The making of a revolutionary

A Memoir of the Young Guevara

By DOLORES MOYANO MARTIN

Ernesto Che Guevara's death at the hands of Bolivian troops last October enhanced a legend that began when he was Fidel Castro's right-hand man in Cuba. This memoir, by a childhood friend in Argentina, describes some of the events and influences that helped shape him as a revolutionary. The author, now living in Washington, has drawn primarily upon her personal journals, and correspondence with mutual friends.

IN 1932, because of 4-year-old Ernesto Guevara's asthma, his family moved from humid Buenos Aires to Alta Gracia in the mountains of Córdoba, where the air is dry and sharp and the sky as blue and cloudless as a postcard. In 1941, the Guevaras rented a row house around the block from ours in the city of Córdoba. There were then five children: Ernesto, the oldest, followed by Celia, Roberto, Ana María and Juan Martín, or Patatín, the baby. Although Ernesto never acquired a Córdoban accent and was easily identifiable as not native to the province, Córdoba became his hometown. Even after the family moved back to Buenos Aires in 1946, they returned to spend their summers in the mountains.

Córdoba, which Ernesto once described as "this flat city of my loves," is known as *La Docta*, "The Scholarly." Though now a thriving industrial city, it was then a university town with a church in every block, full of students, priests and nuns. The magnificent baroque cathedral, like a gray elephant, faced the main plaza with its general on horseback, under whose shadow little Indian-looking conscripts in Nazi-style helmets made advances to the pinafored maids on errands. Across the plaza was the Royal Cinema, where the children of the oligarchy were shown American war movies with the love scenes heavily censored by the Catholic Action. In the cafes, anticlerical liberals met to talk politics with Spanish Republicans and other anti-Fascist European exiles. A city of bookstores, religious processions, student demonstrations and military parades; a city gentle, dull, almost torpid on the surface but simmering with tensions.

With an insignificant middle class, little industry and an omnipotent and omnipresent church, Córdoba was still a feudal city in many ways. At the top of the social pyramid there were a minuscule grand oligarchy, living in splendor; a middle oligarchy, without private planes and polo fields but with plenty of other consolations, and an impoverished oligarchy, which the Guevaras joined. In this last group appearances were kept up by endless financial acrobatics.

THE Guevaras were part of the Buenos Aires upper class, and until the loss of the family's considerable fortune had lived very well indeed. Ernesto Sr. is a cousin of Alberto Gainza Paz, the editor of that bastion of conservatism the Buenos Aires daily La Prensa. Young Ernesto once mentioned, not without pride, that he was a descendant of one of the colonial viceroys of the River Plate, roughly the Argentine equivalent of having had an ancestor on the Mayflower.

Unlike the rest of the impoverished oligarchy, the Guevaras made no bones about being poor. This unconventional admission and their candidly Bohemian ways incensed the genteel. As someone said of the Irish—and the Lynch side of the Guevara family was Irish—in their house the inevitable never happened, only the unexpected. Mealtimes were not fixed; one just ate when one felt hungry. You were free to ride your bicycle from the street through the living room into their backyard. In the house, one could hardly see the furniture for the books and magazines piled high everywhere. One of my earlies
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CHE—Guevara (left), who legally adopted the name Che in 1959, with Premier Fidel Castro in early 1965, shortly before departing on the guerrilla mission that was to end with his death in Bolivia last year.

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my earliest memories of Ernesto is of him in bed, his head shaved like a convict, and wearing striped pajamas, which gave him the look of a concentration camp inmate.

Ernesto's mother, Celia, had the same wickedly teasing streak as her son. Passionate and truthful, she could be exceedingly stubborn. Ernesto Sr., a civil engineer and practicing architect, was an immensely likable man who exuded warmth and vitality. He spoke in a booming voice, and was rather absent-minded. Occasionally, he sent the children on errands which he had forgotten by the time they returned.

The Guevaras kept their house wide open to everybody and this delighted the neighborhood children. In fact, they encouraged their own children to be as democratic as possible and to bring anyone they wished for a visit. Workers, mechanics, caddies, newsboys, people from all walks of life would meet to socialize with the Guevaras' upper-class friends. Both parents shared an aristocratic contempt for bourgeois formalities and undoubtedly enjoyed shocking some of their more conventional friends who would arrive only to be formally introduced to the corner newsboy.

IN most Latin American cities, especially in the provinces, the poor and the rich live side by side. There are no ghettos in this feudal society, where somehow physical immediacy does not affect the enormous social distances. Our neighborhood was typical in this respect. On one block there would be a row of neat houses, flowers growing in their backyards, mestizo maids hosing down the

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ERNESTO—These snapshots of the young Guevara are from the author's albums. Top left, as a 23-year-old medical student in 1951, he vacations on her family's ranch in Argentina. Top right, earlier that year, he goes seafaring as ship's doctor on a merchantman bound for Patagonia. Above, a 1950 picture of him as daredevil bicyclist. The inscription reads: "To my [female] Cordoba admirers." The signature: "From the King of the Roads."

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clouds of dust from unpaved streets, while the childen rode tricycles and bicycles on the sidewalks. The next block would be empty of houses, but not of people. In these empty square blocks, called *baldíos*, and in squalor and filth, lived the poor in shacks made of cardboard and tin.

Ernesto's house on Chile Street faced one of the worst *baldíos* in the neighborhood. One of our pastimes was to sit on the curb of the safe side of the street and watch the goings-on in the *baldío*. There was the coughing woman in black who would nurse her baby under a *paraíso* tree and spit phlegm over his head. There was the dwarfish 12-year-old called Quico who had the wide-open eyebrowless and lashless look of a Flemish painting. "For one sucker, Quico will show you his tongue. It's white," we would inform a new friend. "No kidding." And for one sucker you could see the furrowed tongue, white from either disease or malnutrition, protruding from the hairless, impassive face, after which Quico would dart back into his *baldío* hole.

