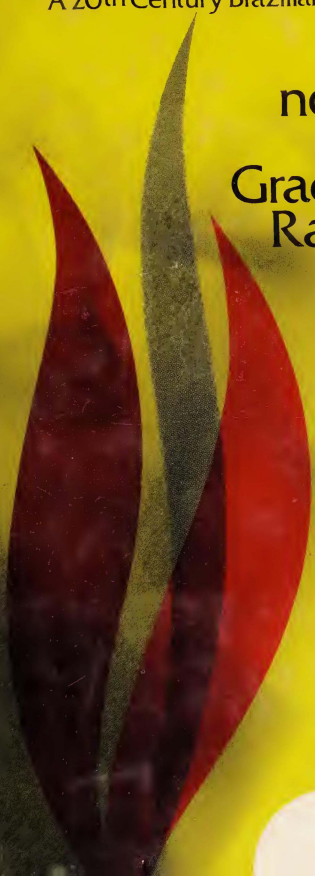


São Bernardo

A 20th Century Brazilian Classic

a
novel
by
Graciliano
Ramos



São Bernardo

Graciliano Ramos

São Bernardo is considered to be the masterpiece of one of Brazil's most important writers. Set in the backlands of northeastern Brazil with its poverty-stricken peasants, its violence and feuds, and the decay of the old landed aristocracy, it is the story of the rise and fall of Paulo Honório. In his blunt, first-person account, Paulo tells of his journey up from the slums and prison and his single-minded pursuit of the ownership of the hacienda, São Bernardo, where he had once worked as day laborer.

Ramos's almost spartan prose, his subtle characterization, his taut style, and trenchant psychological insights are fully revealing of the inner Paulo Honório behind the brutal exterior. In the end Honório's marriage to Madalena and the tragic consequences tear away the protective shell that has hidden his real humanity from himself. This brilliant novel is superbly translated by R. L. Scott-Buccleuch.

About the author

Graciliano Ramos was born in 1892 and grew up in this primitive area of northeastern Brazil. He held several government posts in education, and his second novel, *São Bernardo*, established his reputation after its publication in 1934. In 1936 under Getulio Vargas's dictatorship he was imprisoned and given a post as a federal inspector of education. He wrote three other novels as well as some short stories, an autobiography entitled *Childhood*, and an account of his imprisonment. Since his death in 1953 he has been considered one of Brazil's foremost writers.

São Bernardo

GRACILIANO RAMOS

São Bernardo

A novel

translated from the Portuguese by

R. L. Scott-Buccleuch

TAPLINGER PUBLISHING COMPANY
New York

First published in 1979 by
TAPLINGER PUBLISHING CO., Inc.
New York, New York

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English translation © Peter Owen Ltd. 1975
Translated from the Portuguese *São Bernardo*

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Ramos, Graciliano, 1892—1953
São Bernardo.

Translation of São Bernardo.

I. Title.

[PZ3.R1477Sao 1979] [PQ9697.R254] 869'.3 78-27169
ISBN 0-8008-6991-5

Printed in the United States of America

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

Though as yet little known to the general reading public outside Brazil, Graciliano Ramos (1892-1953) needs no introduction to students of Brazilian literature. Indeed, few will deny him a place in the foremost rank of modern Brazilian writers or question the considerable influence he still exerts today, more than twenty years after his death. And, though not a popular novelist in any sense of the word, his work is now reaching a wider audience than he could have imagined, thanks to the fact that two of his four novels, *São Bernardo* and *Vidas Secas*, have been made into successful films.

Graciliano Ramos, like José Lins do Rego and Jorge Amado, was one of a group of writers who chose the impoverished north east of Brazil as the setting for their work. Their writing, deeply imbued with social consciousness, records the profound changes brought about by the slow influx of modern ideas, and the sufferings of a region afflicted by the hostility of nature and the indifference of the authorities.

The action of *São Bernardo* takes place in Alagoas, the author's native state, in the late 1920s and early 1930s. By this time the break-up of the old semi-feudal estates and the ruin of their patriarchal owners was almost complete. Ruthless and ambitious men, over whom the forces

of law and order maintained only a precarious hold, disputed the possession of lands which, properly cultivated, could bring immense wealth to their owners in a short space of years. This was a time of long and violent feuds, amounting almost to warfare, in which individuals, families and, inevitably, political parties were involved. The exploited labouring classes, whose condition under their new masters was, if anything, worse than before, turned for consolation to strange religious cults or listened to communist theories, while the more militant young men took up arms to join the *Cangaceiros*, private bandit armies who waged ceaseless war in the backlands.

The 1930 Revolution referred to in *São Bernardo* effectively destroyed what remained of the power of the old land-owning aristocracy. But the triumph of its left wing supporters was short lived: the new president, Getulio Vargas, eventually assumed dictatorial powers, instituting the *Estado Novo* with its openly fascist tendencies. Paulo Honório, had he known it, had little reason to fear the introduction of the soviet.

Graciliano Ramos is not so much concerned with the broader background of national events or natural catastrophes as with the way they affect the lives and characters of individuals. All his novels tell of the struggle of an individual against the hostile forces of nature or society, and all end in suffering and tragedy. There may be glimpses of a kind of heroism but no real hope penetrates the general gloom.

The author achieves his effects through the combination of profound psychological insight with a Portuguese style that is taut, terse and almost spartan in its bareness. The qualities of this style are not easy to convey in English and Ramos's fondness for regional idioms, not commonly used in the rest of Brazil and frequently obscure in meaning, further add to the difficulties of the translator.

Wherever possible, references to currency have been simplified. The monetary unit used was the milreis (a thousand reals), a thousand of which formed a conto. During the period covered by the story the exchange rate varied from approximately three to six milreis to the pound sterling.

Rio de Janeiro
September, 1974

R. L. Scott-Buccleuch

I

Before beginning this book I had the idea of putting it together by the division of labour.

I appealed to some of my friends, and almost all of them declared their willingness to contribute towards the advancement of Brazilian letters. Father Silvestre would be responsible for the moral side and the Latin quotations; João Nogueira agreed to take charge of punctuation, orthography and syntax; our typographer would be Arquimedes, while to be literary supervisor I invited Lúcio Gomes de Azevedo Gondim, editor and director of the *Cruzeiro*. I, for my part, would draw up the general plan, introduce into the story some rudiments of agriculture and cattle-breeding, foot the expenses and put my name on the cover.

I spent an exhilarating week in conference with my principal collaborators, picturing to myself rows of volumes and a thousand copies sold, thanks to the eulogies which, with the death of Costa Brito, I had been kind enough to place in the tottering *Gazeta*. But my high hopes were dashed: I realized we just did not see eye to eye.

João Nogueira wanted the novel to be written in the language of Camões, with the sentences back to front. Think of it! Father Silvestre received me coldly. Ever since the October revolution he'd been like a wild beast, demanding rigorous investigations and punishments for those who didn't wear a red scarf. All I got was a scowl. And we were friends! So he's a patriot. That's all right by me – we all have our eccentricities. I dropped him from

the team, and my hopes were now centred on Lúcio Gomes de Azevedo Gondim, an easy-going journalist who writes what he's told.

We worked for a few days. In the afternoon Azevedo Gondim would hand over the office to Arquimedes, lock the drawer where he kept the cash, take his bicycle and arrive at S. Bernardo after half an hour's pedalling along the road that Casimiro Lopes had been trying to repair with two or three men. There he would comment on the news in the papers, attack the government, drink a glass of cognac brought by Maria das Dores, and then, feeling the occasion demanded it, humbly propose :

'Shall we get down to it?'

At first all went well, there being no differences between us. We talked at great length, but each one was listening to his own words, paying no attention to what the other was saying. For my part, I was so carried away by my enthusiasm for the subject that I quite forgot about Gondim's character, even to the extent of regarding him as a kind of blank sheet of paper destined to receive the confused ideas that were buzzing around in my head.

It ended in disaster. A fortnight after our first meeting the editor of the *Cruzeiro* handed me two typewritten chapters so full of gibberish that I lost my temper.

'Damn you, Gondim ! You've mucked up the whole thing. You conceited ass ! You crook ! You nitwit ! Nobody speaks like that !'

The smile vanished from Azevedo Gondim's face ; he gave a gulp and, mustering the remnants of his miserable little vanity, replied that an artist can't write as he speaks.

'Can't he?' I asked in astonishment. 'And why not?'

Azevedo Gondim replied that it can't be done because it can't be done. 'That's how it's always been. Literature is literature. You can argue, quarrel, talk business naturally enough, but the written word is quite a different matter.

If I were to write as I speak no one would read me.'

I got up and leaned on the balustrade to have a closer look at the Limousin bull Marciano was leading to the stable. A cricket began to chirp. Old Margarida, bent double, was coming along the wall of the dam. In the church tower an owl hooted. I gave a shudder, thinking of Madalena. I began to fill my pipe.

'It's the very devil, Gondim. Everything's gone to pot. Three attempts come to nothing in a single month! Have a brandy, Gondim.'

II

I abandoned the project, but the other day the hooting of the owl caused me to resume my literary labours abruptly, making use solely of my own resources and without considering whether this would bring me any advantage, either direct or indirect.

In the end it was a good thing to deprive myself of the co-operation of Father Silvestre, João Nogueira and Gondim. There are certain things that I would not reveal, face to face, to anyone; but I intend to recount them here because this work will be published under a *non de plume*. And if they find out I'm the author, naturally they'll call me a liar.

But to proceed. What I intend to do is to tell the story of my life. A difficult job! I may perhaps omit to mention some useful particulars that seem to me dispensable, mere side-issues. Or it may be that, living so much among clodhoppers, I don't have sufficient faith in the understanding of my readers to repeat unimportant episodes. Anyway, as can be seen, this is put together in no sort of order.

That doesn't matter. As my workmen say, all roads lead to one end – in their case the bar.

Seated here at the dining-room table, smoking my pipe and drinking coffee, I sometimes pause in my slow task, look out into the night at the dark foliage of the orange trees, and tell myself what a burdensome object a pen is. I'm not used to thinking. I get up and go to the window that looks out on to the garden. Casimiro Lopes asks if there's anything I want.

'No.'

Casimiro Lopes squats down in a corner. I return to my seat and re-read these idle phrases. Think of it. If I had half Madalena's education I could do this standing on my head. I've finally come to realize that all those books had their uses.

One thing is certain, when it comes to writing I can get by in statistics, cattle-raising, agriculture, book-keeping – knowledge which is quite useless in this type of work. If I make use of it I run the risk of using technical expressions unknown to the general public and being looked upon as a pedant. And it's obvious that at fifty I'm not going to start trying to pick up ideas I didn't get round to when I was young.

I didn't get round to them because they didn't attract me and because I set my face in a different direction. My aim in life was to own S. Bernardo and its lands, to build this house, plant cotton and castor beans, put up the saw-mill and the seed-removing plant, replace the scrub with fruit and poultry farms and build up a good herd of cattle. This seems easy now, after the event, but at the beginning, when you're desperately looking round for somewhere to make a start, the difficulties are tremendous. Then there's the chapel that I built at the suggestion of Father Silvestre.

Being engaged on these undertakings, I acquired neither João Nogueira's learning nor Gondim's nonsense. My

readers, therefore, will have the goodness to translate this into literary language if that's what they want. If not, they won't be losing much. I make no claim to be a writer. It's too late to change one's profession. And my little son crying over there needs someone to look after him and show him how to get on in life.

Then why am I writing?

God knows!

And the worst thing is I've already spoiled several pages and haven't even begun.

'Maria das Dores – another cup of coffee.'

Two chapters wasted. Perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad thing to make use of Gondim's, after I've corrected them.

III

Let me begin by stating that my name is Paulo Honório, I weigh 196 pounds, and I celebrated my fiftieth birthday last St Peter's day. My age and weight, together with these grey bushy eyebrows and this red, hairy face of mine, have earned me considerable respect – respect which was not so pronounced when these assets were lacking.

But to be honest, my exact age and the St Peter's day birthday were adopted by me for convenience since that's how it appears in the parish register of baptisms. I have the certificate, which mentions godparents but makes no mention of either father or mother. Quite likely they had good reason for not wishing to be known. Anyway that's the reason why I can't celebrate my exact day of birth. And if there is any difference it can't amount to much: a month more or a month less. It's of no consequence, and more important events suffer the same uncertainties.

I am, therefore, the originator of a family, a fact which if on the one hand is to be regretted, on the other relieves me of the inconvenience of being burdened with poor relations, a species who thrust themselves with shameless persistence on to those who are working their way up.

If I were to attempt an account of my childhood I'd be obliged to lie. It appears I just knocked around in complete idleness. I recall a blind man who used to twist my ears, and old mother Margarida who sold candy. The blind man is dead now, but mother Margarida lives here in S. Bernardo. It costs me ten milreis a week, which is enough to make up for all that she did for me. She's a hundred years old, and any day now I'll be buying her a shroud and having her buried near the high altar in the chapel.

Until I was eighteen I sweated as a labourer, earning five cents for twelve hours' work. It was then I committed my first act worthy of note. At a shindig that ended up as a free-for-all, I got an armful of Germana, a dishy mulatta, and pinched her ass a real treat. She just about pissed herself for joy. Next moment she's off making up to João Fagundes, a type who changed his name to steal horses. Result was she felt the weight of my fist and I stuck my knife in João Fagundes. Then the police took me, and when I recovered from the lashing they gave me I spent three years, nine months and fifteen days rotting in jail, where I learned to read with Joaquim, the cobbler, who owned one of those tiny bibles the protestants have.

Joaquim the cobbler died. Germana went to the bad. When I got out she was in the trade, door open and all clapped up.

At that time I wasn't thinking any more about her; I was thinking about making money. I got myself put on the electoral roll, and Pereira, a money-lender and political bigwig, lent me a hundred milreis at five per cent a month. I paid back the hundred milreis and borrowed another two

hundred with the interest cut to three and a half per cent. It never went any lower, and I studied arithmetic so as not to be robbed more than it suited me.

I twisted in Pereira's grasp like an animal at the gelder's (to put it grossly). He bled me white, the scoundrel. I got my own back later: he mortgaged his property to me and I took the lot, his shirt included. But that was much later.

At first no money came my way, though I hunted it tirelessly, travelling through the interior trading in hammocks, cattle, images, rosaries and various odds and ends, making a bit here, losing a bit there, working on credit, signing promissory notes and engaging in the most complicated negotiations. I suffered hunger and thirst, slept in the sand of dried-up rivers, quarrelled with types who scream your head off when they speak, and conducted commercial transactions with revolver at the ready. Here's one example. Dr Sampaio bought a herd of cattle off me, but when it came to forking out he gave me the brush-off, cool as you like. I begged and pleaded, got people to intercede, did everything, but he remained as rigid as the rim of a church bell. I gave him a tale of misery – how I had scores of obligations to meet, that this wasn't fair-play, etc., the whole works. The shifty-eyed villain, a swell and a big gun in his own town, gave me back a lecture. I didn't give up; I picked some lads in Cancalancó and ambushed him on his way to the fazenda. I tied him up and hauled him into the bush, ripping his hide on the thorns and cactus.

'Now we can get down to business.'

The doctor, who taught rats to gnaw through oil cans, blustered about justice and religion.

'What justice? I don't know any justice or religion. What I do know is that you're going to cough up thirty contos plus six months' interest here and now. You either pay up or I'll have you bled little by little.'

Dr Sampaio wrote a note to his family and that same day handed me thirty contos three hundred. Casimiro Lopes acted as messenger. I wrote out the receipt, thanked him and took my leave.

'Thanks, may God reward you. I'm sorry to have put you out. Goodbye. And don't think of coming after me with your justice or I'll really lose my temper, and your death won't be a pretty one.'

I didn't return to those parts. If I did, I knew perfectly well I'd get my head bashed in and my face ripped about so that I wouldn't be recognized when they found me with my teeth sticking through, grinning at the sun, and all my money gone – the money I kept inside a large cattle-bell stuffed with leaves that hung from my saddle-bow. It was safe there: if the money and the leaves fell out the bell would tinkle.

Eventually tiring of a wandering life, I went back to my own part of the world. Casimiro Lopes, who was not the one to tempt the devil, went with me. I like him. He's fearless, can lasso and track, and has both the nose and the fidelity of a dog.

IV

I decided to settle down here in my home town, Viçosa, Alagoas, and before long was scheming to take over the estate of S. Bernardo, where I had worked as a labourer for a wage of five cents.

My former boss, Salustiano Padilha, who all his life had stinted himself disgracefully in order that his son should be a doctor, had ended up by dying of stomach trouble and hunger, without seeing the coveted title in the family. I

set out to meet young Padilha (Luís) casually, giving no hint of any ulterior motive. I found him in the billiards saloon playing baccarat, blind drunk. Gambling is, of course, a profession, though not the most admirable, but the man who drinks while he's playing needs his head examined. After watching for half an hour I could see the lad was a novice and was being robbed shamelessly.

I struck up a friendship with him and in two months lent him two contos which he promptly frittered away on cards, parties and loose women at the 'Breadcrust'. This folly didn't displease me, and when one day, completely broke again, he came to invite me to a S. João party at the fazenda, I let him have another five hundred milreis. On seeing the promissory note I affected indifference.

'What's this for? Between us . . . such formalities!'

But I kept the paper.

I found the property in ruins: nothing but weeds and insects. Some walls of the main house had fallen in and the paths were just about impassable. But the soil was splendid.

At night, while a stinking mass of blacks were kicking up dust in the living-room with their sambas, and the drums and flutes were beating out the national anthem, Padilha and a gang of women were gathered round a huge pot of boiled sweet corn in the weed-ridden garden. I pulled him away from this interesting occupation.

'Why don't you cultivate S. Bernardo?'

'How?' asked Padilha, rubbing his eyes because of the smoke and leaning against a papaya tree that was wilting in the heat of the fire.

'Tractors, ploughs, proper cultivation. Haven't you ever thought about it? How much do you think this would bring in if it were decently looked after?'

With his hand and lip Luís Padilha gave a gesture of ignorance, shameful in a landowner, and without attaching

any importance to the subject went back to his interrupted games and his women. But in the morning, with an atrocious hangover, he pestered me, moaning disconnected words. At every jolt of the ox-cart that was taking us to town he raised his head.

'Jus' fine, Paulo. 'S going to be hell.' He clung to one of the poles of the cart and started to vomit. Then he dozed off only to wake up sick and belching. 'Ploughs, there's nothing like ploughs.'

He came to see me the next day, still slightly under the effects of his binge.

'Paulo Honório, I've come to ask your advice. You're a practical man. . . .'

'At your service.'

'I believe I've already told you that I've made up my mind to cultivate the fazenda.'

'Sort of.'

'Well, I have. As it is, it won't do. It's producing all right, but it could produce much more. With ploughs . . . don't you agree? I've been thinking of planting manioc and putting up a modern flour-mill. What do you think?'

'You're crazy. Spoiling such fertile soil planting manioc.'

'But it's good.'

I gave no more thought to the matter, and merely let him get worked up with enthusiasm and go and discuss his project at night, at the 'Gurganema' bar, to the sound of guitars. Down by the river, clutching a bottle of booze, he would annoy his fellow carousers with harangues on seeds and chemical manures. It quite turned his head: there he was wanting to study agronomy, and before long the whole town knew about his plantations, his machinery and his flour-mill.

'How goes the farming, Padilha?'

At first he would answer, but then, recognizing the jibe

and hurt by the spitefulness of his friends, he took to avoiding people.

'The scum,' he muttered, as he allowed himself to be cheated at baccarat. 'Let's get on with it.' And no one knew whether he was referring to the partners who were fleecing him or those companions of his who ribbed him. He came to see me and unburdened himself.

'The scum! You see how it is; an ambitious scheme like this and those oafs just make a joke of it. They don't know anything round here in this dump. All they think about here is dirt and debauchery.' Filled with bitterness, and with his original decision now much weakened, he confessed to me that he had tried to get a loan from Pereira. 'The dolt! I explained it all in the clearest possible terms and proved conclusively it's a splendid deal. He didn't believe me and said he was broke. So I thought maybe you might be interested. Can you let me have twenty contos?'

I gazed in amusement at that sallow little figure, with his thin lips and rotten teeth.

'Padilha,' I said jokingly, 'have you ever rolled your own cigarettes?' Padilha bought his ready-made. 'It's handier,' I agreed, 'but more expensive. Padilha, if you'd ever rolled cigarettes you'd know how difficult it is to make a thousand of them. Now try to imagine that it's harder to earn a thousand reis than it is to roll one cigarette. And a conto has a thousand bills of a thousand reis. Twenty contos make twenty thousand one thousand reis bills. You don't seem to know that. You talk of twenty contos with that innocent face of yours as if money was old paper. Money is money.'

Padilha hung his head and muttered sulkily that he knew how to count. He went off, but kept coming back and insisting.

Padilha was stubborn, and offered a mortgage on S. Bernardo.

'Nuts! S. Bernardo isn't worth a parakeet's breakfast.

Pereira's right. Your father let the place go to pieces.'

Eventually I gave him a vague promise. 'All right. I'll think about it.' I was still thinking about it a couple of days later. 'We'll see, Padilha. Money is money.' I played this game for a week, gathering information about the age, state of health and financial situation of old man Mendonça. When I made up my mind, wise men swore I was crazy.

Padilha took the twenty contos (less what he owed me and the interest), bought a printing plant and founded the *Viçosa Mail*, an independent political newspaper of which only four numbers appeared before its place was taken by the Literary and Recreational Club. Azevedo Gondim drew up the statutes and at the first session of the general assembly Padilha was proclaimed an honorary member and honorary president for life.

As far as agriculture was concerned, Luís Padilha hung back, waiting for some catalogues of machinery that never arrived. He began to avoid me. If we happened to meet he would cower away, pretend to be absorbed in something or pull down the brim of his hat. When the first promissory note was due he fell ill. I called on him and found him hiding in the dining-room playing backgammon with João Nogueira. When he saw me he was so confused that his skinny fingers with their nicotine stains and bitten down nails trembled as he shook the dice.

From then on there was no holding him. They told me he had hotfooted it to S. Bernardo.

'What would he be doing there?'

On a certain day in winter, the last promissory note fell due. It was raining cats and dogs. Early in the morning I told Casimiro Lopes to saddle the horse, put on my riding cloak and set off. Seven and a half miles in four hours. The road was just one long bog. I saw the chimneys of Mendonça's mill and the strip of land that was always

a bone of contention between him and Salustiano Padilha. Now Bom-Sucesso's boundary fence was eating into S. Bernardo.

I headed for the house, which seemed even older and more dilapidated in the rain. The muçambê bushes hadn't been cut. I dismounted and went in, stamping my feet and rattling my spurs. Luís Padilha was sleeping in a grubby hammock in the main room, oblivious to the rain lashing on the windows and the leaks in the roof that formed puddles on the floor. I shook the loop of the hammock. The ex-director of the *Viçosa Mail* got up in astonishment.

'You here? How are you?'

'Very well, thank you.'

I sat down on a chair and presented him with the promissory notes. Padilha looked away with a shudder of distaste. 'I've been thinking about that business; I've been thinking a lot about it. I've even lost sleep over it. Yesterday morning I was intending to come over and arrange things with you. But I couldn't. This rain . . .'

'Let's forget the rain.'

'I'm in serious difficulties. I was going to propose an extension with accumulated interest. I've no funds.'

'What about the mill and the ploughs?'

'A winter like this does for everything,' Luís Padilha replied evasively. 'I've no funds but the deal is a sure thing. Now about the extension . . .'

'Save your breath. I want a settlement.'

'A settlement! Haven't I just told you that I can't. That is unless you want to accept the printing press.'

'The printing press! Are you crazy?'

'That's all I've got. It's the only way, to use what you've got. I don't deny I owe you money, but how am I going to pay with a knife at my throat? If you turned me upside down this minute there isn't a nickel would fall out of my pocket. I'm flat.'

'That's no way to talk, Padilha. These promissory notes are due.'

'But I'm broke. Do you want me to steal? There's nothing I can do, the matter's closed.'

'Closed my foot, you louse! It's only just beginning. I'll have everything you've got – I'll leave you in your shirt and underpants.'

The honorary life president of the Literary and Recreational Club became alarmed.

'Have a little patience, Paulo. Nothing is solved by quarrelling. I'll pay. Wait a few days. A debt is only bad for the one who has to pay.'

'I'm not waiting another hour. I'm being serious and you're behaving like a fool. I won't put up with any nonsense. Do you want to settle the matter amicably? Make a price for the property.'

Luís Padilha's jaw dropped and his tiny eyes opened wide. S. Bernardo was quite useless to him, but he had a sentimental attachment to the place: it was here that he hid his bitterness and his poverty, shot birds, swam in the stream and slept. He slept too much for fear of meeting Mendonça.

'Make a price.'

'Between ourselves,' the poor wretch murmured, 'I'd always hoped to keep the fazenda.'

'What for? S. Bernardo's not worth a bean. I say this as a friend. Yes, a friend. I don't want to see a buddy of mine with a noose round his neck. These lawyers are like hungry wolves, and if I get Nogueira to put them on the scent, they'll have you skin and bone. It'll cost you a packet, Padilha. What's your price?'

We talked business until nightfall. To start off with, Padilha asked eighty contos.

'Are you crazy? Your father would have given it to Fidelis for fifty. And it was dear at that price. And now

the mill's a ruin, the neighbours' cattle have broken down the gates, the houses are in disrepair, Mendonça's got his claws in. . . .'

Out of breath I paused, breathed again, and offered him thirty. He came down to seventy and we talked about something else. When the bargaining started again, I increased my offer to thirty-two. Padilha reduced his to sixty-five, swearing before his Maker that it was his last word. I too maintained that I wouldn't budge another cent because it wasn't worth it. But I made it thirty-four. Padilha, for the sake of friendship, agreed to take sixty. We wrangled for two hours, repeating the same arguments, but we couldn't agree.

