

Part II

THE RETURN OF MARTIN FIERRO

1

Listen to me -- you who are silent, and if you're listening -- silence please,
as what I'm going to do this time if my memory helps me out
is show you that my story was missing the best of it.

When you come out from the desert you're in a kind of dream:
I'll see if I can get to make sense in such grand company,
and if I wake up from my sleep at the sound of the guitar.

I can feel a trembling in my breast and my mind growing confused,
and as I'm playing now I pray for some wise spirit
to come and put the words in my mouth and breathe courage into my heart.

If I don't reach the top score I'll reach the point below for certain: *
and I can show this confidence because the gift of song
was received in me at the same time as the water of my baptism.

Poor men as well as rich will grant I'm in the right;
and if they get to listen to what I'm saying in my own way
I tell you they won't all be laughing -- some of them will cry.

A man who has had to suffer has a lot to tell,
and I'll begin by asking you not to doubt whatever I say --
because a witness ought to be believed if he's not being paid to lie.

I give thanks to the Virgin and I give thanks to the Lord
that through so many hardships and having lost so much
I did not lose my voice as a singer nor my love for the song.

The Eternal Father granted that all who live should sing:
everyone must sing who has it in them as we're doing now -- *
the only creatures with no voice are the ones that have no blood.

A city man sings... and he's a poet! a gaucho sings... and Lord preserve us!
They stare at him like ostriches -- they're amazed at his ignorance ...
But shadows are always useful to show how much light there is.

The country's for ignorant people and the town for educated ones:
I was born out on the plain and I tell you, my songs are
for some people -- just music, and for others, good sense.

I have known many singers it was a pleasure to listen to,
but they don't care to give opinions and sing to amuse themselves --
but I sing giving opinions as that's my kind of song.

Whoever goes along that path has to give out all he knows --
and though what I know is not much there's this in my favour:
I know what kind of heart the man has who'll listen to me with pleasure.

Even Time will not wash out what's painted by this brush:
no one will take it on himself to correct the design I make --
not anyone paints who fancies it but one who knows how to paint.

And don't think, you who hear me, that I'm boasting of my wisdom:
I've learnt – though late in life, and without repenting of it --
that to tell certain kinds of truth is like committing a sin.

But I go on along my road and nothing sidetracks me:
I'm going to tell the truth -- I'm no one's flatterer --
there's nothing imitation here, this is pure reality.

And anyone who wants to alter me will have to know a lot:
he's going to learn a lot if he knows how to listen to me;
he'll have a lot to think over if he wants to understand me.

Longer than I and all who hear me, longer than the things they describe,
longer than the events they tell of my verses will endure:
there's been a lot chewed over to put this challenge out.

Sad complaints spring from my heart, a sore lament springs there:
and I have suffered so greatly and been so deeply wronged,
that I defy each year to come to bring forgetfulness.

You'll see now if I waken up how I get back into my swing:
and nobody need be surprised if I'm lit by a stronger fire,
because I want to tune the top string so tight that I'm playing it on air.

And with the strings at their highest pitch, since that's the key I choose,
my hand won't slacken so long as my voice remains --
unless the string breaks or the peg cracks from the strain.

Although I broke my guitar before* so it wouldn't tempt me again
I have so much to tell of and such important things
that God have mercy on the man who taught me to tune the strings.

I follow no one's example, no one's showing me the way.
I say what needs to be said- -- and anyone who's set on that track
when he's singing, ought to sing with all the voice he's got.

I've watched the ball go rolling and there's no stopping it;
and after all my rolling around I've made up my mind to come here
to see if I can make a living and if they'll give me work.

I can guide a ploughshaft* and use a lasso as well,
I can ride in a round-up and work in a corral;
I can keep my seat on a waggon-shaft easy as on a bucking colt.

So let me have your attention if you'll do me that honour.
If not, I'll keep my mouth shut -- because a singing bird
will never settle himself to sing on a tree that bears no flowers.

There's some dirty clothes here to be washed out and I won't get up till it's done.
Listen to me as I'm singing if you want me to give up what I know...
There's so much I have to say to you I command you to listen to me.

And now let me have a drink -- once again there's a big hand to play.
My throat's getting thirsty and I'm not holding back --
because an old man's like an oven, he warms himself through the mouth.

NOTES to II.1.

II.1.4] *top score...the point below*] in the original, 'thirty-one' and 'thirty', scores in a card-game similar to vingt-et-un (ponton).

