

FROM BALTASAR AND BLIMUNDA*

The Convent of Mafra was built by Dom João V in fulfilment of a vow he made should God grant him an heir, here go six hundred men who did not make the Queen pregnant yet they are the ones who pay for that vow and carry the can, if you will pardon that old-fashioned expression.

Were the road to descent straight, everything would be reduced to a game of alternation, one could even say an amusing game of release and restraint, as the ropes are slackened to give this stone kite its freedom and then tightened once more, as it is allowed to slide freely as long as the acceleration does not get out of control before being secured again so that it does not plunge into the valley, crushing as it goes those men who do not get out of the way quickly enough, the men themselves being like kites that are held by these and other cords. But there is the nightmare of the bends in the road. As long as the road was flat, the oxen were utilised, as we explained, by being positioned some on each side in front of the cart, where they could pull it into line with the curve itself, however short or extended. It was simply a matter of patience and had to be carried out so often that it soon became routine, unharnessing and harnessing, the oxen suffered most of all, for the men did not have to exert themselves apart from shouting. Now they were shouting in desperation when confronted with the diabolical combination of curve and slope that they would be obliged to manoeuvre time and time again, but to shout in this situation is to lose one's breath, and they do not have much breath to spare. Better to decide how the job should be tackled first and to leave the shouting for later, when it will bring some relief. The cart starts moving towards the opening of the curve, keeping as close to the inside as possible, and the front wheel on that same side is wedged, it is vital that the wedge should not be so firm as to secure the entire load on its own, nor so fragile that it is crushed by the weight of the cart, and anyone who imagines that this is easy should have carried that stone from Pêro Pinheiro to Mafra instead of simply watching the operation from a distance or viewing it in retrospect by reading this page. Wedged in this precarious fashion, the cart

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can sometimes come to a dead halt and capriciously refuse to move, as if its wheels were embedded in the ground. That is the most common setback. Only on those rare occasions when the circumstances are favourable and all the factors are taken into account, such as the incline of the curve towards the outside, the reduced friction on the ground, and the right gradient on the slope, will the platform yield without difficulty to lateral pressure applied from the rear, or, more miraculous still, turn independently on its own point of support up there in front. But the rule is that enormous pressure must be applied at focal points at the proper time, so that the momentum will not prove excessive and therefore fatal, or, thanks be to God for the lesser evil, insufficient, which calls for renewed pressure in the opposite direction. Crowbars are applied to the four wheels at the back, and an attempt is made to dislodge the cart, even though it may be only half a span towards the outer side of the curve, the men on the ropes lend a hand by pulling in the same direction, the scene is one of utter confusion, with those on the crowbars on the outside working amid a maze of hawsers, stretched and taut like metal wires, while the men on the ropes, who are working from various positions down the slope, find themselves slipping and rolling over from time to time, with no serious consequences for the present. The cart finally yields to pressure and is dislodged by several spans, but during this operation the outside wheel in front is successively blocked and released to prevent the platform from capsizing halfway through one of these manoeuvres at a point when the cart is poised to go forward and there are not enough men to secure it, for there is so much chaos that most of them have far too little space to work efficiently. Looking down on this activity, the devil marvels at his own innocence and compassion, for he could never have conceived such punishment to crown all those other punishments he metes out in hell.

One of the men working on the wedges is Francisco Marques. His expertise has already been put to the test, one bad curve, two very bad, three worse than the others, four only if we are mad, and for each of these curves some twenty manoeuvres are required, aware that he is doing a good job, perhaps he is no longer even thinking about his wife, everything in its own good time, besides, he must keep an attentive eye on that wheel, which is about to turn and has to be blocked, but not too quickly, in case he undoes the work carried out by his team-mates in the rear, and not too slowly, in case the cart starts to gather speed and break free from the wedge. And this is precisely what happened. Perhaps Francisco Marques was distracted or raised his arm to

wipe the sweat from his forehead, or looked down on his native town of Cheleiros as he suddenly remembered his wife, but the wedge slipped from his hand at the same moment that the platform broke free, no one knew how but within seconds he was trapped under the cart and crushed to death, the first wheel passed over him, the stone alone, in case you have forgotten, weighs more than two thousand arrobas. They say that one calamity soon brings others in its wake, and that is nearly always true, as any man here can testify, but this time, whoever dispatches these calamities must have felt that it was enough that one man should lose his life. The cart, which could easily have gone tumbling down the slope, came to a standstill a little way ahead, its wheels caught in a pothole on the road, salvation does not always come where it should.