I decided to talk about my travels in the interior. Then I casually insisted on the thirty-four contos and secured a reduction to fifty-five. I became generous: thirty-five. Padilha stuck firm at fifty-five, and I insulted him by saying that old man Salustiano had thrown away the money spent on his college fees. I even threatened physical violence. He dropped to fifty. I pushed my bid to forty, swearing I was doing myself an injustice. At this point it was each man for himself. Neither would give an inch. On my side I called in Mendonça, who was swallowing up the property, and the officials with their evaluation and expenses. The terrified wretch came down to forty-eight. I repented of having offered forty: it wasn't worth it, it was sheer robbery. Padilha quickly made it forty-five. I stuck on forty. Then I wanted to call the whole thing off.

'I'm in a bad way. Haven't got a bean.'

After discounting what he owed me, the balance would be payable in promissory notes. Padilha went out of his mind: he wept, commended himself to God and renounced what he'd done. Let them all come, the lawyers, the officials, the police, the devil himself. They could have everything. To hell with the agreement. To hell with the law.

'Why should I worry about the law? To hell with it!'

He'd got ways and means. Of course he had, he'd nothing to be afraid of. There were ways and means all right. He'd demand his rights through the press, and protest against his expropriation. I pretended to commiserate with him and promised to pay cash and to include a house that I owned. It was worth ten contos. Padilha said seven contos for the house and forty-three for S. Bernardo. I knocked him down two more contos: forty-two for the property and eight for the house. We haggled for another half hour before the bargain was sealed.

To prevent him changing his mind, I took Padilha into town and kept an eye on him throughout the night. Early next day the door of the trap closed on him as he signed the contract. I deducted his debt, the interest and the price of the house, and handed him seven contos five hundred and fifty milreis. I felt no remorse.

V

'You should have consulted me before buying the place,' shouted Mendonça from the other side of the fence.

'What for? The former owner was of age, wasn't he?'

'Of course he was,' answered Mendonça, thrusting forward his white beard and his hooked nose. 'But you ought to have enquired more closely before letting yourself in for trouble.'

'I'm not looking for trouble. I think we can settle this between ourselves.'

'That depends on you. The present boundaries are provisional, did you know that? We might as well get that

clear. We each keep to what's ours. There's no point in mending the fence. I'll pull it down so we can decide where it should go.'

I put it to old man Mendonça that he'd already taken over quite a bit of S. Bernardo land. I asked him to produce his documents. If we couldn't come to an agreement, the best thing to do would be to send for a lawyer and a surveyor.

'Splendid! You get yourself well in with the authorities and have me where you want me. I'm not going along with that. The fence is coming down.'

I quickly counted the men with him, then my own, and declared that the fence would not be pulled down. I was prepared to discuss the matter reasonably, but would not listen to threats. Then, half regretting my words, I moderated my language. Mendonça was a short-tempered man and it didn't suit me to quarrel with him. What I didn't want was to knuckle under at our first encounter.

Casimiro Lopes took a step forward, but I placed a restraining hand on his shoulder. Mendonça took the point and began to treat me with excessive politeness. I did the same, and as he needed some cedars that were growing near Bom-Sucesso, I offered them to him. He refused, but suggested exchanging them for some zebu heifers. I told him I didn't intend raising Indian cattle, but spoke enthusiastically about Limousin and Schwitz. Mendonça had no time for purer breeds that eat too much and can't stand up to ticks; he fattened calves for the butcher. I repeated my offer of the wood and he got excited. We spoke drily, rapidly, smiling coldly at each other. The men were suspicious. My heart was thumping as I estimated the consequences of all this play-acting. Mendonça stroked his beard.

'As far as the boundaries are concerned, I'm sure we can discuss it calmly and come to an agreement later on.'

'Of course,' said Mendonça.

We said goodbye. I carried on laying out the barbed wire and replacing old nails by new ones. Mendonça, from a distance, looked back smiling, fixing me with his red eyes.

When I returned home that evening, it was a grim-faced Casimiro Lopes who accompanied me. As I said nothing, he gave a cough and stood still. I leaned against a lemon tree, trying to dispel the dark thoughts that would not leave me.

'Bring four men tomorrow and fill in this bog. And clear this stream so that the water doesn't overflow.'

'That all?'

I thought that instead of filling in the bog it would be better to call Caetano to work in the quarry. But I didn't countermand the order, as this tends to diminish one's authority.

'That all?' asked Casimiro Lopes again.

I grasped the thought that seemed to exude from his tangled hair, his narrow forehead, his enormous cheeks and thick lips. Perhaps he was right. I'd have to be careful, avoid the woods, watch my step on the paths. And the broken-down house with its walls falling in . . .

I decided to send for Caetano and some quarrymen.

What the hell! I shook my head to drive away the glimmering of a plan.

'That's all for now.'

VI

That second year I ran into terrible difficulties. I planted castor beans and cotton, but the crop was poor, prices low, and I spent months scraping along in a desperate struggle for survival. I worked like a slave, scarcely sleeping, getting up at four in the morning, working for days in sun and rain, carrying my knife, gun and cartridge belt, and, when I stopped to rest, eating a piece of fish with a handful of flour. At night, in my hammock, I gave Casimiro Lopes his instructions. He would squat down on the mat and, though worn out, listen attentively. Sometimes Shark would bark outside and we would prick up our ears.

On one occasion we heard footsteps outside the house. I peered through a crack in the wall. It was pitch dark but I could make out a shape. The footsteps continued. The dog growled and barked.

'This too!' whispered Casimiro Lopes.

Next day I went to see Mendonça, who received me warily. We talked about one thing and another, but especially about votes. I conversed politely with his two daughters, both spinsters, and expressed regret at the death of his wife, such an excellent woman, so kind and attentive. Mendonça was astonished and asked where I had seen Dona Alexandrina.

'A long time ago. I was one of old Salustiano's hands; used to work on his plantations.'

The women drew back in horror, but the father commended my honesty in frankly avowing my origins. Then he complained about his neighbours (nobody got on with him).

'There are some scum here who began like you did but have developed swelled heads. It's no disgrace to work. If I'd been born in the gutter, why should I bother to deny it?' He tried to take me down a peg. 'A hired worker, hey? Don't let it worry you. Fidelis, who's now a highly respected mill owner, used to steal chickens.'

While he was running down his neighbour, I was watching him. Little by little he lost the signs of uneasiness that my presence had caused. He seemed perfectly at ease, commenting on the defects of others and forgetful of everything else, but I'm not sure whether it wasn't all put on. I tried to ingratiate myself by discussing elections. But it's possible I didn't really succeed in fooling him and he was playing the same game with me. If so, he played it very well for I convinced myself that he didn't suspect me. In that case it was I who played well, if I convinced him I'd gone there to talk politics. If that's what he thought he was crazy. Most likely, he didn't. Maybe he thought so after being fooled into believing I was sincere. That's what happened to me. Repeating the same words, the same gestures and hearing the same stories, I ended up liking the landlord of Bom-Sucesso.

Instinctively I continued to watch him closely. He roused himself, yawned, showing his yellow, pointed teeth, and clapped his hands, flattening a mosquito. There were mosquitoes buzzing around like bullets, he said. He'd spent a terrible night. I answered that I'd slept like a rock. The swamps in S. Bernardo had been filled in and there wasn't a single mosquito left. I regretted having spoken so hastily. Mendonça looked at me out of the corner of his eyes and I guess he wasn't satisfied. He referred again to his sleepless night and I repeated how well I'd slept. He looked doubtful, his face twitching. Of course he knew it was a lie.

We both lied for all we were worth. I brought the conversation back to my life as a labourer. It wasn't a success :

the women whispered together and Mendonça tugged at his lip. A surly-looking hand came into the room. Mendonça frowned. I wanted to get away but I was afraid it might be an inopportune moment, so I sat there hoping to modify the disagreeable impression I had created. Obviously the women thought I was a bore.

'If next winter's like this one it'll be the end : this'll become a sea of mud and you won't get a single manioc root to grow.'

'True,' said Mendonça, visibly annoyed with his workman who was gazing at him steadily without raising his head.

'Well, goodbye,' I said abruptly. 'The election's on Sunday, right? Fine. I'll kill . . . (I was going to say an ox, but I changed my mind; everyone knows I have only half a dozen electors) a sheep. A sheep'll be enough, won't it? That's settled. Till Sunday.'

I went out feeling dissatisfied. That is more or less what took place. I don't remember the details.

I crossed the yard and took the path leading to S. Bernardo. It was a disgrace. Fancy stealing other people's land and leaving it with the roads all rutted and the undergrowth whipping the face of whoever passes by! I passed through the disputed zone. The fence was still in the same place where I had found it. Mendonça was anxiously trying to push forward, but restrained himself, while I, for my part, was seeking unsuccessfully to regain the former boundaries. We had had only one serious disagreement; a lad from S. Bernardo got Mendonça's sugar foreman's daughter into trouble, and as a result Mendonça started cutting down the wire. But I repaired the fence and made the 'culprit marry the girl.

I had a look at the cotton field and walked on to the wall of the dam. There were few workmen. I climbed the hill. The foundations of the new house were finished and

the walls were going up. Suddenly a shot rang out. I gave a shudder. It came from the quarry, where the foreman, Caetano, was working with three men. There was another explosion, a bad one, and a shower of small stones flew up. When were they ever going to finish those slow, everlasting jobs? Unfortunately I hadn't the means to get down to them properly. And even with the few workers I had, it often happened that on a Friday I didn't know where the money was coming from to pay the wages on Saturday.

I stopped to question the bricklayer. There was only one. The walls were a metre high. If I employed more men the job would work out cheaper. As for the work on the dam wall, it was losing ground rather than going ahead, while the quarry, where I could see some tiny figures moving, looked as if after six months' work nothing had been removed from it.

Way down below an ox cart passed by, and there was another one coming, laden with bricks.

Where could old Margarida be living now? It would be good to find out where she was and bring her to S. Bernardo. The old negress must be close on a hundred now, poor thing.

I waited until the men had cleaned their spades and put away their tools. I was alone. The ones from the plantations and the dam were dispersing too. There were more explosions from the quarry, the last. I thought of Mendonça. The swine. This side of the fence the cotton was flourishing and castor beans were growing in the clearings; on the other side, nothing but wild grass and thistles. How many acres of land had the scoundrel stolen? Luckily we were at peace. Or seemed to be. Nevertheless, I'd better look smart getting home.

I walked down the hill and went for dinner. While I was eating I talked in a low voice to Casimiro Lopes, first of all using circumlocutions, later outlining a definite plan.

Casimiro Lopes brushed aside the circumlocutions and approved the plan. With my project thus agreed upon I closed the doors and wrote off some letters to banks in the capital and to the state governor. Those to the banks requested loans, while the one to the governor informed him that I was about to install numerous industries in the near future and asked for exemption from tax on the machinery that I would be importing. The truth is that I was unlikely to get the loans and I couldn't think up any way of paying for the machinery. But I'd got used to the idea of considering it almost bought. Afterwards I consulted the Satuba Agricultural School about the possibility of acquiring a Limousin calf.

As I was finishing I heard footsteps outside the house. I got up and peered through the crack. There was a fellow there making up to Shark by snapping his fingers. Looking closely I thought I recognized the surly-looking character I'd seen in Mendonça's room. I left the spy-hole and called Casimiro Lopes, who took my place. I lay down, thinking about Caetano and the quarry, my mind full of hammers, levers, steel for drills, dynamite and fuses.

'Some of theirs,' whispered Casimiro Lopes, shaking the loop of the hammock.

'Could only be.'

Next day, Saturday, I killed the sheep for the voters. Sunday evening, as he was returning from the election, Mendonça was shot in the chest and bit the dust there and then, on the road close to Bom-Sucesso. Today the spot is marked by a cross with one of its arms missing. At the time of the murder I was in town talking to the parish priest about the church I intended to build in S. Bernardo. In the future, that is, provided business progressed satisfactorily.

'How terrible!' said Father Silvestre when they brought the news. 'Did he have any enemies?'

'Enemies! Did he have any enemies! As thick as lice. Well, what about it, Father Silvestre? How much did you say a bell costs?'

VII

It was about then that I met Ribeira in Maceió: he was down and out, working in the office of Brito's *Gazeta*, a tall, thin, stooping old fellow with a sallow complexion and side-whiskers. It was obvious he was hungry. I took a fancy to him and, as I was needing a book-keeper, I brought him back with me to S. Bernardo. I gave him a position of responsibility and listened to his story, which I reproduce here, putting the verbs in the third person and using almost his own words.

Ribeira was seventy years old and miserable, but there had been a time when he was young and happy. In the little village where he lived, men would take off their hats to him when they met and the women would look to the ground and say, 'Praise be to Our Lord Jesus Christ, major.' When anyone received a letter he went to him for it to be read. Ribeira read their letters, knew their secrets, was highly respected and known by the title of major. If two neighbours had a dispute about land, Ribeira would summon them, study the case, draw up the boundaries and prevent the contestants from quarrelling.

The major's wisdom went unquestioned. Ribeira was, in fact, not entirely without instruction: he memorized ancient laws, re-read newspapers, old ones, and by the light of an oil lamp would wear his eyes out poring over books full of mysterious words that were difficult to pronounce. If one of these odd words ever became known,

Ribeira would explain its meaning and so enrich the vocabulary of the inhabitants.

It was the other men who were ignorant.

It sometimes happened that one of these innocent creatures was found dead, killed with a club or a knife. Then Ribeira, who was a just man, would seek out the murderer, tie him up and take him off to the city jail. Meanwhile the dead man's family would remain under the major's protection. Or it might be that some poor girl would burst into tears and finally confess that she was pregnant. In this case Ribeira found the seducer, summoned the priest, and the marriage was celebrated in the local chapel. When the child was born Ribeira stood as godfather. When the major made a decision, no one appealed against it. His word was law.

There were no soldiers in the place, nor even a judge. And as the priest lived a long way off, it was Ribeira's wife who conducted prayers and told bible stories to the children. Quite likely not all the stories were true, but the children of those days were not too concerned with the truth.

Ribeira had a small family and a large house. The house was always full. His cotton plantations were large too. At harvest time the whole population flocked there, and the blacks were not concerned about being black nor the whites about being white.

Ribeira commanded respect, there was no doubt about it. If there was a brawl in the market he would wave his arm in the air and shout, 'All those on my side, follow me.' And that was the end of both the market and the brawl: everyone followed the major because everyone was on his side.

During the St John's night parties, Ribeira's house would be lit up by an enormous bonfire. There were bonfires in front of the other houses but the major's was made up of

many cart-loads of logs. The boys and girls walked round it arm in arm. They used to roast corn on the cob over the embers and fire an old blunderbuss with an ear-splitting noise. It was the major's blunderbuss, a rusty thing which was only cleaned on the occasion of the St John's festivities.

All these things happened long ago. Now everything has changed. More people were born, others died, the major's godchildren grew up and departed by train to do their military service. The village became a small town, and the small town changed into a city, with its mayor, justice of the peace, attorney and police commissioner. They brought machines – and the major's antiquated mill-wheel turned no more. With the arrival of the parish priest, the chapel was closed and a fine church built. The bible stories faded from the minds of the children. The doctor arrived. He didn't believe in bible stories. Ribeira's wife, in grief, wasted away and died.

The lawyer opened his office and the major's wisdom was overshadowed. Numerous cases appeared before the courts. The city progressed at an extraordinary pace. Many men took to wearing ties and engaging in unheard-of professions. Ox-carts no longer creaked along the narrow streets. Now it was all cars, petrol, electricity and the cinema. And taxes! The boys and girls no longer walked arm in arm round the St John's night bonfires: they gathered in animated crowds to dance the tango.

One day Ribeira realized that his house was too big for him, so he sold it and bought a smaller one. His authority, too, undermined by the excessive liberty everyone now enjoyed, gradually became weaker until it disappeared altogether.

Ribeira had a son, who played football, and a daughter, who was mad on clothes. They found the place too backward for them and ran away. Ribeira buried himself away

in shame. He grieved for a week before selling off his sticks of furniture and setting out in search of his children. He didn't find them: the girl was out somewhere working in the factories, and the boy was in the army.

Once in the capital, Ribeira stayed there. He knew the inside of paupers' infirmaries, slept on park benches, sold lottery tickets, legal and illegal, and served as agent for shady companies. Ten years later he was book-keeper-manager of the *Gazeta* at a salary of a hundred and fifty milreis, and was begging money from his friends.

When the old boy had stumbled to the end of his story, I burst out, 'What's the matter with you, Ribeira, did you lose your legs in a car accident or something? What the hell, couldn't you move a bit faster?'

VIII

The surly-looking hand I met at Mendonça's house also came to an untimely end. It was quite a clean-up. People like that hardly ever die in the normal way. Some are bitten by snakes, some drink themselves to death, and others just kill themselves off.

I lost one man in the quarry. The lever escaped from the stone, struck him in the chest and that was the end of him. He left a wife and small kids. They all went the same way: one of the kids fell in the furnace, roundworm did for the second, the last one got angina and the widow hanged herself.

To cut down the mortality rate and step up production, I forbade them to drink hard liquor.

The new house was finished. I think it's unnecessary to describe it, as the main parts have already appeared or

will do so in due course. What's left can be omitted as it would only be of interest to architects, men who are very unlikely to be reading this. It was a handsome house, and very comfortable. Naturally I gave up sleeping in a hammock. I bought furniture and various articles which, with great caution, I began to use; there were others which I have never used even to this day, for the simple reason that I don't know what they are for.

At this point I skip over a period of five years, and in five years the world sees quite a few changes.

No one, surely, is going to think that in confronting the obstacles already mentioned I always went confidently forward, unhesitatingly following a preconceived design. It wasn't like that at all. There were times when I was in despair and anxious to draw back; there were difficulties to get round and tortuous paths to follow. Did I act badly? To tell the truth, I never knew which were my good deeds and which were my bad ones. Some of my good actions landed me in trouble while some of the bad ones brought me advantages. And as it was always my ambition to own the property of S. Bernardo, I regarded as legitimate all the actions which conduced to this end.

Thanks be to God, I gained more than I had expected – these wrinkles, as anyone can see; but also my credit in the business world, at first so difficult to obtain, was now secure, and interest rates dropped. Business doubled automatically. Automatically! And with no difficulty! Once your affairs get nicely settled on the rails, they roll along beautifully. If they don't fit snug, stop everything. But if you see luck's on your side, put on steam: your stupid blunders will be transformed into acts of wisdom. I've seen fellows who kill themselves working to no avail. And I know lazy types who have a flair for the occasion: when it arrives they stir themselves, open their mouths and swallow it whole. I'm not lazy. In my first ventures I was

lucky; in the later ones I forced lady luck to smile on me.

Naturally, after Mendonça's death, I pulled down the fence and put it up again well beyond the point where it had been in Salustiano Padilha's time. There were complaints.

'My dear ladies, Mendonça got away with murder while he was alive. But things have changed now. If you don't like it you'll just have to be patient and take it to court.'

As justice is expensive they didn't go to court. So with the terrain already prepared, I invaded the lands of Fidelis, who is paralysed in one arm, and the Gamas, who were away living it up in Recife, studying law.

The small appropriations passed unnoticed. More important ones were won in court thanks to the wiles of João Nogueira.

I conducted risky transactions, got myself into debt, imported machinery and paid no attention to those who criticized me for aiming at the moon. I took up fruit growing and poultry farming, and began building a road to take my products to market. Azevedo Gondim wrote two articles about this, referring to me as a patriot and citing Ford and Delmiro Gouveia. Costa Brito also published a note in the *Gazeta*, praising both me and the local political authority. That one set me back a hundred milreis.

Despite this publicity, difficulties still cropped up. When I was occupied just with S. Bernardo all went well, but when I got my teeth into four or five properties I stepped on a hornet's nest. I lost two men and was shot at myself in an ambush. It was a light wound – I still have the scar on my shoulder. In exasperation I sent another hundred milreis to Costa Brito and had a word with João Nogueira and Gondim.

'Do something about these ruffians. Here am I performing a public service at no charge. It's a disgrace. The authorities ought to be helping me. Speak to the mayor,

Dr Nogueira; see if he can get me some barrels of cement for the bridges.'

I didn't get the cement, but I built the bridges. And as my plans were far-reaching and the methods I adopted irregular, easy-going people decided I was mad and left me in peace. It was about then that I received the visit of the state governor. The dam had been finished three years previously – sheer folly in Fidelis's opinion.

'What do you want a dam for if the stream never dries up?'

On the face of it it didn't seem much use. But there was a sluice opening from it which gave the water power to operate the seed-removing plant and the sawmill.

The governor liked the orchards, the Orpington hens, the cotton and the castor beans; he thought the Limousin cattle were very suitable, asked for photographs and wanted to know where the school was. I told him it wasn't anywhere. At lunch, during which there was champagne and Dr Magalhães made a speech, His Excellency returned to the subject of the school. I felt like making a few remarks of my own, but managed to restrain myself.

'A school! What do I care whether the next fellow can read or not?'

These government types have a screw loose somewhere. Put a few educated men to gather in the castor beans and see what sort of a harvest you get!

As we left the table, a glassy-eyed Padilha whispered to me: he wanted fifty milreis.

'Not a cent.'

I went on to show our illustrious guest the sawmill, the seed-removing plant and the stable. I gave him a brief explanation of the press, the dynamo, the saws and the de-lousing bath. Suddenly it occurred to me that the school might win his goodwill for certain favours I was intending to ask.

'Yes indeed, sir. And when Your Excellency comes here again you'll find the children all studying their lessons.'

Later on, while we were admiring the countryside from the foundations of the church, I called the lawyer to one side.

'Oh, Dr Nogueira, send Padilha over to see me tomorrow. I must speak to him, but just now the blackguard can hardly keep on his feet. Don't forget, will you? Tomorrow, when he's recovered from his hangover.'

His Excellency took his leave, and that day remained celebrated in the calendar. The cars rolled away down the road, and as I watched the cloud of dust that rose up behind them I rubbed my hands.

'The luck of the devil! This visit will do me no end of good. It's worth cash. I wonder how much.'

To be honest, while I gave every appearance of confidence, I was in fear and trembling of my creditors. Things were going all right for me, there's no doubt, credits were superior to debits, but those crooks had me by the short hairs and knew it. Now I wasn't so scared. The school could represent capital. The foundations of the church also represented capital.

I continued to rub my hands. The luck of the devil!

I decided to look after the Mendonca girls. My own prosperity had begun after the death of their father. In those days, a few square metres of soil meant a great deal to me. A flea-bite! I felt sorry for them. Next day I'd get my men to clean up the Bom-Sucesso cotton, which was stunted and overgrown with weeds. They were in a bad way those Mendonça girls. Their father was a rogue, but was that their fault, poor things? I resolved to keep an eye open lest any unscrupulous neighbours should take over what belonged to them. Women scarcely ever watch over their own interests. Well, if any of those scoundrels dared to meddle with them he'd have me to deal with.

IX

Next day, when I got back from the fields, I found João Nogueira, Padilha and Azevedo Gondim in the porch singing the praises of some female's legs and bosom. They raised the level of the conversation.

'A fine woman,' said João Nogueira.

'Sensible, too,' added Azevedo Gondim.

Padilha knew of no quality comparable to the possession of bosom and legs.

'True,' he murmured, cleaning his nails with a match.

João Nogueira remembered that he was a man of responsibility, over forty years old, with a degree and a balding head that commanded respect. He occasionally went on the spree, but with his clients he stuck to business. With me, who paid him four contos eight hundred to help me – with his laws – make something of S. Bernardo, his behaviour was correct to the extent of pedantry. I addressed him as 'doctor': one couldn't treat him familiarly. Though possessing less knowledge and less cunning, I considered myself superior to him. I looked upon his talents with a certain amount of contempt. But they were useful – and we each had a high respect for the other.

'We decided to keep Padilha company,' said Nogueira. 'We walked with him, and as it was pleasant in the cool of the afternoon, I came all the way to have a word with you.'

I nodded agreement, looking towards a window through which could be seen Ribeira's white side-whiskers and his glasses suspended over the account books. We walked into the office. It was the beginning of the month, so I opened the safe and handed the lawyer two bills of two hundred

milreis. In his trembling hand, Ribeiro made the appropriate entry in the book and then discreetly withdrew. João Nogueira sat down, made out the receipt, took some papers from his briefcase and explained to me the position regarding various lawsuits. At the very first I assured myself that the four hundred milreis had been well spent. The others, too, were getting along nicely. But the notary-public wasn't co-operating, neither was the judge. Red tape.

'That's to be expected. Make promises, Dr Nogueira. Don't pay a penny in advance. Just promises. They'll get paid at the end, if they behave themselves.'

I enquired about other, less interesting, matters, gave Ribeiro some instructions, and we returned to the porch where Luís Padilha was once more discussing legs with Azevedo Gondim.

'Whose legs are they?'

'Madalena's,' replied Gondim.

'Who?'

'A school-teacher. Don't you know her? Pretty girl.'

'A fine woman,' put in João Nogueira.

'A pretty girl,' insisted Gondim. 'A little blonde about thirty years old.'

'Twenty, if that.'

'That's because you didn't see her close up,' said Gondim. 'If you had done you wouldn't talk such nonsense.'

'What's that? I had a close look at her in Magalhães's house on Marcela's birthday. She's twenty.'

'Ah, but you saw her at night. It's a different matter in the daylight. She's thirty.'

Padilha, looking sadly at the heifers grazing on the lush grass beside the stream, and the reservoir where ducks were swimming, gave a sigh and proposed twenty-five.

'That's what she is. Twenty-five.'

I stretched my arms, tired out with spending the whole day in the sun contending with the workmen.

'All right, Padilha, we'll settle for twenty-five to have done with it. You're staying for dinner, aren't you? You can go back in the car. I want to have a word with you, Padilha.'

Luís Padilha had received my message and, ever since the day before, had been burning with curiosity.

'It's this. I'm considering the possibility of opening a school.'

'Splendid,' exclaimed Azevedo Gondim with a smile that flattened his nose even more. 'You took my advice, hey? There's nothing like education.' The lawyer passed his hand over his forehead and predicted in an off-hand manner that the school would be useful. I shrugged my shoulders.

