

Cover of Enrique Gaspar's *Novelas* (1887), containing "El Anacronópete" and the first known drawing of a time machine.

EL ANACRONÓPETE

**ES PROPIEDAD**

ENRIQUE GASPAR

---

EL  
ANACRONÓPETE

---

VIAJE Á CHINA-METEMPSÍCOSIS

---

ILUSTRACIÓN DE

F. GÓMEZ SOLER



BARCELONA  
BIBLIOTECA «ARTE Y LETRAS»

DANIEL CORTEZO y C.<sup>a</sup> Calle de Pallars (Safón de S. Juan)

1887



Establecimiento tipográfico-editorial de DANIEL CORTEZO Y C.ª



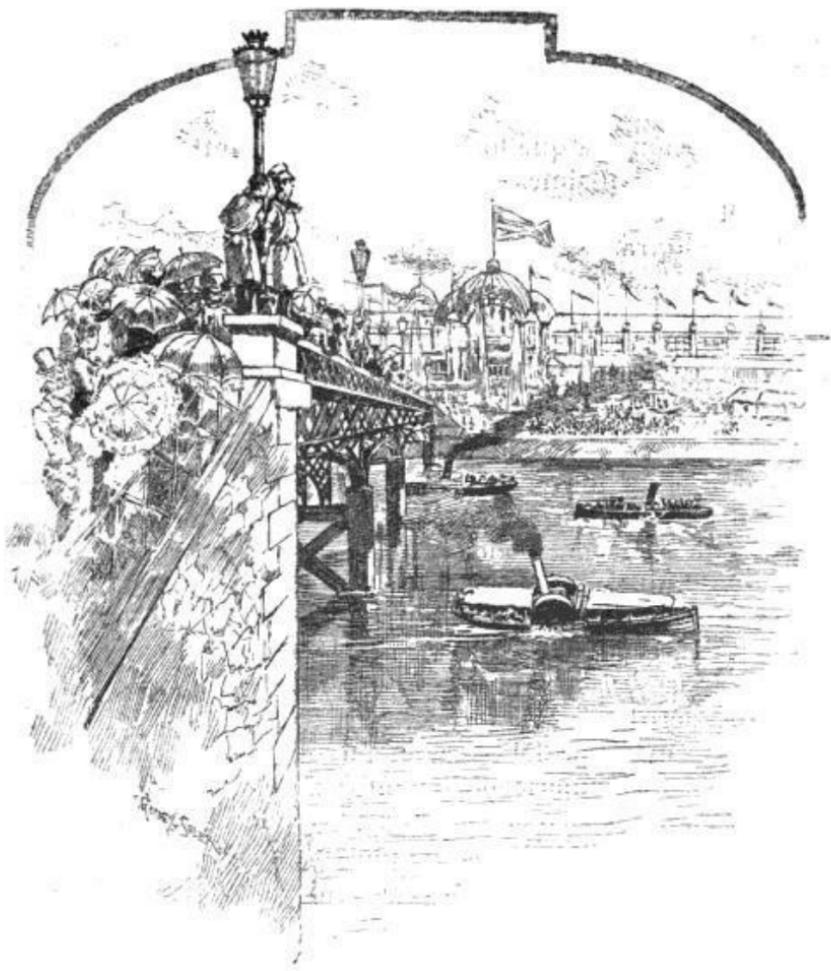
Original Spanish from American Libraries  
<http://www.archive.org/details/elanacronpete00gaspgoo>

Translation by Michael Main ([main@colorado.edu](mailto:main@colorado.edu))

Historical notes and links follow the final chapter.

© 2011,2012,2013,2014 by Michael Main

Visit [storypilot.com](http://storypilot.com) for more adventures in time travel.



## CHAPTER I

In which it is shown that moving FORWARD is not the hallmark of progress

**P**ARIS—focus of gaiety, center of activity, the very core of hustle and bustle—presented that day a singular appearance. It wasn't the orderly parade of Parisians and foreigners heading to the Champ de Mars, some to satisfy common curiosity, others to make a technical study of the

progress of science and industry. More than anything, their appearances reflected a cheerfulness, like the gentry of old Lutecia on their annual procession to take in the Grand Prix de Paris horse race, butchering English and flaunting their fine suits and dresses with trains, each of which by itself was the equal of the prize purse and which altogether could retire the national debt of some countries.

Still, the truth is that although an age of widespread competition pervaded that year of 1878, it wasn't racing either, since it was not more than ten days into the month of July. Moreover, there was no to-ing and fro-ing; that is to say it wasn't the sort of thing that happens in cases wherein the paths of tourists are at odds with those coming and going from their workdays. Everyone followed the same course, a sense of wonder engraved in every look. The shops were closed; trains from all compass points disgorged passengers who stormed carriages and coaches with nothing but the cry: "To Trocadero!"

The steamboats of the Seine, the beltway rail, the American trams—indeed every last means of transportation extant in that modern Babylonia directed its activity toward the one target of the public's desire. Yet even so, through the suffocating heat of that high summer day, two human rivers overflowed the sidewalks, since, ignoring private vehicles, Paris's 14,000 carriages could transport no more than 280,000 people, granting ten trips for each of the two-seaters; hence, with the population approaching two million for the draw of the day which everyone wanted to attend, it seemed that 1,700,000 had to go by foot.

The Champ de Mars and the Trocadero, stage for the coming once-in-a-lifetime demonstration, had been invaded at dawn by an impatient multitude of those who, not counting on a ticket for the actual lecture in the pavilion's Hall of Festivities that day at 10AM, had

to content themselves with lesser affairs by braving admission to the exposition area. Those who still couldn't gain access afflicted themselves on bridges and avenues. The lazier or less fortunate were reduced to spreading out through the heights of Montmartre, church towers, the Bosque hills and the high ground in parks. Roofs, monuments, columns, commemorative arches, observatories, artesian wells, cupolas, lightning rods, anything that offered elevation had been co-opted; and the stores were depleted of umbrellas, parasols, straw hats, fans and cold drinks to combat the sun.

Just what was up in Paris? To be fair, these people who so admire themselves that they place their own mediocrity on pedestals for the world to take them as geniuses all the while amusing themselves with their own stale caricatures, were now stirred to action for ample reason. Science had just taken a step that was to change the course of mankind. One name, until then obscure and Spanish to boot, had come forth with a flash of brilliance to erase the memory of the most eminent minds the world had ever known. And indeed, what had those minds done anyway? Fulton applied Watt and Papin's experiments to maritime locomotion so ships could crash through the waves under his impulsive force; but to leave a port on Monday and arrive in another on Tuesday, as opposed to arriving Saturday with the wind in your sail, cannot be said to bypass time, but—at best—only to spend less. Stephenson, inventing the locomotive, allowed man to devour countryside on two sinews of iron; but remember that greater distances in fewer minutes are always limited to seeking tomorrow on the path of today. The same can be said of Morse: Sending thoughts over a wire via an electrical agent doesn't alter the fact that even when the electric current is capable of circling the globe four times per second, the message still takes  $1/240^{\text{th}}$  of a minute to complete a revolution around the equator. It's

said that such results follow inevitably from the nature of time—not to mention that it's impossible to eliminate the telegraph wires, which goes to show that a telegraph is but one connected entity, or as they say: "It's a very long dog who has his tail pulled in Madrid and barks in Moscow."

The imaginings of the famous Jules Verne, taken to be unbelievably marvelous, were mere child's toys before the magnitude of the real-life invention of our modest man of Saragossa, neighbor to the Courts of Spain. Journeying to the center of the Earth is just a matter of opening a hole to descend through, like the Greeks who many centuries before the Christian era had already dug deep into the lowlands south of Athens to unearth rich veins of lead and silver. Their diggings were shallower, but the principle was no different. Or consider navigating the air by means of the ingenious theory of gas-wielding burners. The approach offers no advantage over leaving the steering to the aeronaut who controls the tether as in the Battle of Fleures whereupon General Jourdan tethered the Montgolfiers' balloon in order to spy on the enemy's position. Another of Verne's imaginings, acquiring the North Pole in the expectation it will thaw, is naught but an exercise in pure patience, as if slavishly imitating those wise people who, in order to do their shopping, wait for a shop that's gone into liquidation. And regarding the Nautilus: Long before Verne, our Catalan compatriot Monturiol had already carried out wildly successful tests in his own underwater vessel, the *Ictíneo*. Indeed, in order to find out what exists in the ocean's depths, it's sufficient to merely assemble a crew of divers. Above all (and kindly forgive my fixation on this point), consider uprooting the alluvial ground on Monday, only to arrive on Tuesday in the Eocene, on Wednesday in the Permian, and to conclude the week in a sea of fire; or traveling in 20 hours from France to Senegal by air;

or perhaps reaching the end of a submarine voyage sooner or later—but always *later* than it began, hence trapping men of science into a rigid notion of “later” that inevitably leads them into chasing after tomorrow as if yesterday were already known to the  $n^{\text{th}}$  decimal place.

The world is humanity’s house, whose inhabitants multiply themselves, building more and more stories, all for more space but without a careful architectural study of the building’s foundations to ensure they’d support the massive weight to be piled upon them. When the passage of half an hour so distorts the facts of an event we’ve witnessed thirty minutes beforehand, can we blindly trust the historians’ accounts of ancient times? Should we base our future behavior on such accounts? By a series of deductions, Jacques Boucher de Crève-cœur de Perthes thought to prove the existence of fossil men, but is it not possible that the femur bone he took for human belonged to a zoological species of some lowlife relative of don Quixote’s mount? Know that our past is unknowable. The sciences study it in retrospect, proceeding more or less by induction, but so long as we have no true awareness of yesterday, it’s pointless to ramble on about tomorrow. Rather than aiming to prove that which can’t be proved about the future, let us instead learn to believe in the touch of God as shown in his truly colossal work of architecture.

Such were the philosophical principles of that one brilliant mind—Don Sindulfo García, doctor of mathematics, physics and the natural sciences—and of his spectacular invention which universally imbued the eager people of the city with anxiety and expectancy, and necessarily awakened in Paris things which (despite being called the Brain of the World) could not fit into its head.

“But tell me, Señor Captain—” asked a gentleman to one of the Hussars of Pavia traveling by omnibus with

19 other individuals to the site of the experiment—  
“as a Spaniard, you must know the workings of *El Anacronópete*.”

“Forgive me,” responded the one asked, “I know I fought the enemies of my country; I know to be cautious with the men and to be gallant with the ladies; I know of military discipline, strategy and tactics; but on the matter of navigating the skies, I know only what I learned from being tossed in a blanket at college when I hadn’t sufficient tobacco to go around.”

“Even so,” persisted the questioner, “I would imagine that, as a fellow countryman of the brilliant inventor of the machine, your notions would be more on target than those of a foreigner.”

“I am proud to be Spanish, and I am also Señor García’s nephew, but I have no more insight into the subject at hand than any other.”

The news of the captain’s relationship with the scientific colossus redoubled the curiosity of the passengers who now wanted to find in him traces of his uncle, much as on the desert plains of Marathon or between the vineyards of the Catalaunian Fields we search for Milciades’ footsteps or the hoofprints of Attila’s steed; the women asked whether Don Sindulfo was married, the men whether he’d been awarded any commendations, and everyone whether he was related to the famous bullfighter Frascuelo.

“But, to cut to the chase,” said one, “what is he proposing to do?”

“That which we, the French, have long tired of doing—” exclaimed a hot-headed patriot—“to travel by air.”

“Yes, with fine control and a dizzying speed,” a policeman added prudently, while keeping an eye on the cavalryman who had put his hand on his sabre, not meaning anything but to position it to his liking.

“I don’t deny,” interjected a fourth, “that it’s marvelous and grand to sail through the atmosphere wherever you desire, but sooner or later that accomplishment was inevitable. But the intelligent man can hardly conceive what this vehicle can really do—to travel back in time, leaving Paris after dining at Le Grand Véfour today only to arrive yesterday at the Monastery of Yuste to partake of chocolate with the Emperor Carlos V.”

“That’s impossible,” everyone shouted.

“Impossible for us, the ignorant,” continued the speaker, “but not so for the last World Congress of Science which has vouched for the invention. All doubts will soon be dispelled. Señor García sets off today in his *Anacronópete* for unknown times, from which he intends to return within a month bringing evidence of his fabulous expedition.”

“I’ll bet the inventor is a *Bonapartista* who wants to restore that traitor of Sedan back to the throne,” a patriot cried.

“Or bring back Robespierre’s reign of terror,” said a royalist supporter, tightening his fists.

“One step at a time,” argued a sensible voice. “If the *Anacronópete* aims to undo history, it seems to me that we must be congratulated as it allows us to amend our failures.”

“Quite right,” called a married man jammed into the front of the bus, thinking of his tiresome wife. “As soon as the ticket office opens to the public, I’m booking passage to the eve of my wedding.”

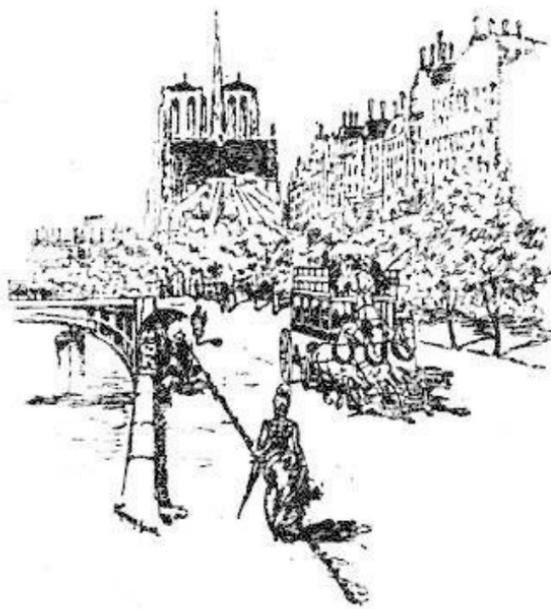
The passengers were still reveling when the bus (not without great risk of squashing the already compressed crowd) ground to a halt at the head of a bridge; and surging off the bus, everyone tried to break through as best they could to seek their destinies.

It seems the tale we’ve just heard is fictitious, but there is nothing truer. Dr. Sindulfo García prepared his

practical experiment to address the most arduous task ever faced by the annals of science: traveling back through time.

What tests had he already done? What branch of study did his discovery belong to, which until today had been but an abstract idea, but that he had been able to thoroughly decipher? What value would various agents put on this whole affair? What colossal entity was it with which he threatened to reveal the truth of the past to a century that looks for its ideals in tomorrow and accepts “forward” as the formula for progress?

The next chapter will tell us.





## CHAPTER II

A lecture explains all



HE spectacle consisted of two parts. In the first, the learned Spaniard bid farewell to his colleagues, to the authorities, and to the public of Paris with a lecture given in the Trocadero's Hall of Festivities, in which by supplanting technicalities with down-to-earth demonstrations he resolved to make the fundamental principles of his machine comprehensible to the layman. The second part was the launching of the mammoth machine from the Champ de Mars into the atmosphere whence the trip would commence. In order to be an eyewitness to the latter, it sufficed to pay the entrance fee to the exhibition grounds, to climb a nearby elevation, or to spread out through the surrounding open space; and this, as we have seen, is what the masses had been doing since dawn, testing the patience and the fists of

the policemen who, to their credit, managed to avert a riot on the grounds. Relatively few were chosen to hear the doctor's words from among the many who claimed the right. The hall, although spacious, was simply incapable of containing so many people. None of the spectators had partaken of anti-fat treatments, but nonetheless it was said that everyone had thinned because each seat, on average, held at least a person and a half. The entrances were jammed and the aisles impassable with the multitudes patiently awaiting a chance to advance a single step, even knowing they would never reach the front.

The presidents of the Republic, the legislative bodies and the cabinet; the diplomatic corps, the commissioners of the institutes and academies, the chiefs of corporations and of the army, all in their uniforms littered with medals and ribbons, were interspersed with the humble priest who had no more than the distinguished Cross of Golgotha on the back of his black or purple cassock. Some donned tailcoats, although they were few since, this being France, rarely was a man not in uniform, imposing his civil status with chagrin upon the oceans of ladies' silk, cascades of lace, and bright mountainous clouds of hair, some as dark as a tempest, others fair like the setting sun breaking through layers of storm clouds, but almost none the color of snow announcing the winter of life—for in the country of Violet and Pinaud, the concepts of "woman" and "old" were mutually incompatible.

At long last the hour rang out: A ripple of excitement raced through the hall as two ushers threw open the door and in stepped the Scientific Commission, to the right of whose president walked our hero, his face imprinted with a semblance of modesty befitting his talent. Everything about him was commonplace. His first name, rather than wise, seemed farcical. His surname was unlinked by even the merest thread to those

branches of the García family, such as the Paredeses or the Córdobas, who lent a lushness to the genealogical tree and prevented a lack of respect with which a certain celebrated García offspring—*La Malibrán*—is renowned for in the world of art, as if, instead, she may be *La Bernaola*, the notorious criminal. He wore his 50 years not with the pride of the titan laying the pavestones to climb to heaven, but with the resignation of the porter who shoulders a trunk. Our dear little man, clean-shaven with not a hair out of place, his neatly brushed suit hanging from his slight frame, had one of those faces that just seemed to fit the name he'd been given. In a nutshell, he lived up to the name of Don Sindulfo García and was deserving of the nickname *Pichichi* that his maid had branded him with. Such was the wrapping that wisdom had chosen to astound the world, showing once again that under a bad surface, hides a good drunk.

The commission took their seats under the monumental organ; the president rang a small silver bell to open the session, and the inventor of *El Anacronópete* crossed to the rostrum through a storm of applause that died down, not from the inaudible sound of his faint voice, but from the movement of his lips alerting the audience that he'd spoken the ritual "Gentlemen..." which begins all lectures.

With silence restored, the hero expressed himself in this manner:

"I will be brief in that the more hours taken here, the longer the distance that separates me from my destination of yesterday. I will be informal since, with my theories already sanctioned by the scientific world, it remains only for me to make myself understood to all. Nevertheless, I will address any points you may raise.

"Everyone knows my purpose, to go back in time—not to halt the continual march of life, but to rewind it and bring us closer to God, guiding us to the origins of the planet we inhabit. But in order to explain how to

turn back time, it is first necessary for us to know what time consists of. Let us proceed in order. God created the heavens and the earth: that one dark; this one without form, and void. And He said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. Thus we have the sun floating in the celestial sphere and the world suspended in space by rule of solar attraction.

Everyone knows, ever since Galileo demonstrated the principle of the revolution of the planets, that the Earth—it moves! But what science still has not said is why the earth should spin from west to east rather than the other way around; and this, as I'll explain, is the basis of my *anacronopétic* method."

The audience let out a murmur of satisfaction, and the scientist continued his lecture.

"In the beginning, the earth was engulfed in chaos, one immense fireball which, as any incandescent body, gives off those emissions we know by the name of radiation. Fixed on its axis as the final act of creation, it had not yet begun to rotate as required by the Maker, but the heat in the east was infinitely more intense by virtue of being constantly bathed in the sun's rays. Any one who's seen asphalt melt in a caldron will have noticed the enormous amounts of hot gas given off. Imagine, therefore, the emissions of gases from setting alight a spheroid whose volume is 1079 million cubic myriameters. The most ignorant layman sees that such an exhalation couldn't occur without a series of eruptions with accompanying crashes and tremors. Well now, if firing a cannon causes a recoil in the gun, then every outburst of radiation should bring about a dislocation in the earth's landmasses. And seeing as the outbursts proceeded more frequently and with more intensity in the eastern part of the planet (that part where the sun burned brighter), the repeated recoils from constant shocks toward that side caused the revolution of the spheroid on its axis in the direction of

west to east—a wise plan by Providence for the periodic succession of day and night—and so it will carry on, as long as the Almighty pleases to have the central fire serve as His engine.”

A prolonged hurrah welcomed this new theory, so daring and unexpected. The doctor, without wetting his lips (as to not lose the attention of the listeners, who were used to seeing their speakers take a drink at the conclusion of a speech), picked up the thread of his thought where he'd left off.

“Every phenomenon has a cause; however, two and a half centuries have passed since the inventor of the thermometer and the proportional compass, that wise man of Pisa who showed by the pendulum's swing how to measure the arterial pulse and count the passing of seconds—to wit, Galileo—told us the Earth moves, but not until today has the reason for such a simple fact been revealed. But is this enough? Not hardly. If every phenomenon has a cause, it also needs a conclusion that bears a result, thereby fulfilling a purpose.

“A man cries out, ‘The Earth moves!’ and subsequently science asks: ‘Why does it move?’

“‘By volcanic eruptions,’ answers Observation, yet in the next breath, Philosophy crosses swords with science, calling a halt and crying out in turn, ‘But with what purpose does it move?’

“We shall answer Philosophy. The Earth moves in order to create time. Our planet, which as we have seen was nothing more than an incandescent mass, came to solidify her crust and saw colossal mountains emerge from her surface; she filled her seas from her breasts and adorned her deserts with extraordinary flora and rich fauna. How did she beget this miracle? Very simply, by the passage of time. Over a succession of days or epochs, the work was presided over by the wisdom and will of the Supreme Maker, who permitted the revolution to continue toward the perfectibility of

man as the master stroke of His omnipotence. Thus, the transformations of the world were the handiwork of time. But who is this craftsman? What are his materials? Where is his workspace? The craftsman works with radiation; his materials are the gaseous elements; his workspace *is* space: TIME IS THE ATMOSPHERE. The wonders of nature, science, art and industry that present themselves today for our admiration (while we proudly believe them to be a genuine manifestation of progress) all emanate from that region where, until now, man has not managed to find more than air, rain, thunderbolts, flashes of lightning and a half dozen other accidents of weather. Restrain your impatience: I will prove these statements by a practical demonstration, for I'm partial to the notion that seeing is believing."

A surge that threatened to become an explosion broke out in the auditorium. The president shook his bell, and the speaker, who had turned his back for a moment, faced forward again taking in hand a top hat whose cylinder was wrapped with one of those gauze grieving bands with which a man says he is in mourning to those who don't ask, for what little comfort that amounts to.

The gauze band, previously prepared for the event, made five or six wraps around the hat and was unattached except for a bit on the inside. Don Sindulfo began to unwrap it, drawing guffaws from the onlookers, who, as in all corners of life, made the most of the opportunity to abandon themselves to a whimsical and unruly state.

Taking no note, the scientist continued his task until, with the band hanging by its stitching from the brim to the crown of the hat, he pointed out the plush felt cylinder, now free of all wrapping, and said:

"Behold the Earth in her incandescent state as it pleased God to release her into the infinity of space. As you can see, she is fixed—stationary; but soon, the radiation, represented by this gauze, produces an erup-

tion; the aftershock creates movement in the world, and the sphere begins to rotate on its axis, giving rise to time itself, which is nothing more than incessant motion.”

And as he spoke, his right hand stretched the gauze, simulating a column of rising smoke, while his left imparted an imperceptible rotation to the hat.

“Gaze upon time,” he continued, indicating the gauze. “Would you like to know how from an unbroken succession of seconds emerge minerals, plants and organic beings? How from the adaptation of algae comes the garden, from clay comes a set of diamonds, from a grotto comes architecture, from the three-lobed trilobite comes the forehead of man and the infinitesimal calculus? Then follow me into time’s atmospheric workshop...”

Astonishment was painted on every face. The doctor let out a smile of exultation, a sign of his conviction, and clearing his throat, he continued.





## CHAPTER III

A theory of time, how it forms, how it breaks down

**D**ON SINDULFO continued. "Everyone has seen the phenomenon of transformation that occurs in steam upon having escaped up the chimney from a pot of soup boiling on the stove. First, it cools, turning to water droplets that will put out the fire if they fall back down to the bottom; or it changes to soot if the condensation is sufficiently far from the fire to allow solidification. It follows that if the pot were to continue boiling for a period of years without interruption, eventually a film or crust of the vapor's deposits would form in and around the soup, neither more nor less than that which forms on a hearth, and over time, it will ultimately petrify. Accordingly, let us apply this principle to our case.

“The hat is the earth, the gauze the hot gases. It rises and condenses, but also it revolves and surrounds like the girdle that binds a dandy’s waist or the turban wrapping a Muslim’s head. And here, arising from the rotation, you have the first layer of gauze already hiding the silk of the hat, just as the first solid film settling on the globe hid the igneous mass of the planet. Now, the gauze appears full of ridges and crevices. What do they represent? The mountains and the plains—the opus of time. And where was the time produced? In the atmosphere. Does this mean that the Himalayas and the Príncipe Pío Hills, the Valley of Josaphat and the Andorra la Vella, have all fallen to us from the clouds? Indubitably. Here’s how: The horrific, prevailing hurricanes swept molten substances towards a fixed point on the Earth’s surface where these substances, agglomerated and accumulated, formed protuberances just like the uniform ridges that pile up when we blow on a plate of semolina. On the other hand, endless electrical storms opened trenches in the earth’s crust or depressed it into channels through which ran the lava that became the reefs of today. Finally, torrential rains cooled and solidified it all, giving rise to ‘primitive ground’—the first solid layer (counting from the bottom up) of an eventual 80 kilometer crust that serves as our pedestal.

“By and by, some will object to me: ‘I don’t see in these atmospherical revolutions anything but the world’s agents of change; there’s no inherent concept of time. The world is undoubtedly the work of these agents, but I see no reason to admit that the animals, minerals and vegetables are themselves the product of lightning, hurricanes or rain.’

“‘What is time?’ I will then ask, answering that time is movement, for in stillness there is neither ‘before’ nor ‘after.’ And what imparted movement onto the Earth? Radiation, volcanic explosions, and finally the building

up of pressure and the eruptions of hot gas. What did these vapors carry with them? Everything that constitutes our planet today: The proof is that if the Earth had not moved, then the vapors, escaping into space, would have carried away by evaporation all its substances, leaving us with no planet. Thus, the atmosphere—constantly receiving the breaths of the planet and returning them transformed—is the site of cosmic change where movement occurs, and therefore where time is produced. How is it that you've seen only water droplets in the rain, in a flash of lighting, in the gales of a hurricane? Open your minds and worship the Creator who through these fluids delivers endless tomorrows, just as how over a period of nearly seven thousand years, He commanded forth the here and now in which you live and the marvels you admire. From the clouds sprang forth the miraculous pillar of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and the obelisk of Pope Sixto V in the Eternal City; the rains brought us the ancient red porphyry of Egypt with its embedded white crystals of feldspar. From His workshop fell Cleopatra's Needles and the Column of Pompey. The vermillion with which the son of David and Bathsheba ordered the temple of Jehovah to be painted—what produced it if not the mercuric sulfide showered upon Almadén in La Mancha? The copious minerals shed from the bowels of dark clouds bestowed upon you the very houses you inhabit by supplying the limestone and rock to be mined for mortar and building stone. From the same cloudburst that delivered the clay-marl for bricks, came the feldspar-laced kaolin that's made into the everyday crockery from which you eat and fine china that adorns your sitting rooms. Without the atmospheric activity that transformed the vegetation of the Carboniferous into coal, where would the railroads be that cross the Mont Cenis and St. Gotthard Pass, or the steam-driven vessels, such as the Sweden's Vega, which already

opens the Northeast Passage through the Bering Strait? Do you deny that in every raindrop exists the germ of a locomotive or schooner and in every storm lies the genesis of a train or a fleet? But locomotion is not the sole outcome of the rain; from the atmosphere's flood of tears emerged smokestacks, streetlamps and a woman's caress: because in extracting hydrocarbons from bituminous coal, gasworks arise and the residuum yields the coal that draws the family to a fireside or, when the coal crystalizes as a diamond, serves to form the bond between husband and wife. The compass and the electric telegraph have the bolt of lightning as their inspiration. What would become of humanity without elemental mercury to record the variations in temperature as well as to serve in the extraction of gold and silver from ore? But there is more. Amongst the constituent elements of the atmospheric phenomena, God apportioned to Earth the embryos of the shellfish, the tortoises, the birds, the reptiles and the mammals of the Mesozoic; and the air, purified in the Tertiary Period through the absorption of carbonic acid by the coal-bearing vegetation, blew so breathable for the living kingdom that the organisms falling to ground with the raindrops developed, crossbred and grew into the mastodon, hippopotamus, rhinoceros, horse, bull, buffalo, deer, camel, tiger and lion. Finally, the Quaternion presented us with the mammoth, the aurochs, the urus, the fallow deer, the Irish elk, and the giant sloth—until to crown His work, Providence takes a portion of clay, carefully prepared for one purpose during the six days of the Creation, and models from it a figure, which with His divine breath he declares to be *man, king of the Creation*. Gentlemen, the concentric wrappings of the gauze represent the geological epochs of nature. These epochs should be considered the mathematics of the world. Are they not the sum of natural atmospheric processes? Yes. Through them, do we not count the age of

the world? Again, yes. So if every stratum is a series of centuries, then each raindrop, each spark of light, each gust of wind must be a sliver of a second, and the hours circulate through space, all reaffirming that time is the atmosphere.”

The audience’s enthusiasm, held back by the admiration, erupted at this first available break, and a storm of applause and cheers resounded in the hall and out into the corridors where the people applauded just to be a part of it.

One of the attendees, rising from his seat with such resolve that the public thought he was leaving, faced the scientist and said, “May I voice a doubt?”

“Any and all that arise,” answered Don Sindulfo.

“If the speaker considers time as a dense band and considering the flattening of any spherical body at its poles, is it correct to presume that the Earth’s poles are without the wrapping just as the top of the hat and the brim have remained free of gauze in the demonstration?”

“Undoubtedly—and this confirms my thesis. Given that the atmosphere is time, and time is formed by events, it follows that if no one has yet gone to the poles, then nothing has happened at the poles; and with no need of a wrapping where there is no activity, this economy of atmosphere is but the armhole in nature’s tailor-made suit.”

The scientist’s amusing refutation met with resounding laughter, and without batting an eye, he continued.

“Nothing is simpler, gentlemen, than decomposing an object when its constituent elements are known to us. If I know that this grieving band of my hat consists of concentric layers of gauze wrapped around the cylinder, then by unwrapping them in the direction opposite to that which was used in their circumscribed revolutions, I will undoubtedly arrive at the lowest level and uncover the crown of the hat—which when applied to the

cosmos means that by plunging through the geological strata, we will alight upon the primordial chaos. Though just how does this unwrapping take place in the case of time itself? A satisfactory explanation requires me to disclose a little of my apparatus. *El Anacronópete*, which is a kind of Noah's Ark, owes its name to three Greek roots: *Ana* meaning 'backwards,' *crónos* meaning 'time,' and *petes* meaning 'he who flies,' hence explaining its mission to fly backwards through time, since indeed, thanks to it, you can eat breakfast at seven in Paris in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, lunch at noon in Russia with Peter the Great, dinner at five in Madrid with Cervantes (provided you have money that day), and spend the night on the road, only to land with Columbus at dawn on the beaches of the virgin Americas. Its driving force is electricity, which science still has not been able to apply to locomotion without conductors, however near it was to doing so—and that is what I've managed to do, harnessing its power and speed. That is to say, with one and the same mechanism, I can direct my apparatus to circumnavigate the globe twice in one second at half throttle, or slow to the crawl of a wagon; I can ascend, descend, or stop cold. Given the means of propulsion, everything else reduces to mechanical procedures whose workings arouse no real interest, especially in a public that remembers the works of Jules Verne—works of entertainment which, while I will not compare them with the serious scientific nature of my theories, do encapsulate hypotheses based on physical and natural studies, thus relieving me of trivial explanations of such things as regulators, compensators, thermometers, barometers, precision timepieces, high powered binoculars, containers of potash used in Reiset and Regnaut's device to produce breathable air, and so many other rudimentary details. I will launch myself, therefore, into the heart of the atmosphere—which is the very body to be broken down

and which I will continue to call 'time.' Now, since time wraps itself around the Earth in the opposite direction to the rotation of the planet, *El Anacronópete*, in order to unwrap time, must move diametrically opposed to it—in the same direction that the Earth moves, from West to East. The world takes 24 hours for each revolution on its axis; my apparatus travels at a speed that is 175,200 times faster than this; and as a result, in the time it takes the Earth to journey one day into the future, I can voyage 480 years into the past.

“Be that as it may, the first thing that springs to mind is that, whatever the speed and altitude one travels at, *El Anacronópete* will do no more than trace an orbit around the Earth as do the moons around the planets; and so, in effect, would it be *if* the atmosphere remained unaltered; but in each orbit, I disrupt the daily work of the atmosphere, and the place where I stop—there it is yesterday. Let’s verify this phenomenon.

“It’s common knowledge that to preserve sardines from Nantes and peppers of Calahorra, we must remove the air from their tin cans. Wrong. We remove *the atmosphere* and consequently *the time*; you see, the air is no more than a compound of nitrogen and oxygen, whereas the atmosphere, in addition to consisting of 80 parts nitrogen to 20 parts oxygen, also contains an amount of water vapor and carbonic acid, elements that are never left behind when forming a vacuum. But never mind the science—let’s speak to common sense.

“Imagine the world is a tin of red peppers from which we have not extracted the atmosphere. What happens when the can is sealed without this precaution? Time begins to exert its influence and carry out its work. First, a few molecules adhere to the sides of the container, agglomerating and solidifying, only to petrify with the passage of years and yield those substances in which we would find the mineral beginnings of primitive rock. We then note that the substance is covered

with a kind of scum that is none other than rudimentary vegetation. And finally, microscopic organisms in the water vapor come to life, reproduce and develop, like maggots in our tin of preserves, enriching it with the unending variety of the animal kingdom. Can you still doubt that the atmosphere is time?

“Well then, let’s examine it the other way around. Suppose we open the tin 100 years after fully extracting the air. What do we see? The peppers in a perfect state of preservation, as if time had passed them by; so, given that the activity of the atmosphere ought to have destroyed or metamorphized them and that the absence of this activity has kept them utterly intact, it follows that what we are eating 100 years later is the plant life of a century before, and therefore, we have turned back time a century. Quite clear. Suppose we had not extracted the air from the tin and we opened it at the moment when the decomposition began; if we then take a spoon and start to remove the layers of mold that wrap the peppers, their reddish color, not yet disturbed, will be discovered beneath the spoilage laid down by the atmosphere. This, then, is the theory of time. Even a world so very young that its molten core is yet undeveloped nevertheless finds itself covered in these films of mold, which *El Anacronópete* is going to dig through with the aid of four great ‘spoons’—pneumatic devices attached to its angular endpoints; with them, not only do I dislodge the paltry twenty leagues of gaseous matter that surrounds our globe in concentric layers, but, on having evicted them, I then sail through the resultant vacuum, thereby preventing atmospheric friction from catching my ship on fire. Consider again a simile: The atmosphere is no more than an agglomeration of imperceptible atoms, in the same way that a beach is nothing but a gathering of millions of grains of sand. Or consider a more vivid analogy: The atmosphere is a vast plaza packed with people on the day of a revolution. If

an unarmed, reckless man were to insist on running from one end to the other against the flow of the crowd, he would be pushed this way and pushed that way, facing resistance everywhere, ultimately being pulled under the waves of humanity, just as *El Anacronópete* would eventually come to a blazing end by way of the friction and agitation of the atmosphere.

“So just what does a prudent governor (represented by science in this instance) do? He provides a horse (the electricity applied *El Anacronópete*) to carry the individual, surrounds the plaza with a detachment of cavalry (the four pneumatic devices), and, to prepare for the run, he orders the crowd dispersed into adjacent streets. The consequent outcome is a familiar one. The atoms are scattered in front of the lancers; those molecules left behind try to fill the vacuum formed by the others’ dislodgement or dispersion; but, as the cavalymen sweep up the insurgents’ rearguard and those at the front flee beyond reach of the lances, the crowd is dispelled, and the man, now free of all opposition, happily gallops through the vacuum opened by the spears of the squadron.”

The delirious auditorium lay on the verge of bursting into exuberant acclamation; but it stopped on seeing that the interrupter was again standing, and, facing the speaker, he called out:

“I’m afraid I must voice another doubt.”

“I’m listening,” said the scientist.

“If by this irrefutable procedure one travels back through time, does it not follow that as the time traveler loses years, he will become younger?”

“Indubitably.”

At this, the fairer sex communicated their feelings with cries of joy.

“So these forces will shrink the traveler to nothingness?”

“That is what would have happened had science not foreseen everything.”

“And how will Your Lordship neutralize these effects?”

“Very simply: by making myself inalterable via a series of electrical shocks of my own design. I don’t want my body to revert to the past? This is not a problem; for as easy as preserving fresh sardines for the future, I assure you that yesterday will indeed become my own tomorrow. It is merely the food-canning procedure applied to animal life with the effect reversed. And with that cleared up, allow me to conclude my conference because the hour advances and I have a pressing appointment tonight with Philip II to hear whether that pastry chef from Madrigal was or was not positively the Portuguese king whose disappearance will presently cease to be one of the mysteries of the past.”