But the most frightening of the *baldío* people was the man with the dogs. A nightmare out of Goya, he lived with three or four mangy and abused dogs in one of the darker and deeper hovels of the *baldío*. The man had lost both his legs and had fashioned himself a wooden cart which the dogs pulled downtown every morning, while he held the reins and whipped them. Some said he went to a church downtown and sat outside begging; others claimed he sold lottery tickets. Because the dogs had a difficult time pulling the weight over the rim of the *baldío* hole, their whines always preceded the apparition of the man's face—contorted into red, sputtering anger.

One day, a group of us children, including Ernesto, who was busy working on his bike, were standing on the street playing when the racket of the dogs was heard. As the man emerged over the rim, a bunch of laughing *baldío* kids began throwing stones at him and calling him names. Ernesto, the only one from our side of the street on familiar terms with the *baldío* gang, told them to stop it, and immediately the barefoot children ran back into their holes. The man pulled the reins and came to a full stop in front of us. Without saying a word, yet with a hatred so glacial that it made us shiver, he looked us over, especially Ernesto. In his icy silence, he was telling us to save our good gestures, to keep our good intentions. It was not those barefoot kids who were his enemies. It was us. Then, in his usual cloud of dust and whining dogs, the man vanished.

Ernesto's whole life was a crossing of that street of his childhood. A crossing into the forbidden world of the man with the dogs—and the woman with the goats in Bolivia. The last entry in his guerrilla diary speaks of giving 50 pesos to an old woman with goats "with orders not to say a word but with little faith that she will keep her promise." Who was that old woman of the goats? Atropos, the hag of fate, who held the thread of his life and betrayed him? Or one of those peasants of whom he wrote: "They are as impenetrable as rocks. You speak to them, but in the depths of their eyes you note they do not believe you."

AS a child, Ernesto was a natural leader. Friends told me how, when the family lived in Alta Gracia, on the Córdoba mountains, Ernesto, then about 7 or 8 years old, was the leader of a gang of kids, golf-course caddies and the sons of peons who worked in the nearby hills. He would often challenge the children of the local gentility and sons of well-off families vacationing in Alta Gracia to a soccer match. Ernesto's proletarian team would win decisively, and the losers would go home weeping to mamma, with Ernesto and his gang taunting them.

He enjoyed nothing more than shocking his well-behaved, less adventurous schoolmates, although he was always an excellent student. (His memory was so good that he could glance at the lesson during recess and get an A in class.) I remember one story that made the rounds among our friends. We had been told that ink and chalk were poisonous and never to put either in our mouths. When some overconscientious classmate warned Ernesto of the peril, he replied that it was rubbish. "Watch," he said, setting up the chalk and inkwell the way a Latin-American worker might do his *café au lait* at breakfast when pre-

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He did forbidden things to see if they could be done

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paring to dip bread in it. Dipping the chalk into the ink, Ernesto bit off a good chunk and, as he chewed it, remarked: "Not bad, not bad." Then he took a sip of ink, drying his mouth with the blotter. As he walked about after his meal, several horrified 8-year-olds followed him, anxiously waiting for the coma to begin.

Another friend recalled Ernesto at 13 or so, walking on a very high, narrow fence, with sharp cane stubs on either side, on which, had he fallen, he could have been impaled. As Castro said of him in his memorial speech: "In all the time we knew him he displayed an extraordinary lack of fear, an absolute disregard for danger, a constant readiness . . . to do the most difficult and dangerous things. . . . No one was ever . . . certain that he would adopt even minimum precautions." He never lost his enthusiasm for sports, especially violent sports, though sometimes, because of his terrible asthma, he had to be carried from a rugby field half-unconscious.

Nevertheless, Ernesto's defiance of death, his apparently Hemingwaylike courting of danger, was not impetuous and exhibitionist thrill-seeking. When he did something dangerous or forbidden, whether eating chalk or walking on a fence, he did it to find out whether or not it could be done, and if it could, which was the best way to do it. The underlying attitude was intellectual, the overriding motive experimental. Ernesto was not a show-off or a thrill-seeker as a child, but a tireless and unconventional experimenter.

One of his few compromises with his asthma was that, unlike most of his peers, he did not start smoking. He also did not drink, not because he disapproved of it, but simply because he did not like it. He much preferred to drink the traditional Argentine maté (Paraguayan tea), which he could sip endlessly from a gourd. He was remarkably frugal in his eating habits, sometimes seeming to live on a vegetable diet. He never learned to dance, possibly because he had a tin ear. We would beg him to sing "The March of St. Lawrence"—a simple-minded tune which all Argentine schoolchildren know by heart, comparable to "Yankee Doodle" in catchiness. Ernesto's wildly off-key rendition invariably broke up the house.

As a young man, Ernesto had an infallible detector for the phony. In fact, all the Guevara family were great debunkers. Once they sensed any pomposity, pedantry or pretense in some poor soul, they would tease mercilessly until the victim fled. Ernesto was a masterful leader of these attacks. In my early adolescence, I took my reading very seriously and was especially fond of the Spanish-Arab mystics. After one comment on the subject which Ernesto overheard, he leaned forward in his chair, asking with great interest:

"How was that? Hey, everybody, listen to this: Do any of you clods know about Arab mystics and—what was it?—Manichaean dualism?" His Córdoban accent, imitating mine, was getting a little bit more pronounced, but I was so flattered by his attention that I disregarded the danger signals. Very proud, I said: "The lover and the mystic in St. John's poetry have this double vision. The inner eye and the outward eye, the lover-mystic sees both ways and the Arab poet's line goes, 'O, shame, shame. . . .'"

