

New California

Lima Barreto

No one knew where the man had come from. The postal agent could only tell he answered to Raimundo Flamel, since that was the name on the mail. And what mail there was. Almost every day, the postman would go to the end of town, where the stranger lived, carrying a heavy packet of letters from the world over, thick magazines in backwards languages, books, packages...

When Fabrício, the bricklayer, returned from a day's work at the new resident's home, everyone at the store asked about his commission.

"I'm making a furnace," said the black man, "in the dining room."

Imagine the amazement in the little town of Tubiacanga, learning of such an extravagant construction: a dining room furnace! On the following days, Fabrício could tell he saw glass balloons, dull knives, cups like the pharmacist's... an assortment of peculiar things lying around on tables and shelves, like cooking utensils in the devil's own kitchen.

The village was alarmed. Some, more forward looking, thought him a coiner; others, the simple and the believing, that he had struck a deal with the devil.

Chico da Tirana, the oxcart driver, passing by the mysterious stranger's home with his squeaky old cart, watched the smoke coming out of the dining room stack and couldn't help but cross himself and mutter a prayer. Had it not been for the pharmacist, the deputy would have laid siege to the home of that suspicious individual who disquieted the imagination of the whole citizenry.

Reflecting upon the information provided by Fabrício, Bastos, the apothecary, concluded the stranger was a scholar, a great chemist, there exiled to further his scientific forays in peace.

A respected college man, a councilman and a physician too - since doctor Jerônimo didn't care for prescriptions and had become his partner at the

drugstore only to live his days more comfortably - Bastos's opinion stilled every conscience. Because of him, the population granted quiet admiration to the person of that great chemist who had chosen their town to reside.

In the afternoon, if they saw him walking by the banks of the Tubiacanga, sitting here or there, gazing into the clear waters of that stream, lost in thought before the melancholy dusk, everyone removed their hats, often adding a "doctor" to their "g'evening". The way he treated the children struck a chord with the townsfolk; the way he watched them, as if pitying them for having been born to suffer and die.

Indeed, on any sweet afternoon there was something Christ like in how kindly he doted on the black children, their skin so smooth and their manners so sad, deep in moral captivity, as well as on the white children, their skin dull, broken and coarse, withered by the tropics.

Sometimes, he wondered why Bernardin de Saint-Pierre had wasted so much feeling with Paul and Virginia¹ and forgotten the slaves that surrounded them...

Soon, there was almost universal admiration for the scholar, short of unanimous only because a single man would not hold the new resident's merits in high regard.

Captain Pelino, schoolmaster and editor of the *Tubiacanga Gazette*, the local newspaper, and affiliated with the government party, had it in for the scholar. "You will see," he would say, "who this man is... A deadbeat, a rogue, maybe a thief fleeing from Rio".

His opinion was baseless, or better still, based on hidden spite for a contender that could rival his fame as a scholar. Pelino was no chemist, far from it, but he was a scholar, a grammarian. No one wrote anything in Tubiacanga without a paddling from Captain Pelino; even when discussing some notable man from the Capital, he couldn't help but say: "The man has talent, it is undeniable! But he splits his infinitives..." And he pursed his lips as if he had swallowed something bitter.

The whole of Tubiacanga was used to respecting solemn Pelino, who corrected and amended the greatest glories of the country. A wise man...

In the evening, after reading a little something from an eminent philologist, Sotero perhaps, or maybe Candido de Figueiredo and Castro Lopes, and after having dyed his hair once again, the old schoolmaster walked slowly out of his house, denim jacket buttoned up to the collar, and headed down to Bastos's drugstore for a chat. Chat is merely a figure of speech, because Pelino was greedy with his words; he mostly just listened. When, however, someone committed the slightest slip of the tongue, he cut in and made an amendment. "Hopefully," said the postman, "it..." And the schoolmaster intervened with evangelical serenity:

¹ Refers to the novel *Paul et Virginie*, written in 1787 by Bernardin de Saint - Pierre.

"Do not say 'hopefully', Mr. Bernardes; in our tongue, we say 'it is to be hoped'."

And the conversation would continue after the amendment, only to be interrupted by another. Moments like these made more than one speaker move away, but Pelino remained indifferent to them, sure of his duty as an apostle of linguistic purism. The scholar's arrival had made him stray, even if only a little, from his mission. Now his every last strength was directed against the unexpected rival.

