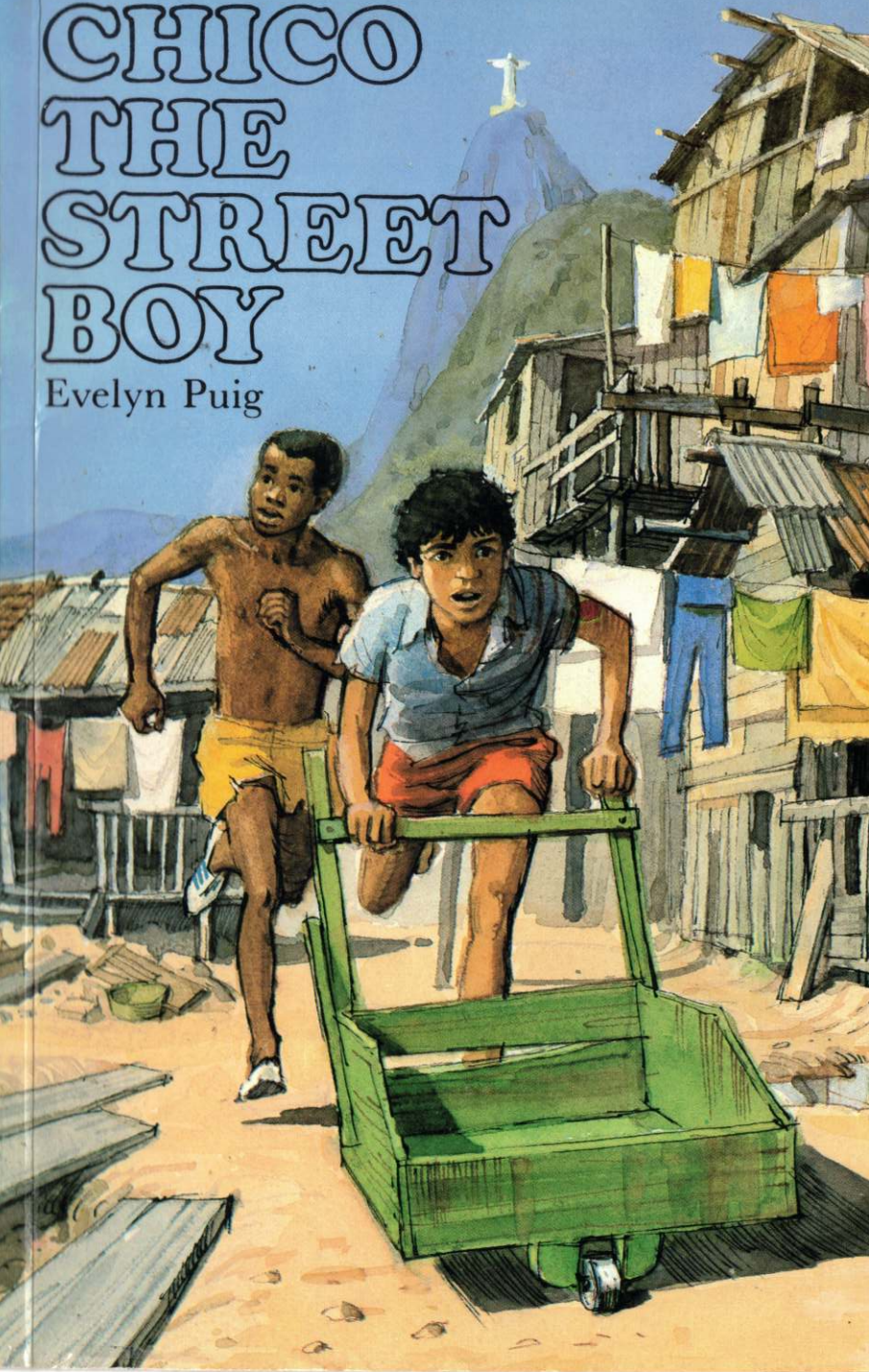


CHICO THE STREET BOY

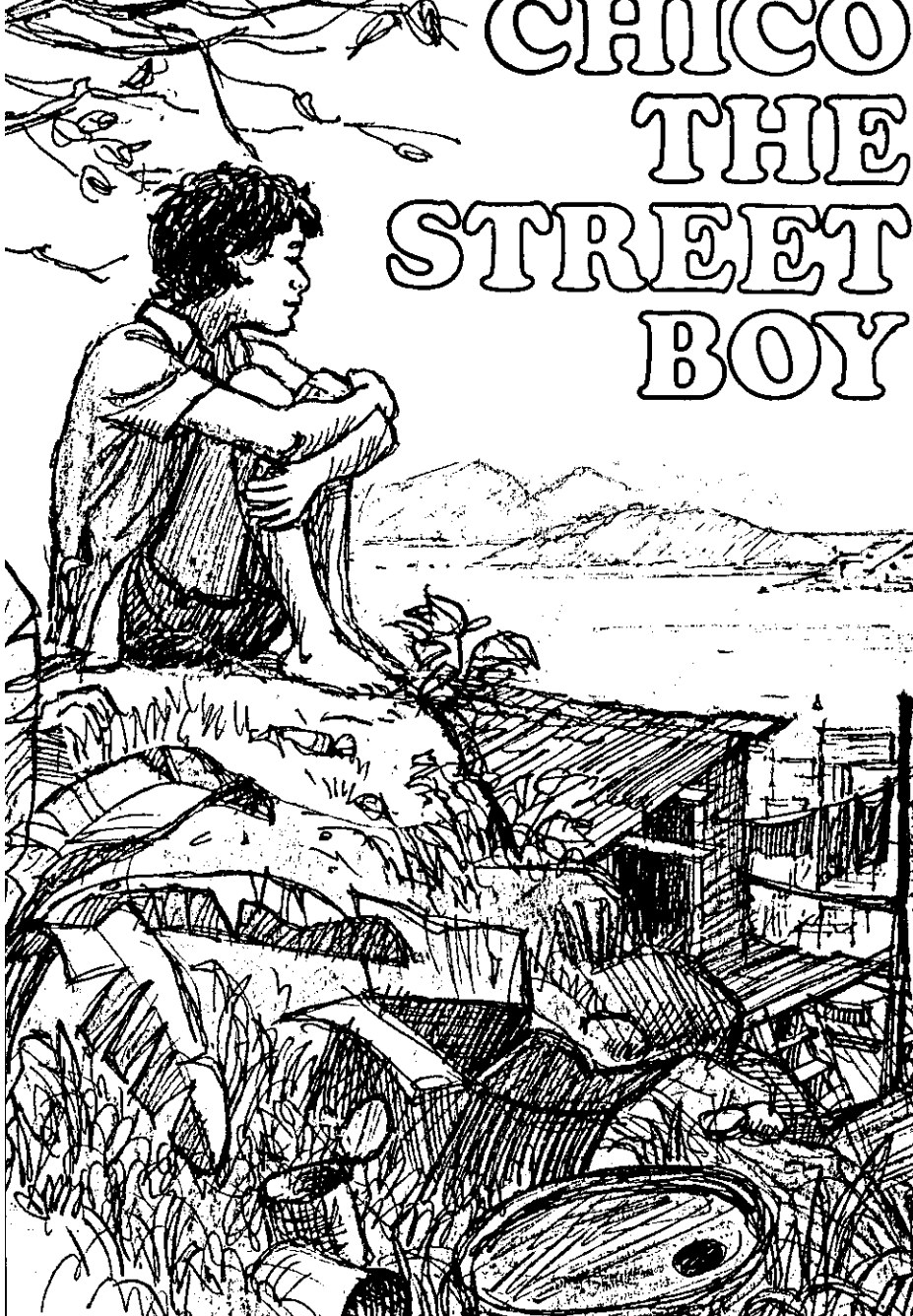
Evelyn Puig



CHICO THE STREET BOY

Evelyn Puig is a Doctor of Philosophy and a graduate of the University of Vienna. She lives in Brazil with her Guatemalan husband and two children. Over the last twenty years she has come to know intimately many of the families of Rio de Janeiro's *favelas* or shantytowns through the work of Moral Re-Armament in which she and her family are actively engaged. As a result she has a deep respect for the hard struggle of men, women and children who have come from the interior of the country to the big city looking for work and a place to live.

CHICO THE STREET BOY



by EVELYN PUIG

drawings by W. Cameron Johnson

GROSVENOR BOOKS

LONDON MELBOURNE WELLINGTON



Published in 1984
Grosvenor Books, 54 Lyford Road, London SW18 3JJ
21 Dorcas Street, South Melbourne, Victoria 3205, Australia
PO Box 1834, Wellington, New Zealand

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ISBN
0 901269 79 4 hardback
0 901269 80 8 paperback

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PHOTOTYPESET BY INPUT TYPESETTING LTD LONDON SW19
PRINTED IN MALTA BY INTERPRINT LTD

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1

Chico's Home

Chico sat on the hillside hugging his knees looking down at the big city of Rio de Janeiro. This was his favourite place. He often came up here. He loved the scramble to get here and then to look down at the city, and over to the sparkling blue bay. Directly below, all along the hillside, were the shacks, and among them his own home where he lived with Tio Edú, Tia Geni and their three children.

Peering down from his perch he could see one of the children, nine-year-old Verónica, trudging up the hillside with a large tin can of water. All their water had to be carried from the public tap below and everyone in the family had to help.

Then Tia Geni appeared in the doorway of their home with baby Valdemar on her hip and little Vanda aged three hanging on to her skirt. Supper must be ready. Tio Edú would soon be

back from his hard, busy day's work driving a bus through the crowded streets of Rio de Janeiro.

Although Tia means aunty and Tio uncle, they were not Chico's real family, but they never made him feel like that. They were kind to him and treated him much like the other children – a scolding a day and rice and black beans most days. On good days there was a fried egg or half a fried egg on top of the rice, or a piece of dried meat in the beans.