At that point, and in an exaggerated Córdoban accent, Ernesto recited a profane couplet about a one-eyed nun and a cross-eyed saint. Everybody laughed and the score, as always, read: Guevaras, 1; Visitors, 0.

In his late teens, Ernesto amazed all of us by going into business. With his friend Carlitos Figueroa, he began manufacturing an insecticide which they called *Vendaval* (Strong Wind). This they did with an effective, if outlandish, mixture of chemicals and talcum powder, which they packaged themselves and sold to hardware stores. Another business scheme Ernesto and Carlitos organized was selling shoes. They decided that they would buy shoes at auctions—where they were not paired off—for a minimum price, collate the pairs, and sell them at a profit. Either they could not match the shoes or find buyers for the leftovers, because in the end Ernesto had a considerable supply of unmatched shoes and occasionally would

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show up at a party wearing different sizes.

The fact that Ernesto not only paid no attention to his clothes, but tried his best to look unfashionable was a favorite topic of conversation among our friends. One has to know the mentality of the provincial oligarchy to appreciate the remarkable effect of Ernesto's appearance. Terribly clothes-conscious, all the boys we knew put a great deal of effort and money into obtaining the latest fads: cowboy boots, blue jeans, Italian shirts, British pullovers, etc., back then in the early fifties. Ernesto's favorite piece of clothing in those days was a nylon shirt, originally white but gray from use, which he wore constantly and called *La Semanera*, claiming he washed it once a week. His trousers would be wide, floppy and, once, I recall, held up by a piece of clothesline.

With Ernesto's entrance into a party, all conversation would cease, while everybody tried to appear nonchalant and unimpressed. Ernesto, enjoying himself hugely and perfectly aware of the sensation he was creating, would be in complete command. Mysteriously, instead of his being embarrassed by all of us, it always worked the other way around.

AT any social gathering, the directness, the candor, the mocking quality of his opinions made his presence dangerous. When Ernesto came to dinner at my family's, we would wait for the worst to happen with a mixture of dread and delight. One night, my supremely Anglophilic relatives were discussing Churchill. In that house his name was invoked with the same reverence that Queen Victoria received in the India of the eighteen-eighties. As each elderly member of the family contributed his favorite anecdote of the man, Ernesto listened with undisguised amusement. Then, at the first lull in the conversation, he interjected: "Churchill? Bah! He was just another politician." During the uproar that followed, one of my uncles, well-known for his self-restraint, jumped up from his chair and stomped out. Ernesto was anticipating the temper of the present generation, to whom Churchill, an obsolete and slightly pompous figure out of the last century, hardly seems relevant to the issues of the age.

My father's cousins, the Ferreyras, were members of the grand oligarchy of Córdoba. They owned an enormous Edwardian château in the city and a large ranch at Malagueño. The ranch included two polo fields, tennis courts, swimming pools, Arabian stallions, and a feudal village of workers for the family's limestone quarries. The family visited the village church every Sunday for mass, worshiping in a separate alcove to the right of the altar with its own separate entrance and private communion rail, away from the mass of workers. In many ways, Malagueño exemplified everything Ernesto despised. Yet, unpredictable as always, Ernesto had fallen madly in love with the princess of this little empire, my cousin Chichina Ferreyra, an extraordinarily beautiful and charming girl who, to the dismay of her parents, was equally fascinated by Ernesto. It would have been difficult to conceive two more opposite

OFFICIAL — Guevara, then Cuban Minister of Industry, at the U.N. in 1964 during his one visit to New York.

poles than Chichina and Ernesto. Family opposition to him was fierce. Doomed from the start, touched with the magic aura of the impossible, their stormy courtship nevertheless was touched with comic episodes.

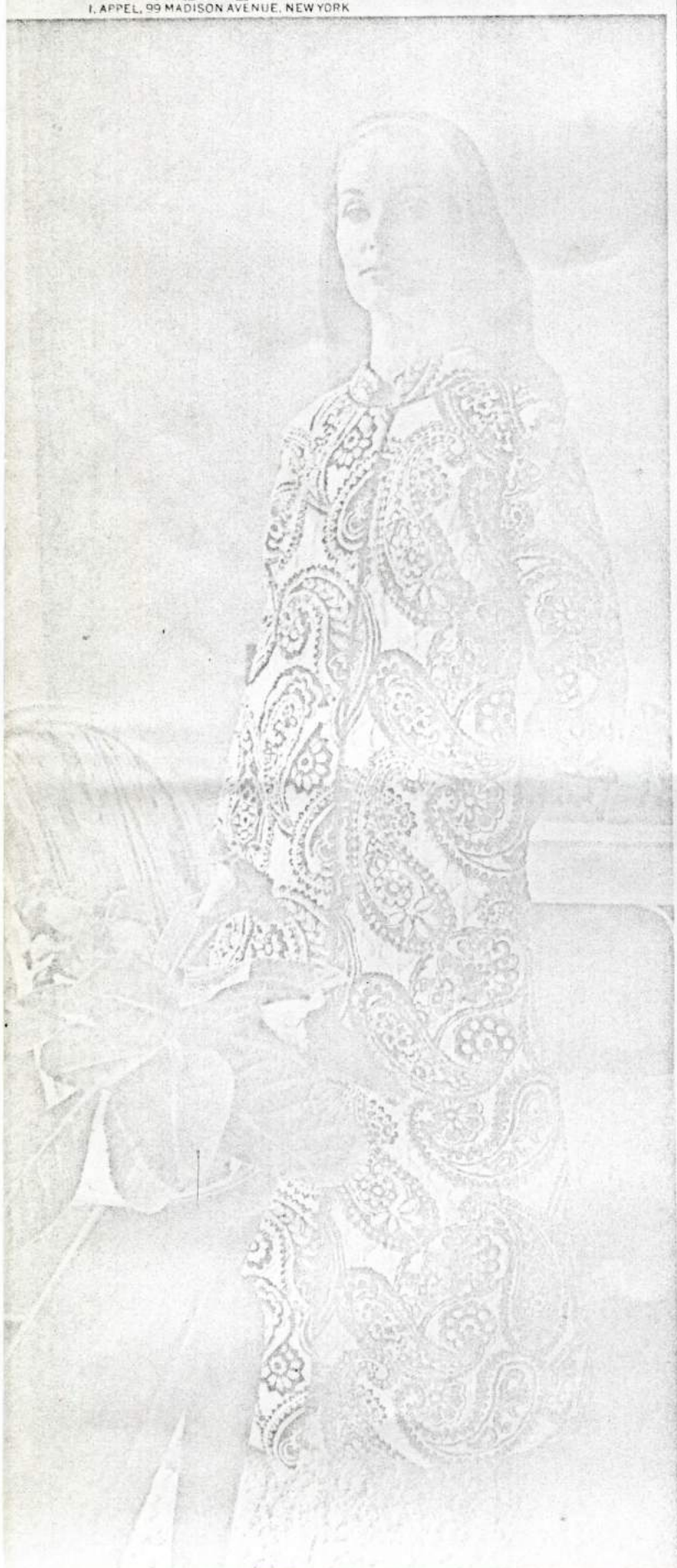
I remember his decision to learn to drive while riding in the family's car with Chichina at the wheel one day in 1950 or 1951. Grabbing Chichina by the waist, he opened the door, pushed her out onto the sidewalk and slid behind the wheel. Down the avenue went the Plymouth, the engine coughing, gears grinding, stopping, jumping and starting again with Ernesto at the wheel like a man possessed, or, as Chichina put it, "Just like Mr. Toad with his new motorcar in 'The Wind in the Willows.'"