His words and eloquence fell on deaf ears: not only did Raimundo Flamel pay his bills on time, he was generous, a protector of the poor, and the pharmacist had seen him mentioned as a renowned chemist in a trade magazine.

II

The chemist had been living in Tubiacanga for years when, on a beautiful morning, Bastos saw him enter the pharmacy. The pharmacist's pleasure was immense. The scholar hadn't yet condescended to visit anyone, and, one day, when sacristan Orestes dared to visit his house, asking him for some donation for the coming feast of Our Lady of Conception, he received him and contributed with visible annoyance.

Seeing him, Bastos got out from behind the counter, hurried to welcome him with the most perfect demonstration that he knew who he was dealing with, and, with almost a cry, said:

"Welcome, doctor."

The scholar didn't seem surprised either with the pharmacist's demonstration of respect, or with the academic treatment. He mildly looked for an instant at the shelves full of medicine bottles, and replied:

"I would like to talk to you in private, Mr. Bastos."

The pharmacist was truly astonished. How could he be useful to a man whose name was known around the world and whom the newspapers talked about with such refined respect? Was it money? Maybe... Some delay in receiving his revenues, who knows? And he led the chemist inside the house, under the apprentice's astonished look - for a moment, he let his "hand" rest on the mortar where he was macerating some tisane.

Eventually, at the very back of the house, he reached the little room that he used for more detailed medical examinations or for small operations, for Bastos also operated. They sat down, and Flamel soon disclosed:

"As you must know, I'm devoted to chemistry, and I do have a respected reputation in the scholarly universe..."

"I know perfectly well, sir, and I have told my friends here."

"Thank you. Well, I've made a great discovery, extraordinary..."

Embarrassed at his own excitement, the scholar made a pause, and then continued:

"A discovery... But, for now, it won't do to communicate this to the academic world, do you understand?"

"Perfectly."

"That's why I need three reputable people to witness a specific experiment of the discovery, and give testimony on paper, to protect the priority of my invention... You know: there are unexpected events and..."

"Certainly! There's no question!"

"Believe it or not, it's all about making gold..."

"What? What do you mean?" replied Bastos, wide-eyed.

"That's right! Gold!" Flamel answered firmly.

"How?"

"You will find out", the chemist said dryly. "The issue at hand is who should be witness to the experiment, don't you think?"

"Absolutely, your rights must safeguarded, considering..."

"One of them", interrupted the scholar, "is you; the two other, you, sir, will do me the favor of suggesting."

The pharmacist thought for a minute, scrutinizing what he knew, and, after three minutes, he asked:

"How about Colonel Bentes? Do you know him?"

"No. You know I don't get along with anyone here."

"I guarantee you he's a serious, wealthy, and very discreet man."

"And is he religious? I ask", Flamel soon added, "because we shall have to handle the bones of corpses, and only these will do..."

"No! He's almost an atheist..."

"Well! He'll do. And the other one?"

Bastos started thinking again, and this time he took a little longer consulting his memory... Eventually, he said:

"Lieutenant Cavalhadas, the collector, do you know him?"

"As I've already told you..."

"Right ... He's a trustworthy, serious man, but..."

"But what?"

"He's a Mason."

"Even better."

"And when is it?"

"On Sunday. On Sunday, the three of you will come to my house to witness the experiment, and I hope you'll not refuse to initial my discovery."

"It's a deal."

On Sunday, as promised, the three respectable people of Tubiacanga went to Flamel's house, and, days later, mysteriously, he disappeared without leaving a trace or explanation.

III

Tubiacanga was a small peaceful town of three or four thousand inhabitants, at whose station express trains would, once in a while, deem it worthy to stop. There hadn't been a robbery or assault in five years. Doors and windows were only used ... because they were the style in Rio.

The only crime registered in its sparse records was a murder during city elections; but since the murderer was a member of the political party in office, and the victim of the opposition party, this event did nothing to alter the town's habits. It continued to export its coffee, and gaze at the small houses of the town reflected in the scrimpy water of the small river that gave it its name.

But the surprise of its inhabitants was nothing if not immense when they discovered one of the most hideous crimes in recent memory! It was not a dismemberment or a parricide, not the murder of an entire family or an assault on the tax collector - it was much worse, sacrilegious in the eyes of every religion and conscience: the violation of the graves of "Rest in Peace", the town cemetery, God's own acre.

