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The Guilt Merchants

Ronald Harwood



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Ronald Harwood was born in Cape Town in 1934 and also educated there. He first came to London in 1951 to study acting at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. He started writing in 1959, and is the author of four television plays: *The Barber of Stamford Hill* (1960), *Private Potter*, with Casper Wrede (1961), *Take a Fellow Like Me* (1961), and *The Lads* (1963), all of which were produced by A.T.V. Of these the first two plays have been filmed. His stage play, *March Hares*, was produced early in 1964, and later the same year he completed the screen-play for *High Wind in Jamaica*. His first novel, *All the Same Shadows*, was published in both this country and America, as well as in many translations. Ronald Harwood is married, and has two children.

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I

It was the same every morning. As Anido closed the front door behind him and stepped into the sun, the horse-drawn fruit cart with the old man at the reins rattled by.

'Pineapples! Watermelons! Pineapples!'

Anido forced a smile and raised his hand in greeting. The old man grunted and the cart trotted on down the cobbled hill. Anido looked at his watch and waited. In the distance the church clock struck eight and on the final stroke Anido pulled on his hat and walked towards the town.

It was hot; the sky was cloudless and the murmurs of the small town starting the day filled the early morning air.

Anido walked steadily. He took out a handkerchief and mopped the back of his neck; his neat rabbinical beard already glistened with sweat.

An old woman, sitting on a stool in a shadowy doorway, dipped chunks of bread into a bowl and watched him with idle interest as he passed. Two boys with bulging satchels flashed by, yelling their way to school.

He neared the centre of town and the streets became more crowded as the people straggled reluctantly to work.

The small shops, square and rickety like playing-card structures, were open and the owners stood outside, hands behind back, exchanging greetings across the road and waiting for the first business of the morning.

Anido walked on down Cortez Street into The Square, the heart of El Pueblo. It was not really a square. The two main streets of the town bisected each other like the arms of a cross, and where they met, in the centre, a tall stone pillar had been erected. The town fathers, with foresight, named the junction 'Square of the Revolution'. It was one

of the few names in the town that had never needed to be changed.

Weaving his way through the untidy traffic, Anido crossed to the far corner, to the large grey building where he worked. The painted sign above the entrance said:

THE CORDONEZ CATTLE COMPANY

(Leather Warehouse)

He stood outside and rolled a cigarette, watching his fellow-workers wander in. The first puff made him cough. Jostling the others, he pushed through the narrow doorway, fumbling for his handkerchief. He spluttered and sneezed, and Riado, the young import clerk, wavy-haired and self-assured, said mockingly: 'Gesundheit!' while the girl with him giggled. Anido glowered at them as they ran up the stairs, holding hands.

He was distracted by someone touching him gently on the arm. Teresa Fernandez, her large round face hidden under rouge and powder, stood beside him.

'Good morning,' she said quietly.

He nodded.

She said: 'I waited for you last night. Where were you?'

'Not now!' he said angrily. He looked from side to side, to see that no one had heard them.

'I'm sorry,' Teresa whispered.

He ignored her and she followed him up the bare, wooden stairs to the first floor. They made their way to their adjoining desks in the accounts department. Anido put his hat in a locker by the window and took out his plastic cuffs, slipped them over his jacket and sat down. He flicked imaginary crumbs off his desk top.

Señor Cuchillero, the manager, entered and the morning's work began with a sudden rush of activity. Nine men and six women, adding, multiplying, subtracting and dividing. Balancing books and drawing lines and filing receipts and losing dockets and watching the clock from start to finish.

Señor Cuchillero walked up and down the aisle like an invigilator at an examination. He never stopped, he never paused, he hated being interrupted. He was an amazingly thin

man with tired eyes and a droopy moustache, and to keep himself sane he imagined he was the captain of a giant liner, pacing the bridge as she set to sea.

Except for Anido, farthest from the door, the men worked in shirt-sleeves with their jackets hung over the chairs.

His desk was immaculate, the pencils sharp, the blotting-paper clean; he liked being a clerk, having his figures correct, being accurate. He worked neatly, pencilling the figures first, and inking them in only after he had checked them. His files were always up to date and he controlled the export of all leather for the Cordonez Cattle Company, verifying quotas, organizing stocks, and dispatching orders.