ERNESTO'S carefree appearance, the disarray of his clothes were deceptive. Underneath was no self-indulgent hippie escapism, but an implacable will to discipline and an extraordinarily methodical streak. (A Cuban exile who had worked with him in the Bank of Cuba said, "Nobody realizes that Che was what in the United States we would call a 'first-rate executive.' Every day he would clear his desk of all incoming papers and be very thorough and organized about the business of the day, even if his working schedule was somewhat eccentric." He started working at 2 P.M. and quit about 3 A.M.)

Yet, despite all that intensity, he had such control that I do not recall his ever losing his temper. Ernesto's control is difficult to explain. He kept very tight rein over his feelings, yet he was never cold. On the contrary, his presence was always intense, vital, radiating the taut intensity of a feline: exquisite control over enormous energy. Even his eyes were at once very penetrating, intent, yet very serene.

A writer who knew him wrote that Ernesto "spoke with that utter sobriety which sometimes masks immense apocalyptic visions." Among the evidence captured in Bolivia and exhibited by the Organization of American States in Washington was Ernesto's personal copy of Régis Debray's "Revolution in the Revolution." At one point, Debray criticizes one of Ernesto's bold tactics in the Sierra Maestra. Evidently miffed by this criticism, Ernesto had scribbled on the margin: "To climb Mount Everest is a premature aspiration also, until you learn the way—the learning, that is the action."

The Mt. Everest reference is a recurring symbol. Mario Monje, the former head of the Bolivian Communist party, recalled it. In his fateful interview with Ernesto, held in eastern Bolivia in December, 1966, Monje refused the party's support and told Ernesto that without that support he and his guerrillas were doomed. To this, Ernesto replied: "My failure will not mean that victory was



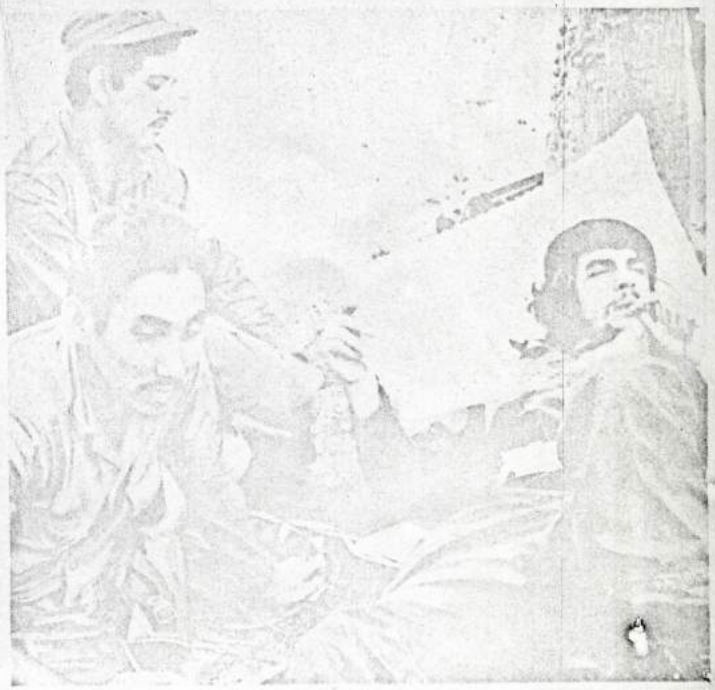
not possible. There were many failures in the attempts to climb Mt. Everest and it was finally conquered."

BECAUSE of his coolness, his detachment, his control, Ernesto was a superb debater. However, there was one argument which could make him almost angry. I became aware of this after one long discussion we had about Nietzsche and the validity of Christ as "Saviour of the poor." Needless to say, Ernesto shared Nietzsche's opinion that Christ as a revolutionary leader had been a flop. Some of us were quite taken by the unorthodox Christianity of writers like Renan, Unamuno, Kierkegaard and Dostoevski. I remember mentioning them in the course of our argument and Ernesto's scoffing: "Rubbish! Sentimental nonsense. Nothing. Look, when it comes to meaningful action those guys are full of hot air. In fact, if Christ himself stood in my way I, like Nietzsche, would not hesitate to step on him like a squishy worm." And with his foot, he ground an imaginary Jesus worm into dust.

