

Cagliostro

SAMPLER

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SAMPLER

Cagliostro

Vicente Huidobro

SAMPLE

*translated from Spanish by
Warre Bradley Wells*

Shearsman Books

Second Edition.
Published in the United Kingdom in 2019 by
Shearsman Books Ltd
50 Westons Hill Drive
Emersons Green
BRISTOL
BS16 7DF

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
(*this address not for correspondence*)

ISBN 978-1-84861-658-5

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First published as *Mirror of a Mage* by
Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, in 1931;
first U.S. edition published by Houghton Mifflin Co.,
New York & Boston, 1931.

First publication in Spanish as *Cagliostro*
by Ediciones Zif Zag, Santiago, Chile, 1934.

Notice

Every effort has been made to trace the representatives of the translator's estate but we have had no success. We would be pleased to hear from anyone who controls the literary estate of W. B. Wells.

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SAMPLER

PREFACE

Everybody, no doubt, is more or less familiar with the name of Cagliostro. A man so mysterious, alike in himself and in the circumstances of his life, can hardly fail to interest people, especially those who are connoisseurs of things curious.

But who was Cagliostro?

If we look up his name in an encyclopaedic dictionary—*Larousse*, for example—we find this reference: ‘Cagliostro—A clever charlatan, doctor and occultist, believed to be an Italian, born at Palermo, and said to have died in the castle of Saint Leo, near Rome (1743-1795). Had a great success at the Court of Louis XVI and in the Parisian society of that time; played a great part in Freemasonry; was involved in various affairs, including the famous affair of the Queen’s Necklace; afterwards removed to Rome, where he was condemned to death by the Inquisition, but this sentence was commuted to imprisonment for life.’

Other encyclopaedias say that nothing is known for certain about his origin, or even about his death. Others again add that he passed himself off as a magician and claimed to be able to make gold and to possess marvellous recipes for increasing the size of pearls, diamonds, and other precious stones; and that he also claimed to know the Elixir of Life. According to some accounts, he carried his audacity to the point of declaring that he could divine the winning numbers in any lottery whatsoever.

On one occasion he solemnly declared that he had already lived for three thousand four hundred years, and that he would live as long again. That nothing should be lacking to complete his legend, it was even said that Cagliostro believed himself to be capable of raising the dead.

All the extraordinary powers of this man, according to these authors, were to be attributed to the fact that he was a clever charlatan, a prestidigitator of the first order. The marvels that are told of him were the result, they say, of collective suggestion; for perhaps this man was more learned than anybody else (here we have a small concession) in certain phenomena of hypnotism and magnetism.

In other words this magician-charlatan, this magician-prestidigitator, worked miracles which were due solely to collective suggestion. Therefore they were not true miracles but false miracles, feigned miracles. He made people believe that he manufactured gold, he made them believe that he possessed the Philosopher's Stone, he made them believe that he enlarged precious stones, and all the rest of it.

This is a curious argument which, in seeking to discredit marvellous things, would explain them away by other things no less marvellous. It rejects one extraordinary thing in the name of another that is equally extraordinary. For it is not to be denied that a man who possesses the power of mass suggestion to such a point that he can make people see whatever he wishes them to see is, at least, as extraordinary as a man who manufactures gold, makes pearls grow, or increases the span of life. The one fact is as marvellous as the others.

Those false men of science of the generation of thirty or forty years ago, who refused to accept anything outside the sphere of eating and digestion, who shied at any phenomenon a little out of the way, and who when they had to explain it tangled themselves up in their reasoning and tied themselves up in their speech to the end of talking nonsense which explained nothing—such men would be laughable if they were not lamentable.

I do not mean to imply that I am a miracle-monger, or that I believe in all the prodigies that are told in old wives' tales—far from it. But it does seem to me that there are many phenomena about which we are as yet ignorant; and that, if we cannot explain them in an intelligible way, it is much better not to try and explain them, but to admit frankly that for the time being they are incapable of explanation. This attitude appears to me to be more dignified and less ridiculous than that of offering half-baked explanations.