At half past ten a boy came round with a tray of cold lemon drinks and a basket of fruit. Anido took an orange and peeled it carefully with his pocket-knife.

Teresa sipped her drink and said to Anido: 'I'm sorry about just now. I didn't mean to ...'

'Please,' he said. 'Not now.'

'I'm sorry ...'

Señor Cuchillero wandered towards him. 'Anido,' he said.

'What?'

'Señor Cordonez's just been on the phone. He wants to see you.'

'What about?' Anido asked.

'How the hell should *I* know? Go and find out!'

Anido stared at him angrily. He slipped off his plastic cuffs and walked out of the office, down the stairs into the street. He crossed to the opposite side to the main offices of The Cordonez Cattle Company.

'Señor Cordonez asked to see me,' he said to the girl at the front desk.

'All right,' she answered, bored.

Anido knocked on the door. 'Come in,' a gruff voice called.

Benno Cordonez sat behind his desk, his shirt open, the rolls of fat protruding. His face was like a Hallowe'en pumpkin and it shone with sweat and good humour.

'Come in, Carlos,' Cordonez said. 'Come in. I want you to meet someone.'

Anido hadn't noticed the other man in the room. He was

about forty and very pale, with a shock of black hair, sprinkled grey. He had heavy eyebrows which met at the broad bridge of his flat nose. His shirt was open at the neck and the sleeves were rolled up tight. A panama hat lay near his feet on the carpet. When he stood up, Anido was surprised at how tall he was.

Cordonez said: 'Carlos, this is Mr Sidnitz from London, England, who has come all the way to South America to do business with us. Mr Sidnitz, this is Carlos Anido, my chief export clerk in charge of leather.'

The two men shook hands. Cordonez went on: 'Mr Sidnitz arrived this morning on the early bus. Had a lousy journey, as you can imagine . . .' Cordonez laughed at the back of his throat. 'He doesn't want to do any business right this second but I thought it was good to get you two acquainted from the kick-off. He's going to be staying with us a few days, so there's no rush . . .'

'Any particular grade of leather, Señor Sidnitz?' Anido asked pleasantly.

'Well,' Sidnitz said. 'I'm in suitcases . . .' Cordonez chuckled.

'Ah,' Anido said with satisfaction. 'You'll want our Grade Six. I will look up our stock figures. I'm sure it'll be all right.'

'Thank you,' Sidnitz said.

'I'll have to check supplies, too, we've been sending rather a lot to West Germany lately.'

Cordonez lowered his eyes and then grinned. 'Business is business, Mr Sidnitz. You know, they're big buyers.'

'Of course,' Sidnitz said. 'I was in Munich a few weeks ago.'

Anido stepped towards him. 'Were you, really?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'I was born near there,' Anido said.

'Is that a fact?'

'Yes. How did you like it?'

'Well,' Sidnitz said, 'it's very modern. Very gay. Yes. I liked it really, but one still feels a cold shudder run down one's spine in Germany. You look at everyone over thirty-five and think: "What the hell were *you* up to?"'

Anido bit his bottom lip and nodded. 'Yes,' he said. 'I know what you mean.'

'Still,' Sidnitz said prodding the corner of his eye with a forefinger, 'they've made a marvellous recovery.'

Anido smiled. 'Yes. I'd like to go back and see - '

'Jesus!' Cordonez said leaning back in his chair. 'After what they did to you?'

Anido looked down at the carpet. 'Yes, one can't help where one was born,' he said.

'Honest to God,' Cordonez said. 'I don't know how any Jew can go into that goddam country.'

Sidnitz shrugged. 'As you say: business is business.'

'Sure, sure, sure,' Cordonez said. 'Well - you two have met and that's the main thing. Mr Sidnitz'll be staying with us a couple of days, and as tomorrow's Friday would you care to join us for Sabbath dinner?'

'Thank you, that would be - ' Anido mumbled. 'It was nice meeting you, Señor Sidnitz.'

Sidnitz smiled and Anido went towards the door. Cordonez said: 'How's Melina?'

'The same . . . thank you.'

'His wife is very ill, Mr Sidnitz.'

'I'm sorry. I hope she'll be better soon,' Sidnitz said.