The closest Ernesto came to anger was over the Christian rejection of violence as a moral alternative. To him this constituted the height of hypocritical evasion and criminal complicity. In his eyes, this attitude had served to perpetuate a system which itself had institutionalized violence of the gradual, installment-plan variety. He once said that if he had to choose between a soldier and a priest, the soldier would be the lesser of two evils.

Notwithstanding his distrust of piety and meekness, Ernesto greatly admired Gandhi. In his early 20's, his bible was not any of Marx's works but a heavily annotated copy of Nehru's "The Discovery of India." As far as any of his friends can remember, he had no connections with any left-wing political organization, group or trend, whether Socialist, Marxist or Communist. In fact, he was extremely suspicious of all political groups. He once implied that he did not see much difference between any political party and organizations such as labor, the church, the army and business.

His strongest political emotion was a deep-seated hostility toward the United States. In his eyes, the twin evils in Latin America were the native oligarchies and the United States. The only things he liked about this country were its poets and novelists; I never heard him say one good thing about anything else. He would disconcert both nationalists and Communists by being anti-American without subscribing to either of their points of view. With much bad luck, since my mother was American, I would often rally to the defense of the United States. I was never able to convince him that United States foreign policy



ILLEGAL—Guevara, right, and other members of Castro's guerrilla force take a break after a raid in December, 1958. A few weeks later, they held the country.

was, more often than not, the bumbling creature of ignorance and error rather than the well-designed strategy of a sinister cabal. He was convinced of the existence of these dark princes of power and evil who directed every United States move abroad. Because of the United States, he was skeptical about the nonviolent way of Gandhi and Nehru for Latin America.

He was always ready to discuss the question of violence as a means, an instrument. What was it? When should one use it? Why should one use it? I recall an argument he had with my cousins concerning the rules of the game in street-fighting. "What was a fair fight? How did one fight fairly?" were the questions being asked. Ernesto dismissed the lot of them. "Nonsense," he said, adding that in the first place he would never get involved in a fist fight or a street fight. However, he emphasized, should he decide to fight it would only be a fight to the kill, and then "the hell with all your silly gentleman's rules of fair fighting." In such a fight he would use every dirty trick available.

Reminiscing about Ernesto in the Cuban press, his friend Alberto Granados, a biochemist, recalled another illuminating anecdote. In 1943, when Granados was arrested along with other Córdoba University students for participating in an anti-Government demonstration, Ernesto went to visit him in jail. Granados asked the 15-year-old Ernesto to organize the high-school students to demonstrate against the arrest of the university students. Ernesto astonished his older friend by replying: "Hell, Alberto, go out on the streets to have the cops beating us with nightsticks? Out of the question. I go out to demonstrate only if they give me a gun." One had to aim for victory.

As he once put it in a letter to a friend: "A victory without margin does not convince me. In this I am like Perón." In 1951, he explained in another letter: "*Yes* or *no* have been made for people like me. . . . I have the capacity to use these terms in fundamental decisions." One of the more fundamental decisions he made later in his life was that in Latin America there could not be any change without violence and bloodshed.

Characteristically, however, he was not humorless about this position. When he met my sister in New York while paying an official visit to the United Nations in 1964, she told him of meeting the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes. Ernesto nodded. "Ah, yes, Fuentes," he said, "*la izquierda atinada* [the cautious left]." My sister asked, "What do you mean by that?" and Ernesto replied, "Don't you know? We are the *izquierda agitada* [the agitated left] and Fuentes the *izquierda atinada*."

An endless source of bewilderment to all of his friends was the speed with which Ernesto could slip from severity and cold detachment into a humorous, tender and intimate mood, and vice versa. One of our aunts would tell us, "He's a Gemini, that's why." The humorous, tender, self-deprecating side of Ernesto was irresistible. With all his intellectual arrogance, he was surprisingly lacking in vanity. In this sense, Ernesto was altogether different from Castro, according to Cubans who have known both men.

Ernesto could really laugh at himself. He once wrote that people who became his friends went through three stages: "The first is one of bedazzlement generally due to the fact that he [the prospective friend] never has heard so much nonsense expressed with so much self-confidence in a friendly chat. The second stage is one of stagnation. Discovering that many of the originalities are nothing but clichés developed on another plane outside of the static morality of our society, the [prospective] friend becomes tired. If his ennui is such that he does not vanish entirely, one enters the more or less longer period of the third stage, also known as real friendship." Ernesto, who could be so cold, ruthless and cutting with people he did not like, was a man of deep and lasting friendships. He would make immediate contact with children by never talking down to them. I remember his trying to fix a broken toy and discussing it with the child as though it were a broken watch or something just as important, which of course it was to the child. He also never talked down to the servants.