Chico was twelve. Ever since he could think, Chico had asked about his own father and mother. Where were they? But Tio Edú and Tia Geni found many excuses for not telling him. Each time it was like a door that slammed shut just when you imagined you saw something inside. Either they didn't know, or more likely they didn't want to tell. "We took you in when you were a baby and needed a home," was all they would say. But there was a longing deep inside him. He thought, "One day – one day I will find my parents." He imagined what his mother would look like and what his father would say to him – and what they would do together. There were lots of things he wanted – a large ice-cream – a new pair of trousers – hot sausages and mustard. In his dreams they all

belonged to that day when he would find his parents.

"Supper!" thought Chico hungrily. He got up and raced down the hillside laughing as he ran.

Inside the shack it was boiling hot. The corrugated iron roof was burning with heat. The air was like steam coming from a plate of soup. How they prayed for a breeze on such a day! But when a breeze came in fresh from the sea, it often brought clouds and rain. And whenever it rained water dripped through the roof, and if it fell on someone's neck, they would jump suddenly as if the cold hand of a ghost had touched them. So when it rained, they would long for sun again!

2

The Market

Chico worked in the market. The market was fun. There were other boys there and lots of things happening all the time. He had made a cart with the help of Tio Edú. It was a rough wooden box on three small but heavy iron wheels, one at the front and two at the back.

The back axle was fixed to a stepping board for his foot.

He was very proud of his cart. It could easily carry up to two hundred pounds of vegetables and fruit. The women shopping for their families were glad to see him. He loaded their heavy bags of oranges and bundles of spinach on to the cart. Then, stepping with one foot and pushing with the other, he scooted ahead of his customer to take her shopping home for a small charge.

The market started early in the morning. By noon it was very hot. The salad had wilted and the fish smelt. This was when the poor people came to get the left-overs for a few cruzeiros. The boys like Chico who had worked the whole morning were also given some vegetables or fruit here and there from a kind-hearted trader. This helped to feed their families.

It had all started for Chico when one day Tio Edú said to him, "My boy, now we have more children in the family, you must leave school and go out to work and do your part to fill our rice-pan."

Chico felt sad because he would miss going to school, but he found many friends among the barrow-men and this helped. He liked Adam who cut funny faces in his pumpkins and put

them out to laugh at everyone passing by his table. He liked Magdalena and José, the kind old couple who often gave him an orange or a tangerine.

But he kept away from Jorge, the fishmonger, because one day, just to tease him, Chico had put marbles into the mouths of a whole row of fish ready on the table, and Jorge had discovered it and had thrown old bones and the heads of smelly fish at him.

There was also Apple-Anna. She never gave an apple away to anyone. "Much too expensive to throw about," she said. She polished each apple with a cloth and piled them one on top of another in a lovely pyramid. The boys never stopped trying, "An apple, Anna, give me an apple!" "One, only one, Anna!" But Anna didn't give away any at all.

She was sending her ten-year-old son, Pericles, to a fine school in the afternoons. He was very spoiled. He was supposed to help his mother in the mornings, but he hardly ever did.

Usually Chico did not earn much. There were many boys and competition was strong.

One day he had the idea of painting his cart a bright green. That attracted the women's eyes and they would pick him out among all the others. He also tried to be extra helpful with

the heavy bags and hand them quickly up the stairs of the different houses. Then he would be recognised next time and asked to help again.

3

Bolt from the Blue

One day in early December something extraordinary happened. Tio Edú did not come home after his work.

He did not come home one night, two nights, three nights. Tia Geni cried a lot.

After two weeks had gone by she finally called Chico and said, "You are old enough to understand – Edú has left us."

"Left us?"

"He has gone off with another woman to another district."

"Why did he go, Tia Geni?"

"I don't know. I really don't know. Maybe he wants to set up another family."

Chico could not understand. Why would anyone want to set up another family if they were lucky enough to have one already?

"He's not been the same ever since our first child died," said Geni. "That was the time too

when he started to drink."

Chico thought of Tio Edú. Often he was tired or sad, or both, and sometimes he was drunk. But he also could tell jokes that were fun.

"What will happen to us?" he asked.

"We'll have to leave this home, Chico. I've found work with a family, but I can only take the baby with me."

"And Veronica?"

"Veronica and Vanda can stay with the neighbours. I'll have to pay for their food." She looked at him. Tears were again running down her brown cheeks. "It has all been so sudden, Chico, I don't know what to do. We need to eat and Valdemar is sick and needs care. So I thought, if from now on you could look after yourself . . ."

How thin and worn-out she looked. He wanted to help her. "You must not worry because of me, Tia Geni. I am twelve already. Twelve years and four months. All in all a hundred and forty-eight months. I'll manage."

She laughed through her tears about the hundred and forty-eight months, and then went to pack the girls' things and to prepare her own belongings and those of little Valdemar.

Chico looked round for his things. He found another sleeveless shirt. Under the mattress

which he had shared with the two girls he had hidden his treasure; an old and rusty knife. He took that too. Tia Geni gave him his tin mug, metal plate and spoon and fork. All this he put into a bag and tied it to the handle of his little wagon. There was really nothing else.

He went to say goodbye to Geni and the children. When he came to Veronica, he whispered: "I'll think hard how to bring your father back."

Then he left.



Nowhere to go

That day Chico had already worked in the market and Tia Geni let him keep the money which he had earned. Counting it, he saw that he had enough to buy some rice, beans, eggs and bread. "I'm rich," he thought. He jumped on his cart and went careering down the road.

He felt free and happy, shouting and singing as he went on his way. After all, he had his cart and he had some money. He could work in the market and he was his own boss now.

Somehow, though, a chilly feeling crept into his stomach. Where would he sleep? Where was he to cook his meals? He had to have some kind of meals. Again he thought of his parents. They must be somewhere. Wouldn't they have a home for him? If only he could find them!

He slowed down and kept thinking. He had not many possessions, but what he had needed to be protected. Luckily he had learned how to protect himself from the boys in the market. Some of the bigger boys were really rough and you had to be quick-witted to look after yourself.

As he passed a baker's shop, a delicious smell of freshly baked bread reached him and he went

in and bought three small crusty loaves. Through the grey paper they were wrapped in he could feel they were still warm. He tucked them under his arm and thought how good they would be. Then he looked round for a place where he could eat.

He found a small square with some trees and a children's playground. He sat down happily on the corner of a bench under a tree. It was peaceful here, and there were shouts and laughter from the children playing games.

The crust of the bread was crisp when he bit into it. What good bread it was! There were one or two birds hopping nearby who were interested in the crumbs; and he noticed a boy whom he knew from the market. It was Beto, one of the tough ones, quite a bit older and taller than he was.

The boy sat on a bench not far away and kept looking at him. Chico wondered why. He kept his cart close to him and turned his head to look at the children flying on the swings. He might have a swing himself a bit later. When he looked again, the boy was still staring.

Suddenly it all became clear to him. "Want a piece?" he asked very casually.

"Wouldn't mind," said the other boy, casually too. But he wolfed down half a loaf so fast

that Chico said, "You can't have had much to eat today!"

"Haven't had anything."

"What happened? Didn't you get any customers this morning?"

"Not a single one. At home they were so angry I got no food. They wouldn't believe me that I hadn't had a single job. They thought that I had spent the money. My father beat me and then I ran away. I always run away when he beats me."

"Is he your real father?"

"Yes, he is!" Beto growled and then spat on the ground in disgust.

"I think, if I had a father I wouldn't mind even if he did beat me," said Chico wistfully.

"You say that, 'cause it's not you what's getting bashed. He doesn't like me."

"Why not?"

"'Cause I'm black."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, my mother is black, but my father is kind of light, a bit brown, about like you. My sisters are all the same as my father, only I came out really black and that's why he doesn't like me."

"What does it matter how dark or light you are?" exclaimed Chico puzzled.

"You don't know – I can see that."

Chico looked at him and wondered. "Even so, Beto, at least you have a home . . ." After a little while he added, "I'm on my own from today on."

"What happened? Did they throw you out?"

"No. Tia Geni and Tio Edú have broken up. Tia Geni has to go and work in a family. The girls are with a neighbour and I'm on the street."

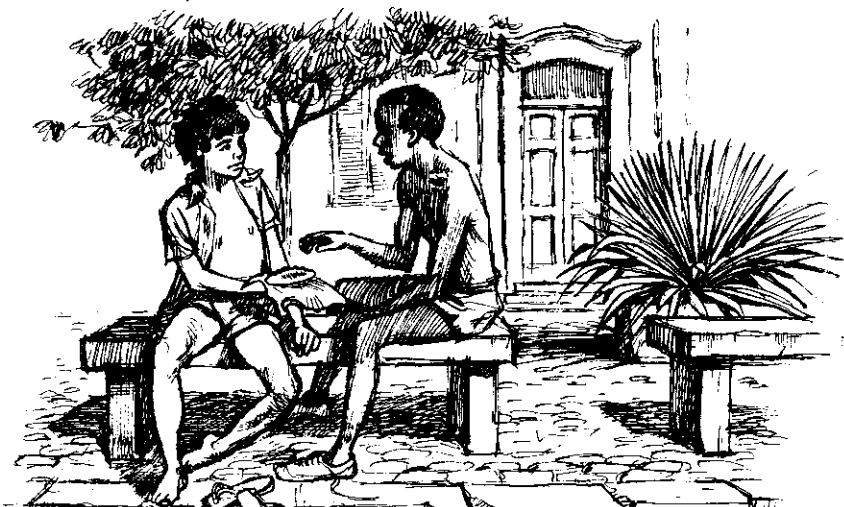
"Why don't you come with me?" Beto's face lit up.

"To your home?"

"I'm not going home tonight. I have a place. You'll see. I've often slept out. It's quite a good place. Safe. I don't show everyone, you know."

Chico was glad that someone wanted to take him somewhere.

They finished the bread between them.



The Tunnel

Beto led the way along a railway-line. It was built in the bottom of a gully with steep sides. As the street went alongside it they could look down, until they came to where the railway line tunnelled its way into the hillside. The road climbed over the hill and steps went down to the rails that glinted in the last light of the sun.

It was a beautiful evening with banks of clouds in the south and everything was covered in a rosy glow. Beto pointed to the stairs leading down. "That's my place, in the tunnel there," he announced proudly.

