The Exiles and Other Stories

Horacio Quiroga

1987

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Front Matter

Title Page

THE EXILES
and Other Stories
By
Horacio Quiroga

Selected, translated,
and with an introduction
by
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With the assistance of
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Introduction

At the turn of the century the subtropical territory of Misiones, in northeastern Argentina, was a frontier region, not only by virtue of its location between Brazil to the east and north and Paraguay to the west, but also, and especially, because it was a land of pioneers, somewhat like Alaska and the Yukon at the same moment in the history of North America. It was populated by aboriginal natives, mestizos, blacks, and whites; by Argentines, Brazilians, Paraguayans, and foreigners from abroad; by speakers of Guaranã, of Spanish and Portuguese, and of a number of later immigrant languages from Europe. The zone was—and remains—important for its forest products, and above all its yerbales or plantations of yerba mate, the green tea especially favored in Uruguay, Argentina, Paraguay, and southern Brazil. Such plantations were first established by the Jesuits in the early seventeenth century, as a major economic venture of their reducciones (collective settlements) of Guaranã natives, which flourished till the company was expelled from the Spanish dominions in 1767. It is of course the missions they founded which gave Misiones its name.

This is the setting of almost all of the most celebrated stories of Horacio Quiroga, including those selected for the present volume—excepting the lead story, "Beasts in Collusion," which is set in the Brazilian Mato Grosso to the north. They are tales of risk and danger, suffering, disease, horror, and death; but also of courage and dignity, hard work, and human endurance in the face of hostile nature and the frequent brutality of men. In most of the stories translated here (all but two appearing in English for the first time) there are piquant touches of humor and bemused irony as well.

Our title, The Exiles and Other Stories, echoes that of one of Quiroga's own volumes, Los desterrados (1926), often said to be his best book. Included here are five stories from that collection, seven written earlier (1908–1923), and one subsequently (1929). This latest tale, "The Forerunners," picks up a theme introduced in the title story, "The Exiles," and is one of five that present characters who appear in more than one story. All thirteen are similar in inspiration, and may be said to constitute

a kind of loosely structured, episodic novel—along with some of those published in The Decapitated Chicken and Other Stories (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), especially “Drifting,” “A Slap in the Face,” “In the Middle of the Night,” “The Dead Man,” and “The Son.” These stories are held together by common themes, situations, and conflicts—and of course their common setting in Misiones—but most of all by their vision of man (of men and women) in that setting, including Quiroga himself, who appears in various guises, and according to A. H. Rodrãguez “made of himself the best character in his work” (El mundo ideal de Horacio Quiroga, 3a ed. [Posadas: Montoya, 1985], p. 47).

Quiroga has been compared to our own Jack London, his contemporary and fellow-practitioner of a characteristically New World type of fiction. But he was far less ideological and political than London, more bourgeois in origin, better educated, and more literary as a youth, having published before he was twenty and edited the Revista de Salto before his trip to Paris at twenty-one (1900). His formative years coincided with the apogee of the estheticist modernista movement in Spanish American literature (Rubén Darío arrived in Buenos Aires in 1893, and stayed till 1898), and his first two books (1901, 1904) betray its influence, as well as that of Charles Baudelaire's exemplar, Mr. Edgar Allan Poe. At this time his interest in the dark side of life was still largely literary, though he had already suffered the death of his father, his stepfather, and a close friend (see “A Quiroga Chronology” at the end of this volume).

When he discovered Misiones, Quiroga apparently found a world free of the constraints of urban life, where he could forge an existence in accordance with his own designs. He was of course not a primitive, but a sophisticated modern who brought culture and technology to the wilderness. He had books, all sorts of tools, and even a Model T, the latter a decided rarity in the Misiones of that day. From 1903 on he would spend about half his time in the north (including the Chaco, Corrientes, and Paraguay as well as Misiones) and half in Buenos Aires, where he would continually long for the home he had built with his own hands, overlooking the Paraná, near San Ignacio (see map). He had become a successful writer in the city, and did not need to struggle in Misiones, but that was where he wanted to be, where he felt he belonged. No doubt it was his destiny to confront life in its most basic forms, and to exploit the openness of the frontier, both directly, in his manual labor, and literarily, in his fiction. Though the urban Quiroga will always be remembered for such gripping tales as “The Decapitated Chicken,” it is in Misiones that he finds his truest and most authentic voice. And his intense feeling for the land and its people is unmistakable. Even a quasi-mystical communion with nature is detectable at times.

Quiroga's characters are a varied lot. In this book we find parents and children, servant girls, prostitutes, laborers, foremen and overseers, craftsmen, shopkeepers, landowners and lumber barons, river sailors, scientists, derelicts and drunks, and even union organizers. Some characters are mestizos, or creoles of European stock. Many others are immigrants: from Sweden, Holland, Belgium, and England; France, Spain, and Italy; Germany, Poland, Hungary, and Turkey. Like the United States, the River

Plate region was a land of opportunity in those days, and the influx of immigrants was very large, especially as compared to the number of native-born. (In 1914 there were about a million Italians—to say nothing of other immigrants—living in Uruguay and Argentina, out of a total population of about nine million.) Though a few of Quiroga's foreigners ultimately break under the strains of life in their harsh new environment, almost all are hard workers, like most of the creoles and indígenas who live beside them.

Work, indeed, is a central concern in these stories. There are contract laborers (mensualeros or mensús) who slave for months under cruel supervision, only to splurge their advances on a week's orgy in Posadas and return to the hazards of tropical fever, brutality, and death in the lumber camps. There are peones and household servants who work for short-term wages and are likely to walk off and disappear as quickly and unexpectedly as they first came on the scene. A number of workers are fierce independents who will commit themselves to just one task at a time in order to maintain their freedom from bosses. Others are small entrepreneurs who pluck logs from the river, try to grow crops, or establish cottage industries like cooking charcoal or the distillation of liquor from oranges. And finally, in "The Forerunners," we have the tragicomic story of the field hands on the yerba plantations and the first frustrated efforts to build their labor union.

Quiroga is no socialist, but his stories clearly reveal his sympathy for the victimized mensús and plantation workers and other peones subjected to the barbarities of cruel bosses. He does not lecture, but simply describes conditions as he finds them. He shows little interest in the class struggle but, as befits a writer of fiction, a great deal of interest in individuals. Their skills impress him, and he admires their strength and persistence in the face of adversity. (Many of his characters are closely modeled on persons he actually knew in Misiones.) His ethic of work may be viewed as a kind of metaphor for human dignity.

Our author's material is regional and local, and in this sense he is a criollista or nativist. But he is seldom merely picturesque. While his characters and their circumstances are authentic, and he sometimes presents their activities in considerable detail, he is much less concerned with documentation than with basic human problems: survival, taming nature, confronting injustice, raising and protecting children, mastering difficult tasks, rising to creativity—and showing compassion for those who fail and suffer, through weaknesses of their own or the villainy of others. The focus is characteristically Hispanic in that the psychological is far less important than the existential. In some of his urban stories Quiroga displays an interest—inherited at least in part from Poe—in abnormal mental states, but here, in Misiones, his concern is man among men, especially man in conflict—and sometimes in harmony—with nature. (A marginal exception is that of alcoholism, particularly in the case of Dr. Else in "The Orange-Distillers.")

Quiroga is probably the most important precursor of the so-called "Boom" in Latin American fiction, which coincided, roughly, with the third quarter of the twentieth cen-

tury. In recent years the names of Borges, Carpentier, Cortázar, Sábato, Bioy Casares, Onetti, Donoso, Fuentes, Rulfo, Vargas Llosa, Cabrera Infante, Nobel prizewinners Miguel Angel Asturias and Gabriel García Márquez, and a number of others, have become internationally familiar, and justifiably so. But they did not emerge from the void; the ground had been prepared, by Quiroga and some of his contemporaries, who were able to shed much of the artificiality, inflated rhetoric, and polemical tendentiousness, as well as many of the normative conventions (largely derived from European literature) of early twentieth-century fiction in Latin America. Their work became less shallow, less programmatic, less extraliterary in purpose. Quiroga in particular began to treat the more deep-seated, more central aspects of human experience—and to do so concretely, in strictly American terms. That he succeeded is shown most obviously by the fact that he is still widely read and appreciated, not only within but also beyond the Spanish-speaking world—indeed that his reputation has grown, his work now receiving increased attention from critics and literary historians.

But as a transitional figure he could hardly have risen to the formal mastery of a Borges, a Cortázar, or a García Márquez. He is not a great prose stylist, though his means, by and large, seem adequate to his purposes. Some of his weaknesses are evident in the melodramatic and somewhat heavy-handed (but nevertheless powerful) "Beasts in Collusion," which he did not include in any of his books. A number of his stories lack a clear center, sharing two or more prominent themes, such as "The Charcoal-Makers" and "The Exiles." Others wander from one incident to the next, like "A Workingman." There are occasional small inconsistencies of detail, imprecisions of syntax, and more often lapses in semantic rigor. But there are just as many stylistic felicities—such as the control of substandard dialect in "The Forerunners"—and the whole is vivid, convincing, and oddly profound. Furthermore, the stories of Misiones present a coherent world-view, a kind of creole tragic sense of life, ranging from pure horror to the anthropological irony of "The Contract Laborers," "The Log-Fishermen," "A Workingman," "The Exiles," "The Forerunners," and others. Quiroga remains unique, apparently inimitable.

He wrote about two hundred short stories, and at least a third of them remain memorable. He thoroughly understood the genre, and exploited almost all of its possibilities, including the fantastic, a mode generally restricted to his urban stories, and only tangentially represented here (most clearly in "The Yaciyateré"). For rather complicated reasons, including the decline of Hispanic prestige in Europe after 1588, he is less well known than some of his peers (and freely acknowledged masters), such as Poe, Maupassant, and Chekhov. But he is in the same class as they, even in his unevenness, and his best work belongs not only to Latin America, but the world.

We have mentioned his attachment to Misiones. But perhaps only a visit to that land can convince one of its immense attractiveness: its rich red earth, its forests and yerbales, its magnificent falls on the Iguazú, its remote towns and villages, the resplendent jacarandás along the streets of its lovely capital, Posadas—and above all the majestic river, Olivera's "devil of a Paraná" ("A Workingman"), which defines its long

border with Paraguay. These stories, whatever their incidents and conflicts, whoever their characters, are preeminently tales of Misiones, their narratives compenetrated with Misiones, its trees and waters, its climate, it agriculture, its people. San Ignacio's Jesuit ruins and Quiroga's house outside town have been cleaned up now, for the tourists, but readers of his tales can still picture them as they were more than sixty years ago, when Dr. Else mistook his daughter for an enormous rat. Because sense of place is so important in Quiroga, and because most readers in our distant climes will never see Misiones, I have thought it important to provide a map, and a list of place names, which follow the text. (But if you can, take a plane to Rio, and continue on to Foz-do-Iguaçu. Cross the new bridge to Argentina, and take a long bus ride south, down through Misiones to Quiroga country.)

In these translations I have not attempted to improve upon Quiroga, nor to drag him out of his context and into Anglophone literature. I have tried to stay close to his Spanish, to avoid dipping too far below the surface in search of his underlying meaning. In the process I have no doubt stretched the capacities of English a bit, but intentionally, in the conviction that a translation should not conceal its origin, not read as though written directly in the receptor language, but rather exploit the rich possibilities of the bilingual encounter, while respecting the norms of that second language. In so doing I hope I have conveyed something of the special flavor of Quiroga's prose, which like Quiroga himself is sui generis.

J. D. D.

Translator's Note

Listed below are the Spanish titles of the stories translated for this book, ordered according to their dates of publication in Quiroga's own collections (as reprinted by Losada), and the sequence in which they appear in each of these. This order differs somewhat from that of their first appearances, which are indicated by the dates in square brackets. The first story and the last were never collected by the author.

Story	Collection
1. Las fieras cómplices [1908]	
2. Los mensú [1914]	Cuentos de amor de locura y de muerte (1917)
3. Los pescadores de vigas [1913]	Cuentos de amor de locura y de muerte (1917)
4. El yaciyateré [1917]	Anaconda (1921)
5. Los fabricantes de carbón [1918]	Anaconda (1921)
6. El desierto [1923]	El desierto (1924)
7. Un peón [1918]	El desierto (1924)
8. Los desterrados [1925]	Los desterrados (1926)
9. Van-Houten [1919]	Los desterrados (1926)
10. Tacuara-Mansión [1920]	Los desterrados (1926)
11. La cámara oscura [1920]	Los desterrados (1926)
12. Los destiladores de naranja [1923]	Los desterrados (1926)
13. Los precursores [1929]	

Beasts in Collusion

I

On a stormy night in June, a man was walking furtively along a path in the depths of the jungles of Mato Grosso. The night was profoundly dark. The thunderclaps rumbled one after the other, and, to the massive churning of the sky, the jungle answered with the deep murmur of its trees shaken by the heavy wind. From time to time the sky was crossed by the livid flash of a lightning bolt; black and ghostly, the woods came into view, only to disappear instantly in the impenetrable darkness.

The jungle (always terrible even in the daytime with its ambushes and its treachery) at that hour, in the gloomy solitude, irresistibly filled the most intrepid soul with anguish. A person in the city—even in the most desperate straits—never feels alone; human lives swarm around him; their close proximity supports him. But in the jungle it's different. There everything conspires against him: the still and heavy air, the hostile silence, the deadly emanations from the plants that let death seep through in their morbidly seductive, voluptuous aroma, the beasts crouching behind tree-trunks that seem indifferent to our passage, the snakes that make a hell of that earthly paradise; in the jungle everything schemes against man.

Nevertheless, our traveler, despite the dark terror inherent in a stormy night in the forest, with no protection but his own courage, did not seem to be afraid. His cautious pace showed concern, yes, foresight as well, but not fear. To a knowing eye something about him revealed a person accustomed to the jungle. This something was his way of walking. He lifted his feet higher, a lot higher than apparently necessary, like someone walking on stilts, and this with a natural pliancy that identified from afar the son—either native or adoptive—of the forest.

Bristling with trunks and branches, the jungle floor, in fact, requires raising the legs so as not to trip, and this maneuver, extremely tiring at first, ends up becoming unconscious and therefore quite easy. On that account one can spot without fail the more or less jungle-wise character of the walker.

So our man was a person accustomed to the woods. And the bolts of lightning which, with their flashing glare, have allowed us to follow his feline progress, will permit us to learn something more.

Thus, in the livid brilliance of a ray of lightning followed by a frightful thunderclap, one could see that the traveler was wearing a pith helmet, a torn blouse and torn blue trousers, and heavy boots. The helmet revealed at once that its wearer was not a

laborer; but on the other hand his visible nonchalance with respect to the forest, rare in a boss, seemed to affirm that he was.

What was he, then? An owner of a logging-camp? And what could he be doing on that night, in the very depths of the forest, walking along like someone watching for something, and all this without a shotgun? That's what we'll shortly know.

Like backlashes from the very fire that had lasted since nightfall, the lightning bolts had diminished. But now the rain was coming down in torrents, and the whole jungle, beaten without respite by the monstrous drops, gave off a muffled rumble.

"Damn!" the traveler muttered as he stopped. "Only paca rats are fit to go out in this weather."

He said this in Spanish, but with a distinct Italian accent, and raised his head with that unconscious curiosity one has to look at the sky when it's raining furiously. At that instant a resplendent lightning bolt split the air in front of him. The traveler closed his eyes, dazzled. For a moment he kept them that way, to dispel his temporary blindness. When he opened them he already had normal vision, and he plunged it into the darkness before him.

"And that dimwit isn't here yet!" he muttered a second time.

What strange appointment could that be? The traveler remained motionless, getting even wetter—if that were possible, because the water was running from his helmet in streams, as though from an umbrella.

Despite his stillness, however, he couldn't hear a soft rustling that arose behind him. At that moment a thunderclap erupted, and when its noise died down the rustling stopped as well.

The slightly shaken branches were left in total silence. Nevertheless, an uncanny feeling led our traveler to think that something had just taken place. Was it a chance solicitude? The intuition of danger common in frontier people, accustomed to a constant life-on-the-alert? Whatever the case, we've seen that the man we're concerned with didn't seem to be at all affected by the gloomy spectacle of the jungle on a night like that. But this time was different. He turned his head quickly, thrust his falcon's glance into the deep canebrake he sensed at his back, and held still a while, lending that attentive ear which subdues and contracts all the other sensations of the body, and which the bush-hunter puts to use with all his heart and soul, for hanging from it, as from a thread, is his life.

He heard nothing, and turned around, again investigating the darkness; and hurling an emphatic curse, went on ahead. Then at the edge of the canebrake two doleful green dots glared out. They advanced with deathly slowness up to the trail and followed the traveler's progress. After a while the green dots began to move in his direction.

Meanwhile our strange traveler was continuing his cautious advance, when suddenly a wail of agony—long, throbbing, and afflictive—drowned out the noise of the storm. It came from deep in the distant reaches of the jungle. When he heard it the traveler stopped abruptly; but rather than one of terror, a beaming expression of joy broke out on his face.

“At last!” he shouted, almost running. A moment later he stopped again, seized with intense anxiety.

“It seemed to be close to the ground,” he murmured, in the grip of anguish.

A moment went by. Finally making up his mind, he spread his mouth open with the thumb and index finger of his left hand and let out a long cry into the sinister night, the same desolate wail that had come to him. A moment later, but much nearer, the melancholy signal sounded again, and the traveler uttered a deep sigh of relief.

“I’ll have to tell him not to imitate so well,” he murmured smiling and moving on.

The cry of agony that both had just sent forth was a perfect imitation of the one you can hear from the anteater on frigid winter nights, and it sounds like a-hu! a-hu! a-hu! ahu! ahu! ahhhúu!

An instant later a shadow stood in front of the man we’ve met. The newcomer, from what could be glimpsed during the flashes of lightning, was wearing a large straw hat with a red band. Above the waist a striped workshirt, which by now couldn’t have many buttons left, judging from the wide opening it left at his chest. Around his waist, on top of his drawers and down to his knees was a burlap rag held up by a narrow cord.

“How come you took so long?” our traveler said to him hurriedly. “I’ve been soaked to the bone for an hour already.”

“Nothing much,” said the newcomer. “The manager called me to look over the account books. He says he’s tired of settling everything on Saturday.”

The traveler smiled.

“Caldeira, eh?”

“Yes, he says that ever since you’re not the boss, everything’s been going better.”

The traveler smiled again without saying anything. But after a while he murmured:

“Poor Caldeira! I think she wants to see him as well.”

When he heard she, the Indian (for the man who had arrived was an Indian) shuddered.

“I haven’t seen her for days,” he murmured.

“Who?”

“Her.”

“Oh! she’s fine.”

The Indian gave the traveler a look of terror and respect.

“Careful, boss!”

The traveler smiled again.

“Boss, I think that’s going too far . . . ,” insisted the Indian in a low voice.

His speaking companion put his hand on his shoulder and fastened on his eyes a deep look of irony and compassion.

“Poor Guaycurú!” he said slowly. “Poor Indian!”

Surely those simple words evoked awful things, for the latter lowered his head as though under the weight of an oppressive memory.

“Is it all over?” said the traveler affectionately.

"Yes," replied the other man softly. And he added, in a murmur:

"When it's hot I burn. I've got poison in my blood."

"Still, your face is better now," said his companion. "Let's see . . ."

He moved his face closer to the Indian's, and at that moment a bolt of lightning rent the sky with a phosphorescent slash.

The traveler fell back instantaneously.

"Damn!" he muttered, turning pale. "It's not a human face anymore . . ."

And in fact that presence wasn't a face, but something deformed, swollen, out of proportion, cut up into badly healed sores. The forehead, neck, chest, all one could manage to see, offered the same monstrous appearance.

The traveler eyed him a while, his look continually flaring up with ominous glimmers of revenge.

"Has Alves seen you like this?" he asked.

"Yes," muttered the Indian.

"What did he say to you?"

"He laughed. Yesterday morning when I went to the store to get cooking grease, he yelled at me, laughing . . ."

His words broke off and a howl escaped from the depths of his breast. The traveler shuddered.

"What did he tell you?" he insisted.

"That he was very pleased with the little lesson he'd given me and that he was going to start over again . . . ," he concluded, lowering his voice bit by bit.

In that trailing off of his voice alone there was a world of suffering, of horrible nightmarish memories and intolerable pain.

"And your feet?" continued the traveler. "Can you walk all right?"

"Yes, they didn't bite much there . . ."

"I once heard tell of that in Africa," murmured the traveler, as though talking to himself, "but I never believed it was true . . . Well then," he added after a moment of silence, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, Guaycurú. I presume he'll remember something about you tomorrow."

"And about you, boss."

"About me? . . . All I've got is this!" he replied, smiling and holding out his left hand. There were three fingers missing, and the stumps were still red.

"But didn't you get it in the chest too?" added the Indian.

"Yes, a little; a broken rib. But are they talking about me?"

"The other day Juan heard the blasts from your shotgun, but Boss Alves doesn't think it was yours. He says some jaguar must have eaten you. Last week a dog brought in a bloody rag from the bush. The manager thinks it's your shirt."

"That's all they know?"

"That's all."

"And about her?"

The Indian shuddered again.

“No,” he murmured softly.

The traveler was about to answer, and something would surely have come out about her, that creature terrible enough that just evoking her would cause a lowering of voices—he was getting ready to answer, we say, when Guaycurú, lunging forward, caught him quickly by the arm. His companion took a step back.

“Listen, boss!” said the Indian hurriedly.

“What’s up?” replied the traveler, as he spun around as nimbly as a cat.

“Listen to that, boss!” answered the Indian.

They both held still. Then, above the noise of the leaves whipped by the rain, a distant murmur reached their ears, as deep as if it were coming up from underground. The men looked at each other briefly, eye to eye.

“It’s a jaguar,” said the traveler simply. He didn’t have the slightest tremor in his voice, since anxiety over the unknown was succeeded by a real danger, formidable no doubt, but the effect of which, in men of true mettle, is to calm the spirit, preparing all its forces for the struggle.

The Indian still had his ear tuned to that awful warning sound.

“Listen, boss! It’s not a jaguar,” he said.

Once more they held still, and the grim roar came at them again.

“Right, it’s a mountain lion. It’s coming on the run,” said the traveler.

A moment later he added:

“It must be a man-eater.”

“It’s picked up our scent. It’s coming down the trail,” muttered Guaycurú.

And indeed, this time the roar had been heard much nearer.

An instant later it sounded again, then again, and our men, with the quick judgment of those accustomed to knowing the exact limit of their powers, realized, without faltering, that they were no match for that animal, and were doomed.

“And what’s worse, not even a revolver,” muttered the traveler, in a tone of annoyance, but not fear. “Have you got your machete?”

“Yes, no use . . . It’s a man-eater. Quick, boss!” he yelled suddenly, grabbing him by the arm.

“It’s coming running. Let’s climb this lapacho.”

The jungle had just trembled with a deep roar, this time nearby. The beast, prodded by hunger and delight in human flesh, came rushing toward its prey, letting out a growl of anxiousness.

In a moment our men were astride the first branches of the leaf-laden tree—which was not much of a refuge, because the puma climbs with even greater impetus than the jaguar.

But at least that way a defense was possible, while on the ground they would have been torn apart at once between the formidable jaws of the beast.

One after another the roars came ever more clearly, and the animal now was upon them.

"It's coming running," muttered the Indian, clenching the grip of his machete in his practiced hand. In fact, they could now hear a muffled rustle of branches shaken violently; and—so near this time as to provoke tumultuous heartbeats in those two apparently predestined to a horrible death—a roar announced the immediate presence of the beast, And our men had already made a last appeal to all their self-possession, when the traveler, who for a minute now had been listening to the roars with astonishment, murmured as he grew pale:

"I know that . . . Guaycurú! That way of . . ." And before the Indian had time to answer, the traveler let out a cry of joy, beating his forehead: "We're a couple of idiots. Guaycurú! We didn't recognize her!"

And they bounded to the ground.

II

The Indian, who was more agile, jumped from his perch into empty space. They were five meters up, and this is a risky leap anywhere. But he was saved by his incredible native adroitness, coming out with no more than a twisted ankle.

No sooner was he on the ground than the traveler, with amazing speed, brought his hands to his mouth in the form of a horn, and let go in the night a hoarse and protracted yell that resounded gloomily in the jungle, thus sending forth, in the very depths of the wild beasts' domain, the challenge of a powerful human voice. The yell was answered immediately by a terrific roar, so near that the men shuddered, despite their bravery.

A moment later the branches were shaking, two eyes were shining in the dark, and an enormous shadow was flinging itself upon them in a single leap—but it was a leap of joy.

"Down, Divina, down!" shouted the traveler, restraining the advances of his lioness with his commanding voice. The animal went on emitting raucous howls of delight, trying to rub up against her owner however she could.

It's no secret that a puma's caresses are as much to be feared as its rages, and that the paw it holds out toward its master with the solicitous intent of caressing him has five claws, five perfect Arabian daggers that cut deep into the flesh, no matter how slight the affection which incites them. So the traveler, content as he was with the devotion his lioness was showing him, was very careful to avoid her getting near.

"Why this, boss?" asked the surprised Indian, coming near. But the animal turned her head toward him and let out an intense and ill-tempered growl.

"Careful!" the traveler yelled at him. "Don't get close! When she sees me again after several hours, she gets terribly jealous. Down, Divina!"

In the vague light he had seen the tail of the lioness take a rigid, horizontal position. Since this is an unmistakable sign of attack, he barely found the means to control her

with his voice. At once he had to pet her lavishly, since the animal, with her initial excitement now past, was voluptuously rubbing herself between her master's legs. She even allowed Guaycurú to gently scratch her head. Once they'd managed that, and since the pleasure she was feeling was far greater than her passing jealousy, she renewed her forthright friendship with the Indian. Five minutes later the three of them were walking down the trail in brotherly comradeship.

Rain, wind, and thunderclaps had ceased. The silence of the jungle seemed even deeper, as though under water. Only the lightning-flashes went on noiselessly illuminating the sky.

"What about this?" asked Guaycurú again. "How did she escape?"

At that moment the traveler was examining the sturdy collar of the beast walking beside him, and he rose up after a fruitless investigation.

"I don't know," he replied. "The collar is in perfect shape. The chain's come off, but I can't figure out how she managed to detach the hook. If we were dealing with a dog I'd be ready to believe that somebody removed the chain; but I don't think there's anyone so totally down on life that he'd get the idea of going to release this cat," he concluded, landing a powerful slap on the flank of the lioness, who purred at the caress. That slap, a product of the traveler's nervous energy, was very far from being a caress. But the lioness surely understood it that way, because she lifted her head toward her master with indolent affection, in quest of another sweet token of love.

"You think she was hungry?" asked Guaycurú.

"No; this morning she ate half the deer she caught yesterday, and today at nightfall, since I didn't know how long I was going to be gone, I let her loose to go into the woods, but in a little while she came back bored. All the better," murmured the traveler in conclusion.

The lioness, as if she understood that they were talking about her, looked at one and then the other with phosphorescent eyes, as she walked on with the long and predatory pace of wild beasts.

The two strange travelers and their even stranger companion had been moving along for an hour, and it looked as if that troubled night was going to end with no further disturbances, when suddenly the lioness stopped dead in her tracks.

The warning of an animal who comes to a stop facing straight ahead in the woods is well worth bearing in mind. And especially so in the case before us, since along with her animal nature the lioness enjoyed the advantage of having been born in that very jungle which had just given her notice of something out of the ordinary.

The men stopped.

"What's up?" asked the traveler in a low voice.

"I don't know," replied the Indian in the same tone. "She's heard something."

They listened carefully, holding their breath, but heard nothing.

The lioness kept standing still, however, with her ears pricked up. She looked to one and then the other side of the trail, with that profound attention of eyes and ears

peculiar to animals lying in wait, for whom the faint rustle of a leaf can be a decisive sign of life or death.

This went on for a while. All of a sudden the animal's gaze came to rest on a point at the edge of the woods. She extended her head still farther, as if to look better at what she saw, and then, lowering it slowly to ground level, with her snout against the earth she let out a muffled, sad, and deathly roar, which sent a chill of anguish into the hearts of the men.

"I don't see anything," muttered the traveler. "It must be a scent."

"Of people?"

"No; she wouldn't roar that way . . . Still . . ."

"She's afraid, boss . . ."

"Right, and in the case of a scent she wouldn't be—especially if she smelled humans," he concluded, with a delicate smile we've already noted when he spoke of her on other occasions.

Meanwhile the lioness had begun to move cautiously ahead, without lifting her snout from the earth, and howling ceaselessly.

"Now I know what it is!" shouted the traveler suddenly. "Divina, come here, Divina! It's going to bite her!"

The Indian shuddered.

"Yes, it's a snake. A month ago I heard that same complaint of hers from far away, and she came in with her snout horribly swollen . . . Divina!"

The two men jumped forward, and with a shove the traveler drove the lioness aside. They were already halfway through the woods and there, on the red earth, they saw a black viper—a ñacaniná—with its neck erect and ready to spring upon the first creature to come near.

These ñacaninás, serpents two or even three meters long, are terribly aggressive and afraid of nothing. As soon as they sense they're being attacked they fall upon the attacker, be the latter a man, a dog, or a wild animal. And not only that: they pursue, dashing with incredible speed after whatever has annoyed them; and since they take cover stealthily, these black snakes are the most appalling residents of the jungle.

For all that, the lioness had no desire to give up the fight. Her owner just barely restrained her, worried to death, since with one more step his Divina would cause the serpent to strike out against her, and there's no antidote in the world for the venom of the ñacaniná.

"Guaycurú, the machete! I can't hold her anymore!"

The Indian understood. With lightning speed he pulled out his machete and in one leap was between the pair and the ñacaniná. Then he took a step ahead and the neck of the snake contracted. The lioness, between the arms of her master who was holding her around the neck, was roaring as she struggled to get free.

"Quick! She's getting away!" he had time to yell in desperation. A second later the lioness was leaping at the serpent. But the Indian, with frightening calm, had taken another step forward, and as the ñacaniná came at him, extended straight-out like a

spear, he made a quick move with his wrist that was almost imperceptible. When the lioness fell on the serpent, all you could see was a black body flip-flopping in horrible contractions among the feet of the beast. But now it had no head; the machete had sliced it off without a jolt, with no roughness at all, solely by way of a marvel of presence of mind and hand.

Finally! The men let out a sigh, now free of that second ordeal of their gloomy nocturnal expedition. The lioness, with two silent bites, had torn up the still convulsive body of her enemy. Now quiet, she joined her master, and the three set out on their trip again.

The storm had passed, but the sky, still cloudy, remained profoundly black. In that murky darkness the somber wayfarers had no guide but the scarcely visible line of the trail, and above all their keen backwoods intuition.

They were walking in single file, with no vacillation; and from a distance someone who'd been watching them would have seen, in the distressing forsakenness of the jungle, two greenish lights, the two awful shining dots of the jungle, that guided the somber trio's nocturnal progress.

In the meantime, and while their strange adventure continues on its course, let's say a few words about our characters, so as to understand the frightful drama which was coming to a head.

III

On a certain summer afternoon, at three o'clock, at the peak of an oppressively hot siesta-time, two sweaty men were waiting on the bank of the river for the steamboat that came upstream against its racing current. The two were Yucas Alves, owner of a logging camp four leagues from the shore, and his overseer.

When the steamboat had come to a stop, a scow moved off from her side, boarded by a passenger dressed in white.

When the craft landed, Alves went ahead to meet the passenger.

"Are you Longhi?" he asked him—in Spanish, but with a very thick Portuguese accent.

"I am," replied the other simply, looking calmly at the repulsive face of the owner of the logging camp.

"You've been highly recommended to me," added the latter. "Do you know your work well?"

"Yes, I've been a lumber inspector for fourteen years in Misiones."

"If you're not too demanding, I think you'll be satisfied here."

"I hope so."

Four hours later they were entering the camp. The work of inspecting the lumber cut and trimmed by the axes, of plunging day after day into the bush, of moving

ceaselessly from one place to another, of wasting away from heat and mosquitoes, is appallingly hard. The newly hired inspector, however, had energy enough for every trial, and within his lean body concealed extraordinary physical strength.

Things went well at the beginning. But little by little he began to notice the atrocious cruelties that prevailed in the camp. Those who know what happens in almost all logging camps will understand perfectly what is here undisclosed; and those who are unaware are better off to remain so forever.

Alves was the prototypical despot, irate, cowardly, cheap, cruel to the point of refinement, and possessed of an iron will.

At the end of the first month Longhi understood that he wouldn't last there very long. At the end of the second, he was certain that Alves disliked him and that something serious was going to happen. And the clash did in fact take place, with regard to some logs that were badly measured, according to Alves.

"It seems to me that you showed more promise at the beginning," the owner told him dryly.

"That's possible," replied the other, keeping calm.

"It's your duty to do things well," Alves cut in rudely.

Longhi looked him straight in the eye, and retorted, turning pale:

"My duty is to do what I can." His voice was calmer still.

"Your duty is to keep your mouth shut!" bellowed Alves, flaring up in anger.

The livid inspector slowly put his hands in his pockets, with a composure much more terrible than his contained anger, and said to him, enunciating clearly:

"It seems to me that you're mistaken, Sr. Alves."

". . . ?"

"I'm no common laborer."

"Eh?"

"And no hireling like those others . . ."

Alves made a motion, but at once Longhi added, still looking at him:

". . . and I swear to you that the first move you make to draw your revolver, by my mother's ghost I swear to you that I'll blow off the lid of your brains."

The inspector didn't even reach for his own pistol to back up his threat; his look was enough. Alves understood that he'd made a mistake, and turning green he muttered something and left. But Longhi in turn understood that the struggle was no more than begun and that Alves wouldn't leave it at that.

And in fact six days later the expected catastrophe fell on the heads of Guaycurú and the inspector—our nocturnal traveler, that is, as all will have understood by now.

The climax came one morning near noon, and its incidental cause was the following: Among the innumerable laborers at the camp there was an Indian called Guaycurú, who as a child near death had been abandoned by his parents in the woods, and whom an old woodcutter from Corrientes had taken in and raised. At first the Indian—an excellent logger, by the way—had looked upon the new inspector with suspicion, which was perfectly understandable. Inspectors, as a rule, measure wood in such a manner

that they always find a way of recording a lesser amount: instead of four meters, two and a half; rather than eighty square feet, fifty—and so on in the same vein. It's useless for the lowly woodcutter to defend the inches that have cost him hours of agony, of heat, mosquitoes, and snakes in the back country; the inspector starts laughing or warns him that if he keeps on causing trouble he'll be obliged to blow his brains out. The woodcutter lowers his head, hands over his lumber without a word, and so on till the next log. What can he do? Sometimes there are tragic attempts to settle the score, but the terror inspired by the boss is usually too great.

As one might expect, Longhi was too much of a man to lend himself to such thievery, all the more vile since its victim was a poor godforsaken laborer, of whose privations and harsh labors to earn a sack of fat or beans he was only too aware. So by the end of the second week he had won the affection of the peones—but in spite of themselves, since, accustomed as they were to the endless plunder and bad faith of the lumber inspectors, they thought that his fairness was merely apparent, concealing some kind of trick. Longhi recognized the legitimate suspicions of those hapless creatures, grieving for them from the bottom of his heart.

The Indian, especially, had always been the enduring victim of the inspectors. In the great helplessness of his race and humble condition, he had never been able to get credit for even half of his lumber. They always found that his beams were badly squared, or had wood-borers, or had been felled during a rainy period—always something bad for him. Mutely, the Indian would go back to his job, which hardly brought in enough to keep him from dying of hunger, and by now his stringent misery had lasted for twenty years.

So when the new inspector measured his lumber without robbing him of a centimeter, his surprise was without end. Like the other peones, he inevitably believed it was nothing but some sort of ruse, but when he delivered another log, and another and another, and saw them all measured fairly, in the dark soul of the savage the divine light of blind trust in another human being slowly began to shine.