A militant young Spanish

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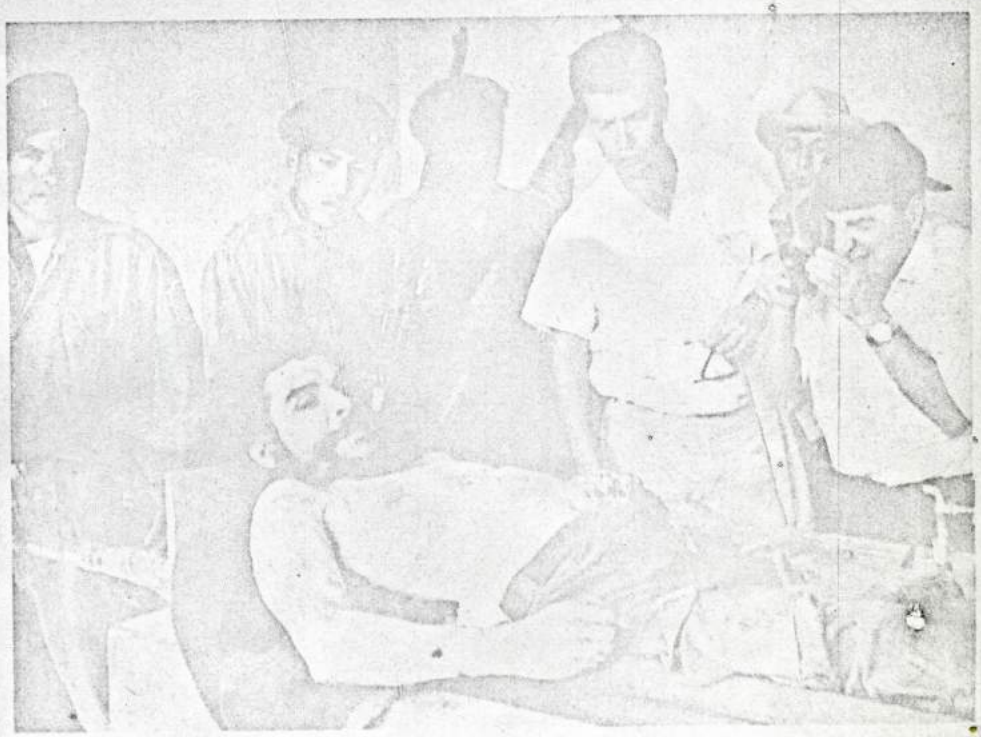

REVOLUTIONARY'S END—With Bolivian troops standing guard, the corpse of Che Guevara is put on display to confirm his death last October.

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Communist lived in our block. The contrast between this young man's and Ernesto's attitudes toward the poor was revealing. When the young Spaniard came to our house, he would make a special point —directed at my parents, no doubt — of first marching straight into the kitchen to greet the servants. Unaware of their wry smiles, he would hand our semiliterate servants a couple of abstruse Communist pamphlets. When Ernesto came to visit, if he happened to see one of the old women servants who appeared to be in a mood to chat, he would approach her, ask her for a maté, and sit quietly by her sipping it as if he had always lived in that kitchen. If the old maid was in a downcast mood, complaining of her rheumatism, Ernesto would discuss the ailment and its various cures. If she was in a joking mood, he would kid her along. Never patronizing or condescending, after the maté he would get up and leave as naturally as he had arrived. All our servants adored him.

When my father was killed in an automobile accident, Ernesto, to my surprise—because he was not the least bound by conventions such as paying visits of condolence —came to see me at the house where I was staying, and where he was not especially welcome. Unlike most people at the time, he was very direct and looked me in the eye, asking simply: "Are you going to be all right, kid?" I answered: Yes. After surveying the crowd sitting around me in silent disapproval, he left. He later told somebody: "That bunch of drooling phonies was not doing her any good." He was right.

During summer vacations at the end of high school, Ernesto would bicycle to spend a few days at a time at a leper hospital in San Francisco, about 125 miles from Córdoba, where Alberto Granados was working. A friend recalled asking Ernesto what he did in the leper hospital. Ernesto replied that, among other things, he read to the lepers. The friend wanted to know whether he read them "Patoruzú," Ernesto's favorite comic strip. Ernesto replied no, he was reading Goethe to them at the time.

A great reader like his parents, Ernesto enjoyed reciting poetry. At the parties

of the Spanish Republican exiles who were living in Córdoba and were members of the Guevaras' circle of friends, and especially after the third glass of wine, everybody would recite the great Spanish Republican poets Lorca, Machado and Alberti. All of us, including Ernesto, grew up with their poems ringing in our ears. Another favorite of his was the Chilean Pablo Neruda, and in translation he liked Walt Whitman, Robert Frost and Baudelaire.

WHEN Ernesto finished high school in November, 1946, most of his friends thought he would go on to study engineering, because of his facility in mathematics. Instead, early in 1947, he entered the Medical School of the University of Buenos Aires.

Of his choice he wrote in a letter: "I am determined to finish but not to incarcerate myself in the ridiculous medical profession. . . . Those six or seven years lost in the study of a career are the most monstrous interest which society exacts from its future *taitas* [crooked leaders] because they coincide with the most beautiful years of our lives." He took off a couple of months in 1951 to sail to Patagonia as a ship's doctor (or more precisely, male nurse), and upon his return he began making plans for a grand tour of Latin America in company with Granados. But he promised his mother that, then, he would go back to Buenos Aires to obtain his medical degree. Eventually, there were two grand tours.

ERNESTO left on the first in January, 1952, when he was 23, on a beat-up motorcycle which he and Granados had fixed up. That summer, he came to Miramar, on the Buenos Aires seashore, to say good-by to Chichina, announcing his intention of crossing the Andes on the motorcycle. We all laughed in disbelief: Crossing the Andes on *that*? It seemed impossible. (They accomplished the feat, although the motorcycle collapsed after the crossing and they had to walk and hitchhike for the rest of the trip.)

As a farewell gift, Ernesto gave Chichina a puppy which had traveled under his jacket and which he christened in English Come-Back. The puppy, which according to Ernesto was a German shepherd police dog, grew into a delightful mongrel, the joy of the whole family. Uncle Horacio called him "my secret-police dog."

From Chile, Ernesto and Granados traveled to Peru, working their way as dishwashers, load carriers, sailors, cabin boys and doctors. They learned to do anything from peeling potatoes to curing the sick, and in the process they got to know firsthand what it means to be poor and to have to work for a living in Latin America.