Chico did not really want to go into the black mouth of the tunnel. It seemed very dark. But Beto was keen to show him and pushed him along. "You'll see – quite cosy."

They had to carry their carts down the stairs on their heads.

In the tunnel they could hardly see anything until their eyes got used to the dark. Then Chico saw the rails that went right through to the other end. Either side of the single line there seemed just enough room for a person to sit or lie.

"Nice and dry when it rains," said Beto.

“When the train comes through, you just roll a little closer to the wall, so the wagons won’t hit you. An old drunk showed me this place. Haven’t seen him around for a long time now though. Maybe he died. It’s the freight-train from the port that comes through here.”

Beto had a pile of old newspapers stowed away under a heavy stone and before long he had prepared two beds with them.

Chico said that he wanted to wash, and went to look for a public tap in the neighbourhood. He was sorry he had forgotten to bring the empty powdered milk tin he used at home for a shower. “Tomorrow I must find myself another one,” he thought. Tia Geni had taught him to have a shower every day, even if it was only filling an empty tin with water and pouring it all over yourself.

After washing as well as he could at the tap, Chico made his way back to the tunnel.

He looked at the sky, wondering if it would be good weather for the market again tomorrow. It had been fine all day. He longed for his lost home and wondered how it was that such awful things could happen on such a beautiful day.

*

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In the middle of the night Chico woke up with a tremendous start. There was a thunderous rumbling noise all around him. Then came a sharp wind.

"The train," he thought, "the train!" Fear held his heart still, as if it would never beat again.

Suddenly it seemed almost on top of him. He remembered what Beto had said and threw himself against the wall. Even so, he seemed to feel the train right in his bones and head and ears as it went shrieking and screaming by. His breath stuck in his throat. He wanted to get away, but there was the hard wall right beside him and he did not dare to get up. After what seemed a long time, the last wagon went by and the noise ebbed away.

Chico was trembling all over. He turned to feel for Beto, only to find him fast asleep. In answer to his prodding he received nothing but a grunt.

He stepped over Beto and staggered out of the tunnel. On no account would he stay in there and have another train pass him like that.

Outside the rain was coming down, and though he kept close to the wall, soon he was drenched. He sat on his haunches with his back to the wall. Rain was dripping from his hair

and running down his face. With the cool drops of rain there were other, hot ones, running down his cheeks. He was crying.

Well, what of it – it was dark and no one could see. He was not the crying kind usually. Not even when he had broken his arm and they set it at the hospital had he cried. The doctor and nurse had praised him.

But now – everything was too terrible and he could not stand it. How could he continue to live like this without a home to go to? It cried out inside him, “Why can’t I have a father and mother like other children?”



And then, quite suddenly, it was as if a voice deep inside him said, "I am your Father. Be quiet. I am your Father, and I will look after you."

He felt a light and warmth in him that he had never experienced before. He did not have to ask anyone. He knew it was God speaking to him. The same God they had so often prayed to for a fresh breeze, or for rain. He wanted nothing more than to keep this warmth and happiness that filled him. However, after a few moments it was gone. But he knew he was no longer alone. He felt safe and cared about and that he would be always.

With that he went back into the tunnel and stretched out again on his bed of newspapers. He fell asleep immediately.

That night the train did not pass again.

6

Apple-Anna

It was hard to wake Beto next morning. "Hey you," Chico shook his shoulder and shouted at him, "you are snoring like a pig. We have to go to the market. Luckily the rain has stopped."

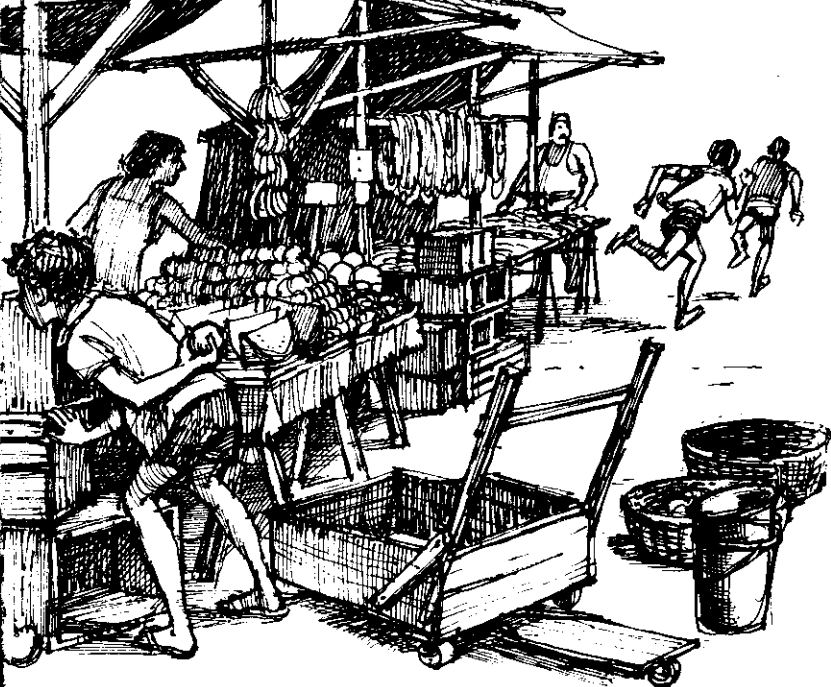


The other boy rubbed his eyes, "I'm not going today."

"What do you mean, you're not going! No work – no food. Come on!"

The market was in a different street each day and different people came to it. Chico treated Beto to coffee and milk at a bar, and then they were both absorbed into the life of the market.

When Chico passed by the stand of Magdalena and José, they handed him a banana. He munched it happily and rolled on with his cart.



He was just going to throw the skin of the banana with a quick fling under the table of a vegetable stand, when dozens of apples came tumbling towards him. Surprised he looked up and saw Apple-Anna in complete confusion, trying to recover her apples which were spreading out like little red balls on the grey cobblestones everywhere. Wisps of hair were standing out from about her round face and tears of despair were rolling down her cheeks, while she groped for the apples.

Several boys stood around with their carts. They laughed and shouted, "Anna, where are your apples?"

"Those are the apples you wouldn't give us, Anna!"

Some of the boys ducked and picked up an apple, then ran away laughing with their prize. A few yards away, over the heads of the crowd, appeared the cap of a policeman. In an instant the boys vanished.

Chico was hiding behind a neighbouring stand, an empty banana skin in one hand and an apple in the other. The apple had a bite out of the shining red skin. He could hear Apple-Anna complaining to the policeman that one of those vandals had bumped into her table with his cart and the beautiful pyramid had tumbled down. Now all the apples would be bruised and the day's takings would be lost . . . and where – for heaven's sake – was her own son, Pericles, who was supposed to be helping her and was nowhere to be found?

* * *

By mid-morning Chico had made three long deliveries and one short one. Then he looked for Beto and found him sitting on his cart at

the very end of the market street.

"Did you see those apples rolling?" he asked.

"Uh." Obviously Beto was feeling very down.

"How many fares, Beto?"

"One."

"Better than none."

"They don't like my face."

Chico looked at his friend who really was a dirty and unhappy sight. "You may have to clean up a bit," he said.

Beto raised his foot to give him a hearty kick, which Chico expertly avoided. He sat down next to him on the cart.

"I've been thinking," he said, "about your father and him not liking you and all that. It may not be true, you know."

"Huh!"

"Even if it were, you make it worse the way you go on. You could try to *do* something helpful for him tonight."

"But I'm not going home. I'm going back to the tunnel with you. Right?"

Chico did not like the thought of a night alone with the trains, but he said, "A home is better than a tunnel." He jumped up. "Let's go and work some more. I'll help you get another customer." Reluctantly Beto got up and they went off together.

Rice and Beans

At the end of the morning Beto had a lot more money in his pocket. He was beaming.

"All right, I'll go home after all, but you must come with me."

"I want to go and visit Veronica and Vanda," replied Chico, "to see how they are doing. Good luck at home with your dad."

"Hm. Maybe – but then you come and see me tonight." When he saw Chico's doubtful face, he added, "You'd better come and see how I'm getting on!" Then he told him how to get there.

"Tonight then," he called over his shoulder as he left.

"See you, Beto," cried Chico.

Chico bought a big bag of tangerines which he knew the girls loved, and started off to the house where they were living. The sun was strong and it was quite far to go. He passed a small canal and then a long garden wall which he knew well. The garden belonged to a woman everyone called "the rich widow". No one really knew if she was a widow – or if she was rich – but everyone knew that she lived alone in this

big house surrounded by the garden and protected by a ferocious dog that always barked when anyone passed by. In the middle of the hustle and bustle of the hill, and the lively passing of people up and down, this garden at the bottom was like an island.

Chico wondered why the woman lived there alone. Perhaps her family had died, or else left her, and now she lived there, maybe afraid, with the wall and the dog her only protection.

Pushing the cart with its cargo of tangerines Chico climbed the steep road up the hill.

Veronica and Vanda jumped for joy when they saw him, and they held a tangerine-feast immediately. Esperanza, with whom they were living, smiled warmly. Chico asked her if she had heard any more from Tia Geni or Tio Edú. She said that Edú had gone away with a dumb blonde. "That playful thing will never make a good wife," she added. "You'll see, the first row that comes up – she'll leave him. It's Geni I'm sorry for."

"And what about us?" thought Chico.

Esperanza gave him a plate of rice and black beans. After he had talked more with the girls he said goodbye again, promising to come to see them from time to time.

Going down the road, he was thinking hard.

If he could go to Tio Edú and talk to him . . . but what would he say . . . that his family needed him? He had a feeling that it might not be as easy as all that.

On the way down he spoke to several old friends. One small girl he knew was sitting on a boulder by the roadside. She was sucking her rag doll.

"You look hungry," observed Chico.

The little girl nodded.

Chico paused. Aware of the money in his pocket he lit up inside, "Why, I could give her some!" "Here," he said, pulling out some cruzeiros, "take these to your mother."

The girl took the money and closed her small fingers over it. Then like a shot, she ran off down the road.

"Something's wrong here," thought Chico. "Her shack is up the hill, not down. What's she up to?"