At first, the gravedigger thought it was the work of dogs, but when he checked the wall, he did not find anything but small holes. He closed them, but to no avail. The very next day, a perpetual resting place had been broken into and the bones were missing; on another occasion, a mausoleum and a shallow grave. It was either a person or the work of the devil. The gravedigger did not want to pursue the matter on his own. He went to the deputy and the news spread through the city.

The rage of all in town took over every possible feature and purpose. The religion of death precedes all else and will certainly be the last to die in people's minds. Against the profanation, the six Presbyterians of the town - the Biblical folk, as they were called - cried out; as did the surveyor Nicholas, a former cadet and a positivist of the Teixeira Mendes line; Major Camanho, president of the "New Hope Masonic Temple" protested, the Turk Miguel Abudala, a haberdasher, did so as well, and the skeptic Belmiro, a former student, who did nothing for a living, and drank *cachaça* at the taverns. Even the daughter of the railroad engineer, who constantly despised the hamlet, ignoring even the sighs of the locals who had fallen in love with her, always waiting for the express train to bring her Prince Charming - the beautiful and arrogant Cora could not avoid sharing the outrage and horror that such an act had caused in the whole village. What did she care about the tombs of former slaves and humble yokels? What could it matter to her beautiful brown eyes what the fate of such humble bones was? Would their theft perchance disrupt her dream of showing off the radiant beauty of her mouth, eyes and bust on the sidewalks of Rio?

Certainly not, but it was Death. Death, relentless and powerful, to which she also felt enslaved, and which one day would also sweep away her beautiful

bones to the eternal peace of the cemetery. When that day came, Cora wanted her bones resting in a peaceful, quiet and comfortable coffin, in a safe grave, after her flesh had become the charm and delight of worms ...

The most incensed of them all, however, was Pelino. The Professor wrote a most choleric article, cursing, screaming, vociferating; "In the history of crime", he declared, "already full to its brim with the most repulsive facts ever, such as the dismemberment of Maria de Macedo, the strangulation of the Fuoco brothers, we have not registered any that is nearly as vile as the looting of the graves of 'Rest in Peace'."

And the village was constantly terrified. No longer did one see peace on people's countenances; business was paralyzed; all courting suspended. Day after day, dark clouds hung over the houses, and at night, they all heard noises, groans, supernatural noises... It was as if the dead were asking for revenge ...

The looting, however, continued. Every night there were two, three graves open and emptied of their funereal contents. The entire population, en masse, decided to guard the bones of their ancestors. They arrived early, but soon, yielding to fatigue and sleepiness, one after the other withdrew, and in the wee hours, there was not one on guard. On this very day the gravedigger noticed that two graves had been opened and the bones taken to a mysterious destiny.

All then organized a watch. Ten determined men swore to the deputy they would guard the mansion of the dead overnight. There was nothing irregular on the first night or on the second or third, but on the fourth night, when the watchmen were about to doze off, one of them saw an indistinct shape sneaking off down the block of mausoleums. They ran and managed to catch two of the vampires. Their anger and indignation, dormant until then, emerged, and they beat the macabre thieves with such violence that both looked dead in the end.

The news soon spread, and when the identity of the two malefactors was disclosed in the morning, before the entire population, they were recognized as the Collector Carvalhais and Colonel Bentes, a wealthy landowner and the mayor. The former was still alive, and in answer to the repeated questions that were made, he could only reply that he was gathering the bones to make gold and that the partner who had escaped was the apothecary.

There was surprise and there was hope. How does one make gold with bones? Is it possible? But how could such a wealthy and respected gentleman fall to the level of a thief of corpses if it was not true!

If it were possible to do so, if from those wretched funereal spoils it was possible to make some money, it would be a blessing for them all!

The postman, whose old dream was his son's graduation, saw right there and then the way to carry it through. Castrioto, the judge's clerk, who last year managed to buy a house, but had not been able to put up even a fence, thought about a wall that would protect his garden and livestock. In the eyes of the

farmer Marques, who for years had been pining for some pasture, the green meadow that belonged to Costa loomed, a place where his oxen could fatten and gain strength ...

The needs made plain by each and every one would be abated, fulfilled and satiated by those bones that were gold, and those two or three thousand people; men, women and children; young and old, as if they were all one person, ran to the apothecary's house.