While in Peru they met a doctor who told them about a leper colony in San Pablo, on the Amazon River, in the province of Loreto. Both Ernesto and Granados, always interested in leprosy, went to live at the colony and almost started a revolution by fraternizing with the lepers. The colony doctors were extremely cautious in avoiding any physical contact with the patients; they ate with gloves, wore face masks and took the patients' temperature with a thermometer attached to a long stick. Not Ernesto and Granados, who organized a psychotherapy program for the inmates with soccer

matches, excursions, monkey hunts and visits to jungle Indians. These efforts endeared the two young Argentines to the lepers. At their departure in June, the lepers built them a Kon-Tiki style raft made of balsa wood and cane which they christened Mambo-Tango. There was a big farewell ceremony at which the lepers read speeches and sang songs to the accompaniment of a saxophone.

ON their unlikely craft, Ernesto and Granados sailed down the Amazon to Leticia, a port where the frontiers of Brazil, Peru and Colombia join. At that time Ernesto wrote: "I became enamored of the Amazon . . . even though monkey meat is no delicacy." He also wrote his family, "If you don't hear from me in another year, go find my shrunken head in a U.S. museum."

In Leticia they entered a soccer match and won free tickets to Bogotá. From there, they traveled to Venezuela, where Granados accepted a permanent position in the clinical laboratory of a leper hospital. Ernesto decided to return to Argentina and fulfill the promise he had made his mother to get his medical degree. It was assumed by both friends that after his graduation, Ernesto would eventually join Granados and settle to work at the leper colony in Venezuela.

Ernesto, always nearly broke, found a seat aboard a plane belonging to some relatives or friends, equipped for the transport of race horses and scheduled to fly to Buenos Aires after delivering some horses to Miami. Except for his brief stay in New York to deliver a speech at the U.N. in 1964, this was his only real visit to the United States. He spent several weeks with one of my cousins who was then a student at the University of Miami. Remembering all our arguments about this country, I groaned when I heard he was at Miami. I knew how this visit must have confirmed all his preconceptions about the United States: that this was a garish, money-grubbing, vulgar nation which discriminated against its Negroes and ignored its poor. The worst of the North and the South, Miami was probably the spot in the United States most uncongenial to him.

Ernesto returned to Buenos Aires in October, 1952, and graduated as a doctor the next March. Between those two events, in January, 1953, he paid us his second, and final farewell visit at the old family house in Malagueño. He came especially to see Chichina, now for the last time.

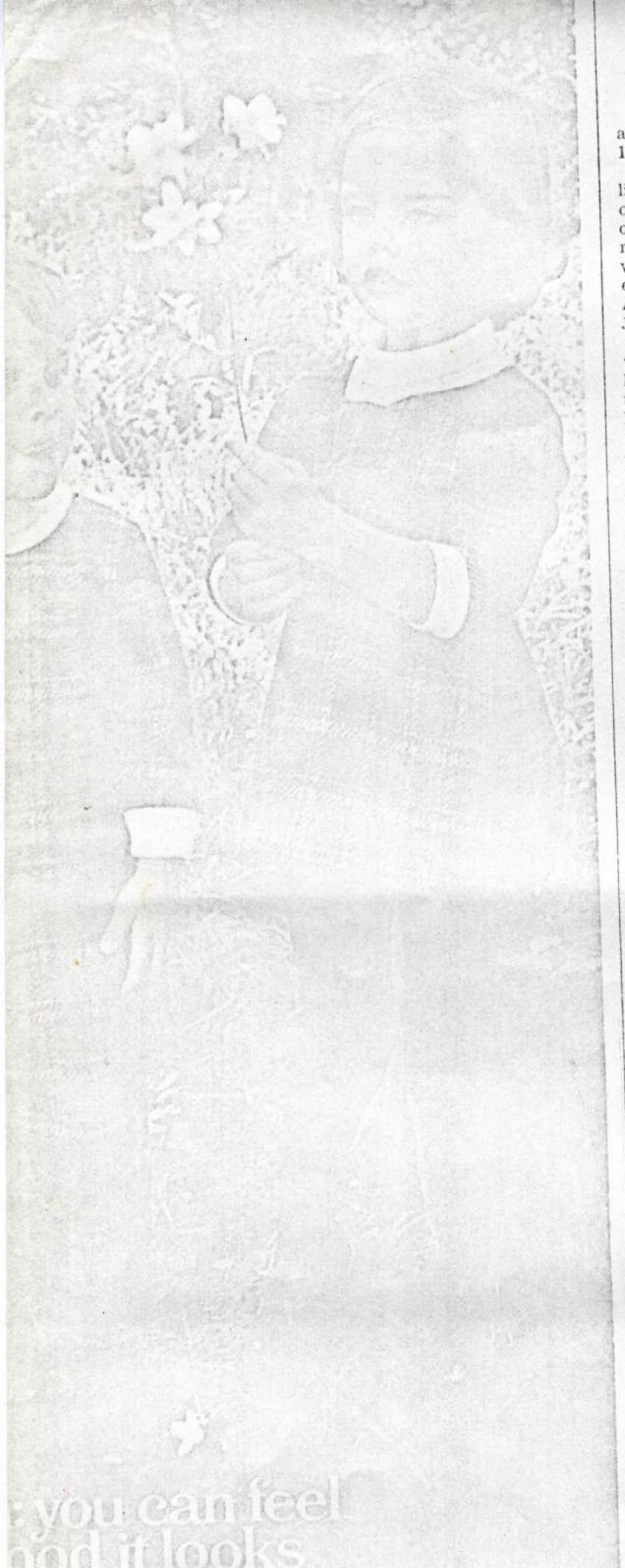
In July, 1953, he was scheduled to leave on another tour of South America, and eventually to join Granados at the leper colony in Venezuela. But this second tour took him instead to the Sierra Maestra and to Cuba.