II.1.8] *as we're doing now*] really 'we two', as if he was singing in a competition, in 'counterpoint'. (see Canto 30).

II.1.21] *broke my guitar before*] as described at the end of Part One. There was a seven-year interval between the writing of the two parts. Martin Fierro says (in II.11) he spent five years with the Indians.

II.1.24] *ploughshaft* etc.] agricultural work not on horseback was unusual for a gaucho, who often considered it demeaning.

2

Sad notes come from my guitar but the story warrants it.
There's no use looking for cheerfulness but only more lamenting
from a man who's born and lives and dies in the midst of cruel afflictions.

It's a sad thing to leave your home and launch out to a strange land
taking with you your heart filled with misery and pain...
But we're borne along by misfortunes as the pampa wind* blows the sand.

Setting out to cross the desert as if you were a criminal*
and leaving behind you here forsaken -- as we did then --
your wife in someone else's arms and your young children gone.

Many times during the crossing of that vast plain,
remembering your unhappy state so far from those you love,
you lie down among the desert weeds and give way to bitter tears.

I'd be standing, lonely, on the bank of a stream
brooding over a thousand things and as I turned, suddenly
I'd think I saw my girl or hear her calling me.

And the horse is drinking the smooth water, sip by sip,
while with no comfort anywhere you even forget to eat
for thinking of your dear woman and your children and your home.

*

You'll recall that Cruz and I cast out into the desert.
We entered the pampa land and turned up at the end of the trail
at a camp of the indians -- the first we'd come across.

Bad luck was haunting us, we arrived at an unlucky time.
They were holding a council making plans for a raid --
and at times like that, the indians don't even trust their own breath.

A tremendous uproar started when they saw us coming.
We weren't able to pacify a dangerous swarm like that --
they took us for spies from the frontier guard* and they'd have run us through with their spears.

They took away our horses in no time at all,
then they weren't sure what to do -- Lord knows what they had in mind --
the brutes were thrusting their lances a hairs-breadth from our eyes.

And they were jabbering away waving their arms and dancing around;
one of them loosed his bolas and made straight for me...
We never though we'd escape alive, not even by a lucky fluke.

Out there, there's no mercy nor any kind of hope.
The indian's opinion is that it's always right to kill --
since whenever he's not drinking blood* he likes watching it run out.

Cruz was for fighting to the death and asked me to join with him.
But I said, "Let's hold out till the fire's near enough to burn..."
You've less to fear from danger the more of it you've known.

The greater a danger is the more cautious you need to be;
you've more chance of surviving, always, by treading carefully --
because cautiousness and courage have no call to disagree.

At last an Interpreter came up seeming to bring a reprieve.
He told us "Your lives are spared by order of one of our chiefs.
He sends me to tell you the reason is that we have a raid on hand.

"He has told the others that you remain as hostages,
so in case any of them fall alive into the Christians' hands
they'll ransom their brothers with you two fugitives."

They went back to their council to discuss all their alliances
or their massacres, maybe -- and it happened as I'll describe.
They made a circle on horseback leaning on their spears.

An old indian goes to the centre and starts jabbering in there --
Lord knows what he's telling them to do, but the whole gathering
listened to him closely for no less than three hours.

Finally he howled three times and another dance starts up;
showing off his strength and skill giving tests of horsemanship,
racing his horse to a skidding halt* and whirling his spear round his head.

Then he goes down the line of indians stopping before each one
shouting threats into his face -- and raving, the old fiend
gives a yell each time as he brandishes the cane-shaft of his spear.

The whole place bursts into an uproar uglier than war itself...
In the thick of a cloud of dust it turned into a confusion
of horses and indians and spears and terrifying howls.

It's like a dance of wild animals as I'd imagine it.
It was a colossal whirlwind -- the screams curdled your blood --
till, after two hours of it the hurricane died down.

At night, they formed into a ring and put us in the middle of it,
and to let us know they wanted to give us no room for hope
they ranged us round about with eight or ten rows of warriors.

There they stayed on the alert guarding us relentlessly.
When it looked as if they were snoring -- *Huincá!** one of them would shout --
and *Huincá Huincá* they echoed all the way down the line.

Indians are great ones for sleeping, though and they sleep very soundly too.
No one can beat them for snoring -- and their life's so unconcerned
they'd snore stretched out at their ease if the world turned upside down.