A flood of cheers descended upon the room. Men’s tricorn hats and topers alike were flung into the air; the speaker’s rostrum was beset by hosts of flowers from the ladies; and the organist, playing a march specially composed for this solemnity, could hardly be heard above the tumult of the unrestrained audience.

Finally, our illustrious compatriot, surrounded by the Scientific Commission and with the public on his heels, managed to reach the door and there, hailing the crowd with a cheer like a call for a new civilization, he crossed the balustrade, descended the hill of the Trocadero, and headed for *El Anacronópete* which majestically rested its immense mass on the esplanade of the Champ de Mars.





## CHAPTER IV

In which matters of family are dealt with



**G**RAND effects are not always the result of grand causes. As a case in point, we have but to examine the Peloponnesian War, which history attributes to eminently political motives, but which nevertheless owed its origins to the abduction of three maidens from the tutelage of fair Aspasia, perpetrated by those raucous youths of Megara and (as goes without saying) a thing not at all to the

liking of Pericles—about whom malicious ne'er-dowells gossip on whether he had anything to do with the tutor herself, though it seems to me that the man was rather more amorous towards her than not, for when she was accused of impiety, he took charge of her defense without knowing more than to bury his face in his cloak and shed tears like a toddler in the Pnyx, which, incidentally, did earn absolution for the good disciple of Anaxagoras.

But, classical erudition aside, Don Sindulfo's invention did not, as it seemed, come from his love of science; instead, it was from a menial interest, or I should say from a purely personal aspiration.

So, a few words about his life.

As a young man, our hero found himself alone in the world, doctor of science and owner of a vast fortune whose annual income he invested almost solely in various apparatus from the best foreign factories to enrich his study of physics and mineralogy. As extravagant with his studies as he was miserly for everything else, he arrived at age 40 without knowing even the rudiments of love. All his needs for companionship were fulfilled by his friendship with Benjamín, another Sabiote two decades younger, but nearly as alien as Don Sindulfo to all earthly things; truthfully, Benjamín had no time for anything but learning Sanskrit, Hebrew, Chinese and a couple of dozen more difficult languages, for which his aptitude was without equal. Although they did not live in the same house, it may as well be said that they lived together, since Benjamín never left the García house without partaking of his plate of stew at two o'clock and his casserole at eight, by virtue of which Benjamín, who'd never had two pennies to rub together, solved the problem of eating without means of support, while Don Sindulfo found a grateful stomach who would countenance his absence of manners.

The Saragossan newspapers, as in all of the Iberian Peninsula, unfolded one morning to announce the sale of the museum of a celebrated archaeologist of Madrid who had died a few weeks before; and as Benjamín, who went nuts when it came to antiquities, was showing a desire to acquire some trinkets, Don Sindulfo procured for him the opportunity by deciding to take them both to the capital city and putting his pocketbook and his connections at the disposal of his antiquarian friend.

No sooner was it said than done: They arrived at Madrid, taking a shared room at the Peninsulares, and the day of the sale they proceeded to the storehouse of the collector. Benjamín would have bought it all if he'd had the money, but his poverty restrained him, although even so it was necessary for Don Sindulfo to urge him to put down certain specimens. The truth is, it would take a saint to relinquish even a chance of owning the possessions in this pile of wonders. Here, in a leather case, was the fossilized eye that Hannibal lost in the siege of Saguntum; beside it lay the mythic tip of the horn of Apis; just beyond, a rifle rested full of mold, for having been loaded with hemp seeds, it was supposed to be that of Ambrosio, who until then had been thought to be but a legend. But as the prices were beyond the reach of entire fortunes, Benjamín had to lower his sights and aim for the acquisition of one relatively important medal. Time had corroded part of the inscription, but the Latin which could still be read was this:

SERV C POMP PR  
JO HONOR

—leaving no doubt about the origin that the catalog attributed to being a commemorative tribute by Servius Caius, prefect of Pompeii, to the honor of Jupiter.

They were readying to leave the museum when the attention of the engrossed amateur was drawn to the unaccountably low appraisal price of a particularly odd mummy. Indeed, the sarcophagus was not shaped like any Egyptian, nor was the embalming procedure that which, according to Herodotus, was practiced in Thebes and Memphis by opening the chest with a sharp stone flake to remove the ventricle and fill the belly with myrrh, cassia and palm wine. Neither had the mummification been achieved with the resin called *katrán* by the Arabs, extracted with intense heat from an abundant shrub found on the shores of the Red Sea, in Syria and the Arabian Peninsula, as Colonel Bagnole records it. Its withered look seemed natural; but, it had no trace of any incision, nor was it wrapped in linen strips, and, from the lack of residual impressions, it was likely never wrapped. The catalog modestly said: "Mummy of unknown origin," and this lack of pedigree or any history made it beneath consideration for those who ordinarily devoted themselves to genealogies which, most of the time, were apocryphal anyhow.

Benjamin, a keen observer, used his five senses to study the minutest details; and focusing on a bracelet or metal ring fitted around the right ankle and graced by a Chinese inscription—which the inexperienced had taken as an adornment—he couldn't suppress a cry of surprise.

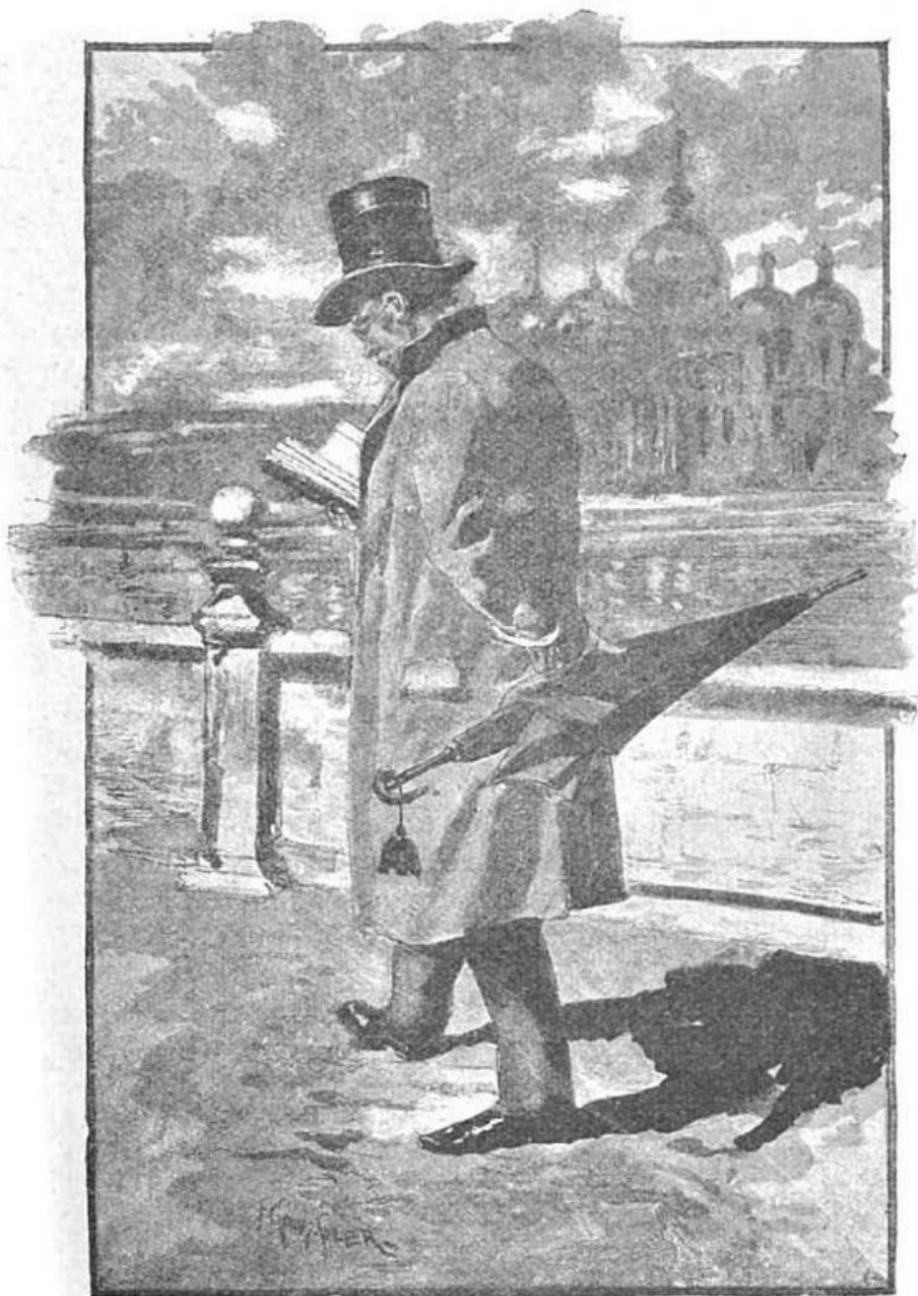
"What is it?" asked Don Sindulfo.

"I have just made a wonderful discovery."

"Which would be—?"

"Hien-ti!" exclaimed Don Sindulfo, already drawn into his friend's enthusiasm. "The last descendant of the Han dynasty—?"

"—dethroned in the third century of the Christian era by Tsao-pi, founder of the Ouei dynasty."



Don Sindulfo

“Meaning...?”

“Meaning that these people, the cradle of civilization from which sprung the rest of the world, possessed, if not the secret of immortality, at least that of the fabled longevity of the ancients.”

Don Sindulfo, without waiting for further explanations, pulled out his wallet and drew up a payment order against his bank account, commissioning the transport to the Peninsulares of the acquired items, among which was also another discovery made at the last minute of a petrified bone, for which he had to pay its weight in gold, since, according to the catalog, it was nothing less than the shin of a fossil man discovered in the vicinity of Chartres at an excavation of the tertiary period.

The two inseparable companions thought of nothing but their preparations for the return to Saragossa to embark on their scientific research. But a simple bean lodged in their path was fated to break the monotonous pattern of their existence. It happened in the early evening as they went to settle the account and bid farewell to the banker, a burly Zamoran widower who'd made his fortune as a military supplier in the first civil war.

“And how were you treated at the hotel?” he asked them.

“Miserably—French cuisine wherein one never knows what makes its way into one's stomach. We leave Madrid without partaking of traditional Castilian fare.”

The banker brightened. “Well, then, today you will satisfy your desire, for I've just received some garbanzo beans from Fuente-Saúco, which butter could make no tenderer.”

“We don't wish to put you out.”

“Not at all.”

“Are you certain?”

“Please—for all you have brought to me.”

“Then it is settled.”

As a result, they stayed to eat with the banker, who had a daughter who was mute; but, although she lacked the ability to speak, she had no problem making herself understood through gestures of her hands and feet. I don't know with which of those means of communication she disported herself more during the meal, but it is certain that by dessert, Don Sindulfo, who sat to her right, was—despite his forty years—lovesick for the girl like a schoolboy. Admittedly, the daughter was worthy of all this, for there was no line of her figure that lacked maximum curvaceousness, nor had she any facet that would not inspire one to be the next Espartero, not only to pursue her as in Bilbao but to embrace her as in Vergara.

The journey was put on hold; the visits persisted; the necessity of not entrusting the upkeep of their equipment to hired hands spurred Don Sindulfo to obsess on the desirability of marriage, and Benjamin's concurrence encouraged the scientist. Following proper etiquette, the request was made, and the banker—who always had a supply of Saúcoan garbanzos to taste whenever a man presented himself as a potential suitor—said yes with the joy of a patient who has been cured of cancer. There is no need to record whether the news was well received by the girl, for it is widely known that the case of marriage for the mute is a happy one.

A handsome dowry was stipulated, wedding presents arrived, and since the plan was for the new couple to reside in Madrid, the two scientists returned to Saragossa to suitably pack the laboratory. One month later, husband and wife and friend had set up home on the *Calle de los Tres Peces* in the royal district.

Mamerta, as the Señora García was called, turned out to have an exquisite nature; she liked spending time

with Benjamin more than with her husband—which meant nothing in particular, considering that as a multilingual he taught her to sign in several different languages, while Don Sindulfo, even in his own language, failed to make himself understood—and women thrive when they are given conversation. Also, she had always had an eye for a man in uniform; but Don Sindulfo, realizing that girls are disposed that way, would from time to time dress in his national cavalry uniform that he used every other year, and this made her quite content. Her only flaw was that she could not abide being contradicted. Such would instantly bring on a nervous breakdown leading to a series of rapid cuffs to the back of her husband's head, which from a sense of self-preservation caused the prudent man to let her have her way in the future, so as—he said—not to overly stress her nerves. Another of her particularly noteworthy features was that at the sight of a sewing needle, she fainted—which, despite good intentions, made domestic chores impossible. So she spent her day putting up her hair at the dressing table, signing with Benjamin, or strumming the guitar—something that nobody had taught her and no one could comprehend, but that she invariably reproduced with the same rhythm, identical modulations and similar effects, paining the eardrums of those who heard.

And thus, six months passed full of peace and contentment for the trio; then came the summer and with it trips to the seashore, which the banker generally took to Biarritz to lose weight (though never successfully) accompanied by his daughter who always strived to put on weight (also with no success). Seeing as how Mamerta, despite her marriage, had not filled out, the girl decided that year to again go with her father and soak in the sun at the favorite beach of the empress. They arrived and took to the sea, but the banker, while being a skillful swimmer, had the misfortune of a dizzy

spell, and he went under. His daughter cried for help with signs; the rescue boat sped out like a dart; the girl was not nimble enough to avoid it, and, given that she was knocked in the back of the head by the prow, there was not one, but two corpses brought back to shore. So, as the father had been the first victim and Mamerta had written her will in favor of her husband, Don Sindulfo found himself in possession of a considerable fortune that, together with his own assets, allowed him to do a fair imitation of Croesus.

“When it rains, it pours,” goes the saying, and never has a proverb proved more prophetic, as this was but the first of our sage hero’s tribulations, although it all turned out well as far as the benefit to science was concerned. Also at that time, Don Sindulfo’s sister died, a long-time widow just as rich as he was and a mother of a tender bud of fifteen springs who responded to the name of Clara. On departing this world from the outskirts of Madrid—the small town of Pinto where she’d resided—the sister had named her brother as trustee for the estate and guardian to the girl with no conditions other than not separating her from the orphan Juanita, four years older than Clara, with whom she had been raised and whom, notwithstanding Juanita’s humble condition of being Clara’s handmaiden, Clara loved dearly. As a mourning widower whose activities inclined him toward solitude and whose circumstances now occasioned another change of residence, our scientist—with his inseparable companion, their retorts and crucibles, their rain gauges and compasses, their rock specimens and fossils—relocated to Pinto to hide himself away between the naïve silliness of Clara and the harmless quips of Juanita who, although an orphan of the streets, was nonetheless cut from the cloth of her dead mother and father with a wry wit that belied the usual tenor of Madrileños when left to their natural instincts. No less than a real-life Maritornes, she greeted

the scientists not with trust or affection, but with a quickly assigned nickname for each: Don Sindulfo she called *Uncle Muumuu* and the linguistics master was *Chief Sitting Room*.

But, oh, the folly of the humanity! For this man who approached forty without having experienced the attractions of the daughters of Eve, six short months of consortium sufficed to throw him under the influence of their spell. Unaware that his case with the mute had been a patent case of matrimony ceded to the first suitor, Don Sindulfo arrived at the conclusion that his face was money in the bank, for how else had he acquired non-damaged goods at such a bargain price? Regularly, he put this idea forward to his niece who, innocent and loving, accepted it without ever seeing more than an uncle's face.

Encouraged by what our hero judged to be the triumph of his attractiveness and further spurred on over some months by the suggestions of Benjamin who was always ready to flatter his benefactor's weaknesses, Don Sindulfo decided one day to declare his cheeky thinking to his ward, which earned him a flat refusal, although watered down by bitter tears of Clara, who was not disposed to explaining the reason for her opposition.

"Good lord! You come here!" Juanita said to him on learning what had happened. "Do me the favor of standing in front of this mirror and looking at the wrinkles: Do you really think my mistress would like to marry a bellows?"

"Insolence!" cried Don Sindolfo in a blind rage. "You'll be turned out into the streets for that!"

"Turned out? Not by you nor by anyone else. I am here by decree of the will, and the court will protect me, a notarized maidservant."

“But why dash all my hopes?” asked the guardian in a humble tone, testing whether sweetness might achieve a better outcome.

“Well, that *is* a mystery—but in the end let’s just say my lady and I care less for the natural sciences than for the military arts.”

“What?”

“It’s simple. She longs for her cousin Don Luís, a captain of the Hussars, and I for his orderly, Pendencia; within three days, they will arrive to garrison Madrid, so if you persist with your *entendres*, you will presently observe the pickled scientist that results.”

That revelation, confirmed by his niece, was the *coup de grâce* for Don Sindulfo, whose passion, goaded by jealousy, rose to new heights. The captain, more in love with his cousin than ever, actually reached Madrid in a week, and two hours later, presented himself in Pinto; but the door of the house was hermetically sealed by Don Sindulfo with an ultimatum that the captain show his face again only at penalty of Clara being disinherited. The first impulse of Luís was to appeal to the courts for justice against the arbitrariness of the heartless guardian; but Clara was not of legal age, so the judge would likely overlook the specious paternalistic behavior, and besides, there was the matter of her mother’s will which forbade her from taking a husband without Don Sindulfo’s approval.

There was nothing for it but to suffer quietly and bide his time. But still, the heart wants what the heart wants. From that point forth, the household was a living hell, since letters came and went with that Maritornes woman acting as intermediary, and our wise hero found himself pouring strength into a vigilant watch that bore no fruit.

“Oh!” exclaimed the unhappy watchman in desperation. “Howsoever have the laws become so lax? Oh, for those happy times in which a guardian had a right to

command respect from his ward. If only one could be transported to that time, wrongly called antiquated, in which respect and obedience to one's elders were the basis of society. Ah, to travel back through the centuries!"

"God's truth!" Benjamin answered, playing the yin to Don Sindulfo's yang. "With that, we could drop in on the Chinese Empire of Hien-ti and sort out the whole mummy enigma, about which every historian I've read has been less than useless, focusing solely on Confucius and Mencius."

This potent idea soon grew to consume both men. The polyglot came to dream in Chinese while his colleague obsessed on extracting air from containers for analysis and decomposition via a pneumatic machine. But all was for naught until Providence—who aimed in this case, as in most discoveries, to disguise himself as a chance occurrence—came to their aid.

One afternoon our modern-day Don Bartolo, driven by jealousy, tiptoed into the kitchen like a sparrowhawk trying to surprise the pigeons who always took refuge by the hearth, whereupon he discovered Juanita working through minor emancipation papers, which were hastily put away in that place where the maidservant knew Don Sindulfo could not lay his hands on them.

"What are you up to?" he asked her.

"Improving my mind," she said without flinching.

"Your time would be better spent cleaning the fireplace, which is engulfed in an inch of soot and a cadre of cobwebs." Don Sindulfo, who held a knife in his hand, brandished it with clear intent of committing a homicide, but he stopped short, scraping away at the hood above the fireplace to forestall his anger. "Try amusing yourself," he added, "by clearing away the layers of garbage and you'll see that this stove is actually a working model."

“My dear sir, don’t make me laugh! If such were the case, then your worrying it with that blade would have scratched away more than enough layers to turn back sufficient years.”

Don Sindulfo readied to hurl the trash at the young miscreant, but a sudden idea crossed his mind and he stopped short like a crane on one foot with the bearing of Cain hearing the Lord ask *What have you done with your brother?* The girl’s retort, although vulgar and without the slightest scientific merit, had just triggered a solution to the very problem that he’d struggled with so deeply.

From that moment on, he went to work, continually driven by his love and urged forward by his jealousy. Physics, mathematics, geology, dynamics, mechanics, calculus, meteorology—in short, all humanly possible fields of study—revealed their innermost secrets, ultimately boiling down to a single formula which yielded his marvelous invention while also laying forth the rules for regressing through the centuries and sweeping aside time itself.

Several years in addition to all of his capital and a large part of his niece’s were then invested in the construction of *El Anachronópete*. In the meantime, the niece and her captain waited patiently and, whenever possible, pleaded for compromise with the uncle, albeit in vain. Don Sindulfo kept an ever-tighter rein on the girl and hid his true purpose from everyone but Benjamin, all the while being absorbed in his work and letting his mind run free with the fantasy of eventual victory.

The completion of the device, coinciding with the Universal Exhibition of 1878, finally brought forth the day when multiple wagons were loaded with its disassembled pieces. Gathered together in the first car, the inventor, his friend, the niece and that nuisance of a maid undertook to lead the train of wagons all the way to Paris where, no longer deterred by the Hussar and

still very much in love, the guardian planned to realize his dream—the outcome of which will soon be seen by the diligent reader who continues to follow the course of this incredible story.





## CHAPTER V

### Cupid and Mars



WHILE the contraption was being assembled in the designated area near the exhibition hall, Don Sindulfo settled in with his family at the Concord hotel site on the Boulevard Maleshebes. Needless to say, the scientist spent his hours at the Champ de Mars directing the construction, while Clara and Juanita were locked in their rooms, since our compatriot, jealous as a

Turk, continually feared an escape or a kidnapping. When the girls went out, it was always in a closed car, and at the theater they sat in a private box behind a latticework screen.

All these precautions—as well as the distance separating them from Madrid, the thought of soon departing from the present era, and the inescapable

military duties that tied his nephew Luís to Madrid—instilled a relative calmness in Don Sindulfo's demeanor. So passed almost a month of diminishing fears, when one evening on returning alone from a session of the scientific Congress and climbing the steps on the left side of *La Madeleine*, he felt a tug on his coat from behind. He turned his head and nearly had it taken off as his mouth was met by the hand of Pendencia, his nephew's aide.

"*Me da vu de la candel?*" he said in his Cordoban attempt at the language of Racine while endeavoring to light his cigar stub from the *medianito* of the dazed Saragossan.

"You can go to hell! Just what are you doing in Paris?"

"Why, I have come by government order with fifteen azzociatez to the bankz of *la Zeine* to learn French and to dizplay our form and character."

And indeed, the Minister of War had sent to the exposition a representative from each branch of the Spanish army to brandish their uniforms as well as their enviable courtliness and dashing appearance.

"And my nephew is also in the group?" asked the scientist, anticipating his misfortune.

"Of course, it iz he who commandz uz! They choze him alone."

"What!"

"The minizter told him, 'My good man, you are going to demonztrate that we are not all zo ugly as that uncle of yourz.'"

"Insolence! But I see the scheme, and its intent will be thwarted. Woe to him who dares to declare war on me! You can tell him that from me."

And as at that moment, they were coming to the hotel, Don Sindulfo broke off from Pendencia, who left with a parting shot: "By your order, Don Muumuu." He

then ran in search of his master, whom my dear readers will have already recognized as the captain of the Hussars who rode in the bus to top of the bridge at the commencement of this story.



“Who has been here? Have you seen someone on the balcony?” asked the anxious uncle on entering his niece’s rooms.

“Just whom do you want us to see when you’ve padlocked even the stained glass windows?” impugned Juanita with her usual sufferance.

Don Sindulfo thought it inadvisable to offer further explanation and turned to head for his room adjacent to that of the prisoners; but as he turned his back to leave, a roll of papers was shown pinned to his coat by Pendencia when he had lit his cigar during his ramble down the boulevard; Juanita deftly seized them as her master opened the door, for both the servant and her mistress knew that Cupid would have taken advantage of the first available opportunity to communicate clearly with them.

The moment they were alone, they began reading the letters. Luís had enclosed a thousand affirmations of love for his cousin, giving assurance that they would soon be free from the yoke of their ruthless uncle.

That of Pendencia was as terse as it was worthy of understanding. Thus, he said, “My hart a wates; And I am hear coma yors til deth siend Roce Gomez.”

Juanita, accustomed to her soldier’s epistolary style, knew what he wanted to say: “My heart awaits. And I am here. Comma (the punctuation mark). Yours until death. Signed, Roque Gómez.”

By the next day, Luís occupied a room in the same hotel. Fortunately, Don Sindulfo, who was first to enter the dining room, saw him and retreated before the others were alerted, marching them all back up the stairs and issuing orders that hereafter they would eat in their separate rooms. Precautions were redoubled: Whenever the guardian was out, Benjamin remained behind on lookout. But it was all for naught; Luís was bribing the waiter on duty, and letters flew back and forth wrapped in napkins. Was the monkey business discovered? Did the waiters keep it to themselves? Was Juanita forbidden from approaching the table to retrieve

a dish or kept strictly in her room at all costs? No, none of these things stopped the missives, now glued to the bottom of a pitcher of water for the boudoir, then tucked into the hollow of a pastry that, at the agreed-upon signal, Clara would choose for herself, and finally inside a walnut shell carried by the restaurant's dog that Pendencia had taught to sneak between Don Sindulfo's legs every time he opened the door to take receipt for himself of these selfsame delicacies.

This was really no way to live; the hundred eyes of Argos would not have been sufficient to deal with such an onslaught of deception. Thus, as soon as *El Anacronópete* was ready to be inhabited, Don Sindulfo established their residence in it under pretext of custodianship, obtaining a permanent guard of two gendarmes who prevented the approach to the device by anyone who was not accompanied by the inventor himself. But if the incorruptibility of the guards gave way to neither the pleas nor the bribes of Luís, the mischief of his aide was only multiplied by these obstacles. As soon as the travelers went out as tourists to *Les Invalides*, where he had already discerned the lay of the land, he presented himself with a wooden leg and a false goatee, wrapped in a beggar's rags, asking for a handout in the middle of the boulevards, which—seeing that begging was still banned—cost him a few hours in the guardhouse. Almost always, the schemes ended in discovery; and so, Don Sindulfo decided that henceforth they would go out only for mass and in a carriage. Pendencia disguised himself as the coachman; but he was exposed, for having been given in French directions to *La Madeleine*, he, who was not strong in languages, took them to the cemetery of *Père Lachaise*. Finally at the end of his rope, he colluded with the Swiss guards at the church attended by his compatriots, and occupying a post as an attendant who during the ceremony collects the offerings of the faithful, he prepared to deliver a

letter to Clarita; but an unfamiliarity at circulating up and down the pews, encumbered by a halberd and an ungainly drumstick, caused him to entangle himself in his dress sword at the most inopportune moment, falling right on our scientist while his wig landed on the prayer book of a gentleman and his tricorne hat deposited itself on the head of another devotee, at which point the jig was up and Don Sindulfo abruptly exited with his party in tow, returning to *El Anacronópete*, which henceforth became, for all intents and purposes, a prison cell for its inhabitants.

The day after this catastrophe was a day of despair for the lovesick Luís, who saw all hope disappear, and for the aide and his fifteen associates, who lamented approaching the end of their expedition without having reaped the fruits of their machinations. The only consolation for the captain was to take his place with the children in the gallery beneath the central arch outside the lecture hall of the exhibition and to contemplate from there *El Anacronópete*, which towered a hundred meters above with the bleak majesty of an immense tomb.

One evening, where as usual they found themselves contemplating who could most accurately fire a hollow bullet containing a new missive or who had the best ballistics knowledge for launching a cable containing a telephone wire, the clouds opened up with a downpour that seemed to bring the very waterfalls of heaven down to Earth.

“There’z going to be a fine zplazh up if it floodz,” said the aide, listening to the deluge overflowing the gutters.

“Have no fear,” his master assured him. “The drains are perhaps the most marvelous aspect of these structures. Have you not seen the underground plans for this section of Paris? The culverts are higher than this vault.”

“How’z that?” exclaimed Pendencia, wide-eyed. “There are zoowerz here?”

“Indeed! Look, the main sewer runs almost tangent to *El Anacronópete*.”

“Fanzzy that! You could drive a carriage through it, and here you are, zitting on your handz.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Ah, not all are born for war, military geniuzez zuch az Napoleon and I.”

“Please explain yourself!”

“It iz very zimple. If Don Zindulfo erectz ezcarpmentz and counter-ezcarpmentz for their defenze, then we burzt through them with minez and counterminez. Gentlemen...to the zewerz!”

An enthusiastic cheer welcomed the Cordoban’s idea. Clearly, the sewer was the last bastion of love. With high spirits, they examined the underground plans and saw that a cross-tunnel of a few meters would suffice to emerge under the exact center of *El Anacronópete*. Bribing the manager of the sewer works in that section of Paris was a straightforward task, seeing as how the individual in question hailed from an area that bordered on Spain near the Aragon Valley and he was partial to the reign of Carlos IV, so Luís did not begrudge him an amount more than adequate to attain the necessary access.

Time was short, but against ten and seven Spaniards, half of whom were Aragonese and Catalanian, there are no obstacles, especially in the case of military men who are always under orders from some general or other, but never mind. Their picks and shovels made way; the tunnel was propped up with timber, and finally on the day set for the improbable journey, while Don Sindulfo gave his lecture at the Trocadero accompanied by the inseparable Benjamin, sixteen sons of Mars presented their captain with the final blow of a pickaxe that placed

them squarely beneath their target. Emerging from the pit, they found themselves in a rectangular enclosure the height of a healthy young man. It was a platform structure designed to protect the machine from the dampness of the parade grounds.

The invaders' plan was to batter their way through the floor of *El Anacronopete*; but to their astonishment, they found it open because in order to clean out the hold, the vessel had a gate at the bottom that operated electrically like the mechanism of a horizontal guillotine, and presumably to increase ventilation to the ground floor, it had carelessly been left open with no thought that an underground attack could occur.

"Upward and onward!" was the unanimous cry, and—bounding up stairs, traversing corridors, bursting into rooms—they came upon the captives who could not suppress a scream of terror at seeing before them so many men with weapons of all sorts, carried for every possible eventuality.

Words cannot describe the moment of recognition. Those of my dear readers who know love should simply feel it.

"We must flee, my dear," was the first sentence that Luís, pressed by time and circumstance, uttered to his cousin.

"Oh, never!" she responded. "Whatsoever my fate, I shall remain resigned to it, rather than break the oath sworn to my dying mother."

All manner of pleas, extortions and tears were useless before the indelible resolution of that humble and obedient daughter. All hope seemed lost, at which point the cheers of the crowd penetrating the walls induced Clara to inquire about the source of the commotion. When Luís explained that it was due to the popular enthusiasm for his uncle's invention, the hapless prisoners, who heretofore had paid no mind to the scientific undertakings of the guardian, spewed forth an

outraged stream of invectives against that monster who, over their silence, was forcing them into a journey so fraught with danger.

“This is unbearable!” stammered the orphan Clara.

“That demon of a scientist!” said the Maritornes. “Well, we are not idiots who must stand still and take it!”

“I zay! We will not, ezspezially after coming zo far.”

“We must flee,” repeated Luís, warning that the shouting was ever closer. “Flee, not to hide our love, but to petition the courts to protect it under just laws.”

This clear-headed observation had its effect. Minutes were precious, the tyrant was approaching, and a frightening future could befall them from hesitation.

“So be it!” exclaimed Don Sindulfo’s young ward resolutely, and together they headed to the tunnel.

But, upon reaching the opening, they found it blocked.

A cave-in had cut off their retreat.





## CHAPTER VI

The vehicle considered as a morality lesson



WHAT to do in such dire circumstances? The faint-hearted proposed staying in the hollow below *El Anacronópete*, waiting for its take-off to allow them to leave; but that ran the risk of being discovered should the missing captives be noticed, and—even disregarding that possibility—there lay the chance of being pulverized by any small deviation of the vehicle's initial course. The more resolute among them pressed for breaking down the door and effecting an exit via gunfire. That suggestion was scraped as too violent and quite possibly fruitless, so in the end, an idea suggested by the prudent prevailed: hiding and waiting for a more opportune moment to take flight.

As fate would have it, the cargo hold where they found themselves was fully stocked with construction materials, intended for repairs, as well as provisions of all sorts, to the extent that hiding places were less than abundant. Some hid themselves behind casks of cooking oil, others in the interstices between hay bales; and thus were formed parapets of flour sacks and canned food, as the alliance entrenched themselves among piles of vegetables and built a stronghold from the sarcophagus of the mummy.

Clara advised everyone to exert great caution, exhorting them not to move until she or Juanita returned from their search—in response to which Pendencia, on behalf of his companions, made a solemn promise, eliciting unanimous guffaws at his white, flour-coated face.

While this scene took place within *El Anacronópete*, other incidents, worthy of being narrated, occurred without.

Concluding the lecture, Don Sindulfo, as we have seen, began his triumphal march from the Trocadero to the Champ de Mars among the cheers of the frenzied crowd and two columns of National Guard that the city of Paris had put at his disposal to ensure a brisk procession. Once inside the exhibition area, the city officials invited our scientist into the comfort of an elegant tent, raised *ad hoc* next to *El Anacronopete*, the center of which proffered a feast capable of satisfying the intemperance of Lucullus and emulating the splendor of Cleopatra's banquets. It was the farewell luncheon offered by the municipality of Paris to the celebrated inventor, since it seems to be a law of nature, respected by custom, that at any public celebration, the stomach must be celebrated to the utmost.

The hosts, guests and parasites (who sprout spontaneously in all dining rooms) were seated, and as the bodies rested, so began the work of the jaws. During the

appetizer course, torsos at the table formed neat, upright angles. As successive courses slothfully made their way through digestive systems, the angle of torsos became steadily more acute, so by the time champagne arrived, bodies struggled to maintain their balance and the pretense of a perpendicular to the tablecloth could no longer be maintained, seeing as how the support of backbones had shifted from shoulder blades to arm-chairs and obtuse angles reigned openly.

Then began the toasts, some worse than others, though certainly all bad since there is nothing that limits the intelligence so much as praise. So, as a favor to my persistent reader, I will limit myself to recounting the one thing in this litany of perorations that *was* good—precisely because it offered no praise.

The librarian of the Sorbonne, rising from his seat and bringing to light an exquisite copy of *The Illiad* recently published at the expense of the Bibliophile Society, begged Don Sindulfo that when he passed through the Olympiad in which the father of the epic flourished, he should implore Homer to sign his *magnum opus*, correcting the typographical errors he found and testifying under witness of that facsimile whether it was in Chios or in Smyrna where he saw first light.

“I propose to replace this last phrase by ‘where he was born,’ ” interposed a scholar of history, “because, assuming that logic was in those days as exacting a science as it is today, we expose ourselves to the possibility of continued ignorance as to the homeland of the poet of Troy—for if you were to ask him where he saw first light, he may well take it *ad pedem literæ* and answer ‘nowhere’ by reason of being blind from birth.”

The amendment was adopted, and the floor passed to the Chairman of the Board of Agriculture, who as the minstrel responsible for ensuring the country’s agricultural interests, correctly enlightened Don Sindulfo—

almost in verse—on the urgency of combating odium and phylloxera in the vineyards, for which he believed the surest cure was a few shoots of Noah's vines to transplant to France.

This proposition raised a storm of applause, because everyone knows wine is one of the main riches of the trans-Pyrenean soil, whose production, although fabulous, has slackened to the point where it no longer covers the demand.

Many more were the ideas that emerged during the dessert course, all of which were designed to improve the human condition, and an infinite number of personal requests of a laughable nature were made of the doctor. There was the theater backer who offered unlimited funds to bring Molière to give twelve performances before the close of the exhibition. And the printer who promised to relocate to Greece in the time of Pericles in order to print the Socratic conferences and to publish a political newspaper.

Don Sindulfo thanked each and every petitioner; he noted that his first trip had no objective other than that of exploration, and, offering to carry out all that was possible of the different commissions they were entrusting to him, he called an end to the ceremony.

He had not yet reached the door when the chief of police, exiting his carriage, entered the pavilion and approached the scientist.

"Would Señor Garcia grant me a brief conference?" he asked.

"I would with pleasure, were it not already the appointed hour. I fear any further delay will abuse the public's patience."

"But an official mission brings me here, on behalf of the Cabinet."

In the face of this remark, there was no way to refuse. The other diners judiciously retreated to one end

of the tent, leaving just the two at the opposite end to have the following dialog:

“The governor has delegated me to ask of you a special service.”

“I am honored with such trust. Please ask, and I will listen.”

“It is no secret to anyone that France, unfortunately, is going through a period of relaxed morals that threatens to destroy the already undermined foundations of the family, which, in turn, is the foundation of every society.”

“Although it pains me, I am forced to agree.”

“The government, more interested than anyone in the redemption of their homeland, has devoted great resources to reaching the bottom of this issue, and they believe the breakdown of social structures can be traced to those scandalous bordellos which not only emulate but transcend the historical and barely plausible fame of the houses of Sybaris and Capua.”

“Of course, but I fail to see what part I can play in this redemptive work.”

“I’m getting to that. To reform a woman is to create a good mother, whom we lack.”

“Quite so.”

“You are very kind, and you have my thanks, for you understand that having good mothers guarantees the good upbringing of children. Good children develop into good spouses, and from there it follows that the family is redeemed and the homeland saved.”

“We are in agreement.”