'Thank you. I'll see you again, I hope.' Anido made a curt bow and left the room. As he closed the door behind him, he instinctively leaned back against it and listened. He heard Cordonez say: 'Well, what do you think?' and Sidnitz answered: 'It depends if he'll talk. So many of them don't like to, you know . . .' Anido could not hear what followed. He stood still for a moment to brace himself, but his mouth twitched and the old pounding in his temples began again. He walked past the girl at the desk hoping she could not see the panic he felt.

Sidnitz leaned back in the leather arm-chair and stared at the ceiling. Cordonez watched him waiting for him to continue, but Sidnitz closed his eyes and stretched his legs.

‘He had a rough time,’ Cordonez muttered.

‘I’m sure.’

Cordonez played with the paper-knife on his desk. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Suffered a lot. But the trouble is, Mr Sidnitz, that Anido’s still very conscious of being a Jew, you know what I mean? Now take me, for an example, my family’ve been out here years and years. People forget I’m Jewish. Not that I’m ashamed of being a Jew, you understand? It’s just that I don’t choose to draw attention to the fact. But, with Anido . . . I mean that beard. In this day and age? It’s all right in a Rabbi but – you know what I mean?’

‘Yes.’

‘In Israel, I mean, they don’t wear beards, do they?’

‘No – not the young ones, anyway.’

‘To hell with the young ones! I mean our generation. No, it’s old hat, Mr Sidnitz.’ Cordonez scratched his head with the paper-knife.

‘Poor guy, Anido,’ he said sadly. ‘He’d like to be strict, you know. But his wife is very ill. It’s difficult for a man on his own. Very difficult. Now when they came here, soon after the war, golly-gee, but she kept a strict house. Then when the boy was born – they’ve got a son, you know – she became ill. Very difficult.’

Holding his hand to his mouth, Sidnitz yawned. He shook his head. ‘I’m terribly sorry,’ he said.

‘Golly-gee!’ Cordonez said. ‘But I’m thoughtless. Of course. You want to rest, have a bath. Here I am chatting away. But I see so few people, you know.’ He laughed.

Sidnitz said: ‘I really am very sorry. I didn’t mean to yawn.’

Cordonez banged a hand to his forehead. ‘How impolite of

me! My wife would be furious! Don't tell her, will you? She's English too, as a matter of fact.'

'Really?'

'Yes. You'll like Anna. She's my third wife, you know. Both my other wives were American. They couldn't stand the pace out here. You've got to laugh! They both of them nearly went mad! Golly-gee, there's nothing to do here. That's why I'm glad to see you. I mean, you know, you can get very lonely in a place like this. My neighbours are all *goyim*, and we're the only Jews here, apart from Anido that is.' He said warmly: 'Golly, but it's nice to see one of your own kind now and again. You'll enjoy the Sabbath dinner tomorrow, I guarantee, Mr Sidnitz. We're not strict, but we like tradition. We have Anido over once in a while, but my wife finds him . . . well - the honest truth is, Mr Sidnitz - my wife sort of finds him repulsive. He's a nice enough guy.'

Sidnitz yawned again, a great open-mouthed stretch of a yawn. 'I really am very sorry.'

Cordonez laughed. 'Don't be silly. Once you start, you can't stop! You must be tired.'

'Yes.'

'Would you like to go up to the house now? Edmundo'll direct you.'

'Really, I'd like to take a walk I think.'

'Sure, sure, sure. Call for me at noon. We pack up about that time.'

'Thank you. You're being very kind.'

'Nonsense,' Cordonez said with a wave of his arm. 'Look, I'm glad you're here. I think you ~~do~~ a great job, Mr Sidnitz. When we were in Israel last year and I told my brother Leon about Anido and so forth, and he said he'd send you over, I was - er - greatly excited, Mr Sidnitz. I can't put it too strongly. I really felt I was doing something, taking part, you know what I mean?'

'You haven't told anyone?' Sidnitz asked.

'Golly-gee, no!'

'Not your wife?'

'No.'

'Good. It's better that I'm a leather buyer from London.'

'That's right!' Cordonez said expansively. 'That was *my* idea, you know. Leon thought it was great!'

