

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

goin', he'd come and catch up with me, then after a while it'd start all over again.

Well, you know, fello, what do you reckon, the moment I set foot in the stockyard, just about to greet my host 'Afternoon!', I felt a shot burn through my heart... I couldn't feel the weight of the pouch 'round my waist!

I had lost the three hundred gold pieces I had on me, to pay fo' the cattle I was meant to drive.

I was blinded by this white light, followed by some purple flashes... and then everything grayed into black.

I was dirt poor in those days, and even today, you know how it is... I was just startin' out in life, and the money belonged to the boss, owner of a salting works, an honest man who had a temper like hailstorm...

I was still collectin' myself, half shocked, when I heard someone ask:

"Hey, fello! Are you ill?"

"No, sir, thank you, it ain't no ailment. Somethin' horrible has chanced upon me: I lost a fortune of my boss' money..."

"You don't say!..."

"It's true... I'd rather die than this! What will he think of me now?..."

"It's a hell of a situation, but don't let it get you down, young man."

At this point, the cusco jumped up to the horse's muzzle, like he was tryin' to lick its snout, and rushed back down the road, barkin' like crazy. He looked at me, ran up and back, and then started barkin' up a storm again...

Ah!... All of a sudden it all came back. It was like I was seein' the spot where I had stopped, the swim, hangin' my clothes on a leafflower branch, and the pouch on a rock, my gun belt on top of it, and even the cigarette I'd taken a last drag of before I dived in, the butt stuck on a thorn, still glowin', lettin' out a thin little trail of blue smoke, goin' straight up in the windless air...; everything, I could see everything.

It was there, by gully, the pouch. And there was only one thing for it: ride back at full gallop, before other journeyers came along.

I was on my horse in a flash, and right then the dog started to jump and play and bark – Lord have mercy – like he was talkin' to me.

And off I went, back 'round the kink in the fence.

Pretty soon I came upon a host of drovers, a large herd of horses behind them, cert'nly headed to put up at the ranch. We all tipped our hats as we passed by, many of them deep into their ponchos. My heart was skippin' beats, keen to ask some questions... but I bit my tongue.

I leaned forward and spurred my horse into a full gallop.

The dog panted along, under the shadow of the horse, which was already gettin' long.

The road expanded before me, deserted; to my left, the fields stretched out as far as the eye could see, peaceful and green in the soft twilight sun, spotted

with cattle settlin' down for the night; to my right, the sun, very low, golden red, going behind a mass of clouds with silver edges.

Not a lapwing in the dry mudholes; a hidden partridge or two whistled softly in the tall grass; in the distance, between the last glimmers of light escapin' on one side and the night siffin' in from the other, there flashed the white of a big stork, flyin', serene, barely movin' its wings, like a sad goodbye when we don't wave our arms either...

A cool breeze began to fall, and an immense silence took over everything.

The bay was a fine animal, and the mutt was calmer now, off to my side, tongue out and tail up, pacin' fast and tight in the low dust raised by the horse's hooves.

And the sun set. It left a burnin' light in the sky, like a grass fire, then the twilight, and the dark night closed in; then just stars in the sky... just stars...

The bay kept champin' at the bit, groanin' with every gallopin' step, eatin' up the miles. Above my head was Orion's belt... so beautiful, so bright, so straight, it seemed to follow me. It reminded me of my little' uns, who were lookin' at it too, maybe; it reminded me of my mother, my father, who saw them when they were children themselves, and used to call it *Marias, As Tres Marias*. My friend! You're a young man, you spend your life joshin' – God bless you! – without ever knowin' the heavy sadness of the *pampas* when your heart aches.

I hadn't cried in a long spell. But right then and there I felt some tears in my eyes, slowly, as if crawlin'... quiverin' on my lashes, shimmerin' there a while. They dropped warmly onto the dusty ground as I took off gallopin'... they were like stray water drops that not even a fly or an ant would notice.

Through my tears, like a beam of sunshine comin' through the clouds, a tune from my hometown crossed my mind:

Sing! and let your soul fly

Singin' eases the pain

Sing! it's no time to die

Singin' brings life back again

But how could I sing?

The horse took a deep breath and came to a halt, shakin' his ears and sniffin' in the dark. It knew the place, this was it.

I could hear the dog breathin', petered out. I got off the horse.

Not a leaf rustled. The silence in the shadow of the trees caused a great deal of wonderment... it wasn't fear, mind you, fear never so much as grazes the heart of a gaucho!

Down the road, I could hear the water rollin' over the stones. Fireflies danced in the dark. I went down to the place where I had rested. I groped the

tree branches and found the stone where I had left the bag and guns. I reached out my hand and fumbled everywhere, here, there... nothing!... nothing!

I froze on the inside. My boss would say I stole the bag!... stole it!... Because how could I ever explain that I had lost it? How? A thief, thief, that was what I was!

A *discomposin'* idea sprang into my head: I should end it all, so I wouldn't be afflicted with the shame of suspicion. Yep, that was just what I should do: kill myself... right here, right now!

I drew my gun and set the trigger... I blessed myself and held the thick, cold, charged pistol against my ear...

I'll tell you one sure thing, son! There truly is a God!

In the heat of that moment, my eyes were drawn to... *As Tres Marias* glintin' on the water, the dog seated on the stone, next to me, lickin' my hand... and the horse that whinnied up on the road, by the bank of the stream. At the same time, a cricket started its lively tune in the hollow of trunk nearby! My good fello! I am not a man given to blasphemy, but it was God who made those stars shine there and made those simple critters shake that awful thought off of me...

The small, loyal dog reminded me of the affection of my people. My horse made me think of freedom, my work. And that singin' cricket gave me back my hope.

Damn it all, friend! I ain't got no learnin'... and we judge a book by its cover, without seein' the heart of the matter. Well, my heart, at that moment, was like a flower under the sun, in an open field at high noon. God's light was shinin' everywhere.

And, once again, at peace with myself, I put my gun back in my belt, rolled up a cigarette, stroke the lighter and began smokin'.

And I went on thinkin'. I reckon it was my fault entirely... I had lost three hundred gold coins, a fortune to me. I couldn't get my head 'round it... I usually took special care of everything. Now, what I'd do was sell my small farm, mos' of my poor cattle – except for a few dairy cows, for the sake of the young'uns, and the pair of field oxen – sell my herd of bay horses... done! That should be more than enough. And in case it wasn't, I'd find some other way. Now, for a man to end his life... a family man too... it just wouldn't do!

And slow-like I went back up the bank. As soon as my horse felt I was there, it pranced and bit the bridles.

I tied the halter around the horse. As it turned 'round, I mounted, relieved.

The happy cusco went 'round in circles,, I went galloping back to the farm.

As I rode 'round the fence, I could see the light comin' from the house. The dogs came out barkin'. The horse whinnied all cheerful, sensin' that its friends were near. In the barn, other horses whinnied.

In the barn, I got off the horse and loosened the halter. The horse carried on, joyfully.

I then went in: at the door I said, "God bless y'all, good evenin'!" and walked in, with the dog right beside me. In the room, there were a few countrymen, the group that was arrivin' when I was leavin'. They were sippin' *chimarrão*.

On the table was the kettle, and next to it, like a coiled snake, was my bag, stuffed with the three hundred gold coins.

"Why, yes, God bless you, partner! Good evening! So, was you ever scared so senseless?"

And the men chuckled, as good men would at an innocent prank.

And so did I. My eyes wandered from the bag to the dog, coiled around my feet.