

Fourteen chapters from *'Platero and I'* written by Juan Ramón Jiménez.

Translated by Salvador Ortiz-Carboneres

VI

THE KINDERGARTEN

Platero, if you were to come with the rest of the children to the kindergarten, you would learn your alphabet and you would do strokes with a pen. You would know as much as the donkey in the wax museum, the little Mermaid's friend, who appears garlanded with cloth flowers through the crystal which shows the Mermaid all rosy flesh and gold in her green element; more than the doctor and the parish priest of Palos.

But although you are only four years old, how big and clumsy you are! In which little chair could you sit, at what desk could you write, what notebook and what pen would do for you, where in the chorus, tell me, would you sit to sing the Creed?

No. Doña Domitila, in her purple robe of the Order of the Nazarene, with its yellow cord like that of Reyes the fishmonger, would have you, at best, kneeling for two hours in a corner of the banana patio. She would hit your legs with her long dry cane, or she would eat the quince jelly from your packed lunch, or she would hang burning paper under your tail and she would make your ears as red and hot as those of the wheelwright's son when it is going to rain...

No, Platero. No. You come with me. I shall teach you about the flowers and the stars. And no one will laugh at you as they would to a dimwitted child, or place on your head, as if you were what they call an ass, a dunce's cap with large eyes painted in bright red and blue, like those of the river barges, and with ears twice as long as yours.

IX
FIGS

Dawn was misty and cold, a good one for figs and, at the stroke of six, we set out for the Rica to eat them.

Under the great century-old fig trees, whose grey trunks entwined their huge thighs in the cold shade as under a skirt, night still slept; and the wide leaves – such as Adam and Eve wore – treasured a fine weave of tiny clear pearls which whitened their soft greenness. From within it, one could see, through the low emerald foliage, the dawn, which, more alive each moment, was turning rose, the colorless veils of the east.

...Crazy with excitement, we were running to see who would get first to each fig tree. Rociillo caught the first leaf of one with me, breathless with laughter and heartbeats. “Feel here.” And, with her hand, she put my hand over her heart, her young breast moving up and down like a tiny imprisoned wave. Adela could hardly run, being chubby and small, and she was getting annoyed at being so far behind. I picked a few ripe figs for Platero and put them on the seat of an old vine stump so that he would not get bored.

Adela started the fig throwing, exasperated at her own clumsiness, with laughter in her mouth and tears in her eyes. She slammed a fig on my forehead. Rociillo and I followed suit, and much more than ever through the mouth, we ate figs through our eyes, nose, sleeves and nape, without a truce and amid sharp shouting. The figs fell aimlessly in the vineyards, fresh with the dawn. A fig hit Platero, and he became the target of the excitement. Since the poor fellow could neither defend himself nor reply in kind, I took his side; a soft and bluish deluge crossed the pure air in all directions, like rapid grape-shots.

A double laughter, abated and tired, expressed from the ground the girlish surrender.

THE BONEYARD

You, my dear Platero, if you die before I do, will not go in the town crier's little cart to the vast salt marsh, or to the ravine of the mountain road, like the other poor donkeys, like horses and dogs that have no one to love them. You shall not have your flesh bloodied and removed from your ribs by the crows, like the fishbone of a boat against the scarlet sunset, an ugly sight for the travelling salesmen going to the railway station at San Juan in the six o'clock coach; nor shall you lie swollen and stiff among the rotten mussels in the ditch, or frighten thrill-seeking children leaning over the edge of the slope, holding onto the branches, when they go out on Sunday evenings, in Autumn, to eat toasted pine seeds in the pine forest.

Do not worry, Platero, for I shall bury you at the foot of the tall round pine in the orchard at the Piña, which you like so much. You will be close to life's serenity and mirth. The children will play around you and the girls will sew in their tiny low chairs at your side. You will know the verses which loneliness will bring me. You will hear the singing of the lassies while washing in the orange grove and the sound of the water-wheel will rejoice and refresh your eternal peace. And, all the year round, the goldfinches, the titmice and the greenfinches, in the enduring verdure of the treetops, will provide a brief canopy of music between your tranquil sleep and the constant blue of the infinite sky above Moguer.