He started after her with his cart bumping over the cobble-stones. Soon he caught up with her.

"Hey! I said, take it to your mother!"

The girl looked at him with big earnest eyes. She shook her head.

"Come on, you're not going to buy sweets with that!"

She shook her head again.

"Now, you'd better tell me."

She looked at him for a long time. Finally she said, "Father drinks."

"Oh," Chico nodded slowly, "I get it! You don't want to take the money home. He may get hold of it for drink - and you don't want that. Is that it?"

She only nodded, her serious eyes still looking at him.

"What will you buy?"

"Rice."

She turned again towards the grocer's at the bottom of the hill. Chico followed her with his eyes. She was so little and so responsible.

"Wait a minute," he cried. He got another crumpled wad of cruzeiros out of his pocket. "You'd better get some beans as well."

8

Beto's Dad

It was getting dark when Chico reached Beto's home. The house stood at the end of a dirt road. It was small but sturdily built with bricks.

He found Beto waiting for him outside. He

didn't need to ask how things had gone. Beto's face looked like three days of rain.

"Not too good, eh?" Chico asked.

"So much for your bright ideas!" exclaimed Beto.

"What happened?"

There was a puzzled expression on the older boy's face. "I thought I would give all the money from the market to my father and that he would be pleased. I'd never brought home so much before. Know what he did? Started to shout at me: 'Where have you been all night? What did you do? Did you steal the money?' "

"And then?"

"Then I lost my temper too, and told him all I felt about him. How he's always after me for everything! How I can't do anything right!"

Chico did not know what to say.

"Maybe you need to wait and see," he said finally.

Beto shrugged. "Listen Chico, I've got a place for you to sleep tonight. Better than the tunnel. There's a shack this side of the house. The toolshed we call it. A bit small, but there's hardly anything in it. Mostly rubbish. You can sleep there."

Chico was doubtful. "Did you tell your parents?"

"Of course not. Anyway, no one will ever know. Once a month someone goes in there. We don't even bother to lock it. You can leave your cart here in the shadow beside the wall."

Under cover of darkness Beto pushed him along, first through the gate and then through a creaking door into the small shack.

"What's this under my feet?" asked Chico.

Beto felt with his hands. "Dunno if it's an old doormat or a dead dog. Anyway, if it was alive, it would get up and yell."

After clearing the floor as well as they could in the dark, and after Beto had given him lots of advice about keeping quiet he went out and closed the door, leaving Chico alone with his thoughts.

Somehow he did not feel like sleeping. Through his mind wandered pictures of the other inhabitants of the hut – of rats and running mice, jumping fleas and cockroaches – they were all sure to be there as well as him. He listened. Was that a rustling in the dark? He found it hard to breathe.

"I wonder," he said to himself, "if there isn't one inhabitant too many in this shack – and if that isn't me!"

He thought that if he could at least open the door, he would not feel quite so much like that.

In the dark he felt for the door handle. It wasn't there!

"Hey, how do I open this door?" He gave it a push. Nothing happened. Desperately he put his whole weight behind it. With a creaking protest it yielded.

He felt better when he could see a bit of sky and some bright stars. He stretched out on the floor as well as he could, his head close to the door and a light breeze fanning his forehead. What a hot night it was! He lay thinking about things and remembering the terror of the tunnel last night. Then he also remembered the promise he had had that God was his father and would look after him. Before he knew it, he had fallen asleep. His awakening was sudden and wet.

First he could not think what it was, but then he realised that it was water – *water*, lots of it, all over him.

In the light of a lantern he saw a man with an angry face bending over him. He held an empty bucket in his hand.

"And who do you think you are, coming in here and stretching out to sleep?" he growled.

Chico sat up and tried to wipe the water from his face. "I'm a friend of Beto's."

"Beto! That scoundrel! That layabout! That



good-for-nothing son of mine. That loud-mouthed thief!"

"He's not!" cried Chico.

"He's not what?"

"He's not a thief! He's not like that!" Why, this was Beto's father! Astonished by his own courage, he added, "He thinks you don't like him . . ."

Afterwards Chico could not remember what happened next. His ear had been taken hold of, and was pulled painfully out of the shack by a big hand. The rest of him followed somehow.

Luckily he remembered his cart and grabbed it as he stumbled out of the gate.

By then he was so angry that he shook his fist at the man and shouted: "You! You don't understand anything! You're not a proper father!"

9

The Fight

Drawing his cart behind him Chico wandered through the dark streets. There were few lights in these parts. At times he didn't quite know if he was awake or asleep. It was like walking

clumsily in a bad dream. But he knew that he was wet.

He felt sad and discouraged. What could you do with a father that did not see further than the end of his nose?

He wondered how he had been discovered. Beto's father must have seen the open door of the shack and come to look. So much for a place to sleep.

What now? The tunnel? He shouldn't be too far from it here – and he still had his cart! He felt for the little bundle of treasures attached with string to the handle of the wagon. Yes, it was there. Then he stepped on the board – better get moving, especially as he was not quite sure of the way in the dark. He did not know the time either. It must be very late.

In the quiet of the night the cart with its metal wheels made a tremendous rumble on the cobble-stones. He brought it on to the pavement. That was a little better.

Ahead of him were some lights. A small square. Under one of the lights was a group of fellows talking. Some were sitting on a broken wall and some on the pavement. There seemed to be about twelve of them.

Chico was going by with his cart, when a tall thin lad caught him by the arm. "Hey! Where

are you going? Must be to a midnight market. Ha! Ha!" They all laughed. It sounded rough.

"So, where *are* you going?" he growled with his hand on Chico's cart.

"You leave my cart alone!" panicked Chico.

The tall boy whisked Chico's cart from him and said mockingly, "I'll do no such thing. You come and get it!"

Chico was furious. How dare he take his cart! He threw himself at the bigger boy trying to wrest it away. For the moment the cart seemed like his whole home – it was his only possession. Spoiling for a fight the bigger boy waded into Chico with fists flying. There were cries of encouragement from the onlookers.

Chico hadn't been working in the market for nothing. He defended himself well. But soon he was getting the worst of the fight. Several others joined in. He fell to the ground and as he tried to scramble up again demanded, "Give me my cart!" in a voice that shook.

"I know what!" exclaimed one of them. "He can make himself useful tonight – that is if he wants his cart back."

"Right. Good idea!" There were shouts of agreement.

Chico was jerked to his feet and his arms were pinned back in the firm grip of one of the



gang while the others formed a huddle, and started to speak in whispers interrupted by sniggers and sneering laughter.

He could hear snatches of the talk:

“... one wheel of each car ... why not two?”

“... can you see them blokes in the mornin’, wanting to drive to work?”

“... we should be there to see the fun ... !”

“You’ll be snoring away at that hour!”

Then they dragged him away with them, allowing him to bring his cart. “That’ll be needed – part of the plan,” one of them said.

After they had turned a number of corners, they came to a street with small but nice-looking houses. Nearly all had a car parked outside.

“Now you stay here, boy,” said the one who

seemed to have most of the ideas. "Here at the corner. Miguel" (he pointed at a hefty fellow) "will stay with you and watch. If you betray us, it's the end of you. Just so you know. If a cop comes, you're to take this cart of yours and come rolling towards us. Don't shout. Just come rolling, then we'll know and have plenty of time to make a getaway."

They went off up the street.

Chico was fairly certain that they were going to let the air out of the tyres of each of the cars. Then in the morning, all those people would have to change the tyres . . . if it was one wheel, it would be a nuisance, but it would be possible . . . but if it were two? He wondered if there was anything he could do to stop them.

Miguel was looking around carefully all the time, watching Chico out of the corner of his eye.

No more could be heard of the other boys. They must have moved well away, or be doing their work in great silence. There seemed to be no one about in the hollow of the night. Far away a dog howled. The two boys stood in the shadow of the houses.

Then Miguel made a sudden movement and gripped Chico's arm in a painful squeeze. He pointed to a corner not far away. A policeman

had just turned the corner. They could see his metal badge gleaming under the street lamp.

"Much too much light here," mumbled Miguel. "Get going, boy, and fast! Roll along with as much noise as you can. Go on! Get going!" he ordered in a fierce whisper giving him an almighty shove in the small of the back.

Chico was a street boy and for him, too, the police were the enemy. He set off at great speed, his little cart rattling through the silence.

Immediately there was the sound of a whistle.

And then it happened. Crash! Chico and the cart somersaulted into a large hole in the road. Stones loosened by the fall jerked down on top of him. He was winded and felt cut and bruised everywhere.

10

In the Enemy's Camp

The next thing Chico knew was a strong hand gripping his shoulder. Could it be Miguel?

When he lifted his head from the dust he soon saw why Miguel had vanished so fast. The policeman that towered over him was very tall and heavily built – a mountain of a man with

a sharp nose, broad mouth and heavy chin, and by the stripes on his arm a sergeant. Not someone to fool around with.

He shone his torch over Chico, "Looks like you hurt yourself. You're covered in blood. What have you been up to?"

Chico did not answer.

"Why were you running away?"

No answer.

"Are you alone?"

No answer.

"Where do you live, boy?"

No answer.

"So you won't speak. And probably you were not alone. We'll soon find out. Come along, you stay right by me and we'll have a look around."

Chico drew his cart out of the hole. The handle was loose now. That would have to be repaired. In the dark he could not see if that was all the damage.

He felt again the big hand on his shoulder — but anyhow he had no strength left to run away. He was completely done in by all that had happened that night.

"You come with me," said the policeman. "You're hardly fit to stand up. We'd better go to a chemist's on the way to the police station. If I bring you in like that they'll think you've mur-



dered someone – the way you're covered with blood!" He seemed to be grinning at his own joke and Chico found his heart warming to this man. Was he really an enemy?

"Maybe I can sleep at the police station," he thought. But his heart was pounding.

He followed the policeman. There was not a soul to be seen in the whole street. The sergeant shone his torch at some of the cars. He looked thoughtfully for a while at an empty tyre.

He must have decided to leave it at that.

They walked for a long time that night with Chico still pushing his cart but advancing more and more slowly. They passed one chemist after another – each more closed and bolted than the one before.