“Very well. Now, of these hapless women who, to the shame of their own community and strangers alike, have dragged their vices to our populous cities, displaying their goods with hysterics—well, few are those who achieve a beneficial outcome and a secure old age. Hospitals, theaters, sheltered doorways tend to

be their last entrenchments; and there are many who, on having lost what stunted health they had in their early years, turn repentantly to the path of virtue, yet still find themselves unable to escape the state in which their excesses and depravity have plunged them, leaving them unable to experience even the simple pleasures of family. The Cabinet, therefore, in special session, has charged me to interpret their feelings about you and commissioned me to present to you a proposition."

The chief edged his chair ever closer to Don Sindulfo, and continued:

"Have we misunderstood, or is it true that with the wonderful vehicle of your invention, a traveler can grow young again by going back through time?"

"That is true, with the proviso that the traveler has not previously been subjected to my series of electrical shocks which convey inalterability; with the treatment, you would travel centuries experiencing no change in age."

"How long would it take to travel back twenty years?"

"About an hour."

"And arriving at that end, you can keep the age of the person at that point by way of your facilities?"

"Certainly."

"Well, well! The government's plan is to beseech you to accept in your expedition a dozen ladies who are getting on for forty (an age in which advancing years have not caused them to abandon their illusions, yet extremely advanced in women of their social class clinging to any hope of improvement), and in a mere sixty minutes you will permit these women to regain twenty lost Aprils. In this way, there is no doubt that—learning from their experiences, remorseful for their failures, and once again finding themselves as mis-

tresses of their youthful charms—they will follow the path of moderation and abandon that of vice.”

“Your intention is commendable, but are you not afraid, Señor Chief, that when they realize that what comes into this world in a baby’s bonnet need not leave in a shroud, then the good ladies in full command of their faculties may want to tempt fate again?”

“I hope not. In any case, this is nothing more than a test from which we will desist if we do not succeed, or if successful, we will repeat on a large scale. So, how do you answer to the Ministry?”

“I am too honored to reject this mission, but I must warn you that I travel with my niece and—”

“—Don’t be afraid of the ladies’ excesses. They will behave with dignity. We have already warned them, and the fear of punishment will contain them.”

“I am glad to hear it, although I have my doubts.”

“I can assure you, the threat of punishment is fearsome.”

“What will they face?”

“To not have a single year rolled back if they should go overboard in any manner.”

“You are right, and I am somewhat relieved.”

“Then we agree?”

“Completely.”

“The government will reward you handsomely.”

“It is reward enough for me that France is exemplary in the moral order of the Supreme Being, an order that in so many other aspects has been overturned in the world.”

After the interview, the procession, with Don Sindulfo at the head, exited the pavilion to find the cheerful new expedition members waiting in their carriages. Alighting, they joined the official group, and altogether they departed in the direction of *El Anacron-ópete*.

Arriving at the foot of the colossus, they issued a final farewell. The scientist, Benjamin and the travelers entered the vehicle, which was then hermetically sealed, and from that moment captured the eyes of every bystander.

It was less than a quarter hour later when a murmur of two million souls undulated through the space. *El Anacronópete* rose with the majesty of a Montgolfier balloon. Nobody applauded because there was no hand not occupied by binoculars, monoculars, opera glasses or telescopes; but the enthusiasm reflected in this silence was more pervasive than any noisy ovation.

Rising to the zone wherein the journey was to commence, the monster, reduced to the size of a star, stood still, as if it were getting its bearings. Suddenly, a cry broke out in the crowd. The speck, bathed in the blistering sun, had disappeared into the sky with the abruptness of a shooting star passing before our eyes from light to darkness.



## CHAPTER VII

Set forth when you please!



*L ANACRONÓPETE* consisted, as we have seen, of a podium or base on which rested the floor of the cellar, and through the thickness of the floor, stairs descended to give access to a hatchway, the sole entryway to the ship. The ship was rectangular. Each of its huge corners held a correspondingly formidable waste pipe, projecting upward like a giant shotgun muzzle bent into a figure 7. On the main level, around all four sides, ran a balcony whose doors, as all openings of the self-propelled vehicle, remained sealed during travel. Enclosing the top, an immense crystal dome, secured against high winds, allowed the travelers, with the help of powerful optics, to contemplate the beautiful scenery and correct their course as needed. A pair of cornices crowned colonnades at opposite ends, each emblazoned with the name of the colossus and supporting a parade deck; thus, while sailing through the vacuum, no one had to fret over

sewage or be on guard against atmospheric disturbances.

So, outwardly, *El Anacronópete* was a kind of Noah's Ark without keel; given that its vital functions were unrelated to liquid matter, and yet it still might be called upon to float, it had a more than sufficient belly which, in the style of ancient vessels, rose up to support the ship under the balcony. Now, let us examine the interior.

The ground floor was fully occupied by the store-room with the exception of a small space devoted to a vestibule and a spiral staircase intended as a stately entrance to the upper levels, from which also descended a second, smaller staircase built into a corner. On the opposite side lay Garcia's electrical apparatus, whose currents would render one's body inalterable; with foresight, this had been constructed from various materials and provisions on board. In front of it, the mechanism of Reiset and Regnaut worked to produce breathable oxygen. Both this device and that of the inalterability current were wisely reproduced several times in *El Anacronópete*, although their effects could be easily had in any part of the ship via appropriate conveyors. Also, electric batteries were placed throughout the vehicle to provide current wherever any objects needed to be transported, for this activity was accomplished electromechanically. Consider, for example, the gate which, in the form of a horizontal guillotine, gave access (as we have seen) to the sons of Mars; it corresponded to another identical structure carved into the floor of the upper deck. And now you want to load *El Anacronópete*? Since this is nothing more than lifting the goods to the necessary level, you merely place them underneath the open gate, apply an electromechanical driver, and by themselves, they rise through the openings until you apply the electrical insulators that stop the ascension at the desired point.

Cleaning was accomplished by a similar procedure. Mechanical brooms swept the floors and conveyed wastes to a chute on the main floor. Through this, it fell into the hold where the operation was repeated and a yawn of the guillotine expunged them; all this was continuous, so that if the first sweep began on Monday, then by Saturday the second pass would commence.

On the top floor was the powerful means of locomotion: the electric works. Nothing is as fascinating as the story of that mechanism; but given that this would lead us rather astray, the reader, having accepted the principle, must excuse me from a detailed technical explanation, and I will limit myself to saying that the core threw its torrents of electrical current to all the gears and couplings responsible for the propulsion and to the pneumatic tubes madly pumping the atmosphere. An elegant gauge displayed speed, and a simple needle regulated it. Nearby were the observatory and the laboratory with their lenses, retorts, maps, compasses, libraries, aerometers and chronograph instruments.

To the right side of a central corridor, stood staterooms for the ladies (with dressing room and bathroom) and a large larder in the kitchen (wherein a live chicken on an iron plate could be brought, defeathered by electric shocks, and then roasted by continuous sparks at a speed 7200 times quicker than any common grill). The laundry room, situated at the end of the corridor, was nothing short of a miracle. Dirty clothes entered at one end and came out the other washed, dried, pressed and mended. The left wing was entirely reserved for the stronger sex, and it had nothing of remark, except perhaps the timekeeping post where one clock noted the passage of time as actually experienced, and another showed the current time of the passing historical era, expressed by the century, year, month and day according to the Gregorian calendar.

After enthusiastic and final goodbyes to the community, the scientists made their way to their stronghold where Don Sindulfo's first concern was to place the astonished group of newcomers under lock and key in the collections room with instructions to stay put until he sought them out; this was more for reassurance than for doubting their promises, he reasoned, as putting them behind bars could only strengthen their vows. Immediately afterward, a single electric pulse hermetically sealed *El Anacronópete*; with this done, he administered the inalterability treatment to Benjamin, which then passed from the hand of his friend to himself.

"Time can no longer exert its influence on us," he exclaimed with an air of triumph when the operation was finished.

"And yet," wondered his inseparable companion, "what possible harm could have come of allowing *El Anacronópete* to make us a few minutes younger?"

"I understand your intention, and no one is more interested than I in losing a few years, seeing as how a younger me might forestall the harshness of my niece; but it is only we two who know this mechanism, so if you and I should face some accident, what fate would befall us in being fired aimlessly into space, and what responsibility would we be abdicating, knowing that we have left insoluble the most gigantic of the scientific problems?"

The observation was so virtuous that the polyglot had no objection, though the truth is any objection at that point would have been futile, because once established, only the regular action of time had the power to destroy the effect of the inalterability current.

Thereafter, they sought out the ladies' dressing room where Clara and Juanita had taken refuge like little children who hide when they think they have done something wrong; and leading the ladies to the

laboratory, Benjamin tricked them into contacting the electrical conductors so Don Sindulfo could bring about their inalterability with a few jolts that made them writhe like snakes.

“Look, you,” said Juanita, facing up to her master and ready to set him straight with a sharp word. “If you want to eat semolina for the rest of your life, just keep this up and I’ll remove all your molars myself...without opening your mouth. What have you done to us that’s left us epileptic?”

“Less crying!” remonstrated her master. “You are under my rule here. My authority is in effect, and there is no asking for explanations of my behavior. Your mission is to obey and keep quiet.”

“In that regard,” interposed Clara, “don’t push it.”

“What! Do I hear insubordination?”

“No, sir, but I protest that you have abused your position, forcing us to unexpectedly embark on a journey for which the world has no precedent.”

“And who has told you this?”

“Who else, by God, but the very same Spanish soldier who mocks you, in spite of knowing as much modern mathematics as Montezuma?”

“Do my ears deceive me? Has Luís found some means of getting you a notecard?” asked the stunned scientist with no suspicion that in the midst of his strict security, the captain could have been the living notecard himself.

“A notecard? I’d say so...in fact, enough cards for you to play whist!”

“Don’t be insolent, or, you’ll find yourself sold as a slave to the first patrician encountered on the streets of the Caesars’ Rome.”

“And what are the patricians going to do to me? Well—what?! Do I not come from *Liberales*? My father

was quartermaster of the volunteers of Isabella the Second. Listen, sir, to our pleas.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Did I not tell you that *Don Muumuu* was the Calomarde of uncles?” interjected Juanita.

“You will end this scheming!” bellowed Don Sindulfo, livid with rage. “Your schoolgirl crushes are gone—and since you have not seen fit to accept my hand, I will lead you to countries and times in which the will of the guardian is law for his ward, so that despite your recalcitrance, you will have to be my wife.”

“Never that! I will die first, before such torture. And since logical argument has brought you to violence, henceforth my pure valor will stand against you.” Then, casting a conspiratorial glance toward Juanita, she added, “Set forth when you please.”

“Yes, sir. Right away, sir,” said Don Sindulfo. “Commence lift-off. And at first landfall we will immediately deliver you with a list of charges to the authorities.”

The scientist said no more; he threw switches and *El Anacronópete* began to ascend, not without some agitation on the part of the women prisoners who saw the contours of the city disappear under its decks.

In the other room with the new women passengers, the reaction was more lively and anxious with impatience for the results of the trip. Down below, in the storeroom, silence reigned. Only Pendencia spoke in a low voice to his superior, giving notice of the slight swaying: “My captain, we launch.”

Suddenly, the colossus changed course and began to push aside the atmosphere without a sole becoming aware of traveling around the world twice per second, all because the engines, operating in a vacuum, had nothing against which to rub and produce a sensation of movement.

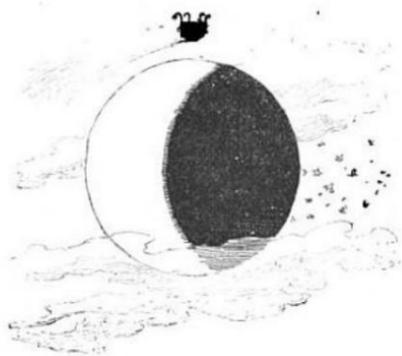
“It works!” exclaimed Don Sindulfo with a fatherly pride inspired by his invention.

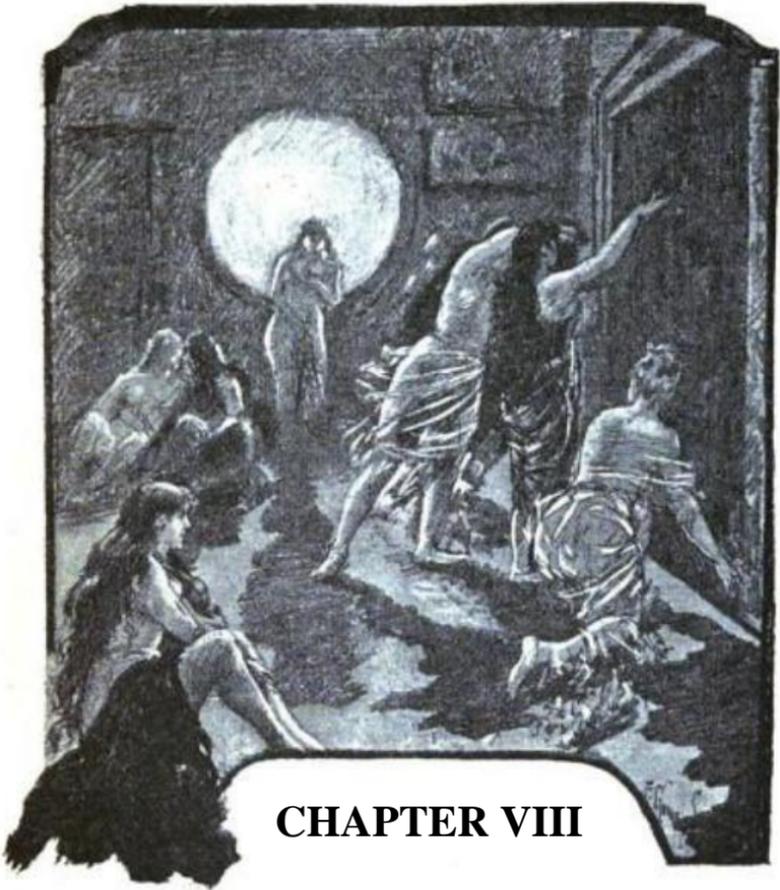
“Onward!” cried his niece, resolutely.

“Praise be to the genius!” stammered Benjamin, embracing his benefactor.

“Jesus!” said Juanita. “This is blander than a dish without salt. Not a bell tower to see, nor a treasure—not a thing to cheer one’s heart. I prefer an ordinary day at home. Come on, Don Sindulfo, wake me up when we get to *Les Invalides*.”

The poor girl had not realized that she had begun her statement in Paris on July 10, 1878, and ended it on December 31 of the previous year above the peaks of the Andes.





## CHAPTER VIII

### Retrograde effects

**T**HE die was cast and there was no way back, or rather, no way forward, if we are to be logical with the situation. Clara and Juanita withdrew to their dressing room, feeling secure in the vicinity of their defenders and quite ready to bring them forth at the first stop made; but it seemed risky to reveal their presence while underway, fearful that Don Sindulfo would take revenge by condemning them all to never-ending flight.

The scientist, for his part, could not savor his triumph enough with Benjamin; and to be fair, he did

not lack sufficient cause, as no experiment had ever displayed such rousing success.

"*Eureka!*" he exclaimed in a burst of enthusiasm, as if he were a second Archimedes shaking the world to its foundations without even the aid of a lever.

"How far have we gone?" asked his polyglot friend.

"We left Paris twenty-one minutes ago," he replied, consulting the chronometer. "Consequently, we have backtracked seven years, and we are at the tenth of July, 1871."

"Shall we determine our course and position?"

"Make it so."

"Heading east," said Benjamin, fixing his eyes on his compass.

"Steady as she goes," replied the scientist, checking his own.

"Latitude 50°."

"Exactly."

"We need no more than to aim our spyglasses one degree southward to directly observe our starting point."

And swiveling their spyglasses to the southern port-hole of the observatory, where the blinds were opened electrically, both men took measure of the scene. They had previously turned off the electric lights that constantly lit their hermetically sealed quarters, which otherwise would be dark as night because, of course, they were shuttered against the dizzying alternations of light and shadow stemming from sudden transitions between day and night at a rate of forty-eight hours per second.

The time travelers had taken a few observations without noticing anything in their path other than haze lit up like phosphorescent breath announcing the presence of cities in the night, or great silhouettes of the same cities bathed in sunlight and trimmed by the dark background of fields, when without warning the two

observers let out a unified cry as sudden as the shock that they'd experienced. Out the darkness and directly from the meridian of Paris, the flash of an immense blaze had just struck their retinas.

"The Paris *Commune!*" exclaimed both.

And indeed, that glow was the spillover of North American wells, casting their devastating spells in vain against the convictions of an old but noble Europe. The scholars, however, were not moving from their observatory until they found further verification of their chronological deductions; a few seconds sufficed to pass through the spring of 1871 and cross the harsh winter theater of the most frightening of the international struggles, a campaign richly exemplifying human madness. The earth was an immense blanket of snow, as if the cold of terror sown in the countryside had germinated into fields of ice. The light of Helios was not reflected except in deadly surfaces of steel and bronze, while parabolas of shellfire appeared as blazing arcs rising through shadows as if to prevent a collapse of the celestial dome. Hot air balloons entrusting the salvation of the homeland to atmospheric currents, carrier pigeons returning to the Ark without olive branches, Paris capitulating, the handing over of the city of Metz, an orphaned crown at Sedan!...and what other wayposts? Yes, their calculations were correct. They were in the Year of Punishment.

They closed the blinds and once again illuminated the room.

"Maestro, I wonder....," said Benjamin.

"What?"

"Since we are headed to yesteryear, and we'll reach the past with our experience of history, wouldn't it be possible for us to change the human condition by preventing the cataclysms which such absurd engagements as these have produced in society?"

"Be more precise."

“Suppose we arrive at the Guadalete River in the last years of the Gothic empire.”

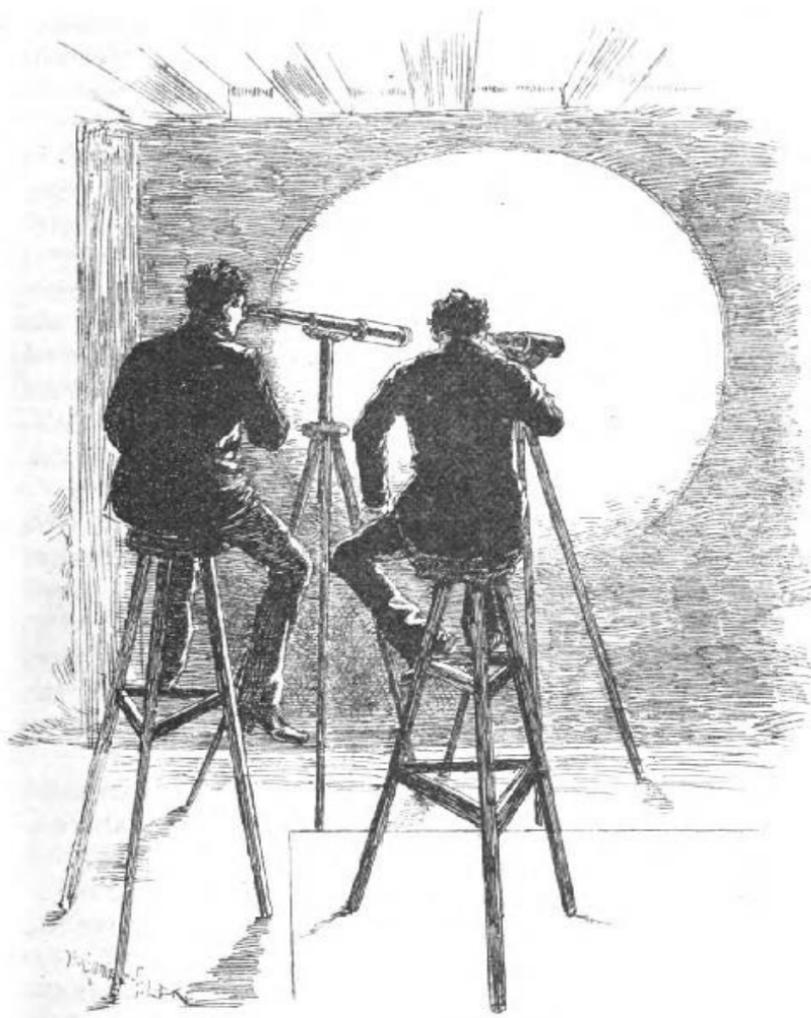
“And then?”

“Don’t you think that giving a lesson in morals to Doña Cava and Don Rodrigo, or sitting down Count Julian and making him read Cantu, Mariana and Lafuente in order to see the consequences of his betrayal, would shift the course of events and prevent the Moorish domination of Spain?”

“By no means. We may be present as eyewitnesses to the *fait accompli* of past centuries, but never destroy that which already exists. More to the point: we may rewind time, but not rewrite it, for if today follows from yesterday and we are living in the present, then we cannot—without abolishing ourselves—annihilate a cause from which we are the subsequent effect. An analogy can plainly show my theory. Just imagine that you and I are omelettes made with eggs laid in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. If there were no Moors—who were the hens—would we exist?”

Benjamin reflected for a moment before replying, “And why not? Even accepting the hypothesis that we both are descendants of Muza the Moor, preventing him and his relations from penetrating Spain does not preclude our existence. I don’t propose destroying the hens; what I propose is forcing them to lay their eggs in Africa. Then the omelettes survive with no change other than their stove lying in the Atlas Mountains rather than the Guadalete.”

Don Sindulfo bit his lip in concentration without finding a refutation to his friend’s argument, which he called paradoxical, whence he cut off the conversation by opening his desk and recording in his diary the previous observations of their course. Benjamin, in turn, went to the cabinet that held his most cherished archaeological specimens and entertained himself in verifying their classifications.



Let's leave the pair to their wise tasks and see what, in the meantime, occurred in the collections room where the twelve daughters of Eve impatiently anticipated their transformation in which the French government aimed to lay the foundation for a moral regeneration of the country.

For those of my readers who have visited France, most likely all of them, there is no need to describe the travelers' clothes. Having finery as their lure and the art of pleasing as their profession, it's easily inferred that our ladies had adorned themselves with all the ingenuity of Lyon's silk industry, exhausted the wonderful resources provided by the lace manufacturers of Cluny and Valenciennes, and threaded together Californian gold with Brazilian diamonds, emeralds of Colombia and pearls harvested from the Gulf of Bengal.

"And dear, Niní, what's up with you?" a slender blonde was asked by another who allegedly was a provocative brunette in her youth and now responded to the name of Naná, since they all had their own stage names.

"For the time being, nothing—but if they return me to city hall with fifteen years gone, I swear I'll never marry, except to a man who supports the government. We must be grateful."

"I'm grateful—every time they handcuff me," answered a nervous woman entertaining herself by folding paper birds from a letter.

"So what do you plan to do, Emma?"

"Make them set me down in the court of Louis XV and present me to His Majesty."

"For me," said another named Sabina, "I'd rather steal away with the Romans who'd return me to Paris where I'd dress in fine cotton and sleep on a plush mattress."

"But we've given our word," insisted Niní.

“Remember that the restoration of France depends on us.”

“Ah, yes, the bundle of official promises,” argued Emma. “The moment they see us young and beautiful, those who cast us as their rehabilitation instruments today will be the first to come disturb our domestic peace tomorrow. Ah, men. Men!...”

And as she continued playing with a paper bird, she noticed it was falling to dust, though she hadn’t crushed it.

“Here’s the proof,” she added, thinking that the phenomenon topped off her argument. “They write their protestations of love on rotten paper, precisely so it won’t last.”

“That’s the fire of passion reducing the letter to ashes,” objected the ever-optimistic Niní.

“Or the humidity here that ruins it,” claimed another. “And *El Anacronópete* doesn’t exactly take awards for cleanliness. Since we’ve entered it, I’ve done nothing but dodge the flakes of fleece and fuzz of all the species that continually fall from the ceiling.”

“It’s true. I’ve noticed it, too,” said Sabina.

“Don’t move, Sabina. Hold still!”

“What is it?”

“There’s a butterfly on the ribbon of your hat. A moth!”

“Oh! And mine has a worm!” shouted another, dashing about in search of a brave-hearted hand to pick it off.

Emma wanted to come to the rescue, but stopped when she saw her own fingers saturated with a viscous substance that had replaced her paper. Instinctively, she tried to shake it off, but when she looked again, the pulp was gone, and in its place, cloth scraps of all sizes and colors hung from her hand.

An astonished cry resounded in the room and the pandemonium became complete when Sabina, regarding Nini, saw her gapping mouth eject a false tooth by the impetus of a true tooth that took its place. Simultaneously, Nana's dyed blonde wig lost its color and suddenly lacking the cord that held it in place, fell to the floor revealing a head covered with silky strands that could well be the envy of Faust's Margarita.

"Look at Emma," someone shouted. "Her crow's feet are gone."

"And Coralia has lost her wart," exclaimed another.

"The smoothness of my skin!"

"My shoulders are so soft!"

"No more gray hair!"

"We are young!"

"*Viva el Anacronópete!*"

They all consulted their compact mirrors or gazed at their reflections in any polished surface, distributing kisses and hugs in the dizziness of their admiration.

The cause of these wonderful effects is easily explained. Since neither the travelers nor their clothes had been subjected to the inalterability treatment, the rolling back of time also rolled back the destructive nature of its usual march forward. So, each passing moment reduced the age of any physical entity by the same amount that *El Anacronópete* traced backward through time: everything marched toward its origin, and likewise, paper transformed from the consistency of a banknote to the pulp of the paper mill and finally to the rags that were the source of the paper, while satin metamorphosed back to silkmths, whereupon they degenerated to larvae and eventually to their embryonic state. Nothing was more enchanting than those well-rounded figures inelegantly covered in bunches of silkworms interwoven with fleece of the finest wool and contrasting the gilded color of their wispy filaments

with the half-opened oysters that served as bedding to embryonic pearls. What artistic arrangements arose from those minerals embedded in rock fragments, surrounded by cotton buds, edged by green strips of hemp, and crisscrossed by residues of ribbons from clothing older than that moment in history, which kept their integrity as a fashion anachronism amidst the very reversal of nature!

The astonishment was unanimous, the enthusiasm indescribable—but as the backward path of time continued, the phenomena took on alarming proportions. The fabrics and other objects, transformed into raw materials, no longer adorned the curves of our living sculptures. Once each piece of matter had been jolted from its normal course, the fragments began to flee in search of their roots. Fleece disappeared to seek out sheep; oysters, attracted toward shoals, rushed to bury themselves in the coasts of Malabar; cotton fled to sink its roots in the North American plains; boot suede, stripped of its tanning, flew to coat the skeletons of harmless cattle in the Alps; and through the gaps left by the desertion, lines peeped out, worthy of inspiring the classic nudes chiseled by Michelangelo, Praxiteles and Phidias.

Upon contemplating their nakedness, the travelers buried their faces in their hands—such is the modesty inherent in the graceful half of the human species—and issued cries so horrendous that Don Sindulfo and Benjamin, leaving their notes and classifications, ran to investigate the uproar.

“Stay out!” said some as the scientists were readying to open the door.

“We don’t need anything,” exclaimed others.

“Oh, my corset...” shouted yet another.

Clara and Juanita, whom the scientists went to see and brief on the situation, made their way into the room

and, frightened to see such an unusual spectacle, returned to ask for assistance.

“God’s truth! Those ladies are going to catch a cold,” howled the Maritornes.

At this, Benjamin, who had already taken in the situation, arrived with some transmitters for the inalterability process, and through the barely open door, he advised the lady journeyers to grab them. They did so, and with four applications of the procedure and some dozens of moans from the victims, their backward trek was arrested and permanent harm avoided.

“Give them your dresses,” said Don Sindulfo to his ward and Juanita, while he and Benjamin, splitting their sides with laughter, returned to the laboratory to resume their work. But as soon as the polyglot dropped into his seat, he gave a harrowing cry and leapt out again, hair on end, shaking as if from a Galvonic shock.

“What happened?” asked the scientist, running to Benjamin’s aid.

“Just look! Look!” stammered the afflicted man, pointing to the famous commemorative medal acquired at the auction of the Madrilenian archaeologist and attributed by the catalog to Servius Caius, prefect of Pompeii, in honor of Jupiter.

Don Sindulfo took the disk, which shone brighter than the silver water tray on the table. The object in question had not yet been carefully examined, as they were waiting until the moment in time that could conclusively verify its authenticity; but that time was upon them, since their backtracking had undone the corrosion and the entire message now stood out on the burnished background with a terrifying eloquence. Indeed, the message:

SERV... C. POMP... PR...  
JO... HONOR

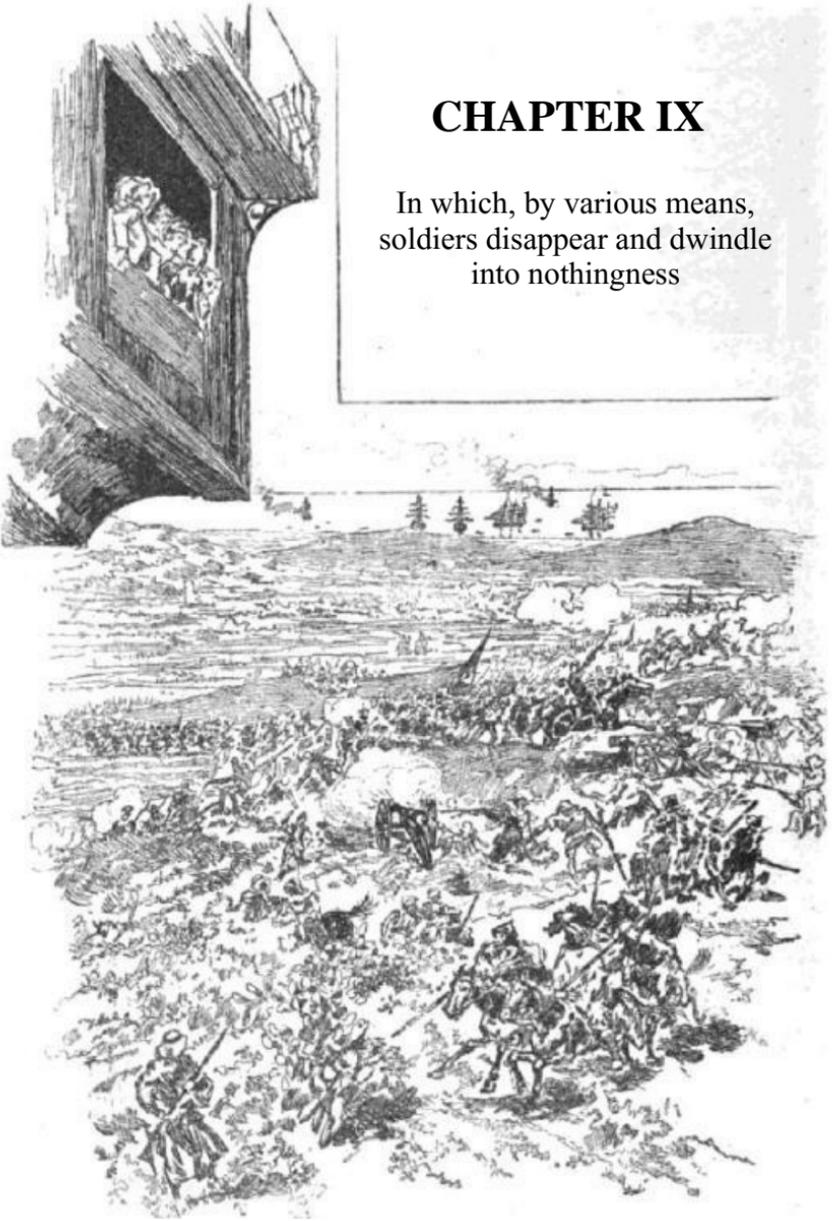
was an announcement engraved in brass about a hearse company founded in Paris at the time they were crossing, which restored to its full French integrity proclaimed:

SERVICE DE POMPES FUNEBRES  
RUE D'ANJOU SAINT HONORÉ.



## CHAPTER IX

In which, by various means,  
soldiers disappear and dwindle  
into nothingness



WITH proper amends made for their damaged attire due to the reversal of time, the women travelers raced to the laboratory in search of Don Sindulfo to shower him with multiple displays of gratitude.

The scientists had yet to recover from the stupor arising from the metamorphosis of the silver disk; and, indeed, they had ample reason to be confounded at the ignominious outcome that science had occasioned them. Nevertheless, they concealed their anger and, closing away the artifact, turned their attention to contemplating the assorted examples of the most beautiful half of the human species. The assembly was exhaustive, as if one had been transported to the paradise of Muhammad or the *foyer de la danse* at the grand opera in Paris.

Even though the conduct of the female entourage was beyond reproach, Don Sindulfo, fearful of possible imprudence, wished to restrict their contact with Clara and, thus, exhorted her and Juanita to withdraw to their rooms.

“As if we could be locked away,” said the girl from Pinto, “just as we’ve discovered that we’re in the company of *courtesans*.”

“They’re not important,” replied her guardian. “You don’t know each other, nor do you speak the same language.”

“My lady understands French, and those ladies know every language. Already they have told us that they are here by choice and that time itself has rolled back for them!”

Indeed, in the few minutes of contact, not only had Juanita advised the traveling ladies of the situation, but she’d cunningly won over the aid of an entire female posse to buttress her effort in forcing Don Sindulfo into a ceasefire that would allow the hidden soldiers to reveal themselves and thence undertake an escape together; what’s more, for the twelve daughters of Eve, the aspiration of rejuvenation now served as inspiration for a larger hope: to be free.

The guardian recognized that the playing field was tilted against him, and so, reassured by the misconception that returning the Parisian ladies to an age of

relative naivety would draw out their pure and innocent side, he banished "as the tree is bent, so it grows" to the nether part of his mind, and decided to leave the ladies all together, albeit still subject to his inquisitorial inspections.

"We are now entering the year 1860," called out Benjamin, consulting his charts and instruments.

"Alas, the day my boyfriend passed away in Constantine, the Algerian city of bridges!" interposed Niní, bringing into play Don Sindulfo's sympathies and further advancing Clara's scheme.

"And on the same day, not far from there, I left my mother's hearth in Annaba, escaping my stepfather's endless cruelty," professed Sabina, wetting her eyes with saliva to feign weeping.

The scientist moved to quickly take the floor, since a few seconds more would have had all the young women lamenting their Algerian origins. "Calm down," he reprimanded. "You're getting ahead of yourselves. Remember, we're traveling backwards, thus, for us, the start of the year is December 31—or, in other words, we ring in the year when the rest of the world takes its leave, and hence, you have three more minutes before concerning yourselves with that painful anniversary."

"So much the better!" cried Niní in an outpouring of joy. "Now I can see him alive. Ask of me what you will, but restore me to his arms and a new age of happiness will commence for the likes of me, who has thus far known only humiliation."

"Have mercy," shrieked Sabina. "Now that you've taken charge of our rehabilitation, it's our duty to complete it."

"Your wishes are impossible," said Don Sindulfo. "I will convey you back to France on our return trip, but for now, time is money and I cannot afford a stop. And even if we were to stop in Africa, it would be in Morocco to bear witness to that memorable day's battle

at Tétouan, which lifted the honor of the Spanish army to incalculable heights.

“What!” sputtered Juanita, carrying on the plot. “You mean we’re going right through the Rif where my uncle, trumpeter of the Spanish light infantry, battled and died of a bullet wound before I was even born, and you will be so cruel as to not let him give a hug to his favorite niece?”

“Didn’t you just say that he never knew you?”

“That doesn’t matter. We have his ferrotype portrait at home.”

“I think,” babbled Clara, using all her means of seduction, “that my uncle holds the reputation of Spain in high enough regard that he could never fail to pay a just tribute of admiration to our fellow countrymen, nor would it be kind of him to refuse the request of his loyal ward.”

“Since you wish it, it will be,” answered the defeated guardian. “We will observe that epic, but without going down.”

“From a bird’s eye view?” asked Juanita, trying to press her case, but a gesture from her mistress made her realize that Don Sindulfo had reached his limit in concessions.

The scientist turned their course toward 35° north latitude and, when the chronometer reached the evening of February 4, 1860, slowed their march to a crawl and let *El Anacronópete* glide over Tétouan, out of the range of bullets but close enough to the theater of operations to observe the fine points of that memorable battle.

Every heart born from the southern slopes of the Pyrenees to the tip of Point Tarifa pounded violently. The portholes opened, optical instruments turned to the battlefield, and an enthused cry resounded through the observatory.

“There! You can see the combatants,” shouted Naná,

arranging her hair on the off-chance that any of the officers looked skyward.

"Jesus! It's like a diorama," stammered an astonished Juanita.

"But look how strange their movements are," replied Clara, transfixed by the phenomenon unfolding before their eyes.

"It's true," everyone exclaimed, pointing to one peculiar happening after another.

"What is it?" asked the scientist.

"Just look. They do everything backwards."

"Ah, yes," replied the scientist, realizing that it was what he expected and thus of no import to himself. "That is because as we travel backwards through time, our first view of the battle is at its end."

"Right," interjected Juanita. "For you, everything starts at the bottom!"