'I don't know about that; I'm not so sure. Anyway, I thought we might make use of Padilha. Obviously we could set up a rural school and give adequate instruction in agriculture and cattle breeding. But where would I find qualified teachers? And look at the expense! For the time being we'll content ourselves with a bit of reading, writing and arithmetic. Would you be willing to take charge of it, Padilha?'

Padilha enquired about the salary, remarking that he was very busy.

One by one electric lights began to appear. There were lamps even where the tenants lived. As if those wretches huddled together down there by the Bom-Sucesso fence had ever in their lives dreamed of having electric light! They lived in luxury: light until midnight!

Casimiro Lopes came hobbling up.

'Let's have dinner. I asked you to come, Padilha, because I thought you might be wanting a job. But as you're a busy man there's no more to be said. Let's eat.'

At dinner Azevedo Gondim told me the reason of his visit: he'd discovered the whereabouts of old mother Margarida.

'What's that you say! And you kept quiet about it, Gondim!'

Azevedo Gondim filled his glass.

'She lives in Jacaré-dos-Homens.'

'Where's that?'

'In Pão-de-Açúcar. I had a letter today. Her description, age, colour – everything fits. She lives with a family that makes cheeses. I've already taken the announcement out of the *Cruzeiro*.'

'Good. Do any of you know anyone in Pão-de-Açúcar? How about you, Ribeira?'

No one did.

'Well then, Gondim, since you've taken on the job, ask the priest to write to Father Soares about sending the old girl here. And make sure she's well taken care of so she won't deteriorate on the journey. When she gets here you can order that stuff you wanted, Gondim. What's it called?'

'*Clichés*. *Clichés* and vignettes.'

'That's it. Send for the *clichés* and vignettes after the old girl gets here.'

'I've been thinking about the school,' muttered Padilha.

'So have I. You took the words right out of my mouth,' said João Nogueira. 'Ask Madalena, Paulo Honório. She'd be a great asset, a highly educated woman.'

'Decorative too, Paulo,' cried Azevedo Gondim.

'Don't talk rubbish. What do you think I'm looking for, ornaments?'

Padilha, rather uneasily, came to the point and growled, 'I didn't say I wouldn't accept. All I said was I'm very busy. I asked what the salary was.' Being occupied with detaching a wing from the chicken, I didn't answer. 'I

asked what the salary was,' Padilha repeated timidly. The miserable creature! He was as meek and insignificant as a bed-bug.

'Right you are. I don't know what you're worth. A hundred milreis a month? Let's say a hundred and fifty to begin with. You'll get board and lodging, profitable conversation and a hundred and fifty milreis a month all for eight hours' work a day. Agreed? But I tell you straight: business is business, and no one drinks. In this house only the guests drink.'

'Of course,' said the crestfallen Padilha. 'I'll think about it. As for drink, you don't need to worry about me, I don't touch the stuff. I drink at mealtimes, not always, and I may occasionally have a glass with my friends if they insist. I may take the job.'

We finished the dinner in silence. Maria das Dores served coffee and cleared the table. I opened the cigar-box, lit up my pipe and we went into the living-room.

Ribeira unfolded the *Gazeta*. I instinctively hid myself away in a corner, far removed from the open doors. I couldn't avoid one of the windows, though. I was going to close it but then I relaxed: Casimiro Lopes, who was on watch outside the house, sat down on one of the unfinished walls of the church, placed his rifle between his legs, and remained there motionless, alert.

'So Padilha will be going back to S. Bernardo,' said João Nogueira.

'And finish his book,' added Azevedo Gondim. 'Once you get settled you'll be writing like nobody's business, Padilha.'

'What a hope!'

He professes to be ashamed of the stories he has written and published in the *Cruzeiro* under a pseudonym, and, when people talk about them, gets embarrassed, thinking

they are pulling his leg. He drew himself up, looking bitterly at the chairs, the floor and the lamps.

'The salary isn't much; won't even cover the books. But I'll do it. I'll do it for the sake of education : I always felt myself cut out to be a teacher.'

Ribeira turned over the page of the newspaper, his lips moving and occasionally motioning with his hands. It was a rag, that *Gazeta*. And Brito coming to me for money was a bit too much. Azevedo Gondim, tired after his seven-mile walk, yawned and stretched himself.

'So Pereira's candidates have been licked, have they?'

He was referring to the local elections.

'I'm not interested. We've had enough of that.'

Serious elections, yes : I'd send my electors to the polls and receive the party's thanks in return. But these petty local affairs, no. If Pereira had come off worst, too bad for him; out he went, and someone else with a different group of supporters took his place.

'And a good job too,' put in Padilha, who had never forgiven Pereira for having no faith in his agricultural projects. 'That man's an ass.'

'What injustice!' burst out João Nogueira with a smile. 'Until now he was considered an intelligent man. Everyone praised his good sense. And now Padilha calls him an ass.'

'And not only Padilha, my friend,' said Azevedo Gondim. 'Me too. And you yourself. What a time to start something! If it was a regular federal election, O.K., but when the government doesn't care one way or the other about the voting, to want to stick Father Silvestre in the Town Hall! Padilha's right.'

'That's a good one,' I said. 'Didn't you support the priest's candidature in the paper, Gondim?'

'Yes, I did. But I did it for the sake of party unity. Personally I was against it. Nogueira here can back me up. But when I say it was a disgrace I mean what I say.'

I knew that Father Silvestre had spoken of cutting off the subvention of a hundred and fifty milreis a month that the municipality paid to the *Cruzeiro*. This threat stuck in Gondim's throat, and so in silent rage he defended the priest, praising his virtues and deliberately forgetting about the rest.

'Absolutely disastrous. He's a good enough fellow, but that's not enough. So simple he goes by what he hears. He's about as intelligent as a new-born turkey and as thick-skulled as a crocodile.'

'Priests!' said Luís Padilha contemptuously. He was an atheist and a transformist. Ever since I had taken over the fazenda from him he had developed bloodthirsty ideas and would mutter darkly about the extermination of the bourgeois. 'The swine!' And he bit his nails furiously. Ribeira, peering attentively through his glasses at Brito's wretched prose, gave silent gestures of disapproval.

'What puzzles me,' I complained, 'is how the priest managed to bungle it. There he was, practically elected, officially recognized and installed, and then all of a sudden – zoom! – he's in the dust. What happened?'

'Father Silvestre is a revolutionary,' explained João Nogueira. 'He wants to save the country by violent means.'

I gave a shudder. Casimiro Lopes, with a lighter in his hand, was lighting a cigarette. Outside, the whiteness of the moon lit up a patch of forest, far off, making the yellow of the begonia flowers stand out. I got up, made a sign to João Nogueira, and we went to the window.

'Tell me, Dr Nogueira,' I asked in a low voice, 'is this true what they say about Pereira's defeat?'

João Nogueira accepted a cigar and said that there was no doubt whatsoever. 'The government was reasonable and wanted to come to an agreement by putting the priest on the council. Pereira put all his money on the priest and came a cropper.'

'In that case, Dr Nogueira,' I whispered, lowering my voice even more, 'it seems to me the time has come to settle my affairs with Pereira. I've been sitting on the fence waiting to see which way the wind blows because he was the boss. Now he's down things are different. I've got him nicely tied up in this account here. It's ages old. I'll give it you. See if you can get me a mortgage.'

'As you wish,' said João Nogueira. Then he became enthusiastic. 'Most certainly. Make out the procuration. You will be doing the party a great service, Paulo Honório. Put the squeeze on Pereira.'

X

Round here, whenever there's a saint's day, there always appear stories of journeys to make, illnesses and various other pretexts for the worker to loaf about. Sunday is lost, so too is Saturday on account of the market, so that the week consists of a mere five days which the church reduces even further. As a result, wages don't go round and this lot live with their bellies complaining.

On one of these holidays, not being able to find anyone to clean weeds from the reservoir or cut down some brushwood, I was amusing myself listening to Padilha and Casimiro Lopes talking about jaguars. They don't understand each other. Padilha, a townsman and a weakling, is talkative and admires violent action; Casimiro Lopes is lame and rarely opens his mouth. He regards the school-master as his superior because he reads books, but to give expression to this opinion he opens his eyes wide and gives a short whistle. In the interior he would spend hours without making a sound, and when he was in a happy mood

would croon to the cattle. Half a dozen words were all he needed. Lately though, through listening to people from the city, he had picked up some new expressions which he used all mixed up and in the wrong place. That day, try as he might, he could say no more than that jaguars are fierce, cunning beasts.

'They've got spots. Big teeth, big feet. And their claws! Terrible!'

Padilha asked the other to repeat his description, to which, on his own account, he went on adding new characteristics. Casimiro Lopes dissented but, trusting in Padilha's learning, at length gave way, and before many minutes were out the jaguar had been transformed into an animal the like of which has never been seen.

'Casimiro, I want you to take a note down to the priest for me.'

I wrote to Father Silvestre, thanking him for the interest he had shown in Margarida's difficult journey. She had arrived a few days before and was living in a little house surrounded by banana trees. I gave Casimiro Lopes the letter, took my hat and went to pay my second visit to the old negress. I went down the hill and, crossing the wall of the dam, put to flight a cloud of wild duck and jacanas. With the latest rains the water level had risen considerably, and the banks of water-weed looked as if they were going to block the drainage channel. The sluice which led off to the seed-removing plant and the sawmill was overflowing. Both were closed. A wasted day.

I found Margarida sitting on a mat, drawing on the tiles with a piece of charcoal.

'How are you, Mother Margarida?'

She tried to straighten her stiffened back, recognizing me by my voice before she darted her white eyes at me.

'Here I am groaning and weeping, my son, borne down by my sins.'

'Sins! You used to be a saint. And now all shrivelled up, a tiny little thing scarcely able to move or think, what sins could you possibly have?'

On account of her short-sightedness she spoke without looking up, repeating the same advice she used to give me when I was a child. A pang went through my heart, and I drew near and sat down beside her on the mat.

'I looked for you a long time, Mother Margarida. I didn't forget you. It made me a very happy when I found you. And if there's anything you want, you only have to ask. Send for anything, Mother Margarida, don't be shy.'

She gazed in astonishment at the chairs, the little table, the electric lamp and the furniture of the adjoining bedroom.

'What's all this luxury for? Keep your things, you may need them. I'll never sleep in a bed. Waste not, want not.'

'Don't worry, Mother Margarida. Just take things easily and sleep peacefully. If you get short of wood for your fire, let me know. Don't let the fire go out because the nights are cold.'

'That's all I need, a fire. Fire and a pot.' She went on drawing figures on the ground. As she bent down, through the open top of her blouse you could see a rosary of blue and white beads touching against her withered breasts. 'I'd like a pan as well. They stole the other one.'

I remembered the old pan which was the centre-piece of the little house where we lived. My life revolved around it for many years: I washed it, removed the rust stains with sand, and was fed from it. Margarida had used it almost all her life. Or was it the pan that had used her? But now she was so weak she could no longer cook sweets, and such a thing was quite unnecessary.

'All right, Mother Margarida. You shall have a pan just like the other one.'

XI

I woke up one morning thinking of getting married. The idea came to me without the stimulation of any particular bit of skirt. I haven't much time for love, as you must have noticed, and it has always seemed to me that women are peculiar creatures and difficult to manage.

The ones I knew included Marciano's wife, Rosa, a slut. There was also Germana and others of her class. By them I judged the lot. I had no inclination for any in particular; what I wanted was to provide an heir for the estate of S. Bernardo. In my mind's eye I tried to form a picture of someone tall, strong, thirty years old, black hair – but I stopped there. Imagination is not my strong point, and the fine qualities I have just mentioned came to me in an isolated way, they were never united to form a complete person. I called to mind women I knew: Dona Emília Mendonça, one of the Gama girls, Azevedo Gondim's sister, Dona Marcela, the daughter of Dr Magalhães, the judge.

An unpleasant incident took place about this time. One afternoon I came across Luís Padilha by the wall of the chapel (the chapel was finished; it just needed painting); he was holding forth to Marciano and Casimiro Lopes.

'It's sheer robbery. Philosophers have proved it beyond any doubt and you can find it in books. Think of it: all those acres of land, houses, woods, lake, cattle, all belonging to one man. It's not right.'

Marciano, a broken-down mulatto, puffed himself up, assumed an air of importance and displayed his toothless gums.

'You're right. I know I'm ignorant and don't understand such things, but I lie awake at night thinking about it. We kill ourselves working for others. Isn't that so, Casimiro?'

Casimiro Lopes puckered his nose and declared that from the beginning of the world everything had had its owner.

'Owner my foot,' shouted Padilha. 'What happens is that we kill ourselves working to make other people rich.'

I came out of the sacristy and blew my top.

'Working! What at? What work do you do, you idle parasite, you slave, you?'

'I didn't mean anything, really I didn't,' said Padilha, trembling. 'I was just discussing some theories with the lads here.'

I laid into the two of them good and strong, and told them to pack their belongings and get the hell out of there. 'Not on my land, you don't,' I ended up, my voice hoarse. 'Beat it! Inside these gates you stick your arse where I tell you. Now grab your things and clear out. What a fine teacher I got for myself. I can imagine what this good-for-nothing teaches his pupils.'

Later, however, all apologetic and full of smooth talk, Padilha swore by all the saints that the school was working fine and that it would break anyone's heart to leave so many children without the bread of learning. As for the theories, that was only to pass the time and make fun of Casimiro. 'I wasn't born yesterday? Do you think I'm going to go around spreading subversive ideas?'

Next day Rosa came up to me in the orchard, whimpering and pleading, with her five children – three clinging to her skirts, one in her arms and the last still in the oven. As for me, my authority doesn't count for much where she's concerned, so I calmed her down.

'Send that brute Marciano here to see me. I'll think it over. Goodbye.'

That night I got Marciano and Padilha together in the dining-room and bawled at them a long sermon proving that it was I who was working for them. But I got mixed up and had to be content with just abusing them.

'You thankless nincompoops!' They cowered away and I let them have it again. 'You bird-brains! You muddle-headed imbeciles!' Then I gave them a bit of advice. In the face of this mildness, Padilha tried to argue, but when I got furious again he realized it was no good. Marciano shrank into himself, raising his shoulders and trying to force his head into his body. He looked like a turtle. Padilha bit away at his nails.

'I'll overlook it this time. But if I find you carrying on like this again, I'll send for the police and you'll soon find out that this place isn't Russia. You understand? Now beat it.'

They vanished. I was still breathing indignation, but then I calmed down. Just pretend nothing happened. It was a lot of twaddle. All those idiots sleep too much and gabble to no purpose. Not Marciano, though, poor fellow. He's a good herdsman, and after all he's Rosa's husband. As for Padilha, I enjoyed humiliating him by showing the improvements I had made to the property.

And so I again directed my thoughts to the women referred to at the beginning of this chapter. I considered the Mendonça and Gama girls, Gondim's sister (whose name I didn't know) and Dr Magalhães's daughter, Marcela. This Dona Marcela was a smasher. Those eyes of hers! The only trouble with her was that she used too much make-up on her face and had a lisp. Patience! Only God is perfect.

I was hesitating whether to make an approach to Dr Magalhães when out of the blue came a letter from Costa

Brito demanding an advance of two hundred milreis. Costa Brito had changed sides. The *Gazeta*, which had always vigorously supported the government, had moved over to the opposition for the sake of a post as State Deputy, and now discovered the public administration to be in a state of disorganization and at the mercy of a bunch of incompetents. And those of us who voted for the party in power, but were neither fish, flesh nor fowl, were vilified, scorned and derided. On my last trip to the capital the director of the *Gazeta* had the nerve to charge me fifty milreis for a miserable article of four lines. In the café, drinking his beer, he exclaimed indignantly :

'They want publicity for nothing. To hell with them. You spend your life writing away like a slave, lying your head off, so that those whippersnappers can make it ! Think of the expense ! Just the price of paper ! And when they're elected, what do you get ? A kick in the teeth ! Not even some wretched, piffling little post that any semi-literate mayor could fix standing on his head. They want their praises sung. They know where they can stuff them.'

I wasn't needing Brito, but I handed him the money in consideration of former services he'd rendered and also because I don't like to quarrel with people from the press. Then I mentioned the crisis and let him know that there was no point in coming back for more. But Brito has the belly of an ostrich : he took no notice of my warning and sent me several letters, the tone at first pleading, but later demanding. The one that came to interfere with my matrimonial plans added threats. I sent a telegram, refusing the money : NO GOOD INSISTING. FED UP.

Why should I sweat my guts out here for the sake of a writer ? I wasn't his father. He's not my responsibility. I don't mind putting my hand in my pocket occasionally and within reason. But not for threats. Not for blackmail. What the devil could he say against me in his paper ? As

I wasn't a civil servant, my relationship with the party was limited to bribing voters, handing them the official list of candidates, and contributing towards the music and fireworks at the governor's receptions. The *Gazeta's* poison couldn't affect me. Not unless he started meddling with my private affairs. In that case the only thing to do would be to take a stick and break some of Brito's ribs.

I suppressed these violent notions and tried again to fix my mind on Dona Marcela's make-up and lisp. It worked. But from time to time the picture faded, and in the intervals there appeared Marciano, Rosa and her kids, Luís Padilha and Costa Brito.

XII

The Pereira case was gathering dust in the registry office, waiting for the judge to put his verdict on the documents. João Nogueira told me this one afternoon. So, lumping together the Pereira question and the virtues of Dona Marcela, I went into town next day determined to call on Dr Magalhães. I found him in the evening in his drawing-room, which served him as a study, together with his daughter and three visitors: João Nogueira, a tall, thin, elderly woman dressed in black, and another woman who was young, fair and very pretty. They formed two silent groups, the men separated from the women.

Dr Magalhães is a little man; he has a large nose, pince-nez, and behind these a tiny pair of twinkling eyes. His thin lips are usually compressed, separating only when Dr Magalhães talks about himself. Moreover, when this subject is broached, he never stops. As I've said, however, at that moment they were all silent. Dona Marcela was

smiling at the young blonde woman who was also smiling, showing her little white teeth. I compared one with the other and the importance of my visit was reduced by fifty per cent. As a result I gave up my thoughts of Marcela and tried by indirect means to drag out of the judge those words that were so vital to the lawyer.

Dr Magalhães passed a hand over his brow and asked, 'What newspapers do you take?' I replied that I took some agricultural periodicals, the party paper, the *Cruzeiro* and the *Gazeta*. I praised Azevedo Gondim and attacked Brito.

'He's a scoundrel, don't you think?'

Dr Magalhães was non-committal. João Nogueira went to the bookshelf, took a book from one of the two shelves, sat down again and began to read. From the other end of the room came a murmur of conversation punctuated by laughter. Since it was necessary to think about something, I reflected on the absurdity of this custom, which requires the separation of the men from the women. When they do get together it's nearly always sex that's the cause of it. Perhaps that explains why the most innocent actions are so badly interpreted. I address a lady and she becomes shy and confused. If she doesn't become shy and confused, some onlooker will swear that there's something between us.

'You haven't been to the cinema lately, have you?' said the lady in black in a loud voice.

'Not for fifteen days, Dona Gloria,' replied Dona Marcela. 'I think it must be fifteen days. Daddy, how long is it since we last went to the cinema?'

Dr Magalhães worked it out. He took a cigarette from his pocket, broke it in two, made one half into a thinner one and lit it.

'Two weeks.'

'That's right. Fifteen days.'

'No, you're wrong,' corrected Dr Magalhães. 'Two weeks.'

'But aren't fifteen days the same as two weeks?' asked Dona Marcela.

'No. Two weeks are fourteen days.'

Dona Marcela wasn't convinced :

'I've always heard that two weeks are fifteen days.'

'I've heard it too,' confessed Dr Magalhães. 'I've heard it many times. But it's wrong. There are seven days in a week. Seven and seven make fourteen, don't they? Well then? It's fourteen.'

João Nogueira put aside his book and suggested that perhaps Dona Marcela was including the day of the cinema.

'That's possible,' agreed Dr Magalhães. 'But if you don't include it, it's fourteen.'

'But if you do, it's fifteen,' cried Dona Marcela.

'It's better not to include it,' advised Dr Magalhães. The atmosphere was now more lively, and the blonde girl made a move as if to get up.

'It's early yet,' whispered Dona Marcela. The woman in black remained seated and began talking about novels. Dona Marcela had just read one, an adventure story. She was going to see if she could remember the plot, but became all mixed up and couldn't get the names of the characters right. She began again but once again got mixed up.

'It's a book you'd love, Dona Gloria.'

'I don't go in for literature,' said Dr Magalhães. 'A long time ago I read a bit. Not nowadays, though. It's all Greek to me. I'm a judge, that's all. A mere judge.'

Dona Marcela had almost worked out the plot of her adventure story. Dona Gloria was listening. The blonde girl sat there with her head slightly bent and her delicate hands folded. Beautiful hands! Beautiful head!

'When I'm giving judgement,' said Dr Magalhães, 'I become abstracted and ignore my own feelings.'

'I was only talking about that yesterday to Dr Nogueira,' I put in.

Dr Magalhães thanked me. 'To do this one must be independent. I am independent. What can they do to me? I have no need of them.'

I've no idea what people Dr Magalhães was referring to. João Nogueira touched him on the shoulder and whispered. I guessed it was about the Pereira business. Partly out of politeness and partly so as not to put in question the judge's integrity, I got up and moved away. I went to the window and lit my pipe. Dona Marcela was finishing her account of the novel. The lawyer looked to be pleased. I closed my teeth on my pipe and, rubbing my hands together energetically, said :

'Well now ! What can you tell me about the candidates the party's putting forward? I don't know them, but I suppose there must be one or two outstanding speakers amongst them.'

'Do you believe in all that?' asked João Nogueira.

'In all what?'

'Elections, deputies, senators.'

Not having any fixed ideas about such things I held back, hesitating. 'People get used to what they see around them. As for me, as long as I can remember I've seen voters and ballot-boxes. From time to time they do away with the voters and ballot-boxes and cook the results. But it's a good thing for the citizen to think that he has an influence on the government even though he hasn't any. There on the fazenda the humblest labourer is convinced that if he were to give up, all the work would go to pot. I foster this illusion. Consequently they put their heart into their job.'

João Nogueira thought for a moment.

'In my opinion deputies and senators are a useless lot and their appetites are far too big.'

I was going to reply but I noticed that Dr Magalhães was about to say something. My words stuck in my throat.

He too remained silent, and we both paused for a minute, each waiting for the other. It was then that I noticed that the blonde girl was watching us attentively with her large, blue eyes. Suddenly I realized that I was falling for her. She was completely the opposite of the woman I had been imagining, but I was gone on her in a big way. She was a tiny little slip of a thing. Dona Marcela was a buxom wench with a hefty bust, arse and neck.

As no one broke the silence I replied to Nogueira, but half addressing the blonde.

'There are useless things that we tend to cling on to. I keep this pipe, which is not only useless but is in fact bad for me.' I filled the pipe. 'But to be honest I'm not so sure it is useless. Maybe it isn't. That's why I attend the elections. You, sir, would naturally not wish to do away with the law.'

Dr Magalhães, to whom the statutes are as important as the air he breathes, was scandalized.

'Oh!'

'No,' answered João Nogueira. 'Though what comes out of congress isn't usually worth very much. What we should do away with is congress itself. Laws should be made by specialists.'

'Ah!' sighed Dr Magalhães in relief. Laws or decrees, provided they were properly written down on paper, it was all the same. He crossed his legs, nodded his head, pushed out his lip and, holding up one of his fingers, said, 'What we need is an élite.'

'Exactly,' said João Nogueira. 'An oligarchy.'

But Dr Magalhães objected to the term.

'Ah, no!'

'What's wrong with that?' exclaimed João Nogueira. 'You can only have an élite of a few persons in the government. That's an oligarchy.'

'But what else does the opposition do but scream its head

off in the papers and at its meetings against this?' I asked.

'The opposition doesn't know what it's talking about. Call that an oligarchy? What they've got is an enormous number of crooks in power. Think of the congressmen alone. And there's the ministers, the presidents, the governors, the secretaries, the southern politicians. Too many fingers in this pie. And what a dirty game! Look at our representatives in the federal congress! What do you say, Magalhães?'

Dr Magalhães didn't say anything.

'I never read politics. I'm just a judge. I study, consult my books, that's all. I wake up early, have a small cup of coffee, shave and take my bath. Then, after a walk in the garden, I glance through the magazines and have lunch, a light one on account of my stomach. I rest for an hour, write, consult my authorities. I dine, then take a turn round the city, at night entertain my friends when they call, and I go to bed.'

Dona Gloria could not restrain herself.

'How right you are. One must always look after one's health.'

There was a wicked expression on João Nogueira's face.

'Of course one must look after it. But as I was saying, this never was an oligarchy. There are too many people.'

'But if the opposition complains that there are so many, imagine what it would be like if the number were reduced. Then there would be no end of complaining.'

'Why?'

'Because many of the top-dogs now would become under-dogs, and so there would be more discontent.'

As the lawyer had drawn near to the window, I whispered in his ear, 'Did he promise a decision?' João Nogueira gave a sign of assent. I took my leave, saying, 'No, I don't agree with you at all, Dr Nogueira. This country's not in such a bad way. Just think of the justice we enjoy. . . .'

'As for me, I'm just a judge,' said Dr Magalhães. 'I study, I consult the greatest writers. . . .'

I waited until he had finished, took my leave a second time and left.

I wandered idly about the city, haunted by the blonde girl's eyes and hoping for some lucky chance that would enable me to discover her name. No lucky chance came so I decided to look for João Nogueira to find out her name, position, family – all the details necessary to one who is contemplating taking a serious step. At ten o'clock I went to the office of the *Cruzeiro* but there was only Arquimedes working on the type-setter. I called at Sousa's billiard saloon. There were no customers except one, half drunk, who said, 'Dr Nogueira must be at Ernestina's house.' I had no idea where Ernestina's house was, but around midnight I discovered the lawyer in the hotel discussing poetry with Azevedo Gondim. I listened for an hour, anxious to learn something. I learned nothing.

'Dr Nogueira, could you spare a moment? It'll only take a minute, Gondim.'