And that wasn't all. One afternoon as Longhi finished measuring his log and while the Indian was watching him, the inspector raised his eyes and saw that he was shivering, with his head sunk between his shoulders.

"What's the matter?" he asked him. "The fever?"

"Yes," replied the other laconically, looking away. In his gaze there was a cold, bitter sadness, that of a sick man disillusioned and as lonely as a stray dog.

"Why don't you take quinine?"

The Indian didn't answer.

"Don't they have some in the store?"

"Yes," murmured the Indian, "but it costs a fortune."

"How much?"

The Indian said something in a low voice.

The inspector let out a cry of indignation.

“What a crime!” he exclaimed, looking at that human being fatefully condemned to be consumed in his fever, and feeling a tenderness for the poor pariah that came up from the very depths of his manly fortitude. He finally left, and Guaycurú watched him walk away with a look of painful irony.

“Like all the rest,” he muttered.

But the next day he had the surprise one might suppose when he saw the inspector arrive at his thatched lean-to, deep in the woods.

“Here you are,” he told him, holding out a large box. “Take two, an hour before the attack. There’s forty of them. If it doesn’t go away, let me know.”

The Indian took the box without looking at him, and without saying a word.

“See you tomorrow,” said the inspector simply as he drew away.

When he had already walked a hundred yards or so, he heard the noise of footsteps, and saw the Indian coming towards him. His brow was contracted as though he were in pain.

“I want to know what this costs,” he said in a muffled voice.

“It doesn’t cost anything,” the inspector replied.

The Indian knit his brow still more, examining his fingernails one by one.

“It’s not poison?” he muttered, looking at him out of the corner of his eye.

The inspector understood the whole sum of sufferings, injustices, and suspicions that had soured the logger’s soul to the point of making him question the simplest act of kindness.

“No, it’s not poison,” he answered gravely.

Seeing that the Indian kept his head down, he drew away again, but after a few steps felt his hand pressed hard against a mouth, and heard a voice broken by sobs saying:

“You’re a good man, boss, a good man.”

Longhi took his hand away, laughing to disguise the deep emotion he felt.

From that moment on, no loyalty and faith were greater than those of the Indian. The inspector was simply a god to him, the object of that absolute fidelity to be found only in the savage when he surrenders his elusive soul.

And this devotion to the inspector, added to the sympathies he inspired in the other peones, was the reason Alves found for avenging to the dregs the bitter bile Longhi had forced him to swallow. His hostility toward the inspector, which had begun with jealousy of the respect his workers had for him, burst into total flame when he found out how much Guaycurú loved him, and especially when he learned that Longhi didn’t rob his woodcutters. Of course the natural thing would seem to be that he summarily fire an employee who held down his profits; but, aside from the fact that what he paid Longhi was a lot less than usual, Alves simply wanted to take revenge.

So it came about that one afternoon the most trivial pretext added fuel to that venomous vengeance.

Alves was coming back from the port on horseback when he ran into Guaycurú. The boss reined in his mount.

"What are you doing at this hour dilly-dallying along the trail?" he reprimanded him.

"Nothing. I'm going to the store to get flour," replied the Indian as he came to a stop, trembling with fear.

"Flour? Didn't you get some on Saturday?"

"Yes, but it got wet on me."

"It got wet on you! Damn your hide! Did you deliver lumber?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"One lapacho."

"How much was that?"

"Twelve feet."

Alves brought down his fist in a violent blow against the saddle-tree.

"Sure," he said snidely, "twelve feet. Don't let me catch you on the trail again, bandido!"

With his head still lower than before, the Indian murmured:

"I delivered wood on Saturday too . . ."

"What do I care about your Saturday and your wood? What I want is for you to work. Hear that? Come with me! Let's go see your stupid log."

They started out. Alves wasn't talking, but his ignoble face remained constricted. When he arrived he dismounted and threw the reins violently to the ground, certain that there were a dozen people there who'd rush to pick up the reins of boss Alves, and went down to the dock with the Indian.

He looked over the log prepared by Guaycurú, and finally raised his head, staring at him with a gaze lit up by sullen fire, which announced a storm of wrath.

"And this is the wood you brought in?" he said, with a slight kick at the beam.

The intimidated Indian didn't open his lips.

"Who accepted this wood?"

"Boss Longhi."

"Around here there's no boss but me, bandido!" cried Alves, turning red. "You hear? The only boss here is me, me! All the rest are a mess of bandits, all of them! You get that? All of them!"

This last was addressed to the laborers and other employees who were listening a short distance away. Such was the tyrannical control Alves held over his people that not one of them lifted his forehead. The laborers glanced at each other furtively; the others acted as though the words had nothing to do with them. But his thundering was too severe for the bolt of lightning not to be near.

"Boss Longhi . . . ," continued Alves, now unable to contain himself. "I don't know if he's a boss in his blasted country! But the one who accepted that blasted wood is a jackass! Longhi or whoever! The one who . . ."

He was going to go on, but when he noticed that all of them were looking toward the main trail, which lay behind him, he turned and saw Longhi coming back from

the woods at a tranquil pace. Though he was still quite a distance away, there was no chance he hadn't heard, given the silence of the countryside. The employees exchanged a rapid glance among themselves. But Alves had already turned white-hot. When he saw Longhi he held back, and for a few seconds one could see portrayed on his face the struggle between his fear and his hatred of Longhi. The latter won out.

"Who accepted this wood?" he asked, addressing the employees, as if he didn't know.

"I did," answered Longhi, sure that this occasion was decisive, and already putting his hands in his pockets so as to better contain himself.

"You?" asked Alves, turning his head toward him with disdain. "You don't know what wood is, then!"

"I think I do, though," replied Longhi calmly. "What's the matter with it?" he added, approaching the log.

"Nothing at all! Just totally eaten up inside!"

Longhi squatted and struck the log with his knuckles in several spots.

"I don't think so," he said.

"You don't think so! What I think is that you've been stealing your salary from me; that's what I think."

Remembering the prior clash between Alves and Longhi, the employees trembled, and opened their eyes wide so as not to miss a bit of what was going to happen.

But Longhi had squatted again, as though to examine the beam more closely than before. When he stood up he was still pale.

"Besides," continued the Brazilian, "that's no way to square. Where you come from maybe, but not among respectable people."

This time he seemed to have violated the limits of Longhi's deep-seated self-control; but once again the inspector bent over the end of the beam, set his eye at the level of an edge, and checked angles for a while. Again he stood up. And now he was livid.

"I beg your pardon," he said with alarming calm, "this beam is quite well squared."

"Ah! you think it's squared?" he exclaimed—forgetting Spanish usted in his wrath and reverting to Portuguese vosé. "You're such a thief . . ."

But he couldn't finish. Longhi, with a hoarse cry discharging all his indignation—held in check till then by a strenuous act of will—had flung his lean and nervous hand at Alves' face. The blow was hard and resounded like a rifle-shot. Alves staggered, lifting his arm to his bloodied mouth, and a second later was leaping backward, revolver in hand. He aimed at Longhi's chest and let out a strident, sarcastic guffaw.

"Ah-hah! It looks like it's all over now, eh? Thief! Thief!"

Longhi, his hands in his pockets again, stood still, white as a sheet, staring his accuser down.

"Vosé are a coward!" bellowed Alves, whose wrath was inflamed still more by this new test of composure. "I'm going to kill you like a dog! Thief!"

As he heard this insult for the third time Longhi's arms moved convulsively, and Alves reacted instantly with the arm in which he was brandishing the revolver. One could see clearly, from the contraction of his face, that he was pulling the trigger. The

shot was about to leave the gun when Guaycurú, in a tiger's leap, fell upon Alves and, with a blow to his wrist, sent the revolver flying.

But now things changed; it was no longer a question of Longhi.

"Grab that bandit!" roared Alves.

The peones, who would have wavered if it were the inspector, in a mad throng came pouncing on the Indian. In a moment he was down and bound.

"The other one now! Grab me that other one!" he roared again, pointing at Longhi, who still had his hands in his pockets. Nobody moved.

"Swine!" he yelled, his eyes shining with tears of impotent wrath, and rushing headlong for his revolver, which had fallen a step away from Longhi.

But at the moment he was about to seize it, the inspector, with a tranquil motion, stepped on the firearm, and catching Alves by a shoulder, threw him violently aside. Alves let out a cry and fell on his back.

There's no way to describe the expression on the Brazilian's face when he got up. Tears of rabid exasperation were running from his eyes.

Longhi, calmly, bent over and picked up the revolver and threw it at the feet of Alves, who jumped on it with a hoarse cry of triumph and, aiming at the group of laborers, bellowed:

"Grab that man! Anyone who doesn't move I'll blow off the top of his head."

The peones, cowed, headed for Longhi; but shrugging his shoulders he drew his revolver and told them calmly:

"Act your age, stay put. You don't have to . . ."

A gunshot cut off his words, and was followed by a cry of pain from Longhi. His revolver fell, as a torrent of blood started flowing from his hand. Alves, whose marksmanship hadn't failed him at that juncture, had just lopped off three of Longhi's fingers with a single round, disarming him.

"Quick, tie that man up!" he roared, turning his gun toward the laborers.

Before Longhi could bend over, he found himself surrounded, smothered by a score of arms, and securely bound.

"Take those two bandits to the old well!"

The terrified laborers shouldered the two prisoners and started on their way.

"Now we'll see, seu Longhi!" Alves shouted after him sarcastically. "Don't be afraid, vosé; there's no water in the well . . . but there are some other, better things. As for the other one . . . Is the big anthill still there?" he asked the peones.

As they heard this, an expression of extreme dismay took shape on all their faces.

What torture did Alves have in store for his two victims, such as to give pause to laborers accustomed to his vengeance? That's what we're about to see. The band of men, with their prisoners, went on along the main trail as far as its first branching point, four hundred meters from the logging-camp.

"Halt!" ordered Alves. "Leave those two lying on the ground!"

The peones laid Longhi and the Indian down on the red earth of the trail and waited for new orders from their boss. We have to note that, ever since Alves' revolver had

been aimed at their chests for the second time, all wavering, all trace of conscience or humanity had vanished from their souls. Alves' threats and his familiar angry voice had awakened the slavishness in them, and now they were ten automatons with brutish faces, spiritless, abject, who blindly obeyed that well-known voice.

By now all sympathy for Longhi had left them; there was nothing in the world now but their boss's orders, and so they were on the way to becoming accomplices and executors of the horrible torture to come.

"See if there's water in the well!" ordered the Brazilian. "If there is, get rid of it and dry the place with sand. I don't want seu Longhi to catch a cold."

The laborers headed for the well, a well abandoned at four meters down, because no water had appeared. When it rained, of course, they could draw up a few liters or so. Bending over its mouth, they found it was dry.

"Fine," said Alves. "Less work." And he gave the peones orders in a low voice. Four of them went to the camp, returning shortly with picks, shovels and a rectangular box. Alves opened it and took out two dark cylinders, addressing the inspector, who was stretched out on his back.

"Seu Longhi!" he said, giving him a kick in the head. "Vosé don't recognize this?"

Longhi, who had his eyes closed against the sun, didn't make a move.

"That's no way to be, seu Longhi! That's not right! If you'd deign to open your eyes, you'd see that this is dynamite . . . dynamite, seu Longhi," he affirmed politely. "All right; we'll open your eyes later . . . and the anthill is full?"

"Yes, boss," replied a laborer.

"Excellent; now it's my turn."

And as he said this he went down to the bottom of the well.

"Cut a thick tacuara!" he shouted from below. "Ten inches is long enough!"

A moment later the piece of bamboo was on its way down. Alves made some moves at the bottom and after a while came up sweating.

"Fine! Now throw in all those stones . . . the big ones first. Careful! Excellent."

When that was all done, Alves went down alone once more, put the sticks of dynamite inside the tacuara, implanted the fuse, and climbed out again. Under his surveillance the laborers went back to pitching stones, carefully covering the length of bamboo, and a half hour later the charge was ready.

"Now the other one!" said Alves. "Strip him nude!"

And in no time the Indian was naked.

"Stir up the anthill!"

Two peones went to the hill, but at the instant they were about to act Alves detained them.

"Just a minute! Go get the big bottle that's in the storeroom, the one with the green label."

When the laborer came back with the bottle, Alves addressed Longhi again with a smile of triumph.

"Look, vosé! This we've got here is turpentine . . . And ants," he added, gently patting the bottle, "are very fond of turpentine . . . only they blunder and get very angry, seu Longhi. Your so esteemed friend Guaycurú will remember this a bit."

Then the two peones each sank a stick into the anthill, violently stirring in all directions. The grey appearance of the hill was instantly transformed into deep black; millions of ants emerged in a fury, looking for the enemy that was attacking them. Alves sprinkled that formidable host with turpentine, and the laborers reinforced the bonds of the Indian.

Suddenly Longhi, who for a moment hadn't caught the sound of any voice, heard a horrible howl of pain, and shuddered violently. Another howl resounded more intensely still, one in which all the suffering a human creature can endure came bursting forth from the victim's soul.

"Fine, seu Guaycurú! Fine!" he heard Alves saying. "This is very good for learning how to respect bosses . . ."

Despite his indomitable energy, a cold sweat drenched Longhi's forehead.

The torture had begun. The Indian, thrown naked into the midst of trillions of infuriated ants, was writhing with pain. His body was a monstrous black mass of ants, resembling a lump of coal. The turpentine, killing many of the ants, had aroused the rest, and their formidable pincers were devouring the Indian alive.

When a minute was up—and a minute is horribly long in such circumstances—Longhi heard Alves say:

"A moment of rest, now! Pull him out!"

The Indian was removed and his cries diminished little by little, till they ended in muffled sobs, sobs of impotence and superhuman suffering, as felt by men whose strength is finally broken.

Longhi still kept his eyes closed, and still hadn't moved a finger. Yet within his heart, like a roaring sea, churned all the indignation and noble rage a manly breast can hold. But his turn had come.

"Now seu Longhi," Alves told him, turning toward him again, "now I'm going to teach you something you don't know. You don't know how to fly, right?"

Longhi didn't answer.

"Seu Longhi, please, don't be impolite!" Alves reproached him, with another kick in the head. "I'm talking to you!"

The inspector's face remained impassive; nothing but his pallor, that terrible pallor already known to Alves, had altered his stoic countenance. When the Brazilian noticed it he smiled with joy.

"All right; that proves you're hearing me, at least. Now, seu Longhi, it's a question of flying. Within half an hour your protective self will be on the fly, something that didn't figure in your magnanimous calculations. It'll fly so well that maybe it'll never come back, you hear? So, since it isn't right for old acquaintances to part like that, without saying good-bye, let's say good-bye, seu Longhi."

And abruptly raising his whip, he laid a horrible lash across the inspector's face.

“That’s my good-bye, canalla!” he bellowed violently, forgetting his politeness, while a streak of blood emerged on Longhi’s face. “Take along this remembrance of me! Hey, you!” he yelled at the laborers. “Put this character on top of the well.”

The peones picked up Longhi and put him on top of the dynamite mine. When they filled the well with stones they had left a hollow so the inspector couldn’t roll away, a kind of coffin they now placed him in. A living tomb, so to speak, where Longhi would count off second by second his last moments of life, before being blown into pieces aloft.

Once everything was ready, Alves approached the well and lit the fuse, which sputtered a moment and then went burning away, slowly, silently and fatally.

“After a quarter of an hour,” said Alves, taking out his watch, “when there are just five minutes left, put the other one on the anthill again. It’s fair that Sr. Longhi should have some music.”

One after the other, slow and relentless, Longhi felt his life’s last pendulum strokes gradually coming to an end.

Suddenly the pure air was rent by that same horrible scream that signaled the torture of the Indian.

“There are still five minutes left,” murmured Longhi.

The screams continued, each more desperate than the last.

Then he heard the noise of steps going away.

“They’re leaving,” he said to himself. “In a minute I won’t be alive anymore.”

And for the first time he felt a knot of anguish in his throat, as he thought about his mother.

“Poor Mama!” he murmured. “She couldn’t have any idea what situation her son is in. If she . . .”

A powerful explosion split the air. A furious vomit of stones erupted from the well, and the body of the inspector, thrown off to one side, fell onto a nearby netting of vines, tearing through them, and dropped heavily to earth.

IV

It was eleven o’clock at night. A fresh breeze was blowing along the trail, and the gloomy woods were getting lively with the wailing of wildcats, the flight of deer, and the grunting of boar. Sounding unexpectedly, the moan of a human being abruptly put an end to the concert. Then a broken voice called out softly:

“Boss Longhi!”

Nobody answered.

“Boss Longhi!” repeated the same voice, broken by suffering, all that was left of the vigorous voice of a man. Slowly, almost invisible in the darkness of the night, a shadow came dragging itself up to the well. It stopped there for half an hour, then

moved on to the edge of the woods. There's no way to convey an idea of the tortures and horrible pain implied by the sight of a human being dragging himself along like that. He suddenly bumped into a hand and shuddered violently. The hand was cold, stiff, icy.

"Boss, boss Longhi!" sobbed the Indian, letting his breast release all his love for the only person who had ever cared for him. He touched the inspector's face and his noble, rigid body, and, giving in to despair, wept into the desolate night.

The next day, at dawn, a laborer went to tell Alves that neither the Indian nor the inspector had died. Alves went off with him and found them stretched out next to each other. Despite his baseness of spirit, a chill ran through his body as he fixed his eyes on the Indian. What he saw was a deformed, swollen, bloody lump of a man, devoured by fever and babbling deliriously in a low voice. Alves moved closer and looked over Longhi's livid body.

"That man is dead," he said.

"No, he's not dead," countered the laborer. "His heart is beating."

"How can he have survived?" murmured Alves to himself. "What's wrong with him?"

"It looks like he's got broken ribs."

Alves pondered for a moment and then went back to the camp.

"Go and get those two characters!" he ordered.

When he saw the two dying men before him—two vigorous males that in two hours his despotic cruelty had transformed into two wretched slabs of humanity—a ray of triumph, of all-embracing will, lit up his gaze. The violent jolts of the wagon, aggravating the Indian's delirium, had made Longhi come to; he looked at Alves for an instant and then closed his eyes.

"All right!" said Alves calmly. "Now you've had your lesson, seu Longhi. I hope you profit from it, and learn to show a little respect for men who haven't done you a bit of harm. I assume something must have happened to you when the stones sent you flying and that maybe you're going to die. But anyway I've got no desire to live under the same roof with a thiev-ing in-spec-tor; that's how it is, seu Longhi. So right now I'm going to have you taken to the port and left on the bluff, and if within a week the steamboat comes by, all the better for you."

A moment later Longhi was riding the wagon again, unconscious, and was put down not at the port but at the hut of the wagon-driver, who took pity on him, at the risk of facing Alves' wrath. But when he told him what he'd done, Alves shrugged his shoulders.

"He won't live for two hours anyhow."

But Longhi lived, and six months later, as the days went by, it was Alves' fate to confront Longhi again, but perhaps in circumstances less favorable to him.

How? Very shortly we'll see.

Miraculously saved from the explosion, Longhi had come out of it with a broken rib and horrible contusions on his back, besides the three fingers lopped off by the Brazilian's bullet. The old woodsman took care of him like a father, and Longhi spent

three weeks hovering between life and death. But his robust constitution won out, and finally one resplendent morning he was able to go outdoors, where he took a seat on a log. He was still very weak, but the warmth in the air and the sun that gilded the woods soothed him like a life-renewing balm; and for the first time after two months of fever, delirium, and lethargy, he was able to think clearly.

In the nightmares he had in those two months the sinister figure of Alves had occupied a prominent place.

He saw himself tied down over the explosive charge and the Brazilian laughing and kicking him in the head. And then the cowardly blow of the whip, and the wailing of the Indian being eaten alive. All this torment, in a man who spent two months reliving extreme offenses, had profoundly embittered his spirit. In vain did he try to forget; an implacable thirst for revenge constricted his whole being. Oh, to make him suffer for a minute, even just a second, what he had suffered for two months! He dreamed of something monstrous for Alves, much more maddening than the infernal anthill, something that would yank bestial moans from his tortured flesh and soul . . .

Here he stopped abruptly in the course of his thoughts.

"Yes," he murmured. "Why not? Bestial . . . Ah, now we'll see! Juan!" he called to the woodsman, who that morning had the shivers and was trembling by the fire.

"Boss!"

"Tell me: have you ever seen a tame jaguar?"

"Never; can't be done. A puma, yes."

"Yes, I know. But have you seen a tamed puma?"

"I have. And not just one, a lot of them. What do you want to know for?"

"Nothing; just curious."

The logger looked at him intently.

"My compadre Cipriano has one," he added.

Longhi made a quick gesture, and that terrible pallor out of the past, when he was the man who made Alves lower his eyes, swept over his face.

But this time Longhi's pallor was due to physical debility. He lowered his head and shortly asked indifferently:

"Is it big?"

"No; still a kitten."

"Ah!"

Another pause. All of a sudden the ex-lumber-inspector stood up, and walking laboriously up to the logger, put his hand on his shoulder.

"Listen, Juan. I need to have your compadre sell me the lion." His voice was still broken, but his firm and tranquil look was the same as before. "I've got nothing to give him now; you can't doubt that. But I give you my word that I'll pay him for it."

"I know, boss," murmured Juan with deep respect. "You don't need to tell me that."

"It doesn't matter. Better to say it. Will you see your compadre and ask him to sell it to me?"

The woodsman lifted towards him his trusting and sternly devoted eyes.

"We're not selling you anything, not I or my compadre. With us you've been different from the rest. The lion is yours."

"Thanks," answered Longhi gravely. "When can it be here?"

"Next week. He has to be the one to do it."

The following Monday the lion arrived. It was a lioness, but already grown to a husky size. Longhi had prepared a strong cage, where he installed the beast, who roared when she saw that she was separated from her master.

This was going on in February. In June the lovely feline, now fully developed, wouldn't part for an instant from her new owner.

It's unbelievable what wonders of patience, willpower, and self-control Longhi had to perform to attain that domesticity. Under the sway of his affection and unshakable disposition, the lioness had been transformed into a big dog full of docility and tenderness towards her master. Longhi had achieved what almost all trainers do: he'd taught the beast to be quiet. A stern hiss would make her fall silent; but it must be said that in this terrible struggle for control—control the feline was fated to resist—Longhi was twice on the verge of losing his life. He had five deep scars from her claws on his shoulder. Finally, however, he had succeeded in subduing her.

What was Longhi's purpose in exerting his awful will to teach a lioness something in no way indispensable, and certainly very dangerous?

One night in August—which is to say: six months after the day that Alves made Longhi pay, in the way we've seen, for his noble fairness toward the laborers—Longhi was standing on the central trail, unmistakably waiting for someone. After a while, a woeful cry of pain rang out in the distance, and was answered at once by a muffled roar to his left. Longhi turned quickly toward the woods and hissed. The noise subsided.

A moment later Guaycurú appeared on the trail. The Indian, saved by the panic aroused in the ants by the boom of the explosion, had taken much more time than Longhi to recuperate. There had been four months of interminable pain, wounds that kept reopening, pustules that ate him alive, an atrocious convalescence—only for him to return, barely recovered, to the same mute work as before, and with Alves' threat to begin the affair of the ants again at his slightest mistake.

Out of prudence Longhi hadn't wanted to go see him. But now that he had a mature plan it was necessary to see him, so he'd had the logger take him the message.

No sooner were they together, they who had suffered the most abominable of tortures, than a torrent of emotions welled up in both their breasts. They looked hard at each other, and a moment later Longhi again felt the Indian's lips on his hands. Between them now there was a common bond, impossible to undo: their having suffered together and the inner fire of the same dark longing for retaliation.

They had hardly begun to talk when a horrifying roar quite close to them caused Guaycurú to jump.

"Damn you!" yelled Longhi angrily, turning toward the woods. "What's the matter with you?"

"What is it, boss?"

“Nothing, a lion I own. That stupid . . .”

And he went in among the trees. Right away Guaycurú heard the ill-tempered voice of Longhi scolding. An instant later he came out with the lioness.

And now we go back to the first part of this story, to the stormy night in which Longhi, Guaycurú, and the lioness were walking toward the logger’s hut.

The ex-inspector had asked Guaycurú to send him news, by way of the logger, of the first trip to the port that Alves might undertake. In the afternoon the woodsman got in touch with Longhi, and the object of their nocturnal meeting was to bring his plan to a conclusion.

Once arrived at the hut they talked for quite a while, and when dawn was upon them Guaycurú went back to the camp. The following night he returned to the trail, where Longhi was already waiting for him. Alves had to go by that point, on his way to the port.

The cold, clear weather favored Longhi’s designs. The moon was shining down on the trail, painting a quiet white stripe amid the gloomy woods.

“Are you really sure he said at one in the morning?” Longhi asked.

“Yes, at one. The steamboat went upstream the day before yesterday in the afternoon, and it’ll come by today at dawn. He also said he didn’t want to miss the steamboat for anything.”

“What peones will he come with?”

“With Raimundo, nobody else. He carries his suitcase . . .”

“Quiet!” Longhi cut him off in a low voice. “There’s noise.”

They both held their breath so as to hear better.

“It’s nothing,” he murmured after a while. “Besides, there’s still half an hour till three. He won’t come by here before three o’clock.”

The lioness, numb with cold, struggled to make wild lunges which her master restrained.

“You’ll warm up soon,” he murmured.

Slowly, one after another, the minutes went by, and the end of the drama came upon them.

In the distance, far in the distance, the steps of a horse had sounded on the stones.

“Hurry!” cried Longhi, lending an attentive ear, “and hide in the woods. If the horse doesn’t throw him, come out right away. I’ll stay here.”

The Indian, like a ghostly shadow, ran along the trail and disappeared into the jungle. Longhi, after talking to the lioness a while, caught her snout between his hands, as he always did when he wanted to make her understand something, and in his turn vanished into the woods with her beside him.

Down the trail, with his horse at a walk, rode Alves, enshrouded up to his ears in his heavy poncho. Behind him came a laborer, carrying a stout suitcase on the bow of his saddle.

“Damned cold!” muttered Alves, feeling needles of icy air prick his ears. “Just so the steamboat comes by soon . . . Come on! Let’s pick up the pace!” he yelled to the laborer. And the duo went on at a trot.

All of a sudden an enormous, frightful roar thundered in the jungle beside them. Alves and the laborer let out a yell. The horses, crazed with terror, reared up, their front legs frantically pawing the air.

“Raimundo!” hollered Alves, his voice hoarse from fear, as he tried to control his horse.

“I can’t, boss! The . . .”

The jungle shook with another terrifying roar, which filled the human soul with all the anguish passed on by the flesh when it’s about to be devoured.

“Boss! There it is! Right there! It’s going to jump!” shouted the laborer.

And at once Alves heard the wild charge of Raimundo’s horse, as he reined in and stormed back up the trail, crazed by the imminent attack of the beast. Alves let out a curse and tried desperately to pull out his revolver. But at that instant another roar shook the earth, then at once another, and another, and Alves’ horse, its eyes out of their orbits, and drenched in sweat from fear, made a huge bolt, breaking into a run. The Brazilian, upset by the move, fell off.

“Coward!” roared Alves, getting up.

“He’s no coward, he’s done right,” he heard a calm voice answer him. Alves felt his hair standing on end:

“That voice!”

“It’s mine, that’s all,” the voice spoke again.

And suddenly the Brazilian saw standing before him, with his hands in the pockets of his trousers, the motionless form of his ex-inspector.

Alves’ forehead broke out in a heavy sweat.

“Eh, the dead don’t talk!” he muttered, going furtively for his revolver. But once more he heard the tranquil voice:

“You’d better not draw it.”

Alves looked and saw shining beside Longhi two greenish lights, of that dismal green light of the jungle. A cry escaped from the Brazilian’s chest, and he stood paralyzed with fright.

“Throw down the revolver, Sr. Alves,” he heard again.

Alves unconsciously took hold of it to throw it down. But when he had it free, his mouth twisted horribly, and his arm stretched out.

“Drop it, Sr. Alves; it’s better that way.”

From the impassible tone of his voice Alves realized that all was lost. He was now fully certain that his hour had come, inexorably and irremissibly, and a burst of insults exploded from his mouth.

“Bandit! Thief! I’m to blame for not having had you skinned alive! Thief! Thief!”

“Guaycurú!” called Longhi, as if he hadn’t heard him.

The Indian came running up the middle of the trail and stationed himself behind Longhi.

"Sr. Alves," Longhi addressed the Brazilian, in a placid voice to which the setting, the moon, and the circumstances lent a somber solemnity. "Sr. Alves, listen to me. Five years ago a strong, healthy man arrived at your logging camp, a man who asked for nothing but to work in peace and live as tranquilly as possible. You, Sr. Alves, prevented him from doing the little good that an honorable man can do in your camp. You insulted him, pursued him, tortured him, and if this man is still alive, it's surely because he has a mission other than that of stealing from you, as you claim. That man was incapable of taking revenge. But there are some things that embitter too deeply; so if, after a half-hour's horrible agony, imposed with utter cowardice, and two months of suffering, that man wants to prevent forever the daily torture of two hundred peones, that man is only doing his duty. You've got about a minute left, Sr. Alves."

The Brazilian, in terror, fell to his knees.

"Perdón, perdón!" he shouted.

"Just that is what Guaycurú asked from you."

"I won't do it anymore!"

Longhi smiled imperceptibly.

"Guaycurú," he said to the Indian, "come near so he can get a good look at your face."

But Alves leaped to his feet.

"Bandits!" he yelled. "I'm not dead yet! I don't care a damn about the Indian! And this is for the robber of my lumber!"

And quickly grabbing his revolver, which he had unconsciously returned to its holster, he fired it at Longhi. His aim, thrown off by his haste, failed to score.

"Sr. Alves," said Longhi in a trembling voice, "get in the middle of the trail."

There was such indignation and strangely unshakable will in the voice of Longhi that Alves obeyed like an automaton.

And in a second he was thrown to the ground. The lioness, at a signal from Longhi, had leaped and fallen on him, and was holding him down with her powerful claws. Longhi, with his hands in his pockets, came up and stopped beside him.

"It's killing me, it's killing me!" wailed Alves.

"Not yet," answered Longhi calmly. "In a quarter of an hour."

In that quarter-hour, under the claws of the motionless beast, whose doleful eyes, fixed on his own a few inches away, were driving him crazy, Alves lived an eternity of terror.

"There's a minute left," said Longhi.

Alves, hoarse, could yell no more.

"Ten seconds left," said the same unyielding voice.

In each of his final seconds, Alves paid back every scrap of what he owed for his thirty years of plunder. Suddenly Longhi gave the lioness an imperceptible pat on the back, and breaking the silence there spread down the trail, cold and white with

moonlight, the crunching noise of Alves' head, which had just been split between the teeth of the lioness.

With a new palm-stroke the animal gave up her prey, still growling. Longhi, unmoving, stared at Alves' corpse for a while, and then with a sigh moved off. Guaycurú and the lioness went with him.

On the bluff above the river, Longhi and Guaycurú waited for the steamboat to come. When the smoke from one of its stacks was visible in the distance, Longhi went into the woods and tethered his lioness. What did he say to her? Was there any troubled tenderness he hadn't felt upon leaving his animal, whose life, tightly fettered to his own for five months, he'd just sealed to his life with blood?

When he came out of the woods his face was drawn. The steamboat was coming now, and Longhi waved for it to stop. The scow came moving in and Longhi got ready to get on.

"Good-bye, boss . . . ," said Guaycurú in a hoarse voice, lowering his eyes.

But Longhi, deeply moved, embraced him warmly. From here on they'd never see each other again. He got aboard. A moment later he reached the steamboat and it continued downstream.

Longhi kept his eyes fixed on the shore, where the Indian stood mute and desperate, till the distance erased his image. Then, as the steamer went down the river, leaning on the rail and looking at the dismal jungle, he relived all the anguish of those final months in which he'd left behind so many hopes that now he'd never retrieve: a dark and faithful friend, and a puma who, hoarse by now, roared desperately after the master who was deserting her.

The Contract Laborers

I

Logging-camp workers Cayetano Maidana and Esteban Podeley were returning to Posadas with fifteen comrades on the riverboat Sílex. Podeley, a woodcutter, was coming back after nine months, his contract fulfilled, and thus with his passage free. Cayé, a laborer, was arriving in the same circumstances, but after a year and a half, the time he had needed to work off his debt.

Skinny, disheveled, in short pants, their shirts torn in long slashes, barefoot like most of the others and dirty like all of them, the two mensús devoured with their eyes the capital of the woods, Jerusalem and Golgotha of their lives. Nine months up there! A year and a half! But they were coming back at last, and the still painful axe-blow of life in the logging camp was barely the graze of a wood-chip in view of the grand delights they could smell in the city.

Of a hundred peones, only two get to Posadas with any money. For that one week of bliss to which they are swept downstream by the river, they count on the advance on a new contract. Waiting on the beach, as collaborators and intermediaries, is a group of girls, joyous by disposition and profession, at the sight of whom the thirsty laborers let out their ¡ahijú! of urgent lunacy.

Cayé and Podeley got off the boat reeling with the foretaste of orgy and, surrounded by three or four girls, in a moment found themselves in the presence of more than enough rum to satisfy a worker's longing for that potent beverage.

A little while later they were drunk and signed to new contracts. For what kind of work? Where? They didn't know, and didn't care either. They did know that each had forty pesos in his pocket and the right to spend much more than that. Docile and awkward, drooling with relief and alcoholic bliss, they both followed the girls to shop for clothes. The shrewd maidens led them to a place where they had a special arrangement for a certain percentage, or perhaps to the store of the very company that had contracted them. But in one or the other the girls renewed the extravagance of their glad-rags, nested their heads full of combs, strangled themselves with ribbons—all of it stolen as coolly as can be from their royally drunk companions, for the only thing a mensú can really call his own is a drastic detachment from his money.

For his part, Cayé bought many more extracts and lotions and oils than necessary to perfume his new clothes to the point of nausea, while Podeley, more sensible, opted for a flannel suit. Possibly they paid an inflated bill, only half understood, and backed

by a fistful of papers thrown on the counter. But anyhow, an hour later they were flinging their brand-new selves into an open carriage, wearing boots, ponchos over their shoulders (and .44 revolvers in their belts, of course), their clothing stuffed with cigarettes that they clumsily tore apart between their teeth, and the tip of a colored handkerchief hanging from every pocket. Along with them went two girls, proud of such opulence, the extent of which could be seen in the rather bored expression of the laborers, as their carriage, morning and afternoon, spread through the scorching streets a noxious smell of wood-extracts and black tobacco.

Finally night arrived, and with it the usual spree, in which the same shrewd young ladies cajoled the workers to drink. And their regal wealth in advanced funds led them to lay out ten pesos for a bottle of beer, getting only one-forty in change, which they pocketed without even batting an eye.

So, after repeated squandering of new advances—out of an irresistible need to make up for the miseries of the logging camp with a week of living like lords—the laborers went back up the river again on the Silex. Cayé took along a girlfriend, and the three of them, drunk like the rest of the peones, settled in on the deck, where ten mules were already huddled together in intimate contact with trunks, bundles, dogs, women, and men.

The next day, their heads now cleared, Cayé and Podeley inspected their account booklets—the first time they'd done so since signing their contracts. Cayé had received 120 pesos in cash and 35 in expenses, and Podeley 130 and 75 respectively.

The two eyed each other with an expression that might have been one of panic, if every mensú were not thoroughly cured of that disorder. They didn't remember having spent even a fifth of what was recorded.

"¡Añá! . . ." (the devil!), muttered Cayé in Guaraní. "I'm never going to work this off . . ."

And from that moment he quite naturally took up—as fair punishment for his extravagance—the idea of escaping from the work camp. The legitimacy of his life in Posadas was so evident to him, however, that he felt jealous of the larger advances granted to Podeley.