And indeed, the travelers watched the Battle of Tétouan from back to front, like the hero in Flammarion's *Lumen* watching the Battle of Waterloo as he sped from Earth to the star Capella, overtaking light rays in a way that retraced history in inverse order.

"Observe," continued Don Sindulfo, "how first you notice corpses becomes reanimated."

"Quite true," Benjamin nodded. "And then they shoot their rifles."

"And finally they charge."

"Charge? And you think yourselves wise," said the Maritornes, unable to resist a jab at her nemesis.

"What is it, then? Retreat?"

"No. It's just that they go backwards because we're moving toward the moment in time before they advanced. Now we're at the proper beginning of the battle, and by stopping here, we could watch it in order."

"So...*whoooa!*" said one of the Algerian women, eliciting laughter from all, whose repeated supplications

together with patriotic pride were too much for the scientist to resist. A slight movement of a lever brought *El Anacronópete* to rest in the atmosphere.

Writing this story some twenty-one years after that memorable battle, it seems to me that Don Sindulfo's own account of events, though written off-the-cuff, will hold a certain appeal for generations to come. Thus, I copy here narration from his diary, which undoubtedly inspired the painter Castellani to capture that day with his brush and additionally served as the crown's notification of the consequent panorama displayed in front of the Royal Mint in Madrid. He said it this way:

*We are centered above the Moroccan encampment of Muley-Ahmed. The Spanish troops advance, surrounding the enemy and closing simultaneously. In front, we have the sea, while the city of Tétouan lies behind; to the right is the River Martin, and to the left are the Tower of Geleli and the White House.*

*General O'Donnell orders his forces to execute an enveloping movement on Muley-Ahmed's camp, in order for the troops of General Prim and General Ros de Olano to attack from two different points, protected by the artillery engineers. The cannon fire blasts forth from forty pieces that gradually advance to within 400 meters of the Moroccan trenches.*

*In the forefront, the general sits on horseback beside Colonel Jovellar and his Chief of Staff, General Garcia, issuing orders to the Commander Dana Ruiz. From behind, the Spanish batteries bombard the Arab strongholds. Beyond, lie the far sea and the Spanish fleet.*

*To the right, General Ros de Olano gives directions to his own son and directs the movements of the first division of the third corps, readying his soldiers to penetrate various points in the trenches. Simultaneously, the three regiments—those of*

*Albuera with Colonel Alaminos, Ciudad-Rodrigo with Lieutenant Colonel Cos-Gayón, and the battalions of Zamora and Asturias led by Brigadier Matterhorn—invalidate the camp despite the tenacious resistance from the enemies, one of whom in the anguish of death finds strength to crawl up to an abandoned cannon and fire, wreaking horrific havoc in the first rows of our troops.*

*On the left, General Prim attacks the trenches, rapidly followed by Colonel Gaminde; they breach a pocket, and in flood the Catalan soldiers of Alba de Tormes, Princesa, Córdoba and León. Confusion reigns amongst the enemies, and a fierce shoulder-to-shoulder struggle ensues. To one side, I see Commander Sugañes and Lieutenant Moxó fall and die, hoisting the colors of the intrepid Third Catalan Battalion. Don Enrique O'Donnell vigorously supports the attack of his commander, General Prim, and then heads for Muley-Abbas's stronghold in the Tower of Geleli, which the Moors hastily abandon.*

*Muley-Ahmed tirelessly tries in vain to stop the desertion of his soldiers who flee in panic before the fearless ranks of Prim. Filled with terror, they ignore the orders of their commander, dragging him along in their flight, and leaving behind the treasures of their camp with 800 tents, eight cannons, uncounted weapons with ammunition, camels, horses and supplies.*

*In the background, toward Tétouan, the dismayed sultan of Morocco contemplates the rout of his large army.*

*During the course of the battle, the enemy threatens to attack the rearguard, but without hesitation, General O'Donnell dispatches two battalions of the third regiment under command of General Makenna, and, protected by General*

*Alcalá Galiano's brigade, they rapidly advance along the River Martin, pushing back the enemy and paralyzing their efforts after a brief fight.*

*Meanwhile, formidable enemy forces swarm out of the Tower of Geleli, paralyzing our right flank with their infantry and three thousand horsemen; but the General-in-Chief, ever aware of the ups and downs of the battle, calls on the Count of Balmaseda to advance his lancers' brigade. These troops charged the enemy vigorously, sending them into a hasty retreat assisted by pursuit from General Ríos's reserve corps who had been placed the star fort.*

*The day's battle is now concluded. Tétouan will soon throw open its doors to the winner, and undoubtedly, the Emperor of Morocco already regrets having incited the righteous anger of the Spanish nation.*

The enthusiasm on board *El Anacronópete* knew no bounds. Everyone pleaded with Don Sindulfo to take them down to hug the heroes, including Juanita who claimed to recognize the lungs of her uncle in a trumpet call of attack. The scientist, besides being possessed by general admiration, had an unwarranted, vindictive character which saw in the circumstance an opportunity to rid himself of a certain tormenting wench, so he acceded to the demand with the thought to lift off again as soon as Juanita stepped over the threshold of *El Anacronópete* in search of her supposed relative. To lessen the chance of stray bullets, a secluded grove was chosen for the descent, and with an air of ecstasy, the vehicle made landfall.

But, alas, a man does not commit such malicious actions without, sooner or later, having to face the piper. Each occupant of the ship was savoring the fulfillment of his purpose when Benjamin, gazing out the porthole

to contemplate the horizon, gave a sudden cry and stumbled backwards.

“What is it?” asked his inseparable friend, running to his side.

“Woe is me!” answered the polyglot, losing his color. “We seem to have stumbled upon an ambush set by the Moroccans for our troops.”

A cold sweat broke out on every forehead.

“We must flee!” was the general inclination.

“Look at the hoard headed this way!”

“We have no choice! We must resort to escape,” argued the scientist, running to the controls to put the machine in motion.

Benjamin closed the porthole and restored the lights. “Quick!” he exclaimed. “Before they reach us!”

He had yet to finish his sentence when one of the women gasped, “A Moor!”

“Two!” cried Juanita, hiding behind the men.

“Twenty!” cried a panicked group packed into a corner of the lab.

There were, in fact, two dozen renegades from Muley-Ahmed’s camp, who on their retreat into the forest witnessed the descent of the vehicle and, taking it as a weapon of war, had resolved to attack; but not finding any easy entryway, they grabbed hold of any available part and, climbing with the fortitude that comes only from fanaticism, gained entry through the evacuation tubes before the colossus could take off.

After the initial moment of astonishment, in which no one dared raise their eyes before those hulking invaders with their daggers and muskets and vengeful frowns of a defeated foe, Nana steeled herself and asked Don Sindulfo, “Tell me, sir, what will they do to us?”

“Benjamin and I will have our throats slit,” he said. “And the rest of you will be taken into their harems as slaves.



“With the eunuchs? Oh, what horror!” said the girl, under her breath.

“Well, if we’re to go to the harem,” interjected Juanita to her master, “I think that you might also come...”

“Insolence!”

“...to keep us company and teach us science in our free time, of course.”

But alas, according to the translation that Benjamin provided of the orders issued by the force’s commander,

the scientist's words about the invaders' intentions were correct. The travelers seemed irretrievably lost. However, just then, a brilliant idea sprang to the mind of the beleaguered Don Sindulfo.

"If we can buy a little time," he told the polyglot, "we will yet be saved."

"How?"

"We'll set *El Anacronópete* to maximum speed, and seeing as how these Algerians have not been subjected to the inalterability procedure, they will shrink until eventually each is transported to the moment of his birth, at which point he will disappear."

"A sublime idea!"

And as they shifted forward the control lever, the vehicle took on a dizzying speed.

"At them!" shouted the captain of the invaders, and the Moors were poised to consummate their work; but the moans and lamentations of the fairer sex were so persistent and penetrating that the need for silence compelled them to first bind and gag everyone before they could hope to return to their hidden camp. With their captives thus bound, close to a quarter of an hour went by as the Moors searched in vain for an exit, all to the delight of the captives who, seeing as how they were tied up, could not escape or call for help but could sit back and wait for freedom as their oppressors grew younger moment by moment.

But the temperament of those from south of the Mediterranean is impetuous and impatient. Upon reaching exhaustion, the sons of the desert began to suspect that they themselves were prisoners of their own hostages, and they concluded that the only way out was the way they'd entered, although traversing that route with captives was a clear impossibility, which led them at last to pronounce the extreme verdict of execution for their captives.

By then, they were at the bottommost level of the ship, near the waste chutes, and the women despaired to think that a single cry could have summoned their rescuers, yet they all had been rendered mute. The Moors readied their muskets while the prisoners congregated in a corner. No doubt remained about the sad fate that awaited them. The muskets came to bear, and the poor wretches, huddled and confused, turned their backs in a sense of desperation and powerlessness, when suddenly, our scientist found that his binding rope had been transformed into fine strands of hemp, leaving him free to exercise his muscles. No sooner had the realization come to him than he took action, flipping a nearby switch on the wall. In a single motion, the waste chutes opened and the sons of Hagar disappeared forever into the abyss.

No words can describe the happiness that followed those moments of anguish. With life restored, they clung to each other without regard to sexes or status, and even Juanita could not hold back a burst of gratitude to her master:

“If you were not so ugly, I would marry you!”

But just as the scientist was savoring his triumph, convinced of having won a prominent place in his ward’s heart, Clara timidly brought forth a new tribulation. “It is now time to tell you everything,” she exclaimed, looking to Juanita for council.

“Are you certain?” responded her steadfast companion.

“Yes, come to me, my brave one!” Clara called out, urging the Spanish soldiers to emerge from their hiding places and shamelessly laughing at the astonishment of the good uncle who had intuitively understood the trap they’d sprung.

“What! How are they here?” The blood drained from his face.

Clara repeated her call, adding, "Forgiveness, uncle!"

"Neither for you nor for them!" the jealous guardian insisted, delivering blows to every object within his range.

"Well, then," Juanita replied, "it's war to the death, and we'll see if the scientist is a man or a mouse. Don Luis! Pendencia! Soldiers!—Death to the intelligentsia!"

But as the seventeen sons of Mars emerged, climbing around sacks of flour and over barrels of provisions, a frightened gasp replaced her energetic call to arms, for none of them had been subjected to the inalterability treatment and the oldest had yet to see twenty-five springs, so the score of years backtracked since Paris had reduced the soldiers to toddlers of a tender age.

"This is frightful!" lamented the French women, who in their minds had already been betrothed to the gallant Spanish soldiers.

"I'm going to faint," said Clara, unable to believe her eyes.

Juanita flew into a rage, balling her fists and shouting at her master: "You are the *stupidest* wise man imaginable!"

Don Sindulfo, however, smugly thought they'd all gotten their just desserts, and there was really nothing to complain about. Meanwhile, *El Anacronópete* continued its backward journey, and the infants regressed to the point of crawling.

"God's truth," said Juanita, rabidly. "Don't you see they're dissolving like salt in water?"

"All to the good," was the answer, delivered with the callousness of a second Othello. "Our problems are over."

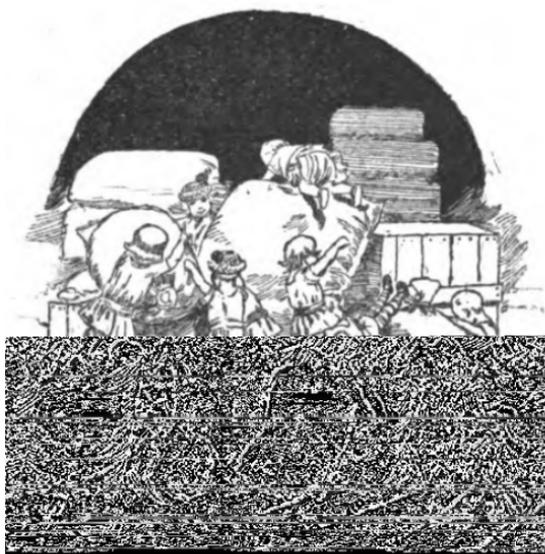
By this point, the little angels were lying on the floor, waving arms and legs in that idle way that they do

and crying a lungful. Moved to compassion, every daughter of Eve took to her bosom a babe and strolled gently through the storeroom, all the while feeling them dwindle away as the implacable uncle rubbed his hands together with glee and smiled a satanic smile.

“My Luís!” repeated Clara over and over through her tears as she caressed what remained of her captain of the Hussars.

“Have you no more jokes for your Juanita?” asked the girl from Pinto to her tiny Pendencia. And that rascal Pendencia as if he still wanted to give proof of his wit, bit her dress in the very place where children of that age receive nourishment.

Suddenly, the women went pale, no longer holding anything to their chests: the soldiers had dissolved to nothingness in their arms.





## CHAPTER X

In which a seemingly insignificant incident is  
nonetheless of great importance



**T**O LOSE a loved one is one of the most terrible trials that the human spirit can endure, and yet, the affliction passes through distinct stages depending on the circumstances that surround the event.

“At least he died in his bed, surrounded by loved ones,” some say to the suffering relative to console him.

“And you have the satisfaction of knowing that God gave him a long life,” will say others.

And indeed, thoughts like these are a balm for the kind of pain which, coming from a place of reason, is a measured response, while deeper pain is reserved for major catastrophes.

Now, dear reader, you can well imagine the travelers' state of mind was as if they were characters in the final act of a tragedy which had no possibility of a *duex ex machine* outcome—for in the eyes of a devoted girl, a boyfriend is more than a mere family member, and in addition to the bitter loss of their loved ones, the enamored maidens suffering was magnified by the torture of seeing them disappear in their very hands.

Faced with the vastness of the fatalities, Clara lost all sensibilities and had to be led to her room by the other expedition members. Juanita felt the wounds just as deeply but nevertheless held herself together, venting anger in screams at her oppressor and calls for the soldiers to rescue her.

But the gravest situation, no doubt, belonged to Don Sindulfo. Certainly, he thought himself a genius, but it was more pettiness in his character than mad scientist, and the deaths of the twenty-four Moors, though legitimate self-defense, acted as two dozen daggers in his heart. Add to this the appearance of the sons of Mars, in which he saw not only defiance of his mandates but also the futility of having expended his scientific resources to flee only to have his rival reappear, and just like that, he allowed time to devour those luckless people without raising a hand. Thus, he takes his first step in crime as we see him stricken by the venalities of jealousy, despair and madness. Nevertheless, let's not be too judgmental.

The Mohammedans, although men, were the enemies of God and had made an attack on his life; consequently, they were dead. But what of those seventeen soldiers, whom he had dealt with as mercilessly as Herod—what injury had they inflicted? Was youthful mischief deserving of so horrifying a punishment? Was not his own nephew one of the victims? Given that they had not been subjected to the inalterability treatment, would it not have been more humane to reverse course back toward the present, and once the soldiers had regained their natural proportions, have them disembark near their own era?

These and many other passionate thoughts ran unconstrained through Don Sindulfo's head, all while seeing the object of his own affection in abject despair, with the end result of such bitter struggle being that he fell deliriously into the arms of his one loyal friend, convulsing without restraint.

“Was he not safeguarded from such effects by the inalterability procedure?” some of my dear readers may ask. Certainly the procedure penetrates the epidermis, crosses the dermis, and infiltrates muscle tissue, reaching the bones which are rendered immutable, as are the other systems through which the effects circulate. Thus, the specimen subjected to the process will not lose his smoothness of the skin or become younger, nor will he suffer a skin rash or burst into flames due to his tremendous speed through the atmosphere—but he continues to experience hunger, thirst, and exhaustion; and is he still accountable to visceral shortcomings, which more often than not are the product of a moral conscience not yet ossified by science into a bulletproof barrier.

So, loaded down with an inanimate body, Benjamin headed for the bedroom with a mind to tuck Don

Sindulfo into bed; but, passing through the laboratory, he recalled the breakneck speed that they had set at the moment of the Moroccan invasion, and fearful of a possible reckless catastrophe, he bumped the throttle down, reducing *El Anacronópete* to what he thought was a safer speed.

From such minutia are born momentous events!

Don Sundulfo was put to bed with his teeth chattering continuously, while, at intervals, he pushed Benjamin away.

“Juanita,” said the latter when he spotted her making for an exit. “Heat a little water to make tea for your master who is not feeling well.”

“Who? Me? Not unless it’s to boil him alive.”

“Oh, come on! Set aside your anger and reflect on the fact that if he dies, there is nobody to lead us to a safe port.”

“Can’t you control this contraption?”

“Very little. But besides, charitableness would advise you to be compassionate. Light the fire while I get tea and sugar from the pantry.”

Whether it was fear of remaining indefinitely in flight or the inherent compassion of her sex, Juanita headed to the kitchen without another word.

“You know, a pair of electric sparks will light the fire faster than you can say ‘Jesus.’”

“*You* can light it by *telegraph*, but I’ll do it the old-fashioned way.”

And so saying, she placed some coals in the stove and, taking out some matches, scratched one after another on the sandpaper without getting a single one to light; but even more remarkable was that neither the matchhead nor the striking surface had a mark on it.

“Clearly,” she murmured, “Don Sindulfo’s slime has infiltrated everything,” and she went off in search of another matchbox and some wood chips or rags to expedite the combustion. Not finding anything meant for the purpose, she paused as she passed through the women’s quarters where there remained a few fragments of fabrics and leather that, although betraying a rich origin, were now scraps and by happenstance were just what was needed in those extenuating circumstances. She arranged the scraps in the stove, but her new attempt at lighting the fire was just as futile.

“I hope you have more skill than I,” she said to Benjamin as he entered carrying sugar and some Hulon tea.

“This is faster,” countered the polyglot, engaging the electric sparks, which immediately ignited the rags but not the coals; and it’s worth noting, although neither of the two observed the phenomenon, that the various bits of tinder were reforming into strange shapes such as ties, dress sleeves, boot heels and haberdashery items.

“Set out a little sugar,” Benjamin ordered Juanita while he put the leaves in the teapot and poured in boiling water.

“Maybe a demon can knock some sugar off this pyramid of Egypt,” said Juanita between repeated unsuccessful bangs of a hammer on the sugarloaf. “It’s harder than a scientist’s head.”

“Leave it,” exclaimed the other. “There’s granulized sugar already.” He took a packet from the kitchen shelf and added a spoonful to a cup along with some medicinal spirits.

“Wait!” said Juanita as he poured the tea. “It hasn’t yet taken on any color.”

A cold sweat broke out on Benjamin's forehead as he realized the meaning of the hardened sugar, the incombustible coals, and the tea that wouldn't steep. Anxiously, he dissolved a bit of sugar in the tea and put a spoonful to his lips.

"Horrors!" he said, turning pale.

"What's happened?" asked the maid, staring at him eye to eye in fear that he, too, would dissolve like the others.

"I should have realized! To preserve the foodstuffs, we made them inalterable, and now they're completely resistant to any physical force."

"Which means...?"

"That the sugar won't sweeten, the coal won't light, the tea won't brew, and nobody will be able to bite into so much as a potato."

"So, we'll die of hunger?" stammered a wide-eyed Juanita.

"No, but we'll have to land for every meal and eat the food of the local time and place, because you can see what happens if we try the procedure on food, and without that, three minutes of backward time travel will turn the bread to wheat and wine to grapes."

"And where will we take our daily bread today?" replied the girl, smiling when she realized that a stop for any reason would afford salvation for the prisoners.

"In hell," muttered Benjamin as he left with the cup of hot water, but serving it to his friend only caused him to vomit, after which he fell into a deep sleep.

Meanwhile, Juanita ran to relate the happenings to her unfortunate companions who, surrounding the bed of Don Sindulfo's ward, had witnessed a scene no less worthy of admiration than the preceding one.

As it happens, the very moment they were extending their condolences to Niní (who before the inalterability procedure had felt two beautiful pearl earrings disappear from her earlobes), the poor orphan brought her hands up to the disinherited cartilages and squealed with joy upon discovering the restoration of the precious jewels.

“Look! It’s a miracle...”

“Indeed!” everyone exclaimed. And a look of astonishment spread from one to another as somehow all the objects destroyed by the backward trek through time were restored. Soon, the collar on Naná’s dress, covered in larvae, transformed itself into cocoons and metamorphosed into the heavy satin of Lyon; and a strip of leather suddenly becomes tanned and molds to Sabina’s foot, with stitches forming as they watch it lace itself into a fashionable Charles IX boot.

“My shawl!” shouted one.

“My lace!” cried others.

And everyone had more effusive exclamations of enthusiasm until the most level-headed of them said, “Don’t go overboard just yet. We may have recovered our trousseau, but who’s to say where it stops?”

“What!?”

“Don’t you fear that this phenomenon, whose explanation we ignore, will have a cost? For every pearl we win back, do we also gain a wrinkle that we’d lost?”

The observation was so wise and the fear of losing their youthful charms so deep that a unanimous cry for relief arose from their lips; the women travelers, leaving Clara in her room under Juanita’s care, dashed off in search of the scientists and were relieved to find Benjamin in the laboratory where he managed to impose silence on the mob only by repeated threats of harsh penalties.

“What does this mean?” asked the most courageous. “Are you making us old again?”

“Let us in to talk,” bade another. “End our quarantine!”

“We’re not lepers!”

Benjamin, who couldn’t comprehend what he saw, pondered the situation with his eyes fixed on the ground and, without thinking, picked up a shiny object, which turned out to be a Moorish coin.

“That’s just a coin dropped by a Kabila,” said Nini. “Never mind that and pay attention to what’s important!”

“But if this coin comes from a Moroccan,” replied the polyglot, “just how is it still here if it never underwent the inalterability process? It should decompose as we travel backwards.”

“Perhaps it’s older than the year we’re in?”

“No. Its date is 1237, and as the Arab calendar originates from the flight of Muhammad in 622, the coin corresponds to 1859 A.D., just one year before we were attacked by the Rif mountain people—a point in time we should have crossed just three minutes after their attack.

“So?...” asked the stunned looks of the travelers, and Benjamin swore as he led them into the clock room to consult the various chronometers.

Immediately, he brought *El Anacronópete* to a halt.

“What is it?”

“In my desire to slow our speed,” said Benjamin, “I no doubt took the needle past the neutral line, so we’ve been traveling forward. We have retraced all our steps and are near Versailles on July 9—the very eve of the day we left Paris.”

There are no words to describe the joy painted on the faces of the women travelers who were convinced that

they'd returned to their starting point without forfeiting their youth. Together, they begged Benjamin to let them land, and although he feared the wrath of Don Sindulfo, his bigger worry was how ridiculous he would look should his companion discover his ineptitude. So it came that to cover up his misdeed—after all, neither Clara nor Juanita had witnessed the event—he agreed as a measure good governance to accede to their wishes, invoking immediate pleasure in the women and earning him an enviable and abundant harvest of hugs and kisses.

Majestically, *El Anacronópete* descended into Trianon Park, the women stealthily departed, and Benjamin, setting their speed to the maximum to make up for lost time, said, “Now, on to China in search of the secret of immortality.”

The next day, the newspapers of Paris brought two pieces of news: one that piqued the interest of all the unemployed on the streets, and the other that shocked the worldlywise.

The first said that twelve young women had been taken to prison for trying to take advantage of the public's credulity by masquerading as members of *El Anacronópete's* expedition, but they were betrayed by the fact that none of pretty women matched the descriptions provided by the prefecture, nor did the impostures possess the passports that all the travelers held.

The second article was more concise, but also more noteworthy for science in whose annals it is still recorded as gospel: In short, at 9:45 in the morning, the astronomical observatory in the vicinity of Versailles witnessed the fall of a huge meteorite.

Thus is history written!

## CHAPTER XI

A bit of tedious, but necessary, erudition



ON THE 14<sup>TH</sup> day of the ninth month of the year 604 (before Christ) in the village of Li, within the district of Tsou, in the present-day province of Hou-Nan, after 81 years of gestation (according to their holy words) was born the great white-haired metaphysician of China, who was appropriately named Lao-tseu, or "the old child."

Until his appearance, the most exotic philosophy of the Celestial Empire boiled down to the *I Ching's* Book of Principles, which was brought together by Fohi, whom historians believe to be Noah after he left the Ark and made his trip to the Xen-si province near Mount

Ararat in the far reaches of Bactria. Its aim is to illuminate the origin of entities and to explain the changes that have occurred through the ages. God is considered the cornerstone on which everything rests. It simultaneously expresses *Li* and *Tao* (reason and law) as they are revealed through human intellect.

Lao-tseu, guided by a gentle wisdom, taught that we should reject our passions rising above all self-interests, grandeur and earthly glories; practice self-sacrifice for the benefit of others, and humble oneself in order to be exalted: language that recalls the humility and charity of the doctrine of the Savior.

All the treasure of his intellect is locked away in his work *Tao Te Ching*. *Ching* signifies that the book is time-honored. *Tao* and *Te* are the titles of the two parts of his treatise, and, like the Torah of the Old Testament, they serve to name the work. Taken together, the titles mean *The Book of Supreme Reason and Virtue*.

Here is an excerpt confirming that when he was faced with adversity in his homeland, instead of advocating reform as Confucius did later, Lao-tseu isolated himself and urged men to look for the ultimate good in ascetic solitude and making a life of absolute calmness:

*Man, he says, must strive to obtain the utmost level of incorporeality in order to sustain as unchanging a state as possible. Individuals appear in life and meet their destinies. We can contemplate the act of successive renewal by which every individual returns to its origin. Returning to ones origin means to be put at rest; being put at rest is to be restored to ones mandate; being restored is to become eternal. One who becomes eternal is illuminated; one who does not becomes the victim of fallacies and all that is anguish.*

The precept espoused here, which we call passivity, was exaggerated by his disciples, the Tao-shih or celestial masters. And while, publicly and privately, Lao-tseu did not construe goodness as anything but the exercise of Virtue and the application of Supreme Reason for mastering the senses and reaching a state of impassivity, his followers abused this notion of inaction, abandoning themselves to an inflexible asceticism; and, proclaiming that knowledge engenders discontent, they enjoined the people to follow a path of absolute ignorance, nevertheless reserving the occult and divinatory arts for their own cartel in order to deceive the masses by portraying themselves as monks during the emergence of Buddhism in China.

The two sects of the Tao-shih, the Yang and the Mé, are but branches of the same trunk: their differences are so slight that they don't deserve to be outlined, given that both include the fundamental principle of the religion and its consequent raising to dogma of the idleness of the ignorant classes.

In the year 551 B.C., approaching the winter solstice of the 22<sup>nd</sup> year of the reign of Ling-uan, was born in the village of Tseu, feudal kingdom of Lu (today, the province of Chang-tung), the great Kun-fu-zzu—or Confucius as we call him in Europe. This philosopher had no inkling of the blind faith imposed by the charlatan monks of the Tao-shih, nor did he ever address human nature, or divine principles, or metaphysics in any way. His nature was not that of an innovator, but instead was limited to restoring the foundations of moral practices in a primitive society.

“That which I teach you,” he said, “you can learn for yourselves by making proper use of spiritual powers. There is nothing so natural or simple as these moral practices which I offer to you. All that I preach, the sages of ancient times already knew. The practices can be reduced to three fundamental devotions—the relation

between vassal and lord, between father and son, and between husband and wife—and the exercise of five principal virtues: humanity, *i.e.*, the love of everyone without exception; justice, which gives to each that which belongs to him; the observance of ceremonies and established custom, so that all those in a community follow the same rule and derive the same advantages and disadvantages; honesty in judgment and in feeling, so that one seeks and desires truth in everything, without egoistic hallucinations for oneself or vehemence for others; and sincerity, or an open heart that excludes falsehoods and pretense, in both words and in deeds. These are the virtues that have earned the reverence of the first teachers of mankind, first in life and later leading them to immortality; take these virtues as a model and strive to imitate them.

Such are the morals of Confucius, whose distinctive character is to articulate the duties of family and reduce all virtues to but one: filial homage. His dogma is obedience of the younger to the elder.

In regard to metaphysics, behold what a Mandarin disciple of Confucius said to Father Pedranzini:

*We are very judicious in making decisions that are not apparent and that the ancient sages found uncertain. The watchword of the holy men is the notion of if: If there is a heaven, the righteous shall enjoy its thousand delights; if there is a hell, the wicked shall be cast down into it; but who is to say whether they exist or not? Refrain from evil and do good, that is the important point. The Book of Great Learning advises that the key is virtue and the byproduct is fruitfulness and well-being. The Book of Conversations counsels you to not do unto another that which you do not want done unto you. Everything rests on this. Conducting yourself in this*

*manner is sufficient: the joys of heaven, if there is one, will follow as a consequence.*

These mores dominated within those sects who called themselves *the Learned* and lived, in opposition to the obscurantist precepts of the Tao-shih, in a community known as *the academy*.

The most notable among the disciples of Confucius was Meng-tseu, or Mencius, who died in 314 B.C. Distressed at the triumphs of the two sects of Tao-shih—that of Yang Zhu, who preached selfishness as the main regulator of human actions, and of Mozi, who held that affection should be extended to all alike, regardless of kinship—Meng-tseu spread an honorable humanitarianism based on the morals of Confucius, summarized as “*He who remains on the straight path of reason, serves heaven well.*” His book brought together three central tenets of Confucius, and its doctrine still today for those who aspire to public office.

We see, then, two major groups vying in the domain of self-awareness: The metaphysics of Lao-tseu, made lax by the mystical methods of the Tao-shih sects who had a hold on the lazy and ignorant masses; and the morals of Confucius, observed by the Learned, enlightening the privileged, and being the *de facto* religion of the state, sponsored and followed by the emperors, who were more indifferent than tolerant of all other practices and beliefs. However, there was a time when the followers of the mystics threatened to upset everything. It was in the second century B.C. when the Tao-shih, spreading the pure doctrine of Lao-tseu, began to espouse strange speculations and claimed to have discovered the secret of immortality in the contents of a mysterious concoction. Any effort of the Confucian sects to unmask them was in vain; protected by the Emperor Wu-ti, they would have certainly triumphed over the Learned had not a Confucian intercepted a

cup that his rivals meant for the emperor and, taking a hurried swallow, drawn the wrath of the august monarch, who promptly sentenced him to die then and there.

“Wait,” argued the Confucian. “If the efficacy of this liqueur is true, the order you have just given is useless; if, on the contrary, it is false, then with my death, your gullibility is exposed.”

Faced with this argument, Wu-ti’s faith in the Learned returned, and once again the Lao-tseu’s influence was limited to the ignorant and the slothful.

Now, as we have already seen, the Learned followed the religion of spirits, which preached skepticism and indifference, consigning death to nothing more than a means of passing the soul to another body or decomposing the soul into thin air, leaving nothing of a man but the blood within his children and his name as it is remembered in his homeland. But additionally, Confucius recorded in his books that he was merely trying to restore the primitive doctrines and, moreover, that he was but a precursor to an illustrious personage who would come from the west; thus, in the first century A.D., the emperor Ming-ti sent forth a fleet to the west, in search of the great reformer. The ships traveled far, but then, not daring to go any farther, they made landfall on an island where they found a statue of the Buddha that they returned to China in the year 65 A.D., which henceforth has been worshipped under the name of Fo by both the disciples of Lao-tseu and by the Learned.

Around this time, some Christians, fleeing the persecutions of Nero, found their way to the Celestial Empire; although, constrained by their low numbers and by the conditions of the country, they remained unrevealed until in 635 A.D., during the reign of Taisung, the city of Chang-ngan saw the arrival of the

Nestorian priest Or-lo-pen of Ta-tsin—i.e., the Roman Empire. The emperor sent his leading dignitaries, who led him to the palace; he presented translations of his holy books, and, convinced that they contained a true and beneficial doctrine, the emperor decreed that new temples be erected and that twenty-one priests were to serve the new religion. These facts are written on a monument in Si-ngan-fu, wherein the Christian doctrine is briefly stated and it is noted that the O-lo-pen missionaries arrived in 636 at the court of Tait-sung; that he issued an edict promoting Christianity; that Kao-tsung built churches in all the cities; that Vu-heu persecuted the faithful; and that Kuo-tsé was always accompanied by a Christian priest in battle.

That, however, is not part of our story. Instead, we'll find ourselves in the third century A.D., a period in China of political unrest that could scarcely be expected to avoid transmitting its influence to the bad blood that flowed between the three religious sects of Lao-Tseu, Confucius and Fo (or the Buddha). But even before this, there were continual power struggles, such as when the emperor Ho-ti, in the year 120, first granted honorifics and status to the palace eunuchs, much to the diminishment of the power that the Learned had enjoyed in the court up to that point. The groups vied for control until the year 187 in which the eunuchs managed to brand the Learned's academy as a treasonous threat against the emperor's own domination. The emperor, Chung-ti, banished the Learned and brought tribunals against the most illustrious, all the while claiming himself to be a friend of enlightenment for having inscribed the five classic books of the *I Ching* on 46 marble slabs in three different styles of logograms.

These events would seemingly draw the Tao-shih to the eunuchs in a common cause, but in fact, they were quick to use the circumstances to their own advantage.

A plague having devastated the empire over the past eleven years, a certain Tao-shih named Chang-kio contrived a cure from special water prepared with some mysterious words. This charlatan easily gained credence among the masses. Gathering a mass of followers, he trained them and soon found himself the head of a large party. His doctrine was that the *blue kingdom*, as he called the Han dynasty, was currently dominant in the personage of the emperor Hien-ti, but it would make way for the *yellow kingdom*. Soon, though, his ambitions became known, and seeing certain loss, he incited open rebellion in the countryside. Fifty thousand men followed his cry, and taking a yellow turban as their insignia, prepared to devastate the country. Their forays were joined by many ambitious self-seekers, eager to fracture China into separate fiefdoms; but the wisdom and bravery of General Tsao-tsao, head of the Learned whom the emperor called to his aid, quelled the insurrection and the vanquished rallied to his banner. Hien-ti appointed him as Prime Minister, but bloated with pride over his victory, Tsao-tsao was soon seen adorned by a cap of twelve pendants decorated with 53 precious stones—a distinctive mark of royalty—and he rode in a carriage of gold drawn by six horses. Before long, he would have seized the imperial seal, had death not caught up to him along the way. His work, however, was taken up by his son Tsao-pi, first chancellor of Hien-ti from whom he wrested the crown in the year 220, bringing a close to the Han dynasty and a start to the Wei.

But let's not get too far ahead of ourselves, since the reader shall attend these memorable events presently; indeed, as the intelligent reader will have already realized, in the year 220 *El Anacronópete* came to Ho-nan, then the court of the Chinese Empire under the reign of Huen-ti during a time when revolt was afoot, General

Tsao-tsau was freshly in his grave, the general's son Tsao-pi was rising in rank, power had been regained by the Learned who, in their turn, persecuted without mercy both the disciples of Fo (because they adhered to the new religion of the Buddha, imported from India) as well as the Tao-shih (for their audacity in appealing to the empire for protection).





## CHAPTER XII

Forty-eight hours in the Celestial Empire



THE SAYING goes that no evil lasts a hundred years, but the saying lies like a rogue, since Don Sindulfo counted sixteen centuries lying in a bed of misery after discharging the sons of Muhammad into space and dissolving the sons of Mars into nothingness, at which point *El Anacronópete* landed in the vicinity of Ho-nan, then the capital of the Chinese Empire.

During the three and a half day trip, Benjamin, taking advantage of the scientist's stupor and the lethargy of the girls, set the ship at an appropriate altitude and quietly slipped out to obtain necessary provisions, since, as we have seen, those carried on board were useless. Their first feast owed itself to the divine bounty of Queen Isabella the Catholic; and, incidentally, that nearly cost him his life, since upon landfall at the camp of Sante Fe, where the Castilian army was at its wits' end before the stubborn resistance of the Moors of Granada, he was taken as a spy of Boabdil—a consequence to

which his attire of sack coat, pants and musket contributed more than a little. Fortunately, the polyglot did not lose his composure, and reminding himself of the advantage he had in already knowing their history, he asked to be taken to the queen where he would make important revelations to her. Doña Isabella was found in the company of her husband, Don Fernando, Cardinal Jiménez and his first captains—all of whom, except the august lady herself, seemed to support continuing the siege that was consuming both the besiegers' patience and the treasury's funds, when Benjamin appeared at the tent.

"You are to lift the siege?" he exclaimed with the boldness of a prophet. Then bowing to the ear of the queen, he added, "Today, is the second of January, 1492—a Friday, the same day of the week on which, at three o'clock, mankind's Redeemer shed his precious blood at Calvary—and at precisely that time today, the banner of Santiago and the Royal standard will fly above the towers of the Alhambra.

Doña Isabella paled; the courtiers around her, suspecting something afool, began to draw their swords; and the language teacher would not have lasted long if the Moors' battle trumpets mixing with the sound of the Christian organ pipes had not brought a saving pause.

"What's happened?" asked the king as the Count Cifuentes appeared in the tent with an obvious expression of joy.

"It happens, sire," said the noble gentleman, "that Boabdil has just surrendered, and to guarantee the victors safe entrance to Granada, he has sent his sons and six hundred men-at-arms as hostages under command of his two most illustrious chiefs.

