

# *The Players*

**Carlos Fortea**

(English sample)



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Whales crowned by spiracles of steam and fear, from whose bellies a procession emerges: first ants wearing top hats, frock coats, and fine-striped trousers, their empty hands flapping energetically; followed by ants wearing jackets, bowlers, and thick portfolios; followed by others wearing long-sleeved shirts and caps pushing iron-clad trunks like giant seeds, flooding the six stations of the capital of elegance and scarcity. Obeying their ant-like nature, they line up in ordered rows before the horse-drawn cars that await them (some have private automobiles awaiting them; others, the taxis that won the battle of the Marne) and they embark headed toward the hotels that will be their home during the next unpredictable months.

Paris awaits these ants, with one of those days whose pale light bathes silhouettes in melancholy. Paris waits while the cars trace its streets, wrapped in unclear expectations.

There is a hotel near the Cité, far from the hotels of the Champs-Élysées where the delegations are accommodated, in which a clean-shaven man with dark hair and a solid features, dressed in a suit of indeterminate style, approaches the reception desk carrying his own suitcase. The chosen little hotel is a family affair, with few rooms, located on a side street, its front desk attended by a young woman with a pleasant smile and a sober beauty. Nothing in its features or the modest lights of the reception, not even the clean streets outside, gives any indication that all have just left behind a war. Paris seems the same as ever.

With the hesitating silence of someone who doesn't know which language to choose (there is no reason to think that the man is a foreigner; his features could indicate this, but they don't proclaim it, and nonetheless only foreigners inundate Paris these days), the woman offers him the register book and a quill with a blackened nib, indicating with a shy gesture the inkwell to his right. The man dips the instrument and, with easy movements, writes upon the lined page: *Gabriel Cortázar–Espagne*.

The moment has come to break the spell of silence, and the traveler asks in correct French what time breakfast is served. With noticeable relief, the woman answers him. Her voice is sweet, pleasant, and for a moment the traveler fantasizes that, since it is such a small establishment, this woman might also be the one to serve breakfast the next day.

Then he reaches down to grab his suitcase and at that moment discovers another traveler, who is watching him from the door with an ironic expression. The newcomer is taller than he is, and his hair is not dark but blond, just like the moustache that shadows his smile and in which a few white bristles can be seen.

The traveler opens his mouth for an instant. It is obvious that the surprise washing across his face is real, there is no fiction in those widespread lips and eyes which are wide-open and, suddenly, very pleased.

The blond man has left a suitcase not much larger than the one Gabriel Cortázar carries to the left of the doorway and approaches him with outstretched arms. His gloved hands pat the Spaniard's back, their hearty slaps echoing in the vestibule of the small establishment while the reunited pair exchange the usual greetings, the questions that expect no answers, of two old friends who have not seen one another for a long time. At one point the Spaniard launches into a stream of questions—how has he been, how is his family—and the blond man raises one hand, placating, while gently shaking his head.

"Wait," he says in Spanish. "Later, when we have a cognac in our hands. There is cognac available here, isn't there? Or is this no longer France? The fact that Austria is no longer Austria doesn't mean that this would not be France!"

At the same moment, at the Hotel Crillon, a man who has signed the large register log as Jeffrey L. Payne, and who in his country is a congressman for New Jersey, unpacks his clothes into the drawers of the Louis XV style dresser in his spacious room. Clothes that are simple and elegant for the most part, except for the tailored dress coat, which he has still never worn and hopes to debut at one of the ceremonies in which the negotiations of the peace treaty would inevitably result.

He is thirty years old and is neither one of the stars of Congress nor one of the fashionable young men of Washington; his income is only what he receives from public funds and his career is just beginning. But he is one of the most intimate members of the group of advisors of the North American president, who personally leads the delegation attending the imminent peace conference.

Wilson had been his teacher at Princeton. They barely coincided in class, during the 1907 class, but the rapport between them had been absolute, first as master and disciple, later as protector and protégé. In 1913, Payne had been summoned to the White House and every effort made so that in a few years he passed from Privy Councilor to the more autonomous position of Congressman. He has crossed the Stygian lake that separates Society from Politics. And he has crossed the Atlantic.

Now he is in Paris, and he asks himself how it is possible that this is his first time here.

Payne, who holds progressive ideas with regard to the social classes, has a strong sense of belonging to an intellectual aristocracy and suddenly it seems incomprehensible to him that he had never before journeyed to Europe, the cradle of triumphant civilization. Suddenly he sees as a lacuna in his training what had earlier been nothing more than a vague desire.