But I shrank from touching on such a delicate subject, fearing I should make myself ridiculous, and I thought too that Nogueira himself might have his eye on the girl. So in silent mortification I begged him to give me a detailed account of the Pereira case.

XIII

I met the blonde girl a second time. I was returning from the capital after a visit made necessary by that scoundrel Brito.

It happened like this. After my telegram (you remember,

the telegram in which I refused to give that crook two hundred milreis), the *Gazeta* began a scurrilous campaign against me. At first the attacks on me were spicy, but evasive; later they became open, and in two furiously hostile articles the kindest epithet Brito applied to me was 'murderer'. When I read that foul stuff I armed myself with a horsewhip and went into town.

'What you should do is sue him,' said João Nogueira. 'You can easily have him put in jail.'

'And if you want to defend yourself, you always have the *Cruzeiro* here,' added Azevedo Gondim. 'You can write something yourself. Or if not, I'll do it, or Nogueira. Unfortunately the *Cruzeiro's* circulation isn't very big. But it's all we've got. It's at your service.'

'Thanks, Gondim; thanks Dr Nogueira. We'll talk about it later. There's no need to worry too much about this nonsense.'

We stayed at the hotel until eleven that night, playing dominoes at a cent a point.

Next day I caught the train, fell sound asleep and woke up at ten o'clock in the central station. Then and there, with my whip under my arm, I started scrutinizing every face. I walked up the Rua do Comércio, turned into Livramento and Alegria, and stopped in front of the *Gazeta*. I paused for a moment to look through the railings at the filthy crates, then I went in, walked through the type-setting room, the printing room and finally arrived at the editor's office where there was just a sickly-looking lad making up news items from Recife papers of the day before. The director had gone to Pajuçara.

'Thanks.'

I retraced my footsteps and waited an hour by the town clock watching the passengers on the Ponta-da-Terra trams. At last Brito's little rat face appeared.

'There you are!'

He retreated and tried to jump back on the step but the tram was already too far off. He frowned in a dignified manner but, seeing the whip, turned pale and stammered.

'How nice to see you. What a piece of luck! We really must have a talk.'

I grabbed him by the arm, pushed him against the clock, and speaking in a low voice so as not to alarm the passers-by, said, 'Now then, you son of a whore, what about those articles. . . .'

'Those were paid articles,' explained Brito. 'They were in the open section, didn't you realize that? Let's go along to the office, we can talk better there.'

By way of reply I took him by the scruff of the neck and laid into him with the whip. A crowd gathered, a policeman whistled and there were protests and screams until finally Brito managed to wriggle clear and hot-foot it up Comércio towards Martírios. I walked back to my hotel but had no time to have lunch before I was summoned to the police-station. They asked a lot of damn-fool questions; I missed the three o'clock train and was not able to convince the police inspector that he was a boor and an idiot. Fed-up and disgusted, I was obliged to call in a lawyer (three hundred milreis, not including smaller expenses with taxis, tips etc.) and got away twenty-four hours later after a lecture by the Secretary of the Interior on freedom of the press and other such crap.

On the train I bought the day's papers. Not one of them mentioned the incident. Nice of them! I started reading an interesting piece about bee-keeping. Little by little I forgot about the inspector's stupidity and the secretary's liberalism. I became reconciled to Brito and admitted to myself that he was good enough at heart and probably wouldn't start anything again. I concentrated on my reading. Yes, bee-keeping might well be a gold-mine.

At this juncture a lady in black came and sat down beside me. As the sun was disturbing her I closed the shutter.

'Thank you.'

Glancing up at her I recognized the woman who, a month before, had listened to Dona Marcela's story in Dr Magalhães's house.

'Not at all, Dona Gloria.'

I noticed that she had a parcel that was about to burst open on her thin, pointed knees, so I asked for it and put it together with my baggage. She was a timid old soul, with a shy smile and manners peculiar to the poor. The train started off, and we began a conversation which became more and more animated until we were firm friends.

'This "Great Western" is a disgrace. A scandal. Call this a carriage. It's a pig-sty!'

I usually begin my train journeys with phrases like these. Dona Gloria was shocked, fearing that the other passengers might hear. She told me in a confidential tone that she didn't think the carriages were very good.

'Shocking, Dona Gloria.'

She looked at me, discreetly.

'I've an idea we've met before, but I can't remember where. My memory is so bad.'

'It was at the judge's house last month. You were with a young lady, a fair girl. . . .'

Her eyes widened.

'Ah, yes.'

The conversation dried up. In order to stimulate it I opened the paper and pointed with a finger :

'There's a splendid article here on bee-keeping. The author really knows what he's talking about.'

She didn't understand. Suddenly she exclaimed :

'Now I remember. You were with Dr Nogueira talking about politics.'

'That's right.'

There was a pause.

'Do you live in the capital?'

'No, I live in the interior.'

'In Viçosa?'

'Yes.'

'I used to as well, a little while ago. But small towns . . . horrible, aren't they?'

'Small towns? And what about the big ones? They're all horrible. I like the country, you see, the country.'

Dona Gloria made a face.

'The country? For heaven's sake! The country's all right for animals. Do you live in the country?'

'In S. Bernardo.'

Dona Gloria had never heard of S. Bernardo, an ignorance which I found offensive since to me S. Bernardo was the most important place in the world.

'It's a fine fazenda. None of that foul water that people drink round here – more like mud. No, madam, there you will find both comfort and hygiene.'

Dona Gloria sat up straight, and abandoning her disdainful air said firmly, 'That's not for me. I was born and bred in the city. Take me away from there and I'm like a fish out of water. So much so that I've been trying to arrange a transfer to a school in the capital. But you need influence. You get promises . . .'

'Ah! You're a teacher?'

'No. It's my niece who's the teacher.'

'The young lady who was with you at Dr Magalhães's house?'

'Yes.'

'What's your niece's name, Dona Gloria?'

'Madalena. You know, she was a brilliant student. . . .'

'Just a minute. Nogueira and Gondim told me about her. She's a very accomplished young woman, and pretty

too. That's right. Gondim spoke a lot about her. Gondim of the *Cruzeiro*, the one with the snub nose.'

'Yes, I know.'

She listened with a smile to the praises of her niece.

'To think of a girl like that being shut away in such a hole, Mr . . .'

'Paulo Honório, Dona Gloria. Pardon the indiscretion, but how much does your niece earn teaching the ABC?'

Dona Gloria lowered her voice to confide to me that primary teachers only get a hundred and eighty milreis a month.

'How much?'

'A hundred and eighty milreis.'

'A hundred and eighty milreis? Is that all? It's disgraceful, madam. How the devil can a Christian soul live on a hundred and eighty milreis a month? Do you know what I think? It's enough to make you wild to see someone of a certain class subjected to such misery. Why, I have employees who have never been to school who are better paid than that. Why don't you advise your niece to give up the profession, Dona Gloria?'

Dona Gloria referred to the difficulty of finding jobs and to the pension.

'What pension? It's not worth a bean. And as for jobs . . . I can tell you how you and your niece can make a mint of money. Keeping chickens.'

Dona Gloria looked disgusted, and as in my enthusiasm I had raised my voice, one of the passengers burst out laughing. He was a young fellow with a little moustache and wearing a ruby ring on his finger. I thrust a hairy face and one hairy hand towards him.

'You don't know what you're laughing at, young man. I see you have a diploma. How much is it worth? Unless your father is well off you'll just be an attorney. You'd be better off raising chickens.'

The youth couldn't muster a word.

'It's a good living, Dona Gloria, a decent living. If you feel like taking it up I can recommend Orpingtons. School! A waste of time! I opened one on the fazenda and put Padilha in charge. Do you know what he is? He's an idiot. But he says they're doing well. And I believe him. At least, Gondim and Father Silvestre were there examining the brats and they found everything in order.'

Dona Gloria's face was working.

'We all have our own way of making a living.'

'Nonsense! Come over to S. Bernardo some time and I'll show you a farm that's enough to bring water to anyone's mouth.'

Of course this conversation didn't take place word for word as I've written it here. There were pauses, repetitions, misunderstandings and inconsistencies that are the normal thing when you talk without reflecting that all you say is going to be read. I have recorded what I feel to be interesting, suppressing certain passages and modifying others. My words to the young gentleman with the ruby ring, for instance, were far more energetic and voluble than the few colourless phrases set down here. The part describing Dona Gloria's headache (and this headache occupied, without exaggeration, half of the journey) was eliminated. In the same way I cut out many foolish observations made by me and by Dona Gloria. Nevertheless many remained, either because I wasn't smart enough to spot them or because I considered them useful. This is the method I have adopted: I select certain elements from a situation; what remains is waste. Or consider again: when I pushed Costa Brito against the clock I also used four or five obscene expressions. These expressions, which were useless in themselves since they neither increased nor diminished the force of my blows, were expurgated from the text, as anyone who rereads the description of the scuffle will notice.

And the scene, freed from these indecencies, is presented in a remarkably sober style.

One thing that I omitted, and which would have produced a good effect, was the scenery. Here I was wrong. When you think of it my narrative gives the impression of a conversation going on remote from this world. Let me explain : with the shutter closed I could only catch occasional glimpses, through the other windows, of bits of stations, bits of forest, factories and sugar plantations. There were many sugar plantations, but that type of agriculture doesn't interest me. I also saw many zebu heifers, a breed that, in my opinion, is leading to the ruination of our herds.

Today all this is nothing more than a confused picture, and if I tried to describe it I would run the risk of mixing up the coconut palms by the lake, which appeared at quarter past three, with the mango and cashew trees that came later. Such a description, however, would only be included here for technical reasons, and I'm not one who's cut out to write in conformity with the rules. So much so that I'm about to commit an error. At least I presume it's an error. I'm going to divide a chapter into two. Really what follows could very well be included with what I was trying to say before I began this digression. But there are no two ways about it, I'm beginning a new chapter solely on account of Madalena.

XIV

At the station Dona Gloria introduced me to her niece who had gone there to meet her. I got flustered and, as I was trying to free my hand, dropped one of

the parcels that I was going to give to the porter.

'Pleased to meet you. I already knew you by name. And by sight. But I didn't know it was just one person. We met a few days ago.'

'It was a month ago.'

'That's right. I was just talking about it with your aunt, who by the way is an excellent travelling companion. I'm delighted to meet you.'

I set off for the hotel, and as their house was on my way we walked together.

'Dona Marcela told me that you have a beautiful fazenda.'

'Beautiful? I can't say I've noticed. It may be beautiful. All I can say is that it's not such a bad place.'

I became embarrassed and fell silent. Until then my feelings had been simple, rudimentary ones, and there had been no need to conceal them from such creatures as Germana and Rosa. With them there was no beating about the bush, nor did they expect it; but with a young lady from training college it is quite a different matter. So I kept my mouth shut and counted the packages that the porter was balancing on his head. With a tremendous effort I succeeded in making polite conversation with Dona Gloria.

'The invitation is open, madam, and I have your promise to come and spend a few days on the fazenda. I hope you'll bring your niece. I'll send the car, and in ten minutes you're there.'

Dona Gloria hadn't promised anything of the sort. Madalena was shocked.

'Oh, no!'

'Why not? You've got the holidays coming on. . . .'

'But to take a trip! . . . That's only for people who are well off.' And then, smiling, 'What would your family say if you brought home two strange women?'

It was my turn to be surprised.

'But I have no family, madam; never have had. I live on my own.'

'That's even worse,' replied Madalena.

'It's improper,' declared Dona Gloria.

I stroked my beard.

'It's a pity. It's such a good place for one to relax! But that's that. If it's improper we'll consider it unsaid.'

Then I took it up again.

'But why is it improper? I wanted so much to show Dona Gloria some Peking ducks, they're really beautiful. Have you ever seen Peking ducks, Dona Madalena?'

'Not yet.'

'There you are,' I protested. 'I can't imagine why people spend their lives studying.'

'Would you like to come in for a moment?' said Dona Gloria. We were by the door of their house in Canafistula.

'Thank you very much, but I'll be getting along to the hotel.' I delayed a minute more. 'This is a terrible place for you to live. Goodbye. And if you should decide to pay a visit to S. Bernardo, let me know and I'll send the car.'

'Of course,' said Dona Gloria. 'And thank you so much for your company.'

'You're welcome.'

Once in the hotel I went straight to the bathroom to wash off the smuts and sweat. Then I was just sitting down at the table when in came João Nogueira, Azevedo Gondim and Father Silvestre.

'Well, what was all the fuss?' asked Azevedo Gondim. 'We heard about it last night.'

'You can imagine what a fright it gave us,' added the priest. 'Such a scandal! Is it true that Brito behaved badly?'

'He certainly did. Driven to it. He's not all that bad. He wanted two hundred milreis, poor fellow, and I

wouldn't fork out. It was stupid of me; I spent at least six hundred, not to mention the bother it gave me for a couple of days. Trouble is, if I'd given him the two hundred he'd have kept coming back for another two hundred.'

'They were saying yesterday that he was in hospital with a stab wound. It even got about that he'd died. Luckily you've been able to set our minds at rest. It was just a few bruises, was it?'

'Bruises my foot! It was nothing more than an exchange of words. Brito started slanging me and I him, people gathered round, and then the police came butting in when it was no concern of theirs. That's all there was to it.'

'I thought as much,' cried Father Silvestre. 'A discreet man like yourself wouldn't go and cause any trouble.'

'Just my luck!' said Azevedo Gondim. 'And I'd written two columns about it for the Sunday edition.'

João Nogueira came up to me and whispered in my ear.

'Come on, what really happened?'

'Just a quarrel, nothing to it.' And then, seizing the opportunity, 'Dr Nogueira, who is that Dona Gloria?'

'The school-teacher's aunt?'

'Yes. What do you know of her family?'

'In what sense?'

'In every sense,' I replied evasively. 'The old woman travelled with me today on the train. She's very pleasant.'

'But what's your interest in her?'

'Well, indirectly she mentioned an ambition of hers, to get her niece transferred. I don't know the director of education, but I get on well with Silveira who's on the administrative side. It might be possible to work the transfer. That is, if they deserve it of course.'

'But she's an excellent teacher and a very fine woman. And here you are wanting to get rid of her. What a

thought! Do you know what will happen if she goes? They'll send us some illiterate old hag.'

'You're right.' Then in a louder voice, 'Will you have dinner?'

They thanked me and made ready to leave. Father Silvestre patted me on the back.

'Fancy you in a scrape like that, my friend. It was all Brito's fault. He's a bit of a hothead but lately he's been doing well with the *Gazeta*.'

I saw them out.

'Oh, Gondim, I wanted to have a word with you.'

He stayed behind.

'I'm dying of hunger, Gondim. Two days almost without eating. Think of it. Shall we have dinner?'

He wouldn't have dinner but said he'd have a glass of beer. By the time I'd got to the dessert he was on his third bottle.

'Some time ago, Gondim, you were talking to me about a school-teacher.'

'Madalena.'

'That's right. I met her one evening and liked the look of her. Is she a decent girl?'

Azevedo Gondim started on the fourth bottle of beer and began to praise her to the skies.

'A wonderful woman. Those articles of hers that she publishes in the *Cruzeiro*.'

My heart sank.

'Oh. Does she write articles?'

'Yes, she's a very clever woman. What's your interest in her?'

'Oh, I don't know. I did have an idea, but her writing for the *Cruzeiro* has put me off. I thought she was intelligent.'

'Come off it,' shouted Gondim indignantly. 'The things you come out with!'

'All right. I won't keep any secrets from you. Listen. I'm fed up with Padilha.'

'Has he been on the binge?'

'Worse. He's spreading those socialist ideas of his on the fazenda. I caught him talking a lot of nonsense. I didn't attach any importance to it, so much so that I kept him on. But on second thought it might be better to get him another job somewhere else.'

'And invite Madalena.'

'Yes, that's the idea. I'm not sure. If she's a straight girl, that is.'

'Straight? Not a doubt. Trouble is, she quite likely won't accept. Coming to live out in the backwoods.'

'Those stupid ideas come from that crazy old aunt of hers. But if she's as sensible as you say she is she'll accept.'

Azevedo Gondim went on munching roasted peanuts and drinking beer.

'Yes, could be. With an increase in salary it would certainly be to her advantage.'

'Of course it would.'

'Could be. But I feel sorry for poor old Padilha.'

'No need to. I'll fix him a job. Didn't I just say so? He's a good for nothing, the poor sod. Now about the girl . . .'

'Have you spoken to her yet?'

'Of course not, man. If I'd spoken to her I wouldn't be asking your advice. Do me a favour, Gondim. It was precisely for this that I asked you to stay. Sound her out.'

Azevedo Gondim was reluctant and exaggerated the difficulties.

'But I hardly know her. You speak to her.'

'Impossible. I've been away for two days and I must be in S. Bernardo today. Anyway, I don't know how to deal with people like her. Too much fancy talk. . . Butter her up, Gondim, it's a favour I ask of you.'

'Very well, then. I'll pitch in with a description of the

countryside, the poetry of the rustic life, the simple peasantry. And if that doesn't convince her I'll chuck in a bit of patriotism as well.'

XV

After my invitation, I formed quite a close friendship with the two women. Madalena didn't make up her mind immediately, and on the pretext of wishing to know her answer I became a frequent visitor at the little house in Canafistula. One day I said casually to Dona Gloria :

'Why doesn't your niece look round for a husband?'

She was deeply offended.

'My niece isn't a sack of worm-eaten beans looking for a bidder.'

'Far be it from me to say so, madam. God forbid. Just a piece of friendly advice. It's a guarantee for the future. . . .'

Dona Gloria straightened her back, thus flattening out her hollow bosom. This dignified gesture pulled her worn-out black dress taut over her stomach, leaving it loose at the back. She muttered some inaudible words. Little by little she returned to her normal position, her shoulder blades adapted themselves once more to the threadbare cloth and her mutterings became comprehensible.

'Naturally, for a woman marriage is something that is . . .'

'Perfectly natural, Dona Gloria. It's even supposed to be good for the health.'

'But there are so many unhappy marriages. . . . And then this isn't something that can be forced on one.'

'More's the pity. It has to be proposed. It's a very bad

arrangement, Dona Gloria. Does anyone ever know the person he ought to marry?’

‘In my opinion, when it’s a question of love it’s essential that the feelings should be reciprocal.’

‘That’s just a lot of romantic nonsense. If the couple are well suited the children will turn out good; if they aren’t, then the children won’t be up to much. I know that much from my zoology manual.’

In the two weeks following this conversation I was kept in S. Bernardo gathering in the cotton harvest. Several times I turned the matter over in my mind. Quite likely Dona Gloria hadn’t been able to keep quiet about it. What might she have said? It was on account of this that I was in fear of a cold reception when I next met Madalena. However, she received me well.

‘How’s the farm work getting along?’

‘Not so bad. I think it’s going quite well: can’t yet forecast what the harvest will be like. And what about your school? Dona Gloria and the children are well, I hope? But I’m sure you’re not very interested in the farm work, and I came here about another matter.’

‘The invitation that Gondim brought me?’

I hesitated :

‘More or less.’

‘I should have told you already that I can’t accept it.’

‘Damnation ! For heaven’s sake, what about the increase in salary?’

‘It wouldn’t do. I’ve been six years in the teaching profession and I don’t intend to give up what’s certain for what’s doubtful. These private schools open up one day and close down the next. . . .’

I expressed my approval.

‘I congratulate you on your caution. You would, in fact, run the risk of ending up without one thing or the other.’

‘I do hope you realize that. . . .’

'I do. And now I have another proposal to make. To be perfectly honest, that story about the school was all phoney.'

Madalena waited, a little wrinkle appearing between her brows.

'What I have to say is difficult, as I hope you'll understand. Well, to cut a long story short I'll speak straight out what I have to say.' I gave an embarrassed cough. 'It's this. I've decided to get married. And as you seem to me such a suitable. . . . Yes, I took a liking to you the very first time we met. . . .'

I broke off. Madalena remained silent; she looked pale and serious, but not surprised.

'Anyone can see I'm not the ideal man you must have dreamed about.'

'It's not that. We hardly know each other.'

'You can't say that! Haven't I told you a lot about my life? And what I haven't told you isn't very important. And you, from all appearances and what I have been able to gather, are sensible, economical and level-headed and would make a good mother of a family.'

Madalena went to the window and remained there some time leaning out, looking at the road. When she turned round I was walking about the room filling my pipe.

'There must be so many differences between us.'

'Differences? And so what? If there weren't any we'd be just one person. There must be a great many. Do you mind if I light my pipe? You learned a whole lot of things at school and I learned others knocking about the world. I'm forty-five years old. You must be about twenty.'

'No, twenty-seven.'

'Twenty-seven? No one would give you more than twenty. There you are, you see. We're closer than I thought. With a bit of good will on both sides we can be at the church inside a week.'

'Your offer is a very flattering one for me, Paulo Honório', murmured Madalena. 'Very flattering. But I need to think it over. In any case I am very grateful to you, I want you to know that. But the truth is I'm as poor as Job, you know.'

'Don't talk like that, girl. What about your education and your person, aren't they worth anything? Believe me, if we come to an agreement I'm the one who's getting the best of the bargain.'

XVI

One evening, a week later, I had been comfortably ensconced there since midday and was chatting and sipping coffee, at peace with the world, when, at the height of the conversation, in blundered Azevedo Gondim and proceeded to drop a brick of the first magnitude.

'Aha, are you here? I was coming to offer my best wishes to Dona Madalena. I'm glad I found you. Congratulations!'

'What's all this about?' I asked, trembling.

'Your engagement,' said Azevedo Gondim. 'Everyone's talking about it. You didn't say anything. . . . When's the wedding?'

I didn't answer. Madalena's eyes were glued to her sewing. Dona Gloria, with a cup in her hand, remained motionless. I felt like twisting Gondim's neck; he realized his blunder and backed against the wall, scratching his chin. To disguise my embarrassment I got up and went to the window. As Gondim drew near I growled at him:

'Are you drunk?'

'I didn't think it was a secret. Everyone knows.'

'Idiot.'

I sat down again. All confused and with my ears burning, I plunged into a discussion of the Nossa Senhora da Conceição Hospital and of the Literary and Recreational Club which, with its moth-eaten shelves, was leading a precarious existence, opening only once a year for the installation of the board of directors.

'What's the use of it?'

Azevedo Gondim sat down and slowly regained his composure.

'It's a society that does some very good work.'

'Nonsense! The hospital, yes. But a library in a place like this! What's the point of it? For Nogueira to read a novel every month. A pitiful species of literature . . .'

When Azevedo Gondim takes hold of an idea he struts round about it like a turkey.

'Education is indispensable; education is a key; don't you agree, Dona Madalena?'

'Well, once you are accustomed to books . . .'

'It's best not to get accustomed to them,' I broke in. 'And don't confuse education with the reading of printed matter.'

'It's the same thing,' said Gondim.

'Rubbish!'

'Well, how are you going to get education if not through books?'

'By knocking about and keeping your eyes and ears open. Nogueira came from school with his head crammed full of knowledge but he didn't know how to interrogate a witness. Now, he's forgotten his Latin and he's a good lawyer.'

'Nevertheless you consider the hospital to be necessary. And why is it you don't throw away your books on agriculture?'

'That's different. In any case, I expect doctors learn less

from books than they do from opening up their patients and cutting up live and dead bodies in experiments. In my spare time I merely read the observations of practical men. I don't give too much importance to these as I have more faith in myself than I have in other people. The authors I read haven't got a first-hand acquaintance with the men or the land at S. Bernardo.'

Madalena nodded her head :

'Exactly. The trouble is, we're not used to thinking like that. The other day I saw a film at the cinema and I believe I learned more than if it had all been written down. Not to mention that it takes less time.'

'And that you don't get your head stuffed with a lot of rubbish,' I added. 'You swallow any amount of trash, Gondim. What's said in whole volumes can often be expressed in four lines.'

Dona Gloria was almost asleep. Azevedo Gondim, confused and annoyed, shrugged his shoulders.

'In my opinion books are useful. If you think the opposite you must have your reasons.'

'Don't forget I'm referring to the rubbishy literature you have in the club.'

'And the worst thing is that what in one's opinion is useless may be necessary to many others,' said Madalena.

'Beauty! That's it!' said Azevedo Gondim triumphantly. 'That's the main thing. Harmony, beauty, you follow me?'

'Don't talk rot!'

Dona Gloria got up and went out. As the subject was exhausted, we all kept silent. Azevedo Gondim tried to revive it but without success.

'Dusty, isn't it? With this north-easter.'

He took his leave.

I stirred myself and sat down by Madalena.

'You see? They're already talking. And according to Gondim it's all they talk about.'

No answer.

'I shan't set my foot here again. In the first place because I don't want to place you in an embarrassing position, and secondly because the situation is ridiculous. Naturally you must have thought it over.'

Madalena put down her sewing.

'I think we can get on all right together. I have always wanted to live in the country, to wake up early and to have a garden to look after. There is a garden, isn't there? But wouldn't it be better to wait a little? To be honest, I can't say I am in love with you.'

'Really now! If you said you were I wouldn't believe you. And I don't like people who fall in love and make decisions in the dark. Especially a decision like this. Shall we name the day?'

'There's no hurry. Perhaps in about a year from now . . . I have things to prepare.'

'A year! A year's grace isn't good business. What are we waiting for? It only takes twenty-four hours to run up a white dress.' Hearing footsteps in the corridor I lowered my voice. 'We can tell your aunt, can't we?'

Madalena smiled, hesitating.

'All right.'

'Have you finished that boring discussion?' asked Dona Gloria at the door. 'I just couldn't keep my eyes open.'

'Nor could I. It was Gondim's fault; he has such funny ideas.'

I sought for a way to formulate my request but couldn't make up my mind how to put it.

'Dona Gloria, I have to inform you that within a week your niece and I are getting spliced. Or, to put it more correctly, we are getting married. Naturally, you will be coming with us. Three can eat just as easily as two. It's a big house and there's plenty of room for everyone.'

Dona Gloria burst into tears.

XVII

Father Silvestre married us before the altar of St Peter in the chapel at S. Bernardo.

It was the end of January. The bignonia scattered its yellow blossom over the woods; in the morning the hill-tops were hidden in mist; the little stream gurgled like a river after the recent thunderstorms, and covered itself with foam as it jumped the falls before joining the lake.