A cry of amazement arose from every breast.

"Who are you?" asked the queen, nearly bowing in astonishment before the one who had gained her faith through his celestial appearance.

“I am but a man,” answered Benjamin, “who asks only that you suffer him to freely follow his path and provide such morsel of bread as you can spare to appease his hunger.”

Such a limited request served only to reinforce the opinion that Doña Isabella had formed of the prophet; and not daring to press earthly treasures on him, she prepared saddlebags with her own hands, overflowing with choice ham of the Alpujarra and the best white bread of Castile, in addition to a flagon of wine from Aragon that the campaign stewards had reserved for the table of Don Fernando.

Benjamin was ready to depart the tent when the sovereign called him aside with clasped hands in a sign of supplication. “What can I do,” she pleaded, “to bring happiness to my subjects and honor to my throne?”

“Give a hearing, my lady,” the polyglot replied, “to a Genoese who will come to offer you a new world.”

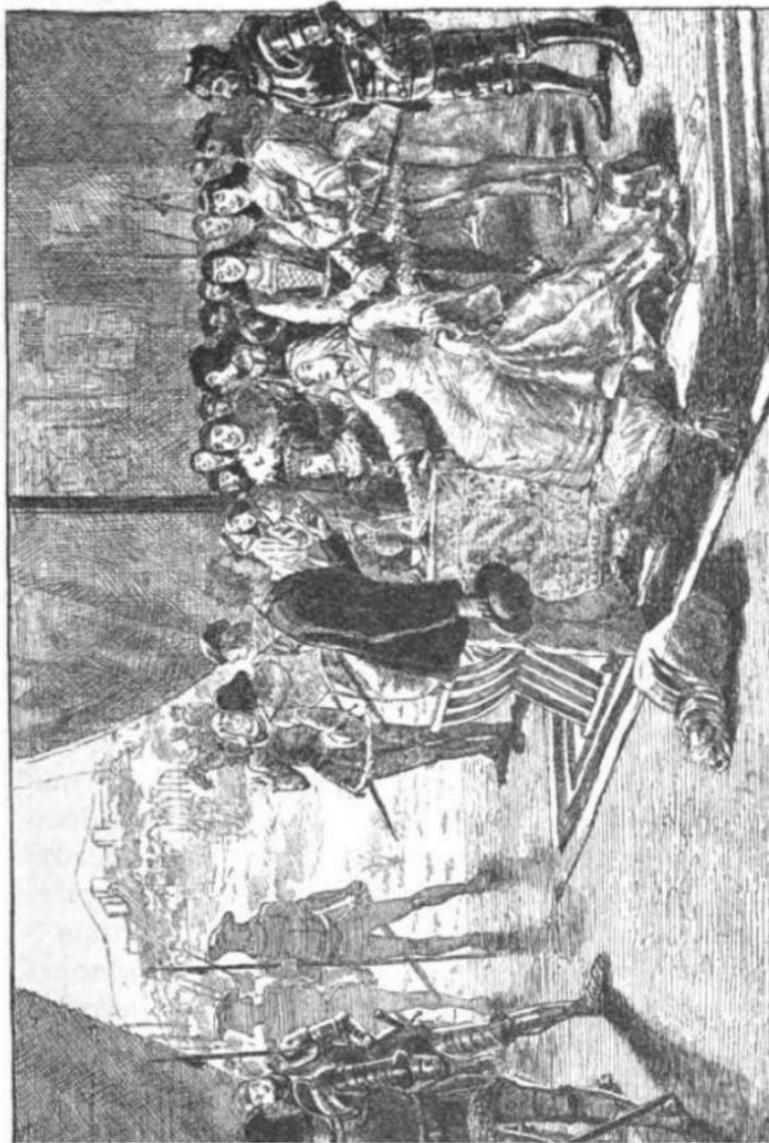
“To Columbus?” asked the admired queen. “I have already seen him, but everyone says he’s a madman!... And besides, my treasury is exhausted.

“Sell your jewels, if you must. He will multiply your investment a hundredfold, bringing back vices for humanity.” And as he spoke, he presented the queen with a Cuban cigar, which the poor lady, not knowing what to do, spun between her fingers.

“And what is this?” she finally inquired.

“Smoke it!” exclaimed Benjamin, and he took his leave.

And thus, two years later, sailing in search of a new course to the East Indies, Columbus returned from the Americas, bringing a new world for Spain and an infinite number of tobacconists to employ the widows of poor soldiers.



“To Columbus?” asked the admired queen.

His second descent in search of victuals occurred twenty hours later when Benjamin made landfall at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, but the foray offered nothing of note. Not so for the next descent, which occurred after a similar period of time into the city of Ravenna on a Sunday afternoon in the year 696.

That town, as everyone knows, was then the residence of the exarchs, who controlled the destiny of that part of Italy, subject to the power of the Byzantine Empire. Governed by the municipal institutions of the Eastern Empire, it was separated into various bands of urban militia, but one barbaric custom survived there. On the festival days, everyone—young and old, women and children, anyone who was able to walk—emerged from the cities and divided into sides, combatting one another with stones, always leaving a few dead and wounded. A joyful Benjamin was making headway back to *El Anacronopete* after visiting a convent where, thanks to the beggar's rags that he'd worn, he had received abundant provisions, when the chaotic clamor of an advancing throng of fleeing people brought home the reality of the dates that he'd read in Agnelli, which recounted that historic time when a victorious mob from the port of Tiguriana pursued the Sommovico faction halfway through the opposite field, hurling stones all the way.

"This is not my fight," the traveler said to himself, breaking into a run across the field, but the pebbles rained down with such profusion that in order to speed his departure, he didn't hesitate to seize a grazing donkey and, taking mount, spurred it forward with swift kicks to the loins. Sadly, though, a stone from a Tigurianan sling had the bad luck to strike his mount squarely in a hock, slicing cleanly through its leg, rendering it beyond all usefulness unless, perhaps, the rider wanted to find the crippled limb to keep as a souvenir of that drama whose final act, we note in passing, had arrived:

The vanquished of Sommovico feigned surrender and, inviting the Tiguriana to a feast, they slew them all and tossed their bodies into the sewers. But those betrayers themselves were then hanged, their possessions burned, their houses ransacked, and the area where they had lived was henceforth known as the *barrio of the assassins*.

By some miracle, Benjamin returned to *El Anacronópete*, shared his fare with Clara and Juanita—who since the demise of the soldiers had had relegated themselves to suffering in their quarters—delivered some medicinal herbs to Don Sindulfo, and continued his march toward the Celestial Empire. However, when he opened his desk to make a few notes in his journal, what, my dear readers, do you suppose he found? Nothing less than the bloody and hairy leg of a donkey sitting in the very place reserved for the famous bone that the luckless men had bought in Madrid, laying out its weight in gold for what they took to be a human fossil from Chartres.

At last, the chronometer rang out the year 220 and, setting the colossal ship down the outskirts of Henan, Benjamin's dream of soon possessing the secret of immortality put to rest any disappointment he'd had over the anthropological setback—a mishap that he hadn't bothered to mention to his fellow travelers.

As for Don Sindulfo, he had finally recovered, although (as the course of events will show) he was not entirely in his right mind. Together with the girls, whose submissiveness was a sign of indifference born of pain, the men set out for the court of Hien-ti, although not before the polyglot whitewashed the disappearance of the French ladies as an insurrection that he'd skillfully put down by disembarking them in accordance with their own wishes.

Nobody commented on the particulars.

Clara and Juanita felt too much heartbreak to deal with anything but their own misfortune, and as for the sagacious scientist, he was as silent as a tree stump, putting every ounce of his thought into his stated project of landing in an era of obscurantism and autocracy where under the partiality of the laws, he could force his ward to become his wife.

The city was deserted, for the empress had died the night before, and the period of national mourning, according to the emperor's edict, forbade any subject of the Celestial Empire to leave his house, open any door, or unshutter any window for 48 hours.

The travelers arrived at the inner walls of Henan, and under interrogation by the head guard about their intents, Benjamin, as the expedition's interpreter, stated their desire for an audience with the emperor Hien-ti. The officer surveyed the excursionists' clothes and the European physiognomy of their faces, and he considered the level of alertness inherent in his standing orders plus his suspicion that our chrononauts could well be members of the outlawed Tao-shih, all of which contributed to a cautious approach in serving the cause of his monarch and, thus, led to his decision to escort the troupe, blindfolded, into the presence of the emperor.

The emperor granted his permission, and the travelers, with more than a little fear but assuaged by the erudition of Benjamin who strived to persuade them that the chief guard's conduct held no malevolence and was merely compliance with Chinese rituals, found themselves in the presence of Hien-ti.

The sovereign was a corrupt man with a depraved mind, whose thirst for pleasure without end bred an insulting luxury that surrounded him at the expense of his wretched subjects. The palace or *yamen* where he lived, which the Prince Tchao of the Ye province took as a model for his own a century later, was indescribably extravagant. Within its walls, one saw nothing but

marble, and the sun's rays glissaded off the polished surface of its varnished and lacquered roofs. The bells, which hung from the entablature between towering silver columns, were of gold, and all manner of precious stones embroidered the curtains draping all the doors.

The most beautiful women, both of the Mandarin class and the commoners, lived there with more than ten thousand people, including numerous artists and astrologers who formed the emperor's entourage. A thousand virgins mounted on richly attired steeds served as his guard and accompanied him on excursions, which were taken in no small carriage, drawn by trained sheep who stood idly by whenever one of the endless divas presented herself to the lustful Hien-ti offering fresh pastures to the ruminants and hoping to catch the monarch's attention for the distinguished honor of being taken into his arms.

Scarcely had the travelers presented themselves in the throne room when Hien-ti, unable to suppress himself, gave a startled tremble in reaction to Clara's beauty. Nevertheless, for appearances in light of his condition as a recent widower, he controlled himself, exchanging only a knowing look with his prime minister, Tsao-pi, who in turn, and perhaps in deference to his master, made a significant gesture toward Juanita as if to say, "This other one, it seems to me, is no sack of potatoes herself."

A complete accounting of all the ceremonial and ritualistic details undertaken at such an interview would require pages upon pages of description, but to give a flavor of the panoply involved, we will summarize what the historian Cantú and other sinologists have on the subject, noting that these practices have survived to present-day China almost entirely and that their foundation lies in the stationing of all members of society.

*The artificial courtesy of the Chinese—say those who know of their ceremonies—manifests itself in all their actions, in their conventions surrounding any meeting, in their way of arranging seating according to status, even in their way of walking and their manner of endlessly paying compliments. They never use the personal I in conversation; they describe themselves as thy humble servant, or, should the occasion warrant, thy unworthy and humble slave. Never utter a word to anyone without treating him as a most noble gentleman. In speaking of one's own home, it is nothing but vile, miserable and abject, as is any gift one should presume to offer, while the slightest belonging of the lord to whom one speaks is worthy of only the highest praise. Every interaction is prescribed by the code of etiquette, which has the force of law, and to neglect the least of their prescriptions is to inflict an insult on the other, certainly inviting dishonor or even opening oneself up to punishment. Upon arrival, European ambassadors were subject to forty days of training, after which, should they commit any mistake before the emperor, their teachers were held accountable.*

*It's said that a Duke of Muscovy, sending his credentials, implored the emperor to treat any ignorant missteps as but venial sins, and the Son of Heaven, returning the passports via his plenipotentiary, answered: Legatus tuus multa fecit rústice.\**

*However, not only in the emperor's court must protocol be followed; every Chinese who wants to visit another, to consult or to conduct business, must be preceded by his servant who presents a visiting card (the tie tsée) with the visitor's name and expressions of respect, for example: The dear and*

---

\* Your ambassador is boorishly quaint.

sincere friend of your most honorable lordship—or *perhaps* the eternal disciple of your wisdom—most humbly presents himself to profess his reverence at thy feet.

*Should the visitor be received, his sedan chair or litter is carried up to the reception room. Upon arrival, ceremonial rites dictate each greeting, each turn to the right or left, the head bows, the first supplication that the visitor enter along with its humble refusal, the reverence with which the host holds the seat of honor that has been reserved for the visitor, which he couldn't possibly sit upon before brushing the dust from his clothing. Finally the visitor consents, his head still bowed since anything else would be irreverent, and the conversation begins with the visitor carefully noting the exquisite refinement, kindness and learnedness exhibited by his elder. Tea is served, for which there are also proscribed ways to offer it, accept it, sip it, and return it to the servant. And on saying goodbye, well on half an hour passes in empty verbiage of which there's always ample supply. If one offers a compliment, the other responds Fie sin, i.e., Your heart is too kind. The smallest favor rates Sie putsin in return. (My gratitude has no end.) Any favor requested is always accompanied by Te-tsui. (How sinful of me to take such a liberty!) No praise is received without protestation, or Ki can. (Must you exaggerate so?) And the finale to this dance is when the host utters the phrase Yeu-mau, tai-man. (Your host has been most inadequate, we have treated you poorly.)*

*The master of the house escorts his friend to the door to see him up on the sedan chair, but this he would never do in his host's presence, so after another exchange of compliments and denials, the host withdraws and the other climbs into the litter, but he has*

*barely taken his seat when the first races back to wish him a happy journey. The guest returns the good wishes, insisting that he would never leave until his friend withdraws; and the friend, all the while, asserts that he will remain nailed to that very spot until his guest disappears over the horizon. After numerous difficulties, the genial tone of the guest finally encourages the host to yield and indeed retreat. The guest sets off and has been gone just a few steps when the host returns to the door to bid him one last goodbye, to which the other responds by poking his head out the window for a farewell gesture. At last, he returns to his own house, and not two minutes later, a servant of the host arrives to inquire about the guest's health on behalf of his master, to lavish thanks for the visit, and to express profuse hopes that the visit be repeated soon.*

Thoroughly armed with these details, we now return to our usual narrative form to observe the four travelers' interview with Emperor Hien-ti and his prime minister in the Palace of the Court of Ho-nan.





## CHAPTER XIII

Nineteenth century Europe meets third century China

**T**HE SIGHT of so many wonders could not but help to draw Clara and Juanita from their stupors, especially the latter, who although she failed to regain her good humor, she did begin to speak again.

“Look,” she said, turning to her mistress, “didn’t you say the Chinese wear pigtailed? Why are these cut short?”

“Because the subjects of the Celestial Empire,” answered Don Sindulfo, “maintained freedom in their coiffure until the 17<sup>th</sup> century whereupon, defeated by the Tartars of Manchuria, they were forced to grow a long braid, like the tail of a dog, as a sign of slavery.”

“I will study on this,” said the girl from Pinto seriously, striking a posture of deep thought.

With the greeting ritual finished, the emperor questioned the travelers about their origin and their objectives that brought them before him, to which Benjamin announced they had come from the west, from a time six hundred years beyond his, and that they’d traveled through the centuries to the Court of Ho-nan to learn the principle of immortality preached by the Tao-shih, whereupon they would refine it and open doors to the man of the future as they were already open in the past.

Hien-ti exchanged a knowing look with his favored advisor. Clearly these travelers were tricksters trying to swindle the court and the people with outrageous stories designed to revive the rebellion of the defeated *Yellow Turbins*. From that moment, a death sentence was tacitly understood, although the ecstatic rapture with which the emperor contemplated the features of both ladies seemed to presage a possible commutation of their capital punishment.

“What proof do you offer to bear witness to the truth of your statements?” asked the monarch in order to uncover the subterfuge that the imposters thought to use to cover their claims.

“Señor,” answered Benjamin, “we can easily convince His Majesty by the presentation of but a small sample of the progress civilization has made in the sixteen centuries that separate us, and of these, the

empire will make immeasurable use, whether they originate from other nations now extant or they derive from China's own discoveries in the long centuries that we have crossed."

"Indeed," said Hien-ti with an incredulous smile, "if things are as you say, then you certainly deserve consideration. Bring forth these wonders of civilization for my admiration."

Benjamin did not have to be told twice and he began emptying an overnight bag that he'd prepared with a variety of trifles, all the while exhibiting the pride of a son of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, cocky with the conquests of his time and believing he could mock with impunity any of his ancestors, to whom, it must be said, he owed the very foundation of knowledge which those of his era had merely gone on to perfect.

"Here we have," said Benjamin, displaying the first item with a patronizing air, "a bronze carafe, made in the style of a Greek amphora from a substance unknown in your empire, but—you will be pleased to know—with innumerable applications."

"Don't be so sure," replied the emperor, cutting Benjamin off and leading him to a columned entrance, beside which stood two enormous vases of the same metal.

"Oh!" said the stunned polyglot. "You not only have the alloy, but you've applied it to monumental work of art!"

Hien-ti could not suppress a laugh, and laying his finger on a string of Chinese characters that adorned the work, he commanded, "Read here."

The distraught traveler took an involuntary step back as he read this astonishing maxim on the neck of the vessel: *To improve your condition, purify yourself every day*, a motto written on all the household goods of the Emperor Chang, founder of the second dynasty, and

whose royal stamp adorned the center, leaving no doubt to its authenticity.

"My fellow travelers," cried Benjamin, "these were cast in the year 1766 B.C."

"Which by my count," interposed Don Sindulfo, "places them nearly 36 centuries before our time."

Benjamin's archaeological anxiety only increased when, underneath a layer of precious stones, he discovered an intricate wall hanging. "What is this? You also know the art of weaving silk?"

"Your ignorance is frightful," replied His Eminence. "Are you not aware that this discovery occurred in the sixty-first year of the reign of Hoang-ti, the epoch in which our learned ancestors gave us cycles of sixty years with years of 365 and a quarter days that form the very foundation of our calendar?"

"And I'll bet," said Juanita when she heard the translation, "that this Mr. *Juan Ti* was already old in the time of Jesus Christ."

"True," replied Don Sindulfo, "seeing as how he flourished 2698 years ago."

"Ah, your contemporary."

"Never mind about the bronze and I'll grant you the fine silk for now," said Benjamin, refusing to admit defeat. "But I guarantee Your Majesty won't know the purpose of this—" and unfolding a small packet, he presented the emperor with a compass.

Hien-ti shared a smile with his minister and led the polyglot to a winder that overlooked the river. "Do you see those ships," he asked.

"With iron hulls!" answered a flabbergasted Benjamin, easily making out the ferrous plating through the twilight.

"Yes. It's been six hundred years since our ships had wooden hulls—and more than a dozen centuries since

we first used this device that you present as a marvel, yet whose inventor is long lost in antiquity.”

The two wise travelers were completely absorbed in speculation about what they'd seen when a deluge of people, shouting to clear a path, emerged at the front of a strange train of wagons and brought the men out of their bewilderment and into the present.

“What's happening?” asked Don Sindulfo.

“Nothing important,” responded Tsao-pi. “Just a fire. Those pumps are going to put it out.”

“Pumps!” everyone cried in amazement.

“Perhaps we should spray you down, too,” added the girl from Pinto to her master, “in hopes of putting out your youthful passions.”

“But this invention,” Benjamin objected, still dismissing the evidence before his eyes, “just like artesian wells, porcelain, suspension bridges, playing cards, paper money—all of them date from eighth to the thirteenth century China, and we are only in the third. Although, of course, the renowned sinologist Stanislas Julien did report much earlier dates to the Paris Academy of Science in 1847, but those dates seemed so fabulous that the Europeans' pride refused to accept them.”

“And what did that good man have to say about us?”

He supposed that by the tenth century A.D., you had engraving and lithography.”

The emperor's only response was to reveal portraits of himself and his deceased wife, made by those very procedures, hanging from the palace walls seven centuries prior to Julien's hypothesis.

“What else does he say?” added Hien-ti.

The polyglot, lowering his voice, answered, “That by the eleventh century you had the wonderful invention of Gutenberg.” And so saying, he unfolded a newspaper

for the monarch, explaining to him the role that the periodical press would come to play.

“Ah, yes! My predecessor tried allowing the publication of a gazette so his subjects themselves could guard against abuses of power, but instead of using it as a watchdog, they turned it into an arena of diatribes and insults, and thus, it was necessary to repeal the authorization and limit publications to only our sacred books.” And he showed the travelers a richly bound copy of the sayings of Confucius that lay on a pedestal.

The two scientists, rabid with bibliomania, rushed to the book, but the shadows of the night were so deep that they wouldn't have been able to examine it had Tsao-pi not given the order to turn on the lights, at which point slaves approached with torches to light the prominent burners on the wall and illuminate the grounds.

“Gas!” was the unanimous exclamation.

“Yes, gas,” said the emperor, calmly.

“But where do you extract it?”

“From deep within the Earth and from animal manure, whose emissions are taken where we want thanks to underground pipes.”

“Julien said that, too, though he attributed it to the eighth century. Still, don't be too astonished by our surprise, Your Majesty, for though we had vague notions of your advances, what you have shown us is so far beyond the decrepitude and backwardness of China in our time that we dared not believe such a civilization of the past could grind to a halt and decay into that which we saw in our present.”

“All nations that reach a high level, tend to see their greatness disappear, so that other great states may emerge,” noted Hien-ti, not believing it prudent, given the plans that he harbored, to tell the travelers straight to their faces that they were vulgar impostors hoping to

pass off the most rudimentary notions of present-day science as wonders of a supposedly future age.

“And should we believe Julien’s assertion that, along with ink and rag paper, gunpowder was among the Chinese discoveries of the second century B.C.?” asked Benjamin.

“Gunpowder?”

“Yes—a composition of 75 parts potassium nitrate, with  $15\frac{1}{2}$  of charcoal and  $9\frac{1}{2}$  of sulphur, attributed to Schwartz, a German monk, in the middle ages, but believed by the sinologist in question to have come to Europe from China where the nitrate potash occurs naturally.”

“Unless you are talking of cannons, I don’t know what you mean. Could it be this?—” And from a panoply of armaments, the emperor selected an arrow smeared with black powder (which could be nothing but gunpowder), whose lower end was tied to a fuse. He lit the fuse, notched the arrow into a bowstring and fired through the window, lighting the sky like a tongue of fire licking ever higher and culminating in a brilliant explosion of fireworks.

From that moment, the German monk was relegated to the company of other imaginary beings.

“No doubt,” continued Hien-ti, “all these processes will be perfected with the march of the centuries, but as you can see, you cannot teach us anything fundamentally new, and the proof is that you come to our realm



seeking a secret of immortality that has long been known by the spiritualist sects of the Celestial Empire—yet, still, I do not wish your trip to be fruitless. I will reveal the secret on but one condition.”

“What?”

“Yesterday, I lost my partner, the empress; our laws allow me to take a new wife after 48 hours of national mourning. Allow me, after that period expires tomorrow, to share the throne with this pretty young woman.”

And thus saying, he put his hand on Clara, who pulled back frightened, demanding an explanation of the sudden onslaught. Benjamin translated the monarch’s demand, which infuriated the girl and exasperated Don Sindulfo when he realized that any hopes of marrying his own niece under the authoritarian laws of the empire were in vain.

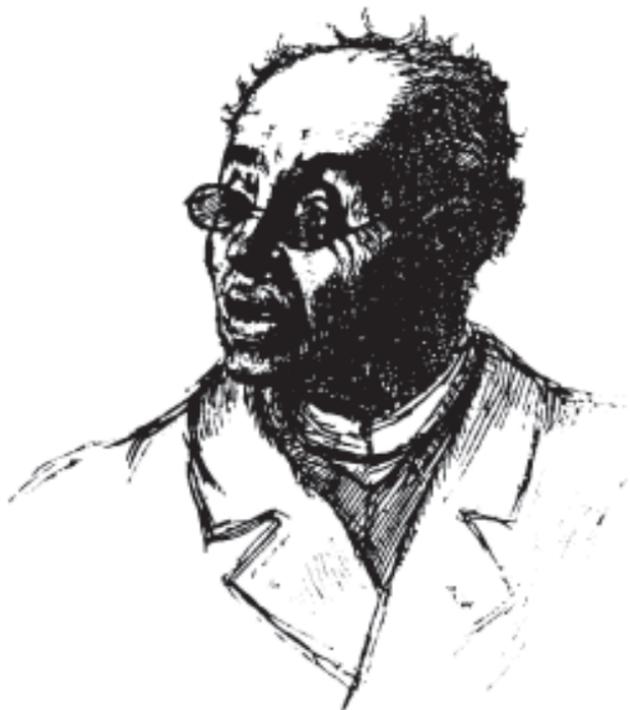
“Tell him that honey wasn’t made for the mouth of a jackass,” bandied the Maritornes. All except the polyglot were marshalling their protests when the realization occurred to Don Sindulfo that their very lives lay in danger should they obdurately refuse, and he suggested a conciliatory plan.

“We’ll pretend to give up,” he said in a whisper, “and take our leave to don the appropriate dress, at which point we return to *El Anacronópete*, lift off, and make like a greyhound.”

The girls agreed to the plan, but Benjamin hesitated because fleeing would deprive him of the coveted secret of immortality. But before long, he, too, seemingly agreed, because the arrangement was in accord with another of his plans, as the reader will presently see.

Meanwhile, the emperor conspired with his minister on how to rid themselves of the impostors as soon as the head of the family gave his permission for the marriage, as was mandatory in China.

Now, Chinese tradition prescribes that a bride must stay in her own house until the wedding entourage procures the transportation to bring her to her husband, and thus, it was determined that the travelers would return to their home to await the arrival of the imperial procession on the next evening.



They all said good-bye to Hien-ti and his minister, and—accompanied by an honor guard to stand watch outside *El Anacronópete*, plus a multitude of slaves loaded with provisions and gifts—they made their way to the vehicle, whose door Benjamin opened and entered first.

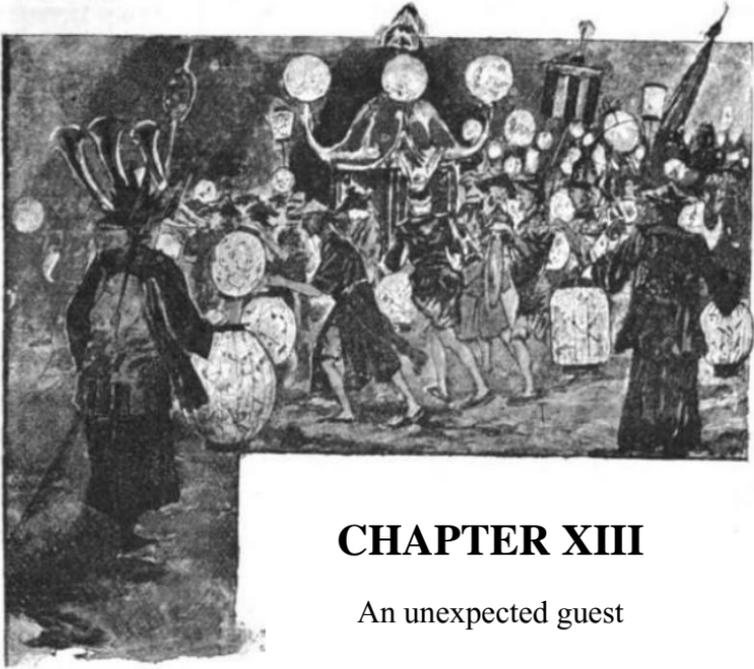
As soon as the servants had withdrawn and the look-outs were dispersed at a respectful distance around the

colossus, Don Sindulfo manned the controls and let forth a peal of laughter:

“They’ll tell stories of how we bamboozled the Chinese,” he exclaimed.

But no sooner had he spoken than he went pale; they were the ones who’d been fooled. Nothing worked. *El Anacronópete* had been reduced to a prison.





## CHAPTER XIII

### An unexpected guest



SADNESS—as much sadness as the night of Hernán Cortés on the eve of the Battle of Otumba, permeated the mood of the expedition members on board *El Anacronópete*. Clara, undoubtedly the most deserving of compassion, was not only in tears but demanded to know, from the depths of their hopeless situation, what offence she had committed, directly or indirectly, that she should be the victim of all the vagaries of their inexorable fate. Her guardian protested that his actions were all in good faith, noting that their plan had been to circumvent emperor's designs by waging a quick escape, but his good intentions, coming from the most selfless of motives, had crashed head-on into a greater force that had reduced them to naught despite all his scientific calculations.

“There are no short circuits since the current flows unimpeded,” said the scientist based on observations that he and his friend had done repeatedly on the

mechanisms—all without suspecting that Benjamin could be sabotaging the readings.

“I’ll stake my life,” argued Juanita to her master, “that if we call in a Chinese blacksmith, he’ll tell us what’s wrong right off. Can you believe these laggards showed off in front of his majesty? Perhaps the two of them should propel us aloft via their intelligence, since they’ve proved to the emperor that they are full of hot air.”

Don Sindulfo looked to his friend in hope of advice, but Benjamin remained quiet, as would anyone with a crime on his conscience that he doesn’t regret and the discovery of which he hopes to avoid through silence. And indeed, the culprit in this situation was none other than the polyglot. It should be said that he was unaware of Hien-ti’s designs on the male contingent of the crew, and he was confident that an appropriate subterfuge would return Clara to *El Anacronópete* for an escape after the ceremony—indeed, his certainty was so bound to his ego that any contrary notions were dismissed before consideration, and no possible danger to his companions could outweigh the thought of losing the secret of immortality by departing 3<sup>rd</sup> century China. Thus, on being the first to enter *El Anacronópete*, he surreptitiously place a china cup at the electrical contact points coming out of the control box, and, thus insulated, the device stopped working. And then, whenever Don Sindulfo (with nary a hint of his colleague’s betrayal) ran a test, Benjamin feigned helpfulness while in reality he skillfully slipped the cup out of its position and then back in again as soon as the scientist, convinced that there was no obstacle, went forward to activate the controls.

With all technical avenues exhausted, he seriously thought of fleeing by ground, but a successful escape was impossible, seeing as how the loyal guards never strayed, even momentarily, from their orders to keep a

continuous watch on the suspicious travelers; and even assuming a possible evasion of the guards, their precarious fate would not be improved since the moment their absence was noticed, the fugitives would be pursued and overtaken anon. In addition, there was another powerful reason to stay put: They could not leave *El Anacronópete* without running the risk of being permanently stranded more than 1600 years from their own time—an eventuality that would have been agreeable to Don Sindulfo if circumstances would have permitted his desire to impose a marital yoke on his young ward.

Thus, everyone resolved to wait for Providence to send them some ray of hope with the new day, and exhausted, they retired to bed.

The night was long and arduous: Every quarter of an hour, the cry of the sentinels cut the monotony of silence, which was also broken at irregular intervals by a banging as of a hammer on nails. The noise seemed to rise from the hold, and fearing an invasion of the Asians, Don Sindulfo and Benjamin descended to the lower level; but they heard nothing more of the hammering until, more than fifteen minutes later, they returned to their rooms.

“It’s definitely coming from a different direction,” exclaimed Benjamin.

“Yes,” interposed the scientist. “Probably a triumphal arch they’re erecting for us.”

And thus absorbed in their thoughts, they awaited the dawn, which was not late in coming and seemed a happy omen of hope. But the day, not pausing in its course, progressed along its way without revealing a means of salvation, each minute devouring any illusions the travelers may have held. At dusk, the day breathed out the last of the 48 hours prescribed by law for national mourning, at which time the new empress was to go to the emperor’s residence to share the throne with the sovereign.

By daybreak, Hien-ti's servants visited themselves upon *El Anacronópete*, laden with sumptuous delicacies, lavish presents, and Chinese wedding attire for the expedition members—all presided over by King-seng, the dashing young preceptor of ceremonies for the royal court, who had a friendly demeanor and to whom they all took an instant liking, although it's impossible to know whether that was for the permanent look of sadness in his face or for the hospitality that he showed to the captives.

Finally, as the afternoon drew to a close, came the slaves and eunuchs responsible for doing up the bride's hair and dressing both her and her entourage—by which I am trying to say that the hour had arrived to abandon all hope. Despair—the last bastion of those without control of their fate—seized the expedition members. Clara and Juanita embraced in a corner, heroically refusing to deliver their bodies into the funeral finery. Don Sindulfo, his eyes panicked at the inequities being forced upon them, urged his friend to protest in the language of Confucius with as much vehemence as he himself was doing in his native Aragonese. Benjamin, without regret for what he'd done, did begin to experience some compassion for his compatriots; and everything had reverted to wailing, confusion and disorder by the time the preceptor sent the servants out of the laboratory and took the travelers aside. "My poor castaways," he said, "do not be afraid. I will save you."

You can but image the surprise and joy of the four at hearing the words of King-seng as Benjamin translated. Clara grasped his hands, Don Sindulfo uttered thanks in Latin as if the notion of benevolence had just arrived in the Celestial Empire, and Juanita hugged King-seng in the manner of her home town, which all but knocked him off his feet.

"Silence, you oafs!" continued the guardian angel of the condemned travelers. "We mustn't be heard. The

emperor assumes you to be from the Tao-see, come to Ho-nan to renew the struggles of the Yellow Turbins, and he intends to execute the lot of you as soon as the marriage is consummated. A wedding means nothing to him other than a means to satisfy his crude appetite in the face of a new law that forbids him to increase his number of concubines.”

“That’s horrible!” the prisoners blurted out.

“Yes, but I know how to put it all to rights.”

“How?” asked the others, pressing in on King-seng.

“About ten moons ago, a wanderer arrived from the west. He had been hiding in Honan, but somehow found a means to contact the Empress Sun-Ché, the now-martyred wife of our tyrant emperor. I don’t know exactly what he said to her, but our august lady, who honored me with her confidences, led me to understand that this man was he whom the Analects of Confucius prophesized would bring knowledge from the west, and that, in effect, he offered her immortality.”

“Immortality!” everyone repeated, listening with renewed interest to the story that seemed to justify Benjamin’s single-minded mania.

“Yes,” continued King-seng, “for both her and those close to her. The empress commissioned me to recruit followers and ordered the mysterious visitor to summon some families from his remote region to stoke the fires of their discipline. You are without doubt the first family to hear the appeal, and as such I provide you with my protection.”

The offer was too good to be true, so no one dared to contradict the preceptor’s supposition; instead, they saw it as their salvation and tacitly agreed to go with the flow, a behavior that meshed particularly well with the aspirations of the polyglot.

“And where will we find the man from the west?” asked Benjamin.

“On that point,” said King-seng, “misfortune stalks you. He is dead.”

“Dead!” they exclaimed in chorus, feigning a deep affection.

“Yes, but now you will continue his work. You see, two days ago the emperor, who was already suspicious that his wife had allied with the Tao-ssé, surprised the foreigner in conference with the empress; and upon hearing that he’d provided her with immortality, he became convinced that they were in cahoots. Tsao-pi, the emperor’s prime minister and counsel leader demanded retribution, so while the westerner’s body was dismembered in the plaza of executions, Tsao-pi announced the fate of Sun-Ché to the people in euphemistic terms: she had “suddenly succumbed,” though in fact, the woeful empress had been buried alive in the dungeons of Husayn by order of her ruthless husband.”

“How barbaric!” claimed the listeners, with the exception of Benjamin who seemed engrossed in deep thought.

“Still,” continued King-seng, “the indignation has given some faint hope to all those who are partial to the empress, given that this kind of death is slow and there remains a slim possibility that she lives even now. But alive or dead, my followers will remove her from her grave, setting off a rebellion during the exact moment of the wedding feast. You must set aside any fear, for I am sworn to protect you with my troops; but the ceremony must go on as backdrop for my plans, because the slightest suspicion can be our undoing. Trust those that I have placed in your service: They obey me with absolute loyalty. Now time marches on, so go!”

The prospect of a clash with uncertain outcome was discomforting for our mild-mannered travelers whose interests were far removed from the empire; but their particular situation was so fraught with insurmountable dangers that they never hesitated in allying themselves

with the faction that offered them some chance of success.

The servants were summoned to dress them in all the glory due their status, and the task even had some joviality in its undertaking—after all, these were Spaniards, who have always had such absurd eventualities in their blood.

Just as the coiffure was being completed, a beastly noise of small drums, cymbals and a gong (or Chinese bell), plus a multitude of lanterns that they discerned through the open portholes, announced the arrival of the imperial entourage at the gates of *El Anacronópete*, where they came to a halt, because the ritual proscribed invading the virgin's home.

"Onward," said King-seng, taking Clara's hand to lead her to the litter on behalf of the emperor.

"Onward!" cried everyone, possessed of the kind of enthusiasm that instills hope.

And they were passing through the storage holds, headed toward the main exit, when more banging and a repetitive pounding brought them to a halt in the middle of the room.

"What is that?" asked the preceptor?

"Did you not hear it before?" responded Benjamin.

"Yes. It sounds like someone is paying us a call."

And as they all focused on the noise, the pounding sped up with an increased intensity.