"You're lucky . . . ," he said. "It's big, your advance . . ."

"You're bringing a girlfriend," countered Podeley. "That costs you in the pocketbook."

Cayé looked at his woman and he was satisfied, though beauty and other endowments of a more moral sort carry very little weight in the choice of a mensú. As a matter of fact the girl was dazzling, in her green skirt and yellow blouse of matching satin; displaying Louis XV shoes, a triple necklace of pearls around her dirty neck, brazenly painted cheeks, and, below her half-closed eyelids, a disdainful cigarette.

Cayé looked over the girl and his .44 revolver: the two were really all there was of value in what he was taking with him. And even the .44 ran the risk of going under like his advance, no matter how slight his temptation to gamble.

A few steps away, in fact, on top of a trunk stood on end, the workers were conscientiously betting everything they had in a game of monte. Cayé watched for a while laughing, as peones always laugh when they're together, for whatever reason; and he drew near the trunk, putting down five cigarettes on a card.

A modest beginning, that might turn out to provide him with enough money to pay off his advance at the logging camp and return on the same steamboat to Posadas, to squander another advance.

He lost. Lost the rest of his cigarettes, five pesos, his poncho, his woman's necklace, his own boots and his .44. The next day he won back the boots, but nothing else, while the girl made up for the bareness of her neck with endless contemptuous cigarettes.

After innumerable changes of ownership, Podeley won the necklace in question and a box of toilet soap, which he found a way of betting against a machete and a half a dozen stockings, which he won, and was thus content.

A week later they finally reached their destination. The peones cheerfully climbed up the endless strip of red earth that scaled the bluff, from the top of which the Sílex looked miniature and half-submerged in the gloomy river. And with ahijús and terrible abuse in Guaraní, they took leave of the steamboat and her crew, who had to swamp away, in a three-hour dousing with buckets, the nauseating stench of filth, patchouli, and sick mules that for four days she carried upstream.

II

For Podeley, the woodcutter, whose daily pay could amount to seven pesos, life in the camps wasn't too hard. Adapted to hope for strict fairness when it came to measuring the lumber he'd cut, and made up for the routine swindling with certain privileges accorded to dependable workers. His new hitch began the next day, once they had marked off his zone of woods. With palm leaves he built himself a lean-to (a roof and south wall, nothing more), settled for eight cross-poles as a bed, and hung his weekly rations from a fork-post. Automatically, he resumed his camp routine: silent mates when he got up before dawn, drunk quickly one after the other without letting go of the teakettle; the scouting expedition for timber; breakfast at eight (flour, jerked beef, and drippings); then the chopping, stripped to the waist, his sweat attracting horseflies, barigüís,[1] and mosquitoes; and later lunch (this time beans, and corn floating in the inevitable drippings); to conclude at night, after further struggle with eight-by-thirty timbers,[2] with the same yopará he ate at noon.

Aside from an occasional incident with fellow woodcutters who encroached on his territory, and from the tedium of days when it rained, which left him crouching before

[1] Small biting insects.

[2] About 26 feet long by 1 foot in diameter (8 meters by 30 centimeters).

his teakettle, the job went on till Saturday afternoon. Then he washed his clothes, and on Sunday went to the store to get provisions.

This was the true moment of relaxation for the workers, when they could forget everything amid the imprecations of their mother tongue, weathering with native fatalism the ever-increasing rise in the prices of provisions, which by then had got to eighty centavos for a kilo of hardtack and seven pesos for a pair of denim shorts. The same fatalism that accepted this—with an ¡añá! and a laughing glance at his comrades—imposed upon the mensú, as basic retribution, the duty of escaping from the logging camp as soon as he could. And if this ambition wasn't in the hearts of all of them, all the workers understood that biting thrust for retaliatory justice, which, if it came, would sink its teeth into the very vitals of the boss. The latter, for his part, carried the struggle to the limit, watching his people day and night, especially the contract laborers.

At that time the workers were busy at the pier, bringing down timbers in the midst of endless shouting, which rose to its peak when the mules, incapable of holding back the wagon as it came down the towering bluff at full speed, ran into one another and stumbled—with beams, animals, wagons, the whole works all mixed up. The mules rarely got hurt, but the uproar was always the same.

Cayé, between one laugh and another, kept on planning his flight. Already sick of revirados[3] and yoparás, made still more indigestible by the foretaste of escape, he nevertheless held back for lack of a revolver, and surely also on account of the foreman's Winchester. But if he had a .44! . . .

In this case fortune favored him in a quite roundabout way.

One day Cayé's girlfriend—who, now deprived of her sumptuous finery, was earning her living washing clothes for the peones—changed her place of residence. For two nights Cayé waited for her, and on the third went to the hut of his substitute, where he loosed on the girl a colossal thrashing. The two laborers ended up alone in a friendly chat, and as a result they agreed to live together, to which end the seducer moved in with the original couple. This was economical and fairly sensible. But since the other worker seemed to really like the lady—something rare in that fraternity—Cayé offered to sell her to him for a revolver with ammunition, that he himself would get from the store. Despite this straightforwardness, the deal came near the point of falling through, because at the last minute Cayé asked for a meter of rope tobacco in addition, which seemed excessive to the other mensú. The sale was finally closed, and while the fresh new couple settled into their hut, Cayé conscientiously loaded his .44, then setting forth to end the rainy afternoon drinking mate at their place.

[3] A dish made of wheat flour, milk or water, and beef fat.

III

Autumn was coming to an end, and the sky, till now in steady drought broken by five-minute squalls, was finally churning up into constant bad weather, humid to the point of stiffening the workers' backs. One day Podeley, who'd been free of this problem till then, felt such a lethargy when he got to the beam he was working on, that he just stood there, looking all around him without knowing what to do. He had no zest for anything. He returned to his lean-to, and on the way felt a light tingling in his back.

Podeley knew perfectly well what to make of that listlessness and that crawling sensation at the surface of his skin. Philosophically, he sat down to drink mate, and a half-hour later a long and penetrating chill ran down his back.

There was nothing he could do. He lay down on the poles of his bed shivering with cold, doubled up under his poncho, while his teeth, uncontrollable, rattled as fast as they could.

The next day the attack, not expected till twilight, was back again at noon, and he went to the commissary to ask for quinine. So clearly was fever revealed in his appearance that the clerk took down the packets of quinine almost without looking at the ailing mensú. Podeley calmly dropped that awful bitterness onto his tongue and, on his way back to the woods, ran into the overseer.

"You too!" he said, looking him over. "That makes four of you. It doesn't matter about the others . . . they don't amount to much. You're dependable. . . . How's your account?"

"Just a little short. . . . But I'm not going to be able to chop . . ."

"Bah! Take good care of yourself and it's nothing . . . See you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow." And Podeley went off at a quickening pace, because he had just felt a slight tingling in his heels.

An hour later the third attack began, and left Podeley collapsed in severe debility, his gaze fixed and murky, as though it couldn't reach beyond a meter or two.

The total rest he succumbed to for three days—a special balm for a mensú, due to its unexpectedness—did nothing but turn him into a chattering hulk bundled up on a stump. Podeley, whose previous fever had had a reliable and periodic rhythm, could find nothing to hope for in that wild run of attacks, almost without intermission. There's fever and then there's fever. Since the quinine hadn't cut off the second attack, there was no point in his staying up there, only to die huddled up in some bend of a trail. So he went down to the store once more.

"You again!" he was greeted by the overseer. "That doesn't look good . . . Didn't you take some quinine?"

"I did . . . I'm out of sorts with this fever . . . I can't handle my axe. If you'll give me enough for my passage, I'll make it up as soon as I get better . . ."

The overseer studied that ruin of a man, and didn't put much value on the life that was left in his laborer.

"How's your account?" he asked him again.

“I still owe twenty pesos . . . I turned in some work on Saturday . . . I’m real sick . . .”

“You know damn well that as long as your account’s not paid off you have to stay. Down there . . . you could die. Get over it here, and you’ll settle your account in no time.”

Get rid of a pernicious fever right there, where he caught it? No, of course not; but a worker who leaves maybe won’t come back, and the overseer preferred a dead man to a distant debtor.

Podeley had never failed to carry out a thing—the only boldness toward his boss that a strong mensú allows himself—and he told him so.

“I don’t care if you’ve failed or not!” retorted the overseer. “Pay your account first, and then we’ll talk!”

This injustice toward him naturally—and very quickly—roused the desire for revenge. He went to stay with Cayé, whose turn of mind he was well acquainted with, and they both decided to escape the next Sunday.

“There you have it!” the overseer yelled at Podeley that same afternoon, as he crossed his path. “Last night three got away . . . That’s what you’d like, right? Those guys were reliable too! Just like you! But you’ll drop dead here before you leave the dock. And be plenty careful, you and everybody listening. You know what’s in for you!”

The decision to flee and its dangers—for which a mensú needs all his strength—is enough to hold in check even more than a treacherous fever. Furthermore, Sunday had arrived; and with motions faked to look like the washing of clothes, and simulated guitar-strumming in this or that one’s hut, the laborers managed to delude the guards, and Cayé and Podeley soon found themselves a thousand meters away from the commissary.

So long as they didn’t feel they were being followed, they wouldn’t abandon the trail, since Podeley had trouble walking. And even so . . .

The distinctive resonance of the woods brought them a hoarse voice from the distance:

“Up ahead! The two of them!”

And a moment later, out of a bend in the trail, emerged the foreman and three peones, running. The hunt was underway.

Cayé cocked his revolver, without delaying his flight.

“Surrender, ¡añá! the foreman yelled at them from behind.

“Let’s get into the woods,” said Podeley. “I’m not strong enough to swing my machete . . .”

“Come back or I’ll fire!” another voice called.

“When they get nearer . . . ,” Cayé began. A slug from a Winchester came by them whistling along the trail.

“Go on in!” Cayé yelled to his comrade.

And taking cover behind a tree he fired five shots from his revolver at the pursuers.

They were answered by strident shouting, as another Winchester slug stripped bark from the tree that was hiding Cayé.

"Surrender or I'll blow your head off! . . ."

"Go ahead!" Cayé urged Podeley. "I'm going to . . ."

And after firing another volley, he followed his comrade into the woods.

The pursuers, held back for a moment by the burst of shots, now charged madly on, firing blast after blast of their rifles along the probable route of the fugitives.

At a hundred meters from the trail, and following its direction, Cayé and Podeley kept moving farther away, bent low to the ground to get under the vines. The pursuers expected this maneuver; but since in the woods an attacker has a hundred chances to one of getting stopped by a slug in the middle of his forehead, the foreman was content with Winchester salvos and threatening yells. Moreover, the shots that missed today had nicely hit their target Thursday night . . .

The danger had passed, and the fugitives sat down, exhausted. Podeley wrapped himself in his poncho, and leaning against his comrade's back endured, in two terrible hours of shivers, the counterstroke to all that exertion.

Then they continued their flight, still in sight of the trail, and when night finally came they camped. Cayé had brought manioc cakes, and Podeley lit a fire, despite the thousand disadvantages of this in country where, apart from butterflies, there are other creatures with a weakness for light, to say nothing of men.

The sun was already quite high the next morning when they found the stream—the first and final hope of fugitives. Without being very selective, Cayé cut a dozen shafts of tacuara bamboo, and Podeley, whose remaining strength was applied to cutting vines of isipó, barely had time to complete the job before curling up to shiver again.

So Cayé built the raft by himself—ten tacuaras bound parallel with vines, and attached to a cross-piece at either end.

Ten seconds after it was done they cast off. And the little raft, swept along by the current, drifted into the Paraná.

The nights in that season are unduly cool, and the two laborers spent the night half-frozen, huddled up together with their feet in the water. The current of the Paraná, which came down laden with enormous rains, twisted the raft in the froth of its whirlpools, and slowly loosened the knots of isipó.

Through all the next day they ate only two manioc cakes, the last of their provisions, which Podeley hardly tasted. Full of holes bored by tambú, worms, the tacuaras were sinking, and as afternoon fell the raft had gone down almost a foot below the surface of the water.

On the wild river, its flow confined between the huge gloomy walls of the forest, devoid of the remotest human cry, the two men, submerged to their knees, drifted downstream spinning in circles, held up a moment motionless before a whirlpool, then moving on again, just barely keeping their balance on top of the almost loose tacuaras slipping away from their feet—in the midst of an inky black night which their desperate eyes couldn't manage to penetrate.

The water was already up to their chests when they ran aground. Where? They didn't know . . . A stand of reeds. But right there they fell still, stretched out on the bank on their bellies.

The sun was already dazzling when they woke up. The reeds extended twenty meters inland, serving as the edge of both river and woods. Not far to the south was a tributary, the Paranáí, which they decided to ford when they'd recovered their strength. But that strength didn't return as quickly as to be wished, since the crickets and worms found in tacuara are hardly very nourishing. Then for twenty hours the dense rain turned the Paraná into whitish oil, and the Paranáí into a furious flood-stream. An impossible situation. Podeley suddenly sat up dripping water, leaning on the revolver to get to his feet, and aimed at Cayé. He was crazy with fever.

"¡Pasá, añá! . . ." (Get going, damn it!)

Cayé saw that he couldn't hope for much from that delirium, and he bent over slyly to get at his comrade with a stick. But Podeley insisted:

"Get in the water! You brought me here! Get across the river!"

His livid fingers trembled on the trigger.

Cayé obeyed; he let himself go in the current and disappeared behind the reeds, where after a terrible trial he managed to get ashore again.

From that point, and from behind, he spied on his comrade; but Podeley was lying on his side again, with his knees pulled up to his chest, under the ceaseless rain. As Cayé approached he lifted his head, and barely opening his eyes, which were blinded by water, he murmured:

"Cayé . . . , damn it all . . . I'm freezing cold . . ."

It was still to rain all night long on the dying man—that dull white rain of autumn floods—till at dawn Podeley lay motionless forever in his watery tomb.

In that same stand of reeds, hemmed in for a week by the woods, the river and the rain, his survivor went through all the roots and worms available and little by little lost his strength, till he sat quiet, dying of cold and hunger, with his eyes fixed on the Paraná.

The riverboat Sílex, which went by the site as evening fell, picked up the now almost dying mensú. But his joy turned to terror when the next day he realized that the steamer was going back upstream.

"I ask you please!" he whimpered to the captain. "Don't put me off in Puerto X! They'll kill me! . . . I'm really begging you! . . ."

The Sílex went back to Posadas, with the mensú on board, still steeped in nightmares.

But after ten minutes on shore he was already drunk, signed to a new contract, and making his staggering way to buy perfumes.

The Log-Fishermen

I

The motive was a certain dining-room suite that Mr. Hall didn't have as yet, and he used his phonograph as a lure.

Candiyú saw it in the temporary office of the Yerba Company, where Mr. Hall was operating the machine with the door open.

Candiyú, as a good native, didn't show the least surprise, being content to pull up his horse a bit across the stream of light and look the other way. But since an Englishman at nightfall, in shirtsleeves due to the heat and with a bottle of whiskey beside him, is a hundred times more circumspect than any mestizo, Mr. Hall didn't lift his eyes from the record. So Candiyú, outdone and beguiled, finally brought his horse up to the door, where he leaned his elbow against the threshold.

"Good evening, boss. That's nice music!"

"Yes, it's nice," Mr. Hall replied.

"Nice!" repeated the other. "So much noise!"

"Yes, a lot of noise!" agreed Mr. Hall, who found his visitor's observations not lacking in profundity.

Candiyú admired the new records:

"It costed you a lot, boss?" (Candiyú's Spanish showed traces of Guaraní, as Mr. Hall's did of English.)

"Cost . . . what?"

"That talking-machine . . . , the boys singing."

Mr. Hall's cloudy and inexpressive look became clearer. The commercial accountant was coming to the fore.

"Oh, it costs a lot! . . . You want to buy it?"

"If you wants to sell me . . . ," replied Candiyú just to say something, convinced in advance of the impossibility of such a purchase. But Mr. Hall kept staring at him forcefully, while scrapings flew off the record from the metal trips of the needle.

"I'll sell cheap to you . . . fifty pesos!"

Candiyú shook his head, smiling alternately at the machine and its operator.

"Lots of money! I haven't got it."

"What have you got then?"

The man smiled again, without answering.

"Where you live?" Mr. Hall went on, obviously resolved to unload his gramophone.

"At the port."

"Ah! I know you . . . Your name Candiyú?"

"That's right."

"And you fish for logs?"

"Now and then, some little log that nobody owns."

"I'll sell for logs! . . . Three logs sawed into planks. I'll send a wagon. All right?"

Candiyú was laughing.

"I haven't got any now. And that . . . machinery, is it very tricky to work?"

"No; a button here, and a button there . . . I show you. When you have lumber?"

"Some rise of the river . . . One ought to be coming soon. And what kind of wood you wants?"

"Rosewood. All right?"

"Hum! . . . That kind almost never come down . . . Only when the river really swells. It's nice wood! You likes fine wood, I see."

"And you'll get a fine gramophone. All right?"

The dealing went on to the sound of British tunes, with the native evading the straightaway course and the accountant corraling him in the little circle of precision. At bottom, and granting the heat and the whiskey, the subject of the Crown wasn't making a bad bargain in trading a sorry gramophone for dozens of beautiful planks, while the log-fisherman, in turn, was putting up a few days of usual work against a wonderful little noise machine. So the deal went into effect, subject to an agreed deadline.

Candiyú has been living on the banks of the Paraná for thirty years; and if, after his last attack of fever this past December, his liver can still pass whatever you please, he ought to live on for a few months more. Now he spends his days sitting on his stick-frame cot, with his hat on. Only his hands—livid paws streaked with green, hanging huge from his wrists, as though foregrounded in a photograph—keep moving endlessly, monotonously, trembling like a featherless parrot.

But in those days Candiyú was a different person. Then he had the respectable job of tending someone else's banana grove, and—not quite so legal—that of log-fishing. Ordinarily, and especially when the river rises, there are loose logs that come drifting down from the lumber camps, whether floating off from a pontoon being built, or because some clowning laborer severs a retaining rope with a slash of his machete. Candiyú owned a telescope, and spent his mornings peering at the water, till the whitish outline of a log, standing out against the cape of Itacurubí, sent him out to meet the prey in his rowboat. The task is nothing special if the log is seen in time, because the oar of a man of spirit—pushing or hauling a ten-by-forty timber[1]—is a match for any tugboat.

Up in the Castelhum logging camp, above Puerto Felicidad, the rains had begun, after sixty-five days of total drought that ruined the tires on the hauling wagons.

[1] About 33 feet long by 16 inches in diameter (10 meters by 40 centimeters).

At that moment the company's salable property consisted of seven thousand logs—a fortune and then some. But since a two-ton log doesn't weigh two scruples[2] at a cashier's desk so long as it's not in port, Castelhum and Company were a far piece away from being content.

From Buenos Aires came orders for immediate mobilization; the manager of the camp asked for mules and wagons; they replied that with the money from the first pontoon to come down they could send him the mules, and the manager answered that he'd send them the first pontoon if he got the mules in advance.

There was no way to come to terms. Castelhum went up to the logging site and saw the stock of lumber at the camp, on the bluff above the Ñacanguazú, to the north.

"How much?" Castelhum asked his manager.

"Thirty-five thousand pesos," he answered.

That was the amount needed to move the logs to the Paraná. And without allowing for the untimely season.

Under the rain that joined his rubber cape to his horse in a single stream of water, Castelhum stared lengthily at the whirling river. Then, with a movement of the hooded cape toward the torrent, he asked his companion:

"Will the water rise enough to cover the falls?"

"Yes, if it rains a lot."

"Do you have all your men in camp?"

"Till now I do; I was waiting for orders from you."

"Good," said Castelhum. "I think we're going to come out all right. Listen, Fernández; this afternoon, without delay, I want you to secure the boom at the mouth of the river and start bringing all the logs over here to the bluff. The stream is clean, if you told me right. Tomorrow morning I'm going down to Posadas, and after that, with the first storm that comes, throw the timbers in the stream. Understand? A good rain."

The manager looked at him, with his eyes wide open as could be.

"The line's going to give before a hundred logs come down."

"I know, it doesn't matter. And it'll cost us plenty of pesos. Let's go back and we'll talk it over some more."

Fernández shrugged his shoulders and whistled to the foremen.

For the rest of the day, rainless but drenched in watery calm, the peones laid out the chain of logs from one bank to the other at the mouth of the stream, and the tumbling of timbers began at the camp. Castelhum went down to Posadas on flood waters running at seven knots, that had risen seven meters the night before, after coming out of the Guayra.

After a big drought, big rains. At noon began the deluge, and for fifty-two hours straight the bush roared with rain. The stream, risen to a torrent, went on to become a howling avalanche of reddish water. The peones, soaked to the bone, their skinny frames revealed by the clothing clinging to their bodies, kept heaving logs down the

[2] Two scruples: less than a tenth of an ounce.

bluff. Every effort provoked a unanimous cry of encouragement, and when a monstrous log came tumbling down and plunged with a cannon-boom into the water, every one of them let go his ¡a . . . hijú! of triumph. And then the wasted striving in the liquid mud, the pike-poles slipping loose, the falls and bruises under the torrential rain. And the fever.

At last, abruptly, the deluge stopped. In the sudden silence roundabout you could hear the rain still drumming down on the woods nearby. More muffled and deeper-sounding was the rumbling of the Ñacanguazú. Only a few light drops, and far between, still fell from the depleted sky. But the weather continued sultry, without the slightest gust of wind. It was a time for breathing water, and the workers had barely rested an hour or two when the rain began again—that white, compact, and vertical rain that led to swelling rivers. The work was urgent—wages had gone up commendably—and as the storm went on the peones kept on shouting, falling, and tumbling under the icy waters.

At the mouth of the Ñacanguazú the floating barrier held back the first timbers that came down, and, bowed and groaning, withstood many more, till under the irresistible thrust of the logs that struck the boom, like projectiles out of a catapult, the line gave way.

II

Candiyú watched the river through his telescope, judging that its present swell—which there in San Ignacio was two meters higher than the day before, and had carried off his rowboat in the bargain—was probably a huge flood below Posadas. The timbers had started to come down, cedars or the like, and prudently the fisherman conserved his strength.

That night the water rose another meter, and the next afternoon Candiyú was surprised to see out of the end of his telescope a pack, a veritable throng of loose logs coming around the cape of Itacurubí. Wood that was perfectly dry and loomed up whitish above the water.

That was his place to be. He jumped into his canoe and paddled out to hunt his game.

Now on a swelling of the Upper Paraná a fisherman finds lots of things before getting to his chosen log. Whole trees, of course, ripped sheer from the earth and with their black roots waving in the air, like octopi. Dead cows and mules, along with a good share of wild animals—drowned, shot, or with an arrow still stuck in the belly. Tall cones of ants piled up on a massive root. Maybe a jaguar; all the foam and floating lilies you like—to say nothing of the snakes, of course.

Candiyú dodged, drifted, bumped, and tipped over many more times than necessary till he got to his prize. At last he won it; a blow of his machete laid bare the blood-

red grain of the rosewood, and lying up against the log he managed to drift along obliquely with it for a ways. But the branches, the trees, came by ceaselessly, dragging him with them. He changed tactics: roped his prey and then began the mute and truceless struggle, silently throwing his heart into every stroke of the paddle.

A log drifting down on a big swell has enough momentum to make three men hesitate before taking it on. But coupled with his great spirit Candiyú had the experience of twenty years of piracies at low river and high, and besides, he wanted to be the owner of a gramophone.

Nightfall presented him with circumstances entirely to his liking. The river, almost at eye level, was flowing swiftly, with the sleekness of oil. On both sides dense shadows passed and passed again, incessantly. The body of a drowned man bumped into the canoe; Candiyú bent over and saw that his throat was slit. Then there were troublesome visitors, attacking snakes, the same kind that climb up the paddle-wheels of steamboats and on into the passengers' cabins, when the river swells.

The Herculean work went on; his paddle trembled under the water, but he was swept along in spite of everything. At last he gave in; he narrowed the landing angle and gathered the last of his strength in order to get to the edge of the channel, which grazed the towering rocks of the Teyucuaré. For ten minutes the log-fisherman, with his neck-tendons stiff and his chest like stone, did what nobody's ever going to do again to get out of the channel in a swell, with a log in tow. The canoe finally crashed against the rocks and keeled over, just when Candiyú still had strength enough—but no more—to secure the rope and fall on his face on the shore.

A month went by before Mr. Hall got his three dozen planks, but twenty seconds after that he was handing over the gramophone to Candiyú, along with twenty records.

The firm of Castelhum and Company, despite its flotilla of steam-launches, sent out—and for well over thirty days—to retrieve the logs, lost a lot of them. And if some day Castelhum comes to San Ignacio and visits Mr. Hall, he'll sincerely admire the said accountant's dining-room suite, made out of rosewood planks.

The Yaciyateré

When you've seen a little boy with a raging fever laugh like crazy at two o'clock in the morning, while outside a yaciyateré is circling around, you suddenly get ideas about superstitions that go right to the core of your nerves.

Down here it's a superstition and nothing more. People from the south say the yaciyateré is a big gawky bird that sings at night. I've never seen him, but I've heard him a thousand times. His song is very pure and melancholy, and as repetitious and obsessive as any you'll ever hear. But in the north the yaciyateré is another story.

One afternoon, in Misiones, a friend and I went out to try a new sail on the Paraná, one of our own design. The canoe was also a creation of ours, built to the bizarre scale of one to eight. Not very stable, as you can see, but capable of skipping along like a torpedo boat.

We left at five in the afternoon, in the summertime. Since the morning there had been no wind. A mighty storm was threatening, and the heat was unbearable. The river flowed like oil under a white sky. We couldn't take off our sunglasses for an instant, since the double glare of sky and water was blinding. On top of that, a migraine starting to bother my comrade. And not the slightest breath of air.

An afternoon like that in Misiones, with the air the way it is after five days of north wind, bodes nothing good for a person drifting down the Paraná in a racing canoe. On the other hand there's nothing more demanding than to row in those conditions.

We kept on drifting, intent on the southern horizon, till we got to the Teyucuaré. The storm was coming.

The heights of this peninsula called the Teyucuaré, split straight down above the river into enormous cliffs of pink sandstone over which dangle vines from the woods, extend far into the Paraná, forming toward San Ignacio a deep inlet completely sheltered from the south wind. Huge blocks of stone broken loose from the cliffsides bristle on the shoreline, and against it the whole Paraná crashes, swirls, and finally escapes downstream, in rapidly funneling whirlpools. But from the last cape inward, and along the bank itself, the water backs up, gently lapping the Teyucuaré all the way to the end of the cove.

On that cape, and in the shelter of an immense stone block, to avoid being surprised by the wind, we beached the canoe and sat down to wait. But the polished rocks were really burning hot, though there wasn't any sun, and we went down to crouch at the water's edge.

The south, however, had changed its appearance. Above the distant woods a white tail of wind arose, pulling after it a blue canopy of rain. The river, suddenly opaque, had broken into ripples.

All this happened quickly: We hoisted the sail, pushed off the canoe, and abruptly, behind the dark block of stone, the wind swept by, grazing the water. It was just a single five-second gust, and already there were waves. We rowed toward the head of the shoal, for not a leaf was moving yet behind the parapet of the cliff. All of a sudden we crossed the line—imaginary, if you like, but perfectly defined—and the wind took hold of us.

Now consider this: the size of our sail was three square meters, which is far from big, and we headed into the wind at a thirty-five-degree angle. Well, the sail blew off, torn away like a mere handkerchief, and without any time for the canoe to feel the shock. Then instantly the wind dragged us off. It only caught our bodies, but that was enough to counteract the oars, the rudder, whatever we tried to do. And we weren't even moving astern; it carried us sideways, gunwale down, like a capsized wreck.

Wind and water, now. Over the crests of the waves the whole river was white with a mantle of rain that the wind swept from one wave to another, blew apart and then back together in abrupt, convulsive gusts. And add to this the explosive speed with which waves against the current rise, on a river still bottomless in that vicinity at a depth of sixty fathoms. In a single minute the Paraná had been transformed into a hurricane-harried sea, and we into a pair of castaways. We were still being blown sideways, tipping over, taking on two or three buckets of water with every slap of wave, blinded by rain, our faces aching from the lashes of the storm, and trembling with cold.

In Misiones, under a summer storm, the temperature can easily drop from forty to fifteen centigrade, and in only a quarter-hour. Nobody gets sick, because it's that kind of country, but you freeze to death.

The high seas, in short. Our only hope was the beach of Blosset—fortunately a clay beach—which we were now approaching at headlong speed. Whether the canoe could have taken another slap of water and stayed afloat, I don't know; but when a wave cast us five meters up the shore, we thought we were plenty lucky. Even so we had to rescue the canoe, which drifted back and then up into the reeds like a cork, while we sank in rotten clay and the rain came pelting down upon us like a shower of stones.

We got out of there; but after about a quarter-mile were dead tired—this time from heat, not cold. Go on along the beach? Impossible. And cutting through the brush on an ink-black night, even with a Collins machete[1] in your hand, is only for fools.

Nevertheless, that's what we did. All of a sudden something barked—or rather, howled, since dogs in the wild only howl—and we stumbled onto a hut. Inside, but not easy to see against the flame of the hearth, were a laborer, his wife, and three little

[1] Collins machetes were made in Hartford, Connecticut, until the company was sold after World War II. The name is still used by other manufacturers, but their machetes are of inferior quality. An authentic Collins could hold up as long as a half-century, and many are still in service.

kids. And also a gunnysack stretched out as a hammock, in which a child was dying of fever.

"What's he got?" we asked.

"It's a hurt," answered the parents, after turning their heads toward the gunnysack for a moment.

They were sitting down, apparently unconcerned. The kids, on the other hand, were all eyes, gaping outdoors. Right then, from far away, the yaciyateré began to sing. The youngsters instantly covered their heads and faces with their arms.

"Ah, the yaciyateré," we thought. "He's come to get the kid. Or at least to drive him out of his mind."

The wind and rain had moved away, but the air was very cold. A while later, but from much closer, the yaciyateré sang again. The sick boy shuddered in the hammock. His parents kept looking at the fire, unconcerned. We told them about cold-water cloths to the head. They didn't understand us, and it wasn't worth the trouble anyway. What good could that do against the yaciyateré?

Just as I had, I think my comrade had noticed the little boy's agitation as the bird got nearer. Naked from the waist up, we kept on drinking mate, while our shirts were steaming as they dried by the fire. There was no talking now, but in a gloomy corner we could clearly see the terrified eyes of the children.

Outside, the woods were still dripping. All of a sudden, barely half a block away, the yaciyateré sang again. The sick child reacted with a burst of laughter.

That's how it was. The boy had a soaring fever, because he had meningitis, and he answered the call of the yaciyateré with a burst of laughter.

We were drinking mate, and our shirts were drying out. The child wasn't moving now. He just snored every now and then, with a rough jerk of his head back against the gunnysack.

Outside, this time in the banana grove, the yaciyateré sang out once more. The boy reacted instantly with another laugh. The children let out a yell and the flames of the hearth-fire went dead.

As for us, a chill ran up and down our spines. There was someone singing outside, and moving closer, no doubt about that. All right, a bird, and we knew it. And this bird who'd come to abduct the child, or drive him crazy, was answered by the child himself, with a burst of laughter out of his now still higher fever.

The damp firewood was now flaming anew, and the huge eyes of the children were shining again. We went outside for a moment. The night had cleared up, and we'd be able to find the trail. Our shirts were still a little smoky—but anything was preferable to that meningitis laugh . . .

We got home at three in the morning. Some days later the father came by, and told me the boy was doing all right, that he was getting out of bed already. Healthy, in a word.

Four years after this, while I was up there again, I had to help take the census of 1914, in the sector of Yabebirí-Teyucuaré. I went by way of the river, in the same canoe, but this time just rowing. Again, it was afternoon.

I went by the hut in question and didn't find a soul. On the way back, at twilight, I saw no one either. But twenty meters up ahead, standing on the stream-bank in front of the dark banana grove, was a naked boy, about seven or eight years old. His legs were extremely skinny—the thighs even more than the calves—and his belly was enormous. In his right hand he held a fishing pole, and his left was clutching a half-eaten banana. He looked at me without moving, and without deciding whether to eat or let his arm drop all the way.

I spoke to him, without effect. But I pressed on, asking him about those who'd lived in the hut. Finally he burst out laughing, as a thick stream of spit dribbled down to his belly. It was the boy with the meningitis.

I rowed out of the inlet. Furtively, the boy had followed me down to the beach, admiring my canoe with wide-open eyes. I pulled at the oars and let myself drift away in the backwater, still within sight of the twilight idiot who couldn't make up his mind to finish his banana, out of admiration for my white canoe.

The Charcoal-Makers

I

The two men set the sheet-metal contrivance on the ground and sat down on it. From the place where they were to the trench it was still thirty meters, and the big box was heavy. This was their fourth halt—and last, since close-by the trench cast up its scarp of red earth.

But heavy too was the midday sun on the bare heads of the two men. The harsh light bathed the landscape in a livid eclipse-like yellow, with no shadows or contours. Light from a noonday sun, a Misiones sun, in which the two men's shirts were gleaming.

From time to time they looked back toward the route they had covered, then instantly lowered their heads, blinded by light. One of them, moreover, displayed the stigma of the tropical sun in his premature wrinkles and the intricate crow's-feet about his eyes. After a while they both got up, took hold of the four-handled barrow again, and step by step arrived at last. Then they slumped down on their backs, in the peak sunlight, and shielded their faces with their arms.

The contrivance was really heavy, the weight of four galvanized sheets fourteen feet long, held together by fifty-six feet of L and T irons an inch and a half thick. The product of a difficult craft, but one that was etched to the core of our men's minds, for the contrivance in question was a furnace for making charcoal that they had built themselves, and the trench was nothing other than the circular-heating oven, also a result of their work alone. And by the way, though the two men were dressed like laborers and spoke like engineers, they were neither engineers nor laborers.

One was called Duncan Drever and the other Marcos Rienzi—of English and Italian parents respectively, though neither of them had the slightest sentimental predilection for the stock he came from. They thus personified a type of South American that has appalled Huret,[1] along with so many others: the son of Europeans who makes fun of his inherited motherland as boldly as he does of his own.

But Rienzi and Drever, stretched out on their backs with their arms over their eyes, weren't laughing on this occasion, because they were fed up with working for a month from five in the morning on, more often than not in cold that had dropped to the freezing point.

[1] Jules Huret, a French travel authors who wrote a book about northeastern Argentina, published in 1911.

And this was in Misiones. At eight o'clock, and till four in the afternoon, the tropical sun had its way; but no sooner did the sun go down than the temperature started to drop along with it, so fast you could follow the mercury's fall with your eyes. At that hour the region would begin to freeze, and literally; so that the thirty degrees centigrade of noon were reduced to four at eight in the evening, and then at four in the morning came the galloping descent to one below, two below, three below. The night before it had gone down to four below, with the resulting disarray of Rienzi's geographical knowledge, for he couldn't manage to get his bearings in that carnival climatology—which had little to do with weather reports.

"This is a subtropical country with sweltering heat," Rienzi would say, tossing away the tin-snips scorched with cold and going off to take a walk. Because before the sun comes out, in the glacial twilight of the frosted countryside, working with bare steel tears the skin off your hands quite readily.

Nevertheless, not once in all that month did Drever and Rienzi abandon their furnace, except for the rainy days, when they studied modifications on the blueprint, freezing to death. When they decided on distillation in a closed container, they already knew just about what to expect in connection with the various systems of direct firing—including that of Schwartz.[2] Once they were firmly committed to their furnace, the only thing that never varied was its capacity in cubic centimeters. But its form and fit, lids and condenser, the diameter of the smoke-pipe—all that had been studied and restudied a hundred times. At night, when they retired, the same scene was acted out again and again. They would talk in bed for a while about this or that, whatever had nothing to do with their current task. Then the conversation would cease, because they were sleepy. At least they thought they were. After an hour of deep silence, one of them would raise his voice:

"I think seventeen ought to be enough."