From Buenos Aires he traveled on a milk train to Bolivia, where he was little impressed by the revolution of Víctor Paz Estenssoro, then in full swing. He characterized it with a medical term, saying that it was not a revolution but a "revulsive," an agent which diverts a disease from one afflicted part of the body to another. Although social conditions in Latin America infuriated him, he was profoundly skeptical of political solutions, especially those advocated by liberal reformers. In Bolivia, he worked for a short while at the Agrarian Reform office but soon left to go to the Oriente (eastern Bolivia — where he would die 14 years later). For a time he took charge of the leper colony of Los Negros near Santa Cruz.

From Bolivia he again traveled through Peru and the Amazon basin to Tolima in Colombia where he was a witness to that incredible Latin American phenomenon the Colombian *violencia* — a partisan war in the rural backlands which took a toll of more than 300,000 lives over a 10-year period, frequently including the most savage and psychotic mutilations of women and children. From there he made his way to Central America.

WHILE he was walking through Central America, a group of young Argentines offered him a ride to San José, Costa Rica. There, in a cafe, he met a group of Cuban student exiles. The Cubans were loudly recounting their now-famous attack on the Moncada barracks, led by Fidel that July 26. After listening with his usual skepticism to the Cubans' euphoric account, Ernesto asked the young men: "Now that you have told us Moncada, how about telling us a Western?" (A favorite pastime among Latin American schoolboys is telling one another movie plots). At the time it appeared fantastic to Ernesto that that handful of kids had actually defied an army barracks.

His friend Ricardo Rojo, the Argentine lawyer who had traveled with him to San José, persuaded him to postpone joining his old friend Granados at the leper colony in Venezuela, and to join him in a visit to Guatemala. They



or its color, cotton for its *comfort*. Offers the best of both in a cotton knit
n knit turtleneck polo shirt) and a cotton knit plaid dress. Red/
green/red; sizes 2 to 4, 3 to 6X. The coverall (left) about $10.00;

He was amazed: "I did not know I was so important!"

arrived there in January, 1954.

In Guatemala City, Ernesto lived in a boarding house full of Peruvian Apristas and other Latin-American exiles, near the Quinta Avenida. He was the only one of the boarders who did not take the Arbenz regime too seriously. Joking about the weakness of the Government structure, with tireless irony he punched holes in the enthusiasm of the pro-Arbenz boarders. More interested in exploring the Petén and its Maya ruins —he had long been fascinated by pre-Columbian archaelogy — Ernesto departed, leaving his friend to argue about Guatemalan politics. At the time, rumors of American intervention were in the air, and the plot to depose Arbenz was being hatched in the Guatemalan Army by Col. Carlos Castillo Armas and his followers.

The coup took place after one of Ernesto's trips to the Petén. Finally aware of the extent of American intervention and the hopelessness of the Arbenz regime — the "petty-bourgeois reformers" whom he had so often mocked —the sarcastic medico, the uncommitted and unimpressed spectator changed. According to friends, he became so furious at the role of the United States that he immediately tried to organize a resistance. Ironically, the U.S. intervention accomplished what the entire spectrum of the Latin-American left had failed to do: to convert this detached skeptic into a political activist.

The doctor died and the guerrilla leader was born there in Guatemala City in June, 1954. Ernesto, then 26 years old, began organizing blue-collar and white-collar brigades which he deployed at strategic points throughout the city. For three days he did not sleep. Word of his activities began to spread: An Argentine *loco* was making trouble, running all over town organizing a resistance movement.

The Argentine chargé d'affaires, Nicasio Sánchez Toranzo, worried that Ernesto would be in danger once Castillo Armas took over, searched for him all over Guatemala City. When he found and spoke to Guevara, Ernesto was amazed: "I did not know I was so important!" Sánchez Toranzo advised him to give up his hopeless resistance and to take immediate refuge in the Argentine Embassy. Reluctantly, Ernesto agreed. Sánchez Toranzo provided him with a safe conduct to travel to Mexico City. There he met the Castro brothers, and . . . .

SOMETIME after March, 1965, but before leaving Cuba on the final odyssey which would end with death in Bolivia, Ernesto wrote his parents a farewell letter. The terse, crisp simplicity of the Spanish original is not possible to render into English. He wrote:

DEAR VIEJOS:[1]

Again I feel between my heels the ribs of Rosinante;[2] *I return to the path with my adarga*[3] *on the arm. Almost 10 years ago I wrote you another farewell letter. As I remember it, I complained of not being a better soldier and a better doctor; I am no longer interested in the second. As a soldier I am not too bad.*

Nothing has essentially changed except that I am more deeply aware, my Marxism is rooted and purified. I believe in armed struggle as the only solution for peoples who are fighting for liberation, and I am consistent with my beliefs. Many will call me an adventurer, and that I am, but of a different type, one of those who risks his skin to prove his truths.

It may be that this is the final one. I am not seeking it [this final occasion], but it may lie in the logical scheme of possibilities. If so, I send you a last embrace.

I have loved you very much, though I have not been able to show my love; I am extremely rigid in my actions and I believe that at times you did not understand me. It was not easy to understand me. Nevertheless, do take me at my word today.

Now, a will power that I have polished with the relish of an artist will sustain a pair of flaccid legs and tired lungs. I will do it.

Once in a while remember this small condottiero[4] *of the 20th century. A kiss to Celia, Roberto, Ana Maria, Patatin, Beatriz and everybody. A big embrace to you from a prodigal and recalcitrant son.*

ERNESTO.

1. An affectionate Argentine term for parents, literally meaning "old ones."
2. Don Quixote's horse.
3. A leather shield. An unusual word, immortalized by Ruben Dario in his poem to Don Quixote.
4. Italian for a Renaissance soldier of fortune.