Finally the sergeant stopped in his tracks. "This won't do," he said. He looked at Chico under a street lamp. All he could read in the boy's eyes was utter weariness.

"I'll tell you what – we're close to my place and I was on my way home. We'll go there and I'll clean you up. That will be better. Come on, it's not much further."

They stopped in front of an old house standing in the middle of an untended garden. The policeman opened the gate.

"Now, my lad, you promise me you won't run away and I promise I won't be nasty to you – agreed?"

Chico nodded. Then they entered the house.

When the light was switched on it showed a dismal room full of furniture and things everywhere. Everything looked old, dirty and dusty.

The thought went through Chico's mind how Tia Geni would have scrubbed and brushed here.

He was pushed into the kitchen where the sergeant took a first aid box from the shelf and started to wash Chico's face, neck and arms with a piece of cotton wool and disinfectant. The big hands moved about his face gently. The washing uncovered some deep cuts, one especially painful on his right cheekbone.

"This wasn't all from the fall into the hole, was it?"



Chico shook his head. But the sergeant saw that he would not talk – anyway not that night.

“Do you have a home?” he asked.

Chico shook his head.

The big man pointed to a sofa in the kitchen. “You can sleep here,” he said. “Tomorrow we’ll see what to do.”

Chico’s head had hardly touched the rough sofa, when he fell into a deep sleep.

The policeman looked at him for a while. “I must be getting old,” he thought. “Instead of taking that little gangster to the police station, I bring him home. God knows why,” he grumbled to himself, “maybe I’m just an old fool.”

With that he went to his room to sleep.

11

Steel Wool and Coconut Soap

Chico woke next morning with the sun shining on him. It was coming in through the kitchen window. Slowly he remembered all that had happened the night before. He was in the policeman’s kitchen!

What a relief it was to stretch out on the sofa. He felt as if all his bones had gone soft. Too

many scares for one night. He closed his eyes once more.

Much later he woke again with a start. The market! It must be late already. Today – Friday – the market would be along the canal, the place he liked best.

He remembered there was a clock in the front room. Swinging himself off the sofa, he tested his feet on the floor. It was painful, but it was all right – he could walk.

He went to look at the clock. It was big, all in wood and bronze, hanging on the wall. The hands said quarter to twelve. He made a face at it. He was too late for the market – and, of course, his cart needed mending.

He went to the front door to look at his cart.

The front door was locked and there was no key. He was a prisoner. He thought back to the night before. The sergeant had said not to run away . . . and now, he was locked in. “That’s the cops for you. They never trust you.” He glared at the door. What should he do next?

He wandered back into the kitchen and stretched his arms and legs looking around. Just then he noticed a piece of paper on the stove. It was a message written in big letters, “Good morning. I had to go to my work. Will be back after five o’clock. There is coffee and milk on the

stove and bread next to the sink. Help yourself.”

He pounced on the food. Phew – now he felt really better! But what could he do until five o'clock? Better sleep again.

He stretched out on the sofa, but sleep did not come. He suddenly thought, “Why not do something for the sergeant?” He sat up. Yes, but what?

The first thing he thought of was to wash the mug and coffee pot, then the milk pan. Next he scrubbed the sink.

He remembered what Tia Geni used to do with her pots and pans which always shone like mirrors. He looked for steel wool under the sink and found some – and coconut soap as well. With these he scoured all the pans that hung on nails over the stove and looked so dull.

It took him a long time. But then the pans were so bright and sparkling that he stood admiringly in front of them. He felt happy and laughed, “Look what some steel wool and coconut soap can do!”

He noticed that the floor of the kitchen was very dirty too. He went to the bathroom where the sergeant kept his brooms. There were a lot of them, some broken, but there was no floor cloth.

“His wife must be away,” thought Chico, “or

else he's not married – seems kind of messy here.”

Where could there be a bit of old cloth? He tried the back door. To his astonishment it opened. “I was not a prisoner at all! This was open all the time!”

He looked outside. He didn't find a cloth, but he found a plastic bucket.

He tipped plenty of water over the kitchen floor, scrubbed it with soap and swept the dirty water down the drain with the straw broom. It was not a perfect job and the tile floor was very old, but at least it was a little better. With the back door open it would soon dry.

Chico was hot all over. “Better have a shower now,” he thought. “I think that would be OK.”

As he stood in front of the kitchen mirror, after a cold refreshing shower, trying to comb his wet hair with his fingers, Chico heard the door being opened.

The sergeant came in, carrying some parcels under his arm. “Hey son,” he said. Then his eyes took in the tidy kitchen and fell upon the sparkling pans hanging on the wall.

The big man looked and looked some more. And then he smiled.

The sergeant had brought fresh bread and eggs, and while he went to take a shower Chico fried the eggs and cooked some rice as well. Then they ate.

Afterwards Chico helped to clear up the dishes. The sergeant looked thoughtfully at him as he carefully handled the plates with sponge and soap. What would he do now with this boy and how could he find out what he was really up to?

He liked him, his bright dark eyes, and thin intelligent face. Somehow he reminded him of his young sister, Noemia, whom he had loved. She had looked like that when she was about twelve. There was a sting in his heart when he thought of her.

Later the policeman and Chico sat in the bamboo chairs on the veranda in front of the house. These chairs were old and full of holes, but you could sit very comfortably in them.

The sergeant looked at the bushes that grew wild in the garden. The evening breeze moved each leaf. It was a long time since he had had someone to sit with on this veranda.



"I haven't told you my name," he said, "I'm Francisco."

"I'm called Chico."

"That's kind of funny – Francisco* and Chico . . . ?"

Chico, who did not see why it was funny, said nothing.

"This house was my parents' home, but I'm all alone here now. They died many years ago . . ."

Chico sat very still.

"However can I get him to talk and find out what he was up to last night?" wondered

*Chico is the short form of Francisco.

Francisco. After a pause he thought, "Perhaps if I tell him something about myself it might help." He was silent for a time. At last he said, "I had a sister once. She married a man who was no good. A dark chap, who had come from the north of the country to work in the city. They had a baby boy." None of us in the family agreed with the marriage. We thought no good would come of it – and we were proved right."

Francisco was staring into the shadows of the dark garden. "It happened at the height of carnival. You know how it is. Everyone on the street and the sound of drums all night long. My sister Noemia loved carnival. Often she had won a prize in a samba school. She was as pretty and lively as a humming bird and full of song and dance.

"But she was self-willed too. She always wanted to dance. That day they must have quarrelled and Vicente, her husband, locked her in while he went out so she wouldn't go to the carnival. That same afternoon he took part in an armed raid on a bank. A guard was killed. Some of the gang got away but he was caught and put into prison. He never got back home.

"No one knows how she managed to escape from the house, but she did. She had that kind of spirit, you couldn't just lock her in . . . It had

been a very hot, steamy day. Late in the evening there was a torrential rainstorm. It flooded the roads, soaked everything and everyone and stopped the traffic and the dancing. Noemia was found the next morning huddled in the mud in front of the house, burning with fever. She had violent pneumonia. She must have fallen too because she was bruised and hurt. She had on her brightly coloured carnival dress."

There were beads of sweat now on Francisco's face. "He must have loved her very much," Chico thought.

"They took her to hospital but it was too late. I didn't know, you see, during carnival we're on duty day and night. I was fed up too with their quarrels and fights and didn't stay in touch with them. We heard when it was all over – she had died and he was in prison."

"And the boy? What happened to the baby boy?" Chico's voice came out with a strange sound; his throat was dry.

"I don't know. On the hill where they lived, no one knew anything of the little child. Maybe he died too. When I think of that chap Vicente – I could wring his neck." Francisco's face was both angry and sad. "Just as well he is stewing in prison. They're not treated with velvet gloves there. It's rough all right."

Chico found he was not afraid of the big man now. He told him about Tio Edú and Tia Geni and the children, about how he lost his home, about the market, the tunnel and Beto's shack and how the gang had got hold of him.

Francisco listened carefully. "So that's what happened last night. I'm glad you told me, Chico. If more people trusted us we could help more."

"But how can I live when I have no home to go back to?" It came like a cry from deep inside Chico. "And in Beto's home no one understands him."

Francisco had no answer. They were silent for a long time.

"Well, I think we'll go to bed," said Francisco finally.

While they locked the door and closed the windows, Chico asked, "Were you ever married, Sir?"

"Married? Yes. My wife died some time ago," he replied. "Well, good night Chico."

Francisco went to his room and Chico went to the kitchen. That night he tossed and turned on his sofa. He could not sleep. It seemed so very hot and thoughts were running wildly through his head and heart. Hadn't Tio Edú once said something about carnival when he

had asked about his parents? Tia Geni had never allowed him to take part in a samba school at carnival time. Oh all this was nonsense – but sometimes she had sighed when she looked at him and said that too much laughter brought tears. He sat up with a jerk and looked out of the window at the waving branches of the trees outside. There was such a bright moon that he could even see the roofs of the nearby houses. “I must be imagining things,” he thought. “It’s no good. There *are* coincidences in life.” But he was so restless that it seemed impossible to sleep. “What really happened?” he wondered.

He couldn’t think of anything except to go and see Tia Geni and ask her if she knew the story of his parents.

Then he slept.

The next morning while Chico was getting ready to go to the market Francisco helped him to put new screws into his cart.

“Thank you for everything,” Chico said, attaching his little bundle to the handle. He held out his hand, “Goodbye.” Francisco shook it warmly and opened the gate for him. Then he laid his hand on Chico’s shoulder. “I’ll look out for you tonight?” he said.

Apple-Anna again

When Chico arrived at the market, someone ran after him. It was Beto.

"Where have you been?" he panted. "I thought you were lost!"

"I got picked up by a cop."

"No!"

"Sure – he treated me all right. Very decent, really."

"But you look all beaten up!"

"Hmm – but that's another story."

"Well, listen to *this*. You are to come to my home tonight."

"I'm what?"

"You're to come to my family. You know, it worked."

"What worked?"

"What you told me – about talking to my old man and all that. The next morning he called me and asked me if I really thought that he didn't like me. He told me how he had thrown water at you in the middle of the night. I really had a good laugh at that one!"