"I think so too," the other would answer right away.

Seventeen what? Centimeters, rivets, days, spaces, anything at all. But they knew perfectly well that the topic was their furnace, and what it was they were referring to.

II

One day, three months earlier, Rienzi had written to Drever from Buenos Aires, telling him that he wanted to go to Misiones. What could they do up there? It was his idea—despite the public hallelujahs about the industrialization of the country—that a small industry, properly conceived, could work out well, at least during the 1914 war, which was then in progress. What did he think of that?

Drever answered: "Come on up, and we'll look into the matter of charcoal and tar."

To which Rienzi replied by getting on the boat for Misiones.

[2] Probably the Swiss chemist Heinrich Schwarz, a contemporary of Quiroga.

Now the distillation of wood by firing is an interesting problem to resolve, but one requiring a lot more capital than Drever could have at hand. To tell the truth, his capital consisted of the firewood on his land and what he could do with his tools. With this, as well as four sheets of metal left over from when he put up his shed, and the help of Rienzi, it was possible to give it a try.

So they tried. Since when wood is distilled the gases don't work under pressure, the materials they had were good enough. With T-irons for the frame and L-irons for the openings, they assembled the rectangular furnace, about fourteen feet long by two and a quarter wide. It was tedious and dogged work, since on top of the technical difficulties they had to deal with those resulting from the lack of materials and some of the proper tools. The first fitting, for example, was a disaster: there was no way to match those brittle, jagged edges. So they had to put it together with rivets, at one per centimeter, which amounts to 1,680 just for joining the sheets lengthwise. And since they didn't have any rivets they cut 1,680 nails—and a few hundred more for the frame.

Rienzi riveted from the outside. Drever, squeezed inside the furnace with his knees at his chest, sustained the blows. It's no secret that to flatten nails you need a lot of patience—and there inside the box Drever ran out of his with bewildering speed. Every hour they would change places, and as Drever came out cramped and bent, rising jerkily to his feet, Rienzi would get in to put his patience to the test against the skidding of the rebounding hammer.

That's the way they worked. And the two men were so set upon doing what they wanted that they didn't let a day go by without bruising their fingernails. With the usual adjustments on days when it rained, and the inevitable commentaries at midnight.

During that month they had no recreation—this from the urban point of view—but to penetrate the woods on Sunday mornings with their machetes. Drever, who was used to that life, had a firm enough wrist to cut only what he wanted to; but when Rienzi was the one who was breaking the trail, his comrade was very careful to stay four or five meters back. Not that Rienzi's grip was bad; but it takes a long time to learn to use a machete. Then again, they had the daily distraction provided by their helper, Drever's daughter. She was a five-year-old blonde, and motherless, because after three years in the region Drever had lost his wife. He had raised her by himself, with infinitely greater patience than that demanded by the furnace rivets. Drever wasn't a mild-mannered person, and he was hard to get along with. Where that rugged man had gotten the tenderness and patience needed to raise his daughter alone and come to be idolized by her, I don't know; but the truth is that when they were walking together at twilight, one could hear dialogues like this:

"Daddy!"

"Sweetheart . . ."

"Is your furnace going to be ready soon?"

"Yes, sweetheart."

"And you're going to distill all the firewood in our woods?"

"No; we're just going to see what we can do."

"And you're going to make some money?"

"I don't think so, baby."

"Poor darling daddy! You can never earn much money."

"That's the way it is . . ."

"But you're going to run a nice test, daddy. Nice like you, dear little daddy!"

"Yes, honey."

"I love you very much, very much, daddy!"

"Yes, sweetheart . . ."

And Drever's arm would come down over his daughter's shoulder, and the child would kiss her father's rough and broken hand, so big that it covered her whole breast.

Rienzi wasn't one to waste words either, and the two could easily be regarded as unapproachable. But Drever's little girl was pretty familiar with that sort of people, and she'd burst out laughing at Rienzi's terrible scowl, every time he tried, by frowning, to put an end to his helper's daily demands: somersaults on the grass; piggyback rides; swings, trampoline, teeter-totter, cable-car—not to mention an occasional pitcher of water on her friend's face when he stretched out on the grass in the sun at noon.

Drever would hear a curse and ask what caused it.

"It's that damned little scamp!" Rienzi would shout. "All she can think of is . . ."

But faced with the prospect—remote as it was—of an injustice on his own or her father's part, Rienzi would hasten to make peace with the child, who, from a squat, would make fun of Rienzi's face—washed as clean as a bottle.

Her father played with her less; but with his eyes he would follow his friend's lumbering gallop around the meseta, toting the little girl on his shoulders.

III

It was quite a strange trio—the two long-striding men and their blonde, five-year-old assistant, who went out and came back and went out again, from the meseta to the oven. Because the girl, raised and taught without leaving her father's side, knew all the tools one by one, and more or less how much pressure you need to split ten coconuts all at once, and what smell could rightly be called that of pyroligneous acid. She knew how to read, and everything she wrote was in capital letters.

Those two hundred meters from the bungalow to the woods were crossed time and again while the oven was being built. With firm steps at dawn, or sluggish at noon, they came and went like ants along the same path, with the same winding course and the same bend to avoid the outcropping of black sandstone just above the grass.

If their choice of heating system had been difficult, getting it to perform went far beyond what they had imagined.

"It's one thing on paper and another in the field," said Rienzi with his hands in his pockets, every time a painstaking calculation—of the gas volume, air-intake, surface of the grate, or firing chambers—turned out to be useless on account of their poor materials.

Naturally, what they'd decided upon was the riskiest course possible in that order of things: spiral heating in a horizontal furnace. Why? They had their reasons, and we'll let them be. But the truth is that when they lighted the oven for the first time, and right away the smoke came out of the chimney, after having been forced down under the furnace four times—when they saw this the two men sat down for a smoke in silence, watching it with a rather distracted air, the air of men of character viewing the success of a hard job to which they've given all their effort.

It was finally done! The accessory installations—the gas-burner and tar-condenser—were child's play. The condensation was assigned to eight wine-casks, since they had no water; and the gases were conveyed directly to the hearth. So Drever's little girl had the chance to marvel at that thick stream of fire coming out of the furnace, where there was no fire.

"How pretty, daddy!" she'd exclaim, standing still with surprise. And planting kisses on her father's hand, as she always did:

"You know how to do so many things, my darling daddy!"

Whereupon they'd go into the woods to eat oranges.

Of the few things that Drever had in this world—apart from his daughter, of course—the most valuable was his orange grove, which earned him no income at all, but was a delight to behold. Planted originally by the Jesuits, two hundred years before, the grove had been invaded and overgrown by the forest, and in its underbrush the orange trees went on sweetening the air with the scent of their blossoms, which at twilight spread all the way to the paths of the open countryside. The orange trees of Misiones have never met with any disease; it would be hard to find an orange with a single blemish. And for beauty and delicious flavor, that fruit is beyond compare.

Of the three visitors to the grove, Rienzi had the biggest appetite. He could easily eat ten or twelve oranges, and when he went back to the house he always carried a loaded sack over his shoulder. Up there people say that a frost favors the fruit, and just then, at the end of June, they were already sweet as syrup, a fact that somewhat reconciled Rienzi to the cold.

This Misiones cold—which Rienzi hadn't expected, and had never heard tell of in Buenos Aires—hindered the firing of the first batches of coal, causing an extra-large expenditure of fuel.

In the interests of good organization, they would light the oven at four or five in the afternoon. And since the time required for complete carbonization of wood is normally no less than eight hours, they had to feed the fire till twelve or one in the morning, down deep in the pit before the red mouth of the hearth, while behind them a mild frost was settling in. Though the heating was impaired, the condensation proceeded

wonderfully in the icy air, and this enabled them to get a 2 percent yield of tar on the first try, which was very gratifying in view of the circumstances.

Either one or the other had to oversee the process constantly, since the casual laborer who cut their firewood persisted in his ignorance of that way of making charcoal. He would intently observe the various parts of the apparatus, but shake his head at the least allusion to putting him in charge of the fire.

He was a mestizo, a big lean fellow with a sparse moustache, who had seven children, and would never answer a question, however easy, without first consulting the sky for a while, whistling aimlessly. Then he'd reply: "Could be." In vain had they told him to add fuel without worrying, till the opposite lid of the furnace sputtered when he touched it with a wet finger. He laughed heartily, but wouldn't accept the job. So the come-and-go from the meseta to the woods continued at night, while Drever's little girl, alone in the bungalow, amused herself behind the windowpanes trying to make out, in the flashing of the hearth, whether it was Rienzi or her father who was stirring up the fire.

At one time or another, some tourist going by at night toward the port, to board the steamboat that would take him to the Iguazú, must have been more than a little surprised at that glare coming up from underground, amid the smoke and steam from the exhaust pipes: a lot of solfatara and a bit of hell, which would soon afflict the imagination of the native laborer.

The latter's attention was keenly attracted to the selection of the fuel. When in a certain sector he discovered a "noble wood for burning," he would take it to the oven in his wheelbarrow, as impassive as if he were unaware of the treasure he was conveying. And faced with the stoker's delight, he would turn his head aside indifferently—to smile to his heart's content, as Rienzi liked to say.

There thus came a day when the two men found themselves with such a stock of highly combustible woods that they had to decrease the intake of air at the hearth, air that now came in whistling and vibrated under the grate.

Meanwhile, the output of tar increased. They recorded the percentages of coal, tar, and pyroligneous acid obtained from the most suitable woods, though it was all done grosso modo. On the other hand what they took down very carefully—one by one—were the disadvantages of circular heating for a horizontal furnace; on this they could admit to being experts. The expenditure of fuel didn't interest them muchand besides that, with the temperature at the freezing point most of the time, it wasn't possible to make any calculation at all.

IV

That winter was extremely harsh, and not only in Misiones. But from the end of June onward things began to look really strange, and the region suffered to the very roots of its subtropical being.

In fact, after four days of mugginess and threats of a massive storm, settling into a drizzle of sleet with clear skies to the south, the weather grew calm. Then the cold began, a quiet and piercing cold, barely perceptible at noon, but already nipping the ears at four o'clock. Without transition the country passed from the whiteness of daybreak to the almost dizzying splendor of a winter noon in Misiones, only to freeze in the darkness of the first hours of night.

The first of those mornings, Rienzi, half-frozen with cold, went out for a walk at dawn and came back in a little while as frozen as before. He looked at the thermometer and spoke to Drever, who was getting out of bed.

"You know what temperature we've got? Six degrees below zero."

"It's the first time that's happened," Drever answered.

"So it is," agreed Rienzi. "Everything I see here is happening for the first time."

He was referring to his mid-winter meeting with a pit-viper, and where he least expected it.

The next morning it was seven below zero. Drever began to doubt his thermometer, and got on his horse to go verify the temperature at the home of two friends, one of whom tended a small official weather station. There was no doubt about it: it was actually nine below zero; the difference from the temperature recorded at his house was due to the fact that Drever's meseta, being very high above the river and open to the wind, was always two degrees warmer in winter—and two degrees cooler in summer, of course.

"We've never seen anything like this," said Drever on his return, unsaddling his horse.

"That's right," confirmed Rienzi.

The next day, as dawn was breaking, a boy arrived at the bungalow with a letter from the friend who tended the weather station. It read as follows:

"Please record the temperature on your thermometer today when the sun comes out. The day before yesterday I sent in the figure we noted here, and last night I got a request from Buenos Aires to correct the temperature I transmitted. Down there they're scoffing at nine below zero. What's your reading now?"

Drever waited for sunrise, and wrote in his answer: "27th of June: nine degrees below zero."

The friend then telegraphed the figure recorded at his station to the main office in Buenos Aires: "27th of June: eleven degrees below zero."

Rienzi saw something of the effect such cold can have on almost tropical vegetation; but fully confirming it was kept in store for him till later on. In the meantime, his and his friend's attention were cruelly drawn to the illness of Drever's daughter.

V

Since a week earlier the girl hadn't been feeling well. (This, of course, was noted by Drever afterward, and became one of the distractions of his long periods of silence.) She'd been a bit listless, very thirsty, and her eyes smarted when she ran.

One afternoon, when Drever was going out after his midday meal, he found his daughter lying on the ground, exhausted. She had a fever well above normal. A moment later, Rienzi arrived and found her in bed, with burning cheeks and her mouth wide open.

"What's the matter with her?" he asked Drever in surprise.

"I don't know . . . a fever of 39 plus."[3]

Rienzi bent over the bed.

"Hi, little lady! It looks like we won't play any cable-car today."

The little girl didn't answer. It was typical of the child, when she had a fever, to shut out all pointless questions and just barely respond with curt monosyllables, in which you could spot the character of her father for miles.

That afternoon Rienzi took care of the furnace, but came back every now and then to see his helper, who was then the tenant of a little blond nook in her father's bed.

At three o'clock the girl's temperature was 39.5, and 40 at six. Drever had done what you have to do in such cases, even giving her a bath.

Now, bathing, nursing, and caring for a five-year-old child, in a house made of planks and put together worse than a furnace, during icy-cold weather, is no easy task for two men with calloused hands. There are questions of little shirts and other tiny clothes, drinks at set times, details that lie beyond the powers of a man. Nevertheless, with their sleeves rolled up their hardened arms, the two men bathed the child and dried her. Of course they had to heat the room with alcohol, and later change the cold-water compresses on her head.

The little girl had yielded a smile as Rienzi was drying her feet, and this seemed to him a good omen. But Drever feared a stroke of pernicious fever—the end of which one never knows in lively temperaments like hers.

At seven her temperature rose to 40.8,[4] dropping to 39 for the rest of the night and climbing again to 40.3 the next morning.

"Bah!" said Rienzi with a carefree air. "The little lady is tough, and it won't be this fever that'll cut her down."

And he went off to the furnace whistling, because it was no time to start thinking foolishness.

Drever said nothing. He walked back and forth in the dining room, pausing only to go in and see his daughter. The girl, consumed by fever, persisted in her curt, monosyllabic responses.

[3] Over 102° F.

[4] About 105.4° F.

“How do you feel, little one?”
“Fine.”
“Aren’t you hot? You want me to pull down the bedspread a bit?”
“No.”
“You want some water?”
“No.”
And this without deigning to turn her eyes in his direction.
For six days Drever slept a few hours in the morning, while Rienzi did the same at night. But when the fever stayed threateningly high, Rienzi would see the father’s silhouette looming motionless beside the bed, and at the same time realize that he wasn’t sleepy. Then he’d get up and make coffee, which the two men drank in the dining room. They would urge each other to rest a while, but a mute shrug of the shoulders was their common response. After which one of them would start looking over the titles of the books for the hundredth time, while the other stubbornly rolled cigars at a corner of the table.
And always the baths, the heating, the cold compresses, the quinine. The girl fell asleep sometimes with one of her father’s hands in hers, and no sooner did he try to withdraw it than the child felt his move and tightened her fingers. So Drever would remain sitting motionless on the bed for a good while, and—since he had nothing to do—gazing constantly at the poor little wasted face of his daughter.
Then from time to time a delirium, with the child suddenly propping herself up on her arms. Drever would quiet her down, but the girl rejected his touch, turning the other way. After that her father would resume his walking, and go drink some of Rienzi’s ever-present coffee.
“How is she?” asked the latter.
“About the same,” answered Drever.
Sometimes, when she was awake, Rienzi came in and strove to lift everyone’s spirits with jokes about the little scamp who was playing sick and had nothing wrong with her. But even when she recognized him the girl stared at him gravely, with the sullen fixity of high fever.
The fifth afternoon Rienzi spent at the oven working—which served as a good distraction. Drever called him in for a while and went to take his turn at feeding the fire, automatically throwing stick after stick of firewood into the hearth.
At daybreak the fever went down more than usual, went down still more at noon, and at two in the afternoon, with her eyes shut, the child was lying motionless, except for an intermittent contraction of the lip and little tremors that sprinkled her face with tics. She was cold, her temperature below normal now at only 35 degrees.[5]
“An attack of cerebral anemia, almost for sure,” replied Drever to a questioning look from his friend. “Some luck I’ve got . . .”

[5] Equivalent to 95° F.

For three hours, on her back, the girl continued her feverish grimaces, surrounded and singed by eight bottles of boiling water. For those three hours Rienzi walked very quietly around the room, watching with a frown the image of the father sitting at the foot of the bed. And in those three hours Drever became fully aware of how huge a place in his heart was occupied by that poor little thing left over from his marriage, and whom the next day he would probably take out to lie beside her mother.

At five o'clock Rienzi, in the dining room, heard Drever getting up; and with a still more wrinkled brow he went into the bedroom. But from the door he could see the gleaming forehead of the girl, who was drenched in sweat—and out of danger.

"Finally . . . ," said Rienzi, with his throat foolishly contracted.

"Yes, finally!" murmured Drever.

The girl was still literally bathed in sweat. When after a moment she opened her eyes, she looked for her father, and when she saw him extended her fingers toward his mouth. Then Rienzi drew near:

"So? . . . How we doing, little lady?"

The girl turned her eyes toward her friend.

"You recognize me, now? I bet you don't."

"Yes."

"Who am I?"

The child smiled.

"Rienzi."

"Fine! That's what I like . . . No, no. Go to sleep now . . ."

At last they went out to the meseta.

"What a little lady!" said Rienzi, making long lines in the sand with a stick. Drever (six days of nervous tension capped by those three final hours is too much for a father by himself) sat down on the teeter-totter and dropped his head on his arms. And Rienzi withdrew to the other side of the bungalow, because he saw his friend's shoulders were shaking.

VI

Her recovery was really swift from then on. Over cup after cup of coffee on those long nights, Rienzi had come to the conclusion that, unless they replaced the first two condensation chambers, they would always get more pitch than necessary. So he decided to use two large casks in which Drever had prepared his orange wine, and with the help of their laborer had everything ready by nightfall. He lit the fire, and after entrusting it to the care of the native went back to the meseta, where from behind the panes of the dining room the two men gazed with rare pleasure at the reddish smoke which again rose up in peace.

They were in conversation, at midnight, when the half-breed came to tell them that the fire was coming out another way, that the oven had buckled in. The same idea came to both of them at once.

"Did you open the air intake?" Drever asked him.

"I did," replied the native.

"What firewood did you put in?"

"The load that was right there . . ."

"Lapacho?"

"Yes."

Rienzi and Drever exchanged a look, and then went out with the laborer.

It was all very clear: The upper part of the oven was covered with two layers of sheet-metal on L-iron supports, and as insulation they'd spread two inches of sand on top. In the first firing section, which was licked by the flames, they'd shielded the metal with a layer of clay over wire mesh; reinforced clay, let's call it.

Everything had gone well as long as Rienzi or Drever kept watch over the hearth. But the laborer, in order to speed up the heating for the good of his bosses, had opened the door of the ash-pan all the way, just when he was feeding the fire with lapacho. And since lapacho is to fire as gasoline to a match, the extremely high temperature attained had swept away the clay, the wire mesh, and the metal top itself—leaving a hole through which the blaze arose, compressed and roaring.

That's what the two men saw when they got there. They pulled the firewood out of the hearth, and the flaming stopped; but the breach was still vibrating, white-hot, and the sand fallen onto the furnace was blinding when stirred up.

There was nothing more to do. Without speaking, they headed back toward the meseta, and on the way Drever said:

"To think that with another fifty pesos we could have built a really good oven . . ."

"Bah!" countered Rienzi after a moment. "We did what was right to do. With a perfect installation we wouldn't have found out a lot of things."

And after a pause:

"And maybe we'd have built something a little bit pour la galerie . . ."

"Could be," agreed Drever.

The night was very mild, and they sat for a long while smoking at the doorway into the dining room.

VII

The temperature was too mild. The weather broke up, and for three days and three nights it rained out of a storm from the south, which kept the two men shut up inside the swaying bungalow. Drever took advantage of the time to finish off an essay on creolina—which as a killer of ants and parasites was at least as strong as its namesake

derived from pit-coal tar. Rienzi, apathetic, spent the day going from one door to another to look at the sky.

Till on the third night, while they were in the dining room, and Drever was playing with his daughter as she sat on his knees, Rienzi got up with his hands in his pockets and said:

"I'm going to leave. We've already done what we could do here. If you can raise a few pesos to work on the project, let me know and I can get you what you need in Buenos Aires. Down there at the spring, you could set up three furnaces . . . Without water you can't do anything. Write me, when you manage that, and I'll come up to help you. At least"—he concluded after a moment—"we can have the pleasure of being sure that there aren't many guys in the country who know what we do about charcoal."

"I think so too," confirmed Drever, still playing with his daughter.

Five days later, under a radiant noonday sun, and with the sulky ready at the gate, the two men and their helper went to take a last look at their work, which they hadn't approached since the accident. The laborer took off the top of the oven, and like a scorched cocoon the furnace appeared, dented and twisted in its sheath of wire mesh and grey clay. From the oxidation of the fire the sheets removed were quite thick around the breach opened by the flames, and at the slightest contact their surface peeled off in blue scales, with which Drever's little girl filled the pocket of her apron.

From right where he was, along the entire border of the adjacent and surrounding woods and into the distance, Rienzi could assess the effect of nine-below cold on tropical vegetation with warm and shiny foliage. He saw the banana plants rotted into chocolate pulp, collapsed within themselves as though inside a pillowcase. He saw yerba plants that were twelve years old—thick trees, in short—scorched to their roots forever by the cold white fire of the frost. And in the orange grove, which they entered for a final gathering of fruit, Rienzi looked in vain overhead for the usual glitter of gold, because the ground was totally yellow with oranges. On the day of the great freeze they had all fallen when the sun came out, with a muffled thumping that pervaded the woods.

So Rienzi was able to fill up his sack, and since time was running short they headed for the port. The girl made the trip on Rienzi's lap, keeping up a very long dialogue with her friend.

The little steamboat was already leaving. Face to face, the two men looked at each other, smiling.

"A bientôt," said one.

"Ciào," answered the other.

But the parting of Rienzi and the girl was a lot more expressive.

When the steamboat was already veering downstream, she still cried out to him:

"Rienzi! Rienzi!"

"What, little lady?" they could manage to hear.

"Come back soon!"

Drever and the girl remained on the beach till the little steamboat was hidden behind two massive outcroppings of the Teyucuaré. And as they were slowly going up the bluff, Drever in silence, his daughter held out her arms for him to pick her up.

"Your furnace burned out, poor daddy! . . . But don't be sad . . . You'll invent a lot more things, my darling little engineer!"[a]

The Wilderness

I

The canoe glided along the edge of the woods, or what might seem to be woods in all that darkness. More by instinct than from any clue, Subercasaux felt its nearness, for the gloom was a single impervious block, starting at the rower's hands and extending up to the zenith. The man knew his river well enough so as to not be unaware of where he was, but on such a night, and under threat of rain, landing his craft in the midst of piercing tacuara canes and patches of rotten reeds was very different from going ashore in his own little port. And Subercasaux was not alone in his canoe.

The atmosphere was sultry to the point of asphyxiation. In no direction his face might turn could he find a little air to breathe. And at that moment, clearly and distinctly, some raindrops pattered in the canoe.

Subercasaux raised his eyes, looking vainly into the sky for a tremor of brightness or the fissure of a lightning bolt. All afternoon, and now as well, one could not hear a single thunderclap.

"Rain for the whole night," he thought. And turning to his companions, who kept silent at the stern:

"Put on your rain-capes," he said briefly. "And hold on tight."

In fact, the canoe was now bending branches as it moved along, and two or three times the portside oar had skidded on a submerged limb. But even at the price of breaking an oar, Subercasaux stayed in contact with the foliage, since if he got five meters offshore he could go back and forth all night in front of his port, without managing to see it.

Skimming the water at the very edge of the woods, the rower advanced a while longer. The drops were falling more densely now, but also at greater intervals. They would cease abruptly, as if they had fallen from who-knows-where, and then begin again, large, warm, and separate, only to break off once more in the same darkness and the same atmospheric depression.

"Hold on tight," repeated Subercasaux to his two companions. "We've made it home."

For he had just caught a glimpse of the mouth of his port. With two vigorous strokes of the oars he propelled the canoe onto the clay bank, and as he fastened the craft to its post his two silent companions jumped to the ground, which in spite of the darkness was easy to see, since it was covered with myriads of shiny little worms that made its surface undulate with their red and green fires.

As far as the top of the bluff—which the three travelers climbed in the rain, at last compact and uniform—the soaking clay shone phosphorescently. But then they were shut in again by the darkness, and in its midst had to search for the sulky they'd left resting on its shafts.

The saying "You can't even see your hands in front of your eyes" is made to order. And on such nights the momentary flash of a match is of no use but to deepen the dizzying darkness right afterward, to the point of making you lose your balance.

They found the sulky, nevertheless, but not the horse. And leaving his two companions on guard next to one of the wheels—where they stood motionless under their drooping capes, noisily spattered by rain—Subercasaux went off among the painful thorns to the end of the trail, where he found his horse, tangled up in its reins, of course.

He hadn't taken more than twenty minutes to look for the animal and bring it in, but when he sought his bearings in the vicinity of the sulky—saying: "Are you there, kids?" and hearing: "Yes, daddy"—Subercasaux became fully aware, for the first time that night, that the two companions he had abandoned to the night and the rain were his two children, aged five and six, who didn't stand as high as the hub of the sulky wheel, and who were huddled together, dripping water from their rain-capes, and calmly waiting for their father to return.

Finally they were on their way home, chattering and happy. When moments of worry or danger had passed, Subercasaux's voice was very different from the one he used to speak to his youngsters when he had to address them as grown-ups. Now it had lowered by two tones, and no one there would have thought, upon hearing the tenderness of their voices, that the man then laughing with the children was none other than the one with the curt and harsh accent of a half an hour before. And now the real talkers were Subercasaux and his daughter, since the little boy—the baby of the family—had fallen asleep on his father's knees.

II

Subercasaux usually got up at daybreak; and though he did it noiselessly, he was well aware that in the next room his boy, as much of an early riser as he was, had been lying with his eyes open for quite a while, waiting to hear his father before he got out of bed. And then the unchanging ritual of morning greetings would begin, passing from one bedroom to the other:

"Good morning, daddy!"

"Good morning, my dear little boy!"

"Good morning, darling little daddy!"

"Good morning, spotless little lamb!"

"Good morning, little mouse with no tail!"

“My little raccoon!”

“Little daddy armadillo!”

“Little cat-face!”

“Little snake-tail!”

And in this colorful style it would go on for a good while longer—till, once they were dressed, they would go have coffee under the palms, while the little lady kept on sleeping like a stone, till the sun in her face awakened her.

With his two young children—in their temper and training handiwork of his own—Subercasaux considered himself the happiest father on earth. But this he had achieved at the cost of greater grief than usually experienced by married men.

Abruptly, as things happen that are inconceivable for their appalling unfairness, Subercasaux had lost his wife. He was suddenly left alone, with two little children who hardly knew him, and in the same house, built by him and fixed up by her, where every nail and every brushmark on the wall was a sharp reminder of shared happiness.

The next day he found out, when he chanced to open the wardrobe, what it is to all of a sudden see your already buried wife’s underthings; and on a hanger, the dress that she never had time to try out.

He went through the urgent and fateful need, if you want to go on living, to destroy every last trace of the past, when with his eyes set and dry he burned the letters he had written to his wife, and she had saved since their courtship with more devotion than her big-city clothes. And that same afternoon he found out, at last, what it’s like to be finally worn out from sobbing, and hold back in your arms a young child who’s struggling to get loose so he can go play with the cook’s little boy.

Hard, that was terribly hard . . . But now he was laughing with his two kids, who along with him formed a single person, given the uncommon way in which Subercasaux brought up his children.

The youngsters, for example, had no fear of the dark, nor of being alone, nor of anything that contributes to the terror of babies raised at their mother’s skirts. More than once night descended when Subercasaux still wasn’t back from the river, and the children lit the wind-lantern to wait for him, unworrying. Or they would wake up alone in the middle of a furious storm that kept them blinded behind the windowpanes, only to go back to sleep again at once, secure and confident of their daddy’s return.

They feared nothing, except what their father warned them they should fear; and at the top of the list, naturally, were snakes. Free as they were, exuding health and stopping to look at everything with eyes as big as those of happy puppies, they wouldn’t have known what to do for a moment without their father’s company. But if, when he left, he let them know he was going to be gone for such and such a time, the kids were content to stay and play together. Similarly, if on their long joint trips through the woods or on the river Subercasaux had to go off for some minutes or hours, they would quickly improvise a game, and wait for him unfailingly in the same place, in this way repaying, with blind and cheerful obedience, the confidence their father placed in them.

They went horseback-riding on their own, and this from the time the boy was four years old. Like all free creatures, they were perfectly aware of their limits, and never went beyond them. Sometimes, alone, they would get as far as the Yabebirí, to the pink sandstone cliff above the river.

"Make sure of the terrain and sit down afterward," their father had told them.

The cliff rises straight up to a height of twenty meters from deep and shaded waters which cool the crevices at its base. There on top, tiny as they were, Subercasaux's youngsters would approach the edge, testing the stones with their feet; and, once secure, sit down and let their sandals frolic over the abyss.

Naturally, Subercasaux had achieved all this in successive stages, each one of them charged with its own anxieties.

"Some day a kid'll get killed on me," he said to himself. "And for the rest of my days I'll be asking myself if I was right to bring them up this way."

Yes, he was right. And among the few consolations of a father left alone with motherless children, the greatest is being able to raise them in accordance with a single course of conduct.

Subercasaux was therefore happy, and the children felt warmly bound to that big man who would play with them for hours on end, teach them to read on the floor with large heavy letters made of red lead, and sew up the rips in their pants with his huge toughened hands.

From sewing gunnysacks in the Chaco, when he was a cotton planter there, Subercasaux had retained both the custom of sewing and his pleasure in it. He sewed his own clothes, those of his children, the holsters for his revolver, and the sails of his canoe—all with cobbler's thread, and knotting every stitch. So it was that his shirts could tear at any point except where he had tied his waxen thread.

When it came to games, the children both recognized their father as a master, especially in his way of running on all fours—so outlandish that it made them shout with laughter right away.

Since in addition to his regular activities Subercasaux was a restless experimenter, whose interests took a new tack every three months, his children, constantly at his side, were acquainted with a lot of things not usually known to children of that age. They had seen—and sometimes helped in—the dissection of animals, the making of creolina, the extraction of latex from trees to seal their raincoats; they had seen their father's shirts dyed all sorts of colors, the construction of eight-ton outworks for the study of cements, the making of superphosphates, orange wine, yerba dryers of the Mayfarth type, and the suspension of a car-cable from the woods to the bungalow, hung at ten meters above the ground, along which the youngsters would then go flying down to the house in little cable-cars.

Around that time Subercasaux had been attracted to a vein or deposit of white clay left exposed by the last great retreat of the Yabebirí. From the study of this clay he had gone on to the others of the region, which he fired in his pottery-ovens—constructed, of course, by him. And if he had to get data on cooking, vitrification, and the like,

using specimens of no particular form, he preferred to experiment with pots, masks, and imaginary animals, in all of which his children helped him with great success.

At night, and on stormy afternoons when it was really dark, the factory moved into high gear. Subercasaux would light the oven early, and the experimenters, shrunk by the cold and rubbing their hands, would sit down in its warmth to model clay.

But the smaller of his ovens easily generated 1,000°C in two hours, and at this point, every time they opened the door to feed it, a veritable bolt of fire that burned their lashes came out of the white-glowing hearth. So the ceramics-makers would retreat to a far end of the workshop, till the icy wind that came whistling in between the shafts of tacuara in the walls would drive them back, workbench and all, to get cooked with their backs to the oven.

Except for the youngsters' naked legs, which now took the blasts of heat, everything went along well. Subercasaux had a weakness for prehistoric pots; the little girl preferred to model fancy hats; and the boy, without fail, made snakes.

Sometimes, however, the monotonous snore of the oven didn't cheer them up enough, and then they turned to the gramophone, and the same old records in use since Subercasaux's marriage, which the kids had abused with all sorts of needles, nails, thorns, and bits of tacuara that they themselves would sharpen. By turns, each of them would take charge of attending the machine, which amounted to automatically changing records without even lifting their eyes from the clay, and resuming their work right away. When all the records had been played, it was another's turn to repeat exactly the same operation. They didn't even listen to the music anymore, since they knew it perfectly by heart; but the noise entertained them.

At ten o'clock the ceramics-makers considered their task concluded, and rose to proceed for the first time to the critical inspection of their works of art, since till all of them had finished not the slightest commentary was allowed. And then it was quite a sight to see the jubilation over the ornamental fantasies of the little lady, and the enthusiasm aroused by the boy's relentless collection of snakes. After which Subercasaux would put out the fire in the oven, and all holding hands they would run through the icy night to their house.

III

Three days after the nocturnal canoe-trip we've told about, Subercasaux was left without a servant girl; and this incident, trifling and inconsequential anywhere else, altered the life of the three exiles in the extreme.

In the first moments of his bereavement Subercasaux had been able to count on the help of a fine woman to raise his children, the same cook who wept and found the house too lonely at the death of her mistress.

The next month she left, and Subercasaux went through all sorts of grief to replace her with three or four sullen girls pulled out of the back country, and who'd only stay a few days, because they found their boss's character too harsh.

Subercasaux, as a matter of fact, was partly guilty, and he admitted it. He spoke with the girls just barely enough to make himself understood, and what he said had an excessively masculine logic and precision. When they swept the dining room, for example, he cautioned them to also sweep around every leg of the table. And this, expressed so sparingly, exasperated and fatigued the girls.

For the space of three months he couldn't even get a girl to wash the dishes for him. And in those three months Subercasaux learned a bit more than how to bathe his children.

He learned, not how to cook, because he already knew that, but how to scour pots and pans with the very sand of his patio, squatting in the icy wind, which made his hands turn blue. He learned to interrupt his work again and again to run and take the milk off the fire or open the smoking oven; and he also learned to bring in three buckets of water (not a one less) from the well at night, to wash his kitchenware.

This problem of the three inescapable buckets was the substance of one of his nightmares, and it took him a month to realize that he couldn't do without them. In the first days he had naturally put off cleaning pots and dishes, which he piled up side by side on the floor, so as to wash them all at once. But after wasting a whole morning on his haunches scraping burned cooking vessels (they all got burned), he opted for cook-eat-and-scrub, a three-step process the delights of which aren't known to husbands either.

He really had no time left for anything, especially during the short days of winter. Subercasaux had entrusted the children with keeping the two bedrooms in order, a job they did passably well. But he himself didn't feel he had spirit enough to sweep the patio: a scientific, radial, circular, and exclusively feminine task, which—though he knew it was basic to well-being in huts in the wilderness—transcended his patience.

In that loose, undisturbed sand, turned into a plant-laboratory by the climate of alternating rains and burning sun, the sand-fleas spread so much that you could see them crawling over the shoeless feet of the children. Subercasaux, though he always wore stromboots, paid a heavy tribute to the fleas. Almost always lame, he would have to spend a whole hour after the midday meal with his boy's feet in his hands, blinded by sun in the patio or on the veranda and splattered by rain. When he finished with the youngster it was his own turn; and when he stood up at last, with bended back, the boy would call him again because three new fleas had bored deep into the skin of his feet.

Luckily, the girl seemed to be immune; there was no way her little toenails could tempt the fleas, seven out of ten of which fell by right to the boy and only three to his father. But those three were too many for a man whose feet were the key to the rustic life he led.