When she saw the electric light wires, the telephone, the furniture and the various metal objects that Maria das Dores kept polished and gleaming, Dona Gloria admitted that life there was bearable.

‘Didn’t I tell you?’

I offered her a room in the left wing of the house, behind the office, with a window looking on to the red wall of the church. This wall has now been turned green by the action of the rain, but in those days, when it was new, it was the colour of raw meat. Madalena and I stayed in the right wing – from our verandah we had a view of the cotton fields, the meadows, the seed-removing plant, the sawmill and the road, which wound its way round a hill.

‘So we’re going to begin a new life,’ said Madalena, happily.

From then on I began discovering things about her that surprised me. As you know, I had been content to judge by her face and by the few odd items of information I had picked up.

For a week I was at pains to model my language on hers but was unable to avoid a number of solecisms. I changed

my tactics. It was nonsense. Madalena wasn't worried about such things. I had imagined her to be a schoolroom doll. I was wrong.

She didn't take to Padilha whom she considered 'mean spirited'. (Here I explained to her that I wasn't concerned about his spirit. All I required from my men was work : the rest didn't interest me.) She didn't take to Padilha. But she liked Ribeira : she went into the office, glanced through the books, examined documents and took the typewriter, which had jammed, to bits. And two days after the wedding, still with a sad, serious air, she set off roaming through the fields and tore her dress on the cotton plants. At dinner time I found her in the seed-removing plant, talking to the mechanic.

'So here you are ! How like a woman !'

But I advised her to be more careful.

'These men are no better than brutes. So you want to work? All right. Go and work with Maria das Dores. But the farm labourers, they're my concern.'

'I don't like what Maria das Dores does. And I didn't come here just to sleep.'

'It's only the novelty that attracts you.'

'And another thing,' went on Madalena. 'Caetano's family are suffering hardships.'

'Have you already met Caetano?' I asked in astonishment. 'Hardships - it's always the same old story. The truth of the matter is I don't need him any more. He'd better look around for something else.'

'He's sick. . . .'

'He should have put some money by. They're all the same, live from hand to mouth. They fall ill and then they're asking for an advance, for medicine. Bang goes all the profit.'

'He's worked too much. And he's so old !'

'Yes, he's lost all his strength. He puts the lever under

some little stone and calls the other men to come and shift it. He's not worth the six milreis he was getting. But don't worry: send whatever is necessary. Send half a bag of flour and a few litres of beans. It's all money down the drain.'

XVIII

'You have a good understanding of book-keeping, madam,' declared Ribeira.

Ribeira lived here and worked with me, but he didn't like me. I don't think he liked anyone. He lived in the past in that little village, now a city, of half a century ago, with its mill-wheel, its rosaries, its oil-lamps and its St John's night prophecies. Over seventy years old now, he would go for walks, preferably along the by-paths. And he was most reluctant to speak over the telephone. He hated the times in which he lived, but got himself out of difficulties by using ceremonious manners and expressions that are now out of date. The little energy that still burned in him was sufficient for him to cope with those thick, leather-bound books. He made complicated entries with loving care, and would spend fifteen minutes making a new heading in a large, flowing, somewhat unsteady hand, and adding flowery decorations to the first letters.

'You know a great deal about it,' he went on. 'And although I am not in entire agreement with the method you adopt I can say that, were you so inclined, you are quite able to take charge of the book-keeping.'

'Thank you.'

'Not at all. You know what is to be done, and you have good handwriting, madam. I am just a wreck. Any day

now . . .' He struggled for words. 'Any day now I shall be with God.'

'That's what you always say,' grumbled Padilha. 'You've got nine lives, you have.'

He was hoping to accumulate the two posts of teacher and book-keeper, and was getting impatient.

'I shan't last long, I'm worn out,' replied Ribeira. 'And I should die happy if I could leave the books in the hands of someone who wouldn't spoil them with erasures.'

'That's easy,' murmured Padilha.

'Perhaps, but you have to know what you're doing. Now madam here . . .'

'That would be funny,' retorted Padilha, 'Dona Madalena accounting for the accounts.'

'Nothing more natural,' said Madalena. 'Heaven only knows, not that I want to do it. Senhor Ribeira is in good health.'

'We are all mortal, madam. It is true that no one can foresee the designs of Providence, but at my age . . .'

'What is the salary?'

'What a thing to ask!' said Padilha in surprise. 'Fancy you being bothered with trifles like that. To be paid for it! It's taking out of one pocket to put in the other.'

'And why not? If Senhor Ribeira has to retire . . . How much do you earn, Senhor Ribeira?'

The book-keeper scratched his white side-whiskers.

'Two hundred milreis.'

'That's very little.'

'What's that?' I shouted, trembling.

'It's very, very little.'

'You're crazy! When he was with Brito he earned a hundred and fifty and had to keep himself. Here he's got board, lodging and laundry.'

'That's quite right,' said Ribeira. 'I lack for nothing, and what I earn is enough.'

'It wouldn't be if you had ten children,' said Madalena.

'Of course not,' agreed Dona Gloria.

'To hell with it!' I roared. 'You too! Stick to your novels.'

Madalena turned pale.

'You don't have to lose your temper. We all have our own opinions.'

'Agreed. But it's stupidity for a person to give an opinion on a subject he knows nothing about. Every monkey on its own branch. What the devil! I don't go discussing grammar. But what I do know is how to run my own farm. And it'll be a good thing if you don't start trying to give me lessons. You make me lose my patience.'

I threw my napkin over the plates before the dessert and got up. A quarrel just a week after our wedding. It was a bad omen. But I put all the blame on Dona Gloria, who had only opened her mouth once.

XIX

I came to realize, but not all at once, the excessive sweetness of Madalena's nature. She revealed herself little by little, but never revealed herself entirely. The fault was mine, or rather it lay with this brutal life, this life which brutalized my soul.

And talking like this I become aware that I am wasting time. For if I am unable to capture the very essence of my wife, what is the purpose of this narrative? There is none, but I am compelled to write.

When the crickets begin their chorus I sit down here at the dining-room table, drink my coffee and light my pipe. Sometimes the ideas don't come, or if they do, there are

too many of them – and the page remains half completed as it was the day before. I re-read some of the lines; they are not good, but it is not worthwhile trying to correct them. I push the paper aside.

I am tormented by a strange emotion – a terrible restlessness, a crazy desire to return into the past and gossip again with Madalena as we used to do every day at this time. Regret? No, not that: it is despair, anger, a crushing weight around the heart. I try to remember what we used to say. Impossible. My words were mere words, a clumsy reconstruction of events, while hers had some quality which will always elude me. To savour them the better I used to turn out the lights and let the shadows close in on us until we were two indistinct shapes in the darkness.

Outside could be heard the grunting of the toads and the moaning of the wind; the trees in the orchard became black smudges.

‘Casimiro!’

Casimiro Lopes was on watch in the garden, squatting down beneath the window.

‘Casimiro!’

Casimiro Lopes’s figure appears at the window. The toads grunt and the wind rustles the trees which are scarcely visible in the gloom. Maria das Dores comes in and her hand goes to the switch. I stop her: I don’t want any light. The tick-tock of the clock dies away and the crickets begin to sing. Madalena appears at the other side of the table. I whisper to her:

‘Madalena!’

The sound of her voice reaches my ears. No, not my ears. Neither is it with my eyes that I see her.

I am sitting at the table with my hands crossed. All objects have merged together and I see only the white table-cloth.

‘Madalena . . .’

Her gentle voice still comes to me. What is she saying? Of course, she is asking me to send some money to Caetano. This angers me, but my anger is different from other occasions; it is a long-standing anger that leaves me absolutely calm. It is crazy for someone to be angry and calm at the same time. But that is how I am. Who am I angry with? With Caetano. Even though he is dead I feel he ought to be working. The sluggard!

I see the table-cloth again, but do not know if it is the one on which my crossed hands are resting, or if it is the one that was here five years ago.

There is a murmuring of the wind, the toads and the crickets. The office door opens softly and Ribeira's footsteps die away in the distance. An owl hoots in the church tower. Could the owl really have hooted? Could it be the same one as two years ago? Perhaps it was the very same cry as then.

Now Ribeira is talking to Dona Gloria in the living-room. I forget that they have all left me and the house is almost empty.

'Casimiro!'

I think I called Casimiro Lopes. From time to time his head, with its leather cowboy's hat, appears at the window, but I do not know whether the vision belongs to the present or to the past.

Contradictory emotions surge up inside me: I grow angry and compassionate; I beat my fist on the table and tears well up in my eyes. To outward appearances I am calm: my hands are still crossed on the table-cloth and my fingers look made of stone. Yet I threaten Madalena with my fist. Strange!

In the confused murmur of the fazenda I make out the minutest details. In the kitchen Maria das Dores is teaching her parrot to speak. Shark growls out there in the garden. From the stable comes the lowing of the cattle.

The living-room is a long way away, to get there you have to walk down a long corridor. Despite this I can hear quite clearly Ribeira's conversation with Dona Gloria. The difficulty would be to reproduce what they are saying. I have to admit that in their conversation no words are used.

Padilha whistles in the porch. What can have become of him?

If I should convince Madalena that she's wrong . . . Explain to her that we must live in peace . . . She doesn't understand me. We neither of us understand the other. What is to happen will be very different from what we expected. How absurd it all is!

There is a deep silence. It is July. The north-easter is stilled and the toads are asleep. As for the owls, Marciano went into the roof of the church long ago and finished them off with a stick. And the crickets' nests were stopped up.

But I repeat, all this still comes to torture me.

I can no longer make out the ticking of the clock. What time is it? I cannot see the dial in the dark. When I came to sit here I could hear the strokes of the pendulum, I could hear them clearly. I ought to wind up the clock, but I am unable to stir.

XX

As I have stated, Madalena was of a very sweet nature. I noted in her such signs of tenderness that I myself was moved. And as you know I am not a man who is easily moved. The truth is I have changed a lot these last two years. But it won't last.

Madalena's acts of kindness surprised me. She was generosity itself. I later perceived that these were just traces of a vast affection she had for all human creatures. Patience! I had no right to expect a share – and what came to me was unlooked-for profit. We lived together very well for a time.

You will remember that I left the table angry with Dona Gloria. Well, some minutes later Madalena brought me a cup of coffee and told me she was sorry for having provoked the incident.

'It was thoughtless of you.'

'It was,' said Madalena, blushing, 'I should have known better.'

'You should think before you say things like that.'

'I know,' she said, very upset. 'I forgot that they were both employees when I spoke. Oh it was wrong of me, terribly wrong of me!'

Here I took the cup of coffee and relented.

'No, it wasn't as bad as that. Don't let's exaggerate. It was just a misunderstanding. Thank you, very little sugar. Misunderstanding is the right word. I'll explain. Here it's different from what it is elsewhere. The cinema, bars, invitations, the lottery, billiards and the devil else, we have nothing like that, so there are times we hardly know what to do with our money. Shall I tell you something? I began life with a hundred milreis that I borrowed. Yes, a hundred milreis. Well, they stretched like rubber. Everything that we have comes from those hundred milreis that that crook Pereira lent me. Jewish usury it was : five per cent a month.'

Madalena listened attentively, nodding approval, with all the appearance of a well-mannered young lady.

'Yes, of course, of course. The trouble is that this is still all so strange to me. I shall have to get used to it.'

I called Casimiro Lopes and handed him the cup and the tray. Then I lit my pipe.

'What I am sorry about—'

I stood up.

'I never express regret about anything. What's done is done. But pulling a long face doesn't get you anywhere. What I said to Dona Gloria . . .'

'Poor thing. She wasn't even paying attention to the conversation. She spoke just for the sake of saying something.'

'And she really put her foot in it. Please do me a favour : let her know that I had no intention of hurting her. She's an elderly person and to be respected. . . . It was unintentional, you know. I suppose I'm an irritable fellow at times.'

You can see we were as meek as a couple of lambs. And we lived like this for a month. At her insistence I gave her a job.

'You look after the correspondence. You'll be wanting a salary. That's all right, we'll discuss that later. Ribeira will open an account for you.'

XXI

Nevertheless, despite all the precautions we took and the padding we used to lessen the shock when we came into conflict, another misunderstanding arose. This was later followed by many others.

In the morning Madalena worked in the office, but in the afternoon she used to go for a walk, visiting the workmen's houses. The thick-lipped children, sickly-looking creatures, would cling to her skirts.

She went to the school, found fault with Padilha's teaching and then started pestering me to get a globe, some maps

and other bits and pieces which I won't specify because I don't want to take the trouble to look it up in the files. One day I absent-mindedly sent off the order. When the bill arrived I got a shock. That lot set me back six whole contos. Six contos' worth of booklets, cards and pieces of wood for the workmen's kids. Think of it. A small fortune like that spent by a man who learned to read in prison using children's books, almanacs and a black-covered Protestant bible. But I controlled myself. I controlled myself because I was resolved not to quarrel with my wife and because I had the idea of showing all that stuff to the governor when he put in another appearance. But in any case it was an unnecessary expense.

I signed the bill, put on my hat and went out. Passing by the stable I noticed that the animals hadn't been fed.

'That's not so good.'

I gave a shout. There was no response. I went angrily down the hill. There at the bottom, at the door of the school, I found Marciano sprawling on a stool, chatting to Padilha.

'Back to work, you scum.'

'But I've finished,' stammered Marciano as he rose to his feet.

'Like hell you have.'

'But I have, sir. I swear I have.'

'Liar. The animals are dying of hunger, they're gnawing the wood.'

Marciano grew indignant.

'Why, only now their troughs were full. I've never seen cattle eat so fast. No one can stand this life any longer. You never get a chance to rest.'

What he said was true, but none of my workers had ever spoken to me like that before.

'What do you mean, you cuckolded fool, you?'

I hit him under the ear and felled him to the ground.

He staggered to his feet, dizzy, whereupon he received five more blows and the same number of falls. The last one left him squirming in the dust. Finally he got up and limped away, hanging his head and wiping the blood, which was streaming from his nose, on his sleeve. I paused for a few moments to get my breath back. Then I turned to Padilha.

'You're the one to blame.'

'Me?'

'Yes, you; you're always filling that blackguard's head with stupid ideas.'

Padilha turned pale and denied it.

'That's not true at all; it's most unjust. He came pushing his nose in here, really. I didn't call him, even said, "Marciano, you'd better go and feed the animals." But he didn't pay any attention and stayed hanging around. I was fed up, as heaven's my witness; I don't like the look of that ruffian.'

I was just about to give him a piece of my mind when I saw Madalena, on the wall of the dam, looking at the shattered Marciano. I walked towards her, grumbling as I went.

'The cheek of it! Give them an inch and they take a mile.'

But my anger had gone. What worried me now were those boxes of material for the school, no earthly use in these remote parts. What was it in aid of? The governor would be perfectly happy if the school produced one or two individuals capable of getting their names on the electoral roll.

'Getting a breath of fresh air?' I asked Madalena, who was gazing at the dark roof of the stable.

She didn't answer. I looked at the drinking pond, the dry bed of the stream beyond the draining ditch of the lake, and in the distance, the quarry, which was just a

whitish blur on the slopes of the hills. The woods were growing dark. A cold wind sprang up. The last loads of cotton arrived at the seed-removing plant. There was a long blast on a whistle and the men abandoned their work. I glanced at my watch: six o'clock.

'It's horrible!' cried Madalena.

'What's that?'

'Horrible!' she repeated.

'What is?'

'Your behaviour. It was barbarous! Brutal!'

'What the devil are you talking about?'

Could she be out of her mind? No, she seemed normal enough, with her lips compressed and her brow wrinkled.

'I don't understand. Do you mind explaining?'

She spoke indignantly, in a trembling voice.

'How could you bring yourself to treat a human creature like that?'

'Oh, you're thinking about Marciano. You had me worried, I thought it was something serious.' At that moment it never occurred to me that such an insignificant incident could bring two sensible people into disagreement.

'To strike a man like that! Oh, it's disgusting!'

I thought she must have been upset for some other reason as that was just a trifling matter.

'Pooh, that's nothing, my girl. You're making a mountain out of a molehill. People like that obey orders, but only if they're beaten into them. Anyway, Marciano can hardly be called a man.'

'Why not?'

'How should I know? The will of God, I suppose. He's a booby.'

'Of course. You do nothing but humiliate him.'

'That's not true,' I said, changing my manner. 'He was a booby already before I met him.'

'Probably because he's always been kicked around.'

'Nonsense. He's a booby because he was born a booby.'

Madalena said no more, but turned her back and began to climb the hill. I accompanied her in silence. Suddenly she turned round, her deep blue eyes flashing, and asked in a hoarse voice :

'But that was brutal! Why did you do it?'

I lost my patience.

'I did it because I thought I ought to do it. And I'm not in the habit of justifying my actions, you understand? That's all that was needed! Such a fuss over one of the men getting a few cuffs! And what the devil is there between you and Marciano for you to get so upset about him?'

XXII

Dona Gloria used to like to have a chat with Ribeira. Their conversations, which were interminable, were in two tones : He spoke in a loud voice and looked straight ahead, while she whispered and glanced to either side. Whenever she saw me she kept quiet.

I quite understand these changes of hers. I was a hired worker myself, and I know that humble people normally spend their leisure time running down their betters. And Dona Gloria's leisure time was just about all day. She slept, had lunch, dined, had supper, read novels in the shade of the orange trees, and infuriated Maria das Dores who was driven mad by her attentions. She grumbled about everything : the rats, the toads, the snakes and the darkness. Whenever I was about she would play the martyr, and would never tire of singing exaggerated praises of

town life. Part of the day she used to spend in the office.

Ribeira addressed her as 'honoured madam' (Madalena was just 'madam'). Judging by certain words, gestures and pauses, I guessed she was there bemoaning the fate of her niece. She was always there by the desk making a nuisance of herself.

Madalena was typing. Ribeira, with tremulous care, was writing; from time to time he would stop to look for the ruler, the rubber or the pot of glue which were not in their proper places because Dona Gloria had the irritating habit of picking things up and never putting them back where she found them. Annoyed by this disorder, I used to look black, give a few quick, crisp orders and go out so as not to blow my top. But eventually I couldn't contain myself. One day, it was the fourth of the month, and the balance sheet of the previous month was still not ready.

'Why are you so late with it, Ribeira? Have you been ill?'

The old man rubbed his side-whiskers in distress.

'No, sir. It's just that the totals don't agree. Since yesterday I've been trying to find the error but haven't been able to.'

'Why not, Ribeira?'

He remained silent.

'Very well, then. Put a notice outside on the door prohibiting anyone from coming in who isn't on business. This is a place for work. Make the notice out with large letters. Anyone, you understand? Without exception.'

'Is that meant for me?' said Dona Gloria, drawing herself up.

'Put the notice up right away, Ribeira.'

'I asked if that was meant for me,' repeated Dona Gloria in a meeker tone.

'It's meant for everybody, madam. And if I said that there are no exceptions, there are no exceptions.'

'I came here to speak to my niece,' stammered Dona Gloria, now back to her normal voice.

'While she's in this room your niece can't receive visitors; she's an employee like the others.'

'I didn't know. I thought I wouldn't be interrupting.'

'I'm afraid you were wrong. No one can write, calculate and talk at the same time.'

Dona Gloria crept from her chair to the wall where, describing a right angle, she made her way to the door which opened and closed again silently. I sat down and began to compare the journal with the ledger. Ribeira came up to help me.

'Don't bother.'

Using a penknife and a ruler, Ribeira cut out a square sheet of cardboard. Madalena got up, put the cover on her typewriter, brought me the letters and waited until I had finished reading them before leaving the room. I signed the letters and put them in their envelopes.

'What does Dona Gloria come here gabbling about, Ribeira?'

'Nothing of importance,' replied the book-keeper. 'Dona Gloria has a heart of gold and talks very well on a variety of subjects, but to be frank I haven't been listening to her with undivided attention.'

I realized how absurd it was to question that serious-minded man about Dona Gloria's gossip.

'She is a very fine woman,' declared Ribeira as he marked lines with a pencil on the cardboard square.

'Not bad.' I got up. 'Take care with unwelcome visitors.'

'Of course,' answered Ribeira.

In the living-room I found Madalena stretched out on the sofa, heartbroken. She quickly dried her eyes.

'Why did you have to be so brutal?'

Madalena was pregnant, and I handled her like delicate china. Lately she'd been saying things to me I didn't like,

but I pretended not to understand. I watched her belly growing bigger. That was a compensation. I sat down and, so as not to upset her, said :

'Yes, it was brutal. Necessary, but nevertheless brutal. It's the devil, having to do something like that.'

'Then why do it?' said Madalena, in a jeering tone.

'There you go again. Don't start like that, for heaven's sake. I hate cheap jibes. With me it's all open and straight to the point. I don't go for people being evasive.'

'Who's being evasive? You behaved brutally.'

'I had to.'

'You didn't. Anyone can see that you don't like my aunt.'

'Me? I neither like her nor dislike her. I thought she wanted something to do. And that reminds me, it would be a good thing if you gave up typing now. That won't do you any good. Are you feeling ill?'

'No.'

'In any case you're entitled to a holiday some months before and after the birth.'

'Thank you.'

'As I was saying, I thought your aunt wanted to do some work. I even gave her some advice once, on the train. She stood on her dignity. She spends her time with nothing to do, reading a lot of rubbish. I'm not criticizing her for that. But what I won't have is her preventing other people from getting on with their work.'

'Listen, Paulo,' sobbed Madalena. 'You're mistaken. You're wrong, I swear to you you're wrong. My aunt is a woman who merits respect.'

'I agree, she sometimes has a kind of dignity, but with her, dignity doesn't last very long.'

Madalena went on :

'I don't know anyone who works as hard as she does.'

'Good grief !' I shouted, my astonishment lifting me up from the sofa.

'Are you going out?'

Looking back, I don't think it was the astonishment that lifted me from the sofa. More likely it was the custom I had of going into the fields early every morning. It is true that work of the farm had been completely driven from my mind, but Dona Gloria and Madalena had held me back almost an hour, so that the movement I made represented a necessity that became clear to me as soon as I was on my feet.

'Are you coming?'

Madalena accompanied me, talking as we went.

'From what you told me you began life very poor.'

'I can't say how I began. My earliest memories are of being a guide to a blind man. Then I sold coconut candy for mother Margarida. I've told you about that already.'

'Yes, I know. You had a hard struggle. But believe me, Dona Gloria had more to contend with than you did.'

'Well, I'm waiting. What did she do?'

'She took charge of me, brought me up and educated me.'

'Is that all?'

'You don't think that's very much? That's because you don't know the effort it cost. Greater than yours to obtain S. Bernardo. And one thing I'm sure of is that Dona Gloria wouldn't exchange me for S. Bernardo.'

The vanity of it! The state schools turn out infant teachers by the dozen. A property like S. Bernardo was quite a different matter.

'There's no comparison.'

'We used to live in the house of a circus artist,' said Madalena. 'There were two chairs. If there were visitors Dona Gloria sat on a kerosene tin. My study was the tiny dining-room. The table had to be propped against the wall because one of the legs was broken. I worked there for many years. At night, to economize, we used to turn the

lamp low. Dona Gloria would go to the kitchen to sob and greet. Her habit of whispering and walking on tiptoe comes from that time. The two of us slept in a narrow bed. When I was ill Dona Gloria would spend the night sitting up, and when she couldn't keep awake any longer she lay down on the floor.'

Madalena fell silent. Her description of their poverty touched me, and I said :

'You had a hell of a hard time.'

'Dona Gloria was the one who was never ill,' went on Madalena. 'When I went off to school she put on her shawl and went out to earn our keep. She had many jobs. Knowing the priests she was able to arrange flowers, put the register of baptisms in alphabetical order and decorate altars. She got to know the judges, and copied out the judgements of the court. At night she sold tickets at the cinema. And as the baker who lived near us was illiterate, she used to keep the accounts for him in a little book. Of course, taking on so many trivial jobs she didn't earn very much.'

'You must realize . . .' I murmured vaguely, gazing at the red backs of the heifers amid the molasses grass. Madalena interrupted me.

'And at examination times she still found time to intercede with the examiners, God and everyone else, so that I shouldn't fail. Dona Gloria is tireless. What she can't do is to dedicate herself exclusively to one job. That explains her continual restlessness. Here there are no cinema tickets, court judgements, registers of baptisms or baker's accounts. Dona Gloria sees machines and men who work just like machines. But she does try to be useful : she goes to church, puts flowers on the altars and cleans the glasswork round the images in the sacristy; she tries to cook and then falls out with Maria das Dores; she offers to help Senhor Ribeira, and she's already tried her hand at typing.'

A truck drove by, heading for the sawmill. From the woods came the dull thuds of an axe. Ox-carts creaked over there by Bom-Sucesso.

'Dona Gloria wouldn't have been any better off if she had concentrated on selling cinema tickets or writing out lists of baptisms: her earnings would always have been a mere pittance.'

'Why didn't she take up a job that pays better?'

'Difficult to find. In any case there has to be somebody to sell tickets and copy out judgements.'

I didn't answer: I felt not the slightest sympathy for poor Dona Gloria. I still considered her to be an old gossip who ruined everything she laid her hands on. Such a variety of jobs annoyed me. I shrugged my shoulders, but so as not to hurt Madalena, I said:

'You may be right. I don't think so. But then everyone has his own way of getting along in this world.'

XXIII

It was Sunday afternoon and I was returning from the seed-removing plant and the sawmill where I had been giving the mechanic a piece of my mind. A twisted fly-wheel and a jammed dynamo. The man had promised to fix it in a couple of days. No good. Result was piles of wood, and cotton filling up the storehouses.

'Incompetent bastards.'

At the side of the stream I came across old Margarida sitting on a stone, washing her legs that were as thin as sticks.

'Good afternoon, Mother Margarida.'

'Praise be to Our Lord Jesus Christ,' replied the old

negress, seeking to recognize me with her nose and her ears. Between scents and sounds she finally discovered me. 'Ah.'

'How are you, Mother Margarida? Are you keeping well?'