Why should we assume it to be impossible that the alchemists of earlier times manufactured gold? Why should we regard this as so extraordinary? Are we not surrounded by the extraordinary? Is it not extraordinary to put a record in a gramophone and out of a disc of pulp or celluloid like this reproduce the human voice? And what about wireless telegraphy, and television, and all the phenomena of

electricity? Perhaps there is nothing extraordinary about the fact that a little cable is capable of transmitting, from a distant dynamo, the energy necessary to keep hundreds of tramcars running about a city?

It may be asked: if some alchemists succeeded in making gold, why can we not do so today? This is a very poor argument, for everybody knows that an invention may be lost. We do not know today with any certainty how Archimedes burned the enemies' ships from a distance. Among occultists, moreover, formulas did not pass from hand to hand as they pass today among men of science. These formulae were expressed in intentionally obscure symbols, so that only the highly initiated could discover their secrets.

On the other hand, I think that it will readily be admitted that a man might have invented something, have shown it to his friends, and then have died without ever having been able to explain his processes. Nobody can deny that this could happen, or that it may have happened.

Is there any reason why Cagliostro should not have been precisely such a man? Who can assert, and claim authority for the assertion, that Cagliostro did not make gold artificially, or increase the size of diamonds, or divine the winning numbers in lotteries, or cure sick people who had been given up as hopeless by other doctors? Such an assertion amounts to claiming that the knowledge of all men must necessarily be the same.

Was Cagliostro a charlatan? It is possible that all doctors are charlatans. Attend any session of a medical society. What magnificent charlatanry; and what magnificent assurance in this charlatanry! Read the papers presented to medical societies and institutes merely in the last forty years, and then make a reckoning of all the theories discussed, accepted, and today discredited. What brilliant charlatanry; and what full-bodied assurance in that charlatanry!

What was the great claim of Cagliostro? It was that he possessed certain secrets unknown to his contemporaries, and that he could cure infirmities of the body and especially of the spirit, and that he used these powers to acquire a real ascendancy over men and nations. To what end? Some say that he was the visible representative of certain occult sects which pursued objects unknown. Others say that he

desired only to establish on earth a regime of greater social justice and liberty of ideas.

The author of this book has not attempted to follow Cagliostro in all the episodes of his life. I say nothing here of his journeys to England, or of his trial in London, in the course of which his accusers themselves admitted that on several occasions he had given them lottery numbers which proved to be winners. I say nothing either of his journey to Russia and his stay at the Court of Catherine, or of the years which he spent in Italy.

I have confined myself to telling, in the minor key of mystery, his life and legend in France. Towards the end of the reign of Louis XVI France and a large part of Europe were invaded by numerous secret societies, whose activity, unknown to the great majority of people, had a vast influence upon the events of the time. How many happenings whose origin is obscure to us perhaps had their birth in underground retreats where a handful of hunted men plotted by the dim light of a candle!

These societies arose out of the miraculous East. The power of the occult fascinated some of the best minds of the West. Attracted by the lure of these forgotten sciences, they devoted themselves wholeheartedly to the study of alchemy, magic, and all the mysteries of the Kabbalah. Among the initiated only a few chosen spirits can have possessed truly superhuman powers. Admission to these societies involved the most absolute secrecy. Woe to him who betrayed it!

Whence did Cagliostro arrive in France? Whither did he go? These are questions which he always himself desired to leave a mystery. The author has chosen to respect that desire.

The eternal questions which different authors have raised about Cagliostro must be settled in a book more scientific than this. Was Cagliostro a person in the service of a nation or a secret society which aspired to change the general political regime in Europe? Was he a man engaged in hidden designs, or was he simply a man inspired? What mysterious hand, and to what end, guided personalities so strange as those of Cagliostro and the Count of Saint Germain? When Cagliostro said that he had lived for thousands of years, and

that he would live for many centuries more, was he speaking of a material fact, or was he rather referring to the revolutionary spirit which he seemed to incarnate in his time?