Sand-fleas, in general, are more harmless than snakes, botflies, and even the little barigüís. They walk high on their legs across the skin, and all of a sudden pierce it swiftly, going down to the raw flesh, where they make a little pouch that they fill with eggs. Neither the extraction of the flea nor of its nest is usually troublesome, nor do its bites go bad more than might be expected. But for every hundred clean fleas there's one that carries an infection, and with that you have to be careful.

Subercasaux had such an infection in one of his toes—the insignificant little toe of his right foot—and couldn't manage to subdue it. From a little pink hole it had grown to a swollen and terribly painful split along the edge of his toenail. Iodine, bichloride, hydrogen peroxide, formaldehyde—there was nothing he had failed to try. He wore his shoes, however, but didn't leave the house; and his endless labors in the woods were now reduced, on rainy afternoons, to slow and silent walks around the patio, when as the sun went down the sky would clear, and the woods, outlined against the light like a shadow pantomime, would come nearer and nearer in the superbly pure air till it touched your very eyes.

Subercasaux realized that in other living conditions he could have conquered the infection, which only called for a little rest. The afflicted man slept badly, shaken by chills and sharp pains late at night. At daybreak he would finally fall into a very heavy sleep, and at that moment would have given anything to stay in bed till even as late as eight o'clock. But the little boy was as much of an early bird in winter as in summer, and Subercasaux would get up shaking with fever to light the Primus stove and prepare the coffee. Then there was the midday meal, and the scrubbing of pots. And for diversion, at noon, the endless saga of his youngster's fleas.

"Things can't go on this way," Subercasaux finally said to himself. "At all costs I have to get a maid."

But how? During his married years this terrible concern with servant girls had been one of his regular anxieties. The girls would come and go, as we've said, without saying why, and this when there was a lady of the house. Subercasaux would abandon all his tasks and stay on his horse for three days, galloping along the trails from Apariciocue to San Ignacio, after any useless girl who might want to wash the diapers. At last, some day at noon, he would emerge from the woods with a halo of horseflies around his head, and his horse's neck ragged and bloody—but triumphant. The girl would arrive the next day, astraddle behind her father, with a bundle; and exactly a month later would leave with the same bundle, on foot. And Subercasaux would again put aside his hoe or machete to go get his horse, already waiting and sweating motionless in the sun.

Those were bad experiences, that had left him with a bitter taste, and now had to start up again. But which way would he go?

During his nights of sleeplessness Subercasaux had already heard the distant rumbling of the woods, battered by rain. Spring is usually dry in Misiones, and winter very rainy. But when the pattern is reversed—something always to be expected of the

climate in Misionesthe clouds disgorge a meter of rain in three months, of the meter and a half supposed to fall in all the year.

They were already almost hemmed in. The Horqueta, which cuts across the road to the shore of the Paraná, had no bridges at all at that time and was passable only at the wagon ford, where the water fell in foamy rapids over round and shifting stones, trod by horses quaking with fear. And this under normal conditions; for when the stream had to take on the rain of a seven-day storm, the ford was submerged under two fathoms of racing water, strung out in deep bands which suddenly broke up and coiled into whirlpools. And the settlers from the Yabebirí, detained on their horses before the flooded grassland, watched dead deer go by, revolving as they floated on. It was like this for ten or fifteen days.

The Horqueta could still be crossed when Subercasaux decided to go out; but in his state he didn't dare cover such a distance on horseback. And after all, what was he likely to find in the direction of Cazador Creek?

Then he remembered a young fellow he'd employed at one time, bright and hard-working as few are, who had told him laughing—the very day he arrived, as he scrubbed a frying pan in the dirt—that he'd stay for a month, because his boss needed him, but not one day more, because that was no work for a man. The fellow lived at the mouth of the Yabebirí, across from Toro Island, and that meant a strenuous trip; for if the Yabebirí plays its game of dropping and rising up again, the eight-hour stretch of rowing will crush the fingers of anyone who's not already used to it.

Subercasaux made his decision, however. And despite the threatening weather went down to the river with his children, with the cheerful air of one who finally sees the open sky. The youngsters repeatedly kissed their father's hand, as they usually did when they were full of joy. Despite his feet and all the rest, Subercasaux kept up all his courage for his children—but for them it was something very different to take a hike with their daddy through the woods aswarm with surprises, and then run barefoot along the shore, over the warm and springy mud of the Yabebirí.

There what they expected awaited them: the canoe full of water, which had to be bailed out with the usual scoop and the gourds for keeping bugs that the children always slung over their shoulders when they went into the woods.

Subercasaux was so hopeful that he wasn't disturbed enough by the dubious look of the muddied waters—of a river where you can usually see the bottom as far as two meters down.

"The rains," he thought, "still aren't coming down hard with the southeaster . . . It'll be a day or two before it rises."

They kept on working. Standing in the water on both sides of the canoe, they bailed away as best they could. Subercasaux, at the start, hadn't dared to take off his boots, which kept sticking in the deep mud, so badly that it caused him great pains to pull out his foot. Finally he took them off, and with his feet free and sunk like wedges in the stinking mud, he finished bailing out the canoe, turned it over, and cleaned off the bottom, all in two hours of feverish activity.

Ready at last, they left. For an hour the canoe glided along more rapidly than the rower would have liked. He was rowing badly, braced by a single foot, his naked heel scarred by the edge of the support-beam. And even so he was moving fast, because the Yabebirí was racing now. Finally, the sticks swollen with bubbles starting to fringe the backwaters, and the moustache of straw caught up against a big root, led Subercasaux to realize what was going to happen if he waited another second to veer the prow toward his port.

Servant girl, young man . . . , a rest at last! . . . , and more hopes gone. So he rowed without losing a stroke. The four hours he spent, tortured by worry and fatigue, going back up a river he'd gone down in an hour, in air so rarefied that his lungs gasped in vain—only he could thoroughly appreciate. When he got to his port the warm and frothy water had already risen two meters above the beach. And down the channel came dead branches, half submerged, their tips bobbing up and sinking in the sway.

The travelers reached the bungalow when it was already close to dark, though barely four o'clock, and just as the sky, with a single flash from its zenith to the river, at last disgorged its huge supply of water. They had supper at once and went to bed exhausted, under the clamor on the metal roof, which was hammered all night by the deluge with unrelenting violence.

IV

At daybreak, a chill to the bone awoke the master of the house. Till then he had slept like a block of lead. Contrary to what was usual since he'd had the infected toe, his foot hardly hurt at all, despite the exertions of the day before. He took the raincoat tossed on the bedstead and pulled it on top of him, and tried to go back to sleep.

Impossible. The cold went straight through him. The frost inside spread outward to all his pores, now turned into needles of bristling ice, a sensation he got from the slightest rub against his clothes. Curled up in a ball, assailed all up and down his spinal cord by intense and rhythmic waves of cold, the ailing man watched the hours go by with no success at getting warm. Luckily, the children were still asleep.

"In the state I'm in you don't do dumb things like yesterday's," he kept telling himself. "These are the consequences . . ."

As a distant dream, a pricelessly rare bliss he once possessed, he fancied he could spend all day in bed, warm and rested at last, while at the table he heard the noise of the cups of café con leche that the servant—that first great servant woman—was setting before the children . . .

Stay in bed till ten, at least! . . . In four hours the fever would pass, and even his lower back wouldn't hurt so much . . . What did he need, after all, to get well? A little rest, nothing more. He'd said that himself ten times . . .

The day was moving on, and the sick man thought he heard the happy noise of the cups, amid the heavy throbbing of his leaden temples. What a delight to hear that noise! . . . He would rest a little, finally . . .

"Daddy!"

"My dear boy . . . "

"Good morning, sweet little daddy! You're not up yet? It's late, daddy."

"Yes, my love, I was just getting up . . ."

And Subercasaux got dressed in a hurry, reproaching himself for his laziness, which had made him forget his children's coffee.

The rain had finally stopped, but without the slightest breath of wind being left to sweep away the prevailing humidity. And at noon it started again—a warm, tranquil, monotonous rain, which dissolved the valley of the Horqueta, the sown fields and the grasslands, in a misty and extremely dreary film of water.

After lunch the kids entertained themselves by renewing their stock of paper boats, which they had used up the afternoon before. They made hundreds of them, fitting them inside each other like ice-cream cones, ready to be tossed into the wake of the canoe, when they went out on the river again. Subercasaux took advantage of the chance to go to bed for a while, where he at once resumed his curled-up posture, lying motionless with his knees against his chest.

Again, on his temple, he could feel the enormous weight that held it to the pillow, so firmly that the pillow seemed to form an integral part of his head. How good he felt that way! Oh, to stay one, ten, a hundred days without moving! The monotonous drumming of the water on the metal roof lulled him toward sleep, and in its murmur he could hear distinctly, so well as to extract a smile, the tinkling of the cutlery being handled swiftly by the servant in the kitchen. What a servant he had! . . . And he heard the noise of the dishes, dozens of plates, cups, and pots that the servants—there were ten of them now!—scraped and scrubbed with dizzying speed. What a joy to be nice and warm at last, in bed, without a single, not a single worry! . . . When, at what previous time had he dreamed of being sick, with an awful problem? . . . How foolish he'd been! . . . And how nice it is like this, listening to the noise of hundreds of spotless cups . . .

"Daddy!"

"Darling girl . . ."

"I'm getting hungry, daddy!"

"Yes, sweetheart, right away . . ."

And the sick man went out in the rain to fix coffee for his children.

Without being quite sure what he had done that afternoon, Subercasaux watched the night come on with intense delight. He did remember that the delivery-boy hadn't brought milk that afternoon, and that he'd looked at his wound a long while, without noting anything special about it.

He fell into bed without even undressing, and in no time the fever laid him low again. The boy that hadn't come with the milk . . . Crazy! . . . Now he was fine, perfectly fine, resting.

With only a few days more of rest, even a few hours more, he'd get well. Right! Right! . . . There's justice in spite of everything . . . And also a little compensation . . . for someone who'd loved his children as he had . . . But he'd get up healthy. A man can get sick sometimes . . . and need to rest a little. And what a rest he was having now, to the lull of the rain on the metal roof! . . . But hadn't a month gone by already? . . . He ought to get up.

The sick man opened his eyes. He saw nothing but darkness, pierced by flashing specks that shrank and expanded by turns, approaching his eyes moving swiftly to and fro.

"I must have a very high fever," said the sick man to himself.

And he lit the wind-lantern on the night-table. The humid wick sputtered on for some time while Subercasaux kept his eyes on the roof. From far away, very far away, came the memory of a night like this when he was very, very sick . . . How silly can you get? . . . He was healthy, because when a man who's only tired is lucky enough to hear from his bed the furious clinking of the kitchen service, it's because the mother is watching over her children . . .

He woke up again. From the corner of his eye he saw the lighted lantern, and after a hard effort to focus his attention, recovered his self-awareness.

In his right arm, from his elbow to the tips of his fingers, he now felt intense pain. He tried to bring up his arm but couldn't do it. He pushed away the raincoat, and saw his livid hand, traced in streaks of violet; frozen, dead. Without closing his eyes, he thought a while about what that meant, along with his chills and having rubbed the open vessels of

his wound against the foul mud of the Yabebirí, and then he came to the clear, absolute and conclusive understanding that his whole being was dying too, that he was passing into death.

A great silence fell within him, as if the rain, the noise, and the very rhythm of things had abruptly fallen back toward the infinite. And as though he were already detached from himself, he saw far off in a landscape a bungalow totally cut off from all human aid, where two small children, with no milk and all alone, were left abandoned by God and men, in a most iniquitous and dreadful state of helplessness.

His little children . . .

With a supreme effort he sought to wrest himself out of that torment which made him grapple, hour after hour and day after day, with the fate of his beloved children. In vain he would think: Life has higher forces that escape us . . . God provides . . .

"But they won't have anything to eat!" his heart would cry out tumultuously. And he would be dead, lying right where he was and witnessing that unprecedented horror . . .

But, in spite of the livid daylight reflected from the wall, darkness began to engulf him again, with its dizzying white dots, which receded and came back again to pulsate in his very eyes . . . Yes! Of course! He'd had a dream! It shouldn't be allowed to dream such things . . . Now he was going to get up, rested.

"Daddy! . . . Daddy . . . My dear little daddy! . . ."

"My son . . ."

"Aren't you going to get up today, daddy? It's very late. We're really hungry, daddy!"

"My little boy . . . I'm not going to get up just yet . . . You kids get up and eat some crackers . . . There's still two left in the can . . . And come back afterward."

"Can we come in now, daddy?"

"No sweetheart . . . Later I'll make the coffee . . . I'll be calling you."

He still got to hear the laughing and chatter of his children as they got up, and then a crescendo reverberation, a dizzy jingling that radiated from the core of his brain and went on to throb in rhythmic waves against his dreadfully aching skull. And that was all he heard.

He opened his eyes again, and as he did so felt his head falling toward the left, so freely that it surprised him. He no longer felt any reverberation at all. Only a growing but painless trouble with judging the distance of objects . . . And his mouth held wide-open to breathe.

"Kids . . . Come here right away . . ."

In no time the children appeared at the half-opened door, but viewing the lighted lantern and their father's countenance, came forward silently with their eyes opened wide.

The ailing man was still brave enough to smile, and as he made that awful face the children opened their eyes still wider.

"Kids," said Subercasaux when he had them at his side. "Pay attention, sweethearts, because you're big now and can understand everything . . . I'm going to die, kids . . . But don't be distressed . . . Soon you'll be grown-ups, and you'll be good and honest . . . And then you'll remember your daddy . . . Be sure you understand, my dear children . . . In a while I'll die, and you won't have a father anymore . . . You'll be alone in the house . . . But don't be alarmed or afraid . . . And now good-bye, my children . . . You're going to give me a kiss now . . . One kiss each . . . But quickly, kids . . . A kiss . . . for your daddy . . ."

The children left without touching the half-opened door, and went to linger in their room, looking out on the drizzle in the patio. They didn't stir from there. The girl alone, glimpsing the import of what had just come to pass, would pout from time to time with her arm at her face, while the boy distractedly scratched the window frame, uncomprehending.

Neither one nor the other dared to make any noise.

But at the same time there wasn't the slightest noise from the next room, where for three hours their father, with his shoes and clothes on under his raincoat, had been lying dead in the light of the lantern.

A Workingman

I

One afternoon, in Misiones, I had just finished my midday meal when the bell rang at the front gate. I went outside and saw a young man standing there, with his hat in one hand and a suitcase in the other. The temperature was easily forty degrees centigrade, and on the curly head of my visitor it seemed more like sixty. He didn't appear to be the least bit troubled, however. I had him come in, and the man moved ahead smiling and looking curiously at the five-meter-wide crowns of my mandarin orange trees, which are, by the way, the pride of the region—and mine.

I asked him what he wanted, and he answered that he was looking for work. Then I looked at him more carefully.

For a laborer, he was dressed absurdly. The suitcase was of tanned leather, of course, and with plenty of straps. Then his suit, of brown lambskin without a single stain. Finally, his boots; and not logger's boots, but goods of the finest workmanship. And above all the elegant, smiling, and self-assured manner of my visitor. He was a laborer?

"For all work," he answered happily. "I know how to swing the axe and the hoe . . . I worked before this in Foz-do-Iguaçu, and planted a field of potatoes."

The fellow was a Brazilian, and spoke a frontier tongue, a mixture of Portuguese, Spanish, and Guaraní, and very rich in piquancy.

"Potatoes? And the sun?" I remarked. "How did you manage that?"

"Oh!" he answered shrugging his shoulders. "The sun's no trouble . . . You be sure to turn the earth a lot with the hoe . . . And come down hard on the weeds! Weeds are the worst enemy by the potato."

That's how I learned how to grow potatoes in a land where the sun—besides killing vegetables by simply burning them as though pressed by a flatiron—shrivels up red ants in three seconds and coral snakes in twenty.

The man looked at me and at everything around him, visibly pleased with me and my surroundings.

"All right . . . ," I told him. "Let's try a few days . . . I don't have much work right now."

"That doesn't matter," he answered. "I like this house. It's a very nice place."

And turning toward the Paraná, which was flowing sleepily at the foot of the valley, he added with satisfaction:

"Oh, you devil of a Paraná! . . . If the boss he like to go fishing, I'll go along with you . . . I had a great time at the Foz with the catfish."

On that I could agree; for amusing himself the man seemed adept as few are. But the fact is that he amused me too, and I burdened my conscience with the pesos he'd eventually cost me.

As a consequence, he left his suitcase on the table on the veranda, and said to me:

"Today I don't work . . . I'm going to look over the town. I'll start tomorrow."

Out of ten peones who go to Misiones in search of work, only one starts right away—the one who's really satisfied with the stipulated conditions. Those who put off the job till the next day never come back, no matter how grand their promises.

But my man was made of stuff too rare to be included in the usual roster of wage-earners, so I had my hopes. Sure enough, the next day—as dawn was still breaking—he made his appearance, rubbing his hands all the way from the gate.

"Now I am ready to work . . . What has to be done?"

I gave him the job of going on with a well through sandy stone I'd begun that was barely three meters deep. He went down in the hole, very satisfied with the task, and for a long while I heard the muffled blow of the pick and the well-digger's whistling.

At noon it rained, and the water swept a little earth to the bottom. A bit later I could hear my man whistling again, but the pick wasn't active enough. I went over to see what was going on, and I saw Olivera—that was his name—conscientiously studying the trajectory of every pick-stroke, so the mud wouldn't spatter on his pants.

"What's this, Olivera?" I said to him. "We're not going to get far that way . . ."

The fellow raised his head and looked at me a moment carefully, as though he wanted to make sure of my appearance. And right after that he started to laugh, bending over the pick again.

"It's all right!" he muttered. "Fica bon!"

I moved off so as not to break with that absurd laborer, like none other I'd ever seen; but when I was barely ten steps away, I heard his voice coming up from below:

"Ha, ha! . . . This sure is all right, boss! . . . So I'm going to dirty my clothes to dig this damned well?"

And the matter kept on delighting his sense of humor. A few hours later Olivera was on his way into the house—and without even coughing at the door to call attention to his presence, something unheard-of in a laborer from the region. He seemed more cheerful than ever.

"There's the well," he indicated, so I wouldn't doubt its existence. "To hell with it! I'm not working there anymore. The well you make . . . Don't know what to do about your well, you don't! . . . Not wide enough. What do we do now, boss?" And he put his elbow on the table, better to look at me.

But I persisted in my weakness for the man, and sent him to town to buy a machete.

"A Collins," I advised him. "I don't want a Toro."

The fellow got up then, thrilled to the bone.

"This is really good! Nice, the Colin! Now I'm going to have me a real fine machete!"

And he left happy, as if the machete were really for him.

It was two-thirty in the afternoon, the crowning hour for apoplexy, when you can't touch a stick of wood that's been left in the sun for ten minutes. Woods, fields, basalt, and red sandstone—everything vibrated, washed in the same shade of yellow. The landscape lay dead, in a silence pervaded by uniform humming, as though from a single drum, which seemed to follow one's sight no matter where it might be directed.

Down the scorching road, with his hat in hand and looking from side to side at the tops of the trees, his lips pursed as if he were whistling—though he wasn't—went my man to get the machete. From home to the town is half a league. Before an hour was gone I caught sight of Olivera from a distance; he was coming back slowly, engrossed in making lines on the road with his blade. Something in his walk, however, seemed to point to a specific task, and not just that of imitating lizard tracks in the sand. I went out to the roadside gate, and then saw what Olivera was doing: he was chasing along a snake, forcing it to go straight ahead of him by goading it with the tip of the machete—one of those snakes that hunt chickens.

That morning he had seen me working with snakes—una boa idea, according to him (perhaps punning in Portuguese on boa "good" and boa "snake").

Having found the snake a kilometer from the house, it had seemed to him very useful to bring it in alive, "so the boss could study it." And nothing was more natural than to force it along ahead of him, as you drive a sheep.

"Nasty critter!" he blurted with satisfaction, wiping away his sweat. "Didn't want to go straight . . ."

But the most amazing thing about my laborer is that afterward he worked, and worked as I've never seen anyone do it.

From quite a while back I had nourished the hope of some day replacing the five bocayás[1] that were missing in the ring of palm trees around the house. In that part of the patio the iron-ore crops up to the surface of the earth in manganic blocks streaked with scorched sandstone and hard enough to repel a crowbar with a sharp and sudden clang. The worker who dug the original pits hadn't gone any deeper than fifty centimeters, and at least a meter was necessary to get to the gritty subsoil.

I gave the job to Olivera. Since here there was no mud that could spatter his trousers, I expected he'd find the work to his liking.

And that's how it was, in fact. He looked the pits over for quite a while, wagging his head at their deficiently circular form, then took off his jacket and hung it from the thorns of the nearest bocayá. For a moment he looked at the Paraná, and after greeting it with an "Oh, you wild Paraná!," he straddled the mouth of the pit.

He started at eight in the morning. At eleven my man's bar-strokes still rang on, with unabated sonority. Whether it arose from indignation at the poorly done original work, or the urge to conquer those blue-black slabs that gave off splinters as sharp as bottle-chips, the truth is that I never saw such persistence in throwing one's heart

[1] A type of palm tree.

into every stroke. The whole meseta echoed with the muffled blows, since the bar was striking at a meter's depth.

From time to time I went up to see his work, but the man wasn't talking anymore. Every now and then he looked at the Paraná, but seriously now, and then straddled the hole again.

At siesta-time I thought he'd be loath to go on under the hellish sun. No such thing: at two o'clock he arrived at his pit, hung up his jacket and hat on the thorns of the palm again, and went back to work.

I wasn't feeling well after lunch that day. At that hour, apart from the sudden buzzing of some wasp on the veranda, and the monotonous, quivering murmur of the landscape smothered in light, it's not common to hear anything at all. But now the meseta was resounding dully, blow after blow. Due expressly to the state of depression I was in, I lent a sickly ear to that reverberation. Each stroke of the bar seemed louder to me; I thought I even heard the man's ugh! as he bent over. The blows had a very pronounced rhythm; but from one to another an age of time went by. And each new blow was stronger than the one before.

"Here it comes," I would say to myself. "Now, now . . . This one's going to boom louder than the others . . ."

And the blow would in fact ring out dreadfully, as though it were the last by a powerful worker flinging his tool to hell.

But the anxiety would come back at once:

"This one's going to be louder still . . . It's going to land right now . . ."

And of course it did.

Maybe I had a little fever. At four I couldn't stand it anymore, and went to the pit.

"Why don't you lay off for a while, Olivera?" I told him. "You're going to go crazy with that . . ."

The man raised his head and looked at me with a long ironic stare."

So? . . . You don't want me to do nothing by your pits?"

And he kept on looking at me, with the crowbar between his hands like a rifle at rest.

I got out of there, and as always when I felt listless, took up my machete and went into the woods.

After an hour I returned, back in shape again. I came back by way of the brush behind the house, while Olivera was just finishing the cleanup of his pit with a metal trowel. A minute later he was coming to look for me in the dining room.

I didn't know what my man was going to say to me after the bit of work he'd done that awful day. But he took a firm stand in front of me and all he said, as he pointed at the palms with a somewhat disparaging pride, was:

"There you got it for your bocayás . . . That's the way a job gets done! . . ."

And wiping away his sweat, as he sat down across from me and stretched his legs over a chair, he concluded:

"Goddamned stone! . . . It ended up like softwood . . ."

II

This was the first stage of my relations with the strangest laborer I ever had in Misiones. He was with me for three months. When it came to wages he was very strict; he always wanted his accounts settled at the end of the week. On Sundays he would go to town, dressed in a way even I could envy—not that much was required for that. He made the rounds of all the boliches,[2] but never drank a thing. He'd stay in a boliche for two hours, listening to the rest of the workers talk, and go from group to group, following changes in liveliness; he listened to everything with a silent smile, but never spoke. Then he'd go to another boliche, later another, and so on till nightfall. On Monday he always got to the house at the crack of dawn, rubbing his hands from the moment he saw me.

We also did some jobs together. For example the clearing of the big banana grove, which took us six whole days, when it should have required only three. That was the hardest work I've done in my life—and maybe the same goes for him—on account of the heat that summer. The air at siesta-time in a banana grove almost as filthy as a chicken coop, in a sandy hollow where the earth burns your feet through your boots, is an extraordinary trial of a person's resistance to heat. Up above, by the house, the leaves of the palm trees were coming to pieces, driven mad by the north wind—a wind out of an oven, if you like, but one that refreshes by making sweat evaporate. But working down in the hollow where we were, amid grasses two meters high, in an atmosphere oppressively close and shimmering with nitrates, bent double so as to swing our machetes close to the ground—that you've got to have a good strong will to endure.

Olivera stood up every now and then with his hands on his hips—his shirt and trousers completely soaked—and wiped off the handle of his machete, pleased with himself for the promise offered by the river, off there at the bottom of the valley:

"Oh, what a bath I'm going to take! . . . Ah, Paraná!"

III

When that clearing job was done, my man and I had the only bit of trouble he ever gave me.

For the last four months we'd had a very good servant girl at the house. Anyone who's lived in Misiones, or Chubut, or anywhere else in the woods or open country, will understand how delighted we were with a girl like that.

Her name was Cirila. She was the thirteenth child of a Paraguayan laborer, a devout Catholic since his youth, who at the age of sixty had learned how to read and write. He never missed a burial procession, always leading the prayers along the way.

[2] A boliche is a country store that has a counter for drinks.

The girl enjoyed our total confidence. Beyond that, we never noticed her showing any weakness for Olivera, who on Sundays was a really good-looking young man. She slept in the shed, half of which was her quarters; in the other half I had my workshop.

One day, though, I'd seen Olivera lean on his hoe and follow the girl with his eyes, as she went to the well to get water, and I happened to be passing by.

"You've got yourself a good peona there . . . ," he told me, extending his lip. "A fine girl! And the lass isn't ugly either . . ."

And with that said he went on hoeing, contentedly.

One night we had to get Cirila up at eleven o'clock. She came out of her room right away, with her clothes on—as all those girls sleep, of course—but also with a lot of powder on her face.

What the devil did the girl need powder for to sleep? We couldn't come up with the reason, short of assuming an overnight flirtation.

But then very late one night I got up to drive off one of the many starving dogs that in those days used to tear the wire-mesh fence with their teeth to get inside. As I went by the workshop I heard noise, and at the same instant a shadow came running out of the shed toward the gate.

I had a lot of tools, a perpetual temptation for peones. And what's worse, that night I had my revolver in hand, for I confess that seeing three or four holes in the fence every morning had finally left me out of joint.

I ran to the gate, but the man was already dashing down the slope toward the road, trailed by the stones he kicked up as he fled. I could hardly see his shape. I fired all five shots, the first perhaps with a not very wholesome intention, but the rest of them in the air. This I remember very clearly: the desperate acceleration of his running, every time I fired.

That was the end of it. But something had attracted my attention: the fact that the nighttime thief was wearing shoes, judging from the rolling of the rocks he dragged along. And up there laborers who wear boots or high-tops, except on Sundays, are few and far between.

The next morning at daybreak our servant girl had a thoroughly guilty look. I was in the patio when Olivera arrived. He opened the gate and came on whistling, alternately, to the Paraná and the mandarin orange trees, as if he'd never noticed them before.

I gave him the satisfaction of letting me be the first to speak.

"Look, Olivera," I told him. "If you're so interested in my tools, you can ask me for them in the daytime, instead of coming to get them at night . . ."

The blow hit its mark. My man looked at me with his eyes opening wide, and with one hand caught hold of the vine-arbor.

"Ah, no!" he burst out, indignantly shaking his head in denial. "You knows right well I don't steal by you. Ah, no! You can't say that!"

"But the fact is," I insisted, "that you were inside the shed last night."

"That's right! . . . And if you sees me someplace . . . you who's a lot of man . . . you knows for sure I don't stoop for to rob you!"

And he shook the arbor, muttering:

"¡Barbaridade!"

"All right, let's drop it," I concluded. "But I don't want visits of any kind at night. Do what you want at home, but not here."

Olivera stood there a while longer, shaking his head. Then he shrugged his shoulders and went to get the wheelbarrow, since at that time we were doing a job of earth-moving.

Not five minutes had passed when he called me. He'd taken a seat on the arms of the loaded wheelbarrow, and as I came up to him he threw a hard punch into the dirt, half-seriously:

"And how you going to prove I came to see the girl? Let's see!"

"I've got nothing to prove," I told him. "What I know is that if you hadn't run so fast last night, you wouldn't be gabbing so much now instead of falling asleep at the wheelbarrow."

I left; but Olivera had already regained his good humor.

"Ah, that's for sure!" he exclaimed in a burst of laughter, getting up to work. "To the devil with the boss! . . . Pim! Pam! Pum! . . . ¡Barbaridade de revólver! . . ."

And moving away with the loaded wheelbarrow, he added:

"Quite a guy, you are!"

To end this story: that same afternoon Olivera stopped beside me as he was leaving.

"And you, then . . . ," he winked at me: "For you I tell you, who's Olivera's good boss . . . With Cirila . . . Go right ahead! . . . She's real pretty!"

The fellow wasn't selfish, as you can see.

But Cirila by now wasn't comfortable at the house. Besides, there's no case up there of a servant girl who's ever been dependable. On one whim or another, without any reason at all, one fine day they want to leave. It's a tremendous and irresistible desire. As an old lady used to say: "They got it like the need to go pee-pee; it's impossible to wait."

Our girl left too; but not on the day after planning it, as she'd have liked to—because that very night she was bitten by a snake.

The snake had been born of a reptile whose shed skin I found between two logs in the banana grove right near the house, when I arrived there four years earlier. This yarará, or pit-viper, was surely just passing through, because I never ran across her; but more often than I cared to I did see samples of the offspring she left in the vicinity, in the form of seven little snakes I killed at the house, all of them in circumstances far from reassuring.

The killing went on for three summers in a row. The first year they were thirty-five centimeters long; the third they got to seventy. The mother, judging from her skin, must have been a magnificent specimen.

The servant girl, who often went to San Ignacio, had seen the snake one day lying across the path. Very thick, she said, and with a tiny head.

Two days after this, my fox-terrier, going after a wild partridge in the same location, had been bitten on the snout. In seventeen minutes she was dead.

The night of Cirila's misfortune I was in San Ignacio, where I used to go now and then. Olivera arrived there on the fly to tell me that a snake had bitten Cirila. We rushed home on horseback, and I found the girl sitting on the dining-room step, moaning and holding her wounded foot between her hands.

At home they had bound her ankle, and tried to inject permanganate right afterward. But it's not easy to appreciate the resistance to the entrance of a needle offered by a heel turned to stone from edema. I examined the bite, at the base of the Achilles tendon, expecting to see the two classic little fangmarks very close together. But the two punctures, from which two thin streams of blood were still dribbling, were four centimeters apart—two fingers from one to the other. So the snake must have been a huge one.

Cirila brought her hands from her foot to her head, and said she was feeling very sick. I did all I could: the enlarging of the wound, pressure, lIberál swabbing with permanganate, and potent doses of alcohol.

At that time I didn't have any serum; but in two cases of snakebite I had treated the patient with overdoses of rum, and had a lot of faith in its effectiveness.

We put the girl to bed, and Olivera took charge of the alcohol. In half an hour the leg was already a misshapen hulk, and Cirila—I like to think she wasn't displeased with the treatment—was beside herself with pain and drunkenness. She kept screaming ceaselessly:

"It bit me! . . . Black snake! Damned snake! . . . ¡Ay! . . . I don't feel right . . . Snake bit me! . . . I'm out of my head with this bite!"

Olivera, on his feet with his hands in his pockets, was watching the sick girl and nodding agreement with everything. Every now and then he would turn toward me, muttering:

"¡E barbaridade! . . ."

The next day, at five in the morning, Cirila was out of immediate danger, although the swelling lingered. From daybreak on Olivera stayed within sight of the gate, eager to report our victory to any and all who went by:

"The boss . . . there's something to see! He's a man all right! . . . Lots of rum and pirganate! Learn yourself a lesson."

What worried me now, however, was the snake, since my kids often crossed that same path.

After lunch I went to look for it. Its lair—so to speak—consisted of a hollow surrounded by stone, in which diluvial esparto grass grew up waist high. It had never been burned off.

If it was easy to find the snake by looking carefully, it was easier still to step on it. And fangs two centimeters long are no delight, even if you're wearing stromboots.

As for heat and north wind, that siesta hour was as bad as it gets. I got to the right place and, separating the clumps of esparto one by one with my machete, began

to look for the creature. All you can see down below, between one clump of esparto and another, is a little bit of dark and dry earth. Nothing else. Another step, another inspection with the machete, and another bit of very hard earth. And so on little by little.

But the state of a person's nerves, when he's sure that from one moment to the next he's going to find the prey, is not to be taken lightly. Every step got me closer to that instant, because I had no doubt at all that the creature was living there; and in that sun no yararci was about to come out and display itself.

All of a sudden, as I parted the esparto grass, and right at the tips of my boots, I saw it. Against a dark background, no bigger than a plate, I saw it go by, just barely touching me.

Now there's nothing longer, more eternally long in life, than one meter eighty of snake that goes passing by—in bits, we'll say, since all I could see was what was allowed by the space opened up by the machete.

But as far as pleasure goes, a fine experience. It was a yararacusú the most imposing specimen I've ever seen—and this variety is incontestably the most beautiful of the yararás, which are, in turn, the loveliest of all snakes, except for the corals. Its body, jet black, but a velvety black, is ringed with broad diamond-stripes of gold. Black and gold; of course. And besides, the most poisonous of all the yararás.

My snake went by, and by, and by some more. When it stopped I could still see the end of its tail. I looked toward the probable direction of its head, and found it at my side, uplifted and staring at me fixedly. It had curved around and now was motionless, watching for any change in my stance.

Of course the snake had no desire for combat, for they never do against man. But I did, and a very strong one. So I came down with the machete, intending to only dislocate its spine, with the object of saving the specimen.

The blow was with the flat of the blade, and far from slight. The result? As though nothing had happened. The creature twitched violently in a kind of bolt of fright that moved it a half-meter away, and again assumed its motionless and watchful posture, though now with its head higher. Staring at me, how hard you can surely guess.

In open country that duel—a mental game of now-you-do-it-now-you-don't—might have amused me for a moment longer; but deep in that underbrush, no way. So I struck with the machete a second time, in this case edge down, going for the vertebrae of the neck. With lightning speed the yararacusú went into a coil around its head, rose up in a corkscrew, flashing its pearl-white belly, and fell back again, slowly uncoiling, dead.

I took it home; it was a meter and eighty-five centimeters long, and every bit of that. Olivera recognized the species right away, even though it's rare in the south of Misiones.

"Ah, ah! . . . Yararacusú! . . . That's what I thought . . . In Foz-do-Iguaçu I killed a pile of them! . . . A pretty devil! . . . For my collection, something you'll like, boss!"

As for the patient, at the end of four days she was walking, more or less. I'm inclined to attribute the happy outcome of the case to the fact that she was bitten in a spot

not very rich in blood-vessels, and by a snake that two days earlier had partly emptied its glands on the fox-terrier. Nevertheless, I was a little surprised when I extracted the venom from the creature: from each fang it secreted twenty-one drops more, almost two grams of poison.

Olivera didn't show the slightest displeasure at the girl's departure. He just watched her go off through the pasture with her little bundle of clothes, still limping.

"She's a good girl," he said, pointing at her with his chin. "Someday I'm going to marry her."

"Good for you," I told him.

"And if I do? . . . You won't need to go around pim! pam! with your revolver any more."

In spite of the help Olivera gave to some of his comrades with no money, my worker didn't enjoy much favor among them. One day I sent him to town to get a barrel, a job you need at least a horse for, if not a cart. When this was pointed out to him, Olivera just shrugged his shoulders and left on foot. The store I sent him to was a league from the house, and he had to go through the Jesuit ruins. Before he'd left town they saw Olivera go by on the way back with the barrel: in its sides he had nailed two nails, and fastened a double wire to them, to serve as a wagon-shaft. He was dragging the barrel along the ground, pulling it without a care in the world.

