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THE BLACK GHOST OF THE PAMPAS

An Argentine Legend

Juan Draghi Lucero

Translated by Margaret H. Harrison

ONCE UPON A TIME there lived a most capable and efficient negro slave. Sometimes his master set him to work at a loom, where he wove cloth neatly with the same skill with which he pruned the orchard's fruit trees. Sometimes he branded the cattle that were to go over to Chile, or shaped great earthen jars, baking them in the oven at the correct temperature. No hand like his for brewing aguardiente. Moreover, he was noted as a daring driver and muleteer, often hauling wine to distant Buenos Aires, where he sold his master's wares and returned with blankets, knives, perfumed powder, and all kinds of odds and ends for the shop.

The slave could also play the guitar. He would sigh sadly as his fingers drew forth the sleeping harmonies of the strings, for he was singing of his lost treasure—freedom. Beholding him thus plunged in gloom, his master, with studied carelessness, asked why he was so cast down.

“Because of my freedom, master,” he replied, rousing himself thereupon to inquire, “Dare I some day hope for my liberty?”

“Yes, negro, I will set you free—on the day when a mammoth snake creeps down from the sky.”

“Master, master,” groaned the slave, shrinking away from the peals of cruel laughter.

His owner was well satisfied with his bargain. He had paid four hundred pesos for the man at an auction sale held by the court of justice under a spreading tree. It had been a profitable deal because

the slave had already cleared that amount, and his usefulness kept increasing with the years.

However, the more the slave toiled, the more he continued to plead and beg for his freedom. So tireless was his persistence that at last his exasperated master roared: "Look here, negro. If completely unclothed, you are able to pass one whole night on that snow-covered mountain top over yonder, I shall sign the papers for your release." And he pointed to the highest peak in the district, one which the clouds caressed by day, and which on clear nights showed its brilliant whiteness against the black background of the sky.

"No man, my master, could endure the cold of that mountain, even if he were completely clothed and wrapped in his poncho."

"When you pass the night on those heights," sneered his master, "I shall not even allow you to have a spark of fire for your vigil. You shall learn the cost of attaining freedom, my man."

"Alas, alas. My liberty will be my death."

And while the slave sweated, forging horse shoes for the animals his owner was sending to Chile, he continued to mutter as he doggedly beat his hammer, "My liberty will be my death." So many back-breaking tasks, however, was the negro forced to perform that at last he found himself swept by the terrible decision: "Even if it costs me my life, I shall go in quest of my freedom."

He asked permission to speak with his master, and when granted it, he rolled his torn sombrero between his hands, and said in a high-pitched excited voice: "My master, I shall pass the night naked on the peak of yonder highest mountain. If I get through with my life, I am to enjoy my freedom. Is it agreed?"

"That is the bargain, negro," replied his mocking owner.

"I shall go tomorrow, master, to win what I most desire, in spite of the terrible conditions."

"Let it be as you say."

The next day, early in the morning, the slave presented himself to his master, and the rich man searched him from head to foot to see if he carried a tinder box or flint to strike a fire; but as the negro had nothing, he let him go. The affair was an excellent jest, worth betting on.

The slave proceeded on his way. He trudged all day and was just able to reach the foot of the mountain. After a little nap, he began the ascent shortly before midnight. He climbed all the next day and part

of the night, but it was only at the beginning of the third day that he was able to crawl up on the fearful heights.

Here everlasting snows and wind lashed the summit with a cold that pierced through the flesh. The negro sought a semi-shelter among some overhanging rocks, where he crouched down as well as he could. When darkness fell, faithful to his promise, he took off his red poncho, his well-worn shirt, his patched trousers and his sandals. Thus naked as he had come into the world, he settled down to endure the terrors of the Andean night.

Placing his hands under his armpits, he rolled himself into a ball in a groove in the rock. He maintained himself this way for a while until, nearly suffocated, he crept out of his hiding place and jumped up and down until utterly exhausted. This went on for a while, until the glacial wind whirled him back to his shelter. Through the ominous silence of the peaks, the night in its immensity folded about him. The snow fell, and the icy wind lashed the heights in a fury.