They pulled Francisco Marques out from under the cart. The wheel had gone over his stomach, which had been pounded into a paste of entrails and bones, his legs had almost been severed from the trunk of his body, we are referring to his left leg and his right leg, for that other leg of his, the one in the middle, the lustful one, which had taken Francisco Marques on so many journeys, was nowhere to be seen, it has disappeared without sign or trace. The men brought a stretcher, on which they laid his corpse wrapped in a blanket that was almost immediately soaked in blood, two men grabbed the shafts, and another two went along to share the burden, and all four would tell his widow, We've brought your husband, they will announce his death to this woman, who is even now peeping out of her front door and gazing up at the mountain where her husband is working and saying to her children, Your father will be sleeping at home tonight.

When the stone arrived at the bottom of the valley, the yokes of oxen were harnessed once more. Perhaps whoever sends calamities was regretting his earlier restraint, for now the platform went over an outcrop of rock and trapped two animals against the sheer mountainside, breaking their legs. It was necessary to put them out of their misery with an axe, and when the news reached the inhabitants of Cheleiros, they came rushing to enjoy the spoils, the oxen were skinned and dismembered there and then, blood trickled down the road in rivulets, and the blows dealt by the soldiers trying to disperse the crowd were to no avail so long as there was flesh stuck to those bones, the cart was kept at a standstill. Meanwhile, night had fallen. The men set up camp, some still above the road, others scattered themselves along the banks of the stream.

The inspector and some of his aides slept under shelter, but most of the men, as was their custom, huddled under their cloaks, worn out by this great descent to the centre of the earth, astonished to find themselves still alive, and all of them resisting sleep for fear that this might be death itself. Those who had been close friends of Francisco Marques went to pay their last respects, Baltasar, José Pequeno, Manuel Milho, and several of the others we spoke of, including Brás, Firmino, Isidro, Onofre, Sebastião, Tadeu, and another fellow, whom we have not mentioned so far, called Damião. They entered the house, looked at the corpse, and asked themselves how a man could die such a violent death and yet look so peaceful, more peaceful than if he were asleep, and released from all nightmares and worries, they murmured a prayer, that woman over there is a widow, whose name we do not know, nor would it add anything to our story if we were to ask her, just as nothing has been added by mentioning Damião and simply writing down his name. Tomorrow, before sunrise, the stone will recommence its journey, one man has been left behind in Cheleiros for burial, and the carcasses of two oxen for eating.

They are not missed. The cart travels as slowly up the slope as it came down, and if God had any feeling for mankind, He would have made the world as flat as the palm of one's hand, so that stones could be transported more rapidly. This operation is now entering its fifth day, and although the road is better now that the slope has been overcome, the men are ill at ease, every muscle in their bodies aches, but who is complaining, since this is why they have been given muscles. The herd of cattle does not argue or protest, it simply resists, by pretending to pull without pulling, the remedy is to leave them to rest a while and feed them a handful of straw, soon they will start behaving as if they had been resting since yesterday, their buttocks swaying as they move up the road, and it is a pleasure to watch them. Until they arrive at another descent or upward slope. Then the forces gather and distribute their efforts, so many here, so many there, Pull there, heave, a voice cries out, Taratata ta, blares a trumpet, this is a veritable battlefield with its dead and wounded.

In the afternoon, there was a welcome downpour of rain. It rained again during the night, but no one cursed. It is wisest not to pay too much attention to what heaven sends, whether it be sunshine or rain, unless it becomes unbearable, and even then the Great Flood did not suffice to drown the whole of mankind, and drought is never so great that a blade of grass does not survive, or at least the hope of finding one. It rained like this for an hour or

so, then the clouds lifted, for even clouds get peevish if they are ignored. The bonfires became bigger, and some of the men stripped to dry their clothes, so that it began to look like a pagan festival, although we know that this was the most Catholic of enterprises, to carry that stone to Mafra, to struggle forth and bring the faith to all who deserved it.