The best answer to these questions, and to all the accusations of which his name has been the object, is to be found in these words of his own:

I am of no age and of no place. Outside of Time and Space my spiritual being lives its eternal existence. If I plunge myself in my thoughts which go back over the course of ages, if my spirit aspires towards a way of life different from that which you see around you, I succeed in being that which I desire ... Judge my way of life, judge my actions; say whether they be good and whether you have seen others of greater power. Then concern yourselves neither with my nationality nor with my rank, nor with my religion.

So much for the personality of Cagliostro.

As for the form of this book, I have only to say that this is what may be called a visual novel, with a technique influenced by the cinematograph.

I believe that the public of today, which has acquired the cinema habit, may be interested in a novel in which the author has deliberately chosen words of a visual character and events that are best suited to comprehension through the eyes.

Some years ago there was much discussion in the intellectual world over the question whether the cinematograph could or would have any influence upon the novel. Recently the periodical *L'Ordre* has been conducting an inquiry into this question here in Paris.

The majority of the replies were foolish. Our gentlemen of the pen feel their pride wounded by the thought that the cinematograph could influence literature. They forget that every invention of men influences men, and above all the sensitive man, the artist.

It is obvious that writing is not the same since the invention of the motor car or of electricity as it was before. Everybody, whether he realises it or not, is subject to the influence of all the inventions of his time. These inventions, possibly without his being conscious of the fact, have filtered through the skin of the man of letters. The result is to be seen not only in the images which he employs, but also in a style of writing which is more nervous and more rapid, which employs more short-cuts and is keener-edged.

I do not mean to suggest that all writers in all their works have been influenced by the cinematograph. But it is undeniable that almost all of them in some of their works, and others in all their works have felt this influence in greater or lesser degree.

Character drawing today has to be more synthetic, more compact, than it was before. Action cannot be slow. Events have to move more rapidly. Otherwise the public is bored. There cannot be large voids or long preliminary descriptions as in the novel of earlier times. In this consists the superiority of the American film at its best over the European; and it has been appreciated here by all true artists, who today make their films *à l'américaine*.

The drawing of characters by means of long psychological processes is finished. Four strokes of the brush, and a living being is painted. Four strokes of the brush, and a situation is painted. Four strokes of the brush, and a landscape is painted. And to paint them well by this method is much more difficult than it was by the old.

We live in an age of pills and tablets. Nobody takes a potion of half a litre for a headache. He takes a tablet of aspirin. We have left potions to our grandfathers.

This book was first published fragmentarily in 'advanced' reviews in 1921 and 1922. It has been completely revised for the present publication. It is my answer to the question whether the cinematograph can influence the novel.

Vicente Huidobro,
Paris, April, 1931.

TO THE READER

It may be supposed that the reader has not bought this book in a bookshop, but rather has bought a cinema ticket.

So, dear reader, you are not coming out of a bookshop, but rather going into a cinema. You take your seat. The orchestra launches into a piece of music, which gets on your nerves. It's really ridiculous... But it has to be so, because most of the audience likes it. The orchestra finishes. The curtain rises or, rather, the curtains part, and there appears:

CAGLIOSTRO

by

Vicente Huidobro

etc, etc, etc etc, etc

Then there appear, in large letters on the screen, an explanatory note concerning the plot in the briefest possible terms:

INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of the reign of Louis XVI, there sprang up throughout France and most of Europe a great number of secret societies, whose activities, although unknown to the majority of the populace, had a great impact on the events of the era.

How many events, of whose origin we are unaware, were perhaps born in dark underground places, where these persecuted individuals debated by the half-light of a candle!

These societies had their origins in the miraculous East, and the power of the Occult so concerned the greatest minds of the West that they surrendered feverishly to the study of Alchemy, of Magic and of all the mysteries of the Kabbalah, drawn by the beauty of this forgotten science.