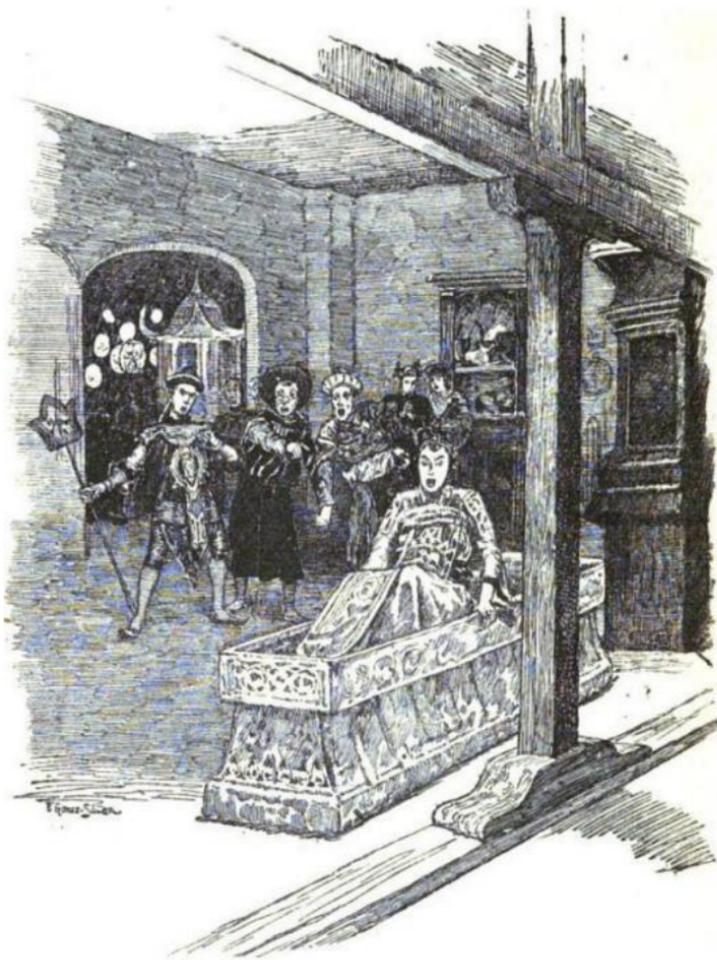
"Can't you tell," noted Clara. "The noise is coming from this way."

"From this box," added Juanita, staring the anti-quarian straight in the eye.

"What! From the mummy?" stammered Don Sindulfo, as amazed as his companions.

At which Benjamin, who had been meditating on the matter, slapped himself on the forehead, shouting "Yes, that's it!"

“What?” cried everyone at once.

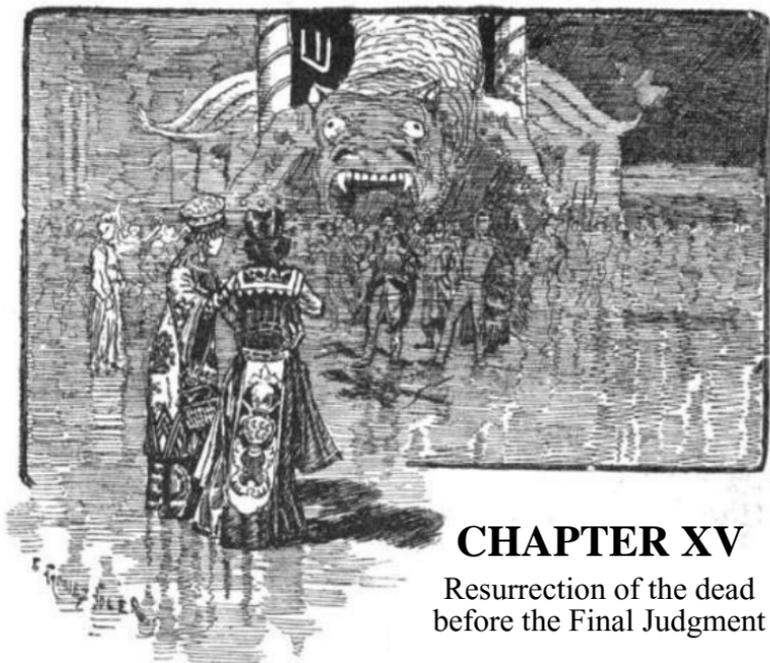


“Sun-Ché!” shouted all the Chinese, recognizing her and bowing down before her miraculous appearance.

“The empress!” reiterated the astonished travelers.

Juanita said nothing, but in truth, she was beginning to suspect that the scientists were not as dense as she'd supposed.





## CHAPTER XV

Resurrection of the dead  
before the Final Judgment



VENGEANCE!—was the first word spoken by the empress upon finding herself surrounded by her loved ones.

“Vengeance!” echoed her followers, cheering Sun-Ché.

“Permit me,” continued the eminent lady, “to kiss the feet of the creature who has ensured my continued existence.” And her eyes, flooded with tears, settled gratefully on King-seng.

“Unfortunately, the honor of having delivered precious days unto you is not mine,” responded the preceptor who, having no other explanation of the empress’s presence in *El Anacronópete*, assumed that its crew had used their cunning to extract the innocent victim of Hien-ti from the dungeons with an much happiness as he himself would have had.

The travelers, although they knew that the mummy—encased in a camphor sarcophagus from a remote epoch in order to resist the degradation of time—owed

its resurrection to the fortunate circumstance of not having been subjected to the inalterability procedure, left the Chinese official in his belief, both because it seemed rational and since it played into their own plans.

“But how?” asked the empress. “Was it these people?”—and upon guessing the situation, she showered Clara and Juanita with kisses of joy, much to the delight of the latter, who had never before received a royal caress.

“Yes, they are the ones who have broken your chains. Sadly, though, they arrived too late to save their brother from the west whose torture, unbeknownst to you, preceded that of your highness.”

“My poor martyr!” lamented Sun-Ché in tribute to the man who had become her best friend. But then, suddenly, she raised her beautiful black pupils and fixed them on Don Sindulfo and Benjamin who, intoxicated with archaeological delight, were savoring their scientific triumph. “It is strange,” she said, “I have seen you before. Your faces awaken dim and confusing memories that I can’t quite place.”

“Oh, no, your majesty! Don’t believe it!” interrupted Juanita. “I beg you to save us from these two gadflies. They are but two malignant growths that have attached themselves to my lady and myself.”

The polyglot, lost in thought on the logic of the empress’s phenomenon, communicated to his friend that perhaps the resurrected mummy had indeed seen them in the storage hold through some gaps in the coffin, but coming in and out of awareness prior to a full revival, she was unable to accurately gauge time during those semiconscious moments, thus attributing recent events to more remote times—a serious wrong conclusion, as we shall see in the unfolding of the rest of our fantastic story.

“But what is that music? And what festival are they announcing?” asked Sun-Ché upon hearing the striking

of the gong that foretold the procession of the hour and the waning of the emperor's patience.

Then King-seng recounted what had happened and told his sovereign of how Hien-ti, claiming to the people that her death had come about by natural causes, was preparing to be remarried to the foreigner whose relatives had been promised the secret of immortality in exchange for their consent.

"The tyrant lies!" boomed the empress with a voice of thunder. "What he promises is your execution, but at that he will fail." And instinctively, she embraced Don Sindulfo as if to defend him from any lying in wait.

"All hope is gone; she's been smitten" whispered Juanita to her mistress. "Let's hope at least that this will forstall your continual torment from that pest."

"The emperor will not succeed," said the preceptor, "because anticipating that you had not yet breathed your final breath, your followers have but been waiting for the ceremony to begin to initiate the rebellion."

"Very well. Let us march, and I shall lead you in combat."

"One moment," objected Benjamin, worried that the hawkish posture of the noble lady would, if defeated, curtail his chance of ever obtaining the miraculous rune which he sought. "Prudence dictates careful consideration before undertaking such a dangerous enterprise."

"Yes," agreed King-seng. "Your eminence must not be exposed. All the plans are in place to spring on the tyrant when he least expects it. Jumping the gun can only turn victory to defeat."

"We should wait until the mystery of immortality is revealed," said Benjamin.

"Immortality?" said the empress with a certain haughtiness. "Whatever you've heard of it from Hien-ti is a lie. I alone possess the methods of the westerner,

and they are hidden from his searches in the depths of the palace.”

“That but doubles our motive to proceed with caution, if our goal is to recover them, for I cannot imagine that you wish to risk losing so precious a prize,” said Benjamin.

“Certainly not! You argue well, though there are still things you must understand about the enigma whose solution seems to come from the west.”

“What?” asked everyone.

“Now is not the time for explanations,” continued Sun-Ché. “Night approaches and the tyrant will be impatient. Get on with joining the emperor’s retinue; pretend to acquiesce to his plans. I will sneak ahead of you to the palace with the answers you need in hand; and as soon as the ceremony commences in the courtyard of the dragon, I will reveal myself to my followers. A brief fight will ensue, after which you will take Hien-ti into custody; and releasing the people from their oppressor, I shall announce with whom I shall share the throne of Fo-hi.”

And having thus spoken, she cast her gaze on Don Sindulfo, turning his blood to ice and earning him an aside in his ear from Juanita, who whispered, “Sometimes good luck falls into your lap when you’re not looking. Viva Don Muumu the First, brave king of the boors!”

Everyone would have shouted a cheer, but Sun-Ché imposed silence, donned the robe of a slave so as not to be recognized, and set forth from *El Anacronópete* accompanied by her two most trusted eunuchs. King-seng escorted Clara by the hand into the enclosed sedan chair, locking her in. The music struck up and the wedding procession slowly made its way through the packed crowd toward the *yamen*.

They passed through fourteen courtyards to get to the imperial grounds, a noted place of honor adjacent to the

main body of the palace. In the center lay a sacred dragon, cast in bronze with open jaws skimming over the ground and coiled tail lost in the heights. Countless kiosks lined the area, forming grandstands for the mandarins and high-ranking dignitaries to deliver their tributes to the solemn ceremonies and serving, so to speak, as an escort into the imperial temple only the monarch, his family and his prime minister had access.

Everywhere boasted stonework, as did the *yamen* itself, open to the four winds and rising above an opulent marble staircase inlaid with blood jade ornaments and lavishly illuminated with thousands of variegated lanterns: Just imagine! Here, a lantern steals its tulip and rose colors from nature, and another enormous globe projects flickering figures through its rice paper walls, as transparent as glass! A fish of light gently waves back and forth with the slightest oscillation of its tail, while just beside it, two roosters are posturing for combat, and look—two watermelon halves hang from great arches, flaunting their reddish pulp! Over there now, a lobster crowns the apex of that cornice, waving its articulated arms and snapping its claws! Incense burns in hundreds of containers; tapestries made of flowers capture images of butterflies and winged insects, continuously freshening the atmosphere. The entrance is guarded by totem doormen: two gigantic, sinister-faced, figures with titanic muscles, dressed in vestments as rich as their artistry is candid. A guard of maidens surrounds the emperor's grandstand; other military forces with their bows and halberds stand behind in a second file. And the palace's lower servants are not omitted: they spill over into every available space around the grandstands.

On the emperor's grandstand, the monarch muttered to Tsao-pi, "Are you certain of what you're saying?"—all in a low voice to avoid being heard by three official concubines who stood behind them.



“Sun-ché!” exclaimed the entire court

“The evidence will speak for itself. The rebellion will break out this very night in the *yamen*, but I swear to you, it will be smothered at once.”

“So these impostors are truly backers of the Yellow Turbins?”

“Yes. And partial to the empress.”

At this point in their conversation, the wedding party began to cross into the imperial grounds of honor with a solemn step, and a voice alerted everyone to ready themselves. Lanterns and banners crowded the background of the procession, terminated by the bride's sedan chair at whose door walked the vigilant preceptor, delegated with the task of presenting the noble consort to the emperor. Don Sindulfo, Benjamin and Juanita took their places around the litter as members of the family, and cavalymen brought up the rear.

Delivering his precious charge to the center of the imperial grounds with the requisite number of ritual bows, King-seng handed the sedan chair's key to the monarch who, upon meeting his betrothed, led her into the adjoining temple. Then the head scholar read the prescripts of Confucius on the duties of a wife to her husband; and he was beginning to congratulate Hien-ti on behalf of the academy, when a melancholy song with a recognizable rhythm made him turn his head to the audience who in astonishment saw the empress appear through the open jaws of the sacred dragon.

“Sun-Ché” exclaimed the entire court, expressing a variety of sentiments.

“Treachery!” cried Hien-ti at the resurrection of his victim.

But the surprise of the Celestial Empire's citizens at having recovered their sovereign was child's play next to that which Juanita experienced, trapped, as she was, by the pincer-like arms of Don Sindulfo and Benjamin, who with bulging eyes and hair standing on end babbled between episodes of nervous breakdown.

“That idiotic music!”

“That’s my wife!”

Juanita believed that they’d gone mad, but no: In fact, the two scholars had recognized the beats of that celebrated song and its unintelligible chorus with which the banker’s daughter (surely, my reader, you remember the mute garbanzo bean girl, our inventor’s wife, the one who drowned with her father during a swim on the beaches of Biarritz) constantly destroyed their eardrums in what seemed like a long-ago life.

They fiercely studied every form and feature of the empress for any sign of affinity with the dead wife, but right from her voice onward, everything about her was diametrically opposite. Yet, still, there was that strange melody. Was it possible for another human being born a distance of 3000 leagues and a time of sixteen centuries away to reproduce those pauses and inflections with such astonishing accuracy?

The two friends had no time to analyze or verify their impressions, for the eagerness of the rebels, overwhelmed by enthusiasm, caused them to shout to Sun-Ché in a united voice as soon as she appeared, and before the emperor’s henchmen could ready themselves for combat, they found their own weapons turned against them. Unfortunately for the would-be liberators, Tsao-pi had anticipated such a move and smeared the bowstrings with a corrosive substance, so that as the bows were pulled, the strings snapped and the arrows, instead of flying to their target, fell to the archers’ feet, leaving them defenseless.

“At them!” commanded the chancellor to his men; and without regard to convention or status, the empress, the time travelers, and the insurgents were bound together in a single throng, their cries smothered by gags of leather.

“Do you have more accomplices?” the emperor asked Clara, who struggled desperately, protesting her

innocence. "And I warn you," added Hien-ti, "that the wedding has been no more than a pretext to uncover your plans. A full denunciation is the only hope to save your life. Now answer me."

Clara gave a negative gesture.

"Very well," said Tsao-pi to the tyrant. "Your orders?"



"Do your duty," he said after a brief pause. "And in order for my people can see that nothing makes me retreat before the health of the state, begin by sacrificing the rebellious empress and the covert supporters of the Yellow Turbins."

And while the prisoners were forced to kneel in front of the dragon, an elite squad of archers voluntarily prepared themselves for the slaughter. They aimed their weapons, but when the emperor gave the command to fire, they turned their bows on him and the fierce Hien-ti fell lifeless to the ground, riven by arrows and bathed in blood. His soldiers, believing the superstition that when a leader dies, his legions fail evermore, took to flight so terrified that not even Tsao-pi's efforts could stop them as Sun-Ché's freed defenders took up the chase, eager to finish the work that the archers had begun.

In the meantime the innocent victims, their existence restored, hugged each other and wept with emotion; and since they were so overcome that they couldn't speak, they thanked their saviors via sign language.

“To whom do we owe our lives?” Clara finally articulated.

“Long live Spain!” shouted seventeen other voices, and the archers, shedding their clothes, were revealed as none other than the sons of Mars, fully grown.

“Them!” exclaimed their countrymen at the event that topped even the saving of their own lives.

“You! And life-sized!” repeated Juanita over and over, measuring Pendencia in her arms and unable to gather in quite enough for her satisfaction.

“What?! Do you think that I’ve zrunck in the faze of danger?”

Clara was on the verge of fainting with joy, but relying on that opportunistic talent that all women have, she swooned no more than strictly necessary to lean on Luís’s shoulder. Benjamin reflected on the possible cause of the phenomenon, while a rabid Don Sindulfo stammered, “How are you here?”

“Zurprized to zee me? We traveled zide by zide, did we not?”

“Allow me to explain,” said the empress. “As I headed for the palace, I saw these men hanging about the gate, and by their clothing, I knew they were with you; so, I communicated my needs to them by signs, and they assured me that they would follow my plans and you would be saved.”

“But that is not the problem!” shouted the increasingly agitated guardian. “How is it that they evaporate to nothingness at one moment and reappear intact in China the next?”

“This isn’t the time to worry about that,” argued Benjamin, fearing some new complication. Then, addressing Sun-Ché, he asked, “Have you the immortality details?”

“Yes,” she replied, producing a scroll.

“Safeguarding the details is crucial.”

“Back to *El Anacronopete!*” everyone proposed.

“But she is broken!”

“Who knows for sure?” claimed Benjamin. “The main thing is to get to a safe place.”

And the empress, cozying up to Don Sindulfo, added, “Yes, now that we are free of that imperial monster, let’s set off so I can abandon myself to this irresistible attraction and take pride in calling myself yours.”

This blunt declaration was the last straw for our scientist, and he would have given in to that exasperation had the recent clash of arms not driven home the proximity of the enemy and the necessity of escape. So, they arranged the ladies in the center of their ranks of, and off they went—some joyfully, some with despair—making their way to *El Anacronópete* without mishap.

And just to finish the account of the civil war between the Tao-shih and the Learned, I will tell you that the followers of Sun-Ché, dispirited at the loss of their sovereign and without a leader to take them into combat, were routed by the army of Hien-ti once they emerged from their stupor.





## CHAPTER XVI

In which all complications sort themselves out



ON BOARD, the situation had changed completely. The girls danced with joy at the unexpectedly happy restoration of their crew, and the empress did not conceal from anyone her elation over being a widow. The soldiers, lulled by Cupid, soon forgot about their past misadventures, while Benjamin, so near to his greatest wish, exalted in the eventualities that had brought him an unimpeded view of his aspiration and made him the *de facto* leader of the expedition.

Indeed, the moment they entered *El Anacronópete*, Don Sindulfo, who had not opened his mouth for the entire retreat, slumped into a chair, overcome with an alarming heaviness of spirit. His face soon set in the countenance of a man in deep meditation, while his glazed eyes wandered from one companion to another, as if facing a sinister threat. A hundred confusing ideas fought their way through the throbbing veins of his forehead in whose pulsations, alternately steady and feverish, could be read either the formulation of a theorem to provide scientific explanation for so many

incomprehensible phenomena, or repeated outbursts of anger ranging from blind jealousy to revenge.

"It zeemz that Don Muu Muu has a zcrew looze," said Pendencia, noting the agitated state of the guardian.

"And you're falling to pieces, too," added Juanita, facing Benjamin. "Who'd believe that just moments ago, when the Chinese wanted to skewer us, these two gentlemen thought they'd recognized Don Sindulfo's departed wife, may she rest in peace. Have you ever heard such nonsense?"

"As for that, we'll discuss it later," answered the polyglot, unfazed. "Not knowing the cause of a thing is no reason to deny its effects."

"What?"

"In this most improbable journey, perhaps the most absurd is also the most logical. Take things one at a time."

Just then, they heard a piercing scream and looked to Sun-Ché who, grabbed by her arm, was struggling to free herself from Don Sindulfo's vicelike grip. The trusting soul, overcome by her instinctive affection for the scientist, had reached out to caress him with a touch, and the poor lunatic had taken it like a sane man sometimes takes a touch from his wife, as if it were his sole reason for being. But the victim, yielding to a nervous fit, wildly swung her free limbs with consequent bad luck for the supposed husband, who took more than a few kicks to the shin followed by a series of blows to the nape of the neck and the face, not the least of which were those aimed at his nose.

"It's her! It's her!" exclaimed Don Sindulfo, releasing her at last and running terrified to the side of his fellow travelers. "It's Mamerta! Don't you remember how we could never cross her without suffering the consequences of her temper, and how she got her way every time?"

“Calm down, my friend. Calm down,” repeated Benjamin, although he himself was no less absorbed than the guardian by the resemblance of the sovereign to the daughter of the banker from Zamora. And while we can’t explain rationally or scientifically how a Spanish woman, drowned in the nineteenth century, can be a Chinese empress of the third century, the only alternative is to assume the similarities to be pure coincidence.

“God’s truth,” said Juanita, coming at Don Sindulfo. “Pull yourself together. Any girl next door has more horse sense than you. If you hadn’t been my master, then at the first sign of craziness when you brought us to Paris, I’d have beaten the sense into you myself.”

“And that iz what helmetz are for,” said Pendencia, noting Juanita’s balled up fists.

“Wouldn’t the dead woman have had some birthmarks or special mannerism to compare with the empress to sort this out definitively?” asked the captain of the Hussars, jumping into the fray.

“Think carefully,” insisted Clara.

Don Sindulfo gathered his thoughts for a moment and finally slapped himself on the forehead. “Yes! Of course!” he said, and he extracted a threaded needle from his lapel, which he always kept for the potential need of sewing a slip of paper into his notebook.

And before the bystanders could discern his purpose, he went to where Sun-Ché was recovering. “Sew this for me,” he said, brusquely pulling a button from his coat and presenting it to her as he stared motionlessly, intent on not missing a single detail of the experiment.

The good woman, not understanding anything that was going on around her, idly took the button, considering it to be an object of curiosity, but at the sight of the lancet-like sewing needle, she gave a piercing cry and fainted dead away in her chair which, as the dear reader may remember and as an edgy

Benjamin explained to the astonished travelers, was the precise behavior of the mute.

“There is no doubt! None!” shouted Don Sindulfo, writhing like a snake. “That abhorrence to the threaded needle stopped her from ever darning a pair of socks.”

“We all know the banker’s daughter was a virtuoso in laziness,” said Juanita softly while an anxious Don Sindulfo uttered incoherent sentences and stomped around with foam at the mouth and fire in his eyes, striking anything in his path and finally retreating to his private room in search of a solution to the conundrum.

Everyone rushed after him, but the door slammed with a crash, cutting them off. So, they resolved to provide some comfort to the empress, a well-intentioned measure that proved unnecessary, since as soon as the needle disappeared, the noble lady was better than ever, as if nothing had ever happened.

“I don’t suppose,” said Luís to the polyglot, “that in his current state, my uncle has given leadership of the expedition over to you.”

“God save me!” added Clara. “He could turn his wrath on us.”

“With him piloting the boat, we are zertain to capzize.”

“You forget,” Benjamin interjected, “I myself am too invested in our outcome to entrust the matter to a madman.”

“So he’s lost his mind?” asked the others.

“I am afraid so, but don’t despair. You may trust in me.”

And while the other travelers discussed the situation, Benjamin asked Sun-Ché to approach the inalterability device and instigated the shock treatment which, judging by the blows she rained on the back of the antiquarian’s head, imparted considerable agony. Then, with a deft movement, he removed the obstructing insulator

that he'd earlier installed and raised *El Anacronópete* to the proper altitude for departure, at which point he brought the vehicle to a dead stop, calling aloud, "Where to now?"

"To Paris!" was the unanimous answer.

"Right! To Pariz to lock the wize man in *el zanatorio* and track down a priez to bless our nuputals."

"But first," noted Benjamin, "let's see whether the main objective of our expedition has been satisfactorily achieved."

"Which is?"

"Acquiring the secret of immortality that the empress has offered to us."

Pushed to explain himself, Benjamin unrolled Sun-Ché's parchment which revealed a plan of a city drawn by an expert hand.

"Just what is this?" asked the archaeologist, fearing a disappointment.

"Bow down before the holy drumhead of the shepherds of Bethlehem," said Juanita.

"But the formula!" insisted an impatient Benjamin, turning to Sun-Ché.

"When the westerner was surprised by my tyrannical husband, he had no chance to fully reveal the mystery to me, but to assure the verity of his pronouncements, he told me that the necessary information had been buried by one of his predecessors in Pompeii beneath the statue of an emperor, marked on the parchment by a red circle."

"Yes, here it is," interrupted Benjamin, pointing to a circular spot on the papyrus, under which was written in Latin: *Stone effigy of Nero*.

"It seems," continued the empress, "that the knowledge of the hiding place passed through several generations with no person daring to pursue it, until the brave martyr whose death we all mourn resolved to bring it to

light; but at the moment when he was preparing to dig down under the statue, he was surprised, accused of desecration, and thrown into jail from which he barely escaped to reach my domain, whereupon I had the good fortune to meet him. We were already planning a secret mission back to his homeland to uncover the mystery when our plans came to the bad end that you already know.”

“A man still lives to carry out the plan,” said Benjamin with sparkling eyes. And to the others, he added, “To Pompeii!”

Some protests rose to meet his cry, but his enthusiasm was so contagious that the travelers, so recently freed from imminent danger, whispered among themselves and surrendered to their wish to see more of the past, by which time Benjamin had set the vehicle in motion on a course straight toward the heart of the sunny gulf of Naples.

The seven hours it took to travel the 141 years that separated *El Anacronópete* from the beginning of the third century to the final third of the first century offered no opportunity for boredom to the travelers who had so much to talk about and so many curiosities to admire. Juanita led the newcomers on a tour of *El Anacronópete* while Benjamin, feeling that things were relatively back to normal, spent his time speculating on the cause of the recent phenomenal events.

The first thing that he sought to explain was the reappearance of the evaporated soldiers. Accordingly, he thought back through the events, keeping in mind that when an outcome is anomalous, there must, of necessity, be an equally irregular cause. Well then, what extraordinary happenings had occurred during the voyage? Momentarily, he recalled the curious retroactive effects that occurred on *El Anacronópete* shortly after they were attacked by the mountain people in Morocco, all caused by a mistake at the controls that, instead of

slowing their speed, took them to Versailles on the eve before their departure. Then the answer dawned on him and darkness was dispelled: The only conceivable conclusion could not be denied. Indeed, dear reader, if you will remember the incident of the Moorish coin (which, dropped by a Kabila, deteriorated to nothing the instant it preexisted its own mint date, but was restored to wholeness as *El Anacronópete* marched forward again past the moment when it was coined), then you, too, will deduce that the resurrection of the Sons of Mars followed the same course. Succumbing to evaporation during the backward flight, the men had lost their human form, but their immortal spirit had not left *El Anacronópete*, just as a grain of wheat buried in the subsoil remains invisible until germination. Thus, as the vehicle headed back to the future, passing the birth of the soldiers, the call of time restored their bones, and with those structures in place, their bodies and minds re-established their robust forms.

But how did they avoid a second dissolution when Benjamin, realizing the navigation error, reversed course? The explanation is simple: After the alternating devolution and recovery of their proportions, the soldiers did not want to lose them again, and hence made their way back toward the laboratory, determined to requisition the protection of science; but, on arriving outside the main hall, they overheard Benjamin's explanation of the inalterability procedure to the Parisians, whereupon the captain of the Hussars, with a rudimentary knowledge of technology, proceeded to the lab to give his comrades and himself a jolt of the process—quite rightly deducing that remaining hidden would better serve the cause of the women prisoners than exposing themselves to the unpredictable risks of the guardian's jealousy. And that is how, hidden in the bowels of the ship, they opportunely arrived in China to avert a catastrophe.

Benjamin wrote these comments in his journal, but he abstained from disclosing his ideas to everyone, preferring to leave them under a spell of wonderment rather than confessing that he hadn't realized the situation earlier.

The second problem proved more difficult to solve. How, over a period of sixteen centuries, did a Chinese empress appear before his eyes with such marked physical differences, but so obvious similarities of mannerisms to Mamerta, drowned on the beaches of Biarritz? He was totally absorbed in this metaphysical puzzle, and his thought process was nearly at an end with no reconciliation of the two like-minded women, when a series of screams like banshees emerged from Don Sindulfo's office, jolting Benjamin out of his ruminations.

"He's crazy! He's crazy!" cried the travelers, who hearing the screams, came quickly in search of Benjamin. "What should we do?"

"He's having a seizure," said the Spaniard.

And instinctively, they all headed to his quarters, but before reaching it, the door opened and a disheveled Don Sindulfo erupted with fists clenched and purple veins throbbing on his forehead.

"Thunderation!" he yelled. "Now I see the answer—I see how Sun-Ché can be my dead Mamerta."

"How?!"

"Metempsychosis!"

None of the laymen understood the word, but the polyglot, understanding, struggled between believing his mentor and complete doubt.

"Metempzychoziz! And do you eat that with a fork or a spoon?"

"Metempsychosis—" continued the scientist without regard to the comment. "The transmigration of a soul, by which the spirit of one who dies passes into the body

of another higher or lower life form, depending on the virtues of the previous life.”

“Oh!” adduced Juanita. “Then you two are on a track for becoming bugs for what you’ve done to us.”

“Do you mean,” questioned the nephew, who was beginning to take an interest in the matter, “that the empress, by a series of transmigrations, eventually came to be your wife?”

“Precisely. And our travel back in time bestowed her upon us in the royal guise that she had in this epoch, just as in the highlands of Africa we might have stumbled upon her as a vegetable or a pack mule.”

“But allow me to say,” objected Benjamin, “that we are Christians and our faith rejects such theories.”

“That matters not,” retorted the madman, working himself up to yet another level. “We are Catholic, but she is a Chinese Buddhist who may well transmigrate as her religion prescribes, for who is to say whether Providence might not impose outcomes exactly according to the beliefs of each practitioner?”

Everyone except Sun-Ché, who might as well have been in limbo, not knowing what was happening, concluded that the poor doctor had lost his mind. Only Benjamin, an honest man of science, gave the benefit of the doubt to the madman’s reasoning, even though it meant setting aside his own beliefs.

“Eureka! It’s beyond doubt!” he cried out like Archimedes and embraced his friend.

“But the wife never spoke,” argued Juanita, “and this one prattles on like a politician.”

“Not necezzarily! If her husband doez not understand what the woman zayz, then it iz the zame as being zilent.”

“Or,” said Luís, smiling, “perhaps becoming mute was a punishment from her Buddha for transgressions committed in a previous existence.”

“In a way,” said Clara, taking advantage of the situation to bludgeon Don Sindulfo’s hopes, “this means your pursuit of me must cease, because linked as you are to this lady by the bonds of marriage, marrying me would be seen as bigamy in the eyes of our religion, would it not?”

The doctor, feeling cornered by Clara’s argument on the precise issue that worried him most—the surprising affinity between the empress and Mamerta—underwent a transformation from a state of relatively peaceful monomania to one of sudden frenzy.

“Could I possibly give up a love to which I have dedicated all the impetus of my life, my work, my spirit?” he said, balling his fists and frantically sweeping his eyes back and forth. “Oh, never!”

“That iz mad!” interrupted Pendencia, then cautiously stepped back with the rest of the group.

“No,” continued the delirious scientist, “if destiny fights against me, then I shall fight back, but regardless, you will be my wife, even if marrying you shall be a mortal sin.”

“She won’t be your wife,” the bold Maritornes replied. “Do what you may—slit our throats, massacre us, annihilate us—but as you have seen, we can rise from the dead!”

“Well, in that case, we shall all perish. It is the only fitting end to this situation.”

“What?!”

“There are twelve barrels of gunpowder in the hold. I will set light to them, and no trace will remain of *El Anacronópete*.”

“Zir, don’t be a barbarian.”

“Calm down,” exclaimed Benjamin, remembering the situation that had forced him to descend to Earth several times in search of food on their trip from Africa to China. “Our provisions—including explosives—were

not subjected to the inalterability procedure and are unusable, as I have observed in practice.”

“Ignoramus!” blurted out the madman in what was almost a moment of lucidity.

“What?”

“By newly applying the procedure via a reverse transmission to an object that has previously deteriorated, the deterioration will be neutralized and the original specific properties will return to any given provision.”

“Now you tell us, and now we’re doomed.”

“It iz time to zay our prayerz to Zaint Barbara.”

“Correct,” said Clara.

“No, do not be afraid,” interposed the guardian with a seeming about face. “After all, an explosion would kill us all, and I have no desire for my loved one to die. Your existence will be spared. But you—” he indicated the military men and the empress before continuing his exaltation with more fervor than ever— “you should prepare yourselves to suffer my vengeance, for you stand in the way of my happiness, and I will exterminate you to get Clara to the altar, even if that means crossing rivers of blood. Yes, ah ha!—I know just the means...”

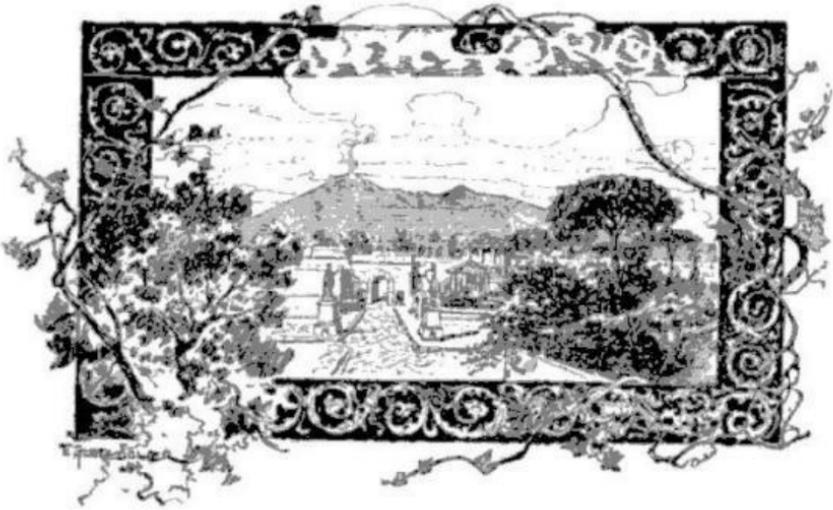
And so saying, he disappeared through the door and headed frantically to the hold. His fellow travelers, rightly suspecting imminent danger, followed quickly in pursuit.

Luis, at the head of the soldiers, was the first to arrive at the hold, but the doctor, who had thought through his plan carefully, was cunningly hidden, so that when he saw the Sons of Mars alight in the middle of the hatch over the exit chute, he spun the gate open, and the seventeen heroes disappeared amongst cries of distress and love from Benjamin and the damsels, who could do naught but watch the horrendous catastrophe.

“Save us!” was the general outcry, and to their credit under the grave circumstances, none of them fainted. Everyone rushed forward, but Benjamin, wary that Don Sindulfo was trying to cut off their path back to the upper levels, advised the three deathly pale women to stay put; then, climbing like a deer up the mounds of machinery, he made his way through a skylight and into the control room where he brought *El Anacronópete* to a dead stop, prudently reestablished to sabotage that he had previously worked out, descended back to the hold via the same route, and guided his compatriots in misfortune out of that place of death and back to safety, all without the madman becoming aware of their escape.

In the midst of these devastating setbacks, a small bit of good fortune smiled upon them: They had arrived in Pompeii.

---



## CHAPTER XVII

### Bread and circuses



FEW months before the arrival of *El Anacronópete*, Emperor Titus, succeeding his father, ascended to the throne in Rome. The mercifulness of this generous ruler, who considered a day without doing good to be a lost day, began to erase the bloody memory of Nero and the sordid greed of his own father, Vespasian.

The hero of Jerusalem—the comfort of mankind, as they called him—had forbidden persecution of the followers of the Nazarene, which had been initiated by Tiberius and only intensified when the son of Agrippina the Younger came to power. Still, misery was not completely unknown.

The surrounding provinces, governed by capricious prefects possessed of supreme authority and shielded by absolute unaccountability, engaged one another in bloody spectacles, sometimes to satisfy the base instincts of the masses, and other times to advance the hidden agendas of the prefectial class. Thus did our travelers find Pompeii.

Rather than political struggles, the inhabitants of Pompeii were generally more concerned with the beautification of their city in order to line their pockets with proceeds from the tourist business and summer residences such as those of the patrician families of Campania and Lazio. And perhaps it was due to their fanaticism for the conservation of public art that when, at the fall of Nero, the rest of Italy destroyed all statues of the tyrant, such were left intact in the streets of Pompeii, without defiling, under the view that even these monuments held artistic merit. But even so, Pompeii was not totally isolated, and as the winds of turbulent Neapolis and Salerno pushed their citizens toward the slopes of Vesuvius, the peaceful city was for four months swept up by Rome's civil strife.

Pompeii's prefect was a senator who'd been bought and paid for by Domitian, that second coming of Caligula who two years later would precipitate the death of his own brother Titus, all the while publically worshipping him as a god and privately denigrating him to mortal listeners. So, while pretending to be a loyal follower of the emperor, the prefect wasted no time in surreptitiously stoking the fires of insurrection to feed the unbrotherly ambitions of the Cain who protected him.

At the time of *El Anacronópete's* arrival, the *vindemiales* had already begun, festivals celebrating the grape harvest from the third of September through the third of October throughout the agrarian parts of Italy. The time of the great games was approaching, and with it, a measure of public discontent, not only because their completion was the impetus for the vacationers' departure and a return to ordinary life, but also because with the advent of Titus, the games were no longer the bloody slaughter from which the Romans drank their military inspiration. Reduced to races, field events, wrestling and boxing, they had discarded their *gladia-*

*dores, bestiarios, secutores* and *dimaqueres* along with the roar of the crowds, the blood and the gore.