A scheme like this, and walking when you've got a horse, bring discredit on a workingman.

IV

At the end of February I charged Olivera with the complete clearing of the woodland where I'd planted yerba mate. A few days after he got started I had a visit from a stonemason, a German national from Frankfurt, with a cancerous complexion, and as slow to speak as he was to turn away his eyes once he had fastened them on something. He asked me for mercury to discover a buried treasure.

The operation was a very simple one: in the presumed location you dug a hole in the ground and put the mercury in the bottom, wrapped in a handkerchief. Then you filled in the hole. On top, at the surface of the earth, you placed a piece of gold—the mason's watch chain, in this instance.

If there was really buried treasure there, the force of the treasure attracted the gold, which was then consumed by the mercury. Without mercury, there was nothing you could do.

I gave him the mercury, and the man left, though it cost him some effort to tear his gaze away from mine.

In Misiones, and in the whole northern region formerly occupied by the Jesuits, it's an article of faith to believe that the fathers, before their flight, buried coins and other

things of value. Rare is the inhabitant of the region who hasn't tried at least once to unearth a treasure, a burial, as they say up there. Often there are definite clues: a pile of stones, in a place where the ground isn't stony; an old lapacho beam, in some uncommon posture; a sandstone pillar abandoned in the woods, and so on.

Olivera, who was coming in from the clearing job to get a file for his machete, was witness to the incident. He listened with his little smile, and said nothing. Not till he was on his way back to the yerba field did he turn his head to say to me:

"The crazy German . . . The treasure's here! Here, in the pulse!" And he clutched his wrist.

On account of this, few people have been more surprised than I was on the night that Olivera abruptly entered the workshop to invite me to go out to the woods.

"Tonight," he told me in a low voice, "I'm going to dig me up a burial . . . I found one of them."

I was busy with I don't remember what. Still, I was very interested in finding out what mysterious turn of fortune had transformed a skeptic of that stature into a believer in burials. But I didn't really know my Olivera. He looked at me smiling, his eyes wide open with the almost captivating light of a visionary, showing me in his way the affection he felt for me:

"Pst! . . . For the two of us . . . It's a white stone, there, in the yerba field . . . We'll share it."

What could I do with such a guy? The treasure didn't attract me, but what did was the pottery he might find, a fairly frequent occurrence. So I wished him good luck, requesting only that if he found a nice jar, he'd bring it back to me unbroken. He asked me for my Collins and I gave it to him. And on that note he left.

The chance to take a walk, however, was very appealing to me, since a moon in Misiones, penetrating the darkness of the woods, is the loveliest sight you can see. Also, I was tired of my chore, so I decided to go along with him for a while.

Olivera's work site was about a mile from the house, at the southern corner of the woods. We walked side by side, I whistling, he silent—though with his lips pursed toward the tops of the trees, as was his habit.

When we got to his work sector Olivera stopped, lending an ear.

The yerba field—as we passed suddenly from the darkness of the woods to that clearing flooded with galvanic light—gave the feeling of a bleak plateau. The newly felled tree trunks were duplicated in black along the ground by the harsh slanting light. The little yerba plants, darkly shadowed in the foreground, and velvety ash-grey on the open plain, were standing motionless, glittering with dew.

"Now . . . ," Olivera told me, "I'm going on alone."

The only thing that seemed to worry him was the possibility of some noise or other. For the rest, he obviously wanted to be alone. With a "See you tomorrow, boss" he pressed on across the yerba field, so that I saw him for a long time jumping over the cut-down trees.

I went back, slowing down my pace along the trail. After an oppressive summer day, when barely six hours earlier you've had photophobia from the blinding light and felt the pillow hotter at the sides than under your very head—at ten at night on that day, all glories are small compared to the coolness of a night in Misiones.

And that night was especially superb, on a trail through very tall, almost virgin, forest. All along the path, and as far as the eye could see, the ground was scored obliquely by beams of icy whiteness, so bright that where it was dark the earth seemed to fall away into a black abyss. Up above, at the sides of the trail, over the somber architecture of the woods, long triangles of light descended, collided with tree trunks, and flowed downward in trickles of silver. The lofty and mysterious forest had a wondrous profundity, fretted as it was by slanting light, like a Gothic cathedral. In these profound surroundings there broke out from time to time, like the peal of a bell, the convulsive lament of the night owl.

I kept walking for quite a while longer, slow to make up my mind to go home. Olivera, in the meantime, must have been tearing his fingernails on the rocks. "Let him be happy," I said to myself.

Well now, this is the last time I saw Olivera. He didn't appear the next morning, nor the one after that, nor ever again. I've never heard another word about him. I asked in the town. Nobody had seen him, and nobody knew what had happened to my laborer. I wrote to Foz-do-Iguaçu, with the same result.

And what's more: Olivera, as I've said, was strict as can be when it came to money. I owed him his weekly wages. If he'd been seized by a sudden desire to change his habitat that very night, he'd never have done it without first settling his account.

But what became of him, then? What treasure can he have found? How come he left no trace at all in Puerto Viejo, in Itacurubi, in La Balsa, or anywhere else he might have taken a boat?

I don't know yet, and don't think I'll ever know. But three years ago I had a very unpleasant experience, in the same yerba field that Olivera never finished clearing.

The surprise is this: Since I'd abandoned the estate for a whole year, for reasons irrelevant here, the growth of the underbrush had smothered the young yerba plants. A laborer I sent there came back to tell me that for the agreed price he wasn't disposed to do anything, even less than what they usually do: it was almost as if the boss himself knew nothing about a machete.

I increased the price, as fairness required, and my workers got started. They were a team of two; one chopped down the trees, and the other stripped off the branches. For three days the south wind bore me the ceaseless and melancholy striking of the axe, doubled by the echoes from the woods. There was no respite, not even at noon. Maybe they took turns. If not, the arms and kidneys of the one who was swinging the axe were exceptionally strong.

But when that third day ended, the worker with the machete, the one I'd dealt with earlier, came to ask me to appraise what clearing they'd done, because he didn't want to work with his comrade any more.

“Why?” I asked him, disconcerted.

I couldn’t get any definite response; but he finally told me that his comrade wasn’t working alone.

Then I understood, remembering a legend to that effect: he was working in yoke with the devil. That’s why he never got tired.

I made no objection, and went to appraise the work. No sooner had I seen his infernal collaborator than I recognized him. He’d often gone by the house on horseback, and I’d always admired the elegance of his—and his horse’s—trappings, considering he was only a laborer. He was also very handsome, with the oily, straight-haired locks of a slicker from the south. He always rode his horse at a walk, and never deigned to look at me as he went by.

But now I saw him from up close. Since he was working with his shirt off, I had no trouble understanding that wonders could be performed with an athlete’s torso like that, in the power of a fellow who was sober, serious, and superbly trained. The long hair and shaved neck, the horse’s provocative pace and the rest—all of it disappeared there in the woods, in the presence of that sweaty young man with the childish smile.

Such was the man—in his natural surroundings—who worked with the devil.

He put on his shirt, and I looked over the job with him. Since thereafter he alone would go on to finish clearing the yerba field, we covered it in its entirety. The sun had just set, and it was quite cold: the thermometer falls along with afternoon in Misiones. At the southwestern edge of the woods, adjoining the open countryside, we lingered a while, since I wasn’t sure how much trouble it was worth to clean out that acre or so, where almost all of the yerba plants had died.

I took a look at the great bulk of the tree trunks, and higher up, their branches. Then, up there, in the last fork of an incense tree, I saw something very strange: two long, black objects. Something like an oriole’s nest. They stood out very well against the sky.

“And that? . . .” I pointed out to the young man.

He looked up for a while, and then ran his eyes down the whole length of the trunk.

“Boots,” he told me.

I felt a shock, and instantly remembered Olivera. Boots? . . . Yes. They were hanging upside down, feet aloft, and caught by their soles in the fork of the tree. At the lower end, where the legs of the boots were open, the man was missing; that’s all.

I don’t know what color they might have been in broad daylight; but at that hour, seen from the depths of the woods, and standing out motionless against the livid sky, they were black.

We spent a good while looking at the tree, from top to bottom and bottom up.

“Can it be climbed?” I questioned my man again.

A little time went by.

“Impossible . . . ,” answered the worker.

There had been a time when it was possible, however, and this is when the man went up. Because it can’t be accepted that the boots were up there for no reason at all.

The logical—indeed the only plausible—explanation, is that a man who was wearing boots climbed up to look around, to get a beehive, or whatever. Without noticing, he planted his feet too securely in the fork; and all of a sudden, for some unknown reason, he fell backward, hitting the nape of his neck against the tree trunk. The man either died right away, or later came to his senses but without the strength to pull himself up to the fork and free his boots. At last—after a longer time than you'd think, perhaps—he ended up hanging still, quite dead. Then the man rotted away, and little by little the boots emptied out, till they were completely hollow.

And there they still hung, close together, chilled as I was in the winter twilight.

We didn't find the slightest trace of the man at the foot of the tree; that's obvious.

Yet if we had I don't think it could have been part of my old laborer. He was no climber, and especially not at night. Who was it who climbed, then?

I don't know. But sometimes here in Buenos Aires, when at the onset of a day with north wind I feel my fingers itching for the machete, then I think that some day or other, unexpectedly, I'm going to meet Olivera; that I'm going to run into him, here in the city, and that he'll put his hand on my shoulder, smiling:

"Hey old boss! . . . We did some great work, you and me, up there in Misiones!"

The Exiles

I

Like every frontier region, the province of Misiones—lying between Brazil to the east and Paraguay to the west—is rich in characters who are very picturesque. And the ones who've been born with spin on them, like billiard balls, tend to be remarkably so. They usually hit the cushions and take off in the most unexpected directions. To wit: Juan Brown, who, having gone there for just a few hours to see the Jesuit ruins, stayed for twenty-five years; Dr. Else, who was led by the distillation of oranges to mistake his daughter for a rat; Rivet the chemist, who went out like a light, too full of carburated alcohol; and so many others who, thanks to their spin, reacted in the most unforeseen ways.

In the heroic days of logging and yerba mate, the Upper Paraná served as a field of action for several highly colorful characters, two or three of whom were still around for us to meet thirty years later.

At the head of these stands a brigand so nonchalant about human lives that he would try out his Winchesters on any passerby. He was from Corrientes, to the south, and the speech and customs of his native province were part of his very flesh. His name was Sidney Fitz-Patrick, and he was more learned than a graduate of Oxford.

To the same period belongs Pedrito, the crew-chief whose gangs of meek Indians bought their first trousers at the lumber camps. No one had ever heard a word in a Christian language from this chief with the not very Indian face, till the day that, as he stood by a man who was whistling an aria from La Traviata, the chief paid attention for a moment, and then said in perfect Castilian:

"La Traviata . . . I attended its premiere in Montevideo, in 1859 . . ."

Of course, not even in the gold or rubber regions are there very many of these romantically colorful types. But in the first outposts of civilization north of the Iguazú, some not at all sorry actors played their roles—when the logging and yerba mate camps of the Guayra were supplied by means of huge barges hauled by towline for months and months against a hellish current, and submerged to the gunwales under the weight of damaged merchandise, jerked beef, mules, and men, who for their part pulled like galley slaves, and sometimes came back alone on ten sticks of bamboo adrift, leaving the vessel in the enormous quiet of the wilderness.

Among these first contract laborers was the black man João Pedro, one of the characters from that era who lived down to our day.

João Pedro had come out of the woods at noon one day with his pants rolled up to his knees and the rank of general, leading eight or ten Brazilians in the same ragged state as their commander.

In those times—as now—Brazil, with every revolution, spilled into Misiones escaping hordes whose machetes didn't always get wiped completely dry in foreign territory. João Pedro, a lowly soldier, owed his rise to general to his great knowledge of the wilderness. In these circumstances, and after weeks in virgin forest which the fugitives had nibbled through like tiny mice, the Brazilians blinked their blinded eyes before the Paraná, at whose waters, shining so white they caused those eyes to sting, the forest finally came to an end.

With no reason to stay together now, the men disbanded. João Pedro went up the Paraná as far as the logging camps, where he worked for a short time, with no major troubles—for him at least. And we stress this last detail, because when a while later João Pedro escorted a surveyor into the depths of the jungle, he concluded his report of the trip in this way, and in this frontier mixture of Spanish and Portuguese:

"Then we had a falling out . . . And of the two of us, only one came back." (Después tivemos um disgusto . . . E dos dois, volvió um solo.)

For several years after that he took care of a foreigner's cattle, off in the pastures of the sierra, with the sole object of getting free salt to bait pit-traps and attract jaguars. The owner finally noticed that his heifers were dying as though sick by design in places strategically suitable for hunting jaguars, and he had hard words for his foreman. João Pedro didn't answer at the time; but the next day the settlers found the foreigner on the trail, horribly thrashed by machete blows, as though pounded like yerba with the flat of a stick.

This time too our man's comment was brief:

"He forgot that I was a man like him . . . And I flattened the Frenchman."

The rancher was Italian; but it made no difference, since the nationality assigned to him by João Pedro was at that time generic for all foreigners.

Years later, and lacking the feeblest motive that might explain his change of locale, we find the ex-general heading for a ranch by the Iberá whose owner was famous for his curious way of paying peones who asked for their wages.

João Pedro offered his services, which the rancher accepted in these terms:

"You, nigger, for your kinky hair, I'm going to pay two pesos and cake-sugar for mate. Don't forget to come and collect at the end of the month."

João Pedro left, looking at him over his shoulder; and when he went to draw his pay at the end of the month, the ranch owner told him:

"Hold out your hand, nigger, and grip hard."

And opening the drawer of the table, he fired his revolver at him.

João Pedro took off running with his boss behind him firing away, till he managed to plunge into a pond of putrid waters, where, by slithering under weeds and floating islands, he was able to reach a mound of clay that rose like a cone at its center.

Taking shelter behind it, the Brazilian waited, peeking out at his boss with one eye.

“Don’t move, darky,” yelled the other man, who had run out of ammunition.

João Pedro didn’t move, for behind him the Iberá was gushing toward infinity. And when he stuck out his nose again he saw his boss coming back at a gallop, clutching his Winchester just above the sight.

Then began a tedious chore for the Brazilian: his assailant rode back and forth trying to get a good shot at the black man, who at the same time circled around the mound, evading fire.

“There goes your pay, monkey,” yelled the rancher at a gallop. And the peak of the mound blew to pieces.

The time came when João Pedro couldn’t hang on any longer, and at an opportune moment he sank back into the pestilent water, extending his lips to the surface teeming with mosquitoes and floating islands, so he could breathe. The rancher, his horse walking now, circled around the pond looking for the black man. Then he finally withdrew, whistling softly, with the reins lying slack over his horse’s withers.

In the middle of the night the Brazilian got to the bank of the pond, swollen and shivering, and fled from the ranch, apparently not very satisfied with his boss’s payment, since he stopped in the woods to talk with other escaped peones, who were also owed two pesos and sugar for mate. These workers led an almost independent life, in the woods by day and on the roads by night.

But since they couldn’t forget their ex-boss, they decided to cast lots among themselves for the collection of their wages, and this mission fell to João Pedro, who set out once again for the ranch, riding a mule.

Providentially—since neither of them shunned the meeting—the worker and his boss came together, the rancher with his revolver on his hip, João Pedro with a pistol in his waistband.

They both stopped their mounts at twenty meters.

“All right, darky,” said the boss. “You come to get your wages? I’m going to pay you right away.”

“I’m here to get rid of you,” answered João Pedro. “You fire first, and don’t miss.”

“That’s fine, monkey. Hang onto your kinks then . . .”

“Fire.”

“Ready?”

“Ready,” agreed the black man, pulling his pistol.

The rancher took aim, but the shot missed. And this time again, of the two men only one came back.

II

Another colorful type who lived down to our day was also Brazilian, as were almost all the first settlers of Misiones. He was always known as Tirafogo, and no other name

he might have had was ever learned by anyone, not even the police—on whose threshold, by the way, it was never his lot to tread.

This detail warrants mention, because even after soaking up more alcohol than three young toughs can stand, Tirafogo always managed, drunk or sober, to evade the arms of the law.

The revels brought on by caña—the local rum—at binges in the Upper Paraná are nothing to joke about. A woodsman's machete, given life by a flick of the wrist from a contract laborer, can split the skull of a boar down to the knob of its spinal cord; and once, across a counter, we saw such a machete, with such a backhand stroke, shatter a man's forearm like a stick of sugarcane, after cutting cleanly, in its flight, through the steel of a rat-trap that was hanging from the ceiling.

If in pranks of this sort, or others more trifling, Tirafogo was sometimes a player, the police were unaware of it. In his old age this fact made him laugh, when he remembered it for whatever reason:

"I was never in the police station!"

The most important of all his activities was that of mule-tamer. In the early days it was customary to take skittish mules to the logging camps, and Tirafogo went along with them. At that time there were no open spaces to break them but the cleared areas by the riverbank, and Tirafogo's mules would quickly take off for the trees and crash into them, or tumble into gullies with their rider underneath. His ribs had been broken and repaired countless times, but for that the tamer didn't hold the slightest grudge against the mules.

"All the same," he would say, "I like to struggle with them!" (¡Eu gosto mesmo de lidiar con elas!)

His distinctive quality was optimism. He always found opportunities to show his satisfaction for having lived so long. One of his vanities, which we used to recall with amusement, was his place among the veteran settlers of the region.

"I'm an old-timer!" he'd exclaim, laughing and stretching his neck forward unrestrainedly. "An old-timer!"

During the planting season he could be recognized from afar for his habits when it came to hoeing manioc. In the full heat of summer, and sometimes down in hollows where not a breath of wind can reach, this work is done normally during the first hours of morning and the last of the afternoon. From eleven till two the solitary landscape is scalded in a steam of fire.

These were the hours a barefoot Tirafogo chose for hoeing manioc. He would take off his shirt, roll up his pants above his knees, and—with no protection but his hat, with its fringed brim and band of corn-shuck cigarettes—bend over and conscientiously hoe his manioc, his back glistening with sweat and reflected sunlight.

When the peones went back to their work again, taking advantage of the now breathable atmosphere, Tirafogo had already finished his. He would pick up his hoe, take a cigarette from his hat, and go off smoking and self-satisfied.

“I like to turn the weeds feet up in the sun!” he would say. (¡Eu gosto de goner os yuyos pes arriba ao sol!)

III

At the time I arrived there, we used to run into a very old and skinny black man, who had difficulty walking and always greeted people with a shaky “Goodday, boss,” humbly doffing his hat to anyone at all.

It was João Pedro.

He lived in a hut—the smallest and most deplorable of its kind you can lay eyes on, even in a logging region—at the edge of some land below the flood line and belonging to somebody else. Every spring he sowed a little rice—which he lost every summer—and planted the few maniocs he needed to survive, which it took him all year long to care for, dragging his ancient legs.

That’s all his strength would allow.

By this time Tirafogo wasn’t hoeing for the neighbors anymore. And though he still accepted an occasional order for leather straps, which it took him months to deliver, he no longer bragged about being an old-timer in a region now totally transformed.

Indeed, the customs, the population, and the very appearance of the country were as far as reality from a dream from those of the early virgin days, when there was no limit to the size of clearings, and these were created by and for everyone, under the cooperative system. Unknown in those days were money, and the Rural Code, and gates with padlocks, and breeches in place of the usual baggy bombachas. From the Pequirí to the Paraná, it was all Brazil and the mother tongue, which was used even with the “Frenchmen” of Posadas.

Now the country was different; new, strange, and difficult. And the two antiguos, Tirafogo and João Pedro, were now too old to feel a part of it.

The first had reached the age of eighty, and João Pedro was older still.

João’s stiff joints, and the chills of Tirafogo—whom the first cloudy day would lead to scorch his hands and knees by the fire—made them finally remember, in those hostile surroundings, the sweet warmth of the mother country.

“Look,” João Pedro would say to his countryman, as they both protected themselves from the smoke with their hands: “We’re far from our homeland, seu Tirá . . . And one of these days we’re going to die.”

“That’s right,” Tirafogo would agree, nodding his head in turn. “We’re going to die, seu João . . . and far from home.”

Now they called on each other frequently, and drank mate in silence, rendered speechless by that belated thirst for the motherland. Some memory, usually trivial, would now and then rise to the lips of one or the other, aroused by the warmth of the fireplace.

"We had two cows at home . . . ," said João very slowly. "And I even played with my daddy's pups . . ."

"For sure, seu João . . . ," confirmed Tirá, keeping his eyes—where there smiled an almost childlike tenderness—fixed on the fire.

"And I remember everything . . . And mamae . . . My mama when she was young . . ."

In this way the afternoons went by, with both of them hopelessly estranged in bright new Misiones.

To make things stranger still, in those days the labor movement was getting started, in a region that retains from its Jesuit past only two dogmas: the slavery of work, for the native; and the inviolability of the boss. There were strikes of peones waiting for Boycott, as if he were a figure from Posadas, and demonstrations headed by a bolichero[1] on horseback carrying the red flag, while the illiterate laborers sang the "Internationale," crowding around one of their number so they could read the text, which he was holding up for them to see. There were arrests for reasons other than rum, and even the death of a sahib.

As one of the local folk, João Pedro understood even less of all this than the bolichero with the red cloth; and, numbed by the cold of an autumn already well on its way, he took a walk toward the banks of the Paraná.

Tirafogo had also shaken his head in the presence of the new events. And, affected by these and by the cold wind that blew back the smoke of their fire, the two exiles finally felt their memories of home take plainer shape—memories which came into their minds with the ease and transparency of those of a child.

Yes, their distant motherland, forgotten for eighty years. And which never, never . . .

"Seu Tirá!" said João Pedro suddenly, with tears flowing freely down his ancient cheeks. "I don't want to die without seeing my homeland! . . . It's a very long time I've lived . . ."

To which Tirafogo replied:

"Just now I'd planned to propose to you . . . Just now, seu João Pedro . . . I saw our house in the ashes . . . and the speckled chicken I looked after all by myself . . ."

And with a pout as liquid as the tears of his countryman, he stammered:

"I want to go there! . . . Our homeland is there, seu João Pedro! . . . The mother of old Tirafogo . . ."

In this way the trip became a certainty. And never in any crusader was there greater faith and enthusiasm than in those two almost senile exiles, on the road to their native land.

The preparations were meager, for meager as well were what they were leaving and what they could take along.

[1] Proprietor of a country store (boliche).

They had no plan, really, except to push on persistently, at once blindly and beaming from within, like sleepwalkers, thus day by day getting nearer and nearer to the motherland they longed for. Their childhood recollections occupied their minds to the exclusion of the hazards of the moment. And as they walked, and especially when they camped at night, they would bring forth bits of memory that seemed to be sweet new happenings, judging from the tremor in their voices.

"I never told you, seu Tirdá . . . Once my youngest brother was very sick!"

Or else, from beside the fire and with a smile that had already come to his lips a good while before:

"Once I dropped my daddy's mate . . . And he beat me, seu João!"

They went along like that, overcome with tenderness and fatigue—for the central sierra of Misiones does not favor the passage of exiled old men. Their instinct and knowledge of the woods provided them with their sustenance and the route to follow, by way of the least rugged trails.

Soon, however, they had to move into the trackless bush, since a period of rains had begun—of those heavy rains that swamp the forest in mists between one downpour and another, and turn the trails into roaring gutters of reddish water.

Though beneath the virgin foliage, no matter how severe the deluge, the water never flows above the bed of humus, the squalor and prevailing humidity by no means further the welfare of those who walk through it. So there came a morning when the two old exiles, laid low by consumption and fever, couldn't get on their feet.

From the crest where they found themselves, and at the first ray of sunlight, which broke through the fog very late that day, Tirafogo, who had a bit more life left than his comrade, lifted his eyes and recognized their native stands of pine. Far away in the valley, through the tall conifers, he saw an old clearing whose lush greenery was bathed in light amid the somber araucarias.

"Seu João!" he murmured, barely propping himself up on his fists. "It's our homeland you can see there! We've arrived, seu João Pedro!"

When he heard this João Pedro opened his eyes, fixing them steadily on the void for quite a while.

"I'm already there, meu compatricio . . . ," he said.

Tirafogo never took his eyes off the clearing.

"I saw our homeland . . . it's there," he murmured.

"I've arrived," the dying man persisted. "You saw our homeland . . . And I'm already there."

"The truth is . . . seu João Pedro," said Tirafogo, "the truth is that you're about to die . . . You never arrived!"

João Pedro didn't answer this time. He had finally arrived.

For a long time Tirafogo lay extended face down against the wet ground, now and then moving his lips. At last he opened his eyes, and his features suddenly broadened into an expression of childish delight:

"I've arrived, Mama! . . . João Pedro was right . . . I'm going with him! . . ." (¡Ya cheguei, mamae! . . . O João Pedro tinha razón . . . ¡Vou con ele! . . .)

Van-Houten

I

One fiery day at siesta time, a hundred meters from his hut, I found him caulking a guabiroba he had just finished making.

"You can see," he told me, brushing his wet forearm across his still wetter face, "that I made the canoe. The wood is aged timbó, and she can carry a hundred arrobas—more than a metric ton. Not like that one of yours, which can hardly hold up under you. Now I want to enjoy myself."

"When Don Luis wants to enjoy himself," added Paolo, changing his pick for his shovel, "you have to let him. He leaves the work for me then; but I just get paid for what I do, and get along by myself."

And he went on shoveling the rubble of the quarry, naked from the waist up, like his partner Van-Houten.

Paolo was a man with the arms and shoulders of an ape, whose only worry had always been never to work under anyone's orders, not even by the day. He got so much per meter of flagstone slabs delivered, and here his duties and privileges ended. He bragged about it at every opportunity, to the point that he seemed to have adapted the moral norm of his life to this independence in his work. And he had the peculiar habit—when he came back from town on Saturday nights, alone and on foot as always—of calculating his earnings out loud along the road.

Van-Houten, his partner, was a Belgian of Flemish origin, sometimes called What's-Left-of-Van-Houten, since he was missing an eye, an ear, and three fingers from his right hand. The whole socket of his vacant eye was burned blue by blasting powder. For the rest he was a short and very sturdy man, with a bristly red beard. His fiery hair fell in constantly sweaty tufts over a very narrow forehead. His shoulders dipped in turn as he walked, and above all he was very ugly, in the style of Verlaine, whose homeland he almost shared, for Van-Houten had been born in Charleroi.[1]

His Flemish origin showed up in his phlegmatic capacity for putting up with misfortune. All he would do was shrug his shoulders and spit. He was also the most unselfish man in the world, never worrying a bit about getting back the money he'd lent, or that a sudden swelling of the Paraná carried off his few cows. He would spit, and

[1] On the way to Brussels with Rimbaud in 1872, Verlaine passed through Charleroi and wrote a poem about the town, later published in Romances sans paroles (1874). He also lectured there in 1893. Verlaine was born in Metz, less than 200 kilometers to the southeast.

that was that. He had just one close friend, and was seen with him only on Saturday nights, when they would set out together on horseback for the town. For twenty-four hours straight they would make the rounds of the boliches, one by one, drunk and inseparable. On Sunday night their respective horses, by force of habit, would take them home—and there the friendship ended. During the rest of the week they never saw each other at all.

I'd always been curious to know firsthand what had happened to Van-Houten's eye and fingers. That day at siesta time, after insidiously leading him onto his own ground with questions about quarries, blasting holes, and explosives, I got what I was longing for, and it goes like this:

"The one to blame for it all was a Brazilian who made me lose my head over his powder. My brother didn't believe in that powder, but I did, and it cost me an eye. I didn't think it would cost me anything, because I'd already escaped alive twice before.

"The first time was in Posadas. I'd just arrived, and my brother had been there for five years. We had a comrade, a heavy smoker from Milan, with a cap and cane he never parted with. When he went down to work he'd put the cane inside his coat. When he wasn't drunk he was a hard man in the pits.

"We agreed to dig a well, not at so much a meter as it's done now, but for the whole well, till it gave water. We had to dig till we struck it.

"We were the first to use dynamite on the job. In Posadas there's nothing but hard slate; wherever you scratch, a meter down the slate appears. There's quite a bit here too, after you get through the ruins. It's harder than iron and makes the pick bounce up to your nose.

"We were eight meters down in that shaft when one afternoon my brother, after setting a charge at the bottom, lit the fuse and climbed out of the well. My brother had worked alone that afternoon, because the guy from Milan was running around drunk with his cap and cane, and I was in my cot with the shivers.

"At sunset, chilled to death, I went to see how the work was going, and right then my brother started to yell at the guy from Milan, who had climbed the stone fence and was cutting himself on the glass fragments embedded along the top. As I approached the well I slipped on the pile of rubble there, and just barely had time to catch myself at the very edge of the hole; but one of my leather work shoes, which I was wearing without socks or laces, came off my foot and fell into the well. My brother didn't see me, and I went down to get the shoe. You know how it's done, right? With your legs apart on two walls of the shaft, and your hands to hang on with. If it'd been lighter I'd have seen the drilled-out blasting hole and the stone dust beside it. But I couldn't see a thing except a bright circle up above, and farther down some sparks of light on the tips of the stones. You can find a lot of things at the bottom of a well, including crickets that fall in from the top, and all the humidity you like; but air to breathe, that you're never going to find.

"Well, if I hadn't had my nose blocked by the fever, I'd have smelled the odor of the fuse right away. And when I got to the bottom and smelled it well—the rotten odor of

the powder—I knew for sure that between my legs I had a loaded and ignited charge of dynamite.

"Up above appeared the head of my brother, yelling at me. And the more he yelled, the more his head shrank and the well stretched and stretched till its entrance was a dot in the sky—because I had the shivers and a fever.

"At any moment the charge was going to blow, and I was above it, glued to the stone wall, and just as likely to fly off in pieces up to the mouth of the shaft. My brother kept yelling louder and louder, till he sounded like a woman. But I wasn't strong enough to climb out in a hurry, and threw myself to the floor, flattened like the head of a crowbar. My brother figured out what was going on, since he stopped yelling.

"Well, the five seconds I was waiting for the charge to finally explode seemed like five or six years, with their months, weeks, days, and minutes, each hard after the other.

"Afraid? Bah, I had too much to do keeping my mind on the fuse that was burning down to the end . . . Afraid, no. It was a question of waiting, that's all; waiting for every instant; now . . . now . . . With that I had enough to keep me busy.

"Finally the charge went off. Dynamite works downward; even hired hands know that. But the shattered stone flies upward, and after I sailed against the wall and fell face down, with a train whistle in either ear, I heard the stones falling back to the bottom. Just one fairly big one hit me—here on the calf of the leg, a soft spot. And besides, the jolt to my ribs, the putrid gases from the charge, and above all my head, swollen with throbbing jabs and whistles, prevented my feeling the shower of stones too much. I've never seen a miracle, and still less next to a dynamite charge. Yet I got out alive. My brother came down right away, I managed to climb out on shaky knees, and we took off at once to get drunk for two days running.

"That was the first time I escaped. The second was also in a well I'd struck a deal to dig. I was at the bottom, cleaning up the rubble from a charge that had gone off the previous afternoon. Up above, my helper was pulling up and dumping the shattered stone. He was a guaino—a young Paraguayan—skinny and yellow as a skeleton. The whites of his eyes were almost blue, and he hardly ever spoke. Every three days he had the shivers.

"After cleaning up, I secured the pick and shovel on the line above the bucket, and the youngster pulled up the tools—which, I think I said, were held by a hitch, not a real knot. That's the way it's always done, and there's no worry about them slipping out, as long as the one who's pulling isn't a bugger like my laborer.

"What happened is that when the bucket got to the top, instead of grabbing the line above the tools to pull them clear, the poor devil grabbed the bucket. The hitch came loose and the boy only had time to get hold of the shovel.

"Fine. Listen to the size of the well: at that time it was fourteen meters deep, and only a meter or one-twenty wide. There's nothing funny about that hard slate when it comes to spending extra time to make wide pits, and besides, the narrower the well, the easier it is to climb up and down along the walls.

“So the well was like the barrel of a shotgun, and I was down at one end looking up, when I saw the pick coming from the other.

“Bah! Once the guy from Milan lost his footing and sent me down a stone weighing twenty kilos. But the well was still shallow, and I saw it coming, straight down. The pick I saw too, but it came down doing flips, banging from wall to wall, and it was easier to see yourself already done in, with twelve inches of steel in your skull, than to guess where it was going to fall.

“At first I started to dodge it, with my gaping face intent on the pick. Then I saw right away that it was useless, and clung to the wall, like a dead man, very still and stretched out as though I were a corpse already, while the pick came down like a madman doing somersaults, and the stones fell like rain.

“Well, it hit for the last time an inch from my head and bounced aside to the other wall; and there it landed in a corner, on the floor of the well. Then I climbed out, with no grudge against the guaino who, yellower than ever, had gone to the rear with his hand on his belly. I wasn’t mad at the bugger, since I felt plenty lucky getting out of the well alive, like a worm, with my head full of sand. That afternoon and the next morning I didn’t work, since I spent the time drunk with the guy from Milan.

“That was the second time I escaped death, and both of them inside a well. The third time was in the open air, in a slab quarry like this one, and the sun was so hot it was cracking the earth.

“This time I wasn’t so lucky . . . Bah! I’m tough to kill. The Brazilian—I told you to start with that he was to blame—had never tried out his powder. This I saw after the experiment. But he was a hell of a talker, and in the grocery he’d tell me his tales without a break, as I was sampling the new rum. He never drank. He knew a lot of chemistry, and a batch of other things; but he was a quack who got drunk on his own knowledge. He’d invented that new powder himself—he gave it the name of a letter of the alphabet—and he ended up making my head swim with his speeches.

“My brother told me: ‘All that is just talk. What he’s going to do is get money out of you.’ And I answered: ‘He won’t get a penny out of me.’ Then,’ added my brother, the two of you are going to fly through the air if you use that powder.’

“That’s what he told me, because he firmly believed it, and he even repeated it while he was watching us load the blasting hole.

“As I told you, there was a fiery sun, and the quarry was burning our feet. My brother and some other curious parties had stretched out under a tree, waiting for the event; but the Brazilian and I paid no attention, since we were both convinced we’d succeed. When we finished loading the charge, I started to tamp it down. Here, you know, we use the earth from clay mounds for this, earth that’s very dry. So down on my knees I started pounding with the tamper, while the Brazilian, standing beside me, mopped his brow, and the others waited.

“Well, at the third or fourth stroke my hand felt the jolt of the charge going off, but I didn’t feel anything else because I fell unconscious two meters away.

“When I came to I couldn’t even move a finger, but I could hear all right. And from what they were telling me I realized I was still beside the blast hole, and my face was nothing but blood and torn flesh. And I heard one of them say: ‘As for this guy, he’s gone to the other side.’

“Bah! . . . I’m tough. For two months I was between losing and not losing my eye, and they finally took it out. And I came out fine, as you can see. I never saw the Brazilian again, because he crossed the river that same night; he hadn’t been hurt at all. The whole blast was for me, and he was the one who’d invented the powder.

“So you see,” he finally concluded, getting up and mopping his brow, “it’s not just any old way that they’re going to finish off Van-Houten. But bah . . . !” (with a final shrug of his shoulders): “Anyhow, not much is lost if you go to the grave . . .”

And he spit.

II

One murky autumn night, in my canoe, I was going down a Paraná so depleted that even in the channel the limpid and forceless water seemed held back to be clarified still more. The banks spread into the watercourse as far as the river receded, and the shorelines, usually formed by woods cooling off in the waters, now consisted of two wide parallel beaches of dappled and muddy clay, where it was barely possible to walk. The shallows of the shoals, revealed by the darker color of the water there, mottled the Paraná with long cones of shadow, whose peaks thrust sharply into the channel. Sandbars and little black islands of basalt had emerged where a month earlier keels were cutting through the deep water with no risk. The scows and canoes that go up river faithfully clinging to the shore scraped their oars on the stony bottom of the shoals, a whole kilometer into the river.