Among the initiates only a very few chosen ones possessed truly extraordinary powers.

Admission to these organisations involved total and complete secrecy. Anyone revealing their secrets was in great danger...

SAMPLER

I.

PRELUDE IN A TEMPEST

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An eighteenth-century tempest broke that autumn evening over Alsace, blushing in her sleep through her turning leaves and the cheeks of her daughters.

Great clouds, black and full as the belly of a seal, swam in the wet winds towards the West, steered by the skilled hands of the constellation of the Charioteer. From time to time the shrewd stab of a lightning-flash poured upon our stricken panorama the chill blood of a wounded cloud.

It was a night propitious for the hammering of counterfeiters and the galloping of the wolves of History. To the right of the reader are the ruin and the busy forge of the tempest; and to the left are wooded hills.

The stately forest was the instrument of the wind. Like an organ or a sea-cave, it lamented as though all the lost children of the world were waiting for their mothers. All this page which I am writing is crossed by a road full of mire, of pools of water, and of Legend.

At the end of it there appeared suddenly a pair of lights, swaying from side to side like a drunkard singing his way over the horizon. A coach mysterious alike in its form and its colour advances towards the reader, closing upon him to the gallop of its horses, whose heavy shoes of iron make all my novel tremble.

Not to be outdone by the Heavens, the coachman lashed his horses with the lightnings of his whip. The coach came on cleaving through the rain as if through cane-fields in the great plains of the Tropics.

The coach arrives before us. It is upon us, only a few feet from our eyes. The rain beats with spiteful intent upon the driver. Reader, fair or plain, you must step aside a pace or two lest you be bespattered by the wheels of this mystery that passes.

Suddenly the tempest waxed—the lightning blinds our rain-filled eyes—and a flash escaping from its invisible anvil struck one of the horses of that dark coach, which seemed more hearse-like than ever as the horse lay dead upon the road, with its two comrades rearing on their hind legs in righteous indignation. Magnificent was the posture of the coachman as he sought to control his startled steeds—like a monarch in Chariot of State at the edge of the abyss of Revolution.

AFTERWORD to the Second Edition

In the 1920s, Vicente Huidobro busied himself with a number of artistic projects, *apparently* moving on from his earlier avant-garde poetry, which had made his literary name in 1917-18. 1921 saw the publication of a French-language selected poems, *Saisons choisies*, and then in 1925 Huidobro published two further poetry collections, both also written in French, which represent a transitional phase in his verse. However, he was also at this point in the midst of writing the great long poem, *Altazor*, and published the first sections from that work in Spanish-language journals in 1925. In 1928 he began writing the long prose poem, *Temblor de cielo* (Skyquake), and also the novel *Mío Cid Campeador* (published in this series as *El Cid*).

In 1923 he had published an anti-British diatribe, *Finis Britanniae*, and claimed that he had been attacked by British agents in the wake of its publication. This was a recurring trope in the author's life: it was to happen again with some Italian agents after he published an anti-fascist poem called 'Fuera de aquí' (Get out of here), and he was attacked twice in Santiago while running for President. Without wishing to cast doubt on Huidobro's honesty, it has to be admitted that he was very adept at getting publicity for himself and for his various projects, and I suspect that one or two of these incidents, at the very least, were less than they were made out to be. All gained him headlines. The decade also saw the publication of the author's collected manifestos (*Manifestes*, 1925), and a collection of essays and aphorisms, *Vientos contrarios* (Contrary Winds, 1926).