Yet another circumstance lay in wait to join those on the surface: The Capitol building in Rome, the Pantheon, the Augusto Library and the Pompey Theater—as well as other monuments of lesser note—had been consumed by fire, and Titus had promised that everything would be rebuilt at his own expense. Moreover, he refused all offers of financial help from the cities of the Empire as well as from allied princes, and he'd sold the furniture of the palace to fulfill his word. Public approval soared and celebrations were organized across the land to commemorate the generosity of the emperor. But Domitian's followers, making timely use of the occasion to take advantage of the sovereign's eagerness to please, led the populace to demand the restoration of their beloved spectacles, and in Rome, Titus bowed to the general outcry by opening the famous amphitheater and consenting to the return of the gladiators and glorious mock sea battles along with over five thousand *bestiarios*—sometimes gladiators and sometimes prisoners, but always pitted against wild beasts. As you might guess, given the circumstances of Pompeii's prefect, the citizens of that city carried more than their fair share when it came to outcries for the revived extravagances.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of September in the year 79 A.D., the official responsible for keeping order in Pompeii was hurriedly making rounds of the various posts, advising each of his men to be particularly vigilant that night, but not interfering with the stream of people emerging from the hot springs, from the Basilica, from the temples of Jupiter and Hercules—indeed, from the shops on the Avenue of Abundance and the slums of Fortune Street alike—all headed in droves to the prefect's residence, carrying lighted torches and shouting out as if they were back in Rome:

“Bread and Circuses!”

The prefect, wanting to cover his own misdeeds with a veil of legitimacy, came to the door of his stately home, surrounded by guards and preceded by six sergeants, each of whom, draped in ceremonial garb, bore the official *fasces* on his left shoulder while employing a *virga* staff with the opposite hand to part the crowd.

"To the forum," said the prefect, proceeding down the Avenue of the General Assembly, with the crowd on his heels continuing to shout:

"Bread and Circuses!"

Once at the forum, that shrine of public opinion, a delegation stepped forth on behalf of the citizens of Pompeii.

"You know," argued the disingenuous prefect, "that such spectacles are forbidden by law."

"You must understand," replied the tribune, speaking for everyone, "that if you allow the people to become too soft, then when the day to fight arrives, they will not have the strength to even open the doors of the Temple of Janus."

"No more races?!" lamented the crowd.

"No more discus throw!"

"We want fights!" was the unanimous cry.

And as the outrage threatened to become a mutiny, the prefect relented to allow the *andabates* who fought less risky battles with helmets or covered in armor.

"No! We want *gladiadores!*" repeated the rabble.

And feigning a bow to the circumstances, the respondent agreed to the demands of the masses, but some of them took it as a sign of weakness in his authority, taking up a new cry—*Bestiarios!*—which soon echoed throughout the crowd in general. And as concession after concession was granted, the Pompeians had restored to them not only the *laquearia* (who by the skillful use of a simple lasso attempted to catch and bring down his opponent) and the *retianos* (who took to battle with

the goal of enveloping his adversary in a net carried in one hand while delivering a death blow from a trident in the other), but also the revolting spectacle of ferocious beasts ripping prisoners of war limb from limb or sending Christian martyrs on their path of glory via the sharp teeth of the *bestiaries*—all to the applause of the wretched crowd.

Patience was not a virtue of the crowd, and thus the fighting was set to be renewed the next day at the amphitheater. But in the haste to mobilize the bloodshed, there was no time to restore the taxes that normally procured the *gladiadores*, which left only the ones that the treasury supplied at its own expense and the mercenary *postulatitii*, who were contracted by private companies and subsequently hired out for a handsome profit.

As for victims for the *bestiaries*, the usual prisoners of war and criminals condemned to this kind of fight were unavailable, so it was determined to replace them with slaves and those impious subjects who followed the doctrine of the so-called impostor of Galilee.

So, with their triumph over the prefect in hand and exhausted from cheering the emperor, the drunken crowd retreated to their homes and happy dreams of tomorrow—a classic case of Pompeii being mired in the ever-dreadful calm before the storm.

At that very moment, the fugitives from *El Anacronópete* slipped like shadows on the cobblestones of lava, straight down the elegant boulevards and into the city. Benjamin, struggling to overcome the vast setbacks, pursued his scientific ends with a singlemindedness that revealed his scholarly Aragonese roots. Provisioning himself with a pickax, he strode determinedly as he consulted a map of the theater of operations by the light of the crescent moon. Sun ché—who in addition to having witnessed the tragic disappearance of the soldiers, had also been unsettled by the madness of the doctor—

leaned on the left arm of her interpreter, completely exhausted and engulfed in sad thoughts. And hanging from his right arm was the one most of all worthy of our compassion: that hapless orphan who for a brief few hours had been in her own seventh heaven, only to be cast from upon high into the deepest abyss of despair.

Juanita was the only one who, despite the gravity of the situation, had not abandoned herself to depression. "You'll see," she said, "how any moment now, they'll appear by the monument, dressed like Jews."

"No, this time we have lost them forever."

"Never! They are like St. Felix who is reborn after being burned at the stake."

"At last, we are here," exclaimed Benjamin, stopping at the crossroads of four avenues, in the center of which stood the statue of Nero facing Domitian Street toward the port of Herculaneum.

The impatient scientist invited the other travelers to rest while he went about the excavations. Clara and Sun-Ché soon reclined on the stones around a fountain that flowed beside them with a gentle murmur, and, hypnotized by its reflections, they promptly fell into lethargy, if not a full sleep. But Juanita, in hopes of seeing her Pendencia appear in the form of a centurion or dragoon, kept the archaeologist company, livening up his task with her pointed gibes.

The location of the treasure was so perfectly marked on the map that within a scarce half hour of digging, the pickax contacted a rigid body.

Benjamin, his heart beating like a windmill, dug up a small metal box that, with no inscription, could only be assumed to hold some precious object. With sweaty palms, the polyglot decisively opened the box, revealing an assortment of thin cords, each of which had a series of knots that were quite obviously not tied at random. The scientist emitted a cry of amazement.



“Cords!” said Juanita. “Gracious! Don’t you think it’s a sign that you’re to hang yourself?”

“Do feel free to shut your foul mouth.”

“At least give yourself a dozen lashes with them.”

“Don’t you know what these are?”

“No doubt they’re a bunch of noodles from the time of Solomon...”

“These are the first form of human writing on Earth, bequeathed to humanity by Fo Hi, as the Chinese called him, or, according to western culture, by Noah as he exited the ark. This is the very prototype of the written word, as revealed to the world’s scientists at the Academy of Inscriptions by the paleographer Shuckford.”

And with the rabid dedication of a true scientist, Benjamin turned his mind to decoding the puzzle, but unfortunately, a dense cloud eclipsed the faint glimmer of the moon, which was already on the verge of setting in the western horizon, threatening to leave him nothing but the sense of touch for his undertaking.

“Then answer me this,” said Juanita. “What kind of ink are they written with? And this: Hasn’t writing always been the same?”

“Not on your life. So far as we know, there are three forms of written characters: those formed from perpendicular lines, those from rounded or orbicular strokes, and those comprised of horizontal lines—although these three big branches subdivide in many variants.”

“Jesus! And I can barely put one letter neatly after another on ruled paper.”

Benjamin, for whom the clouds continued to veil the light of the night sky, needed something to pass the time during his cessation of labor; and so, giving in to his natural tendencies, he took Juanita’s words as an opportunity to present a short paleography course:

“In Carrasco’s *Mythology*, it states that Diodorus Siculus knew of the Indians of Tropobane Island, who had writing made up of straight, perpendicular lines. Du Halde recorded that the Chinese and Japanese, who also employed perpendicular writing, wrote from right to left as do the Hebrews, so their books begin where ours come to an end. On the north shore of the Black Sea, the Sythians carved symbols, referred to as runic symbols

or runes, into rocks with the lines running from top to bottom and vice versa, following a curve or spiral. The Tartars, according to Nienhoff, whose consonants are similar to the Ethiopians' in that each is connected with a vowel, wrote with perpendicular marks from right to left, and the Mongolians wrote from top to bottom in the opinion of Treveux. On the contrary, the inhabitants of the Philippine Islands and Malacca, in their recounting of the origin of the world, wrote top-to-bottom and left-to-right. And the Mexicans, according to Acosta, filled an entire tablet from top to bottom with perpendicular lines. They also knew the use of different colors of dyed strings, knotted and intertwined in various ways, depending on the importance of the event it recorded; this practice was common for all the savages of North America. And according to Baltasar Bonifacio, the large populations of Peru made use of the previously mentioned cords, similar to the North Americans, which they preserved in archives (established and protected by educated people) for the recording of all events deemed worthy of being passed on for posterity."

"Excuse me," interrupted Juanita. "Will you be on your soapbox for very much longer?"

"If it bothers you so much, then leave."

"No, that's not it; it doesn't bother me, since the bits I don't understand just go in one ear and out the other. But if you will allow it, I will sit, and you can continue with the savages north of Havana."

Benjamin acceded to her wish and continued:

"As for the second form of writing, Bastie Bimard and the Greek traveler Pausanias both assure us that the Greeks knew of orbicular writing, as can be seen from the inscription of Iphitus' disk, which dates from 300 years after the siege of Troy. Also, according to Maffei, the Etruscans (or ancient Tuscans) used that form of writing. The most remote northern villages wrote this

way, linking their characters from top to bottom and vice versa, or sometimes sideways or in spirals. It was but a short step for these characters to become true runes, resulting in legitimate inscriptions cited by the very same Pausanias as being similarly to—or even identical with—those of the northern people. The Greek inscriptions on the monuments of the monument erected in Olympia for Cypselus because of their exaggerated, multiple curves.”

“The same thing happened to me with Pendency’s letters. Even coming on ruled paper, each line seemed like chicken scratch. Of course, if it were in Latin, you’d think him to be articulate.”

“Next, let’s take the horizontal form,” continued the scientist.

And Juanita, believing this to be an amiable suggestion, lay herself flat on the ground by the creek as if she were on the softest of beds.

“I won’t fall asleep, no sirree,” she said, misinterpreting Benjamin’s surprise. “Please go on, and if I get bored, I’ll tell you to stop.”

Benjamin searched for the moon, but as it had not yet reappeared, he languidly resumed his discourse.

“Very well. Writing with horizontal lines evolved through a variety of forms. Boustrophedon writing, in its earliest age, ran from right to left; in the second through fourth periods, it went from left to right; and throughout all ages, it’s known for parallel lines in both directions, taking the writing across the page and back to its starting point.”

“That would be a real train wreck! Don’t you think a page of that would read like a fire drill?”

Benjamin continued without pause. “The Orientals have always written from right to left, as did the Etruscans, but the Armenians and the inhabitants of the Hindustan go from left to right. In Greece, the methods

of Pelasgo, Cadmus and Cecrops are engrained in the mythology, and any lengthy writing of theirs follows the form of the Orientals, from right to left. That's also the direction employed by the Huns."

"The who?"

"The Huns, from the area that is now Transylvania."

"Ah, I don't know them."

"The Ethiopians or Abyssinians, the Siamese and the Tibetans, all wrote characters from left to right, and the latter align the tops horizontally. Two notable boustrophedon inscriptions from the time of the Gauls and Franks: one was found in the ruins of the temple of Apollo Amyklaios in Amycles, a village of Laconia, dating to about 1400 B.C.; the second, referenced by Muratori, appears in marble discovered by Nointel or Baudelot in 1672 at a church in Athens, whose marble structures date from 457 B.C. Throughout the ages and to the present day, writing has been recorded on a myriad of diverse surfaces: the skins of quadrupeds, prepared in various ways, as well as those of fish; intestines of snakes and other animals; canvas and silk fabrics; leaves, bark and wood of trees; materials made from plant fiber and pulp; bone, ivory, common and precious stones; metal, glass, wax, brick, ceramics and gypsum—all have been used to record characters."

"As to the question of character, although mine is not the worst (given that don Sindulfo has yet to return our military men), it's possible that you may yet see a servant stoop to writing with her fingernails on the hide of a scientist."

"Marble slabs as well as bronze or iron sheets were in common use among the Greeks and Romans, and skins date back to the time of Job. According to Du Halde, the Chinese wrote on sheets of wood and bamboo tablets before the invention of paper. The pyramids, obelisks and columns, made of marble, stone and brick, all have recorded writing, such as the Babylonians as-

tronomical observations. The laws of Solon were written on wood, and those of the Romans on bronze tablets, three thousand of which were lost in the burning of the capitol building. Northern people recorded runic inscriptions on stones and rocks. Writing in lead slabs dates back to the time of the flood. Inscribed ivory has been preserved in tablets called *dipticas*, meaning ‘two leaves,’ and *polipticas*, which have more than two panels. Writing also occurred, according to Pliny, in the leaves of palms and certain mallows; moreover, in some areas of the West Indies, said Alfonso Costadan, they wrote in macareguo leaves, which are six feet long by one foot wide. Similarly, Michael Boim has said the inhabitants of the Fort of Mieu, lying between Bengal and Pegu, used a kind of palm—the areca—and the bark of the avo tree. In the Kingdom of Siam and Cambodia as well as in the Philippine Islands (where they used methods introduced by the Spanish), they wrote on banana leaves, those of the palm tree, or the smooth part of reeds on which they trace their characters with an awl or knife. The Syracusians employed olive leaves, and the Athenians used shells. Also in Athens, according to Suidas, the names of the brave who had succumbed in defense of the homeland were recorded on Minerva’s veil.”

“Oh, come on! A lot of good it would do the poor lady on her veil. Once it’s over her face, the writing would be backward.”

“The Indians, according to Philostratus, did their writing on *syndones*, as they called their fine linen or garments.”

“Really? I’ve always seen them naked—in drawings, that is.”

“The Jews had a particular skill in joining together pieces of parchment with no visible seam. Accordingly, Flavius Josephus notes that Ptolemy Philadelphus was filled with admiration when the seventy elders sent by

the high priest unrolled in his presence the law, all written in gold characters on a single scroll. Notwithstanding that, it was a dry engraving, without any ink or color, that seems to have come first: the mountain dwellers of *Kuei Cheu* in China did so on delicate wooden tablets. The Parthians decorated their clothes with sewn characters, not using the abundant papyrus that could have been found in Babylonia.

“You’re driving me crazy with the foreign names. Can’t you explain at least one of those linguistic monstrosities that make my head hurt like a rain of pebbles?”

“The papyrus comes from a species of cane similar to the *typha* of the low wetlands. Its roots are usually ten feet long, and though its triangular stems never rise more than two cubits above the surface of the water, as a whole it reaches up to four or five. After undergoing several procedures, it becomes paper, never exceeding its allotted length of two feet. The instruments for writing, with a few differences, have always been the same as what we use today, namely: the ruler, the compass, lead, scissors, the knife, the whetstone, the sponge, the iron style or punch, the pen or reed, the inkwell or inkstand, a lectern, and vials or bottles, one of which contains a fluid to thin the ink and another with vermilion or red ink to write the initial letter of a chapter. Styluses—or *stylus graphium*—and engraving tools—*caelum celtes*—of various sizes and shapes were used for dry writing without ink on marbles, metals, as well as tablets prepared with wax and plaster. The stalks of cane plants (or *arundo*), bulrushes (or *juncus*), and other reeds (or *calamus*) were employed to write with ink before the invention of quill pens. According to Pliny, a great profusion of these reeds or *calamus* from Egypt, Knidos and Lake Amaïs in Asia were harvested by the Greeks in the month of March and taken to Persia near Uruk, where they stewed for six months

among piles of dung and manure, thus acquiring a beautiful, mottled black and amber-colored varnish.”

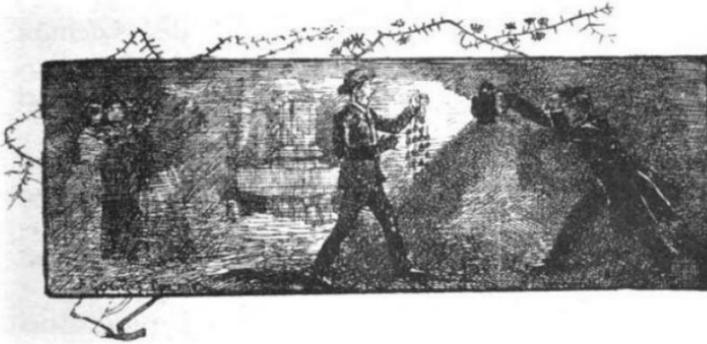
At that moment, Benjamin’s listener emitted a snore, but Benjamin, lost in his reverie, missed nary a beat.

“The use of goose, swan, turkey and crane feathers,” he continued, “seems to date from only the fifth century. The Siamese used pencils. As they did in antiquity, the present-day Chinese use rabbit hair for the finest and softest brushes. The ink from ancient times had little in common with our own, except its color and gum base: It was called *atramentum scriptorium* or *librarium* to distinguish it from the *atramentum sutorium* or *calchantum*. Their black color came from the soot of burnt resin, from fish, from potassium bitartrate, burnt ivory and crushed coals—all of which were blended and baked in the sun. In the east, people used a composition of cuttlefish ink and alum, while the Africans sometimes substituted poppy or used the ink of cephalopods directly. Allatius recounts having seen ink made from burnt goat hair, which, although a little red, had the advantage of not losing its color, staying lustrous, and adhering very well to the parchment, so it was very hard to erase. Chinese ink, known 1120 years before Christ, was an extract of various materials, especially from pines and burnt oil. Among the Indians, a concoction from the branches of a tree called *aradranto* provides a liqueur that...”

Benjamin was certainly coming into his own when he heard a murmuring:

“Just kill me, O wise one,” said Juanita in her sleep. Benjamin, concluding that his erudition was in vain, surrendered.

At this, a man, lantern in hand, strode around the corner and into the *quadrivium*.



“The lunatic!” shouted Benjamin, recognizing Don Sindulfo, who’d come in search of the fugitives, waking the three slumberers as if he’d been an electric shock.

“Please!” exclaimed the unhappy trio, embracing each other in mutual defense.

But before any theatrics could ensue, Benjamin—to whom the lantern light was akin to lightning to a hiker lost in the dark—ran to meet his friend, shouting like the philosopher of Syracuse who leapt out of his bath with the newfound theory of specific gravity: “Eurkea!”

“What is it? Has my rival returned to life?” asked the insane man, conscious of nothing but his obsession.

“No. I have found the secret of immortality. Bring me the light, and I’ll read.”

And consulting the cords, he took a deep intake of air as he saw that the knots followed the Armenian way of writing, a form that he could expound on without end.

“Well, what does it say?”

Benjamin, with more than a little difficulty, read the following:

“‘If you want to be immortal, go to the land of Noah and...’—Damn it!”

“What is it?”

“I can’t translate the meaning of the other characters, but never mind,” he continued in his frenzy. “We will fly to the time of the Patriarchs and solve this indecipherable puzzle.”

“If you don’t know more about a language puzzle than our addled companion—” Juanita took the liberty to interject, but at hearing her voice, the madman turned his attention to the group of three and approached Sun-Ché.

“She tasks me,” he said. “She tasks me, and I shall have her!”

And the scientist was about to rush her when, by good fortune, he tripped over one of the stone benches and fell flat on his face. Benjamin came to his aid while the three frightened females stepped back toward the fountain.

“This is not Christian!” said the girl from Pinto with all the strength and indignation she could muster.

“Christians!” came a low murmur from a man in the shadows to his compatriot, both of whom, attracted by Don Sindulfo’s light, had stalked the stranger and, from the resemblance of the Spanish word to the Latin, drawn a dire conclusion about the time travelers.

“What?” cried everyone, suddenly surrounded by police.

“Seize them!”

General panic broke out.

“I’m innocent!” claimed Clara.

“Kindly respect the empress,” ordered Sun-Ché in Chinese.

“Capture that one, Señor Constable!” babbled the Maritornes, pointing to Clara’s guardian.



But as the protests rose, gags were applied, and the band was led handcuffed to see the prefect, who, engaged in unbridled orgy, was savoring the recent mutiny that he'd instigated for Domitian's cause.

"Have mercy!" they pleaded, freed from their bonds and falling at the feet of the drunken senator.

“Don’t excite him with your whimpering,” said the polyglot. “And remember that he understands only latin.”

“Well, then: *In nomine Domini nostril Jesu Cristi,*” said Juanita, scared to death and recalling the salutation with which her local priest greeted his parishioners each morning.

“Who here speaks the name of the imposter of Galilee?” roared the prefect, barely able to maintain his balance.

“These Christians, who have just defiled the statue of Nero.”

“And who is their leader?”

“This one here is the eldest,” answered Juanita, aided by Benjamin’s translation.

“Up the crater with him, and into the bowels of Vesuvius.”

An explosion of tears and wailing followed the barbarous order, but before the travelers could direct a word of consolation to Don Sindulfo, he had been extracted by the group of police responsible for carrying out the decree.

“As for the others,” continued the drunken official, “prepare them to serve to the circus beasts tomorrow.”

“Ugh! They have condemned us to the circus,” translated the archaeologist, covering his face with his hands, while Clara passed out and Sun-Ché’s confused eyes begged for her own translation without reply.

“The circus? Don’t worry,” Juanita reassured them. “If it’s the one at the *Price* theater, my cousin is the head usher.”

“No, not the *Price*. We have been condemned to be fed to the lions.”

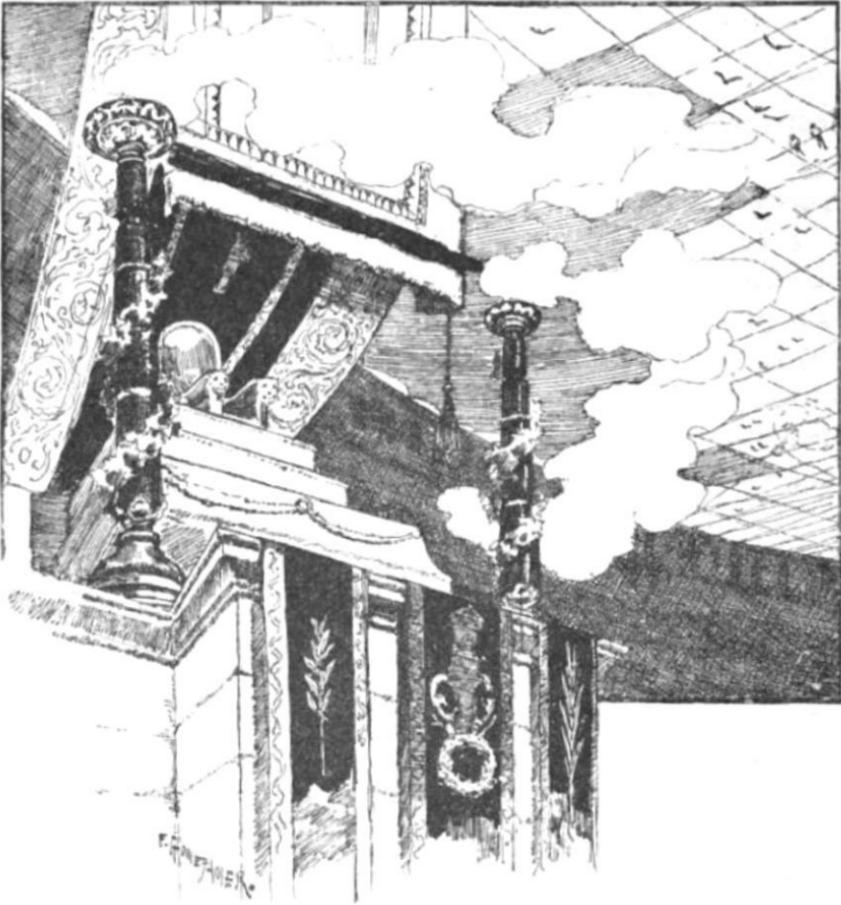
Once again gagged, no one could utter a complaint. The police dragged the culprits from the prefect’s house

and the prefect, teetering, returned to his feast, shouting enthusiastically to the guests:

“The people will have their *bestiaries*; for now, peace is assured in the streets of Pompeii.”

And indeed, a few hours later, to the resplendence of the rising sun, the poor tutor, feet bloodied by the painful ascent of Vesuvius, was tumbled into the deep abyss of the volcano at the same time that his traveling companions lay in the chambers under the amphitheater, ready to serve as the main course to the wild beasts and as a day’s diversion to the most depraved of the masses.





## CHAPTER XVIII

*“Sic transit gloria mundi”*



WON'T stop to describe the amphitheater because, with the exception of those who have been blind from birth, everyone in Spain has seen a bullfighting ring, which serves as the perfect analogy. Suffice it to say that early the next day, twenty thousand spectators—all that Pompeii was capable of—invaded the seats provided by the *locarios* in the *cunei* (or seating areas) organized ahead of time by the *designators* (or masters of ceremonies) according to the status and circumstances of each attendee.

The *podium*, analogous to the bullfighting spectator's platform above a bull pen, had tiered seats that ran in a circle around the plaza and was reserved for high-level functionaries. The *cubiculum*, or prefect's box, was the centerpiece, constructed in imitation of the *suggestum* (the emperor's throne) in Rome and covered with a pavillion-like canopy. Elsewhere, distinctive, though less ostentatious, flags festooned the random locations occupied by a vestal, a senator, or some envoy of a foreign nation.

Below the *podium* lay the rows designated for the noblemen, and after that the *popularia*—the front row seats in full sun at a bullfight, so to speak, although the analogy is not entirely accurate, because damned if the Roman public wasn't bothered one iota by the ruddy rays of Phoebus. And it wasn't because clouds blocked the sun, which shone brilliantly in the middle of the sky with such intensity that had it not been the eighth day of September, they never would have managed without cooling the air, as was done in the high days of summer by the grace of a perfumed liquid, concocted from water, wine and saffron and led via pipes to a covered area dedicated to women at the top of the stands, from which it fell like rain upon the spectators of the contest. Nor was the sun eclipsed at the whim of some overbearing entrepreneur, such as Casiano, who on the eve of an extraordinary bullfight in Madrid in the year of our Lord 1874 was permitted the renowned announcement: *By the order of the authorities, there will be no sun tomorrow.* It was simply that over the heads of the onlookers ran a few canvas awnings, which in the great Roman circuses were usually of purple silk and gold embroidery.

Below the *podium* and all around the arena were the *caveæ*: caverns or small sheds with their *posticæ*, or gates, held closed by the *ferries clathris*—iron latches—and in which were placed the gladiators and wild beasts

destined for combat. In front was located the *libitinen-sis*, a gate through which the dead *bestiarios* were driven to the *spoliarium* where they were stripped of their armor and all earthly possessions.

The echoes of the trumpets announced the approaching gladiators, and indeed, they were soon in the arena, being presented to all the audience and being greeted by waving palms that could well have been a greeting for Frasuelo and Lagartijo had they but changed their costumes and transported the public of Madrid's high and low districts to Pompeii. Bear in mind that applauding and catcalls have long been the way of people in all epochs to express satisfaction or displeasure; and when the latter manifests itself in a theater, the targeted actor had the duty to remove his mask to acknowledge receipt of the jeers.

With the arena cleared after the gladiators' march, a new trumpet announced the arrival in the ring of the *essedarios*—fighters who battled on small chariots, after the fashion of the Gauls or Bretons. Next came the *hoplomacos*, armed from head to toe and opponents of the *provocadores*. Neither one drew blood, reducing the crowd to a state of despair in response to the few inconsequential bumps and lumps. After that, the *mirmillones* or *gallos* appeared, using a spear and shield in a manner that originated in Gaul, waging battle with the *retiaros*, who persued them with a net and trident, shouting *Galle, non te peto, piscem peto*, to which came the reply *Gallo, no á ti, á tun pescado quiero*—all of which was posturing about a metallic fish that the trident fighters attached at the crest of their helmets. At that point, either a *gallo* dropped his shield or perhaps one of the fishermen was more into skewering than netting, but regardless, it's certain that some foolhardy attempt had the misfortune to end in a stumble, whereupon both men

were on their sides to a chorus of catcalls that continued even when the presiding councilor released a bull to be speared.

Finally, the hour of the *meridianos* was sounded—gladiators who fought at high noon and whose spectacle was, technically speaking, the oddball of the afternoon, the fifth trial of strength, but with an exceptional circumstance that bore added interest: Both fighters were *rudiarrii*, meaning that having served three years in a row, they had earned their *rudis*, a thick, knotted truncheon symbolizing retirement or discharge from the circuses, so they need never appear again except, as in this occasion, by their own free will.

Duly applauded and granted permission to begin by the governor or prefect, the pair took up their *arma lusoria*—wooden swords awarded as a prize for various labors—and with them, they began to skirmish, continually crossing with powerful blows, but still only preliminary tests, called *præeludere ventilare*, as when a horse trainer tries the first jumps over a fence. But it was necessary to stay alert during this prelude, because as soon as the trumpet sounded, they put down their toys and, bringing to bear the real tools of slaughter, struck at each other with every ounce of their God-given strength.

So it went, and as the two were famous *mataores*, it took a tremendous effort for the more fortunate—I know not if he was also the strongest—to knock down and run through his antagonist who fell like a lead weight, rolling around in the arena.

At the sight of blood, the people erupted in an enthusiastic clamor. The victor turned his gaze to the crowd who, holding sway over the life or death of the vanquished, could grant mercy by presenting the palm of

the hand with the thumb tucked in; but the thirst for slaughter was such that the judges tended, instead, toward the contrary: a closed fist speaking the unanimous verdict—*recipere ferrum*—amounting to a demand that he be given the dagger. The only item missing was the prefect's ratification of the popular outcry, but the prefect, either through pity or some authoritarian whim to be contrary, waved a white handkerchief as a sign of *missio*—a pardon for the time being on behalf of the monarch Augusto—although this time it was a futile clemency, seeing as the wounded man had just ascended to the status of corpse. His body was removed via a set of hooks drawn by four slaves, and two councilors came down to award the victorious athlete the nominal handful of silver. But the spectators, not believing the reward to be just, rose to their feet, shouting:

*"Lemnisci! Lemnisci!"*

And the prefect, not wishing to offend their sensibilities, agreed to the demand, delivering to the gladiator, in lieu of silver, the *lemniscatus*—a garland of flowers tied by ribbons of wool, symbolizing the moment when a fortunate one was freed from slavery and, henceforth, found himself in the category of freedman.

With a murmur of satisfaction, the audience settled back in their seats, as does any assembly as a precursor to the main show, indicating, in this case, the coming of the *bestiaries*.

Clara and Sun-Ché, crushed under the weight of such a dire situation, were nearly carried in by the soldiers, such was their level of gloom that they couldn't walk. Benjamin, drawing strength from their frailty, advanced serenely, presenting a front of being both a man and a philosopher. Given the circumstances, Juanita faced the situation and entered the arena with an unqualified resoluteness, her bravado emulating those boys who boldly run at the young bulls to stick balls on the tips of

their horns. Having already escaped various imminent dangers, she believed herself to be impervious to further perils, declaring herself, as it were, to be invulnerable. The response to her demeanor can only be compared to the ovations that greet bad comedies in Madrid.

The captives wore shorts and half-length tunics, their arms and legs wrapped in leather strips like the original Lombard warriors. Each brandished a short sword in the right hand, while a red cloth designed to excite the beasts hung from the left, perhaps the forebear our own customs in the art of Pepe-Hillo.

Brought before the box of the prefect, they were forced to intone the *morituri te salutant* three times, but Juanita, always the comic's friend and wanting to convey her knowledge of Latin, missed not a beat from the end of her previous disastrous performance as she pretending to doff her hat with her free arm.

"*Dominus vobiscum,*" she said to the senator. "*Offero atoasti: Mater canis tu semper habio indigestionem retchem. Salutem et scabies.*"

With her peroration concluded, the fighters were scattered around the ring, the guards withdrew, and the prefect gave the signal to release the wild beasts. Juanita, being square in front of the *caveæ*, prepared herself for the onslaught as the doors swung out on their hinges. But instead of lions from the desert of Libya, Luis and Pendencia with fifteen of their comrades-in-arms emerged into the circus, their revolvers on the ready (and opportunely protected by the mechanism of inalterability that the ill-fated Don Sindulfo had revealed to them in his initial fit of madness).

On their appearance, everyone fell into each other's arms, even Sun-Ché, although she did not know who was who, and Benjamin, who was as relieved as anyone at that precise moment.

“Didn’t I tell you?” shouted the girl from Pinto. “They are like asparagus, if you’ll forgive my way of putting it; you cut off their heads and they just pop back up again.”

But the occasion was not the most propitious for entertaining themselves with similes. The spectators, having their hopes dashed and deducing from what they saw that they were themselves the victims of a hoax, lamented in a single voice:

“Treachery!”

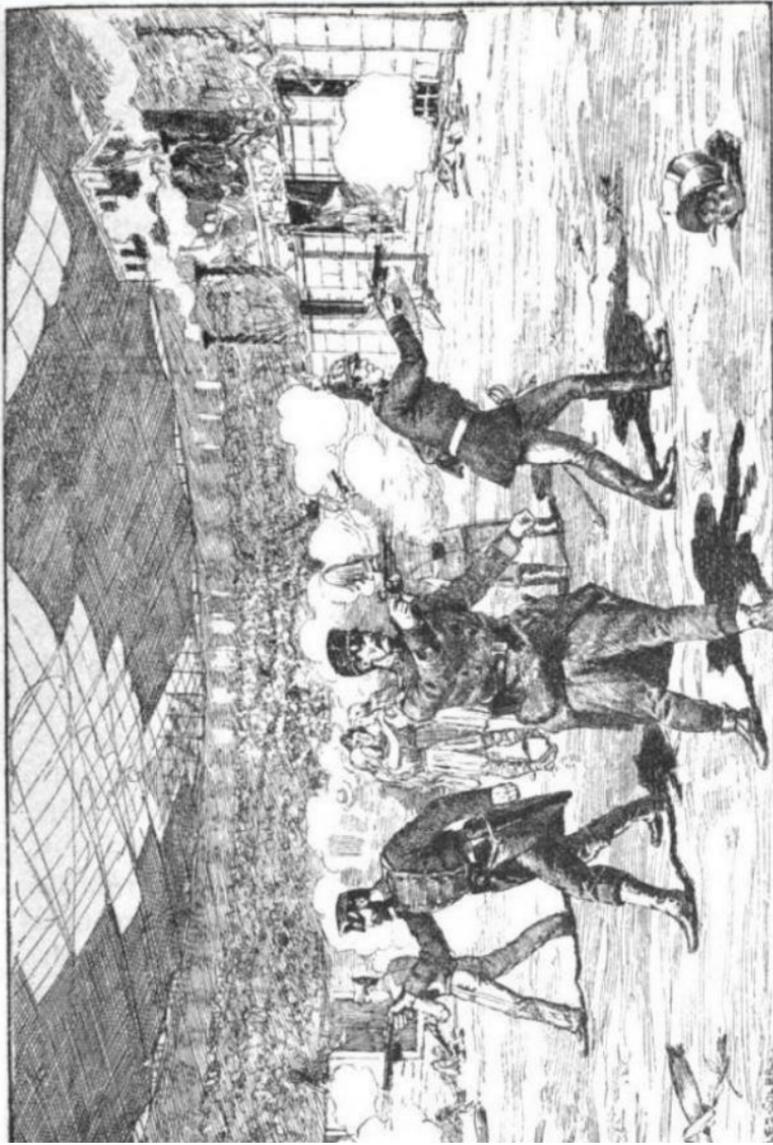
And abandoning the stands, they drew their blades and prepared to rush the arena, taking vengeance into their own hands.

Luis, ever prepared for all occasions, commanded his men to form a square, placing the women in the center, and before the rabble could descend from the podium, a volley was discharged, of which not a single shot missed its mark. A pause of astonishment befell the arena, but even before they’d had time to understand what had happened, the undeniable bravery of the Pompeiani brought them to try an even more vehement push that was met by a second massacre. The faint-hearted froze, while only the most die-hard sent up a cry:

“Onward!”

They had already begun to climb into the arena when Luis ordered a heavier barrage of fire on them, the effects of which were devastating. Those small implements of war, which at such distances sent death by spewing bullets without interruption, took on a supernatural character in the eyes of the locals, which they did not hesitate to attribute to the implacable anger of their gods: panic ensued, closely followed by a general dispersion.

Thus is the power of progress that allowed a handful of men to reduce twenty thousand world-conquering legionaries to a fleeing mob.



Before the rabble could descend from the podium, a volley was discharged...

The amphitheater emptied itself, and then began a catharsis and lamenting of the adverse fate of the guardian for whom any rescue attempt was deemed useless, as surely his sentence must have already been fulfilled; and at last came explanations, most particularly for the reappearance of the sons of Mars, which could not have been simpler.

My readers will no doubt remember the hammering which Don Sindulfo and Benjamin heard while roaming about *El Anacronópete* during the night spent in China. Well, the racket came from the soldiers who, seeking a more secure hiding place during the aerial voyage than their makeshift parapets of provisions, had built a huge pouch or hammock from some tarpaulins and hung it in a vacant space among the ship's framework along with a clever in-and-out gate, concealed by the trash chute and allowing the entry of breathable air via a rubber tube through a simple hole.

"It followz," concluded Pendencia, "that when Don Muumuu—may he rez in peaz—thought he'd thown uz into zpaze, he'd done no more than deliver uz through the front door of our comfortable houze."