"I didn't feel much like laughing!" retorted Chico.

“No – and to think that you were the one who made me talk to him! I told him. So now he wants to see you and apologise. Imagine him saying sorry!” Beto’s face was wrinkling with laughter. “He says you can come and sleep in the shack any time.”

“Thank you, Beto.”

“What do you mean – thank me – *he* thanks *you*. Yesterday I made more money than I have ever made before. Everything seems to be turning out right now.”

“Well, thank God, Beto.” Chico was really glad for his friend.

“Will you come tonight?” asked Beto.

“I don’t know yet. I’ve got to find Tia Geni. So I need to go and see the girls first to get the address.”

“Sounds like a busy day.” Beto jumped on his cart. “Well, I’ve got work to do too. Don’t forget to come.” They rolled on together past the stalls, looking for customers. When they came close to Apple-Anna Beto stopped abruptly. “Can’t go past her,” he said, giving Chico a shove with his elbow. “Mustn’t go too close.”

“Why’s that, then?”

“Oh, its just that she might remember.”

“Remember what?” queried Chico.

"The apples."

"The apples? Why, she's full of apples. Her whole life's apples."

"Apples and Pericles," agreed Beto.

"Pericles is spoiled."

"Spoiled rotten. That's just it. The apples got rotten too."

"What on earth are you talking about?" asked Chico.

Beto whispered, "It was me who bumped into her table that day."

"And now you can't pass by her stall any more for the rest of your living days?"

"Huh!"

"Oh, come on! Let's go and talk to her. She can't be that nasty."

"I don't much want to," mumbled Beto, but he let Chico draw him along.

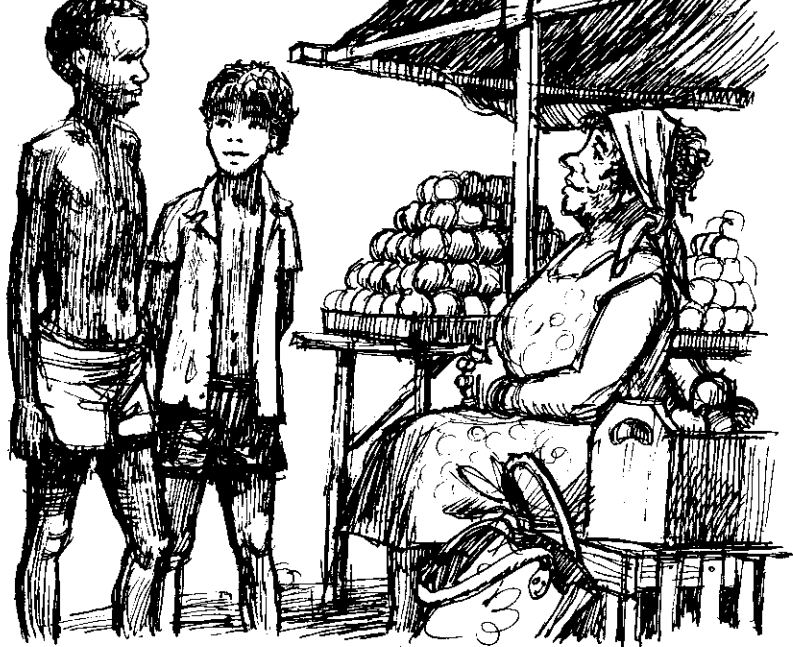
In front of Anna's table it was Chico who spoke. "Mrs. Anna, we were sorry about your apples," he said.

Anna stuck out a plump finger accusingly. "It was you," she cried, pointing at Beto.

Beto was gaining courage. "I didn't mean to, you know."

"I ate one of the apples," said Chico by way of helping to shift the blame from Beto.

"Well, it's possible I didn't build the pyramid



right that day," she said. She paused looking at the boys who were obviously sorry. "You boys need to mend your ways and behave yourselves and not treat other people like that — making them suffer and lose all their sales."

Beto and Chico looked sorry.

"It was Pericles, who really upset me," she said. "He was here. But he ran away when I got into trouble."

The two boys looked silently at her sad face. Beto nodded. "You be sure," he cried, "you got some friends here now, Apple-Anna!"

A Piece of the Puzzle

After the market Chico got Tia Geni's address from Esperanza. Promising Veronica and Vanda that he would come for a longer visit another day, he went to look for Tia Geni right away.

It was not far. When he rang the bell of the flat at the address that he had been given, Tia Geni herself opened the door.

She was glad to see him. "How have things been going with you, Chico?" she asked anxiously ruffling his hair. She looked at his bruises with concern. "What happened to your face?"

"It's nothing. Things are all right now, Tia Geni," he said, "a policeman took me in."

"A policeman? That was good of him. I'm glad God seems to have protected you. I've been praying so much for all you children, you know . . ."

"Yes, God has protected me, Tia," said Chico gratefully.

"You've come just at the right time. The lady I work for is out all afternoon. Come and see Valdemar. He's asleep in his cot in my room and then I'll give you a cup of coffee."

"I don't want to stay long, Tia Geni," said Chico. "I came because I wanted to ask you, can you tell me about my parents, where they are and what happened to them?"

The abrupt question seemed to hang in the air, like a lost balloon that cannot find its way down any more. Tia Geni busied herself at the stove. She had her back to him and he could not see her face.

"I understand that you want to know now you are growing up, but I think you'd better ask Edú," she said finally. "He knows more of what happened than I do. He brought you home with him. We had just got married. We have always loved you like our own child, Chico, you know that," she added as she poured coffee for him and added three heaped spoonfuls of sugar. "It was one of the things that showed me what a good heart Edú really has, when he brought you home that night. It was even before we had any children of our own. We were just married then. Such a tiny thing you were, and crying."

"I'll go and see Tio Edú," he said.

"I don't know his address, but they told me that he lives in the Morro da Coroa. You have to take a bus to get there and then ask."

He said goodbye to her rather quickly, put his cart into the courtyard of a hardware shop

whose owner he knew, and went to catch a bus to the Morro da Coroa.

15

Two Cracked Mirrors

As it did not happen very often in Chico's life, it was always an adventure to take a bus. Sometimes Tio Edú had let the family in for a free ride when he was on duty. Chico loved the movement and the bustle of people trying to get quickly from one place to another.

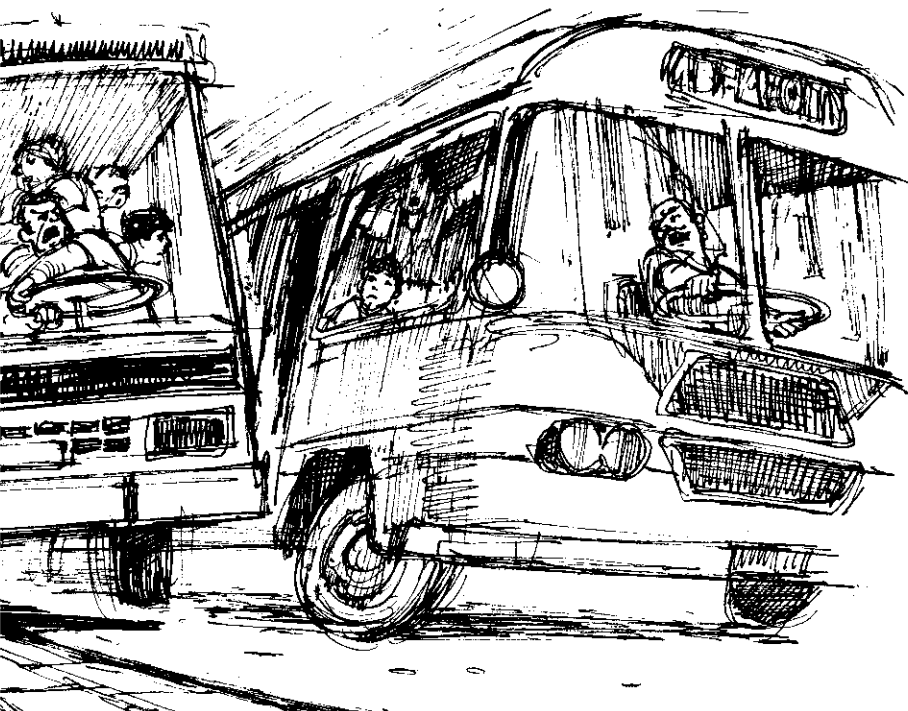


There was a place free at a window and Chico enjoyed the wind blowing in his face.

The bus was filling up rapidly with people – young and old, rich and poor, with all kinds of clothes and all colours of skin. Chico liked all these differences, but he divided people into two categories – those who were patient with you and those who were not.

The crowded bus went at full speed round the bends of the road. Everyone found himself part of a seat to sit on or something to hold on to. “Though,” thought Chico, “you wouldn’t fall far, jammed together like this.”

Suddenly the bus swerved more than usual.



There was a crash and people shouted. Coming round a bend they had run into another bus that was standing at the side of the road picking up people.

The driver of the other bus shook his fist, "Go home idiot, if you don't know how to drive!"

The driver of Chico's bus shouted back, "What do you think you are – a cream puff? It's only your mirror that's broken. Don't make such a fuss . . ."

"Only my mirror. What do you think . . .!"

The rest of what he was shouting was lost, as Chico's bus had taken off fast, its motor roaring.

But it was not long before the other bus caught up with them and drove alongside only a hair's breadth away. It cut in on them and forced them on to the pavement. Women started to scream. Someone shouted, "The heat's gone to his head!"

There came a second crash. The bus screeched to a halt. The other driver had taken revenge. Now their mirror was knocked off, too.

Chico was close now to where he wanted to go. No need to listen to the row that would follow! He climbed out and went quickly on his way.

A Visit to Tio Edú

On the Morro da Coroa, a small rounded hill full of tiny houses and shacks, Chico found out quite easily where Tio Edú lived. Trembling a little inside, he went up the steep cobbled street to the shack that had been pointed out to him. It was a rough hut with closed windows and wooden shutters. There was no sign of anyone around.

He knocked at the narrow door, and knocked again.

A muffled voice came from inside. It sounded like a groan.

"Who is it?"