XIII
SWALLOWS

There she is, Platero, a tiny black and sprightly creature, in her gray nest in the tiles panel of the Virgin of Montemayor, a nest that is always respected. The poor thing seems terrified. I believe that this time the hapless swallows made a wrong choice, as the chickens did last week in going to roost when the two o'clock sun went into eclipse. Spring had the coquetry to arrive earlier than usual this year, but shivering, she had to cover her tender nakedness again in the cloudy bed of March. How sad to see the virgin roses in the orange grove whither in their bud!

Platero, the swallows are here already and yet one can hardly hear them, as in other years when on the very day of arrival they greeted and investigated everything, chattering without pause in their fluted trills. They would tell the flowers all they had seen in Africa, of their two journeys across the sea, how they sometimes settled on the water with their wing for a sail, or in the rigging of ships; of other sunsets, other dawns, other starry nights...

They don't know what to do. They fly about in silence, bewildered, like ants when a child tramples on their path. They don't dare to fly up and down the New Street in insistent straight line with the little flourish at the end, nor enter their nests in the wells, nor perch on the telegraph wires through which the north wind hums, in their classic pose as mail carriers, beside the white insulators... They are going to freeze to death, Platero!

THE CASTRATED COLT

He was black, with blue, green and scarlet iridescences, all of them silvery like the beetles and the crows. A bright fire would flash at times in his eyes, like the one on the cooking-pot of Ramona, the chestnut vendor in Marquis Square.

What a clattering from his brief trotting when, coming from the sands of the Friseta, he would enter triumphantly on the paving stones of New Street! How swift, how nervous, how keen he was, with his small head and fine legs!

Nobly he passed by the low doorway of the tavern – even blacker than he, against the red sun shining from the Castle, which provided a dazzling backdrop to the large shed – with free gait and in a playful mood. Afterwards, jumping over the pine log of the door's threshold, he filled the green poultry-yard with joy and with the din of the hens, doves and sparrows. Four men awaited him there, with hairy arms crossed over their colourful shirts. They led him under the pepper bush. After a brief, rough struggle, first affectionate, then fierce, they threw him down on the poultry-yard dung, and with all of them sitting on him, Darbón performed his duty, putting an end to the colt's magical and tragic beauty.

Thy unus'd beauty must be tomb'd with thee,

Which, used, lives th' executor to be,

- Shakespeare said to his friend.

... Docile and covered with sweat, the colt - now a horse- was left exhausted and sad. It took only one man to get him up and, covering him with a blanket, he led him away, slowly, down the street.

Poor empty cloud, only yesterday a bolt of lightning, courageous and strong! He was now like a book with its binding falling apart. It was as though he was no longer on the earth; that between his horse-shoes and the stones, a new element isolated him, leaving him for no reason, like an uprooted tree, like a memory, on that violent, complete and flawless Spring morning.

THE HOUSE ACROSS THE WAY

Platero, what enchantment the house across the street always held for me in my childhood! In the first place, on Riverbank Street was the small house of Arreburra the water seller, with its yard to the south, always golden with the sun, from where I could see Huelva by climbing the adobe wall. Sometimes, they allow me to enter there for a moment, and Arreburra's daughter, who seemed as much a woman to me then as she does now that she is married, would give me shaddocks and kisses... Afterwards, on New Street – later named Cánovas, and after that Fray Juan Pérez – was the house of don José, the confectioner from Seville, who dazzled me with his golden kid boots, hung eggshells from the aloe plant in his courtyard and painted the hallway's doors canary yellow with stripes of navy blue. Sometimes, he came to my house and my father gave him money and don José always talked to him about the olive grove... How many of my childhood dreams have been swayed by that modest pepper bush, which I could see from my balcony, filled with sparrows over don José's roof! There were two pepper bushes which I could never put together: one, that I could see from my balcony, top leaves in the wind or the sun; the other, the one than I saw in don José's courtyard from the trunk up...

