The atrocious act of cruelty had been completed; they had achieved what they wanted. In place of the child's innocent of all guilt, there was nothing up there but the body of a tiger roaring in its death-agony.

The bengal lights too were dying out. The last stream of sparks of a burned-out wheel reached the rope that tied the wrists – no, the paws of the tiger, for Juan Darien was finished – and the body fell heavily to the ground. The people dragged it to the edge of the forest, leaving it there so that the jackals might eat the corpse and its wild-beast's heart.

But the tiger was not dead. With the cool of the night it regained consciousness, and, dragging itself in terrible torment, it immured itself in the jungle. For a whole month it did not leave its lair in the thickest part of the forest, waiting with the sombre patience of a wild animal for its wounds to heal. All finally scarred over, except one, a deep burn in the side, which did not close and which the tiger covered with great leaves.

For from his recently-lost form he had preserved three things: the memory of the past; his manual dexterity, for he used his paws like hands⁵ and language. But as for the rest he was absolutely and completely a wild animal, not differing in the slightest degree from other tigers.

When he finally felt himself recovered, he passed word to the other tigers to meet that same night by the great cane-brake that bordered on the cultivated fields. And at nightfall he at last started off for the town. He climbed a tree in the neighborhood and waited for a long time immobile. Without even bothering to glance at them he saw pass beneath him poor women and tire farm-hands of miserable aspect; until at last he saw coming along the road a man in great boots and red frock-coat.

The tiger did not move even a twig in gathering himself for the spring. He threw himself on the lion-tamer; with a blow of his paw he knocked him down unconscious, and picking him up by the belt with his teeth he carried him unharmed to the cane-brake.

There, under the immense canes that rose invisible, were the tigers of the jungle moving in the dark, and their eyes shone like lights that moved from one side to another. The man was still unconscious. The tiger said then:

"Brothers: I lived for twelve years among men, as a man myself.

And I am a tiger. Perhaps with my actions I will be able later to erase that stain. Brothers: this night I will break the last tie that links me with the past."

And having spoken thus he picked up in his mouth the still unconscious man and climbed with him to the highest part of the cane-brake, where he left him tied between two bamboos. Then he set fire to the dry leaves on the ground and quickly a crackling sheet of flame ascended. The tigers drew back frightened from the fire.

But the tiger said: "Peace, brothers!" and they became calm, lying down on their bellies with their paws crossed before them to watch.

The cane-brake was burning like an immense castle of fireworks.

The canes were exploding like bombs, and their jets of hot gasses⁶ crossed in sharp arrows of color. The flames ascended in silent puffs, leaving beneath them livid hollows; and at the top, not yet reached by the fire, the canes swayed back and forth, crisped⁷ by the heat.

But the man, touched by the flames, had regained consciousness.

Down below he saw the tigers with their purple eyes raised to him and he understood everything.

"Pardon, pardon me!" he howled, writhing, "I beg pardon for everything!"

No one answered. The man then felt himself abandoned by God and cried with all his soul:

"Pardon, Juan Darien!"

On hearing this, Juan Darien raised his head and said coldly:

"There is no one here named Juan Darien. I don't know any Juan Darien. That is a human name, and we are all tigers here."

And turning to his companions, as if he did not understand, he asked:

"Is anyone here called Juan Darien?"

But the flames had already burned the castle right up to the roof. And among the sharp bengal lights that criss-crossed the firey wall could be seen a black corpse that smoked as it burned.

"Now I am ready, brothers," said the tiger. "But I still have one thing left to do."

And he started off again for the town, followed by the tigers without his taking note of it. He paused by a poor and sad-looking garden, jumped the wall, and passing by many crosses and gravestones stopped before an unadorned patch of ground where the woman whom he had called mother for eight years was buried. He knelt down -knelt like a man - and for a time nothing was heard.

"Mother!" the tiger murmured at last with profound tenderness.

"Only you, of all human beings, knew the sacred right to life of all beings in the Universe. You alone understood that the only difference between a man and a tiger is in the heart. And you taught me to love, to understand, to forgive. Mother! I'm sure that you hear me. I'll always be your son, no matter what may happen – yours alone. Goodbye Mother!"

Straightening up, he saw the purple eyes of his brothers who were watching him from the other side of the wall, and he rejoined them.

At that moment the hot wind brought them from the depths of the night the report of a gun.

"It's in the jungle," said the tiger. "It's the men. They are hunting, killing, slaughtering."

Turning then toward the town lit up by the reflection of the burning forest, he cried: "Irredeemable race! Now it's my turn!"

And turning again to the grave over which he had just prayed, he tore away the leaves that bandaged his wound and wrote on the cross in his own blood, in great letters, below the name of his mother,

AND

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"Now we are in peace," he said. And sending, with his brothers, a roar of challenge at the terrified town, he concluded:

"Now, to the jungle. And tiger forever!"

NOTES

1. This is a literal translation. If you can make any sense out of it, you are welcome to do so.

2. Was this written originally as a children's story? It's not exactly the kind of thing that would be written for children in North America.

3. The "tigre" of south America is the jaguar, which is not striped but spotted. It therefore is not clear where the story is supposed to be set. But of course it is a fantasy story and therefore cannot be expected to adhere to the rules of logic.

4. Literally, "now we are going to see one another." My translation is only a guess at the real meaning.

5. Literally, "the dexterity of his hands, which he managed like a man." From this and other examples I gather that hispanics in some cases use *manos* (hands) to refer to the forefeet of an animal.

6. I have permitted myself to embroider here. Where I have "jets of hot gasses" the original has simply "gasses".

7. The verb is *crispar*. None of the dictionary meanings seemed to fit the context, so I have used the English verb "to crisp", even though the dictionaries do not give this as one of the meanings of *crispar*.

COMMENTS

This story is crude and barbaric – for instance, little attention is paid to making the events seem plausible – but it is a very powerful story. Its rough-hewn aspect probably contributes to the effect and may have been partly or wholly intentional. Quiroga was capable of writing polished stories, as shown by the one I sent you last year.

This story also illustrates the extremely varied character of Quiroga's writing. Would you have guessed that the three stories I've sent you were by the same author, if you hadn't been told?

The story is such that one might well imagine that it was intended as some kind of allegory. It would be interesting to know whether there is any evidence that Quiroga meant to incorporate a definite message in the tale.

By the way, Juan Darien is written in Spanish as Juan Darien, so that the accent is on the last syllable.

The Ted K Archive

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