'I get by, my son. Better than I deserve, as God knows,' said the old woman, wiping her sticks of legs on her striped cotton skirt.

'Is there anything you need for your hut?'

'Nothing at all. I've got everything, your wife sends everything. Luxury fit for a lady: sheets, shoes, so many clothes. What's it all for? Shoes are no good for my feet. And I don't use bedclothes. All I need is a mat. A mat and a fire.'

'That's all right, Mother Margarida. Take care of yourself.'

I walked away nursing my annoyance with Madalena. On the other bank I saw Marciano who was driving the cattle.

'Wait there.'

I crossed the footbridge and went to look at the latest example of Limousin-Caracu crossbreeding.

'Thin.' It wasn't, but I persuaded myself it was. 'You needn't answer, just keep your trap shut.'

It was Madalena who was to blame for having given Rosa a silk dress. It's true it was badly torn. But that was going too far.

'Better to have thrown it away,' I told Madalena. 'If it was no good to you, throw it away. I'm not thinking of the loss but of the unsettling effect of a silk dress on folk like that.'

Madalena returned a hot answer and we weren't on speaking terms for a week. I could hardly contain my fury.

The roof of the sawmill stood out red, stained black

here and there by the rains. On the other side of the stream Margarida's bent head moved slowly above the plumes of grass. Climbing up a path, close behind the cattle, could be seen the tiny figure of Marciano.

'Stupid bitch,' I burst out furiously.

I thought of Rosa's dress and old Margarida's shoes and sheets.

'What a waste!'

Then I remembered the fly-wheel and the dynamo.

'Stupid bitch!'

Madalena, of course, had nothing whatever to do with the seed-removing plant and the sawmill, but that didn't occur to me then: everything became mixed up, which only served to increase my anger. My anger was quite unreasonable. I forgot the presents that Rosa had had from me years ago (face-powder, necklaces etc.) and the expenses with Margarida – I even sent the car for her – and then there were those *clichés* for Gondim's paper. It seemed to me that Madalena was just throwing money away.

'Throwing money away, you understand?' I repeated it so as to convince myself. 'Throwing money away! Sheer waste!'

Margarida's white head could no longer be seen above the molasses grass. Marciano's shape had disappeared round a bend in the road. With the rays of the setting sun the sawmill roof shone a brighter red.

It wouldn't be a bad idea to fire the mechanic.

'What a useless lot!'

I focused my mind on the dynamo, which was what had led me to regard the shoes, the sheets and the silk dress as a shocking extravagance. Then I grew calmer. Yes, a good solution would be to kick out the mechanic. I stopped for a moment to watch the scandalous courtship of a pair of seed-eaters. Ill-fated loving-making. In a few

days' time they would break up and each go his own way with no explanation to anyone. What luck!

I went home. In the porch Madalena, Padilha, Dona Gloria and Ribeira were talking. When I arrived they fell silent.

I pulled up a chair and sat down at a distance from them. Possibly their conversation wouldn't interest me, but I suspected they were running me down. Very likely. Dona Gloria forever with her little secrets whispered into Ribeira's ear. And Madalena listening to Padilha. Padilha who, according to her, had a mean spirit. To hell with them. They were all of a kind. A lively, happy group. Probably a conspiracy. Perhaps nothing at all. But for someone like me, with a chip on his shoulder, it was maddening.

They were ill at ease, no doubt guessing what was passing through my mind. Padilha showed his rotten teeth in a fawning smile. I got up and leaned against the balustrade and began filling my pipe, facing towards the outside since everything in my own home was so cheerless.

An urchin passed by at the bottom of the garden with a sling in his hand. A good illustration of the usefulness of the school. It was a holiday and there he was larking about, killing birds, when he might be studying his books or writing. Six contos' worth of charts, maps, pictures and other ornaments for the wall! Six contos! I scowled and glanced sideways at Madalena who was perfectly calm, as if she had had nothing to do with it.

I lit my pipe angrily and tried to think of something else. Margarida's hut was hidden away there amid the leaves of the banana trees. Marciano came out of the stable staggering with fatigue; as he passed in front of the house he took off his hat and hid his cigarette. The distant quarry was almost invisible now that the road to it had been closed. The municipality was no longer buying stone

and all the buildings on the fazenda were finished. And there was Caetano groaning on his bed, and Madalena sending him a packet of money every week. A nice easy life, if you please. Visits, medicine from the chemist, chickens. There's nothing like being a cripple. I don't deny he was in a bad way, but if I were to help all those who are in a bad way I'd end up in the gutter myself.

Above all, that silk dress for Rosa and those shoes and sheets for Margarida. Without consulting me! Who'd ever seen the like of it? It was outrageous, robbery, sheer robbery!

I sat down again. Madalena started talking to Padilha but I couldn't make out what they were saying. Their embarrassment was wearing off. Padilha kept his eyes on the ground. Why was it I didn't kick Padilha out of the house, that parasite who cheated me out of a hundred and fifty milreis a month fooling around with the school, and who was a mischief-maker, obviously a mischief-maker?

I turned and looked at the garden, which was all white and covered with sand and gravel. At that time there used to be swarms of doves about, flying low or strutting along proudly, pecking at the ground. I counted fifty. Then I lost count and began again without success. There were a good two hundred.

I remembered the time when there was nothing here but mud and weeds. The stream was a trickle of water in a narrow winding bed, that spilt over into the fields, making them into a bog. And Mendonça's fences were gaining ground. What a difference now! I felt like getting up and shouting out: Use your eyes. Are you all asleep? Wake up. The house, the church, the road, the lake, the meadows – it's all new. The cotton plantation is over three miles long and half that wide. The woods too are rich, there's mahogany and cedars like you never saw before. Look at

the seed-removing plant and the sawmill. Does anyone think all this appeared just like that?

Padilha went on chatting to Madalena. I shrugged my shoulders. To hell with them, the devil take the lot of them. Ribeira was gravely nodding assent to Dona Gloria's nonsense. Casimiro Lopes came and sat down on one of the steps. With his pointed knife he cut up some tobacco to prepare a straw cigarette, and as he did so his dog-like eyes wandered over the pastures, the lake, the church and the plantations. Poor old Casimiro Lopes. I'd been forgetting about him. Silent, faithful, reliable in any sort of job, he was the only one who really understood me. He gave me a sad smile. I pulled at my lip and muttered, 'It's a grim life, Casimiro.' Casimiro Lopes twitched his nose and frowned.

The others went on chattering. Damnation ! Buzzing like insects. There was no point in trying to listen to such piffle. Stupid lot ! I got up, yawning. I was tired, that's what it was. The whole day outside checking everything, keeping a close eye on the work. My legs felt weak. I was exhausted. It was almost night. Inside the house all was black. I remembered that the dynamo had broken down. One more thing to put up with. I left the porch and went in.

'Maria das Dores, light the lamps.'

The baby was bawling like a calf torn from its mother. I couldn't control myself : I turned back and roared at Dona Gloria and Madalena :

'Go and look after that poor kid. What a way to behave. So busy shooting off your mouths the very walls could fall in. The child's choking himself.'

Madalena had given birth to a son.

XXIV

It was two years since I had got married, and for that reason João Nogueira, Father Silvestre and Azevedo Gondim were having dinner with us.

That very same day I had told Padilha off; he gabbled some excuse which I didn't pay any attention to, but some hours later the matter gained in importance.

'Padilha, come here,' I said to him that morning in the garden, where he was picking flowers. 'No one's forced to stay here. If you don't like the job you can make tracks.'

'What's the matter?' exclaimed Padilha in amazement.

'What's the matter? You out here picking flowers! Look at the time!'

'Dona Madalena told me to pick some roses.'

'Are you a gardener? Dona Madelena doesn't give orders here. And you waste time gossiping.'

'It's not my fault,' retorted Padilha. 'Go and complain to her. She asked me for some flowers to decorate the table with this evening. What do you want me to do? Say no? And as for our conversations, please try to understand. An educated lady stuck away in the wilds like this. She needs someone with whom she can have pleasant conversations on different subjects from time to time.'

That struck me as being funny. I took no more notice of Padilha, who hastily devastated a rose-bush, pricking his fingers on the thorns, and fled. Pleasant conversations!

Later on, in the office, a vague idea came into my mind; it hammered away inside for a time and then left. When I tried to grasp it, it escaped. I stopped reading the letter I had in front of me and for some unknown reason glanced

suspiciously at Madalena. She was standing up leaning against the desk, absent-mindedly turning the pages of the ledger and looking out of the window at the distant bignonia.

Automatically I signed the paper, and automatically Madalena handed me another. At this the idea came back. But it moved so fast that I wasn't able to make it out. I gave a shudder, and it seemed to me that a change had come over Madalena's face. But the impression was short-lived. I settled down to work, and by evening, when my friends came tumbling out of the car, I felt myself perfectly calm once more.

'Glad to see you.'

As they don't stand on ceremony I took them into the house and quenched Gondim's thirst: whenever he comes to S. Bernardo he demands brandy.

During dinner they were all very lively. Even I, who understand nothing about the subjects they discussed, entered into the spirit of it. To start off with, Azevedo Gondim, whose tongue had been loosened by the brandy, began praising the country life.

'This is the life! Do you think you can raise a turkey the size of that one, scratching around in the garden in town? What a plump bird! God bless it!'

Dona Gloria clicked her tongue and looked away from the centre of the table where a turkey, the object of this extravagant praise, was squatting on a dish. Father Silvestre did likewise and looked out at the garden and the orchard.

'It really must be delightful to live in such a paradise. How beautiful it is!'

'For an outsider,' I interrupted. 'Here you get used to it. And in any case I don't cultivate things for show. I do it to sell them.'

'The flowers as well?' asked Azevedo Gondim.

'Everything. Flowers, vegetables, fruit . . .'

'That's it,' exclaimed Father Silvestre, nodding his grizzled head and frowning his narrow brow. 'That's what it is to use your head. If every Brazilian thought like that there wouldn't be so much misery about.'

'Politics, Father Silvestre?' said João Nogueira with a smile.

Father Silvestre opened wide his little dark eyes.

'Why not? You have to admit we're on the brink of a precipice.'

Father Silvestre is all mixed up. He has a hardworking parish and walks with his head in the clouds. He's as liberal as they come.

Padilha stuck his nose into the conversation.

'I agree.'

'A precipice,' repeated Father Silvestre.

'What precipice?' asked Azevedo Gondim.

The priest paused for a crushing reply.

'What anyone can see. The government's bankrupt! Corruption, villainy.'

'Who are the villains?' asked João Nogueira.

Father Silvestre thrust out his lower lip and became vague. His opinions are those of the newspapers. As, however, these opinions vary and Father Silvestre cannot entertain contradictory ideas, he reads only the opposition papers. He believes them. But occasionally he has his doubts. They swear that the men in power are rogues, and he knows some of them who are respectable. This tends to weaken the convictions he receives from the printed word. And so, needing to accommodate his own observations to the express declarations of others, he decides that individually politicians are men like anyone else, but collectively they are criminals.

'Just listen to that! It's not for me to denounce anyone. Facts are facts. Use your eyes.'

'You should be more specific,' insisted João Nogueira.

'Why? The governing party's rotten through and through. The country is heading for the rocks, doctor. That's what I say: the country's heading for the rocks.'

I passed him a bottle and enquired:

'What's happened to you to give you ideas like that? Something wrong? In my humble opinion people only speak like that when their income won't cover their expenses. I suppose your affairs are coming along well?'

'It's not me. It's the state finances that are in a bad way. Finances and everything else. But make no mistake about it, there's bound to be a revolution.'

'That's all we needed. Finish with this mad-house once and for all.'

'Why?' asked Madalena.

'Are you a revolutionary too?' I sneered.

'I'm only asking why.'

'Asking why? Because credit's disappearing, the exchange rate is going down and the prices of foreign goods are sky-high. Not to mention the political chaos.'

'It would be wonderful,' said Madalena. 'Afterwards everything would be fine.'

'Of course,' said Luís Padilha.

'Do you realize what you're saying?'

'What I find surprising is that Father Silvestre favours revolution,' said João Nogueira. 'What advantage will it bring you?'

'None,' replied the priest. 'It wouldn't bring me any advantage. But the people as a whole would stand to gain a lot.'

'They'll wait a long time,' commented Azevedo Gondim. 'You're preparing a bonfire and are going to get badly burned.'

'Fairy tales,' muttered Padilha.

'Fairy tales my foot,' shouted Azevedo Gondim. 'If

trouble starts, one thing's bound to come out of it, won't it, Nogueira?"

'Fascism.'

'That's what you'd like. What we shall have is Communism.'

Dona Gloria crossed herself, and Ribeira exclaimed:
'God forbid.'

'Are you afraid, Senhor Ribeira?' asked Madalena with a smile.

'I have seen many changes, madam, and all of them for the worse.'

'It won't come to that,' declared Father Silvestre. 'These exotic doctrines don't adapt themselves to our climate. Communism means misery, social upheaval and hunger.'

Ribeira passed his fingers over his shining bald head.

'In the days of the Emperor Dom Pedro there was little money about, and whoever had a conto was a rich man. But there was plenty of everything; pumpkins rotted in the fields. Castor beans and cotton seed had no value. Then with the proclamation of the republic they became worth a fortune. That's why I say that these changes can only make things worse. The railway . . .'

'A nation without God,' roared Father Silvestre to Dona Gloria. 'They shot all the priests, not one escaped. And the drunken soldiers smashed the images and danced on the altars.'

Dona Gloria clasped her hands to her breast and groaned:

'How terrible! Is it possible? On the altars!'

'They did nothing of the sort,' said Padilha. 'That's just counter-revolutionary propaganda.'

'And that is what you are working for, Father Silvestre,' exclaimed Gondim.

The priest defended himself.

'Not me. I stay quietly in my corner. That the govern-

ment is bad, that I believe. That reforms are urgently needed, I agree, they are. As for the talk about Communism, it's a lot of nonsense, it won't catch on. Not amongst us it won't, you needn't worry. Our people are religious, they're Catholic.'

João Nogueira disagreed.

'That's just what they aren't. No one knows any doctrine. If a Protestant sings hymns and preaches the gospel, the devotees of processions go to listen to him; others go in for spiritualism; and the mob believe in witchcraft and even worship trees. Many people enter Catholicism as they do an hotel: they reluctantly choose a dish and then leave it untouched. The more advanced are dyspeptic. You're wrong, Father Silvestre; these people go to Mass but they are not Catholic, and can be easily swayed one way or another.'

Father Silvestre got confused.

'In that case . . .'

But João Nogueira had finished. He was talking to me in a low voice, ridiculing Dr Magalhães.

Madalena was speaking to Ribeira.

'What do you stand to lose?'

'I can't say, madam. I should lose something, most likely. I always do. At least here I have a living. If such a disaster should occur perhaps I shouldn't have even that.'

Madalena tried to convince him but I was unable to hear what she said. Suddenly I was filled with a kind of suspicion. I had already experienced a similarly disagreeable feeling before. When was it?

João Nogueira was annihilating Dr Magalhães. Dona Gloria, warm and well-fed, was beginning to doze off, indifferent to the forthcoming perils. Ribeira stubbornly refused to admit any innovations, while Azevedo Gondim, red in the face, was declaring to Father Silvestre:

'There aren't any. Nogueira is right, there aren't any. I

know men who stick up for religion in the papers and who've never seen a bible.'

When was it? In a flash everything came to me clearly : it was that same day when Madalena handed me the letters to sign in the office. That was it ! She was in league with Padilha trying to corrupt the more serious-minded workmen. That was it, a Communist ! While I was building, she was intent on destruction.

We rose and went to have coffee in the living-room.

That was it. A Communist !

'It means corruption and the dissolution of the family,' insisted Father Silvestre. No one answered. I know nothing about such matters, but I was curious to know what Madalena thought about them. The priest could do nothing but shout. What was Madalena's opinion?

'On that point Father Silvestre's right,' said Gondim. 'Religion acts as a rein.'

'Nonsense,' said Nogueira. 'Are we horses that we need to have a rein?'

What was Madalena's religion? Perhaps she hadn't one? She had never spoken of that to me.

'It's monstrous !' And I muttered the word again, slowly but without conviction. 'Monstrous !'

She was a materialist. I remembered having heard Costa Brito speak of historical materialism. What did it mean, historical materialism?

To be honest, I don't concern myself very much with the next world. I believe in God, the celestial benefactor of my workmen, so poorly paid here on earth, and in the devil, the future tormentor of the thief who stole one of my pedigree cows. So I have a certain amount of religious feeling, though I am inclined to think it is dispensable in a man. But a woman with no religion is unthinkable.

Communist and materialist. What a splendid match. Friendly with that idiot Padilha. 'Pleasant conversations

on different subjects.' What were the conversations about? Social reforms, or something worse. What did I know? A woman with no religion is capable of anything.

'Of course,' I said, in answer to a long harangue directed at me by Father Silvestre. Ribeira and Azevedo Gondim were slowly growing bored. Dona Gloria was dozing. Padilha was in a corner, smoking. 'Probably.' I think I must have been saying something outrageous because Father Silvestre disagreed and treated me to an incomprehensible lecture. I looked for Madalena and saw her in a corner of the window, smiling charmingly at Nogueira. I have no lack of self-confidence. But I was impressed by Nogueira's handsome eyes, his well-cut clothes and his smooth voice. I thought of my one hundred and ninety-six pounds and my red face with its bushy eyebrows. Uneasy, I crossed my huge hairy hands, coarsened by years of toil. I joined this together with Madalena's materialism and communism – and I began to feel the pangs of jealousy.

XXV

I began to feel the pangs of jealousy. My first instinct was to seize Padilha by the ears and kick him out. But I kept him on so as to have my revenge. I removed him from the house and kept him shut up in the school. There he lived, slept and received his meals, cold food on a tray. I went four months without paying him his salary. Then, when I saw him thin and dejected, with a dirty collar and his hair uncut, I jeered at him :

'Be patient. You'll soon get your own back. You're an apostle. Carry on writing those stories of yours about the proletariat.'

The wretch tried to protest. But with continued humiliations he ended up mutely accepting it all. Then one day he broke down and begged me in tears to get him a job in the state administration.

'Impossible, Padilha. Wait for the Soviet. You'll easily get a job in the Red Guard. When that happens you won't remember me, will you, Padilha; there's a good fellow.'

In the house, guarded by Shark and Casimiro Lopes, life was dismal and monotonous. Dona Gloria spent her afternoons under the orange trees devouring brochures and leaflets. Madalena, with a clouded face, sat sewing. Sometimes her face would clear. And when work was done everything invited one to gossip, to snatch forty winks or to idle about.

A gentle breeze was blowing. I felt a shiver of pleasure and an urge to stretch myself. I looked at the hill, with the road winding round it like a ribbon, the woods, the cotton plantation and the still water of the lake. Madalena put aside her sewing and gazed out over the countryside. Her eyes grew large. They were beautiful eyes.

Without either of us moving we each felt we were drawing closer together, but each was fearful of hurting the other. There were embarrassed smiles and vague gestures. I talked about the interior, Madalena about life at training college. That pulled me up in my tracks. Of course. Training college. Silveira used to say that the girls there really led a gay life, and Silveira knows these institutions like the palm of his hand; he even draws up the regulations. Those girls learn an awful lot at training college!

I don't like clever women. They call themselves intellectuals and they're no good. I've seen some of them: they recite poetry in the theatre, give lectures and go about with a husband or something much the same. They say fine things on the stage, but in private life, when the curtains are drawn, they say: Why don't you come and help me,

darling? They've never said that to me, but they have done to Nogueira. I can believe it. They show up in provincial towns smiling, selling leaflets and making speeches, etc. The state capitals are probably infested with them. I find them disgusting.

Madalena was not really what you might call an intellectual. But she wasn't concerned about religion and was concerned about foreign news.

Disillusioned, I held back.

She'd been smiling and making up to Nogueira there by the window. Smiling exactly like those others who make speeches. That's a dangerous game. Anyone who gets involved with João Nogueira will come off worst. He's a good lawyer, and as far as business goes you know where you stand; but with women he's a menace, there's no holding him. And could that conversation have been the first? They knew each other before I came along and made a fool of myself. Maybe they'd been flirting. When I first met Madalena in Dr Magalhães's house, João Nogueira was there. He's a bore, is Dr Magalhães, a colossal bore. Listening to him is worse than listening to a saw at work. 'I'm a judge, you see? A judge. I get up in the morning . . .' Can anyone see Nogueira looking him in the eye and putting up with that? He had his reasons. When he had begun to speak about politics Madalena had looked up eagerly. And after two years of marriage she made up to him in a corner of the window.

I straightened up and abused her to myself : The whore ! Even with Padilha ! How the devil did she have the courage to associate with a wretch like Padilha ? To discuss the social problem. Is he here to discuss the social problem ? Infamous, that's what it was. Then there were her contributions to Gondim's paper. She still went on contributing. Not much, but she went on. Gondim and she had been as thick as thieves. Remember that afternoon when he came

in like a fool to congratulate me? They must have been pretty close. And that time they were discussing her legs and bosom! What faith could I possibly have in such a woman? A female intellectual!

My expression must have been ghastly because Madalena grew pale and began to tremble.

If I could only know . . . Know! Does any husband ever know? Quite likely I was a figure of fun to my own workmen. Perhaps even Marciano and Rosa discussed the matter in bed at night. Could Marciano know of my relations with Rosa? It wasn't possible. I'd always taken care to send him off into town to buy things. Perhaps he didn't want to know. Moreover, one had to admit he wasn't very quick on the uptake. No one can be sure; no one can be absolutely sure.

What would Ribeira say? What would Dona Gloria say?

I walked slowly away and went to see the child who, left to himself, was crawling and tumbling round the bedrooms. I crouched down and looked at him closely. He was thin. He had fair hair like his mother. The eyes were bluish. Mine are brown. He had a snub nose. Most children have a snub nose. I gave up the examination and remained undecided; if there were no traits of mine, neither were there any of any other man.

The child went on dragging itself about, falling over and crying, as ugly as sin. His legs and arms were painfully thin. He cried all day and all night; he cried like a lost soul, and his nurse was half-dead for lack of sleep. Sometimes his face would turn purple, and when Father Silvestre sprinkled water on him at the font I thought he was going to die. When he was teething he broke out all over in boils and they covered him with sticking plaster: he looked just like a cross-breed calf. Nobody bothered about him. Dona Gloria read, and Madalena wandered about, red-

eyed and sighing. I said to myself : She doesn't even love her own child.

The boy never stopped crying. Casimiro Lopes was the only one who showed him any affection. He would take him to the porch and prattle away to him, telling him stories of jaguars and singing him to sleep with old country songs. The child would climb up his legs and pull his beard, and he would sing :

I was born a seven months baby,
Mother's milk I never knew;
A hundred cows there were to give me
Pure white milk by the stable door.

He was a good soul, Casimiro Lopes. I never knew anyone more innocent. I am certain that he has no recollection of the evil he has done. Everyone imagines him a ravening beast. But they are wrong. Only very rarely does his ferocity appear. He understands nothing, expresses himself badly and is as credulous as a savage.

XXVI

From then on I went from bad to worse. I had the impression that I was ill, seriously ill. I was overcome with loathing, constant worry and rage. Madalena, Padilha and Dona Gloria – what a trio ! I felt like grabbing Madalena and beating the life out of her. Beating the life out of Dona Gloria, too, for having spent so many years slaving like a farm-horse to bring up that niece of hers. The most insignificant incidents assumed an exaggerated importance. A gesture or an idle word immediately aroused my suspicions.

A girl from training college! Silveira had given me an indirect warning. Now I had to put up with the consequences of my stupidity so as not to look even more of an ass. To put up with it! Like hell! Was I going to go on putting up with such infamy? What I needed was proof: to walk into the bedroom unexpectedly and find her in bed with another man. I was tormented by this idea of surprising her. I began looking through her cases, her books and opening her correspondence. Madalena wept, shouted and had an attack of nerves. Then there were more attacks, more weeping and shouts, more abuse hurled; my life became pure hell.

One day, as he was passing by the fazenda, Dr Magalhães stopped and had lunch with me. Watching him closely I observed that he was excessively polite to Madalena. Naturally there was nothing wrong in the words he spoke, but the intention was there in his manners, his looks and his smiles. It seemed to me there were some very suspicious whisperings and gestures.

That night I couldn't sleep. I spent hours sitting up, cursing Madalena, who was curled up in a corner of the bed, her legs drawn up to her stomach.

With Dr Magalhães, an elderly man! I reflected that I too was an elderly man, and I stroked my beard sadly. I was partly to blame: I took no care of my appearance. Up to the eyes with the work of the farm, I would spend three or four days without shaving. And when I came back from work I would be plastered in mud: just like a pig. I'd have a hot bath, but no amount of scrubbing could remove that.

And those enormous hands of mine. The palms were enormous: split, calloused and as hard as a horse's hoof. The fingers too were enormous, short and thick. Were these the hands for caressing a woman? Dr Magalhães, who lived by the pen, had hands as soft as kid, and his

neatly-trimmed nails would certainly never scratch. The only things he ever handled were documents.

Madalena breathed heavily. She looked so delicate and frail. Lately she'd been getting thin.

I got up and went to the light. My hands really were enormous. I went to the mirror. Dr Magalhães was ugly enough; but I, thanks to that hell of a life I led, spending all day long in the sun bawling out the workmen, was a ghastly spectacle. Burned by the sun. And those eyebrows! My hair was grizzled, but my beard was turning white. Fancy not shaving! What a sloven I was!

Next day I found Madalena writing. I tip-toed up to her and read the address: it was to Azevedo Gondim.

'Do you mind showing me that?'

Madalena seized a page that had not yet been folded.

'There's nothing to see. It's only of interest to me.'

'Maybe. But I'd like to see it. Do you mind?'

'Haven't I just told you that it's only of interest to me? Don't be so provoking!'

'Show me the letter,' I insisted, seizing her by the shoulders.

Madalena struggled, now holding out the letter at arm's length, now hiding it behind her back.

'Go to hell and mind your own business.'

I was enraged by her resistance.

'Let me see the letter, you slut!'