They found out all they could from us so as to prepare themselves,
because it's always to their advantage to know what troops there are around --
who they are and who's in command of them and what horses and arms they hold.

Each time we answered, one of them gives a cry --
and then, one after the other -- savage brutes that they are --
hundreds and hundreds of voices all echo the same sound.

And that cry, from just one of them, starting as a groan,
grows till it gets to be a howl coming from the entire horde --
and that's how they get the custom of bellowing the way they do.

NOTES to II.2

II.2.2] *pampa wind*] the *pampero*, a cold strong wind from the south-east, across the flat pampa grassland.

II.2.3] *a criminal*] fugitives from justice often went over the frontier to the indians. See notes at I.3.22 and I.13.9

II.2.9] *spies... frontier guard*] the indians were extremely suspicious of any contact with 'christians'. Mansilla's *Excursion to the Ranquele* (see note at I.3.22) shows the dangers of even a peaceable embassy.

II.2.19] *to a skidding halt*] literally, 'making skid-tracks' (*rayando*).

II.2.20] *cane-shaft*] *tacuara*. See note at I.9.32.

II.2.22] *drinking blood*] Indians commonly ate meat near-raw and drank blood straight from slaughtered animals.

II.2.24] *Huincá!* ('win-CA') 'white man' -- cry of alert.

3

So we found we were in for it with no backing out ...
But there's no good in giving up for lost however hard your fate,
nor in thinking about death but how to keep on with life, instead.

Your heart grows tougher, all the time -- no danger makes you scared.
Feeling the time was right for it we two swore there and then
to respect God's will only and no one else from God down.

Evil is a tree that grows and that sprouts again when it's cut.
People suffer in countless ways whether they're shrewd or slow --
the Earth is mother to us all but she gives us poisons too.

But any man of common sense bears his troubles quietly.
I find they're just as many whatever the path I choose --
Misfortune's born from no mother but she has plenty of children.

And if you're born to her inheritance you'll come to ruin, anywhere.
There's no way a man can avoid what Fate has decided on --
the reason a thistle pricks you is because it's made with thorns.

The destiny of a poor man is a tug-of-war that never stops,
and he lives on the watch like a carrion bird -- because trouble won't be satisfied
if the winds of misfortune come and tear the thatch off your roof.

But He who sends us troubles sends us comfort for them as well.
The light that comes down from heaven shines on the mightiest men --
but even the thinnest hair can make its shadow on the ground.

And even though you're suffering a life of bitterest pain,
never let your head hang down -- never, for whatever cause --
the poplar's the proudest tree of all and it's the one that always sighs.

*

The indians just spend their life either stealing, or stretched out flat.
The law of the spear's point is the only one they'll respect --
and what they're lacking in knowledge they make up with suspiciousness.

An indian with a kind heart would be a thing to put in a frame to stare at.
They're cruel with their captives and treat them horribly;
they're sharp-witted and resentful, they're bold and vindictive.

You can't ask them for a favour nor expect their confidence...
Acting from ignorance and out of pure mistrust
they kept us separated and guarded us jealously.

I couldn't get to have any talk with Cruz, at all.
They never gave us a chance -- they cared for us no more than for borrowed horses...
Something like two years, at least this separation lasted.

It would make too long a story to describe all our miseries.
All I'll tell you on this point is that only after two years
the chief did us the favour of letting us live together.

Cruz and I moved further off to the edge of some high-grass land,
and making the best of our life there on the endless desert plain,
we built a tent from two horse-hides the shape of two praying hands.

And there we took refuge to lead our pitiful life,
lightening the cruel captivity with each other's company:
gloomy as a cemetery when the evening prayer-bell rings.

If a man chooses to roam the wilds he needs to be courageous:
first, when he's on the road, and second, when he's at rest --
because in that way of life if you give in, you perish.

When a calf's weak and hungry it'll suck from any cow:
a gaucho will understand this and know what I mean when I say
my friend and I went round hopelessly like stale bread that no one'll buy.

We'd talk together side by side sheltering in our tent:
we were two old veterans fair game to the fleas --
useless as blankets chucked aside when the summer heat comes on.

Food's not easy to come by however hard you try for it.
You live as poor as the plague even straining all your wits --
and like the *coyapu*,* always keeping by the water's edge.

A hunter grows skilful sharpening his wits that way:
the tasty armadillo -- any bird that pipes a note --
every creature that walks the earth ends up on the spit.