'Yes.' Sidnitz smiled and picked up his hat from the floor. 'You'll have to tell me one or two things. I know nothing about leather.'

'Sure, sure, sure. What's there to know? Jesus – but I nearly laughed when you said you were in suitcases. That's great. Travelling like you do, you know what I mean? Great, just great.'

Cordonez stood up and led Sidnitz to the door. 'You take your walk. You'll feel better. Be back at noon.'

'Thank you,' Sidnitz said. He walked out of the office, and Cordonez closed the door.

Sidnitz put his hat on the back of his head. He stretched his arms out, closed his eyes and yawned again and then he noticed the girl at the front desk looking at him. He smiled half-heartedly, nodded politely to her and walked out into the sunlight.

3

Anido sat down at his desk and stared into space. 'Is everything all right?' Teresa whispered.

'Yes,' he said irritably, pulling a pile of papers in front of him and nervously tidying them. But he could not concentrate. He stood up and went over to Cuchillero. Keeping in step with him, Anido said as they walked: 'Señor Cuchillero, I'd like to arrange an appointment at the warehouse tomorrow morning for a foreign buyer. From London. Is that all right?' Cuchillero shrugged indifferently. 'May I use your phone?' Anido asked. Cuchillero shrugged again and walked on, turning the corner of the aisle, head thrust forward, hands behind back.

Anido lifted the telephone on Cuchillero's desk and dialled. 'Warehouse?' he said. 'Anido here. Would you have some samples of Grade Six Steerskin available tomorrow? We have a buyer from London. Good. Oh, and – er – some Grade Four

of Kipskin. Say eleven thirty. I'll confirm that.' He replaced the receiver and smiled, then abruptly he lifted it again and talked to Cordonez's secretary informing her of the appointment.

Anido felt a little better. He returned to his desk and busied himself with his papers.

'Señor Cuchillero,' he said, putting up his hand like a schoolboy wanting to leave the room.

Cuchillero finished the aisle he was walking and with geometric precision marched towards Anido's desk.

Insolently, Anido handed him a piece of paper. Cuchillero looked. He saw the discrepancy: two hundred cattle-hides.

'What's two hundred hides here or there?' he said.

'But my books, Señor Cuchillero, my books.'

'Oh, forget your books!'

'But did we or did we not send eight hundred? You have down here only six hundred, but the receipt says -'

Cuchillero muttered: 'Damn Jew!' and began his endless pacing again. Anido looked at him and thought it is no use asking that man anything. He is ignorant!

I am only doing my job. Oh God - what a morning! That man in Cordonez's office. It's so upsetting. I wish they'd all leave me alone!

He clenched his fists and his nails dug into his palms. Teresa touched his arm and gave an almost imperceptible smile of sympathy. He turned away angrily and thumped the desk twice with his fist and tears welled up in his eyes. He fumbled for his handkerchief.

He was crying more easily these days. Petty things, unimportant things could bring on a flood of tears, and the more he tried to control them, the worse they became. It was the same the other afternoon when his son Andreas said: 'I'll see you to the door, Father.' He cried then. He hunched his shoulders and tried to turn his distorted expression into a smile. He thumped the desk again in an effort to hold back.

But there was always the temptation to intensify the suffering. Certain words, odd phrases, came to mind like a perpetual fountain replenishing the source of its own being. *Exile*. He had merely to think of the word and a barren waste of sadness

and self-pity opened inside him like a wound that never healed. Exile. Oh, God, Germany. Despite what she had done, despite everything, he could not help loving her. Oh, God, Germany. He wanted to reach out his arms and embrace her. When he pointed to her on the map it was like making the first tentative advance to a woman. The finger would search and stroke, the hand would caress. Beloved Germany. The winter mornings and standing schoolboy fresh, the unrelenting harshness of the cold. The smaller children still playing as he strode eagerly to school. He remembered the feeling of being neat and tidy and clean, as if his mother had taken a rag and polished him. He remembered Kleiner, the teacher, thin-lipped and fair-haired, prodding him in the ribs with a pencil for an answer he could not give.

‘What are you, boy?’

‘A German, sir.’

‘No, but tell the class what you really are.’

‘I am a German, sir.’

‘But your mother – your mother isn’t German, is she?’