On clear afternoons, or during rainy siestas, at the slightest change in each day, each hour, what an extraordinary attraction it had for me, from my wrought-iron gate, from my window, from my balcony, in the silence of the street, the house across the way!

XVIII
THE GHOST

The greatest fun for Anilla the Manteca - whose ardent and fresh youth was an unending source of thrills - was to dress up as a ghost. She would wrap herself completely in a sheet, add flour to the lily whiteness of her face, stick garlic cloves on her mouth and after supper, when we were dreaming, half dozing in the small sitting room, she would suddenly appear from the marble staircase, carrying a lighted lantern, walking slowly, silent and imposing. Dressed in this manner, it was as if her nudity had become a tunic. Indeed, the sepulchral vision coming from the dark upper level inspired fright, but at the same time her whiteness alone was bewitching, with a sensual fullness difficult to figure out...

Platero, I shall never forget that September night. The storm had been beating over the town for an hour like a heart in convulsion, discharging water and hail between the despairing insistence of lightning and thunder. The cistern was already overflowing and had flooded the courtyard. The last familiar sounds – the nine o'clock coach, the ringing of the bells for the departed souls, the postman – had already gone by... A little shaken, I went to the dining-room for a drink, and in the green whiteness of a lightening flash I saw the eucalyptus of the Velarde family – the cuckoo tree, as we used to call it, which tumbled down that night – bent down over the roof of the toolshed...

Without warning, a frightful torrid noise, like the shadow of a flash of light which left us blinded, shook the house. When we came back to our senses, we were no longer in the places where we had been a moment before and each of us was alone, without anxiety or concern for the others. Somebody complained of a headache, somebody else of his eyes, another of his heart... Slowly, we returned to our places.

The storm was moving on... The moon, splitting enormous clouds from bottom to top, lit with its whiteness the water which was covering everything in the courtyard. We went around looking at it all. Lord kept running up to and down the yard steps, barking madly. We followed him – Platero; down there, by the night blooming flower, which was soaking wet and exhaled a nauseating odor, the ill-fated Anilla, dressed like a ghost, lay dead, with the lantern still burning in her lightning-blackened hand.

THE TERRACE ROOF

Platero, you have never climbed up to the terrace of the house. You can't know that deep breathing expands the heart when one comes out of the dark wooden staircase and feels the burning of the mid-day sun, overflowing with blue as being next to the sky itself. One is blinded by the whiteness of the brick floor that, as you know, is limed so that the water from the clouds arrives clean at the cistern.

How enchanting to be on the roof! The bells of the tower are ringing in our bosom, at the level of our heart, which beats fast. Far off, in the vineyards, one can see the mattocks gleaming with a glint of silver and sun; we tower over everything: the other roofs, the yards where the forgotten people toil, each at his own task – the chair-maker, the painter, the barrel-maker - ; the leafy spots of the lumberyards, with the bull and the goat; the graveyard, where, now and then, a third-class funeral procession arrives, black and cramped and unnoticed; windows where a carefree girl, in a nightgown, is combing her hair and singing; the river, with a boat that never reaches port; barns where a lonely musician practices on his cornet, or where violent love - direct, blind and secretive – is having its way.

The house disappears like a basement. How strange, the everyday life below appears through the crystal skylight: words, noises, the garden itself, so beautiful when we are in it; you, Platero, drinking at the through, not seeing me, or playing like a simpleton with the sparrow or the turtle!

XXIII
THE LOCKED GATE

Whenever we went to Diezmo's wine shop, I would return along the wall of Saint Anthony Street and stop at the locked wrought-iron gate facing the fields. I would place my face against the iron railings and I would look right and left, straining my eyes anxiously as far as my sight could reach. Right from the threshold, worn and hidden by the nettles and the mallows, a foot-path starts and disappears towards Angustias street. And going along its fence, there is a wide and deep path that I never walked on...