Because out there, the hunt spreads out right to the four winds.
Nothing escapes the round-up, and at the first glimpse of dawn
you're out combing the hillsides and valleys, and nests and holes.

If your life depends on hunting you'll go for any beast
whether it's got feathers or a shell -- because when hunger stirs
a man will get his teeth into any animal that moves.

In the holy heights above lives the master of us all
who teaches every animal to find its own nourishment;
and he produces food for all who are born with intelligence.

And birds and beasts and fishes find their food in a thousand ways;
but it's interesting to observe the way a man deals in this --
he's the only one who knows how to cry and it's he that eats all the rest.

NOTE to II.3

II.3.19] *κογπιύ*] or nutria, an otter-like river beast.

4

Before it's light, the indians start to stir up the plain
with the noise of their bellowing -- and sometimes, earlier still,
they'd set off on an invasion without us hearing anything.

First, they bury their clothes in holes, like armadillos,
and distrustful as always, with their manes of black hair,
riding bareback, they'd set off in their bare skins and not much else.

They use the best horse they can for going on a raid,
and as it's a weapon that can't fail they only take their spear
and several pairs of bolas fastened at their waist.

This way, they travel light and the horse won't tire...
For a raid, the spur they use is the point of a deer's horn
that's been well sharpened and tied on to their heel.

An indian who has a horse that's out of the ordinary
cares for it even in his sleep -- he works at that like a slave --
and he hires it to another warrior when they're going on a raid.

He'll go without food, to guard it, he'll even go without sleep;
it's the only thing they're not slack about -- at night, I'll swear to you,
he'll set his family round it in a circle, to keep it safe.

And this is why you'll have observed if you've had to do with them --
and if you haven't seen it remember it from now on --
that any pampa brave will be riding a horse of the very best.

The indians ride at a long trot, a lasting and steady pace.
They come on a fixed route and never wander off it ...
There's no animal escapes them even on the darkest night.

They move through the darkness in a curve spaced evenly;
they tighten the circle with great care, and when it gets light, they catch
ostriches, deer -- all the game that's got inside of it.

Their signal is a puff of smoke that goes up very high.
None of them fails to spot it with that eyesight they have --
they come from all directions to swell the gathering.

And, so they join together until they've formed those throngs
of such enormous numbers that fall on us when they invade --
to muster them, they've come out from the farthest corners of the land.

The indian's war is a fierce one -- they attack like wild beasts.
They stampede anywhere they like and never get tired of destruction --
they depend for safety entirely on their horse and on their spear.

Anyone who dares stay and face them needs to pull his belt good and tight.*
They're always set to do their worst -- and as they're above such things,
there's no prayer can soften them nor any suffering touch their heart.

They've a mortal hatred for christians and give no quarter when they fight:
they murder without a qualm, they're savage born and bred --
there's no beat of compassion within a heathen's breast.

He gets his sight from the eagle and his courage from the lion.*
There's no animal in the desert he doesn't understand,
and no savage beast he doesn't learn some cruel instinct from.

He's set fast in his brutish ways -- don't hope to see him change.
It doesn't enter his thick head to want a better life --
all a savage knows how to do is how to get drunk and fight.

Indians can never laugh and there's no use expecting it,
not even when they're full of glee celebrating a successful raid --
to laugh from happiness is a Christian quality.

They sweep across the desert like a beast raging for blood,
giving out the most hideous howling that sets your hair on end --
it's as if the whole lot of them were devils damned by God.

They leave all their heavy work to be done by the women.
An indian's an indian and doesn't care to change his state --
he's born an indian robber and stays a robber till he's dead.

Their witch-women instruct them to poison their weapon-tips,
and as they don't even worship God nothing holds the indians back --
the very names they're called by are of animals and beasts.

And, by blessed Christ! they are the filthiest brutes on earth.
It makes me sick when I remember it -- those God-forsaken tribes
live no different from pigs in those stinking tents of theirs.

No one could imagine a more squalid life than that.
They've so little, it shocks you... those brutes of indians haven't learnt
that the earth gives forth no fruit unless it's watered by our sweat.

NOTES to II.4

II.4.13] *pull his belt tight*] i.e. as a preliminary to fighting (see I.7.20)

II.4.15] *lion*] the puma is the American lion, but animal images can be carried over from European poetry.