Huidobro had been fascinated by the new medium of film for some time and was reported by the *Paris-Journal* of April 1923 to be at work on a 'Cubist' film, which would revolutionise viewing habits. A month later, another newspaper *L'Ère nouvelle*, in an article on 'Poets and Cinema' reported that Huidobro had 'completed the scenario of a film *Cagliostro*, in which the specifically cinegraphic action is 'visualised' with an acute sense of optic rhythm.'¹

¹ I am indebted here to René de Costa, who reports this in *Vicente Huidobro: The Careers of a Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

Huidobro reported that the film had been shot in late 1923 by the Romanian director Mime Mizu, but that it had been scrapped due to dissatisfaction over the editing. No trace of the film survives, although there are three pages from a script, written in French, in the author's papers, as well as a letter signed by Mizu confirming the veracity of Huidobro's statement concerning the film. There is a curious parallel here with the formal documentary evidence concerning a disputed publication of the poetry collection, *El espejo de agua* (The Water Mirror, 1914; 2nd edition, 1916), and one wonders whether the author might have been concerned over the possibility of a renewed accusation of dishonesty, of the kind he had suffered in 1918.

A revised version of the script was submitted to The League for Better Motion Pictures in New York and won a \$10,000 award on 20 July 1927 as the best candidate for conversion into a film. On 23 July 1927, the *New York Times* reported, under the headline 'Chilean Gets Film Prize':

Vicente Huidobro, young Chilean poet and novelist, was announced yesterday as the winner of a \$10,000 prize offered by the League for Better Motion Pictures for the book of the year having the best possibilities for moving-picture adaptation. The book, still in script form in the hands of Paris publishers, is called *Cagliostro* and is based upon the life of the eighteenth-century necromancer and popular mystic.²

Alas for the author, this was just at the point when the 'talkies' arrived—*The Jazz Singer* was released on 6 October, 1927—and this style of silent film-making was rendered immediately outmoded.³ However

² It should be noted that, notwithstanding reference to a 'script' in the newspaper article, the award certificate refers to a 'novel', and that a further newspaper article on 24 July, documenting the award ceremony, likewise refers to a novel. As far as I am aware, the typescript submitted to the Prize has not survived.

³ *The Jazz Singer* was not in fact the first sound film. It was however the first full-length feature film with synchronized singing sequences and [some] synchronized speech as well as synchronized instrumental score and sound effects. Previous films, notably *Don Juan* (1926) had already offered synchronized score and effects, but no previous full feature had had all that

the novella, which has many cinematic elements, was published in English translation in 1931 in both London and New York, to positive reviews. It appeared in the original Spanish only in 1934, in Santiago, Chile, where it made no impact at all. The present edition reproduces the text of Wells's 1931 translation, with only some minor edits to the text, where today's usage has diverged markedly from that of the 1930s, or where the original appeared too awkward for modern tastes. It should be added here that the Spanish-language edition had a shorter Preface than the one translated by Wells, but we have not altered the Preface here to take account of that. That edition also had a brief 'To the Reader' and 'Introduction' following the Preface, which I have translated and added to this edition, partly for the sake of completeness, but also because they amplify the cinematic elements of the whole volume.

While Huidobro's career in the film world had come to a sudden end, the extra cash was no doubt welcome, and he managed to make the best of it, rapidly gaining publication for the novella in English, as well as for the *Cid* novel—the only English-language book publications of Huidobro's work during his lifetime. As a souvenir of his days in the film world, Huidobro also had a number of photos of the stars—including Gloria Swanson and Greta Garbo—and a peculiar group photo with a number of starlets (see p.6 of this volume): Lya de Putti (1897-1931, Hungarian silent-film actress); Norma Smallwood (1909-1966, Miss America 1926), Roberte Cusey (1907-?, Miss France 1926, who made two films in 1927-28), a certain ballerina by name of 'Miss Tomiris'⁴ and Jacqueline Logan (1904-1983), known as the 'Venus of New York', but also one of the stars of *King of Kings* (1927), where she played the role of Mary Magdelene.

Tony Frazer

The Jazz Singer offered, and the world of the movies changed overnight. Sound-on-film recording technology (as opposed to sound-on-disc, used in *The Jazz Singer*) was to be the key to the Talkies' complete success, and this technology was being used from 1930 onwards.

⁴ This may refer to Helen Tamiris (1905-1966), dancer and choreographer, who was active at this time.