The slave rolled himself up into a tighter ball. "If I only had a tiny fire," he whimpered. Completely numbed by the cruel cold, he leaped up again, but the raging hurricane of the Sierra whipped him without mercy. Peering down towards the plains, as if pleading for mercy, the negro managed to see, miles and miles away, a small fire that the gauchos had kindled.

Stretching out his shivering arms, his streaming eyes remained fixed on the tiny light lost in the wilds of the pampas. Through his wildly chattering teeth, he shrieked, half delirious, "Give me your heat, little fire. Ah, chih, chih, chih." With this delusion the lengthy hours of the dreary night dragged by.

Time passed, and with it neared the dawn. "Give me your heat, little fire. Ah, chih, chih, chih," whined the slave in his frenzy to warm himself. The light of day found him still stretching out his long arms, seeking the impossible. The painted rays of the East proclaimed the coming of the sun, but the ball of fire had to rise high in the heavens before it could revive the negro. Stunned, trembling from the lash of the cold, he drew on his clothes, and step by step, staggered down the Sierra. He gained the arid river bed, then the footpath, then the trail. Entering the town, he tottered, now falling, now rising, into his owner's house.

"How did you get through the night, negro?"

"Ay, my master. When I reached the peak, I took off my clothes,

and the night hours dragged by with their agony of cold. I did not see how I possibly could escape death, when about ten leagues away at one extremity of the pampas, I spied a little bonfire made by gauchos. I stretched out my arms: 'Give me your heat, tiny fire. Ah, chih, chih, chih,' I said, my teeth striking one another as they chattered. Thus I could endure the tortures of the icy night. The price of freedom, my master."

The owner threw his head back and guffawed. "I can't give you your liberty, negro, because you warmed yourself in the fire."

"But it was leagues and leagues away."

"No matter. Had you not seen that distant flame, you would have lost heart and given up the struggle. When you have recovered your strength, you must try the task again."

"Alas, my master."

After forty days the slave had recovered from exposure. In his desperate desire for freedom, he returned once more to brave the mountain's perils. It took him three days to reach the peak, but on arrival, as night had already fallen, he disrobed and, stark naked, faced the cold.

From Mt. Aconcagua roared down the moaning penitent blasts of a thousand years of snow. They were the burning tongues of eternal cold. The slave defended himself, crouching against a rock. Avverting his eyes from the plains that he might not see the gaucho fires, he only permitted himself to stare at the high heaven. The full moon turned the snow on the sierras even whiter. If one pictures the immensity of night on the Cordilleras, the cold seems more piercing in that white penetrating light. The hours crawled by, dragging, to the greater torture of the sufferer. Pitiless flaying winds from the heights forced him to arch himself under the fury of their whips. Still other blasts sweeping through the night tore over the ridge and flew by, depositing ice and needles of snow on his flesh; and the negro, on the point of collapse, forced himself to shout and stamp, to silence his gnawing wild terror.

Feeling the painful tongue of the enemy, he groaned for an illusion of fire. Lifting his eyes to the sky, he beheld the full moon. "It is the mouth of a burning oven," shouted the slave, lifting his hands on high, pleading for heat and comfort.

"Give me your heat, lighted oven. Ah, chih, chih, chih," rattled his teeth. With this fancy he consoled himself through the rigor of the

pitiless night. The more gusts roared down from the summit, the more the storm lashed on all sides, the more the slave stretched out his arm to the moon. "Give me of your heat, burning oven. Ah, chih, chih, chih," he implored, his teeth dancing. The night deepened, and with this delusion time galloped by.

Day broke, and the sun rode high in the heavens before the negro roused from his stupor. By the middle of the afternoon, life and control of his limbs had returned. He rubbed his body and rolled over on the ground into a little sunshine. Shivering, he just managed to dress himself and creep down the slope, but crushed and broken, racked by a violent cough, falling down and staggering to his feet, he contrived after two days to reach his owner's ranch house. His cough tore his chest apart.

The next day, bent and shaking, he appeared before his mocking master.

"Master," said he, "I have won my poor liberty. I undressed on the mountain peak. All night I resisted the cold."

