

He was a
sullen kind of
guy, with big
lustreless eyes, a
huge mouth and
a heavy
moustache

that looked as if it might drop off his face. First, he had been responsible for the death of Caleiroz in the course of the year of the surveys, then he also killed Marinho with a shot in the right side, but all this led only to a few months of jail in Currazeda. People were too scared to bear witness against him, and the authorities soon lost interest in the case, since nobody else displayed much interest in it. Scarcely had the widow of his first victim ceased keening on the mountainsides when the bullet which killed Marinho was shot from an army pistol which could pierce thick wooden boards at a distance of fifty

paces. But even then the authorities couldn't decide to prosecute him. After a few months of preventive detention, the iron gate of the jail in Currazeda was opened for him, and Joaquim Lomba again began to cause trouble in the mountains.

He practically never worked, and nobody offered him any work, whether as a day-labourer or on contract. But he had some small property of his own and, together with a bunch of grapes gleaned here or there in the vineyards of others and an old penny that he managed to scare up for helping out after a thunder storm or at threshing time, he somehow managed to make both ends meet. It was nevertheless a bleak livelihood that he made, all alone, dressed in filthy rags and always overshadowed by the fear and mistrust of everyone for miles around.

In that whole area, other men had likewise committed murder, and the reputation of their savagery was just as widespread as his. Nobody had yet forgotten Basilio Antunes, the cold-blooded murderer of the miller Candido, or Varela, who jumped on the pregnant belly of his wife and killed her. But Lomba's reputation was far more sinister and widespread. If his name were only mentioned, people shuddered with a very special kind of fear. The fact is that his very destiny appeared to be stamped on his features. At a first glance, one could detect there were not only the deaths for which he had already been responsible in the past, but also those for which he could still be expected to become responsible in the future, and Lomba was well aware of all this. Sulky and incommunicative as he was, the mark which he felt that he bore on his features filled him with a deep sorrow and a rancorous feeling of revolt. There were even days when a feverish and generous sense of broad humanity tried to break forth from the depths of his soul and rise to the light of day on his face. But the first person whom he then greeted would make piecemeal of his attempts at friendliness with a frigid response, a rejection that cut all further communication short, and Lomba's face would then express again its old savagery, but with a new hatred too.

It was one of those days and on such an occasion that he killed Adriano. Lomba had risen early, chewed a chunk of

bread, drunk a draft of liquor, and set out on his way to view the world. But Adriano, the first soul who now crossed his path answered his greeting so sharply that Lomba could no longer restrain himself:

"Careful there, you fool, what harm have I done you?"

Adriano already felt that he was lost:

"None. What harm would you want to do me?"

This was meant to be an explanation, an attempt at an understanding, but Lomba's heart was already full of bitterness:

"What you deserve is that I should teach you how to behave."

In spite of Lomba's being what he was well known to be, Adriano felt obliged to make some show of manliness and self-respect, but still made only a weak attempt at it:

"Go ahead, go ahead, and you'll see for yourself!"

These few words sufficed. Lomba came up to him, raised his scythe and, with only one blow, sliced his head off.

Again, Lomba's savagery remained unpunished. There had been no witnesses and Adriano's people were all afraid of Lomba's vengefulness, so that he continued after that to torment the whole district of Mondroes.

But even Lomba soon began to feel the weight of this cross that all had to bear. Since he couldn't kill the whole population of the district, nor force all those that he knew, one by one, to speak to him peacefully and in good faith, the open wound of his isolation began to fester within him like the guilty conscience of a man who has been excommunicated. There were indeed moments when his self-hatred and pain filled his heart with a flood that could no longer be contained, and other moments when an infinite feeling of emptiness, an incurable despair, a loneliness even greater than that of the stones scattered on the mountainside, tortured him as if with tongues of fire.

Suddenly, in the middle of Lent, Lomba broke one day into the sacristy and announced to the priest, without more ado:

"Father, I've come to confess."

"Fine, Joaquim," the chaplain replied in a meek and humane tone. "You can go straight ahead."

So they went aside together, the good Father sat down, Lomba knelt at his feet, and they then began.

"But I can no longer remember how to go about it," Lomba protested.

"There's no harm in that. You need only follow me."

The sign of the Cross posed no problem. The *mea culpa* went by without any difficulty, after which they went through the first few Commandments and finally got down to the real trouble.

"Well, I killed Gertrude's man, Marinho... And it was I too who did away with Adriano."

All this was no news to the priest, who remained quite calm, barely content to ask:

"And do you repent of your crimes? Are you prepared to beg forgiveness of those against whom you offended?"

Here the situation began to stir up trouble in Lomba's complex world. He had come here to free himself from the abyss above which his soul remained precariously suspended, but now that everything appeared to be in order and the peaceful height of serenity seemed to be almost within his reach, this act of penitence was thrusting him back into the very depths and he felt again lost.