‘Yes, sir. My mother is German, sir.’

‘No, no, no, no, you are not trying. Can anyone tell us what his mother is. Yes, Gunther?’

‘His mother is a Jewess, sir.’

‘Good. Correct. Your mother is a Jewess. That’s right, isn’t it, boy?’

‘No, sir, no. My mother is a German.’

‘Why must you argue with me, boy? You know you shouldn’t argue. Your mother is a Jewess. Now, I think I had better beat you for arguing with me. Don’t you think so, class?’

And they had chanted: ‘Yes! Yes! Beat him! Beat him!’

Oh, God, Germany.

It was no use holding back the tears now. It was no use. Let them come. Let them wash away what suffering remained.

Teresa leaned across and touched his arm. ‘Are you all right?’ she asked.

He closed his eyes, and like a masseur rubbed them with the tips of his fingers. ‘Yes, I’m all right,’ he muttered. She handed him a note. He looked at it.

Tonight again, please. Please.

T.

He turned it over and wrote on the back:

All right. I will come when I can.

C.A.

He passed it back to her.

He tried to concentrate but found it impossible. It was so hot in the office. He had refused repeatedly to work in his shirt-sleeves. It was so undignified, so slovenly. He sat there, a martyr to the sun, his jacket crumpled and limp from sweat.

The sunlight hung between the windows and the floor like pillars caught in the act of falling. There was no breeze to ruffle the papers on the desks. The heat was exhausting. Anido became aware of the incessant, monotonous, senseless rhythm of the typewriters until his head throbbed. He stood up, walked the full length of the office to the door and went out. Teresa watched him till he disappeared.

He wanted a cigarette. Smoking was permitted in the office, but he always felt it wrong. He preferred to go out and smoke unseen and unnoticed in the coolness of the tiled lavatory.

He rolled the cigarette painstakingly and put the dead match in his trouser turn-up. He played with the smoke in his mouth and it soothed him. He became calmer and more relaxed. And then someone tried the door and shouted: 'Come on!' He cupped his hands to shield the cigarette. He waited a second and his heart thumped loudly, Damn, he thought. They've spoiled my one moment of relaxation. Damn them. He puffed at the cigarette furtively. Why couldn't they have used the one downstairs? Why must they come here? Ach, it's wretched. Wretched.

There were few days when he did not hate being in El Pueblo. It was small, stagnant, indolent and so red, so glaringly red that even the sky reflected it. And the people were made to look like so many pieces of old, cracked leather. The people: always sleeping, sitting, standing, lying down. Sleeping anywhere, everywhere, dirty, smelling, time-wasting. Like vermin. Awful. Awful.

And the sun. The white-yellow light that made all the colours unbearable. Most of all he hated the sun. Hated it.

But then there was always the room. Oh, thank the living God for the room. He would go again this afternoon, he thought. Encased within its walls like lying in a coffin, there was more space than the whole world had to offer.

He became aware of the heat again in the lavatory. He stubbed out the cigarette and put it back in the tobacco tin. Then, in case anyone was still waiting impatiently outside, he tore off some paper, crumpled it in his hand, threw it into the bowl and pulled the chain. He shut the lid and turned on the tap at the wash-basin and let it run. He unlocked the door and came out, wiping his hands on a handkerchief. But there was no one there now.

Not far away the church clock struck twelve.

He went back into the office, where they were packing up for the morning. They were noisy, carefree, shouting across the room at one another. He tidied his tidy desk, took off his plastic cuffs and watched Teresa adjusting her large face, screwing her lips to apply the lipstick, squinting and blinking as she powdered her squat, fleshy nose. She closed her powder compact and moistened her lips. She felt Anido's eyes on her and said: 'Shall we have a drink?'

'No,' he said. 'I have to get home.'

The sun was at its height, shining fiercely on the town filling with workers going home to their siestas. Anido stepped from the building into the light and pulled his hat down over his eyes.

He walked to the corner of the street and was about to cross The Square when he saw Sidnitz at the column in the centre, bending over to read the inscription. At first, Anido thought it best to ignore him but he changed his mind. He called: 'Señor Sidnitz! Señor Sidnitz!'

Sidnitz looked up, saw the clerk and waved. He waited as Anido came slowly towards him.