"Tell me, negro, did you not see the fires of the gauchos down on the pampas?"

"I saw none, my master. The fact is that, staring at the full moon, I pretended it was the mouth of a burning oven, and I stretched out my arms to it and fortified myself by calling: 'Give me your heat, burning oven! Ah! Chih, chih, chih!'"

"Uh-uh," snapped his owner. "Had it not been for that fancy, you could never have resisted the frightful cold. I will not give you your liberty, slave. You have not won it fairly."

"Ah, my master."

After sixty days, the negro recovered and decided to face the test for the last time. That night there was no moon.

Seeing him depart, his master said, "Do not even warm your spirit by looking on a gaucho fire leagues away, nor by picturing an oven in the moon."

"What of the stars? May I gaze at them?"

"Only if they line up one by one and form a serpent in the sky."

"Alas, my master."

The slave took three days to climb the peak. Stumbling, falling and rising again, he reached the top, and as darkness had fallen, he undressed. In the Andes the thaws were setting in. In the short periods of sun, the north wind melted only a small part of the snow, but at night

the boisterous south wind returned, with all the malignancy of a delayed cold, whipping mercilessly with its icy breath. Before midnight, in roared the wind that had been pent up in Tupungato. Howling it seemed to concentrate its madness on the ribs of the naked negro huddling among the jagged rocks. He shrank together, seemingly diffused in universal chaos.

Time dragged, but the rocks tore him with their icy points. He jumped up, rubbing his body with small stones to keep up circulation and resistance in his stubborn battle. So violently did he rub that his blood flowed in streams. Moments dragged by. A sudden lull, the strange calm that comes on great heights, gave him a respite in his courageous battle.

When midnight struck, the gales tore down from the great cañons of Mercedano. Its crevices and peaks resounded with the shrill anthem of the melancholy cold. The negro moaned for shelter and crouched again in the shadow of a jutting cliff. Rock and wind brought him face to face with the lashes of the storm. The poor creature crept forth to fight the hostile night. In his third and last night of trial, his uncontrolled tongue vomited filthy words. He felt that his flesh was vanquished and that he faced Eternity. The storm's vortex approached him, returning insult for insult, piercing his flesh with daggers of snow.

The slave repented on his knees, asking pardon of the implacable scourger. His vain words availed him nothing. The full madness of the storm was unleashed. The negro, acknowledging defeat, looked at his clothes and stretched out his hands to them. He lifted his eyes and could not find the moon; he stared at the pampas and could see no gaucho fire.

As he peered into the darkness, he perceived myriads of stars. The sky was sown with them. They seemed burning coals. In his mind's eye, the negro connected them, and gritting his teeth, comforted himself, searching for them through the thick icy gale that vomited crystals of snow about him. The hostile scourge grew more pitiless. Gritting his teeth, the slave moaned, "Give me some heat, coals of heaven. Ah, chih, chih, chih," and he extended his cramped arms. He pulled himself out of the freezing abyss long enough to murmur, "I have no more strength to fight. The cold is in my soul, master. Goodbye to freedom. Alas, for my chains and yoke." His tears, as they left his eyes, turned to little icy tapers.

That moonless night, the negro's master walked out to the patio

and stared up at the Andes. He amused himself peering at the burning morning star, King of the dark night. He observed many other stars and they pleased him too.

Suddenly panic terror gripped him. The fiery star seemed to move and the others were lined up close behind. He saw a viper of lighted stars forming in the sky. The snake was coiling down in a straight path towards the earth. Touching the earth at last, it shot towards the rich tyrant's estancia. An angry blue light illuminated the darkness, and the master's servants beheld a snake of stars shoot through the patio and dart into his foolish mouth, wide open in stark terror. The master shrivelled, a mass of burning coals. It took three days to extinguish the fire and stamp it to ashes.

Sometimes at night, far out on the pampas, the gauchos by their bonfire are horrified at the figure of a black man creeping towards them, groaning as he stretches out his poor hands pleadingly to the flame. "Give me of your heat, little fire. Give me of your heat. Ah, chih, chih, chih."