For a canoe exposed reefs present no danger at all, even at night. On the other hand, shallows hidden in the channel itself can be dangerous, since they are usually peaks of steep hills, around which the deep chasm of water still goes down after seventy meters. If your canoe runs aground on one of those submerged summits, there’s no way of getting it loose; it’ll spin around for hours and hours on its bow or stern, or more commonly on its very center.

Due to the extreme lightness of my canoe, I was hardly exposed to such a mishap. So I was going calmly downstream over the black waters, when my attention was attracted by an unusual flickering of wind-lanterns, toward the beach of Itahú.

At such an hour on a murky night, the Upper Paraná, its woods and its waters, is a single blotch of ink where nothing can be seen. The rower gets his bearings from the pulse of the current on the oars; from the greater density of the darkness as one approaches the banks; from the changing temperature of the atmosphere; from the eddies and backwaters; in short, from a series of almost indefinable signs.

I accordingly put ashore at the beach of Itahú and, guided up to VanHouten's but by the lanterns, which led that way, I saw the man himself, stretched out on his back on his cot, with his eye more open and glassy than to be expected.

He was dead. His still-dripping shirt and trousers, and his swollen paunch, revealed very plainly the cause of his death.

Paolo was giving the accident its due, telling all the neighbors about it as they kept coming in. He never varied the expressions or gestures of his account, and stood constantly facing the deceased, as though he were using him as a witness.

"Ah, you saw," he addressed me as he saw me come in. "What had I always told him? That he was going to drown with his canoe. There you have him, stiff as he can be. He was stiff from this morning on, and he still wanted to take along a bottle of rum. I told him:

"'What I think, Don Luis, is that if you take the rum you're going to tip over and go down head first in the river.'

"He answered me:

"'Tip over, that's something nobody's seen Van-Houten do . . . And if I do tip over, bah, what's the difference?'

"And he spit—you know he always talked that way—and he left for the beach. But I had nothing to do with him, because I work by the job. So I told him:

"'I'll see you tomorrow then, and leave the rum here.'

"He replied:

"'As for the rum, I'm not leaving it.'

"And, staggering, he got into his canoe.

"Now there he is, stiffer than this morning. Josesinho and Cross-eyed Romualdo brought him in a while ago and left him on the beach, more swollen than a barrel. They found him on the rocks across from Puerto Chuño. The canoe was lying up against the islet there, and Don Luis they fished out with their line in ten fathoms of water."

"But the accident," I interrupted him, "how did it happen?"

"I didn't see it. Josesinho didn't see it either, but he heard Don Luis, because he was going by with Romualdo to cast the line on the other side. Don Luis was yelling, singing and struggling at the same time, and Josesinho realized he'd run aground, and yelled at him not to row astern, because as soon as the canoe came clear he'd fall backward into the water. Later Josesinho and Romualdo heard the splash in the river, and the voice of Don Luis, who sounded like he was swallowing water.

"As for swallowing water . . . Look at him, he's got his belt at his groin, and now he's empty. But when we laid him out on the beach he was spouting water like an alligator. I was stepping on his belly, and with every push of my foot a tall stream came squirting out of his mouth.

"A bold man with stone, and too tough to die in the pits, he was. It's true he drank too much; I can vouch for that. But I never said anything to him, because I worked with him by the job, you know."

I continued my trip. For a long while, from the river shrouded in darkness, I could still see the lit-up window shining, so low it seemed to blink right on the water. Then the distance shut it off. But some time passed before I stopped seeing Van-Houten stretched out on the beach and turned into a water fountain, under the foot of his partner who was stomping on his paunch.

Tacuara-Mansión

I

In front of the but of Don Juan Brown, in Misiones, rises a tree with a thick trunk and twisted branches, which shelters the house with its lush foliage. Under this tree, while he was waiting for daylight to go back home, died the chemist, Santiago Rivet, in circumstances strange enough to merit being told.

Misiones, located at the southern edge of a rain forest which begins there and ends in the Amazon basin, provides a haven for an array of human types whom one might reasonably accuse of anything whatsoever—except being boring. North of Posadas, the most uninteresting of lives includes two or three small epics of work or strong character, if not of blood. For it's easy to understand that the types who have gone and got stranded up there—after their first soaking or in the final ebb tide of their lives—are far from timid pussycats of civilization.

Though he never attained the picturesque contours of a João Pedro, for times had changed and he was a man of different stuff, Don Juan Brown deserves special mention among the characters who belonged to that world.

Brown was an Argentine and a totally native one, despite his great British reserve. He'd spent two or three brilliant years studying engineering in La Plata. One day—none of us knows why—he cut short his studies and drifted up to Misiones. I think I heard him say he came to Iviraromí for a couple of hours, just to see the ruins. Later he ordered his bags sent up from Posadas, so as to stay two days more. I met him there fifteen years after that, and he hadn't left the place, in all that time, for a single hour. He wasn't that interested in the country; he just stayed there because it was clearly not worth his trouble to do anything else.

He was still a young man, heavy-set, and very tall as well, for he weighed 100 kilos—some 220 pounds. When he galloped his horse—a rare occurrence—it was notorious that you could see the horse dipping his spine, and Don Juan holding him up with his feet on the ground.

In keeping with the gravity of his bearing, Don Juan was a man of few words. His broad, clean-shaven face, under long and swept-back hair, was more than a little reminiscent of that of a revolutionary tribune of 1793. Due to his corpulence, he had some difficulty breathing. He always had dinner at four in the afternoon, and at nightfall unfailingly arrived at the bar—whatever the weather—at the pace of his heroic pony, being the last of all, again unfailingly, to leave. Just plain Don Juan we called him,

and as much respect was inspired by his bulk as by his character. Here we have two illustrations of that peculiar character:

One night, while he was playing truco with the then justice of the peace, the judge found himself in a tough spot and made a try at cheating. Don Juan looked at his opponent without saying a word, and kept on playing. This encouraged the mestizo, and since chance continued favoring Don Juan, he tried to cheat again. Juan Brown took a glance at the cards and told the judge calmly:

"That's the second time you cheated; deal the cards again."

Effusive apologies from the half-breed, and then another relapse. In the same calm manner, Don Juan warned him:

"You keep on cheating; deal the cards again."

Another night, during a chess game, Don Juan's revolver fell to the floor and a shot went off. Brown picked up the revolver without a word and kept on playing, faced with the noisy remarks of his companions, every last one of whom thought that he'd been hit by the bullet. Not till the end of the game was it learned that the one who got the slug in his leg was Don Juan himself.

Brown lived alone in Tacuara-Mansión (so named because it was really built of tacuara bamboo, and for another scornful reason). Employed as his cook was a Hungarian with a very hard and open look, who seemed to eject his words in explosions through his teeth. He revered Don Juan, who for his part hardly ever spoke to him.

To round out his character: Not till many years later, when there was finally a piano in Ivirarome, did we come to know that Don Juan was a superb performer.

II

The most distinctive thing about Don Juan Brown, however, was the relationship he cultivated with Monsieur Rivet, known officially as Santiago-Guido-Luciano-María Rivet.

Rivet was a perfect ex-man, cast up to Ivirarome by the last big wave of his life. Having arrived in the country twenty years back, and later performed brilliantly as technical director of a distillery in Tucumán, he little by little reduced the scope of his intellectual pursuits, till he finally washed up in Ivirarome as a piece of human wreckage.

Nothing is known of his arrival there. One day at twilight, as we were sitting at the door of the bar, we saw him come out of the woods by the Jesuit ruins, in the company of Luisser—a one-armed mechanic, as poor as he was cheerful, who always said he didn't lack a thing, despite the fact that he lacked an arm.

At that time the optimistic fellow was involved in the distillation of orange leaves, in the most original still you can imagine. Later we'll come back to this phase of his

life.[1] For now we can say that in those moments of distilling fever the arrival of an industrial chemist of the stature of Rivet really fired up the fantasies of the poor one-armed man. He was the one who told us about Monsieur Rivet, and then introduced him one Saturday night in the bar, which from then on the chemist honored with his presence.

Monsieur Rivet was a very skinny little man, who on Sundays combed his hair into two greasy waves, one on each side of his forehead. In the middle of his beard, always unshaven but never long, his lips were constantly thrust forward in profound contempt for everyone, and in particular for the doctores—the "scholars"—of Iviraromí. The most careful test of dryers for yerba mate to be discussed in the bar would hardly extract anything from the chemist but contemptuous spitting, and broken bits of sentences:

"Tzsh! . . . Doctorcitos . . . They don't know a thing . . . Tzsh! . . . Hogwash . . ."

From all or almost all points of view, our man was the exact opposite of the impassible Juan Brown. To say nothing of their relative corpulence: for never in any boliche of the Upper Paraná did anyone ever get to see a person with narrower shoulders, or one more rachitically thin, than Mosiú Rivet. Though we didn't come to appreciate this fully till the Sunday night when the chemist made his entrance into the bar dressed in a brand-new little black suit, fit for an adolescent, which was tight in the back and legs even for him. But Rivet seemed to be proud of it, and only wore it on Saturday and Sunday nights.

III

The bar we've referred to was a little hotel for refreshing the tourists who came up to Iviraromí in the wintertime to visit the famous Jesuit ruins, and who after lunch continued on to the Iguazú or went back to Posadas. During the rest of the time the bar belonged to us. It served as the inevitable meeting place for those settlers with some modicum of culture in Iviraromí: seventeen in all. And, in that amalgam of frontiersmen by the forest, one of the major curiosities was the fact that all seventeen played chess, and well. So that sometimes their meetings would proceed in silence amid shoulders bent over five or six chessboards, between pairs of characters half of whom couldn't finish signing their names without drying their hands two or three times.

By midnight the bar was deserted, except for those days when Don Juan had spent all morning and all afternoon leaning on the counters of all the boliches in Iviraromí. Then he was unshakable. Those were bad nights for the barman, for Brown had the soundest head in the region. Propped up against the drinks-counter, he watched the hours go by one after the other, without moving or hearing the barman, who in order to get Don Juan to leave would go outside every few minutes to predict rain.

[1] "The Orange-Distillers," below.

Since Monsieur Rivet had proved that he too could hold his liquor, soon the ex-chemist and the ex-engineer began to meet in frequent drinking bouts. Let it not be thought, however, that this common aim and end in life had produced the slightest trace of friendship between them. Don Juan, after a "Good evening" more suggested than spoken, would ignore his companion completely. And Rivet in turn did not restrain, for the sake of Juan Brown, the contempt he felt for the doctores of Iviraromí, among whom he of course included Don Juan. They would spend the night together and alone, and sometimes continued all morning in the first boliche to open its doors; but without even looking at each other.

These odd sessions became more common about halfway through the winter when Rivet's partner started making orange alcohol, under the direction of the chemist. Once this enterprise had ended in the catastrophe we describe in another story, Rivet went to the bar every night, in his slim little black suit. And since Don Juan at that time was on one of his worst benders, they both had opportunities to stage fantastic confrontations, till they came to the last of them, which was the decisive one.

IV

For the foregoing reasons, and the obvious profits he earned thereby, the bar-owner went sleepless at night, with nothing to do but look after the glasses of the two drinkers, and refill the alcohol lamp. And you can be sure it was cold on those raw June nights. As a result the bolichero gave up one night, and after entrusting the rest of the demijohn of rum to Juan Brown's integrity, he went to bed. Needless to say it was Brown alone who assumed responsibility for the dual expenditures.

So Don Juan and Monsieur Rivet were left by themselves at one o'clock in the morning, Brown in his usual place, stoned and impassive as always, and the chemist pacing around excitedly with his brow in a sweat—while outside a bitter frost was settling in.

For two hours there were no surprises; but as it struck three the demijohn went dry. They both noticed it, and for a long while Don Juan's bulging and lifeless eyes were fixed on the void in front of him. Finally, half turning, he took a glance at the empty demijohn, then resumed his pose behind it. Another long while elapsed, and again he turned to look at the container. Seizing it at last, he held it upside down above the metal counter. Nothing: not a drop.

An attack of dipsomania can be turned aside however you like, except by the abrupt withdrawal of the drug. From time to time, and at the very doors of the bar, the strident crowing of a rooster split the air, causing Brown to wheeze and Rivet to break the rhythm of his pacing. In the end the rooster drove the chemist into a string of woolly jeers against the doctorcitos. At first Don Juan didn't pay the slightest attention to

his convulsive babbling; but faced with the constant "Hogwash . . . they don't know a thing . . ." of the ex-chemist, he turned his heavy-lidded eyes in his direction, and said:

"And what do you know?"

Rivet, at a trot and drooling spit, then launched into the same sort of invective against Don Juan, who followed him stubbornly with his eyes. Finally he looked away and snorted:

"Goddamned Frenchman . . ."

Their situation, however, was becoming intolerable. Juan Brown's gaze, which had been fixed on the lamp for a while, finally fell sideways onto his companion:

"You who know about everything, industrialist . . . Is carburated alcohol drinkable?"

Alcohol! The mere word stifled Rivet's annoyance like a breath of fire. Looking at the lamp, he stammered:

"Carburated? . . . Tzsh! . . . Hogwash . . . Benzines . . . Piridines . . . Tzsh! . . . You can drink it."

That was enough. The drinkers lit a candle, poured the alcohol into the demijohn through its own stinking funnel, and both came back to life.

Carburated alcohol is no drink for human beings. When they'd emptied the demijohn down to the last drop, Don Juan, for the first time in his life, lost his impassible composure and fell—tumbled like an elephant into his chair. Rivet was sweating to the very locks of his hair, and couldn't detach himself from the rail of the billiard table.

"Let's go," said Don Juan, pulling along the resisting Rivet. Brown managed to cinch his horse and to hoist the chemist onto its croup, and at four in the morning they left the bar, at the walking gait of Brown's stallion, which was capable of trotting with 100 kilos in the saddle, and thus could easily walk with a load of 140.

The night, here very cold and clear, must have been already veiled in fog in the basin of the mountain streams. Indeed, as soon as they got within sight of the valley of the Yabebirí, they could see the mist—lying all along the river since earlier that day—rise up the skirt of the mountain range, unraveling into shreds. Still farther down, the tepid woods must have been already white with steamy haze.

What happened was this: the travelers stumbled suddenly into the underbrush, when they should already have been at Tacuara-Mansión. The tired-out horse resisted leaving the place. Don Juan changed direction, and a while later they had the woods in front of them again.

"We're lost," thought Don Juan, his teeth chattering in spite of himself, for even though the closed-in fog prevented a freeze, the cold was no less biting. He took another heading, this time relying on his horse. Under his astrakhan jacket, Brown could tell he was soaking in icy sweat. The chemist, more severely traumatized, was bouncing around behind him, totally unconscious.

The underbrush made them stop again. With that Don Juan decided he'd done everything possible to reach his house. So right where he was he tied his horse to the first tree and lay down at the foot of it, stretching Rivet out beside him. Visibly shrunken, the chemist had drawn up his knees to his chest and was trembling incessantly. He

took up no more space than a child, and a thin one at that. Don Juan looked at him for a moment and, shrugging his shoulders a bit, took off the saddle blanket he'd thrown over himself and used it to cover Rivet. That done, he stretched out on his back on the icy grass.

When he came to, the sun was already very high. And there was his house, just ten meters away.

What had happened was very simple: not for a moment had they gone astray the night before. The horse had stopped the first time—and every time—by the big tree in front of Tacuara-Mansión, which the fog and the lamp alcohol had prevented its owner from seeing. The seemingly endless marches and countermarches had been confined to simple rings around the familiar tree.

In any case, they had just been discovered by Don Juan's Hungarian. Between the two of them they carried Monsieur Rivet to the hut, in the same shivering child's posture in which he'd died. As for Juan Brown, he lay sleepless for a long time—and despite the hot-water crocks—as he stubbornly calculated, facing his cedar dividing wall, the number of boards they would need for his drinking-partner's coffin.

And the next morning the neighbor-ladies on the stony road by the Yabebirí heard from a distance, and then saw go by, the bouncy little sturdy-wheeled cart—followed hurriedly by the one-armed man—which was carrying off the remains of the deceased chemist.

V

In a bad way despite his enormous stamina, Don Juan didn't leave Tacuara-Mansión for ten days. Still he wasn't spared a visitor who went to find out what had happened, under the pretext of consoling Don Juan and singing hallelujahs for the distinguished chemist who'd passed away.

Don Juan let him talk without interrupting. Finally, in the face of renewed praises of the intellectual exiled in the wilds who had just died, Don Juan shrugged his shoulders:

"Lousy gringo . . . ," he muttered, looking the other way.

And this was all there was to the funeral oration for Monsieur Rivet.

The Darkroom

I

One rainy night at the bar by the ruins we got the news that our justice of the peace, on a trip to Buenos Aires, had been the victim of a confidence game, and that he was coming back very ill.

Both pieces of news surprised us, because there never set foot in Misiones a more distrusting fellow than our judge, and we had never taken his asthma seriously, nor the frequent toothache he treated with a mouthwash of brandy which he never spit out. Swindle him? We'd have to see that.

In the story about the half-liter of carburated alcohol drunk by Don Juan Brown and his partner Rivet, I've already reported the incident at the card table and the part played in it by the justice of the peace.

The name of this functionary was Malaquias Sotelo. He was a stubby Indian with a very short neck, the nape of which seemed to resist his straightening up his head. He had a strong jaw and a forehead so low that his hair, short and stiff as wire, sprouted in a blue line two finger-widths above his thick eyebrows. Below were two sunken little eyes that looked out with perpetual suspicion, especially when they were drowned in distress by his asthma. Then his eyes turned from side to side with the panting apprehension of a trapped animal, and it was a pleasure to avoid looking at him on such occasions.

Beyond this manifestation of his native soul, he was a fellow incapable of squandering a penny on anything whatsoever, and very strong-willed.

From the time he was a boy he'd been a police trooper in rural Corrientes. The surge of restlessness that blows like a north wind upon the destinies of those who live in frontier regions drove him to abruptly abandon this job for that of doorkeeper at the superior court in Posadas. There, sitting in the entranceway, he learned all by himself to read from La Nación and La Prensa. Not everyone failed to guess the aspirations of that quiet little Indian, and a decade later we find him in charge of the peace court in Iviraromí.

He had a fair amount of learning acquired on the sly, quite a bit more than he showed, and recently he'd bought the multivolume World History of Cesare Cantú. But this we didn't find out till later, due to the secrecy with which he hid his ambition to become a "doctor" from the sneers it would surely arouse.

On horseback (nobody ever saw him walk two blocks) he was the best-dressed guy in town. But in his but he always went around barefoot, and toward evening would read by the edge of the highroad in a rocking chair, wearing leather moccasins he made himself, with no socks. He had a few leatherworking tools, and dreamed of getting a shoemaker's sewing machine.

My acquaintance with the judge dated from when I'd just arrived in the region and he came to my shop one afternoon, to ask me—at the very end of the ceremonious visit—if I knew a process that was faster than tannin and less burning than bichromate, for tanning carpincho leather (his moccasins).

Deep down, the man didn't like me much, or at least distrusted me. And this I suppose stemmed from a certain banquet with which the aristocrats of the region—yerba planters, public officials, and bolicheros—celebrated a national holiday, shortly after my arrival, in the square amid the Jesuit ruins, viewed and surrounded by a thousand poor devils and excited children—a banquet I didn't attend but did observe quite thoroughly, in the company of a one-eyed carpenter who one black night had poked out his eye by sneezing into a barbed-wire fence with too much liquor in him, and a Brazilian hunter, an old and withdrawn beast of the woods who, after looking askance at my bicycle for three months straight, had ended up muttering in Portuguese:

"Horse made out of sticks . . ."

My undistinguished company and the work clothes I usually wore, and didn't take off for the holiday—this latter fact especially—were no doubt the cause of the suspicion the justice of the peace could never shed concerning me.

He'd recently gotten married to Elena Pilsudski, a young Polish girl who'd been his companion for eight years, and who sewed their children's clothes with her husband's leatherworker's thread. She worked like a farmhand from dawn to dusk (the judge had a good eye), and distrusted all visitors, whom she watched with a wild and open look, not very different from that of her heifers, who hardly ran faster than their owner when she flew after them at daybreak, with her skirt at her waist and her thighs exposed, through the tall and water-soaked esparto grass.

There was one more person in the family, though only now and then did he honor Iviraromí with his presence: Don Estanislao Pilsudski, Sotelo's father-in-law.

This man was a Pole whose stringy beard clung to the angles of his skinny face, who always wore new boots and was dressed in a long black coat like a caftan. He was constantly smiling, and quick to anticipate the opinion of the humblest person who might speak to him; this being how you could tell he was an old fox. During his stay among us he never missed a night at the bar, arriving always with a different walking stick if the weather was good, and with his umbrella if it was raining. He would make the rounds of the gaming tables, stopping a long while at each one so as to please everybody; or stand by the billiard table with his hands under his coat behind him, rocking back and forth and approving every shot, whether it was a miscue or not. We called him Fine-Heart because that was his usual way of referring to someone's good character.

Naturally, the justice of the peace had been the first to earn that designation—when Sotelo, a land-owner as well as a judge, had finally married Elena out of love for their children. But all of us were included too in the effusions of the honey-tongued rascal.

II

Such are the characters taking part in the photographic affair which is the theme of this story.

As I said at the start, the news of the swindle that stung the judge hadn't met with the slightest acceptance among us. Sotelo was suspicion and mistrust personified; and no matter how provincial he might feel on the Paseo de Julio in Buenos Aires, none of us could see in him the sort of stuff susceptible to any kind of deceit. Furthermore, we didn't know the source of the rumor; it had surely come up from Posadas, like the news of his return and his sickness, which unfortunately was true.

I was the first of us to learn of it, as I was coming back home one morning with my hoe over my shoulder. As I crossed the highroad to the new port, a boy reined in his galloping white horse on the bridge to tell me that the justice of the peace had arrived the night before, on one of the steamboats that make the run to the Iguazú, and that they'd carried him off because he was very sick. And that he was going to notify the family so they could bring a cart to take him home.

"But what's the matter with him?" I asked the boy.

"I don't know," he replied. "He can't talk . . . there's something wrong with his breathing . . ."

As sure as I was of Sotelo's scant good will toward me, and that his vaunted illness was nothing but a common attack of asthma, I decided to go see him. So I saddled my horse, and in ten minutes was there.

At the new port of Iviraromí there's a big new shed that serves as a yerba warehouse, and a run-down, unoccupied chalet that once was a grocery and boarding house. It's empty now, and there's nothing in its gloomy rooms but maybe a moldy carriage valance, and an old telephone on the floor.

In one of those rooms I found our judge lying on a cot, dressed but without a jacket. He was almost sitting up, with his shirt open and his false collar undone, though still fastened at the back. He was breathing the way an asthmatic breathes during a violent attack, which isn't pleasing to behold. When he saw me his head shook on the pillow, he raised an arm that moved around disconcertedly, and then the other, which he brought to his mouth in a spasmodic gesture. But he couldn't manage to tell me anything.

Aside from his facial features, from the inscrutable sunkenness of his eyes and the gritty leanness of his nose, something in particular caught my attention: his hands,

half-emerging from his shirt-cuffs, blue-nailed and fleshless; the livid, locked-together fingers starting to curl up above the sheet.

I looked at him more carefully, and then I saw, I clearly realized that the judge's moments were numbered; that he was dying, that at that very instant he was passing away. Immobile at the foot of the cot, I saw him grope for something on the sheet and, as if he couldn't find it, sink his nails in slowly. I saw him open his mouth, gently move his head and fix his eyes with some amazement on one side of the roof, and there detain his gaze, now fixed on the sheet-metal roof for all eternity.

Dead! In the brief span of ten minutes I had left the house whistling, to console the pusillanimous judge who flushed his mouth with rum between toothaches and attacks of asthma, and was coming back with my eyes stony from the image of a man who had waited precisely for me to come to entrust me with the spectacle of his death.

I suffer acutely from scenes like that. As many times as I've been able to, I've avoided looking at corpses. A dead person for me is something very different from a mere body that's just lost its life. It's an alien thing, a substance horribly old, yellow, and inert, that horribly reminds us of someone we've known. So you'll understand my displeasure before the gross and uncalled-for still-life with which the distrusting judge had honored me.

The rest of the morning I stayed home, listening to the come-and-go of galloping horses. When it was almost noon, I saw a flatbed cart go by, pulled by three mules at a good trot, and in it Elena and her father, standing up and bouncing around as they clung to the rail.

I still don't know why the little Pole didn't come down to see her dead husband sooner. Maybe her father arranged things that way, so as to do them in proper form: the trip down with the widow in the cart, and the return in the same vehicle with the dead man jiggling in the back. That way it didn't cost so much.

This I could tell for sure when Fine-Heart, on the way back, had the cart stop at my place so he could get down and talk to me with his arms waving:

"Ah, señor! What a disaster! We never had a judge like him in Misiones. And he was a good man, really! What a fine heart he had! (¡Lindito corazón tenía!) And they've stripped him clean. Here in the port . . . He's got no money, nothing."

As his shifting glances avoided looking me straight in the eye, I understood the awful suspicion of the Polack, who rejected as we did the tale of the swindle in Buenos Aires, and thought that right in the port, before or after he was dead, his son-in-law had been robbed.

"Ah, señor!" he shook his head. "He had five hundred pesos on him. And what did he spend? Nothing, señor! He had a fine heart! And he brings back twenty pesos. How can that be?"

And now he fixed his gaze on my boots, so as not to raise it to my pants pockets, where his son-in-law's money might be. As best I could I made him see it was impossible for me to have been the thief—simply because there wasn't time—and the old crook went off talking to himself.

What's left of this story is a ten-hour nightmare. The burial was to take place that same afternoon at sunset. A little before then Elena's girl—her eldest—came to the house to ask me in her mother's name if I would go and take a picture of the judge. I couldn't manage to banish the image of the man letting his jaw drop and fixing his gaze in perpetuity on one side of the roof, so I'd have no doubt he couldn't move anymore because he was dead. And now I was supposed to see him again, reconsider him, focus on him, and develop his image in my darkroom.

But how could I deny Elena the portrait of her husband, the only one she'd ever have of him?

I loaded the camera with two plates and set out for the house of the deceased. My one-eyed carpenter had built a coffin, just a straight, untapered box, and the judge was lying inside it, with not a half-inch of clearance at his head or at his feet, his green hands crossed forcibly over his chest.

The coffin had to be taken out of the very dim room of the courthouse and tilted to an almost vertical position in the hallway full of people, where two peones held it up at the head. So under the black cloth I had to immerse my overexcited nerves in that half-opened mouth, blacker toward the back than even death itself; in the jaw drawn back to the point of leaving a finger-width of space between the upper and lower teeth; in the eyes of murky glass under lashes looking sticky and swollen; in all the contortions of that cruel caricature of a man.

The afternoon was declining now and the coffin was nailed shut quickly. But not without our first seeing Elena come forcing her children up to the bier for them to kiss their father. The little boy resisted with terrible screams as he was dragged across the floor. The girl kissed her father—though she was held up and pushed from behind—but with such a fright before that awful thing they wanted her to regard as her father that today, if she's still alive, she must remember it with just as great a dread.

I didn't plan to go to the cemetery, but I did it for Elena. The poor girl was walking just behind the oxcart between her children, with one hand pulling along her boy, who yelled the whole way, and carrying her eight-month-old baby in the other arm. Since it was a long way and the oxen were almost trotting, she often shifted the baby from one dog-tired arm to the other, each time with the same hasty courage. In back of her Fine-Heart ran around amid the retinue whining to everyone about the robbery he assumed had taken place.

The coffin was lowered into the newly dug grave, full of huge ants that scurried up and down the walls. With handfuls of damp earth the townspeople shared in the shoveling of the burial crew, and there was even someone charitable enough to put a clump of dirt in the hands of the half-orphaned girl. But Elena, who was rocking her baby in a state of disarray, ran up in desperation to prevent what might follow:

"No, Elenita! Don't throw dirt on your father!"

The sad ceremony came to an end, but not for me. I let the hours go by without making up my mind to go into the darkroom. Finally I did, around midnight I think. There was nothing out of the ordinary that would disturb a normal situation when

one had calm nerves. It was just that I had to revive the already buried person I could see everywhere; I had to shut myself in with him, the two of us alone in profoundly concentrated darkness; I felt him emerging little by little before my eyes and half-opening his black mouth under my wet fingers; I had to tip him to and fro in the tray so he'd awake from under ground and be engraved before me on that other sensitized plate of my horror.

Nevertheless, I finished. When I went outside the unconfining night gave me the impression of a dawn full of reasons for living and hopes I had forgotten. A few steps away were banana plants laden with flowers, and drops were falling to earth from their huge leaves heavy with moisture. Farther away, across the bridge, the sunburned manioc was standing erect at last, now pearly with dew. Still farther off, in the valley that went down to the river, a dim haze enveloped the yerba plantation, and rose above the woods to mingle there below with the dense vapors that ascended from the tepid Paraná.

All this was very familiar to me, for it made up my real life. And I walked here and there waiting calmly for daylight, so as to begin that life again.

The Orange Distillers

I

The man appeared at noon one day, nobody knowing how or from where. He was seen in all the boliches of Iviraromí, drinking as we'd never seen anyone drink—Rivet and Juan Brown excepted. He was wearing baggy Paraguayan soldier's pants, sandals with no socks, and a filthy white beret tilted over his eye. Aside from drinking, the man did nothing but sing praises to his cane—a knotty stick with no bark—which he held out to all the peones to get them to try to break it. One after another the laborers tested the miraculous cane on the stone tiles, and it really did withstand all blows. Its owner, leaning back against the counter with his legs crossed, smiled in satisfaction.

The next day the man was seen at the same time and in the same boliches, with his famous cane. Then he disappeared, till a month later, from the bar, we saw him moving along in the twilight among the Jesuit ruins, in the company of Rivet, the chemist. But this time we found out who he was.

Around 1900, the government of Paraguay employed a fair number of scientists from Europe—among them a few university professors, but many more experts in business and industry. To organize its hospitals, Paraguay solicited the services of Dr. Else, a brilliant young Swedish physician and biologist, who in that new country found a broad field for his great powers of action. In five years he provided the hospitals and their laboratories with a level of organization that in twenty years as many other professionals could not have attained.

Then his high spirits go numb. The distinguished scholar pays to the tropic land that heavy tribute which—as if in alcohol—consumes the active life of so many foreigners; and now collapse holds back no more. For fifteen or twenty years nothing is heard of him. Till we finally find him in Misiones, with his baggy soldier's pants and tilted beret, displaying, as the only purpose of his life, verification by one and all of the endurance of his cane.

This is the man whose presence convinced the manco (the one-armed man, Luisser) to carry out the dream he'd cherished in recent months: the distillation of alcohol from oranges.

The manco, whom we've already met—along with Rivet—in another story, simultaneously held in his brain three projects for getting rich, and one or two for his amusement. He'd never had a penny, nor any personal asset, to say nothing of the arm he'd lost in Buenos Aires cranking a car. But with his one good arm, two boiled manioc

roots, and his soldering iron under his stump, he considered himself the happiest man in the world.

"What do I need?" he used to say joyfully, waving his only arm.

His pride, to tell the truth, consisted of a more or less deep knowledge of all the arts and crafts, his ascetic sobriety, and two volumes of the Encyclopédie. Apart from this, from his eternal optimism and his soldering iron, he possessed nothing. But in contrast his poor head was a pot boiling with illusions, in which industrial inventions stewed more frantically than the manioc roots in his kettle. Since his means did not allow him to aspire to great things, he always planned small industries for local consumption, or else amazing contrivances for lifting water, by filtration, from the swamp of the Horqueta up to his house.

In the space of three years, the one-armed man had successively tried the making of cracked corn, always scarce in that locality; of tiles of pitch and iron-bearing sand; of nougat from peanuts, and honey from bees; of incense-tree resin by way of dry distillation; of glazed peelings of the orange-like apepú, the samples of which had crazed the contract laborers with sweet-toothed greed; of dye from the lapacho tree, precipitated by potash; and of essence oil of oranges, a project we found him absorbed in the study of when Else appeared on his horizon.

It must be noted that none of the prior industries had enriched their inventor, for the simple reason that they never got set up in proper form.

"What do I need?" he repeated contentedly, wagging his stump. "Two hundred pesos. But where am I going to get them from?"

It was for the lack of those miserable pesos, of course, that his inventions failed to prosper. And everybody knows that it's easier to find an extra arm than a ten-peso loan in Iviraromí. But the man never lost his optimism, and from his difficulties there sprouted new illusions, more crazy still, for new industrial projects.

The orange-essence operation, nevertheless, became a reality. It got established in a way as unexpected as the appearance of Else, and without our having seen the manco run around the yerba mate works any more than usual for the purpose. The one-armed man had no mechanical equipment except for five or six essential tools, aside from his soldering iron. Every last part of his machines came from someone's house or another's shed—like the blades of his Pelton wheel, for which he made use of all the old ladles and serving-spoons in town. He had to scurry around without a break after a length of pipe or a rusted sheet of galvanized metal, which he then would cut, twist, retwist, and solder, with his one good arm, the help of his stump, and his energetic, optimist's confidence. Thus we know that his boiler-pump came from the piston of an old toy locomotive that he managed to win from its child owner by telling him a hundred times how he had lost his arm, and that the plates of the still (his still didn't have a common coil-type cooler, but one in the grand style, with plates) were born of the pure zinc sheets from which a naturalist made drums to keep snakes in.

But what was most ingenious about his new facility was the press for extracting orange juice. It consisted of a barrel perforated with three-inch nails which revolved

around a horizontal wooden shaft. Inside this hedgehog the oranges tumbled, bumped into the nails and came apart as they bounced around, till finally, transformed into a yellow pulp with oil floating on top, they went to the boiler.

The one good arm of the manco was worth a half-horsepower on the drum—even in the vertical sun of Misiones, and under the heavy black sailor's undershirt that the one-armed man never abandoned even in the summer. But since the ridiculous toy pump required almost continuous attention, the distiller sought the help of an aficionado who, from the first days, had whiled away the hours observing the operation from afar, half-hidden behind a tree.

The name of this enthusiast was Malaquías Ruvidarte. He was a strapping youth of twenty—a Brazilian and perfectly black—whom we assumed to be a virgin (and he was), and who, having ridden his horse to Corpus one morning to get married, came back three days later in the dead of night, drunk and with two women astraddle behind him.

He lived with his grandmother in a very strange edifice, a conglomeration of compartments made of kerosene crates, which the black porter kept extending and modifying in accordance with the architectural innovations he noted in the three or four chalets being built at that time. With each new fashion Malaquías raised or added a wing to his edifice, but on a much smaller scale—so much so that in height the corridors of his chalet had a span of fifty centimeters, and through the doors a dog could hardly enter. But in this way the black man satisfied his artistic aspirations, deaf to the usual jokes.

An artist like this wasn't the helper for two maniocs a day that the manco needed. Malaquias cranked the drum for a whole morning without saying a word, but in the afternoon did not return. And the next morning he was again installed behind the tree, watching.

Let's sum up this phase: The manco got samples of essence oil of sweet and bitter oranges, which he managed to dispatch to Buenos Aires. From here they informed him that his essence couldn't compete with the similar imported product, due to the high temperature at which it had been extracted; that only on the basis of new samples obtained by pressure could they deal with him, in view of the deficiencies of the distillation, etc., etc.

The manco didn't lose heart over this.

"But that's what I was saying!" he told us all gaily, catching his stump behind his back. "You can't get anything by direct firing. And what am I going to do with no cash?"