Madalena wriggled loose and ran off round the room shouting, 'You swine.' Dona Gloria came to the door, all flustered.

'For heaven's sake. They can hear you outside.'

I lost my head.

'Shut up, you whore's flesh, you! Are you deaf, standing there with your angel face? You hear? Whore's flesh! And if you don't like it, out! You and that trollop of a niece of yours, you understand? Whore's flesh, both of you!'

Dona Gloria fled with her handkerchief to her eyes.

'Wretch!' screamed Madalena.

All I could say was, 'Show me that letter, you bitch!'

Madalena tore the letter into pieces and threw them out of the window.

'Wretch!' She went out like a whirlwind. In the corridor she still screamed: 'Murderer!'

'Bitch,' I murmured, stunned. And I remained there watching the pieces of paper, carried by the morning breeze, fluttering amongst the rose leaves in the garden. Far off, in the living-room or kitchen, Madalena was still screaming: 'Murderer!' The other names she had called me didn't mean anything. That one did. That was what worried me. Women are sensitive creatures and shouldn't meddle in business that concerns men. The only person who, before her, had called me murderer to my face, was Costa Brito, in the open section of the *Gazeta*. And it was shortly after paying him back for that that I had saddled myself with Madalena. Fool that I was! I'd have been better off if I'd broken a leg. In most cases you're better off with a mistress than getting yourself a wife.

Murderer! How had she come across such an unexpected term of abuse. By chance? Or had she been reading Brito's paper? Most likely it was Padilha who had mentioned some gossip that was going about. That was it! Padilha had changed into someone who was capable of doing harm. What a joke! Padilha! I remembered the case of Jacqueira but it passed out of my mind again, and I began repeating to myself: Murderer! Murderer! I got angry at wasting time on trivialities. Madalena, Dona Gloria, Padilha, sod the lot of them. There was I brooding away while the workmen would be lounging about, idle. Then I stretched myself. I'd had a sleepless night. Then I shuddered and looked at my hands. They really were enormous.

Jacqueira . . . Ah yes, that was years ago.

Suddenly it came to me that Madalena was being very ungrateful to poor old Casimiro Lopes. After all . . .

Murderer! What did she know of my life? I had never confided in her. Each one has his own secrets. Fine thing it would be if we all went about telling everybody everything. We all have our vices. Madalena, coming from training college, must have many. Could I know anything about her past? Her present was bad; only too obviously it was bad.

And on top of everything she was ungrateful. Casimiro Lopes would take her son to the porch and sing and rock him to sleep. Everything was so mixed up and confused. It wasn't Casimiro Lopes she had called a murderer, it was me. At that moment, however, I saw nothing inconsistent in my ideas. I wouldn't have been surprised if they had told me that Casimiro Lopes and I were one and the same person.

Padilha! A bad servant is the ruin of many a man. Who would have thought that Jacqueira . . .

Jacqueira again. Here in short is the story of Jacqueira. Jacqueira was a spineless individual who was always being beaten up by ragamuffins and pedlars. He bore the blows and would mutter, 'Some day I'll kill one of these pests.' Everybody slept with Jacqueira's wife. You only had to push on the door. If the wife didn't open it soon, Jacqueira would do so, yawning and threatening, 'Some day I'll kill one of these pests.'

He did. He hid behind a tree and discharged his fowling-piece straight into the heart of a customer. The jury condemned him by a majority of six votes (sheer stupidity). When he left jail he became a respected citizen. Nobody ever meddled with Jacqueira again.

XXVII

When I cooled off it seemed to me that there had been a lot of fuss over nothing. It was in Dr Magalhães's nature to be polite to any lady without anyone becoming suspicious of him. And the letter addressed to Gondim must have been an article for publication. Nothing more than that. Such trivial things – and ending up in a stupid quarrel and gross insults, with Maria das Dores listening, Ribeira listening. To hell with it.

Madalena was honest, of course she was. She wouldn't show me the paper because she refused to give in to me, a question of dignity, it was quite obvious. What crazy jealousy!

Better behaviour than hers could only be found in a convent. She was discreet and straightforward. And kind-hearted; too much so, even with wild animals. Her thoughts, though, remained a mystery, for no one can penetrate the mind of another. But as regards words and actions she was beyond reproach. She could have hurled worse insults at me. Worse than murderer? That would be difficult. But I didn't hold it against her; the one to blame was that scoundrel Padilha.

After the violent scene of the morning I felt full of optimism, and the brutality within me became directed against the schoolmaster. The shameless wretch! I'll have to fire him. I'll see to it this afternoon.

Padilha offered me a chair, and with a serious air sat perched on a stool looking like a chicken on a spit.

'At your service, Paulo Honório.'

'Bad news. I shan't be needing your services any longer.'

'But why?' asked the astonished Padilha. 'What have I done?'

'What a question! Are you asking me? You ought to know what you've done.'

'I haven't done anything. How could I be locked up here? I'm more of a prisoner than a jail-bird. I never get out. If I take a few steps, there's Casimiro breathing down my neck. What have I done? Tell me one thing I've done wrong.'

'I'm not giving explanations.'

Padilha looked down.

'So that's it. You toe the line and this is what you get. Year in year out you go straight and behave yourself, you do your duty and try to please. And then just when you expect a raise in salary you get kicked out.'

He got up.

'At least give me a few days to put my things together and look around for something else. I can't leave just like that, empty-handed.'

I stood up too.

'You've got a month to clear out.'

'Thank you very much,' stammered Padilha. 'One even has to be grateful. A fine thing that is. If I hadn't been a stooge for your wife this wouldn't have happened.' He got worked up. 'A stooge! "Padilha, go and fetch me a book." And I'd go. "Padilha, bring me some paper." And I'd bring it. "Padilha, copy this page for me." And I'd copy it. "Padilha, pick me some oranges." I'd even pick oranges! A stooge! It's all that woman's fault.'

'Watch your tongue,' I ordered.

'What did I say? That I was a stooge. Well, I was. And that's why you're firing me.'

'Not at all. What you've been doing is spreading gossip, my lad. You've been plotting, my lad. You've been up to mischief, my lad.'

Luís Padilha was dumbfounded. Then the words tumbled out.

'What gossip, what mischief, what plots? You don't mention a single thing. Is it my fault if your wife has modern ideas? If that's it . . .'

'No, that's not it.'

'Then I don't know what is.'

'Listen, Padilha. I'm getting on for fifty and I've seen a bit of the world. I'm not going to mince words. I've closed my eyes to an awful lot, young man. And if I say you were spreading gossip it's because you were spreading gossip.'

Padilha insisted.

'Then tell me. I've got a clear conscience. Tell me. If you know something you can say what it is.'

'Don't play the little innocent,' I said with a jeer. 'Didn't you make up stories to Madalena? Didn't you talk about me? Did you or didn't you?'

'No, I didn't. What do I know to talk about?'

'Oh, come off it, my lad. I heard you.'

Padilha looked thoughtful.

'Oh well, if you heard them there's nothing more to be said. Naturally you heard what I didn't say.'

'I heard what you did say. Don't deny it. My hearing's good.'

'If you heard,' admitted Padilha, 'then it was the story of Mendonça's death. Dona Madalena knew about it already.'

'Knew about what?'

'What people were muttering about. Slander. I explained everything and took your part: Dona Madalena, this is ancient history and digging it up won't bring anyone back to life. Old man Mendonça was a blackguard who went about stealing his neighbours' lands. As for what people are saying, don't believe it: it's just scandal-mongering.'

Paulo Honório is a good-hearted man, he wouldn't even kill a chicken.'

I remembered our quarrel that morning. It was just as I'd thought: gossip spread around by that good-for-nothing.

'Padilha, what did you mean when you said it was all Madalena's fault?'

'Are you trying to deny it? If it weren't for her I wouldn't be losing my job. It was her fault. And mind you, I didn't like it. Many's the time I've said to her openly: Dona Madalena, Paulo Honório has no time for socialism. You'd better drop these new-fangled ideas. Talk like this won't get us anywhere. There you are, you see. The cat drinks the cream and the mouse gets blamed for it. The mouse – that's me.'

I began to weaken.

'What the devil were you talking about?'

My jealousy had become public knowledge. Padilha, the hypocrite, gave a smile and answered:

'Literature, politics, art, religion . . . She's a very intelligent woman, Dona Madalena. And well-informed, too, a veritable library. But I don't need to be telling you all this. You understand the woman you married better than I do.'

XXVIII

'You understand the woman you married.' What a way to put it.

Padilha knew something. Was it possible? Or was he just shooting off his mouth? It was all conjecture. What I wanted was to be certain and to put an end to it once for all. Yes or no.

'You understand the woman you married.' I didn't understand a thing. It was precisely this that took away my appetite. To live with someone in the same house, eating at the same table, sleeping in the same bed, and to discover years later that she is a stranger. My God. But aren't I also ignorant of my own self, and haven't I forgotten so many of my own actions, and forgotten too what I felt during those long months of torture?

You see how we waste time in unnecessary suffering? Wouldn't it be better if we were like oxen? Intelligent oxen. Can there be anything more stupid than for a living creature to torture itself for pleasure? Is it true or isn't it? What does this mean? To go looking for trouble. Is it true or isn't it?

If I had proof that Madalena was innocent I'd give her a life such as she'd never dreamed of. I'd buy her as many dresses as she wanted, expensive hats, dozens of silk stockings. I'd be attentive, very attentive, and bring the best doctors from the capital to cure her pallor and her thinness. I'd allow her to give clothes to the wives of the workmen.

And if I knew she was deceiving me? Ah. If I knew she was deceiving me I'd kill her: I'd open the vein in her neck, but just a little so that the blood would flow for a whole day.

But I was immediately revolted by this cruel thought. What purpose would it serve? A useless crime. It would be better to cast her out and let her suffer. And when she'd passed from hospital to hospital and wandered starving and tattered through the streets, her bones sticking through a skin that was marked with wounds and the scars of operations, I'd toss her a coin in the name of charity.

Was it true or wasn't it?

What did it matter? In the middle of your work death comes, the devil carries you off; at the funeral your friends

pull a long face and later forget even the food you provided them with. What did it matter to me what Padilha, Ribeira, Dona Gloria or Marciano thought? Casimiro Lopes was the only one who had no opinion. What wouldn't I give to be like Casimiro Lopes!

'Things are bad, Casimiro,' I said with my eyes.

And Casimiro Lopes would agree with me, shrugging his shoulders.

XXIX

When my doubts became unbearable I felt I had to have confirmation. Madalena was undoubtedly concealing her cunning.

Undoubtedly, undoubtedly, you understand. Undoubtedly. These continual repetitions served to bring me a kind of certainty. I rubbed my hands. Undoubtedly! Even this was preferable to swinging from one side to the other.

It was only too clear that Dona Gloria was a procuress. With her soft tread, downcast eyes and feeble voice she was ideally cut out to be a procuress. Earlier on she must have been up against it. And so, turning to procuring, she had ruined her own niece. They were hand in glove, those two bitches.

So Padilha had really done me a good turn.

I muttered to myself in rage: Thanks a lot, Padilha. The scoundrel that he was! Not a living creature in S. Bernardo but knew how she was carrying on! 'It was all that woman's fault.' What lack of respect! Whoever would throw such an accusation against a married woman in her own husband's face? Who would dare? Nobody. Could anything be clearer?

Father Silvestre paid a visit to S. Bernardo, and in my suspicion I remained alert and watchful. May God forgive me, I even suspected him. Even a tethered horse likes to eat.

My misery knew no bounds : I saw that Madalena was carrying on with the farm workers. Yes, even with those half-breed workers.

Sometimes the voice of common sense would draw me up short : Take it easy, you fool. You must be out of your mind. Really, no sensible, clean, neat, well-dressed white woman would touch one of those dirty, stinking, dark-skinned brutes. My eyes were deceiving me. But if my very eyes deceived me, what was there left for me to believe in? Didn't I see a workman with a hoe waving to her?

With a great effort and by turning my mind to other things, I managed to control myself. Obviously he hadn't been waving to her. It was impossible.

Like hell it was ! The only reason women don't chase after lice is because they don't know which is the male.

One afternoon, when old mother Margarida came staggering and groping up the hill to visit us, I spent an hour watching her for fear she was the bearer of a letter.

I think I was just about insane.

XXX

One night I thought I heard footsteps out in the garden. Why the devil didn't Shark bark? The cursed dog was losing his scent.

I got up, seized my rifle, turned out the light and opened the window :

'Who's there?'

Could it be an enemy, someone sent by Gama, Pereira or Fidelis? It wasn't likely. There had been no more threats, and Casimiro Lopes and I had had no work of that nature. I flattened myself against the wall instinctively. I thought I could make out a shape.

'Who's there? Man or beast? What, lost your tongue?'

And I shattered the silence with a shot that frightened the inhabitants and made Madalena leap out of bed with a scream. I shut the window and lit the lamp.

'What was it?' wailed Madalena in terror.

'Friends of yours prowling about the house. But make no mistake about it, one of these days one of them will end up stretched out on the ground.'

Madalena threw herself on to the pillows and burst out sobbing. There was a long whistle. Some pre-arranged signal.

'Is that a whistle or isn't it? So you'd fixed to meet him here in the bedroom right behind my back? That's all that was needed. Would you like me to go out? If you want me to go out you only have to say so. Don't be shy.'

Madalena cried and cried. I sobered down. I was being cruel, monstrously cruel. And if the footsteps and the whistle hadn't been on her account? Ah! If that were so there was no punishment too harsh for me. And what if there had been no footsteps or whistle? I remembered one night when I really got a shock and pulled out my knife in fear of a rat. It's easy enough to make a mistake. I decided to change my tone.

'Let's have no more of this crying. Just because someone whistles in the orchard and walks about the garden there's no need for you to cry your eyes out. You'd better stop putting on a show.'

Madalena went on crying and crying until finally she cried herself to sleep. I lay down, keeping to the edge of the bed so as to avoid touching her. Just as I was dropping

off to sleep I heard the creak of a key in the lock and the sound of tiles being moved. I awoke with a start and held my breath. Who could be tampering with doors? Who could be removing tiles from the roof? I moved closer to Madalena and studied her face. Had she heard it? Or was she pretending to be asleep?

I left the bed, drew up a chair and sat down. Madalena was breathing heavily. Obviously no one was meddling with the lock nor with the tiles. I had dreamed it. A nightmare. Perhaps I had dreamed the footsteps too. It was a nightmare. That was it. A nightmare. Quite likely the whistle was the cry of an owl.

There was a chime from the dining-room clock. What time could it be? Half past twelve? One o'clock? Half past one? Or half past some other hour?

I couldn't sleep. I counted from one to a hundred and closed my little finger; I counted from one hundred to two hundred and closed the next one, and so on until I reached a thousand and had both my hands closed. Then I counted a hundred and released my middle finger; another hundred, and the index finger, and by the time I reached two thousand I had both hands open. I repeated this childish trick, this time imagining that each finger represented a conto's profit in the balance sheet, so bringing me an immense fortune; but so great was the fortune that I grew tired of it and interrupted my counting.

The clock chimed a second time. One o'clock? Half past one? Only going to see. I got up and walked heavily. Madalena was still sleeping soundly.

I unlocked the door to the corridor and then locked it. I unlocked it again and then locked it once more. I scanned Madalena's face. What a deep sleep! There she was perfectly relaxed and me here eating my heart out. As relaxed as if everything were just fine. I felt like waking her up and starting again our daily conflict. It wasn't fair that

she should be sleeping like that while I was so worried, so desperately worried. Worried about what? After all, what was I doing there standing there with my hand on the key staring goggle-eyed at Madalena?

What the devil am I playing at? Ah yes, I came to see the time. I opened the door, walked down the corridor and went into the dining-room. It was always something to know what time it was. I sat down at my place at the table. When our disagreements first began I used to sit here every night and argue with Madalena. The words that had poured from the two of us!

'What's the use of arguing and explaining things? What's the use?'

What, indeed, is the use? What I had to say was simple and straight-forward, and it was in vain to expect my wife to speak clearly and to the point. For me to use her vast, complicated vocabulary would be impossible. And when she tried to use my limited, rustic language, the most in-offensive, down-to-earth expressions seemed to me to take on the appearance of snakes : twisting, biting, poisonous.

XXXI

One afternoon I went up into the church tower to see Marciano hunting for owls. Some had settled in the roof, and at night their hoots were enough to deafen your ears. I wanted to be present when he exterminated those cursed birds.

From up there I listened to the sounds made by the invisible Marciano, while from the four small windows, opening in different directions, I was able to look out at the countryside. From one of them I could see below me

a part of the office, a desk, and my wife seated at the desk, writing. A slight movement of the eyes from that familiar everyday scene, and I could see the wall of the house, doors, windows, Dona Gloria's bed and a corner of the dining-room. Looking up, the horizon was made up of tiles, cement and ornamented roofs. Higher still there were fields, hills and clouds.

The molasses grass was now cropped low, and the cattle that were grazing on it looked like celluloid toys. The cotton plantation stretched away up hill and down dale, its colours reappearing again faintly in the distance. In a clearing of the dark, almost black forest you could just make out the tiny figures of the woodcutters in the shade.

An owl hooted. Marciano emerged from the dark hiding places, his woolly hair white with cobwebs.

'One more. A damned big one.'

I was grumbling to myself: What can that stupid bitch be thinking of? Writing like that. She's crazy.

Marciano's wife, Rosa, was crossing the stream. She lifted her skirts up to her waist and gradually lowered them again once she had passed the deepest point. She stood for a moment on the bank with her legs apart letting the water drip, then walked off with a wriggle, wagging her behind provocatively.

The tops of the hills, rounded by the distance, glowed golden in the light of the sun. They seemed to be fantastic heads of saints. If that poor fish were good for anything and had any sense, she'd be up here enjoying these wonderful sights.

As dusk was falling I descended the steps feeling very pleased with myself. Though I am but an averagely impressionable individual, I was convinced the world is not such a bad place. Fifteen metres above the level of the earth we experience the vague sensation of having grown fifteen metres. And when, in our giant state, we see at

our feet immense herds and extensive plantations, all ours, and we see the smoke rising from houses that belong to us, where people live who fear us, respect us, perhaps even love us because they are dependent on us, we experience a deep feeling of serenity. We feel ourselves to be good; we feel ourselves to be strong. And if nearby our enemies are dying, even if they are insignificant enemies that a black boy is disposing of with a stick, our sensation of power is heightened and given permanence. Compared to this, a doll scribbling invisible lines on a scarcely visible sheet of paper is worthy of but little consideration. And so it was that I descended the steps at peace with God and with men, and hoping that I would finally get some rest from those damnable owls.

Lost in thought, I went into the garden and walked towards the orchard to check on the pruning. On the ground in front of the office I came across a sheet of paper with writing on it that had obviously been blown there by the wind. I picked it up and gave a casual glance at Madalena's beautiful rounded handwriting. Frankly, I couldn't understand it. There were several words that I didn't know, others that I recognized, but all jumbled together in such confusion that I couldn't make head or tail of it. It may have been well written because my wife knew all there was to know about grammar, and there were plenty of words crossed out and underlined; but there was nothing wrong with some of the sentences crossed out, and I tried in vain to discover the reason for her corrections.

Trying to be smart and concealing what ought to be clear.

Walking through the orange trees I forgot about the pruning; I reread the paper and some confused ideas surged into my mind making me shiver. What the hell! That was part of a letter, and a letter to a man. The name of the addressee wasn't there because the first part was missing,

but there was no doubt that it was a letter to a man. Stunned, I read it for the third time, pausing over passages that were clear and trying to guess the meaning of those that were obscure.

'This is the proof,' I muttered in astonishment. 'Who can this stuff be intended for?' My suspicions flew to João Nogueira, Dr Magalhães, Azevedo Gondim and Silveira of the training college. I read the letter again and again, swearing like a trooper and with my temples beating. Finally darkness fell and I was no longer able to distinguish the letters.

So that's it! A letter to a man!

I remained there for ages, walking about under the fruit trees.

Am I some son of a bitch Marciano?

And I went back in fury, determined to put an end to my misery once and for all. My ears were humming and red lights danced before my eyes. So blindly was I walking that I bumped right into Madalena as she was coming out of the church.

'About turn,' I shouted, grabbing her by the arm. 'We've got business to discuss.'

'Still?' asked Madalena. And she allowed herself to be led into the darkness of the sacristy.

I lit a candle and, leaning against the table laden with saints on the dais where Father Silvestre robes himself for the Mass, said :

'What were you doing here? Praying? Do you have the nerve to say you were praying?'

'Still?' repeated Madalena.

I expected her to start hurling insults at me, but I was wrong : she just gazed at me intently with her large eyes. I was boiling over with suppressed violence. My hands trembled and made as if to strike her. I pressed them together to control them, and with clenched jaw, said :

'You wrote a letter.'

A cold wind from the hills came in through the window biting my ears, but I felt hot. The door squeaked, and from time to time banged irritatingly against the catch, then went on squeaking. It annoyed me but it never occurred to me to close it. Madalena remained as if she hadn't heard. I looked at her and at a lithograph hanging on the wall.

'Do you think things are going to go on just as they are?'

Marciano's eldest son came tip-toeing in. Without looking at him I roared :

'Beat it.'

The boy went up to the window.

'Beat it,' I shouted again.

He was probably surprised at my appearance, and stammered :

'I'm closing the church, sir.'

I realized that I was being unreasonable and replied with affected calm :

'That's all right. Come back later. It's early yet.'

It was nine o'clock by the sacristy clock.

The north-easter began to blow and the door banged angrily. I plunged my fingers through my hair.

'What are you waiting for, you brat?'

The kid fled.

I don't know how long I remained standing there. My rage turned into anguish, and the anguish into weariness.

'Who was the letter for?'

I looked alternately from Madalena to the saints in the oratory. The saints didn't know and Madalena wouldn't say.

What surprised me was the tranquillity reflected in her face. I had arrived in a boiling rage and with the intention

of killing her. Could one live with someone responsible for such sordid business?

But as the hours passed I felt myself falling into a state of perplexity and cowardice. The plaster saints were not concerned about my afflictions. And Madalena herself had almost the same appearance of impassivity. How was it she was so calm? I told myself that I would be justified in killing her. Why allow such a guilty creature to live? When she was dead I would forgive her her faults. My hands contracted and threatened her again, but now their movements were slow and feeble.

'Say something,' I said in an unsteady voice.

'What's the use?'

'There's a letter. I want to know, you understand?'

I put my hand in my pocket and handed her the sheet, already crumpled and dirty. Madalena spread it on the table, looked at it and then pushed it aside.

'What about it?'

'I've read it.'

The candle burnt itself out. I lit another and held the match between my fingers until it burnt me.

'Say something.'

It seemed to me that there must be a mistake somewhere, and that if Madalena only wanted, the whole matter could be cleared up. My heart was thumping madly, I desperately wanted to convince myself of her innocence.

'What's the use?' murmured Madalena. 'For three years now we've lived a miserable existence. When we try to understand each other, we know before we start that we shall end up quarrelling.'

'But the letter.'

Madalena picked up the paper, folded it and gave it to me.

'The rest of it is in the office on my desk. Probably this sheet blew into the garden while I was writing.'

'Who to?'

'You'll see. It's on top of the desk. It's nothing to make a fuss about. You'll see.'

'Very well.'

I sighed. How tired I was!

'Will you forgive me the unhappiness I've caused you, Paulo.'

'I think I've had my reasons.'

'That's not the point. Will you forgive me?'

I growled a monosyllable.

'What ruined everything was this jealousy of yours, Paulo.'

Words of repentance rose to my lips, but my foolish pride forced me to swallow them. Many times the lack of a shout can lose you the whole herd of cattle.

'Be good to my aunt, Paulo. When the trouble is over and done with you'll realize that she's a fine person.'

Had I been so rough on the old girl?

'It's a result of this misunderstanding. She's to blame too. Her and her ill-temper.'

'Ribeira is honest and hard-working, don't you think?'

'Yes. In the old days he was sitting pretty. Now he's nothing. But he's a good sort, poor fellow.'

'And Padilha . . .'

'Oh no. He's a trouble maker. You shouldn't be defending him. The scoundrel.'

'Have patience. Then there's Marciano. . . . You're very hard on Marciano, Paulo.'

'That's enough!' I said in exasperation. 'That's too much.'

'Don't get angry,' said Madalena without raising her voice.

'What I wanted . . .'

I sat down on a seat. What I wanted was for her to dispel those doubts of mine.

'What was it you wanted?' asked Madalena sitting down as well.

'How should I know?'

And I sat quiet, resting my heavy hands on my knees. Madalena, half serious, half joking, said :

'If I should die suddenly . . .'

'What's that? What a ridiculous thing to say.'

'Why? Who knows what can happen to me? If I should die suddenly . . .'

'Stop talking like that, woman. Why bring up such things?'

'Give my dresses to Caetano's family and Rosa. Share my books among Ribeira, Padilha and Gondim.'

I got up impatiently.

'What a pointless conversation.'

I seized upon a pleasant subject in order to drive away these cheerless thoughts.

'I'm thinking of taking a trip.' Feeling better I sat down again and lit a cigarette. 'After the harvest. I'll leave Ribeira in charge of the fazenda. We'll go to Bahia. Or Rio. Rio's better. We'll rest up for a few months, you can cure that stomach trouble of yours, put on some weight and enjoy yourself. It's good to get a change of air. Can't spend all our lives in this hole working like a nigger. We'll go up to S. Paulo too. What do you think?'

Madalena was looking at the light, which was trembling and making the shadows on the wall flicker. Then she came out with :

'Today in the wood there were some bignonia in flower. I counted four. In a week's time they'll be lovely. It's a shame flowers fall so quickly.'

'Yes, it is,' I muttered, trying to see what bignonia had to do with Rio and S. Paulo. 'But what do you say about the trip?'

Madalena was gazing at the candle.

'Yes, I was praying. Not praying properly, because I don't know how to pray. Never had the time.'

My God, what was she thinking of? That was the answer to my first question.