What a magical fascination to be able to see, through the iron railings of the gate, the same landscape and sky that could be seen in the open. It was as if a roof and a wall of dreams would remove this remarkable view from everything else, to be seen only behind the closed gate... and I could see the road with its bridge and its smoky poplar trees, the brick-kiln, the hills of Palos, the haze of Huelva, And, at night fall, one could see the wharf lights of Rio Tinto, and the large eucalyptus of the Arroyos against the dying purple sunset...

The wine producers used to tell me, laughing, that the gate didn't have a key... As my dreams meandered through un-channeled misunderstandings, the gate looked into the most prodigious gardens, into the most marvelous fields... And thus, as I once tried, trusting my nightmare, to go down the marble stairway flying, time and again, I went to the gate, when morning would arrive, convinced that I would find behind it whatever my fantasy– I don't know whether consciously or unconsciously – mixed with reality...

DON JOSÉ, THE PRIEST

Look Platero, there he goes anointed and speaking with honeyed tongue. But the one who is, in fact, always angelic is his donkey, the lady.

I think you saw him one day in his orchard wearing sailor's breeches and a broad-brimmed hat, casting curses and cobblestones at the kids who were stealing his oranges. A thousand times you have seen, on Fridays, poor Balthasar, his caretaker, dragging his hernia, which looks like a circus balloon, along the tracks to the town to sell his wretched brooms or to pray with the dead relations of the rich...

Never has a man used worse language, nor so disturbed high heaven with his oaths. It's true that he knows, no doubt, or so he says in his five o'clock mass, where and how things are up there... The tree, the clod of earth, the water, the wind, the candle, all this so graceful so gentle, so cool, so pure, so alive, seems to be for him an example of disorder, hardness, coldness, violence and decay. Each day, all the stones in his orchard settle for the night in different places, after being thrown, in furious hostility, at birds and washerwomen, children and flowers.

At prayer time everything changes. Don José's silence can be heard in the silence of the countryside. He gets dressed on his cassock, his long cloak and his shovel hat and, with absent eyes, he enters the dark town on his slow-moving donkey, like Jesus to His death...

THE CISTERN

Look at it, Platero; the last rains have filled it up. Now it has no echo and does not reflect from its depths, as when it is low, the sunlit belvedere, a polychrome jewel behind the blue and yellow panes of the skylight.

Platero, you have never been down in the cistern. I have; I went down when they emptied many years ago. Listen; it has a long passage, and then a tiny room. When I entered it, the candle I was carrying went out and a salamander jumped into my hand. Two terrible chills crossed each other in my heart like two swords, like two thighbones crossed under a skull... Platero, the whole town is undermined with passages and cisterns. The largest cistern is in the courtyard of the Leap of the Wolf, in the square of the ancient citadel of the Castle. The best is this one in my house, which, as you can see, has a curb-stone carved in one piece of alabaster marble. The passage under the church goes as far as the Puntales' vineyard and there it opens to the countryside by the river. The one that starts at the Hospital - nobody has ever dared to reach its end, because it never ends...

I remember the long nights when I was a little boy, with the sobbing murmur of the dense water flowing from the terrace roof to the cistern kept me awake. Then, in the morning, we would excitedly go to see how high the water had reached. When it was up to the rim, as it is today, what astonishment, what shouts, what wonder!

...Well, Platero. Now I'm going to give you a bucketful of this pure, cool water, the same bucket that Villegas used to drink in one drought, poor Villegas, whose body was already emaciated from too much cognac and eau-de-vie...

XXVIII

STILL WATERS

Wait, Platero... Or browse a while in that tender meadow, if you prefer. But let me look at this beautiful pool, which I have not seen in many years...