On the other hand, coming here at precisely this moment compensates for everything: the North Americans arrive in Paris as the bearers of a political program destined to reshape the world. A political program that president Wilson has summarized in his fourteen points and which will bring to the universe the suppression of secret diplomacy, the freedom of the seas, the elimination of economic barriers and the safeguarding of the rights of peoples and minorities.

Coming here as one of the representatives of that tremendous work in the benefit of mankind was a privilege it would be difficult to repeat. A privilege earned on the battlefield, which he now had to exert in the name of those who had supplied it.

He finished putting away his clothes and opened another draw to store the papers he carried with him, work documents that could safely be left anywhere because they merely served as the basis of daily tasks. The others, those that were stamped "confidential", were safely stored in the hotel's strongbox, made available expressly for this purpose.

There were no portraits to place upon the desktop. Despite finding himself at the start of his fourth decade, Jeff Payne had not left a wife waiting for him in the New World, and he was too aware of his age to carry with him family portraits of the earlier

generation. He had no brothers or sisters to think of and, needless to say, he wouldn't fall into that intolerable patheticism of exhibiting a portrait of his political mentor.

Tugging on its chain, he pulled his pocket watch from his vest. Seven o'clock. Soon it would be time for dinner.

At that moment, the room's telephone rang. An elegant artifact of medium size, whose metallic parts had been gold-plated, the others inlaid with mother-of-pearl. He picked up the heavy handset. Unlike the English models in fashion in the United States, in which a sort of small trumpet which one held to one's ear hung from a post which needed to be pressed down upon in order to speak, the room's telephone was a German model in which the mouthpiece and earpiece were joined by a crossbar that rested upon the machine, instead of hanging from it. He picked it up somewhat dubiously.

"Yes?"

"Mister Payne, this is the reception desk," said a voice that spoke in melodious English. "You have a call from the Hotel Murat."

Payne became suddenly tense. The Hotel Murat was no hotel, but instead was the palace of the Princes of Murat; but above all, right now it was the place where the president was accommodated.

"Put me through," he replied.

"They only asked me to give you a message, sir. They asked me to inform you that they expect you for dinner at eight."

"Thank you."

Payne returned the headset to its place. On the very day of his arrival, the president had called him to his table. No self-respecting politician stops himself from relishing the idea that they might belong to the golden circle. Nor did Payne do so.

He didn't have much time, although the president's residence was only five hundred meters away. He re-opened the drawers he had shut a moment before and began to dress for dinner.

As he got ready, his mind wandered over the possible scenarios at the dinner: Germany, the various Central European peoples about to attain nationhood for the first time, the warring countries from across the seas who demanded their part for their contribution to the defeat of the Central Empires, even the neutrals, who didn't want to

remain on the margins of the new architecture of the world that they had been called upon to design.

Words of notable scope, Payne thought. Unable to stop himself, he began to think in historical terms: the architecture of the world, he thought; Rome, Greece, he thought; then he thought that he was thinking foolishness and forbade himself to continue giving himself over to such delusions of grandeur.

He boarded the wooden elevator with glass doors, where the operator greeted him with a nod and a discreet confirmation that he did wish to descend to the ground floor. Two minutes later, he was in the street. He climbed into a hansom cab and had the opportunity, for the first time, to very modestly practice his French:

"The Hotel Murat, rue Monceau, 28, s'il vous plait."

He leaned back against the back of the cab. He rested his hands on his thighs. He closed his eyes.

The Uhlan colonel of the extinct Austro-Hungarian Empire no longer dressed in a sky blue military jacket and red pants, nor did he wear upon his head a helmet with a crest and tuft of feathers. Now, in the capital of the victorious nation, he wore civilian clothes, the celluloid collar of his white shirt begged to be replaced even to the eyes of an observer less inured than Gabriel Cortázar, and its worn cuffs did not hide, but instead showed off, the now outdated cufflinks with the Imperial eagle.

His physical aspect was no better than his clothes. Cradling their cognacs, they clinked glasses in a rough toast to friendship and drank. Cortázar glimpsed over the edge of his glass a brow heavy with furrows from which his hair had receded, sunken eyes framed by deep crowsfeet, a moustache with a deep commissure.

And, nonetheless, the worst were his eyes. They were still blue, of course, but now they were not the eyes of a young man, arrogant and assured, but those of a disillusioned old man. They no longer shone as if polished into splendor by varnish, but were watery and tarnished. They didn't look toward the future, or they didn't see it.