'I used to write so much that my fingers went numb. Tiny letters so as to economize on paper. The night before examinations I used to sleep just two or three hours. No friends in high places, you see. And above all our house in Levada was cold and damp. In winter I used to take my books to the kitchen. No time for going to church. It was all study, study, study for fear of failing the examinations.'

She was out of her mind. It was obvious she was out of her mind. She came out with more strange ideas.

'The workmen's houses down there are cold and damp, too. It's so sad. I was praying for them. For all of you. Praying . . . Talking to myself.'

The sacristy clock struck midnight.

'My God! Is it as late as that! Here we are, chattering away. . . .'

She got up and put her hand on my shoulder.

'Goodbye, Paulo. I'm going to rest.'

At the door she turned round.

'Don't be angry any more, Paulo.'

Why didn't I go with the poor wretch? I don't know. Because I still retained a bit of my stupid dignity. Because she didn't ask me to. Because I was overwhelmed with weariness.

I stayed puzzling over Madalena's disconnected words and peculiar manner. Then I remembered the letter which she had left, incomplete, in the office. Who could it be for? At that my jealousy showed itself once more. There was nothing for it, it would always go on causing trouble.

Little by little I began to doze off until I fell into a troubled, fitful sleep. I believe I dreamed about swamps, and rivers in flood.

When I came to myself the candle was out, and the moon, which I had not seen rise, was shining in through the window. The door was still squeaking, and dead leaves, blown into the sacristy by the north-easter, were rustling on the black and white tiles. The clock had stopped, but I reckoned I must have slept for several hours. Then cocks began to crow, the moon went down, the wind ceased its vain howling and the light of dawn began to play on the images in the oratory.

I got up, my back aching on account of my uncomfortable position. I stretched my arms. They were as numb as if I had had a beating. I got up and made my way to the cowshed where I drank a glass of milk. I chatted for a while to Marciano about the owls, then strolled around the garden waiting for daylight. The woods, with bigonia flowers scattered all about, looked really beautiful.

Three years married. It was exactly a year since that fiendish jealousy of mine had started.

There was a whistle from the sawmill; Ribeira's side-whiskers appeared at a window; Maria das Dores opened the doors; Casimiro Lopes came by with an armful of vegetables.

I went down to the lake feeling worn out, my hips aching. What a night! I stripped among the banana trees, stepped into the water, dived and swam.

The sun was already high by the time I reached the house. My back was still hurting. What a night!

As I climbed the outside steps, I heard screams of horror coming from inside the house.

'What the devil is all this fuss about?'

I rushed inside and along the corridor to find several people in my bedroom making excited exclamations. I brushed them aside and then stopped short. Madalena, as pale as death, was stretched out on the bed, her eyes fixed and froth at the corners of her mouth. I went up to her

and seized her hands : they were cold and hard. I felt her heart : it had stopped. It had stopped.

There were liquid stains on the floor, and pieces of broken glass.

Dona Gloria had collapsed on the rug in convulsions, sobbing. The nurse, with the child in her arms, was whimpering. Maria das Dores was moaning.

I began rubbing Madalena's hands, trying to revive her, and babbling, 'To God nothing is impossible.'

It was a phrase that I had heard some days before in the country, and which now sprang to my mind to afford me a ridiculous hope.

I held a mirror in front of Madalena's mouth and drew back her eyelids, repeating all the time, 'To God nothing is impossible.'

'What a disaster, Senhor Paulo Honório. What an irreparable disaster,' murmured Ribeira, close beside me.

And Padilha, standing awkwardly behind him, said : 'At a moment like this I felt it my duty to come.'

'Thank you, thank you very much.'

Out of habit I went to the office, still muttering to myself, 'To God nothing is impossible.'

The envelope Madalena had spoken of was lying on top of her desk. I opened it. It was a long letter of farewell. I read it, skipping passages and of course only half understanding it, since at every line I came across difficult words that, in my ignorance, I had never had occasion to use. One page was missing : it was precisely the one I was carrying in my wallet in between bills for cement and charms against malaria that Rosa had given me years ago.

XXXII

Madalena was buried beneath the mosaic floor of the high altar.

I put on mourning and ordered a gravestone. Dr Magalhães, Father Silvestre, João Nogueira, Azevedo Gondim and neighbouring landlords came to offer their sympathy. I gave up the double bed and moved to a small room where, outside under the roof, a pair of wrens had nested. Every morning they would twitter furiously. Telegrams and black-edged envelopes piled up on my bedside table.

Needing distraction, I threw myself into the work of felling trees in the woods. Then I ordered the dam wall, which was leaking, to be repaired. But my enthusiasm quickly cooled. That was a means of seeking a livelihood, not death.

I thought about Madalena. In fact, I believe her memory was always present in my mind. What happened was that, in the confusion of the first few days, it became mixed up with a whole host of other worries. But as these receded, her memory rose to the forefront. Barely was I able to dispel it: it would re-form and remain with me. And even my favourite pursuits would become boring and wearisome. I would spend my time walking up and down the living-room with my hands in my pockets and my pipe stuck in my mouth. I would go to the office, glance listlessly through the books, walk through the corridor and bedrooms, and then return to pacing the living-room.

One day I was in the orchard watching a large ant exercise itself in useless marches and countermarches. Useless, that is, to me, since I was unaware of its intentions.

But my observations were interrupted by the unwelcome voice of Dona Gloria.

'I came to say goodbye. I'm leaving.'

I looked up and saw her standing stiffly in front of me, in mourning, wearing that ill-fitting old dress that rucked at the shoulders when she held herself up.

'Where are you going?'

With a skinny finger Dona Gloria drew a vague curve in the air.

'I'm leaving.'

'You haven't anywhere to go.'

And I looked for the ant which had disappeared.

'I'm leaving,' insisted Dona Gloria.

I tried to dissuade her :

'But this is absurd, woman. Walking out without knowing where you're going. Have a bit of sense.'

But Dona Gloria continued as stiff as a broom-handle.

'I'm not asking for advice. I came to say goodbye, I'm not sneaking off like a runaway slave. Tell me what you want.'

I set off on one of my interminable walks from one side to the other.

'All right. We're all free to do as we want. When are you coming back?'

'Never.'

'Very well.' I questioned her further. 'Who are you going with?'

'With God.'

'That's fine. The car has a full tank. Enjoy yourself.'

'Thank you. I'm walking.'

That really put my back up.

'Like hell you are !' I stopped, breathing heavily. 'You're going to go marching off, heaven knows where, telling everyone I kicked you out of the house, that I'm a skin-flint and that you got away with just the clothes on your back, is that it?'

Dona Gloria drew herself up even more and said indignantly :

'Are you trying to keep me back? I haven't killed or robbed or slandered anyone. . . . I'm leaving.'

'Who's trying to keep you back?' I answered. 'Don't be so silly. You want to leave? That's quite all right, I'm not holding you. If you wanted to remain you could stay here until you grew a beard, no one's going to mind. But if you don't want to, there's nothing more to be said. What isn't right, though, is for you to run off as if you were being driven out. I'm not having that. Chancing your luck with nothing in view, oh no! Make arrangements, gather your bits and pieces together.'

'I've already done so.'

'Then travel decently like a normal human being. You need to know where you're going to stay and how much money you'll want to keep yourself.'

'I don't need anything. I don't know where I'm going to live. All I know is that I've got to get away from here today.'

'Don't be a child,' I said, speaking slowly. 'Do you think you can stand that hard life again? It won't be easy. After all that novel reading you'll find it hard enough even to write out the lists of baptisms.'

Little by little, Dona Gloria became more tractable. I don't know whether this was merely in accordance with her usual habit of so doing, or whether she had come with the intention of eventually becoming more tractable.

'Think of the rents of houses in the city, think of the price of medicines. It's easy enough to fall sick, Dona Gloria, but to get your body well again is another matter. Think of the price of food, think of the light bills and the water bills. Life's difficult everywhere nowadays, and in the city it's just impossible, Dona Gloria.'

Dona Gloria agreed that life in the city is, in fact,

impossible. She had demonstrated the necessary independence and pride. More than that no one could require. I told her that I was owing Madalena three years' salary. Dona Gloria believed me, or at least pretended to.

'It's only right you should receive it.'

Dona Gloria agreed.

I gave her money for the journey, made over to her a pension of two hundred milreis a month and sent her to João Nogueira who put her up for the night and saw her off the next day.

A few days later Ribeira resigned.

'You're not serious, are you, Ribeira?'

'This house holds bitter memories for me.'

'And for me too, man. What the hell! But you're crazy to want to leave.'

'I have no doubt, Senhor Paulo Honório, no doubt at all.'

'Have you another job?'

'None.'

'Well then! It's madness. And the worst of all is that I can't even give you a recommendation. At your age you'll never find anything else. Fortunately you've been here some years and have been able to save a bit of money. You'll have a fortune. It'll do to get by with.'

'It is with the deepest regret that I go, Senhor Paulo Honório,' said Ribeira, wiping his eyes. 'The bitterest regret. It breaks my heart to leave.'

'Then don't go, man. Everybody likes you. Stay.'

'Impossible, absolutely impossible. My decision is irreversible.'

'Very well.'

And I gazed sadly at the office, now looking barer since Madalena's desk had been pushed into a corner.

So it was that that fine old man, Ribeira, whom I had hoped to bury in S. Bernardo, departed with his memories to live out his remaining days in cafés and on park benches.

XXXIII

Padilha came into the garden and walked up to the house, greeting me warmly as soon as he saw me. I pretended not to notice these manoeuvres.

‘Come in, Padilha.’

The month’s grace I had given him to leave had expired. Padilha came in and stayed. I let him. It was always company. While I, ill-humoured and lazy, gazed at the Bom-Sucesso fence and thought about the two Mendonça girls who were living almost in misery, Padilha talked. He blathered on and on. I paid no attention to what he was saying. None at all. But at least it was a human voice. Before long he left.

One day Azevedo Gondim came bringing rumours of revolution. The south, the centre, the north east – all were in revolt.

‘It’s the end of the world.’

Padilha rubbed his hands.

‘At last! Now the lid’s off with a vengeance.’

At night the authorities wrote asking for arms and workers. In the morning I sent a truckload of rifles and men.

Then the rumours came thick and fast and turned into fact: battalions were joining, regiments were joining, columns being organized and marching swiftly; there were red flags everywhere, and the government of the Republic was bottled up in Rio.

‘It’s a barbarian invasion,’ cried Azevedo Gondim. ‘We’re finished.’

Padilhã, in a state of continual excitement, devoured

manifestoes and bit his nails. Finally, when the red wave flooded over the state, he suddenly disappeared. João Nogueira explained what had happened.

'Padilha and Father Silvestre went off to join the revolutionary troops and have been given commands.'

XXXIV

The gossip in the city was sickening. And as I have never had any taste for small town intrigue, I shut myself away.

Naturally I was sorry that my party had been tumbled at the first blow. But what was to be done about it?

'Now you'll have to eat the bitter fruit. And keep your mouth shut.'

The Gama brothers, Pereira and Fidelis, would be sitting pretty and be able to jeer at me. This worried me. But they wouldn't be able to do much. Cut the wire of the fence, or order the police to take the knife from one of my workers at the market and beat him up. Nothing unusual. But the worst thing was that Padilha had persuaded a dozen or so stupid hands to enlist with him in the revolutionary army. They'd be back. What for? It would be better if they kept to their monkey-business and exercises.

I yawned. I just about yawned my head off. What a stupid life it was. True, there was the kid, but he meant nothing to me. He was so weak, so pallid.

'If he gets stronger I'll put him in charge of the sawmill. But if he grows up sickly like this I'll put him to school and he can be a doctor.'

So it was I made plans.

To hell with plans! The little world around me was becoming hideous, going mad. And the other, the larger world, with its tumult and confusion, was madder still. News of the revolution reached me through friends and newspapers.

'Damnation!' roared Azevedo Gondim. 'It was a bluff. Just a few threats by telegraph or over the radio, and some leaflets dropped by aeroplanes, and everyone is petrified with fear. This is the most cowardly race God ever created.'

'You're exaggerating,' said the lawyer. 'They did show some courage.'

'Courage, my foot,' cried Gondim. 'Men who ought to have been in arms hid themselves away.'

'Those of the old régime. The revolutionaries are different: they have idealism and courage. I don't say this in public, but it's true.'

'To hell with their idealism. And as for their courage . . .'

'Let's be fair, Gondim,' I put in, in a flat, conciliatory tone. 'It's in the blood of the people. It wasn't worthwhile fighting.'

'Not worthwhile! It wasn't worthwhile! That's what everybody thought and so they gradually took over. There's no sense of shame. There were prominent government figures who suddenly appeared wearing red scarfs round their necks.'

'That was in Alagoas,' observed João Nogueira.

'It was everywhere, man. And even now there are many who don't go over simply because they won't be accepted.'

'As for me,' declared Nogueira, 'it's all the same whether I'm on top or underneath: politics never did me any good. I'm underneath now and I don't intend to climb up. It's true I always thought democracy a lot of nonsense, as I've said to you many a time. The worst of it is that I voted

for the government. But between ourselves, the only reason dictatorship is no good is because we lost.'

Gondim protested indignantly. I said:

'I'd just like to see Father Silvestre in his lieutenant's uniform.'

'What's his interest in playing the patriot?' said Nogueira.

'The brute!' muttered Azevedo Gondim. The *Cruzeiro* had lost its subvention.

Repeated conversations like this served to distract me. The two of them used to dine with me once a week, and in the city the more excitable began to spread it round that S. Bernardo was a hive of reactionaries.

'How's the mess?'

'In a bad way.'

And there came news of unnecessary violence, old scores being paid off and commissions of investigation washing dirty linen.

The moderate Nogueira wanted a compromise between the victors and the vanquished. Gondim hated compromise. A tooth for a tooth, didn't we understand? He preached violence to me, to Nogueira, to the trees in the orchard, inciting us to prepare a counter-revolution (the sooner the better) that would sweep the mob of loud-mouths from power. What he wanted was a government that was really energetic and tough, but at the same time prudent; a hard-working government that would restore order, the confidence of creditors and the subvention of one hundred and fifty milreis a month to the *Cruzeiro*. What we couldn't do was carry on as we were.

He bombarded us with high-flown terms that served him for all purposes in his newspaper. S. Paulo, undaunted, would rise; in S. Paulo the sacred flame still burned; from S. Paulo, land of the *bandeirantes*, new *bandeiras* would emerge to restore our forgotten liberties.

'You can certainly talk well, Gondim,' I said admiringly.

'And you'd go a long way if it weren't for the fact that our party is flat on its back.'

João Nogueira spoke out against the elections and gave some technical advice. Gondim loved voting like an only child, but thought such advice only acceptable in parliamentary commissions.

Casimiro Lopes, a little way off, was listening to them, spellbound.

I looked at the church tower. My thoughts wandered out over the countryside, but returned and went down the steps to the garden, the orchard and into the sacristy.

João Nogueira condemned the literature of the revolution, which was no more than extravagant chauvinism.

The oratory on the table was filled with saints; lithographs hung on the walls; the door was banging against the latch; the candle was out so I lit another and held the match in my fingers until it burned me. The workmen's houses were damp and cold. Caetano's family were in such a bad way it wrung your heart. And poor Marciano, so crushed, broken down and wretched.

There's Azevedo Gondim shouting for liberty. He's up to the eyes in debt, but is quite happy with the miserable income from the newspaper. He's resigned to it. What he wants is to see his paper in the thick of the fight, and then in Sousa's billiard saloon, when the red ball doesn't drop, he can insult the politicians and call them half-wits.

Now the candle was out. It was late. The door squeaked. The moonlight flooded in through the window. The northeaster scattered dead leaves on the floor. And Gondim's voice could no longer be heard.

XXXV

I started off this year on the wrong foot. Several of my customers who had always been reliable suddenly went broke. Some people fled, others committed suicide, and the *Diario Oficial* was full of bankruptcies and forced settlements. I had to accept some very poor deals.

The result was the end of my poultry, vegetable and fruit farming. The oranges ripened and rotted on the trees. I left them there. Better that than have them harvested, selected, crated and despatched, to end up giving them away.

But troubles don't come singly. The mills that formerly used to pay in advance for their cotton suddenly abandoned this excellent practice and even went so far as to buy on credit. I sold one crop like this and they cheated me over the classification.

I was needing to buy new machinery for the seed-removing plant and the sawmill, but when I came to work out the price I realized I'd have to spend a fortune: the dollar was sky-high.

Let's have no more nonsense! Do they think I'm going to kill myself working and then fall over myself to give the produce to those villains?

And on top of everything the banks shut their doors on me. I don't know why but they did. On me, who'd never been behind-hand with my payments! It was a never-ending tale of misfortunes. I spoke my mind to one of the managers.

'All right then, if you don't want to do business say so. These papers are either worth something or they aren't.

If they are, then let's have the cash. Balls! Was it my fault there was a revolution?'

In six months there were so many people going bust that I had to sell the car for a song so that they wouldn't protest a miserable promissory note for six contos.

Times were bad. Now it was the turn of the idlers. The one who ought to be alive now was old man Mendonça, who left his property covered in weeds and his mill standing idle. Work! That's strictly for the ants! The thing to do is fold your arms.

So I folded my arms.

One day, while I was with my arms so folded, gazing sadly at the seed-removing plant and the sawmill, João Nogueira brought me the news that Fidelis and the Gama brothers were going to bring up again the question of the boundaries. And the worst of all was that Dr Magalhães was in another district.

'You can thank the revolution for that,' commented Nogueira. 'Such an upright public servant. A fine judge like Magalhães. An incorruptible judge.'

I shrugged my shoulders in despair. João Nogueira was in despair too. Patience.

And I started off again pacing mechanically through the rooms of the house. Sometimes I pushed open the door of the office to give an order to Ribeira. I imagined I could see Dona Gloria with her books, fooling about in the orchard.

And my steps led me to the bedrooms as if I were looking for someone.

XXXVI

Two years have passed since Madalena died, two difficult years. And when my friends gave up coming to discuss politics, life became unbearable.

Then it was that I had the odd idea of enlisting the help of people more knowledgeable than myself and writing this story. As I've already said, the idea came to nothing. But about four months ago I was writing to some fellow in Minus, turning down a complicated deal to do with pigs and cattle, when I heard the cry of an owl and sat up with a start.

Next day I had to send Marciano up into the roof of the church.

Suddenly the idea of the book came back into my mind. I signed the letter about the pigs, and after hesitating for a while because I didn't know how to begin, wrote out a chapter.

Since then I've been chewing over facts, seated here at the dining-room table, smoking my pipe and drinking coffee, while the crickets sing outside and the orange trees slowly turn to shadows. Sometimes I sit well into the night, spending hours and hours reviving memories. At other times I am unable to settle to this new occupation. Yesterday and the day before, for example, were wasted days. I tried in vain to bring this story to a reasonable conclusion, flowing endlessly on as it does like mountain rain, but all I succeeded in creating was vexation for myself. Vexation, and the vague awareness of many things that I feel.

I'm a broken man. Sickness? No. I enjoy perfect health.

When Costa Brito, on account of the two hundred milreis he was trying to squeeze out of me, threw up those two articles, he called me a sick man, alluding to the crimes that were imputed to me. Brito of the *Gazeta* was a fool. Till today, thank God, no doctor has ever entered my house. I'm far from being ill.

The truth is I'm old. Fifty on St Peter's day. Fifty wasted years, fifty years spent aimlessly, maltreating myself and maltreating other people. As a result I've become hardened and coarsened so that nothing can penetrate this thick skin of mine and wound my blunted sensibility.

Fifty years. How many useless hours. To spend a whole lifetime wearing yourself out without knowing to what end. To eat and sleep like a pig. Like a pig. To get up early every morning and rush out in search of food. And then to put by food for your children, for your grandchildren, for whole generations. What stupidity! What bloody rot! Wouldn't it be better for the devil to come and take the lot?

What I endured! – sun, rain, sleepless nights, plots, violence, dangers – and I am not even left with the satisfaction of having achieved anything worthwhile. The garden, the vegetable plot, the orchard are abandoned, the Peking ducks dead, the cotton and the castor beans withering away. And the fences of the neighbours, implacable enemies, closing in.

Of course, once the crisis is over the property could be built up again and return to what it was. The labourers would toil from dawn to dusk sustained by manioc flour and scrag ends of dried cod; trucks would roll once more carrying the produce to the railway; once again the fazenda would be filled with bustle and noise.

But to what purpose? To what purpose? Won't anyone tell me? Mingled with the bustle and the noise there would be so much weeping, so much misery. The children in

those cold, damp huts would be swollen with vermin, and there would be no Madalena here to send them milk and medicine. The men and women would be no more than wretched animals.

Animals. The creatures who had served me over the years were animals. There were domestic animals like Padilha, wild animals like Casimiro Lopes, and lots of animals for the farmwork, tame oxen. The stables, huddled together down there, had electric light. And the strongest calves studied their lessons and learned by heart the Ten Commandments.

Animals. Some changed their species and joined the army, turning to the left, turning to the right, mounting guard. Others left in search of different pastures.

If I filled the stables again I should be able to have good harvests, put money in the bank, buy more land and build new stables. What for? None of this would bring me satisfaction.

I rose out of my own class; I think I rose quite a lot. As I've said already, I was guide to a blind man, a seller of candy and a hired labourer. None of these jobs, I'm sure, would provide me with the intellectual qualities necessary for producing this narrative. It's not much, I agree, but in moments of optimism it seems to me that it has passages which are better than Gondim's type of literature. I am, therefore, superior to Caetano and such like. But when I reflect that these intellectual trappings of mine are nothing more than odds and ends of learning, acquired haphazardly and loosely strung together, I have to admit that the superiority I pride myself on is extremely limited.

Moreover, I'm certain that the book-keeping and the manuals of agriculture and dairy-farming that formed the basis of my education made me no better than when I was a common labourer. At least in those days I never dreamed of becoming the pitiless exploiter of men that I later

became. As for the other advantages – houses, lands, furniture, livestock, the respect of politicians, etc. – I must confess that this has nothing to do with the essential me.

I think that somewhere along the road I took the wrong turning.

If I'd carried on scouring old mother Margarida's copper pot for her, she and I would have led a peaceful existence. Speaking little, thinking little, at night, after our coffee and candy, we'd have sat contentedly on the mat and offered up our African prayers.

If I hadn't stuck my knife into João Fagundes, if I'd married Germana, I'd be the owner of half a dozen horses, a small pasture, a few carts with tarpaulin covers, and I'd be a successful carrier. I'd have sufficient credit to buy a hundred milreis' worth of material in the city shops, and at the four annual festivals my wife and children would have new clothes to wear. My ambitions would be confined within a limited circle. I should have no great worries and make an enemy of no man. And in the winter mornings, cracking my whip to set off the carts, with my sandals, straw hat and a few coins in my purse, I'd have a nip of rum to keep out the cold and sing my way along the roads as carefree as a beggar.

Today I neither sing nor laugh. If I look at myself in the mirror, I am revolted by the hardness of the mouth, the hardness of the eyes.

I think of the little village where Ribeira lived half a century ago. No doubt Ribeira acquired things too, but he didn't acquire them for himself. He had a large house, which was always full, pumpkins rotted in the fields – and nobody there went hungry. I imagine myself living under Ribeira's protection during the time of the monarchy. I can't read, and electric light and telephones are unheard of. I express myself awkwardly and with a great deal of

gesticulation. Like everyone else, I have an oil lamp, but it doesn't serve any purpose because at night you go to sleep. Hundreds of revolutions can take place. I'll never know about them. Most likely I'm a happy man.

With a shudder I rouse myself from this happiness which is not mine, and find myself here in S. Bernardo, writing.

The windows are shut. It is midnight. There is no sound in the deserted house.

I get up to fetch a candle because the light is going out. I'm not sleepy. To lie down and toss and turn on my bed until dawn is torture for me. I prefer to sit up and finish this. Tomorrow I shall have nothing to do to pass the time.

I put the candle in the holder, strike a match and light it. A shiver goes through me. The memory of Madalena comes back to me. I walk round the table, trying to drive it away. I clasp my hands so tight that I hurt myself with my nails, and when I come to myself I am biting my lips and drawing blood.

From time to time I feel weary and write down a line. I mutter to myself:

'I ruined my life; I ruined it senselessly.'

I grow calmer.

'I ruined my life senselessly.'

I can't help thinking of Madalena. If it were possible to begin again . . . But why fool myself? If it were possible to begin again, things would happen exactly as they did. I am unable to change myself, and that is what appals me.

Caetano's kids are still around, filthy and starving. Rosa, her body broken with continual child-bearing, works indoors, works in the fields and works in bed. Her husband gets more and more oafish. And the workers I've still got are simpletons like him.

To be honest, I must say that I have no sympathy for these wretches. I'm sorry for the situation they find them-

selves in, and admit that I am partly to blame, but I don't go beyond that. There is such a gulf between us! In the beginning we were close together, but this damnable profession drove us apart.

Madalena arrived here full of kind feeling and good intentions. But her kind feeling and good intentions ran up against my brutality and egoism. I don't believe I have always been egoistic and brutal. It is this profession that has given me these vicious qualities. And that terrible suspicion of mine that discovers enemies everywhere. This suspicion is another consequence of my profession. It was this way of life that destroyed me. I am a cripple. I must have an undersized heart, gaps in my brain and nerves different from the nerves of other men. And a huge nose, a huge mouth and huge fingers.

If that is how Madalena saw me she must have found me extraordinarily ugly.

The candle was on the point of burning out.

I think I fell into a troubled sleep and dreamed about marshes, rivers in flood and the figure of a werewolf.

Outside it is pitch dark, and all is silent. And yet I can see the moon shining in through the closed window, and hear the angry north-easter scattering dead leaves on the ground.

How horrible it is! If anyone should appear . . . They're all sleeping.

If only the child would cry. . . . I have no love, even for my own son. What a life!

Casimiro Lopes is asleep. Marciano is asleep. The scum!

And I shall stay here in the dark till I don't know what time; until, overcome with weariness, I lay my head on the table and 'snatch a few moments' rest.

Jacket design by Rus Anderson

ISBN 0-8008-6991-5

Taplinger Publishing Company
200 Park Avenue South
New York, N.Y. 10003

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**São
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