Look how the sun, passing through its thick water, lights up the deep green-gold beauty that the lilies of heavenly freshness contemplate in ecstasy from the bank. They are velvet stairs descending in repeated labyrinth; magical caverns with all the ideal aspects that a dream mythology might bring to the unbridled imagination of a profound painter; Venus gardens that the permanent melancholy of a mad queen with great green eyes might have created; palaces in ruins like the one I saw on that evening's sea when the setting sun was wounding, obliquely, the low tide... And more, and more and more; as much as the most difficult dream could steal, drawing fugitive beauty from her infinite robe, for the remembered picture of a spring hour, full of grief, in a garden of oblivion that had never quite existed at all... Everything tiny, yet immense, because it seems distant; key of innumerable sensations, the treasure of the oldest magician of fevered dreams...

Platero, this spot of still water used to be my heart. Thus did I feel it in me, exquisitely bitter, in its solitude, with prodigious repressed exuberances... When human love wounded it, opening its barrier, the stagnant blood flowed until it left it pure, clean and fluent, like the Llanos' brook, Platero, in the most open, golden and warm April hour.

Sometimes however, a pale ancient hand brings it back to its former green and solitary stillness and leaves it there bewitched, outside itself, responding to the clear calls, - to sweeten its grief -, like Hylas to Alcides in Chenier's idyll, which I have already read to you with a detached and conceited voice...

THE PARSLEY CROWN

“Let’s see who will get there first!”

The prize was a book of prints, which I had received the day before from Vienna.

“Let’s see who gets to the violets first! One... Two... Three!”

The girls set out running, in a joyful hubbub of pink and white in the yellow sun. For a moment, one could hear the silence which the mute effort of their chests created in the morning, the slow striking of the town’s tower clock, the minute humming of a mosquito in the hill of pine trees filled with white lilies, the water running in the brooklet... The girls were just reaching the first orange tree, when Platero, who was idling nearby, caught the spirit of the game and joined them in their lively race. The girls, eager to win, could not protest, nor even laugh...

I shouted to them: “Platero is going to win! Platero is going to win!”

Yes, Platero reached the violets before anybody else and stayed there rolling about in the sand.

The girls returned red-faced and protesting, pulling up their socks, pushing back their hair:

“That wasn’t fair! Not at all! Not at all! Not fair!”

I told them that Platero had won the race and that it was fair to give him some kind of prize.

And anyway, since Platero could not read, the book would be left for another race among them; but Platero should get his prize.

The girls, now sure of the book, jumped and laughed with flushed faces: “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

Then, thinking of myself, I thought that Platero should have the best prize in his own effort, as I do in my verses. And, plucking a bit of parsley from the box at the door of the caretaker's house, I made a crown and put it on his head, brief and maximum honor, like that won by a Spartan champion.

THE THREE WISE MEN

Platero, what excitement tonight for the children! It was not possible to put them to bed.

In the end, sleep overcame them: one in an armchair; one on the floor, by the warmth of the fireplace, Blanca on a low chair; Pepe on the window seat, with his head leaning on the door nails, in case the Tree Wise Men were to pass... And now, in the bosom of this place remote from life, one senses something like life's great and plenteous heart, the vivid and magical sleep of all.

Before dinner, I went upstairs with them all. What a clamor up the stairway, frightening to them on other nights. "Pepe, I'm not afraid of the skylight. What about you?" Blanca said, holding to my hand very tightly. And we placed everyone's shoes on the balcony among the shaddocks. Now, Platero, let us go and dress up Montemayor, Tita, Maria, Teresa, Lolilla, Perico, you and me in sheets, bedspreads and ancient hats. At midnight, we shall parade by the children's window in a procession of disguises and lights, beating brass mortars, blowing trumpets and the conch shell which is in the back room. You will go in front with me; I shall be Gaspar and wear a burlap white beard; you will be caparisoned in the Colombian flag, which I brought from the house of my uncle, the former consul. The children, suddenly awakened, with sleep still lingering over their astonished eyes, will peep through the window-panes in their nightshirts, shivering and amazed. Afterwards, we shall enter their dreams through all the early morning hours, and then late tomorrow morning, when the blue sky dazzles them through the shutters, they will go up, half-dressed, to the balcony to become masters of all their treasure. Last year we laughed a lot. Platero, you will see what fun we are going to have tonight, my dear small camel!