With a great deal of effort, the deputy prevented all from sacking the drug-store and managed to keep them in the square, to wait for the man who kept within the immense secret of a Potosi. He soon appeared. Perched on a chair, in his hand a small bar of gold that sparkled in the strong morning sun, Bastos asked to say a word, promising to teach them the secret, if they saved his life. "We want to know now," they shouted. He then explained that it was necessary to write down the recipe, to record the progression of the process, the reactives - a long ordeal that could only be handed out in print the next day. There was a murmur, some started to shout, but the deputy said he himself would be responsible for the result.

Compliantly, with that peculiar passivity of angry crowds, everyone walked home with only one thought in mind: to immediately obtain the largest number of bones possible.

The event was heard of at the house of the railroad engineer. At dinner, the topic of conversation was nothing else. The engineer tried to recall what he had studied at college, and said that it was impossible. This was alchemy, a dead thing, gold is gold, simple matter, and bones are bones, compounds, phosphate of lime. To think you could transform one thing into another was "nonsense". Cora was quick to laugh at the tomfoolery of those primitive people, but her mother, Dona Emilia, believed the whole thing was possible.

At night, however, the engineer, seeing that his wife was asleep, escaped through the window and ran straight to the cemetery, Cora, barefoot, holding her slippers, looked for the maid to go with her to reap for bones. Seeing no sign of her, Cora went off on her own; and Dona Emilia, finding she was alone, guessed where they had all gone off to and cleared out as well. And the same went on throughout the whole town. A father said nothing to his son, and sneaked out; a woman, thinking she could deceive her husband, left; sons, daughters, servants, the entire population, under the eerie starlight, rushed to the satanic rendez-vous at "Rest in Peace". And nobody was missing. The wealthiest and the poorest were all there. Miguel the Turk, professor Pelino, Dr. Jerome, Major Camanho, Cora, the beautiful and stunning Cora, with her beautiful alabaster fingers, dredged up the graves, pulling off skin that still clung tenaciously to the rotten bones and filled her lap, which until that moment had never been used for anything else. This was the dowry she was gathering, and her nostrils,

which shivered like transparent pink wings, did not notice the fetid tissue that rotted in the malodorous mud ...

Disagreements soon arose, the dead were few and there was not enough to satisfy the hunger of the living. There was stabbing, shooting, shoving. Pelino stabbed the Turk over a femur and even among families issues arose. Only the postman and his son did not fight. They walked together in absolute agreement, and, at one moment, the astute child of eleven urged his father: "Papa, let's go to Mama's grave, she was, after all, so fat..."

In the morning, the cemetery was filled with more dead than it had buried in the last thirty years of its existence. Only one person had not been there, neither killing nor defiling graves: this was Belmiro, the drunk.

He went into a small grocery, door half open, and finding no one there, filled a bottle with cachaça and sat down to drink at the margins of the Tubiacanga river. He watched its waters flow by gently over the rough granite riverbed - both he and the river were aloof as to what they had witnessed, even to the escape of the apothecary with his Potosi and his secret, under the canopy of the eternal stars.

The Gold Pouch

J. Simões Lopes Neto

I was drovin' back then. This one time, it was just me and my horse and a leather pouch all stuffed with gold coins, when I came to cross this very ford that brought me up to the Coronilha ranch where I was meant to spend the night.

It seems like yesterday!... It was February, and I was dog-tired from the ride.

See there, in the shade by that spit of land, I unsaddled under that same clump of woods that is staring back at us. Stretched out on the sheepskin, head on the saddle and hat over my eyes, I lay down and slept like a log.

I woke up to the soft sound of the water, runnin' so fresh, so clean over the pebbles, I just had to dive in, to get rid of the sleepiness... so I slid into the water like a capybara.

I plunged again and again into the swimming hole under the gully, takin' a few strokes here and there, since there wasn't really room for a good swim.

Alone in the silence, I got dressed, saddled up the bay and mounted.

I went some twelve miles down that road and soon made it to the ranch, with the sun still at least a yard and a half up in the sky.

Ah!... I forgot to tell you that a dog was riding with me that day, a very smart, chestnut-colored *cusco*, a good watchdog. It was the young'uns pet, but sometimes he took to followin' me. After I went out the gate, you couldn't get that dog to turn back unless it was with me. He always slept by my side during those journeys, over the back saddle on the harness.

And, in fact, one night...

But that's another story. Let's get to the point.

As I rode, I noticed every so often the *cusco* would stop on the road, barkin' and runnin' back, then lookin' at me, lookin' at me and barkin' again, then runnin' back over our trail. It was like he was callin' me!... But since I kept on