In a journey into the past which happened increasingly every day (it must be a question of his age), Gabriel Cortázar remembered the first time they saw one another: 1905, Alfonso XIII visits Vienna and he is in charge of security for the delegation. Cortázar goes ahead to supervise the preparations and his local contact turns out to be a young official named Christoph von Klettemberg. His habit of ferreting out information, his custom of knowing, makes him start to investigate, to ask the personnel from the embassy who this Uhlan official is, what it even meant to be a member of the Uhlan regiment of the guard, the social importance of this man entrusted with protecting the royal retinue.

With two results: the first, the knowledge that the Klettemberg are one of the oldest noble dynasties of the Empire, although the captain designated for the occasion was a descendant from one of the lesser branches. In any event, blue blood to the last drop.

The second was a piece of evidence more eloquent than mere information: Christoph von Klettemberg has come to find Gabriel Cortázar in the embassy. After exchanging a formal greeting accompanied by clicked heels and reverences, with a cold face he launched a greeting in Spanish which was, in reality, a challenge:

"I am told that you are asking about me, Sir, and I think that it is best that you ask me directly everything you wish to know."

Those confrontational words were followed by a tense dialogue, the tense dialogue turned into one that was looser, which finally flowed into a dinner at the Hotel Sacher, a handshake of mutual approval, the beginnings of a friendship.

A friendship on the verge of its fifteenth anniversary, between people who had understood one another as thoroughly and as quickly as an Austro-Hungarian and a Spaniard might.

Until the arrival of the war.

Cortázar had had no news of his friend for two years. The last message said that the eastern front was a disaster, that the army had proven itself more capable of marching than fighting, and that worse was foreseen.

"To friendship."

Gabriel raised his glass to respond to the toast and asked himself how he would begin the conversation. He chose a banality, "I am glad to see you whole at least."

Christoph looked up at him. Until that moment, his eyes had staring cross-eyed into the mahogany-colored cognac, at his own fingers cradling the goblet. He fixed his gaze on them for a few seconds more before answering, "As whole as Austria, am I?"

Silence returned to the conversation. Gabriel had long known that it plays a part in conversations, just as it does in music, and that it is necessary to respect it.

"Where were you the last time I wrote you?" Klettemberg asked.

"On the eastern front."

"That's right," Christoph nods slowly, as if to himself. "I no longer recalled."

"I don't know much about what happened there. Was it worse than the western?"

The Uhlan colonel lifted his head. His steely eyes stared at his friend, noticing how time has not ravaged his face, how it has not passed equally for both of them. Finally, he shrugs his shoulders.

"I don't know. A war is a war. There is no better place in which to live through it. But, Gabriel, you already know that for people like you and me the worst is not what happens, but that we know what happens. The soldiers trust their commanders and they fight and they die, and we know that their commanders are unable to command them to do more than die. Did you know that the Germany army was about to invade us?"

Gabriel knew it, but shook his head so that the Austrian kept talking.

"When Franz Joseph died, the new Emperor, poor old Charles, tried to establish a separate peace with France and one of his stupid ministers made public this fact. His way, of course. He said that the French were begging for an armistice. And then Clemenceau told the world the truth; our German allies accused us of betrayal and were about to invade us. The only thing missing would be for the losers of the war to also demand a part of our cadaver." He took a long drink of cognac until his eyes filled with tears, then cleared his throat. "But all this is water under the bridge. How are you? How have these years of peace and neutrality treated the Spanish?"

Gabriel noted the tone of irony, but chose to ignore it. He shrugged his shoulders and answered, almost at random, "I'm fine. I left active service, did you know? Now I am involved in certain financial transactions."

"That's why you're in Paris, of course."

"Precisely."

He had not finished speaking that last word when he realized that it had been a useless error. Christoph's hard countenance had shifted into a gentle and sad smile. The Austrian looked at his cognac again and slowly shook his head.

"Gabriel, Gabriel," he said, wearily, "why do you insult me? You are here for the same reason I am: to gather the most information so that your Government stays ahead of events."

Cortázar bit his lower lip, but said nothing.

The Austrian made a disdainful gesture with one hand, "Don't worry, that a friend might take me for a fool is the least that might happen to me for representing a State that was one of the greatest Empires in history and has now been reduced to being a mere corner of Europe. Almost like your own, no?"

Cortázar chuckled. "Blood brothers," he commented.

"Our kings, yes. But that would be a very easy explanation, now that all of them are cousins or grandsons of the deceased Victoria of England. It's obvious there are degrees between them. I fear that we have gotten the worst part of the bargain."

Cortázar doesn't answer. He is surprised by the bitter and sarcastic man his friend has turned into. He had always possessed a fine irony, but bile has turned its grace into fury; its subtle perversity into *atra bilis*.