Someone else, with more money and less intellectual range than the one-armed man, would have put out the fires of his still. But as he looked in melancholy at his patched-up machine, in which every working part had been replaced by another, substitute one, it suddenly occurred to the manco that that caustic yellowish mud that poured out of the drum could be used to make orange liquor. He wasn't strong on fermentation, but he'd conquered greater difficulties in his life. Besides, Rivet would help him.

It was at this precise moment when Dr. Else made his appearance in Iviraromí.

II

As in the case of Rivet, the manco had been the only person in the area to respect the newcomer. Despite the abyss into which both of them had tumbled, the votary of the great Encyclopédie could not forget what the two ex-men had been one day. The many jokes (and how rough they were among those predatory illiterates!) directed at the one-armed man about his two ex-men, found him always on his feet.

"Rum was their undoing," he would answer gravely, shaking his head. "But they know a lot . . ."

Here we need to mention an incident that did not promote local respect for the famous physician.

Shortly after he arrived in Ivirarromí, an habitué had come up to the counter of the boliche to beg him for a remedy for his wife who was suffering from something or other. Else heard him out most attentively, and, turning to the little brown-paper notebook on the counter, began to write a prescription with a terribly heavy hand—till the pen was breaking. Still more heavily, Else burst out laughing and crumpled the sheet of paper, and there was no way to get another word from him. He just went on repeating:

"I don't know anything about this!"

The manco was a little more fortunate that same day at siesta time, walking with the doctor toward the Horqueta under a white-hot sky, when he consulted him on the prospects for adapting rum yeast to the orange mash, how much time it might take to get acclimated, and at what minimum ratio.

"Rivet is more familiar with that than I am," muttered Else.

"Still," insisted the manco, "I well remember that the initial saccharomycetes . . ."

And the good man spoke his mind to his heart's content.

Else, with his beret over his nose to block the glare of the sun, answered with brief comments, and as though unwillingly. The manco deduced from them that he ought not to waste time acclimating any rum yeast, because he'd get nothing but rum, even at one to a hundred thousand. That he ought to sterilize his mash, add plenty of phosphate, and start it working with Burgundy yeast, ordered from Buenos Aires. He could acclimate the yeast, if he wanted to take the time, but it wasn't indispensable . . .

The manco trotted along beside him, stretching out the neck of his undershirt from enthusiasm and the heat.

"Ah, but I'm happy!" he kept saying. "Now I don't lack anything!"

Poor manco! He lacked precisely what was indispensable to ferment his oranges: eight or ten empty wine casks, which in those wartime days were worth more pesos than he could earn in six months of soldering day and night.

He nevertheless started to spend whole rainy days in the warehouses of the yerba plantations, transforming empty gasoline cans into containers for rancid or burned-out fat to feed the laborers, and to run around all the boliches in search of the oldest casks,

those of no use for anything anymore. Later Rivet and Else—since it was a question of 180-proof alcohol—would most certainly help him out.

Rivet helped him, all right, to the extent of his ability—but the chemist had never been able to drive a nail. By himself the manco opened, took apart, scraped, and scorched, one after another, the old wine casks with half a finger's breadth of violet lees on every stave—a trifling task, however, compared to that of putting the casks together again, which he managed to do with his arm and a quarter at the cost of endless hours of sweat.

Else had already contributed to the project with all there is to know these days about fermenting agents; but when the manco asked him to direct the process of fermentation, the ex-scholar stood up and burst out laughing.

"I don't know a thing about that!" he said, tucking his cane under his arm. And he went off walking aimlessly, more blond, more self-satisfied, and dirtier than ever.

Such walks made up the doctor's life. He was found on all the trails, wearing his sandals with no socks and his mien of euphoria. Except for drinking in all the boliches every day, from eleven till four in the afternoon, he did nothing else. He didn't even frequent the bar, differing in this respect from his colleague Rivet. But on the other hand he used to be seen on horseback late at night, clutching the animal's ears and calling it his father and mother, with gross bursts of laughter. They went cantering along like that for hours on end, till the rider fell off finally, to laugh without remission.

Despite this frivolous life, there was still one thing capable of extracting the ex-man from his alcoholic limbo; this we found out the day Else showed up in town walking briskly—to the great surprise of all—and without looking at anyone. That afternoon he expected his daughter, a schoolteacher in Santo Pipo, who visited her father two or three times a year.

She was a slim little girl dressed in black, with a sickly appearance and a sullen look. This at least was our impression when she passed through town with her father on the way to the Horqueta. But in view of what we gathered from the reports of the one-armed man, that expression on the little teacher's face was only for us, brought on by the degradation her father had fallen into, and which we witnessed day by day.

What became known later confirms this hypothesis. The girl was very dark and didn't look like the Scandinavian doctor at all. Maybe she wasn't his daughter; he at least never believed it. His way of behaving toward the girl confirms that, and God only knows how the mistreated and neglected child could manage to get her teacher's diploma, and to go on loving her father.

Since she couldn't keep him at her side, she traveled to see him, wherever he might be. And the money Dr. Else spent on drinking came from the little teacher's wages.

The ex-man nevertheless retained one last sense of decency: he didn't drink in the presence of his daughter. And this sacrifice, on behalf of a little native girl he didn't think was any daughter of his, betrays more hidden ferment than the ultrascientific reactions of the poor manco.

For four days, on this occasion, the doctor was nowhere to be seen. But even though he was drunker than ever when he showed up again in the boliches, we could appreciate the work of his daughter in the repairs to all his clothes.

From then on, every time we saw Else fresh and serious, going by quickly after fat and flour, we all would say:

"His daughter must be coming pretty soon."

III

Meanwhile the manco, astraddle, kept on soldering roofs for the well-to-do, and on his free days scraping and scorching barrel staves.

And this wasn't all: the oranges having ripened very early that year, on account of the unusually severe frosts, the manco also had to think about the temperature in his distillery, so that the nighttime cold, still sharp that October, wouldn't disturb the fermentation. Thus he had to line his but inside with bundles of disheveled straw, in such a way that the result looked like a rough and hostile brush. He had to install a heater, which had a hearth consisting of an acaroid-resin drum, and bamboo pipes that wound like fat yellow snakes among the straw bundles along the walls. And he had to rent—porter and all, for a fee to be paid from the returns on the alcohol to come—the sturdy-wheeled cart of the black man Malaquias, who in this way again went to work for the manco, carting oranges from the woods with his usual taciturnity and the melancholy recollection of his two wives.

An ordinary man would have given up halfway through the task. But the manco never lost for an instant his gay and sweaty faith.

"We don't lack anything anymore!" he repeated, making his whole arm dance, and in time with it his optimistic stump. "We're going to make a fortune with this!"

Once the Burgundy yeast was acclimated, the manco and Malaquías proceeded to fill the casks. The black man cut the oranges in two with a slash of his machete, and the manco squeezed them between his iron fingers, both moving at the same speed and in the same rhythm, as if hand and machete were attached to the same driving rod.

Rivet helped them at times, though all he did was go feverishly back and forth from the seed-strainer to the casks, in the guise of manager. As for the doctor, he'd observed these several operations very attentively, with his hands sunk in his pockets and his cane under his armpit. But faced with the invitation to lend a hand, he'd burst out laughing, repeating as always:

"I don't know a bit about these things!"

And he went to stroll up and down by the roadside, pausing at each end of his route to see if any passerby was in view.

In those hard days the distillers did nothing but cut and cut and squeeze and squeeze oranges, under a fiery sun and covered with syrupy juice from head to foot. But when

the first casks began to turn alcoholic, in a fermentation so lively it cast a topaz-colored spray two finger-widths above the surface, Dr. Else maneuvered toward the fired-up distillery, where the manco was widening the neck of his shirt with enthusiasm.

"Now it's working!" he said. "What do we need now? A few more pesos, and we'll get really rich!"

One by one Else removed the cotton stoppers from the casks, and with his nose in each bunghole inhaled the delicious fragrance of the developing orange wine, a fragrance with a penetrating freshness not to be found in any other fruit-mash whatever. The doctor then lifted his eyes to the walls—to the yellow hedgehog insulation, to the piping that snaked its way amid the straw, shading into fumes of vibrating air—and drowsily smiled for a moment. But from then on he never left the vicinity of the distillery.

What's more, he stayed there to sleep. Else lived on a farm owned by the one-armed man, on the banks of the Horqueta. The national government designates as farms the twenty-five-hectare plots of virgin woods or scrubland it sells at the price of seventy-five pesos a plot, payable in six years—so till now we haven't mentioned this opulence on the part of the manco.

His farm consisted of a solitary swamp where there was nothing but a little shack set apart within a ring of ashes, and foxes in the scrub. Nothing else. Not even door-leaves at the entrance to the shack.

As we said, the doctor moved into the distillery among the ruins, detained there by the nascent bouquet of the orange wine. And though his aid till then was what we know it was, in the course of the nights to come every time the manco woke up to check on the heating, he always found Else tending the fire. The doctor slept little and badly, and spent the night on his haunches in front of the acaroid-resin can, drinking mate and eating oranges heated on the embers of the hearth.

The alcoholic conversion of the hundred thousand oranges finally came to an end, and the distillers found themselves with eight bordelaises[1] of a wine that was no doubt very weak, but still strong enough to assure them a hundred liters of a 100-proof alcohol, the minimum strength acceptable to the local palate.

The aspirations of the manco were local as well; but a speculative type like him, who was already worried about the location of the transformers on the future electric cable line from the Iguazú to Buenos Aires, could not forget the purely scientific aspect of his product. He consequently ran around for a few days acquiring some hundred-gram vials to send samples to Buenos Aires, then got a few samples ready and lined them up on his workbench to send them out that afternoon by mail. When he came back to get them he didn't find them, but he did find Dr. Else, sitting on the scarp of the road with his cane between his hands, supremely satisfied with himself and incapable of a single motion.

[1] Eighteen hundred litres.

The adventure was repeated again and again, so often that the poor manco conclusively gave up analyzing his alcohol: the doctor, red-faced, teary-eyed, and radiant with euphoria, was the only thing he discovered.

Yet not for this did the manco lose his admiration for the ex-scholar.

"But he drinks it all up!" he'd tell us at night in the bar. "What a man! He doesn't leave me a single sample!"

The manco lacked the time to distill as slowly as required, and also to get rid of the sludge in his product. Thus his alcohol suffered from the same ailments as his essence oil, the same sickening odor, and a similar caustic aftertaste. On the advice of Rivet he transformed that impossible rum into bitters, resorting only to apepú—and licorice, as a foaming agent.

In this final form the orange alcohol went on the market. As for the chemist and his colleague, they drank it unstintingly just as it dripped from the plates of the still, with all its brain poisons.

IV

One of those fiery afternoons, the doctor was found flat on his back across the deserted road to the old port, laughing, with the sun coming down straight on him.

"If the little teacher doesn't get here one of these days," said we who knew him, "she's going to have trouble finding the place where her father died."

Exactly a week later we found out from the manco that Else's daughter was on the way, convalescing from the flu.

"With the rains about to come," we went on, "the girl isn't going to get a lot better in the swamp of the Horqueta."

For the first time since he'd been among us, no one saw Dr. Else go by quickly and steadily before his daughter's impending arrival. An hour before the launch put in he went to the port by way of the ruins, in the little cart of Malaquías the porter, whose mare, despite her slow pace, was panting from exhaustion, with her ears drenched in sweat.

The dense and livid sky, as though stagnant with heaviness, could presage no good, after a month and a half of drought. As the launch arrived, in fact, it began to rain. The little teacher with the shivers stepped onto the dripping riverbank in a downpour; she got into the cart in a downpour, and in a downpour made the whole trip with her father—so that when they arrived at night at the Horqueta, unable to hear as much as a fox-howl in the desolate scrub, they could indeed hear the dull crepitation of the rain on the dirt patio of the shack.

This time the little teacher had no need to go down to the swamp to wash her father's clothes: It rained all night and all the following day, with no relief but the

watery lull of twilight, which came at the hour when the doctor was starting to see strange vermin clinging to the backs of his hands.

A man who has already had a dialogue with destiny, stretched out on his back in the sun, may see unexpected creatures when his life's sustenance is suddenly removed. Rivet, before he died a year later from his liter of carburated lamp alcohol, certainly had horrors of that order fixed before his eyes. But Rivet had no children; and Else's error consisted precisely of seeing, instead of his daughter, a monstrous rat.

What he saw first was a large—an enormous—centipede crawling around the walls. Else remained seated staring at the scene, and the centipede vanished. But as the man lowered his glance he saw it rise between his knees, with its body arched, its belly and swarming legs turned toward him—moving up, and up, interminably. The doctor extended his hands in front of him, and his fingers gripped the void.

He smiled heavily: illusion . . . nothing but illusion . . .

But there's more logic to the fauna of delirium tremens than in the smile of an ex-scholar, and they have a habit of creeping obstinately up one's pants legs, or springing brusquely from the corners of the room.

For many hours, in front of the fire with his mate gourd inert in his hands, the doctor was aware of his condition. Calmly, he viewed, tore away, and disentangled more snakes than one can tread on in dreams. And he managed to hear a sweet voice saying:

"Papá, I'm feeling a little sick . . . I'm going outside for a minute."

Else still tried to smile—at a beast that had suddenly burst into the middle of the shack, uttering horrible shrieks—and then got up, at last terrified and panting: he was in the power of the fauna alcohólica.

From out of the darkness innumerable monsters were now beginning to poke their snouts. From the roof as well things he had no want to see were falling down. All his sweaty terror now was concentrated on the door, on those pointed snouts that appeared and disappeared with dizzying rapidity.

Something like the murderous eyes and teeth of an enormous rat lingered for an instant against the door frame, and the doctor, without looking away, took hold of a heavy stick of firewood; the beast, guessing the danger, had already taken cover.

On the ex-scholar's sides, and from behind, things that crept upward were digging into his trousers. But the man—with his eyes out of their orbits—could see nothing but the door and the deadly snouts.

For a moment he thought he could detect, amid the splattering of the rain, a fainter but clearer noise. Then suddenly the monstrous rat emerged in the doorway, stopped a moment to look at him, and finally moved toward him. Else, crazed with terror, flung the stick of firewood at the creature with all his might.

With the scream that followed the doctor came abruptly to his senses, as if the vertiginous tapestry of monsters had been destroyed by the blow and replaced by a most atrocious silence. But what was lying destroyed at his feet was not the murderous rat, but his daughter.

A dousing in icy water, a chill to the core of his being—none of this is enough to convey the impression of such a spectacle. The father still had a scrap of strength left to pick up the child in his arms and lay her on the cot. And as he realized, from a single glance at her midsection, the irremissibly mortal effect of the blow she had taken, the wretched man sank to his knees before his daughter.

His little daughter! Who'd been neglected, mistreated, repudiated by him! From out of the depths of twenty years, in a burst of shame, erupted the love and gratitude he had never expressed to her. Little native girl, little daughter of his!

The doctor now had raised his face toward the wounded child: there was nothing, nothing at all to hope for in that stricken countenance.

The girl, nevertheless, had just opened her eyes, and her gaze, vacant and already dizzy with death, finally distinguished her father. Then forcing a painful smile—bearing a reproach only that pitiful father could in those circumstances appreciate—she murmured softly:

"What have you done, Papá! . . ."

The doctor sank his head into the cot, and the little teacher murmured again, her hand reaching for her father's beret:

"Poor Papá . . . It's nothing . . . I feel a lot better now . . . Tomorrow I'll get up and finish everything . . . I feel a lot better, Papá . . ."

The rain had ended and peace now reigned outside. After a moment the doctor sensed that the ailing girl was striving vainly to sit up, and as he lifted his face he saw his daughter looking at him with her eyes wide open in sudden revelation:

"I'm going to die, Papá! . . ."

"My little girl . . . ," he murmured, and nothing more.

The child tried to breathe deeply, again in vain.

"Papá, I'm dying! Papá, listen to me . . . for once in your life. Don't drink any more, Papá . . . Your little girl . . ."

After a while—a near-eternity of time—the doctor got up and went staggering to the bench to sit down again—but not without first sweeping an odious creature from the seat with the back of his hand, for already the web of monsters was dizzily spinning itself anew.

He could still hear a voice from the other world:

"Don't drink any more, Papá! . . ."

The ex-man still had time to let his hands fall into his lap, in a collapse and abdication more forlorn than the most forlorn of the sobs he was no longer capable of. And there beside his daughter's corpse Dr. Else again saw emerging into view at the door the snouts of the beasts who were coming back for a final assault.

The Forerunners

"Now, boss, I'm sort of educated, and from gabbing so much with the big shots and lowly comrades, I know a lot of words about the cause and can make myself understood in Castile talk. But those of us who did our toddling talking Guaraní, can't none of us never forget the lingo altogether, as you're going to find out right away.

"It was back in Guaviró-mi that we started the union movement on the yerba mate plantations. That's a lot of years ago, and some of us who made up the old guard—just like that, boss!—are gone today. Then we didn't none of us know what it meant—the misery of the wage slave, the claiming of rights, the agrarian proletariat, and so many other things that youngsters nowadays can say by heart. It was in Guaviró-mi, like I said, in the boliche of the gringo Vansuite (Van Swieten), that was on the new trail from Puerto Remanso to the town.

"When I think about all that, it seems to me that without the gringo Vansuite we wouldn't have done a thing, even though he was a gringo and not a mensú.

"How about you, boss, would you want to get mixed up in the hardships of the peones and extend us credit for no good reason? That's what I'm saying.

"Oh, the gringo Vansuite was no mensú, but he could sure swing an axe and a machete. He was from Holland, from Way-Off-Yonder, and in the ten years he'd been a criollo he'd tried ten different trades, without making good at none of them. It even seemed like he bungled them on purpose. He'd sweat like the devil on the job, and then right away look for something else. He hadn't never been a hired hand. He worked hard, but alone and with no boss.

"When he set up the boliche, the boys we thought he was going to go broke, because along the new trail you'd be lucky to see a cat go by. He never sold even a lump of cake-sugar, not in the daytime and not at night neither. Only when the movement started the guys we went heavy on the credit, and in three weeks he didn't have a can of sardines left on his shelves.

"How'd it all happen, you say? Take it easy, boss, I'm going to tell you right away.

"The thing got started with the gringo Vansuite, One-Eyed Mallaria, Taruch the Turk, the Spaniard Gracián . . . y opama—and that's all. Not one more, I tell you true.

"Mallaria we called him One-Eye because he had a great big and sort of bulging eye that looked straight ahead. But he wasn't a real one-eye, because he could see fine with both eyes. He was quiet and hard-working like only he could be during the week, and a hell-raiser like nobody else when he was running around loose on Sundays. He always

walked around with one or two ferrets in his pockets—irarás, we say in Guaraní—and more than once they'd ended up under arrest in the police station.

"Taruch was a dark-skinned Turk, tall and curly like the black lapacho tree. He went around grubby and barefoot all the time, even though he had two brothers with a boliche in Guaviró-mi. He was a good-natured gringo, and fierce like a pit viper when he was talking about the bosses.

"And then there was the stone-man. Old Gracián was a little guy with a beard, who wore his white hair all brushed back, like a monkey. He had a face like a monkey too. Once he'd been the best stonemason in town, but in those days all he did was go around here and there stoned on rum, with the same white undershirt and the same baggy black torn-up pants that his knees came through. In Vansuite's boliche he listened to everybody without opening his mouth; and afterwards he just said 'You win' if he thought the guy who'd been talking was right, and 'You lose' if he thought he was wrong.

"So from these four men, between one rum and the next after dark, out came the movement, clean as a whistle.

"Little by little the word got around among the boys, and first one, then another, we started to drop in at night at the boliche, where Mallaria and the Turk would be yelling against the bosses, and the stone-man just saying 'You win' and 'You lose.'

"I already half understood the stuff. But those wild characters from the Upper Paraná all nodded yes, like they knew what was going on, with their hands sweating just from being so god-awful crude.

"That way the boys we got ourself excited, and between one who wanted to win big and another who wanted to work little, we roused up about two hundred plantation hands to celebrate May Day.

"Ah, the great things we did! Now it seems strange to you, boss, that a bolichero was head of the movement, and that the yells of a half-drunk one-eyed guy woke us up to the state we were in. But in those days the boys we were like drunk on the first swig of justice—wow, what a spree, boss!

"Like I say, we celebrated May Day. Since two weeks before we were meeting every night in the boliche to sing the 'Internationale.'

"Oh, not everybody. A few guys all they did was laugh because they were too embarrassed to sing. And some other still cruder ones didn't even open their mouth and kept looking off to the side.

"Even so we learned the song. And on May Day, in a rain that poked holes in your face, we left Vansuite's boliche on a march into the town.

"The words, you say, boss? Only a few of us knew them, and like pulling teeth at that. Taruch and the blacksmith Mallaria had copied them into the workers' debt register, and those of us that knew how to read would press up by threes and fours against another guy who was holding up the account book. The rest of them, the real country boys, would holler who-knows-what.

“That demonstration was a ball, I tell you, like we’ll never see another one so good. Nowadays we know more about what we want, we’ve learned to fool the bosses royally and not get fooled ourself. Now we have our demonstrations with secretaries, discipline, and guards out front. But on that day, raw and dumb as we were, we had the sort of faith and enthusiasm we won’t never see again in the back country, añamembuí![1]

“That’s the way it was at the first workers’ demonstration in Guaviró-mi. And the rain came down to beat the band. Singing and dripping water we all followed the gringo Vansuite, who went ahead on horseback, carrying the red flag.

“The face of the bosses was something to see as our first march went by, and the eyes of the bolicheros watching their colleague Vansuite, stern like a general out in front of us! We swung through the town singing the whole time, and when we got back to the boliche we were soupy wet, and muddy up to the ears from the spills we’d taken.

“That night we really sucked the bottle, and right there made up our mind to ask for a delegate from Posadas to organize the movement.

“The next morning we sent Mallaria to the yerba plantation where he worked, to take our list of demands. Bunglers like we were, we sent him alone. He went with a red kerchief around his neck, and a ferret in his pocket, to ask his bosses for the immediate betterment of the whole work force.

“When he came back One-Eye told us the bosses had faced him with the charge that he was trying to trample them underfoot.

“‘Madonna!’ he’d yelled in Italian. ‘Ma che foot or anything else! This is about ideas, not men!’

“That same afternoon we declared a boycott against the company.

“Yes, now I’ve got some learning, even though the Guaraní she always gets in my way. But then hardly none of us knew the terms for making claims, and quite a few thought that Don Boycott was the delegate we were expecting from Posadas.

“The delegate finally came, just when the companies had thrown the boys out, and we were eating fat and flour from the boliche.

“You’d sure like to have seen the first meetings chaired by the delegate! Not one of the boys understood hardly nothing of what the most down-and-out caipira[2] knows by heart nowadays. The crudest ones thought what they were winning by way of the movement was to always get things on credit from the boliches.

“We all listened to the delegate’s talk with our mouth wide open; but we didn’t say nothing. A few brave guys went up around the table afterwards and told the slicker in a low voice: ‘So . . . my brother he told me to ask you . . . to excuse him plenty ’cause he couldn’t be here . . .’

“Another one, when the delegate had just called a meeting for Saturday, he’d call the man aside and say to him secretly, in a half-sweat: ‘So . . . me too’s supposed to come?’

[1] Literally, “son of the devil,” in Guaraní.

[2] “Yokel” in Brazilian Portuguese.

“Ah, those were fine times, boss! The delegate was only with us for a little while, and he left the gringo Vansuite in charge of the movement. The gringo ordered some more merchandise from Posadas, and we came down like the locust with our wives and kids to stock up.

“Things were going great: a work-stoppage on the plantations, the boys living high off the hog through Vansuite, and joy on everybody’s face on account of the program for workers’ rights brought in by Don Boycott.

“A lot of time? No, boss. Even it lasted just a little while. A big-shot plantation owner was blown off his horse by a rifle bullet, and nobody never found out who’d killed him.

“And with that, my friend, you see the rain come down on the boys’ enthusiasm. The town filled up with judges, police inspectors, and army stiffs. A dozen workers were arrested, another dozen got a horsewhipping, and the rest of the boys disbanded like a flock of birds into the bush. None of them went to the gringo’s boliche no more. Excited as they were about the May Day demonstration, not a one showed up anymore, no matter how bad-off he might be. The companies took advantage of the situation, and wouldn’t take back any worker who was in the union.

“Little by little, one of us one day, later another, the mensús we started drifting back to the yerba farms. The proletariat, workers’ awareness, claims and demands—the whole works went to the devil Añá along with the first dead boss. Without even looking at the notices all over the doors we accepted the cruel list of conditions . . . y opama, that was that.

“And how long we were in this pickle, you say? Quite a while. Even though the delegate from Posadas had come back to get us together again, and the Federation had its own office in the town, the boys we were feeling hounded, and sort of ashamed about the movement. We were working hard and in even worse shape than before in the yerba fields. Mallaria and Taruch the Turk were in jail in Posadas. Of the first regulars, only the old stonecutter went every night to the Federation hall, to say like he always had ‘You win’ and ‘You lose.’

“Ah! The gringo Vansuite. Now that I recollect him: he’s the only one of us who built the movement who didn’t see it come to life again. At the time of the uproar over the boss that got shot, the gringo closed up his boliche. Nobody went there no more anyhow. Besides he didn’t have enough stock left to half-supply a whippersnapper. And I’ll tell you something else: he locked the doors and windows of the hut. All day long he was locked inside, standing in the middle of the room with a pistol in his hand, ready to kill the first person who knocked on his door. They say that’s how the bugger Josecito saw him, when he spied on him through a crack.

“But it’s true the youngsters didn’t want to go down the new trail for nothing, and in the sunlight the gringo’s bolted-up boliche looked like a dead man’s house.

“And that was right, boss. One day the kids spread the news that going by Vansuite’s hut they’d noticed a bad smell.

"The chatter got to the town; people thought this, that, and the other; and what happened was the police chief and the troops pried open the window of the boliche, and through it they saw Vansuite's corpse on the cot, and it stunk plenty strong.

"They said it had been at least a week since the gringo killed himself with the pistol. So instead of killing the caipiras who were going to knock on his door, it was himself he killed.

"And now, boss, what do you say? I think Vansuite had always been sort of loco-tabuí, as we say. He always seemed to be looking for a trade, and he finally came to think the one for him was to fight for the rights of the mensús. That time too he made a big mistake.

"And there's something else I think too, boss: not Vansuite, or Mallaria, or the Turk neither, they never figured their union work could take them as far as the death of a boss. The boys from around here didn't kill him, I swear. But the shot came out of the movement, and the gringo had laid the ground for that madness when he came on our side.

"The boys we never thought neither that we'd find corpses where we were looking for rights. And turning scared, we fell under the yoke again.

"But the gringo Vansuite was no mensú. On the bounce, the shock of the movement went to his head, which was sort of tabuí, like I told you. He thought they were after him . . . y opama.

"But he was a good gringo, and generous. Without him—who was the first one to carry the red flag out in front of the mensús—we wouldn't have learned what we know today, and yours truly wouldn't have been able to tell you your story, boss."

Back Matter

Map

List of Place Names

Apariciocué. Town in the vicinity of San Ignacio.

Blosset (beach). On the Paraná, west of San Ignacio.

Buenos Aires. Capital of Argentina, located about 850 kilometers south-south-west of Posadas.

Cazador (creek). Joins the Horqueta southeast of San Ignacio.

Chaco. Argentine province, 300 kilometers west of Posadas.

Chubut. Argentine province in Patagonia, 1,100 kilometers southwest of Buenos Aires.

Corpus. Town near the Paraná, 15 kilometers north of San Ignacio.

Corrientes. Argentine province on the Paraná, bordering Misiones on the southwest.

Foz-do-Iguaçu. Brazilian town on the Paraná just north of Misiones, 240 kilometers northeast of Posadas.

Guaraní. Language of the native inhabitants of the Upper Paraná; it is still widely spoken in the region, and has been written since the days of the Jesuits (1600–1767). The name is also applied to the Indians themselves, and to the areas where they live (especially Paraguay).

Guaviró-mi. Perhaps a fictional place, but see Iviraromí.

Guayra. Brazilian region north of Foz-do-Iguaçu.

Horqueta (stream). Flows into the Yabebirí a few kilometers south of San Ignacio.

lberá. Zone in northeast Corrientes, southwest of Posadas.

Iguazú (river). Flows into the Paraná from the east, just south of Foz-do-Iguaçu; famous for its falls, the Cataratas del Iguazú.

Itacurubí (cape and town). On the Paraná near San Ignacio.

Itahú (beach). On the Paraná near San Ignacio.

Iviraromí. Guaraní name for San Ignacio.

La Balsa. Town on the Paraná near San Ignacio.

La Plata. Capital of the province of Buenos Aires, 100 kilometers southeast of the federal capital.

BRAZIL
Foz-do-Iguaçu
Río Iguazú
Cataratas del Iguazú
PARAGUAY
ARGENTINA
PARAGUAY
Río Paranaí
SIERRA DE MISIONES
Río Paraná
Puerto Felicidad
Santo Pipó
Corpus
Río Ñacanguazú
Puerto Viejo
San Ignacio
Puerto Chuño
Río Horqueta
Cazador Creek
Misiones
Río Yabebirí
Posadas
Río Uruguay
ARGENTINA
BRAZIL

Mato Grosso. Brazilian state west of the Paraná; its southern border is about 175 kilometers north of Foz-do-Iguaçu.

Misiones. Northeasternmost province of Argentina, between Brazil and Paraguay.

Montevideo. Capital of Uruguay, on the South Atlantic, 200 kilometers east of Buenos Aires.

Ñacanguazú (river). Flows into the Paraná from the east, a few kilometers upstream from Corpus.

Paraná (river). Second only to the Amazon in South America, it flows 3,200 kilometers from southeast Brazil to the River Plate estuary at Buenos Aires.

Paranáí (river). Enters the Paraná from the east, about halfway between Posadas and Foz-do-Iguaçu.

Paseo de Julio. A street in downtown Buenos Aires.

Pequirí, or Piguirí (river). Major Brazilian river, in the state of Paraná; it enters the Paraná at the southern edge of Mato Grosso.

Posadas. Capital of the province of Misiones; 1980 population about 110,000.

Puerto Cazador. Port on the Paraná, about 10 kilometers north of San Ignacio.

Puerto Chuño. Port on the Paraná near San Ignacio.

Puerto Felicidad. Port on the Paraná, near the mouth of the river Ñacanguazú.

Puerto Remanso. Port on the Paraná, probably fictional.

Puerto Viejo. Port on the Paraná northwest of San Ignacio.

San Ignacio. Also called Iviraromí. Site of Jesuit ruins, 38 kilometers east-northeast of Posadas. Quiroga's Misiones home is on its outskirts.

Santo Pipó. Town about 17 kilometers northeast of San Ignacio.

Teyucuaré. A cerro (low mountain) with stone cliffs, on the Paraná just southwest of San Ignacio.

Toro (island). In the Paraná near the mouth of the Yabebirí.

Tucumán. Argentine province at the foot of the Andes, 1,000 kilometers west of Posadas.

Yabebirí (river). Flows west-northwest from the interior of Misiones and enters the Paraná just southwest of San Ignacio. Quiroga's property was on this stream.

A Quiroga Chronology

1878. December 31. Birth of Horacio Quiroga in Salto, Uruguay, on the River Uruguay across from Concordia, Argentina, and about 500 kilometers southwest of Posadas.

1879. Death of his father in a hunting accident.

1879–1893. Residence in Córdoba, Argentina; return to Salto (1883); mother's remarriage and move to Montevideo (1891); return to Salto (1893).

1896. Suicide of HQ's stepfather, in despair over his bad health.

1897. First publications by HQ, in magazines of Salto. He later edits the short-lived Revista de Salto (1899–1900).

1900. March–July. Trip to Paris which results in a travel journal, Diario de viaje a París, not published till 1949. Unlike many Latin American writers, he does not become an ardent literary Francophile. Back in Salto, he founds a literary society with several friends. In November he takes second prize in a short-story contest, and from then on publishes regularly in Montevideo.

1901. Publication in Montevideo of his first book, Los arrecifes de coral (Coral Reefs), containing poems as well as stories.

1902. Accidentally kills a close friend with a firearm. Exonerated, he decides to leave for Buenos Aires.

1903. Supports himself by teaching as well as writing. First trip to Misiones, where he discovers the subtropical forest.

1904. Becomes a cotton planter in the Argentine Chaco. Publication in Buenos Aires of his second book, El crimen del otro (The Other's Crime), short stories.

1905. Visits Corrientes. Later shuts down his cotton venture and returns to Buenos Aires. Writes the important nouvelle "Los perseguidos" (The Pursued), which marks the beginning of his best work. His reputation is on the rise.

1906. New teaching position. One of his students, Ana María Cires, will later become his first wife. Trip to Misiones in December, seeking property to buy. A month later visits Paraguay.

1908. Publishes a novel, Historia de un amor turbio (Story of a Troubled Love).

1908–1909. November–March. Spring–summer in Misiones, where he now owns land overlooking the Paraná.

1909. Marriage to Ana María Cires in December. They settle in San Ignacio, Misiones, but return to Buenos Aires for another year.

1911. Birth of a daughter, Eglé. Obtains a government sinecure in San Ignacio and resigns his teaching position. Begins cultivation of yerba mate on a large tract he has bought near the River Yabebirí.

1912. Birth of a son, Dario.

1914. Tries charcoal-making and later orange-distilling in collaboration with friends.

1915. Ana María commits suicide by taking poison. A week passes before she finally dies, in her early twenties.

1916. Return to Buenos Aires.

1917. Publication of HQ's fourth book, Cuentos de amor de locura y de muerte (Tales of Love, Madness, and Death); its success results in another edition the next year. His stories become models for a great deal of "nativist" Latin American fiction to come. Assumes the first of several minor posts in the Uruguayan diplomatic service.

1918. Publication of Cuentos de la selva para los niños (Jungle Tales for Children), which are also enjoyed by adults, and have since been translated into several languages, including English (1922).

1919. Another book of stories, El salvaje (The Savage).

1920. Publishes a play, Las sacrificadas (Sacrificed Women), based on an early love affair of his own (1898) which he had already treated in a story (1912).

1921. His eighth book, Anaconda, short stories.

1924. El desierto (The Wilderness), stories and other texts in prose.

1925. Passionate love affair during a stay in Misiones; the girl's family is opposed and the romance ends sadly. In Spain a selection of his stories is published, under the title of one of the most famous ones, La gallina degollada (The Decapitated Chicken).

1926. Los desterrados (The Exiles). Many regard this book as Quiroga's best. Of its eight stories, five are included in the present selection.

1927. Marriage to María Elena Bravo, whom he had met as a friend of his daughter Eglé. She was almost thirty years younger than HQ.

1928. Birth of a daughter, called Pitoca.

1929. Publishes a novel, Pasado amor (Past Love), based on the Misiones affair of 1925.

1931. Return to San Ignacio.

1935. Más allá (Farther On), his last book of stories.

1936. Returns to Buenos Aires in bad health, later discovering he has cancer.

1937. February. Commits suicide in the hospital by taking cyanide. Ceremonies honoring HQ take place in Salto, Montevideo, and Buenos Aires. The long process of collecting his works is begun; though most of them have been collected and published, a definitive Complete Works has yet to appear.

1968. Publication of El desterrado: Vida y obra de Horatio Quiroga (Buenos Aires: Losada), by Emir Rodríguez Monegal, the definitive biography, which was preceded by more than a dozen other studies on Quiroga by Rodríguez Monegal. This chronology is an adaptation and abridgment of his "Indice cronológico," which appears on pages 293–299 of El desterrado.

1976. Publication by the University of Texas Press of The Decapitated Chicken and Other Stories, selected and translated by Margaret Sayers Peden. Most of these stories, like those of the present collection, are set in the frontier region where Argentina meets Paraguay and Brazil.

Horacio Quiroga
The Exiles and Other Stories
1987

University of Texas Press, Austin
The Texas Pan American Series

www.thetedkarchive.com