"It's Chico."

"Come in then."

When he pushed open the door it was so dark inside that at first he could not see anything at all. Then he saw Tio Edú lying on a low bed with a ragged mattress. One of his legs was in plaster. A table stood close to the bed with an empty glass on it.

"So it's you," said the voice from the bed. "How did you get here?"

Chico took a deep breath, "Is it true that my

mother died during carnival time, and my father is in prison?"

Taken off his guard, Tio Edú gasped, "How did you find that out? From some old woman who can't keep her mouth shut?" He jerked his head up from the pillow. "People are such gossips. I hoped this wouldn't catch up with you . . . Ai!" His head dropped back on the pillow and his face was torn with pain.

"So it *was* true!" thought Chico. There seemed to be a big hole where his stomach used to be. "Where is my father now?" he whispered.

Tio Edú gave a deep sigh, "He's in the Frei Caneca prison, here in Rio. I went to visit him once – brought him cigarettes, and told him that we were taking care of you. He used to be my friend."

After a pause he added quietly, "In fact I was in the car the day of the raid. Keeping watch for them. That's why we packed up quickly and moved to another hill, I was afraid they would lock me up too if they found me. Your mother had given you into our keeping so we took you along."

Chico looked at Edú's face where the stubble of a beard was growing. "Does my father know what happened to my mother?"

"Yes he does. He felt that he was to blame

for it. If he hadn't gone on the raid it might never have happened . . ."

"Why did he do it, Tio Edú?"

"You mean the raid? Well, my boy, in case you don't know yet, life isn't easy in this city and even more difficult if you have a family to feed and look after. It's a great temptation – do you understand?"

Chico nodded his head slowly.

"Somehow I didn't go to visit him again. It was hard to know what to say to him. And I was afraid of the police."

Chico stood lost in thought for a while. Finally he looked around and noticing the untidiness and dirt asked, "Who is looking after you Tio Edú? Are you all alone?"

Tio Edú's mouth set in a grim line. "The neighbours come and bring me a plate of food every so often. I'm not hungry anyway," he mumbled.

Chico saw that Tio Edú was much thinner than before. Obviously he was now all alone.

"What happened to your leg, Tio? You should be in hospital."

"They said it wasn't bad enough to keep me in hospital. I had a crash with the bus. We hit the back of a truck one night. I broke my leg and two ribs as well." He turned his face to the wall, but Chico caught the words, "It would've

been better if it had been my neck . . .”

The boy shook his head. “No!” he cried and quickly added, “The girls miss you, Tio!”

“Oh . . . do they?”

“Yes, they and Tia Geni and Valdemar . . .” Chico expected him to ask where or how they all were, but Tio Edú kept his mouth firmly shut.

“Can I fetch water for you?” asked Chico.

“Yes, please. There’s a bucket over there – and it’s sure to be empty. You have to go to the tap three houses down. A drink will do me good. And a wash too,” he added.

After Chico had brought the water and filled the glass, he covered the full bucket with a cloth.

“If I can’t do anything more for you, Tio, I’d better be off now.” Tio Edú shook his head. “Nothing I can think of, Son. But it was good of you to come.”

Chico went to kiss his hand, as he used to do before, to ask for his blessing.

As he reached the door he asked quietly, “What’s my father’s name, Tio?”

“It’s Vicente Carvalho. Vicente Souza de Carvalho.”

Outside the evening sun had painted the sky a glowing red. Chico could see the tall statue of Christ standing on the nearby hill, his arms outspread, as if protecting the city.

The Barking of a Dog

Chico went straight back to Tia Geni. Except for the drive in the bus, he ran all the way.

He burst in on her saying, "You must go there, Tia Geni. He is miserable. He is all alone and his leg is broken."

"Who do you mean? Edú?" she asked astonished.

Chico nodded. "He cannot come to you, Tia, because of his broken leg, you see. And maybe," he added, "because he feels so bad about what he's done. But he needs you – he needs you all."

Tia Geni gave him a big hug. Her hands trembled and tears welled up in her eyes. "I'll go tomorrow," she whispered. "Tomorrow's Sunday, I'm free. I'll go tomorrow."

Chico was happy as he went down the hill. She would go, and – if God helped – they might all be together again and the children would have a father once more.

Lost in thought Chico was startled by a dog who began to bark furiously at him from behind a wall. He realised he was passing the widow's house and garden. The dog always barked like

that when he came by and usually it did not bother him, but as he came to the gate and the dog bared his teeth and growled, Chico was angry, "Go away brute!" he yelled. "Leave me alone. I come past here almost every day and you should know me by now! I've never done anything to you and I've never broken into the house! Stop it! Stop it! Shut up! Go away!"

He was shouting and the dog was barking more and more. An old woman who was sitting on a bamboo chair in the garden, got up and came close to the gate.

"Quiet, Nero," she said, patting the dog, "quiet – he's just passing by, isn't he?" Looking at Chico she added, "Nero gets angry at people who are not well dressed, you know. He thinks they are thieves."



Chico turned on his heel without a word, and ran the last part of the way to the hardware shop where he had left his cart.

In the courtyard he sat down on the familiar wood of his little wagon. It was quiet here in the last light of the day, but inside him there was a storm raging.

All because of that stupid dog it suddenly hit him that he was not nicely dressed, therefore he looked like a thief, his father was in prison and his mother had died. These were the parents he had so much hoped to find. His mother – how much it hurt that she was not alive and that she would never look after him now. A wave of misery swept over him.

In the midst of the whirlwind of thoughts and feelings, he remembered Francisco. “But how can I ever go there again?” he thought. “How can I say, ‘Hey, Uncle, I’m the son of the man who is to blame for your sister dying?’” No, he could not go there again.

He slowly got up and took his cart. He felt so tired, more tired than the night when Beto’s father had thrown water over him.

That evening he went to sleep in the tunnel.

However, when he got up in the morning he had a surprising idea.

The Prison

It was a wonderful day. The sky was wide and blue with just one or two white clouds sailing across it. The sun had not yet come over the horizon when Chico set off with his cart.

He arrived early at Beto's home. A delicious smell of fresh coffee was coming from the kitchen. The open wooden shutters seemed to Chico like friendly outstretched arms. He stopped at the gate and clapped his hands. Two heads appeared at the kitchen window – Beto's father and mother, wondering who was coming to the house so early.

When they saw Chico, they waved, "Come in. Come in, boy!" He was received with great hospitality and served coffee and crusty bread. It tasted wonderful.

"Better than the other night, eh?" laughed the father. "Beto is still asleep – it's Sunday, you know."

"I came to ask you if you could help me with one thing," said Chico. And after an encouraging smile from Beto's mother, he went on, "Could you lend me one of Beto's shirts? I'll bring it back tonight."

“Oh yes,” she replied, “surely.”

The father asked, “Do you want to go to the big football match?”

“No, I want to visit my father. He’s in prison.”

“I’m an idiot,” thought Chico. “Why did I say that about prison? Now maybe they won’t lend me the shirt.” He hid his face in the mug of coffee. But when he looked up again, the eyes of Beto’s father were resting calmly on him. “It’s easy to get into prison and it’s a long painful stretch before you come out. I’m glad you are going to see him,” he said.

Beto’s mother came back with a nice white shirt. “This is too small for Beto now. You can have it and keep it. But maybe I need to get you a pair of trousers as well,” she said looking doubtfully at his old short pants. They had so many stains on them that they looked like a map of the world.

When he left this generous family an hour later Chico had a pair of sky-blue trousers covering his legs, and the white shirt felt fresh and crisp on his shoulders.

Beto – who had finally emerged from his Sunday sleep – accompanied him to the gate. “You can leave your cart here,” he suggested, “easier for you when you get to the prison.”

"Your family is great, Beto."

"Hmm. We've had some awful times, but the sun is breaking through!" The big boy grinned and put his arm around Chico's shoulder. "Good luck," he said.

* * *

At the prison there was much coming and going. It was visiting day. There were families with their packages and lonely women who looked so tired.

Chico watched them all for a time. Then he went in where a notice said, "Officer of the Day". He waited with his hand on the door knob. There was a man behind the desk. All Chico could see at first was a shock of grey hair. Then the man lifted his face from the paper he had been reading, and Chico saw that he had very bright brown eyes, which seemed to be taking in everything about him.

"Yes?" the man said.

Chico had not yet got over his fear of policemen. Speechless he stood close to the door.

"Yes?" said the officer again, and it didn't sound impatient.

Chico took a deep breath. "Please," he said, "can I visit my father?"

“Do you have a permit?”

“No – o.”

“Can I see your papers?”

Chico was taken aback. “I haven’t any papers, Sir.”

The officer was about to shake his head and say, “Sorry I can’t help you,” when he looked again at the boy, at his fresh shirt and his expectant face. In many years of service Superintendent Umberto had learned to read faces and see into the depths of people’s eyes.

“What’s your father’s name?” he asked.

“Vicente Souza de Carvalho.”

The officer turned to a filing cabinet which stood next to the window. He opened a drawer marked S – Z and took out a brown card. Looking at it he said, “Do you know that in the twelve years he has been in prison your father has only had one visitor?”

The boy shook his head. He whispered, “I only knew about him yesterday.”

The officer gave him a white form. “Do you know how to write?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Then fill in this form. Where it says, ‘Number of Identity Card’, put ‘Superintendent Umberto’. I’ll have your father brought down.”

After sweating over the form, Chico was led

through the courtyard and down some long corridors by another policeman. They stopped in front of a door where a guard stood watch.

"This is the boy." The policeman who had brought him gave him a friendly shove and Chico went into the room.

It was a small hall, used for visitors or meetings. There was a wooden bench in one corner and a long table with chairs around it in another. On one of the chairs sat a man.