"These years have gone well for you," the Uhlan colonel says. "Neutrality has allowed you to sell to both sides, to be the granary for a Europe that couldn't plant anything without running the risk that the plough would blow up the earth as it passed. Are there any horses left in Spain?"

For a moment Cortázar sees passing before him, before the windows of his memory, the image of the long trains of livestock heading north. But after the second year of war, horses had lost their importance, there are no heroic charges in the trenches.

"Enough."

He doesn't care to go into details. His friend of yore, the Austrian colonel, would have instantly perceived this as a sign to change the subject, but his new friend, the

defeated official, has lost the appetite for such subtleties. "That's good," he says. "Don't send any more. In my country, the people eat them."

This time, Cortázar sets his glass down on the table with a clatter. An unnecessary noise. And the Austrian hears this understated protest. A cloud of sorrow crosses his brow.

"I beg you to forgive me, Gabriel," he says. "I am losing my composure. And back home I was told, a lifetime ago, that that was the last thing an official could lose."

"Let us talk no more of this. How is your family?"

"Bankrupt. What is your mission here?"

Cortázar gestures with one hand, as if he attempted to trap a fleeting idea.

"What you said earlier: to try to find out what will happen. To try to anticipate events."

"And what do you think will happen?"

Cortázar lifted his eyebrows.

"Nothing you will like. I suspect that some will devote themselves to the necessity of making you feel the whiplash."

"That would be a substantial mistake."

"But feasible. In any event, I am concerned with the aspects that are more..."

"Book-keeping?"

The Spaniard gave a laugh.

"That's one way to call it." He leans forward and crosses his arms on the tabletop. "Do you realize what situation the European economy is in?" He raises one hand and counts on his fingers. "The fields are devastated; where they're not full of trenches, there are unexploded mines; the livestock has been given to the troops to eat; the commercial networks are broken and three of the most powerful countries on the continent, one of them your own, have shattered into pieces. What comes next is very dangerous."

"But not bad for you." Christoph raises his glass in a sort of one-sided toast.

"Nonsense," Cortázar denies. "Those who can't buy now don't buy and those who can buy do so from the Americans. And we had all the economy working to feed a war that has ended. Things stopped working over a year ago. While it worked, the majority of

the money remained in a few hands. Now that it doesn't work, no one knows what has become of that money and what we have is unemployment and tension."

The Austrian slowly shook his head. "Each of us has our problems... Where are you going to begin?"

"Here?"

Klettemberg nods in silence. Cortázar doesn't answer. He is evaluating whether his friend is still in condition to be an ally or if his weight has now plummeted so far that he is of no use to him. He looks at him again, weighing, and replies, "I am going to try to reach the sources of information, but I also aim to sign State treaties. I have been granted... certain powers to achieve these aims." He offers a sarcastic smile. "If you have as well, I can sell you something."

He realizes immediately that that last statement has been unfortunate. The Austrian stares into his cognac, takes a swallow, puckers his wet lips. "I am afraid, my dear friend, that you couldn't sell at the prices that I can afford to pay."

For the umpteenth time since the dinner began, Jeff Payne took advantage of a sip of wine to look at his fellow diners over the edge of his glass. He had done this time and again, in part motivated by discretion, in part intimidated by those who, in his humble estimation, were all much greater than he.

"A little more meat, sir?"

The waiter leaned at his left with a tray full of white fillets of roasted veal. Payne watched the slow advance of the sauce toward the metallic edge of the tray with a certain precaution and, as if he might thereby halt its inexorable march, grabbed up the serving implements and helped himself to another slice.

"The problem is the enormous conflict of interests, the intersection of hatreds," the president was saying. "Keep in mind that these people have spent four years suffering an armed conflict within their borders, not just with the losses this entails, but with the direct privations, the devastation before their eyes. For us it is inconceivable."

He spoke with his usual emphasis, with that captivating air that characterizes very few leaders. Despite having already reached sixty two years of age, he still had an erect

walk and the energetic bearing that his jaw, always slightly clenched, and his forehead, always somewhat furrowed, contributed to project. He walked quickly and gave at all times the impression of always knowing where he was going. Who could always know where they were going? That was the sign of the great.

The diner to his left seemed to highlight precisely this, by contrast. A lean man, with a somewhat-triangular shaped head, topped by a shining and panoramic bald spot, one of those established Americans who everyone called "Colonel" without any reason, without their ever having worn a uniform. Colonel House this, Colonel House that. His clear and intelligent eyes were lit like banked coals and he ate with the regular movements of a beaver methodically gnawing through a tree trunk, causing his salt-and-pepper moustache to undulate.