Having given thanks to God and celebrated the occasion, Benjamin spoke: "Now, let's escape. The land of Noah awaits us." And he took up the bundle of twine that had somehow survived the ordeal.

Intoxicated in their happiness, the others followed him automatically, but coming to the exit, they found it closed and, judging by the crowd's shrieks from outside, they deduced that opening the door would be imprudent. And besides, the populace had brought everything at hand—furniture, crates, timbers, all manner of contrivances—to form one colossal barricade around the entire building, by which they intended to besiege the time travelers with hunger.

The situation was grave. They returned to the fighting ring and had just begun to huddle when a horrific

boom echoed across the city and a violet light illuminated the sky. The travelers crossed themselves, for without stopping to think of the anachronism, they attributed the explosion to gunpowder, thinking that the locals wanted to blow up the building.

“Think of today’s date,” said Benjamin. “What day do you think it is?”

“For us, it’s always Tuesday,” quipped Juanita.

A second rumble increased the alarm. The archaeologist was pale as death, and, inhaling a whiff of sulphur that imbued the atmosphere, he pulled at his hair and shouted, “Damnation!”

“What is it?” demanded the travelers.

“Yes..., yes it is...the eighth of September in the year 79 A.D...the eruption of Mount Vesuvius!...here on the last day of Pompeii!!!—”

He still hadn’t finished his sentence when a quake undulated through the volcanic soil, demolishing the circus seats and felling the large part of its walls while the cohorts tumbled into the arena—a fortunate happenstance, as it saved them from falling debris. Lava fell from the sky in torrents; ash choked their very breath.

“Run for it!” shouted Benjamin, though he could hardly put one foot in front of the other. Everyone rushed through an opening, climbing over corpses burned by the eruption and ignoring the cries of the dying and the desperation of the living.

The inalterability treatment that they’d been subjected to made them impervious to the physical dangers, allowing them to get to *El Anacronópete* with no obstacles because hot debris fell on their bodies without adhering.

Safely ensconced in the vehicle, Benjamin raised it to its traveling altitude. A noise, like a stone striking tubular bells, jarred the ship, but already the colossus had undertaken its dizzying march and, devouring time,

it launched itself for science's sake toward the land of Noah and into the unknown past while leaving behind a sorrowful lesson for the future.





## CHAPTER XIX

### Castaways in the sky

**B**ECAUSE they were determined not to stop, the next leg of their journey was the longest of the entire expedition. They were starting in the year 79 A.D., and as everybody knows, the universal flood corresponded to the year 3308 B.C.

Now, *El Anacronópete* flew well above the region where storms form, and they had nothing to fear from the catastrophic deluge caused by the wickedness of men; nevertheless, they believed, in this case, discretion to be the better part of valor, and they agreed to stop at a later period, historically speaking, than the flood. Thus, from the point of view of traveling backwards, they would touch land before arriving at the great disaster.

Their object was to find Noah; and seeing as how he and his kin still lived 350 years after leaving the Ark, they could not only avoid the risk of the flood, but also gain the secret of immortality that much sooner simply by landing in 2958 B.C., the very year of his death—or,

3037 years before the first-century destruction of Pompeii, as can be seen by adding 79 years to their target of 2958.

As with everything, this was not a matter that you'd want to have to reconsider after the fact, so after due consideration, a couple decades of leeway were added to deal with the unforeseen, and their descent was set to the year 3050 B.C., thirteen years before the death of the patriarch, when he himself was at the age of 937, and a full 258 years after the global deluge.

Calculating in round numbers at a rate of five centuries per day, they needed seven days (including meal stops in which they stayed aloft) to traverse the thirty and a half centuries in question. Throughout the week, their spirits stayed high, although troubled at intervals by the memory of Don Sindulfo, and they had plenty of provisions for two months; so, if—as it is said—nothing could be longer than a week of starvation, then, for our travelers, the opposite was true: nothing could be shorter than a week immersed in each other's happiness.

Thus, the expedition began in the best of possible situations. They spent their idle time explaining the wonders of *El Anacronópete* to Sun-Ché and telling her the vicissitudes of the journey (all the while ignoring the relation of the invention to its inventor, so as to avoid the bitterness of widowhood), and they made plans for the future, all, of course, through rose-colored glasses and perfumed with the sweetness of incense.

Slightly more than half of the road had already been walked when at noon of the fourth day, with the vehicle cutting through the atmosphere almost effortlessly, the mechanical workings suddenly banged to a halt.

"What's happened?" everyone asked with surprise.

"Someone's exchanging gunshots," joked Juanita.

But Benjamin's alarmed attitude did not let anyone enjoy the joke. "Perhaps a short-circuit," he said, meditatively.

“Without power, we’ll crash to the earth,” argued Luís.

“But notice,” pointed out the polyglot, “that we are not moving.”

“How can that be? We must be rizing or falling!”

“No.”

“Ah ha! Like pinze-nez, we ztay in one plaze.”

So, led by Benjamin, the travelers examined every mechanism without finding any fault that would provide the key to the enigma. The afternoon passed in futile exertions, and with the fall of night, their level of apprehension reached considerable proportions, serving only to heighten their danger. Few of them managed to doze, and none slept soundly. With the light of dawn, they repeated the examinations, and given that each of them had an equal lack of mechanical intelligence, the number of individual theories matched the number of individuals.

As a last resort on the third day, the soldiers—without informing Benjamin—decided to proceed with what they saw as a very bright idea: unballasting *El Anacronópete*. And so, they began to boxes and sacks out the hatch, whatever came first to hand, without regard to what was what. They were just finishing up the task when Benjamin, attracted by the noise, arrived in the hold.

“Swine! What are you doing? Stop!” he screamed.

“Thiz beazt needz to loze zome weight!”

“But you’ve left us with nothing to eat, and our position is appalling: We’re shipwrecked in the air.”

That declaration was the signal for panic. All hope was lost, and by random chance of what had been tossed, they would soon be without food. There was barely enough left for another 48 hours.

Undoubtedly, the danger was the gravest they had yet faced.

"Who can save us?" asked Clara, her eyes awash in tears.

"Don't worry. We'll run into an acrobat balloonist who will carry a rope across to us," argued Juanita with an optimism to rival that of the famous Pangloss.

"Balloonists here?" exclaimed the archaeologist with dismay, dashing all hopes. "Don't you realize that we're in the year 1645 B.C. and also over the Wilderness of Sinai?"

"If you lower a cable, I will undertake to climb down and reconnoiter the land," proposed Pendencia.

But no rope on board was long enough, and in any case, even if it were possible, the brave Andalusian would expose himself to being stranded should the vehicle happen to resume its march for no more reason than it had stopped. And indeed, slim as the hope was for a spontaneous restarting, they had no choice but to entrust their salvation to that hope.

As a precaution their rations were cut. By the sixth day, the food ran out. On the seventh, they mashed some pulpy substances containing some liquid into a kind of flour. On the eighth, they were overtaken by fever. The ninth day brought no recourse, and the air that blew through the open windows could barely sustain the breath of the unhappy companions, suffocated by thirst and emaciated by hunger.

On the dawn of the tenth day, the travelers, lying about in the lab, gave it the appears of a battlefield sown with corpses.

"We must act!" said Benjamin with a final roar, coming from utter despair. "What do we do?"

"Draw lots and eat each other," cried a soldier, to which the sons of Mars nodded in close agreement, closing their ears to the pleas that the dazed women cast their way.

“A moment for reflection,” argued Luís, thinking of Clara. “Perhaps a less bloody plan will occur to someone.”

“No. Draw the lots,” shouted the military men, taking up a threatening stance.

“Well,” said Benjamin, “there is no salvation for us. The machinery hasn’t moved for ten days.”

“Nor have our dijeztive trackz.”

“Hunger plagues us relentlessly, and the instinct of self-preservation demands a radical course of action.”

“What a pity that the Jews have killed Don Sindulfo,” babbled the still-witty Juanita. “Who wants him here now?”

“Whatever for? Just one more mouth!”

“No, sir, but we would make him eat crow.”

Upon hearing the word “eat,” the travelers, as one, made a movement to rise, but realizing they were suffering from an illusion, they all sighed and dropped back to the floor.

“No more delays,” beseeched the men.

“May the Lord have mercy on us all,” murmured Clara, taking Luís’s hands in her own.

The love-struck captain interposed himself between Clara and his men. “I exhort you to at least spare the women,” he said.

“But of course. Why elze are we here but to please them?”

“No!”

“Very well,” said Luís. “Then I will offer my life for hers.”

“Ah, that iz different. The rezolution is approved, because we will all have an equal chancez. And now, Juanita, you shall finally be convinzed of my love.”

“How?”

“Because I have told you a thousand times, ‘I love you zo much, I could eat you,’ and if your lot iz drawn, I will prove my affeczion for you.”

Facing such hunger, all notion of humanity and respect were lost, and the soldiers rose to their feet, demanding compliance so voraciously that it would have been exposed as the folly it was

Rising to their feet, the soldiers demanded compliance so voraciously that, were it not for the total loss of humanity and respect that had emerged from such hunger, it would surely have been exposed for the folly it was: placing themselves in the role judge and jury, putting forth a verdict, and reducing all contingencies to the luck of the draw.

“I give in,” said Benjamin. “Let’s get down to it. We’ll write down all the names. Fetch some paper.”

“Paper? We’ve eaten it all, even the banknotes.”

“Then let’s draw straws.”

“No. We’d just end up eating the whole business.”

“I know,” said the polyglot. “I have my collection of minerals and stones; everyone takes a specimen with an initial letter to match their name. For example: Luíslazuli, Pendencia-pearl, Clara-coral.”

“You, Benjamin, will take a sapphire,” Juanita interrupted.

“But that begins with S.”

“Because you make everyone sick to their stomach.”

So the new invention was accepted. Stone lots were chosen and put in a handkerchief to begin the affair.

“Let’s see now. We need an honest hand—”

“And not the zcientizt...”

“You, Clara.”

“I won’t be responsible for the death of my neighbor,” said the girl to decline the offer.

“Then you, Juanita.”

“No. I’m sure to choose the letter J. Let the empress choose, since her touch brought a deserved fairness to China.”

And they were on the verge of having Sun-Ché draw when a bundle fell from one of the ventilators, and every head turned in that direction.

“Don Sindulfo!” shouted the archaeologist, dropping the stones.

“The crazy man!” exclaimed the other bystanders, not daring to believe their eyes.

It really was the wretched guardian who, aroused by the commotion and just as starved as the others, presented to their eyes what seemed to be a talking skeleton.

How was he there? It is but simplicity itself. When he was thrown into Vesuvius, his body, rather than plummeting to the bottom, fell to one of the jutting ledges inside the crater. The inalterability process to which he’d been submitted allowed him to not only survive the fall without the least damage, but also to endure the high temperature in the molten caldera. As for the eruption itself, it launched him into space along with the ledge where he laid; and, at that very moment, *El Anacronópete*, having fled Pompeii, happened to intercept the parabola that Don Sindulfo was traversing. One of the waste chutes accepted him like a mailbox accepts a letter, producing that strange noise that the travelers took to be the impact of a stone on the ship.

“Zo, after the volcano bowled you around, you slipped in the vent of *El Ana-con-pazzé*?

“Quite right, to exact my revenge.”

“What?”

“On seeing that my rival still lives—he whom I had already judged myself to be free of—and hearing that he and my niece have abandoned themselves to the highest form of bliss, jealousy exerted its fatal power over me,

and I conceived the idea that we must all perish together.”

“But how?” asked his colleague.

“By bringing *El Anacronópete* to a halt—easily accomplished, seeing as you know nothing of its inner workings—I condemned you to complete immobility in the unfathomable reaches of the atmosphere, where I could delight in your slow agony.”

A cry burst forth from the soldiers. “Wretch!...Die!”

“Yez, He must die az the first head of cattle to be sacrificed in this holocaust.”

“Kill me in good time; I will only be the first. But doing so will not alter your fate.”

“He’s right,” said Benjamin. “It won’t accomplish a thing.”

“It’ll accomplish a meal,” argued the girl from Pinto.

“Then you’ll have no mercy for us?” they asked Don Sindulfo.

“None. We are all to die.”

“If that iz to be, then we will die, but know that it iz at your hand. At him, comradez.”

The soldiers rushed Don Sindulfo in spite of Sun-Ché’s pleas for forgiveness of the man who himself showed no sympathy whatsoever. They were on the verge of delivering the fatal blow when a gentle rain made its way through the skylight, halting the hands of those thirsty creatures.

“Water!” they all shouted, opening their mouths to receive the heavenly dew.

“It’s snowing!” exclaimed Juanita, seeing that there were more snowflakes than raindrops.

“No, it iz not znow!” said a joyous Pendencia, tasting it. “Something like peas are inside.”

Benjamin, who had remained silent until then, slapped his forehead, intoxicated with joy. “We are saved!” he said.

He ran in search of a Bible from a storage cupboard, while Don Sindulfo, sensing his defeat, was pulling out his hair.

“Look,” continued the polyglot, reading from the book. “Chapter XVI of Exodus: ‘The children of Israel came to the Wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai.’ That is where we are.”

“And so?” asked the astonished bystanders as they contemplated that, together with the rain, hundreds of birds fell from the skylight, enlivening the laboratory with their voices and their fluttering.

“So it was that quails came up at evening and covered the camp, and all around in the morning lay the dew, which the house of Israel called manna.”

“Manna! Blessed be God!”

They all fell to their knees.

“And will you continue to persist in persecuting us?”  
Luís asked his uncle.

“And their wandering lasted forty years,” quipped Juanita. “With the food from heaven, you are spared, Don Sindulfo, and will have plenty of time to whisper sweet nothings to yourself.”

“Yes, I fight in vain,” exclaimed Juanita’s defeated and humiliated guardian. “Do what you may with me.”

“Then on to Noah on Mount Ararat,” shouted Benjamin.

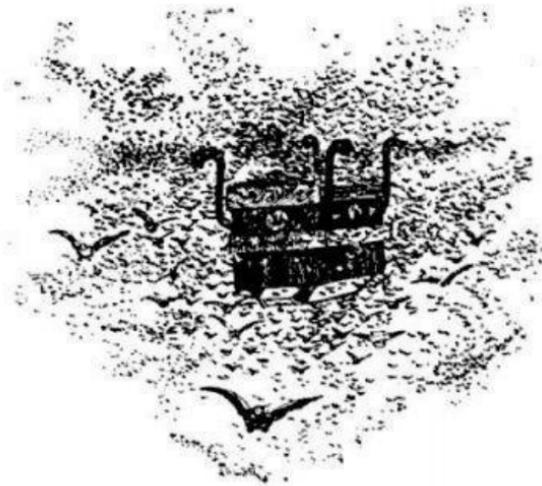
“Be that as it may,” babbled the scientist, adding under his breath, “I will still exact my revenge.”

So the travelers, after collecting more than sufficient of the manna from heaven to renew their lost vitality, forced Don Sindulfo to repair the sabotaged mechanisms of *El Anacronópete* and then shut him up in the clock room as a precaution against some new attack of madness.

“Make zure to not eat any of the quail featherz,” said Pendencia, “zo we can provide the zcientizt with plumage.”

“Didn’t I tell you,” noted Juanita to her mistress. “We’re like a wobbly doll: You can knock us over, but we pop right back up.”

So *El Anacronópete* undertook its majestic march over the land of the people chosen by God, on which the travelers had occasion to see the people crossing the Red Sea by foot while its waters were held back, only to later tumble down, becoming a wide grave for the armies of the fourth Amenophis IV.





## CHAPTER XX

Which is the best, not because it is the finest, but  
because it is the last

**T**HE shepherds were resting peacefully, their livestock scattered around the base of the mountain or grazing the slopes where two rivers danced back and forth, finally bidding each other an intimate farewell, as if anticipating a final parting from which they would never meet again.

In the valley, farmers gathered in their families, dozing under their tents to hide from the rays of the sun and

dreaming, perhaps, of the spoils that a nighttime attack on the neighboring tribe would bring.

The women, reduced in those times to the condition of the least well-treated domestic animals, mended the furs and garments that adorned the mighty Triptolemo and the indefatigable Nemrod, and they prepared dried meat, fighting with dogs over the scraps—such were the rewards of motherhood.

Dominating the camp on a not very high hill stood the chief's tent, where he and the elders organized the raids and resolved disputes within the tribe via verdicts that had nothing in common with justice.

The descent of *El Anacronópete* into that fertile valley produced in the nomadic people the kind of superstitious and fearful reaction that the ignorant always show to the unknown. Startled awake by the shouts of the lookouts, they all readied their slings, drew their staves, and ran to the elders where they uneasily asked whether they should prepare themselves to attack or defend.

Although the descent of the vehicle had something of the supernatural to their eyes and the clothes of the expedition members increased the level of confusion, the smallness of the party relative to the tribe boosted the locals' confidence, and they decided to let the travelers advance, planning to relieve them of their goods in a timely fashion and distribute their women among the most distinguished tribesmen before the nighttime attack on the enemy village.

Just then, a blackish cloud, which had recently come over the horizon, filled the valley with darkness and let loose a torrential downpour.

"Quick! Into the tent!" cried Benjamin, having arrived with his companions at the shelter of the elders.

"It seems to me that they want to welcome us like family," whispered Juanita on seeing the demeanor of the people, but then a challenge came.

“Why have you come to disturb the serenity of our fields?”

“We are wandering travelers, seeking hospitality.”

“You must pay for it.”

“We are exhausted,” continued the polyglot. “Can you not restore our lost strength with some food?”



And the truth is that, tired of quail, the travelers would have paid any price for a modest garlic soup casserole.

“Food for your garbs,” replied the chief. “Nothing is free here.”

They agreed to the terms of the exchange, and an order was issued to serve milk, fruit and some lamb. Meanwhile, the storm was raging and the echo of the lightning strikes in the valley produced an impressive noise.

“Look! Just look at this gathering of venerable elders” repeated Benjamin over and over, contemplating with delight the culmination of his quest being delivered by those greying heads. “Surely they are the ones who possess the secret of immortality.”

“Juzt how old are you, grandpa?”

“Five hundred and seventy-five,” replied the man when Benjamin translated Pendencia’s question.

“Your twin!” Juanita told Don Sindulfo who, engrossed in his own thoughts, let out a small smile of satisfaction each time a lightning strike illuminated the inside of the tent with its eerie light.

“Zo, you muzt know Muhammad,” said a confused Pendencia.

“I think it prudent,” interjected the captain of the Hussars, “that while they are arranging for our food, you clear up your little immortality puzzle so that we may quickly be back underway to our own land.”

“Yes...all my dreams are now there for the taking.”

Trembling with emotion and surrounded by companions who, after so many dangers, also hoped to savor the delights of victory, the paleographer took out the cordage found in Pompeii and eagerly showing them to the chief, Benjamin said, “I wonder if you might decipher this writing, of which I have been able to interpret only the first few characters.”

All the onlookers held their breath. The five-hundred year old patriarch fingered the knots and, spewed forth a raucous guffaw.

“Behold!” he exclaimed, passing the document among the others, who with their irreverent signs of contempt turned the elder’s hilarity into a choir.

“What does it say?” asked a bewildered Benjamin.

“This is all nonsense of that dreamer, Noah: He’s spread this advice to all the tribes on how to live to heal from what he calls ‘the corruption of mankind.’”

“What?” interrupted Benjamin’s companions, sensing a disappointment.

The chief continued. “Noah knows that we live by theft, looting and violence, and he claims that God, whom we do not follow, is going to punish us with his wrath.”

“Has He not already punished you with the Deluge?” objected Benjamin in response to the shameless, public confession.

“The Deluge? I don’t know of it. We came here from a far-off land.”

“But have you not experienced a great flood?”

“Not in my days.”

“Well, back in Madrid, at the Ateneo, I did note that the cataclysm had not been universal. So, to return to the topic at hand, it says here that ‘If you want to be immortal, go to the land of Noah and...’”

“‘And he—’” interrupted the old man, interpreting the writing—“‘shall teach you to know God, giving unto you eternal life.’”

The time travelers could not repress an indignant reaction against Benjamin for the reduction to a morality lesson of what they’d hope to be precious practical recipe for immortality. Everything fit together perfectly: the knotted cords passed down through uncounted generations had been buried under Nero’s statue by some Christian inhabitant of Campania eager to escape the persecutions of the first century; and the westerner in China was a descendant, the holder of the

secret, hoping to induce Ho-nan to spread the word of the Savior as a precursor to glorious conquests of Catholic missions to the far east.

“So, this means...?” stammered the blushing polyglot.

“That you made us go through hell,” said Juanita, “to learn what we, as toddlers, already knew from the catechism of Father Ripalda.”

“And you are the two wise zcientitz!”

The obscenities and tirades did not end until a frightful climax that, seeming to upend the very foundation of the world, produced a dead silence.

Suddenly, the clouds let loose a torrent of rain, as if waterfalls spewed from the sky, and everyone instinctively tried to exit the tent, but they were met by an entering lookout with an errant look.

“Save yourselves!” he said with terror. “The sky is falling, rivers have overflowed their banks, and the valley has disappeared under a roiling sea of foam. To the mountain!”

“To the mountain!” shouted a pair of tribesmen, one racing from the tent and the other snatched out by the hurricane winds.

The women had fainted, preventing an escape by the other time travelers who, to their horror, saw corpses floating by in the water side-by-side with those who still struggled for the heights, their way illuminated only by serpentine lightning strikes over the black backdrop of the horizon—and all the while, the battering waters climbed higher and higher toward the mound that served as scant refuge.

“An imprezive downpour, gentlemen. Could it be the Deluge?”

“Impossible,” said Benjamin. That disaster took place in the year 3308 before Jesus Christ, and we have made it to but 2971, or 337 years later.”

“And now I have my revenge!” Don Sindulfo bellowed joyfully with a diabolical satisfaction.

“What?”

“You shut me up like a wild animal in the clock-room, and I slowed them all to falsify your computations and thereby turn you and I alike into victims of this universal conflagration.”

A prolonged wail greeted the words of the ruthless madman. The situation was untenable; water swept debris all around the feet of the travelers, and the darkness was so deep that any object more than two steps away was indistinguishable. Luís strength began to weaken under the load of holding up his precious cargo. Nevertheless, he tried to climb with her to the very tip of the promontory, but a gust toppled him, throwing Clara out of his arms and into the abyss.

“Leave her to me!” said Pendencia. “I can swim like an anchovy!” He threw himself into the water—tumbling back and forth without harm because of the inalterability procedure—but rather than sinking into the raging water, he then found himself, together with Clara, raised up onto a hard, solid surface. A curtain of lightning lit up the sky, and by its illumination, the fearless soldier took in a view and let out a sharp scream singing a hymn of praises to his companions about Providence’s inexhaustible goodness.

“The crab!” he exclaimed, recognizing the shape of *El Anacronopete* and likening it to an inverted crustacean.

It was indeed the vehicle, dragged there by the current and floating on the waves lapping up the hill as if it were a pier in a graveyard of floating bodies.

Even with bloodshot eyes, Don Sindulfo was first to comprehend the news, bringing forth in him a blind rage.



Entrance was achieved without difficulty via the ship's outside balcony which received Clara, her rescuer, and—a few seconds later—the other expedition members; and neatly slicing through the rain and lightning strikes, they soon found themselves back in their original state, sailing through a most diaphanous and quiet atmosphere.

They all noticed that they were aloft, but being

engaged with providing aid to the sick and given their concern about the duration of the ladies' blackouts, no one thought to ask who had actually put the colossus underway. Finally Luís—fearing that his poor uncle, by reason of insanity, was committing some new offence—posted four lookouts around the driving mechanism with orders to alert him to any movement within so many square feet of the area.

In the first few hours, they despaired of ever saving the seemingly lifeless women who had come so far through so many vicissitudes; but be it remembered that youth, even in the dregs of defeat, can draw upon indisputable reserves to overcome crises, and thus did our sympathetic travelers have a quick and absolute return to their faculties.

They embraced as people do after having survived some great danger, which also, it seems to me, explains why at that point they had neither cares nor fears—indeed, no thoughts but the happiness that awaited them on their return.

“Ah!” said Juanita, “I shall return to Madrid, to hear ovations in *La Correspondencia*...”

“No, no: Each ewe muzt go with her ram. You, my captain, with the lady; Don Muumuu with the emprez; and I with the maidzervant (kindly excuze my manner of adress)”—the lady from Pinto gave him a loving punch in the back—“and together we go to the parrish, the priezt mutterz zome words, and we live happily ever after.”

“At this rate, it won't be long,” added Luís.

That was when the polyglot determined their dizzying speed, but not knowing whether such recklessness was advisable, he quietly retreated to the clockroom to consult the timepieces which, to his great astonishment, he found disassembled, hands fixed to the year 3308, the time of the Deluge, which they had departed six hours before.

“What’s happened?” he wondered, alarmed. He returned to the laboratory and opened one of the portholes to determine their position. It was horrible: The alternations between light and darkness were happening like the clanging of an electric bell in which the transitions between sound and silence are so short as to leave no perceptible space. Occasionally, *El Anacronópete* paused, seemingly seeking a moment of rest until this new Wandering Jew resumed his course as if an inner voice prompted him on: “Onward.”

Benjamin took advantage of these phenomena to examine the incomprehensible situation, scanning outward with the telescope only to see an unending parade of the decomposition of nature. Now, crossing ancient Greece, its mythical secrets open for the taking, he comprehended that the Cyclopes were nothing more than the first mineworkers deep in the bowels of the earth, each sporting a lantern on his forehead, only to be turned into a single eye by later poets; on having crossed over Asia and into the Americas, he was surprised to find that the Siberians had been the first residents of the lands discovered by Columbus, seeing them cross in caravans what was then an isthmus that would become the open waters of the Behring strait; the Mediterranean did not exist; the Alps were but a plain, the Libyan Desert a sea. After the children of Cain, appeared Abel’s corpse, and after Eden, the Creation...

Loud laughter shook Benjamin from his stupor. Don Sindulfo, enjoying the archaeologist’s astonishment, was shouting in a paroxysm of madness.

“You provoked my vengeance, and I refused to retreat from the provocation.”

“What?” exclaimed all the others, sensing some new misfortune.

“You thought to walk forward, but as you can see, you kept going back.”

“So, are we done with these ordeals now?” asked Juanita.

“We forgot to tie him up.”

“Let’s change course!”

“Yes.”

“It’s useless,” continued the lunatic, laughing convulsively. “Don’t you see our speed has increased fivefold? Nothing can stop us: I have destroyed the controls, and *El Anacronópete* runs headlong into the primordial, white hot essence.”

“Horrors!”

“Death awaits us in the chaos.”

“Chaos!”

“Look.”

And indeed, through the porthole glowed a dim light that marked the beginning of the natural world and the end of formless emptiness; but, continuing backward, chaos gradually but persistently increased, and soon, not even thick, port glass would be enough to hold back the flood of water, Earth and fire, all agitated in a suspension of air via periodic violent collisions that propelled the floating vehicle through that incandescent matter. The inalterability procedure that they’d all undergone had lost its potency; asphyxia was overtaking the travelers. The walls could no longer stop the heat, and finally the glass melted, letting forth a torrent of igneous substances with the boom of a hundred volcanoes!!!. . . . .

At the conclusion of the performance of Jules Verne’s comedy, the audience at the theater of *Porte Saint Martin* applauded the inventiveness of the author. Juanita, sitting with Pendencia and the military attachés

sent by our government to the Paris exhibition, occupied gallery seats. Clara, married just the day before to Luis, sat with him in a proscenium box, acknowledging the admiring glances of curious onlookers. They were accompanied by her guardian and his inseparable friend, the archaeologist who had been an integral part of Don Sindulfo's existence since the loss of his mute wife on the beaches of Biarritz, and together, the two had been drawn to the modern Babylon by the lure of the scientific assembly.

And now we understand the rest: The guardian had slept and dreamed. On the road to Paris, he'd told the dream to his family, and they all laughed greatly, which I doubt very much has happened to you, dear reader, with this story. And yet, we must recognize that my work has at least one merit: that a son of Spain has dared to try to bring time itself alive, whereas, on the contrary, it is well known that to kill time is the almost exclusive vocation of the Spanish.



Kindly visit [storypilot.com](http://storypilot.com) for more adventures in time travel.

© 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014 Michael Main

---

Notes and Links:

CHAPTER I:

p. 10, *Courts of Spain*: I think this refers to Madrid, where Felipe II moved the royal courts in 1561. Saragossa lies to the northeast.

p. 10, *Jules Verne*: His stories referenced here include *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, *Around the World in 80 Days*, *The Purchase of the North Pole* (aka *Topsy-Turvy*), and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.

p. 13, *the Traitor of Sedan*: Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte (as Emperor Napoléon III) lost the Battle of Sedan on 2 September 1870 and was deposed two days later.

p. 13, *Robespierre's reign of terror*: In 1794 Maximilien Robespierre instituted a policy of government violence to crush revolution. The period of terror (5 September 1793 to 28 July 1794) ended with Robespierre's execution.

CHAPTER II:

p. 16: Parfumerie Violet and The House of Ed Pinaud were French perfume houses.

p. 17, *the Paredeses or the Córdobaes*: Perhaps the Paredeses are those Garcíaes descended from Diego García de Paredes, notable military figure in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

p. 17, *La Malibrán*: Opera singer María Malibrán (“La Malibrán,” born María Felicitas García Sitches) was famed for her stormy personality. She died 23 September 1836 at the age of 28.

p. 17, *La Bernaola*: Manuela Dolores “La Bernaola” Díaz was executed for murder on 17 June 1859 in Madrid. See Chapter 3 in Sirvientas asesinas.

p. 18, *1079 million cubic myriameters*: One myriameter is 10,000 meters, so this volume is  $1.079 \times 10^{21}$  meters, quite close to the modern estimate for the Earth’s volume.

#### CHAPTER III:

p. 24, *nearly seven thousand years*: the biblical age of the world.

p. 27, *Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra*: Spanish novelist, poet and playwright (1547-1616), author of *don Quixote*.

p. 31, *that pastry chef from Madrigal*: After King Sebastian I of Portugal disappeared in battle in August 1578, Gabriel de Espinosa—a pastry chef of Madrigal—claimed that he was the missing king. He was hanged, beheaded and quartered.

#### CHAPTER IV:

p. 33, *the Peloponnesian War*: [from the PBS show, The Greeks, Crucible of Civilization] “Gossip maintained the war had started because allies of Sparta had kidnapped the best girls from Aspasia’s brothel, a tall story later made into a comic play by Aristophanes. Another comic playwright actually tried to have Aspasia prosecuted for impiety and only Pericles’ personal intervention spared her from possible exile.” See also Plutarch’s The Life of Pericles.

p. 35, *the siege of Saguntum*: in the first phase of the second Punic war.

p. 35: *Apis* was a bull deity in Egyptian mythology.

p. 35, *Ambrosio's rifle*: In Mexico, the “the rifle of Ambrosio” refers to any useless object, such as a rifle loaded with grain instead of gunpowder. I found one earlier reference to a 19<sup>th</sup> century man, Ambrosio of Seville, who exchanged his plow for a rifle full of hemp seed, though I didn't really understand why!

p. 36, *Herodotus*: Greek Historian, 5th century BC

p. 36, *Colonel Bagnole*: Gaspar calls the man Colonel Bagnole, but I found no references to that name. A footnote in another translation indicated that the name should be Colonel Michael E. Bagnold, and a search for that turned up a reference in Dunglison's American Medical Library to Lieut-Colonel M.E. Bagnold, who gave details of the Egyptian embalming process in the 1836 *Proceedings of the Royal Asiatic Society*.

p. 39, *Espartero*: Baldomero Espartero, Prince of Vergara, and Spanish Regent 1840-1843.

p. 40, *favorite beach of the empress*: Empress Eugenie, the wife of Napoleon III, built a palace on the beach at Biarritz.

p. 41, *Croesus*: renowned wealthy king of Lydia.

p. 41, *Maritornes*: a vulgar servant-wench whom Don Quixote mistakes for royalty.

p. 44, *Don Bartolo*: Protector of Rosina in Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*.

## CHAPTER V:

p.48, *the language of Racine*: French playwright Jean Racine.

p. 48, *medianito*: I think this is a long cigar.

p. 70, *Les Invalides*: a district of museums and monuments in Paris.

## CHAPTER VI:

p. 58, *Olympiad*: the four years from one Olympic Games to the next in ancient Greece.

## CHAPTER VII:

p. 68, *Liberales*, such as Baldomero Espartero and Juan Prim, were 18<sup>th</sup> century Spanish defenders of the rights of Ferdinand VII's daughter (Isabella II) to secede to the throne.

p. 69, *Calomarde* was a Spanish statesman and notoriously bad uncle.

p. 70, *Les Invalides* is an architectural district of museums, monuments and temples in Paris.

## CHAPTER VIII:

p. 73, *the Paris Commune*: the fourth French Revolution in 1871.

p. 74, *Doña Cava and the Count Rodrigo*: This paragraph refers to the Battle of Guadalete and the events which surrounded it.

## CHAPTER IX:

p. 85, the Battle of Tétouan was fought in the first days of 1860 near Tétouan, Morocco, in a region called the Rif.

p.85, *ferrotype portrait*: The original text uses the term *garrotipo*, which I can guess is a photographic technology similar to daguerreotypes, ambrotypes and ferrotypes in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. But (from the one mention I found), I don't think *garrotipo* is identical to those three better-documented technologies. Still, I decided to use *ferrotype* as the translation here.

p. 86, *diorama*: Gaspar uses the word *titirimundi*, which I found described as a kind of panoramic painting or diorama, from the Italian *tutti il mundi*. My wife, Janet, also found an amazing article on 19<sup>th</sup> century panoramas, which noted that “During the panorama craze of the early 1800s, audiences flocked by the thousands to witness the latest spectacular representations of nature, battle scenes, and exotic locations in 360 degree painted panoramas displayed in purpose-built circular rotundas.”

p. 86, *Lumen*, first published in French in 1867, also had an 1897 English translation.

p. 89, a *star fort* is a star-shaped fort that evolved in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century to provide more protection against cannonfire than a fort with walls that would be perpendicular to the bombardment.

#### Chapter X:

p. 103, *Kabila*: a member of a Barbary tribe, living in that part of Morocco that *El Anacronópete* visited.

#### Chapter XI:

p. 105, the *Celestial Empire* (天朝) is the traditional name for ancient China.

p. 108: Possibly *G. Battista Pedranzini*, a Catholic missionary to China, although I don't know the dates of

his mission. See the Ricci Institute's [History of Christianity in China](#).

Chapter XII:

p. 114: [Boabdil](#), the last Arabian ruler of Granada in Spain.

p. 121: [Cesare Cantù](#), Italian historian.

p. 122: *Legatus* [ambassador] *tuus* [your] *multa* [tedious] *fecit* [to bring about] *rustice* [rustic].

Chapter XIII:

p. 126: the [Yellow Turbin Rebellion](#) of 184 A.D.

Chapter XV:

p. 147: the throne of [Fo-Hi](#), first supreme ruler and god-emperor of China

Chapter XVII:

p. 167: The Nazarene refers to [Jesus Christ](#).

p. 167: [Nero](#) was the son of [Agrippina the Younger](#).

p. 169: The *bestiaris* are gladiators or condemned prisoners who fought wild beasts. The *secutores* and *dimaqueres* are various forms of armed combat.

p. 170: [fascēs](#) were a bundle of rods with a protruding ax born before Roman officials as an emblem of power.

p. 174: Don Juan Bautista Carrasco's *Mitologia*.

p. 176: [Cypselus](#), an early tyrant.

p. 178: Parts of Benjamin's lecture come from Don Juan Bautista Carrasco's *Mitologia Universal*. The part that I first noticed was in researching Michael Boim, of which Benjamin says, *Lo propio hacen, dice Michael Boim*,

*los habitantes del fuerte de Mieu, junto á Bengala y Pegú, sirviéndose del Areca, especie de palmera, y de la corteza del árbol llamado Avo.* Carrasco's [original text](#) reads, *Lo propio hacen, segun Michael Boim, los habitants del fuerte de Mieu, junto Bengala y Pegú, pues escriben sobre las johas del Areca, especie de palmera, y en la corteza del árbol llamado Avo.* Much of the rest of Benjamin's talk comes from this 1864 work as well.

p. 182: I don't understand the reference to the Patriarchs. It seems like it should be something Armenian rather than the biblical [Patriarchs](#), who are Abraham and his descendants.

Chapter XVIII:

p. 191: [Pepe-Hillo](#), an 18<sup>th</sup> century bullfighter.

Chapter XIX:

Chapter XIX:

p. 200: Pangloss, an eternal optimist in Voltaire's *Candide*.

Chapter XX:

p. 211: I took the *Ateneo* to be the [Ateneo de Madrid](#).

p. 218: In the original Spanish, the author writes that he has tried to *deshacer tiempo* (to "undo time"), while it is well known that to *hacer tiempo* (to "do time," meaning to pass the time of day) is the almost exclusive vocation of the Spanish.