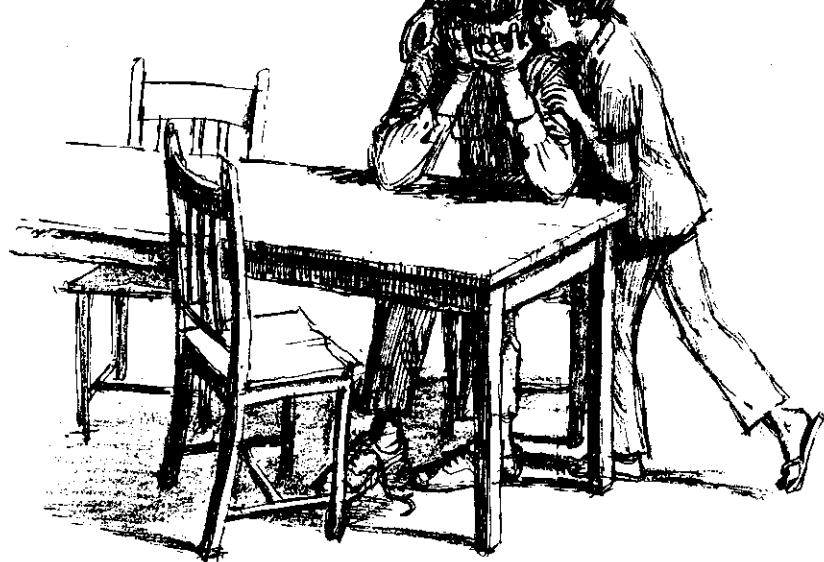
When Chico came in, the man got up slowly, staring at him. They looked at each other for a very long time, or so it seems to Chico. The man's face was furrowed with deep lines and there were shadows under the sad eyes.

Suddenly he put one hand on the table as if to steady himself. "You look so much like your mother." He said it so softly that it was like the rustling of leaves in the wind. But Chico heard.

The man sat down on the chair and buried his head in his hands.

Chico ran over to him, threw his arms around the trembling shoulders, and put his head close to his father's.

They said nothing. They both cried. Chico remembered all the things he had been feeling the night before and thought, "My father has suffered so much more than I have!"



His father said, "We called you Chico because of Francisco."

Chico nodded. "Francisco . . . Chico . . . yes."

"Has Edú looked after you all these years?"

"Yes."

The guard came into the room and stood waiting at the door. Chico got up. "I work in the market and I can bring you fruit."

"Then you will come again?"

"Yes, Father."

Chico went slowly with his guard through the long corridor. There was a mist covering his eyes – when suddenly two big hands gripped him.

Francisco's Visit

The night before Chico went to the prison Francisco had waited up for him.

He had waited a long time; pacing from the door to the window, from the window to the door and looking out.

He could not understand it.

He had been so sure that the boy would come back. He had prepared the second bedroom for him. He had made up the bed and wiped the dust from the most obvious places.

He had opened the window to let in the fresh night air.

He had put a new bulb in the little table lamp.

And then he had waited.

But the boy had not come.

He did not want to admit to himself how disappointed he was. He turned on the television, but the programme seemed boring and the jokes were flat. He turned it off again.

He thought of his wife who had died. He had loved her very much. Now he had begun to love this boy. Didn't he want to come back? Or could something have happened to him?

Tomorrow he must look through the list of reported accidents at the police station. This was a town of many accidents.

He stood in the doorway. He had been able to talk to Chico. In a very strong and strange way he had reminded him of his young sister. Could it be that he had not been generous enough to him? He had only given him the kitchen sofa to sleep on, even though he was badly shaken up.

The sergeant had never found it easy to show his feelings. He closed the front door, and moved through the room like a big restless bear.

Had he been generous enough to his wife? Without her the place was so empty and he had forgotten how to laugh. The death of his sister had hurt so much too.

He stood at the window again. The street was empty. From one of the neighbouring houses music wafted.

"They are a noisy lot," he thought, "at this hour!" But when he wanted to turn away, the melody touched him and he stayed and listened.

He thought again of his sister and then it came to him suddenly. It came as such a surprise that he nearly said it aloud. "It was my fault. It was *my* fault."

He stared into the night but he only saw his



own heart. He thought, "They were young. You opposed the marriage, like the rest of the family. But they loved each other. When they needed it, you did not stand by them. You never offered to help them when things were difficult. You did not believe in them. Things went wrong. They suffered because of your heartlessness." It was long after midnight when he went to bed.

* * *

In spite of having gone to sleep late, Francisco woke up early next morning. It was Sunday, and he did not have to go to work. He marvelled at the thoughts that had come to him in the night.

He would go to church later. He wondered

about looking in at the station to see the list of crimes and accidents from last night, and find out if Chico's name had appeared anywhere. But while he was munching his bread, he knew that he must do something else first – he must go to the prison and see his brother-in-law.

He shaved and dressed himself carefully in his best clothes. And all the time there was a song inside him.

So this was how it happened that the Sunday morning sun shone upon Francisco going to the Frei Caneca Prison.

It was his hands which had gripped Chico so firmly.

20

Coming Home

Francisco looked at Chico. His surprise and his joy were so great that he almost crushed him with his big hands. Even before he could ask him what he was doing there, Chico said, "I came to see my father."

"You came to see your father? What? Here?"

Chico nodded. "You gave me the idea with your story of carnival. Yesterday I went to find

out from Tio Edú if those were really my parents. My father is Vicente Souza de Carvalho."

Francisco's head felt as if it was spinning. Above all the other thoughts in his astonished mind, rang this one, "God has done this – bringing me here! I have found the boy!"

"You're my *nephew*!" he cried.

* * *

They quickly convinced the warder that they had to go in and see the prisoner again.

At the door it was Francisco who was slow. Chico had to take him by the hand and draw the big man over the threshold. They stood hand in hand in front of Vicente.

"I came to ask your forgiveness for the way I've hated you all these years," said Francisco, "and not only that but also for not helping you and Noemia when you needed me."

Chico saw a light spring up in his father's face that had not been there before. From now on everything would be as different as day from night.

Vicente opened his mouth but no sound came out of it. He stretched out his hand – but Francisco gave him a big hug.

He could hardly speak. Vicente said, "I'm the one to ask forgiveness. All these years . . . how sorry I've been! I was burnt up with anger, but I loved her, Francisco. I've always loved her. He looked at Chico and said, "But today I've found my son."

* * *

Later Chico and Francisco walked back home together through the streets. Their feet felt so light they might have been flying. They talked about everything – all that had happened that day. Chico had found his family! Anything was possible!

"We're together now," said Francisco smiling.

At last they reached the old house in the middle of the tangled garden.

"Here's home!" said Chico.

"Shall we have rice and beans for supper?" asked Francisco.

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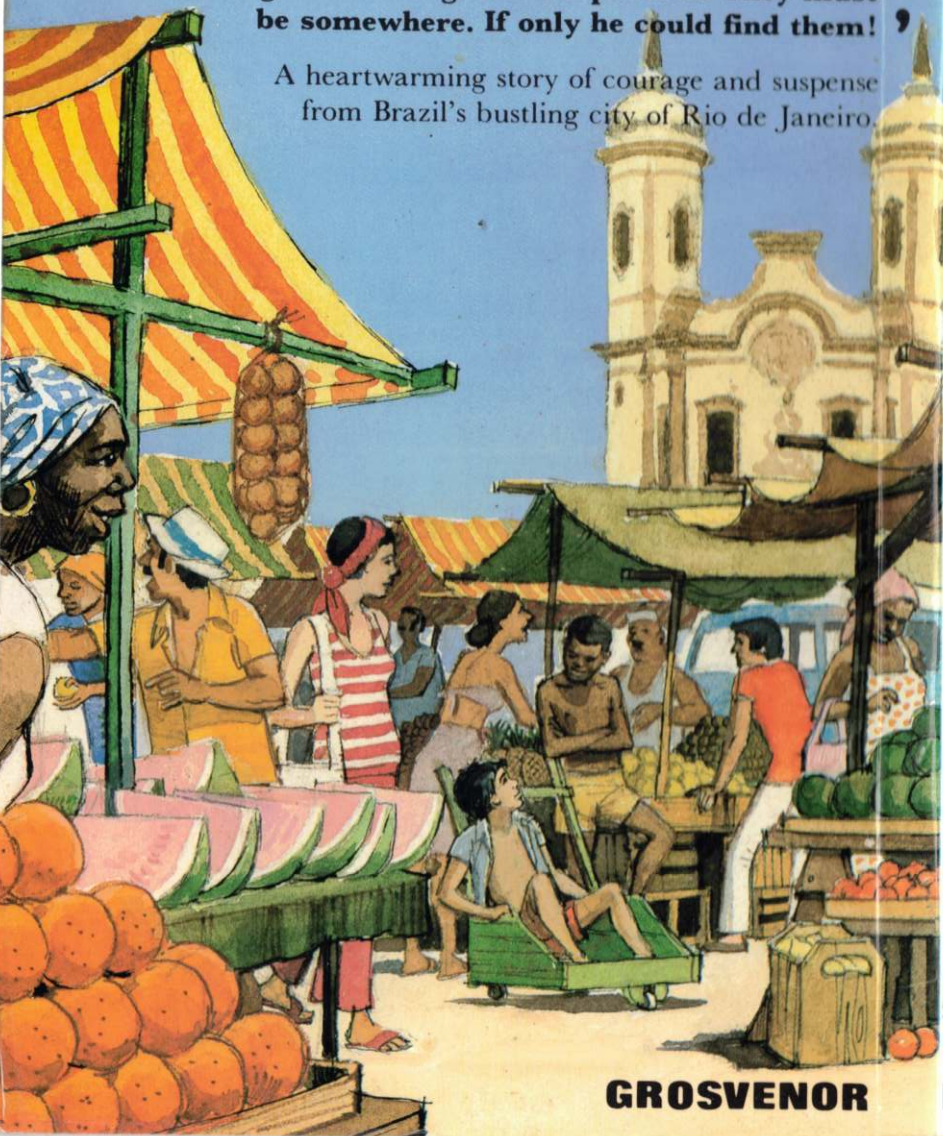
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6 CHICO felt free and happy, shouting and singing as he went on his way. After all, he had his cart and he had some money. He could work in the market, and he was his own boss.

Somehow though, a chilly feeling crept into his stomach. Where could he sleep, now that he was no longer with Tia Geni? Where was he to cook his meals?

Again he thought of his parents. They must be somewhere. If only he could find them! **9**

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