"We may be the only impartial people who will take part in this peace conference," the president concluded.

House arched his eyebrows, but said nothing. Jeff had already noticed that the "colonel" had a tendency to disagree in silence with his boss' more-resounding affirmations, precisely those, he thought, about which his thoughts were more loudly manifest. It wasn't possible to reconcile academic rationale with that of a man of business, he told himself with involuntary disdain.

"And what do you think, Mr. Payne?"

Mrs. Wilson's question brought him abruptly back to the table. A woman of robust complexion, full features and a sharp intelligence, the president's second wife intimidated him a little. Jeff was particularly grateful that she addressed him as "Mr. Payne" in public, which clearly established the necessary distance to refute any supposed relationship with her, the granddaughter of a Payne who was the cousin of Washington's wife and, what was worse, supposedly a direct descendant of the Plantagenets via the Mayflower and of Pocahontas. Jeff didn't wish for his appointment to be attributed to any kind of family relationship between them, nor did he want anything to do with such a legendary lineage.

"The truth is that I don't know to what degree it is possible to maintain impartiality in a situation such as this, Mrs. Wilson. With the president's permission." Jeff

saw that the man in question raised his jaw to focus on him through his spectacles. "I suppose that our allies expect us to take their part and that they will make a pint of it."

"Perhaps the greatest test of a politician might be his ability to resist the pressures of his friends in particular," the First Lady replied smoothly.

Jeff heard a sort of muffled grunt at his right shoulder and the uniformed arm wielding the silver fork sunk enthusiastically into the meat.

"Although General Bliss disagrees," Edith Wilson added.

The man in question halted in his gesture, but did not lift the fork, as if he feared the veal might escape him. A military man of the classic mold (furrowed brow, white moustache, a bald spot that seemed to stop at both sides with the strict aim of framing the silver plate between the two tufts of surviving hair), Bliss was obviously uncomfortable by having to argue with a woman. He slowly shook his head. "I am not worried about the pressure, Mrs. Wilson. I think that when an enemy is defeated there is no longer anything to discuss with them. And in that sense, I stand with our allies."

Jeff was about to reply when he saw that House took the floor, "It has not been demonstrated at all that the enemy has been vanquished, in the military sense of the term. In the first place, Germany maintains a million men mobilized, slowly returning to their bases, but armed and ready. In the second, our allies, as you say, are physically exhausted, they are unable to properly feed their population, and they fight, although they are unaware of this, against the euphoria of victory itself. The whole world is so convinced that the war is over that any surprise would have devastating effects."

"Come now, House." The president shook his head, with an air of annoyance. "That surprise you speak of is highly unpredictable. The conquered countries are undergoing a political revolution at this moment. They have no leaders able to send them back into an external conflict."

"And that revolution does not suit us very well, either," said the diner who had not yet spoken before. Corpulent, with dense and full-bodied features, thick white hair carefully parted, State Secretary Lansing was the only one of those present who competed with Wilson in having a patrician aspect and bearing. He came to Paris as the nominal head of a delegation which the president intended to leave in his hands once the peace

conference was underway. Meanwhile, he played the role of the thinking head. And the dissenting voice.

Jeff knew that Lansing didn't limit himself to intellectual disquisition. Two years ago he had established, under his own initiative and without many public controls, an intelligence service under his direct control in which a handful of special agents acted in a rather opaque fashion.

For a moment, Jeff felt that, with the possible exception of himself, the president had surrounded himself with a group of people who did not agree with him, and he admired the man's courage and honesty. It was obvious that Wilson felt sure enough of himself so as to listen to all these adverse opinions and still maintain his own, or perhaps he preferred that any potential enemy were seated at his own table, instead of sharing a table and meal with other possible conspirators.

"That matter must be treated separately," Wilson replied. "There are ends in it which are beyond me."

"The Soviets have asked to speak with us," Lansing informed him.

"It will be dealt with in its own time."

The president had shown himself to be conclusive and Jeff as well as the others knew when to stop pushing a matter. He looked at Mrs. Wilson and thought he spied a tenuous smile on her face.

The conversation returned to the matter of the probable attitude of the allies and their reservations about the "fourteen points" for peace proposed by the president. Wilson showed himself moved by noble ideas, even mentioned a few celebrated phrases, but when Jeff insisted once again on the difficulties they were going to find to convince the allies that they must follow his plans, the president smiled and uttered a pronouncement that made the young congressman tremble:

"They owe us seven billion dollars. I think that's a good reason to convince people, don't you agree, Payne?"