"No, Father, I don't repent, and I'm not going to beg for anyone's forgiveness."

The priest was by now in a sweat. After drawing from his pocket a snuff-stained handkerchief and mopping his tonsure he returned to his task, as serenely and naturally as ever:

"But, my good man, I can't give you the absolution, if you refuse to be humble and to repent sincerely for what you've done... Well, look, in that case wouldn't it be better if you first went and surrendered to the authorities, and then asked the Lord to forgive you?"

"I'm no fool! I came here because I trust you, Father, and if you don't want to forgive me, well, there's no forgiveness..."

After that, they both rose, sorrowful and despairing of

their failure to come to a harmonious agreement. Even more than ever before, the bitterness, the anger and gloom of his life could be seen deeply etched in Lomba's hard and ugly features.

A few months later, the Feast of Our Lady began to be celebrated in Mondroes, and that was when Lomba, without further provocation gave free rein to his concentrated anguish. Ready for any foolishness, with his pistol fully loaded, he entered the public square in front of the church and began to make a nuisance of himself. First he approached the bandstand and told the conductor:

"Stop that tune and play us a waltz!"

"Are you the church warden," the old fellow then asked him in good faith."

"I'm who I am! Change your tune or I'll shoot!"

The good man staggered, but finally, seeing those glassy eyes and a sign from a woman who was selling sweetmeats, he stopped, distributed new sheet-music, and the band actually began to play a waltz.

Lomba's success here failed nevertheless to pacify him. His heart prompted him to all sorts of foolishness, so he now turned to the man who was in charge of the fireworks:

"Let off a dozen rockets!"

"But I can't, God forbid, except on All Saints Day..."

"Let them all off, or else..."

Lomba's weapon was big and evil-looking, and his words sounded callous and threatening, so that Pe-Tolo, without further encouragement, began to fire all the rockets off, one by one.

"What's this nonsense, you fool? Who told you to fire them all now?"

The Councillor was protesting indignantly, but Pe-Tolo needed only to point to Lomba in silence in order to explain the whole situation.

"Well," the Councillor concluded, "you'll have to scare up other rockets to fire for All Saints!"

But the whole mountainside was still threatened with soon stinking of blood, and the very daylight still suggested murder.

"Stop that nonsense, you mountebank! Step down from up there!"

"Your Lordship appears to be in a mood for discussion. If I weren't so busy attending to the needs of the honorable company..."

He was a huckster, selling his pills and potions for all needs and ills, earning his livelihood as he stood there on a chair, a tough fellow, accustomed to having to cope with hecklers. But when he was told who had thus spoken to him, he was silent, stepped down from his chair and, thinking of his wife and children, hastily began to pack up his vials and jars.

"Why doesn't someone go and summon the police?"

"Why not?"

One thing was certain: they all remained rooted there on the spot, without even one of them daring to go and denounce the scoundrel to the police. They just allowed themselves to stay where they stood, all of them feeling vaguely protected by a word that was both a promise and a threat.

"Let me have a look at that stick!"

For once, Lomba now found himself up against a real will. The boy was only nine years, but firm enough in standing up for himself, even managing now to tame the monster.

"What next? Look at him! Are you crazy or only pretending to be?"

"Let me look at that stick end and shut up!"

"Run away home and eat a cake of soap, you blockhead! If you want a stick, go and run after them!"

A streak of blood and of even greater rage shot through Lomba's eyes, but was soon followed by a tender smile of compassion that refreshed his heart.

"So you won't let me have it?"

"No. I'm not giving it away, no. If I were only free from little nuisances like you!"

The child ran off, following another rocket that was rising noisily into the sky, while Lomba stood there alone, vanquished, powerless, but strangely happy.

"All by myself," he murmured to himself, deeply moved.

Suddenly, the band broke into a light-hearted march, then the dancing began to stir up a cloud of dust in the whole square in front of the church, while more rockets went off and a deafening uproar proved clearly to Lomba that all his whims and bullets could no longer overcome this whole tidal wave of vitality.

"I'm left all by myself," he murmured again as he wandered off aimlessly among the boulders of the mountain-side.

More rockets, a polka, then again the voice of the huckster selling his unguents and potions, and the holiday seemed likely to go on forever. After a few hours had gone by, however, the various villages began, one by one, to summon their folks back home, and the square then remained empty.

"Look there," a man said as he passed by the spot where Lomba had fired the full load of his pistol into the roof of his own mouth.

"But it's Lomba," the other one replied. "For once, my man, you've put your bullets to a good use!"

Lomba's lustreless and wide-open eyes seemed still to want to impose respect and fear, but they now appeared to be speaking alone in his whole body, which lay there crumpled, dead, humble and meek, like a pile of manure.

"Agreed, a blessing on his hands!"

The two men went their way, without another word of mourning, without a shudder or a prayer, and left Lomba, abandoned to the great and fearful night of the mountainside.