5

The ground of the desert shakes when the raiders come back in:
they bring with them thousands of head of cattle and horses ...
you need to be pretty tough not to let it sadden you.

It's a seething mass of indians like grains in a peck of corn.
When they bring the booty together joining all the herds
it's such a tremendous quantity you can't see where it ends.

The women come back weighted down with clothes and blankets piled high.
It's painful to see the waste of it -- they bring loaded on pack-horses
whole stocks of goods from the frontier stores which they've sacked during the raid.

All they care about is plundering, not staying there in the low lands.
They come down on Christian country like fiends out of hell --
if they don't take the Government too it's just that it's not there at hand.

They come back crazy with delight when the raid's been a success,
and before anyone helps himself they start off busily
setting up the *dividy* (as people say in Santiago).*

They share the loot out equally without any quarelling.
Indians don't act greedy, they're quite correct about that --
it's the only time they show respect to any form of justice.

And each one with his share goes off towards his tents --
and then the slaughtering begins beyond all rhyme or reason
so that out of all those thousands there's not one beast left alive.

And when the indian's satisfied that he's done his part of the job
he goes back to his lazy life again and lies there stretched out flat
while the women start in frenziedly skinning the carcasses.

Sometimes they do take a bunch of the cattle, further inland.*
but there's few of them dare undertake this kind of expedition
because mostly, other indians come and steal the lot off them.

But I think the pampa tribes must be the stupidest of all.
They're going round half naked but can't see what's good for them --
for any one cow that they sell they kill five hundred uselessly.

Things like this and others worse I saw for many years --
but if I'm not mistaken these crimes are at an end.,
and the savage heathens can do us harm no more.

The tribes have been disbanded -- the proudest of the chiefs
are dead or taken captive with no hope to rise again,
and of all the braves and their followers there's very few now left alive.*

*

They're savages through and through even in their sports.
They get up a kind of a game you wouldn't think possible –
that's when it's the women's turn to play their part on the scene.

The more savage a man is the worse he treats a woman.
I don't see what delights or joys there could be without her –
it's a happy man who finds one and can get her to love him!

Anyone who knows how life is finds pleasure in her company:
it's right that a man who has a heart should consider her feelings too –
it's only cowards who act tough with women.

A woman's always ready to help a man who's out of luck:
no kind of danger scares her along her road in life,
and there's not one who'd not be pleased to do a merciful act.

You won't find a single woman what I've said won't fit.
I give thanks to the Eternal Father not because he made them beautiful
but because to each one of them he gave a mother's heart.

They're faithful and hard-working and long-suffering in the work they do.
Maybe I'm not praising them enough though I value them a lot --
but those ignorant indians treat them like a bit of dirty cloth.

They sweat their souls out, toiling under the cruellest conditions.
The husband is her master, he rules her like a tyrant --
because even in his love an indian never softens.

He has no tenderness for anyone -- he doesn't know what love means:
and what else could you expect from those breasts hard as bronze?
I saw how they were when we got there and I had them marked from then on.

So long as he's got enough to eat he stays peaceable.
I've been there in their tents and watched their way of life
and I tell you, he's like the raven that forgot to go back to the Ark.*

For him, it would be just a game to spit on a crucifix.
I believe God cursed them and this is my solution --
it's only indians, and pigs and cats who'll spill the blood of their own children.

*

But I won't take your time any more with tales of the indians.
I must ask your pardon, I ran on without meaning to ...
Talking about the savages I forgot that sport of theirs.

They make a circle with their spears and the indian men stay outside.
In come the women, running, like mares on the threshing-floor – *
and there they start their dancing going round and round in the ring.

The chiefs are on one side, and the lesser chiefs, and trumpeters
blowing away at full blast like the call to arms in a battle ...
The women can die in there without them breaking the circle.

Often you can hear them groaning, the poor things,
but their cries are wasted because all round the ring
the indians are lying on the ground blind drunk and howling.

The song they sing is just one word and they never vary that.
*Io-ká – io-ká –** they all repeat, taking up the rhythm of it ...
It's as if I could see them now uglier than Satan.

Loping round inside the ring, sweating, starving and raging wild,
tattered and dragged, on and on from one sunrise to the next,
in thunder or rain, they go on dancing, chanting that same sound.

NOTES to II.5

II.5.5] *Santiago*] the north-west Argentine province of Santiago del Estero. The original joke is dialect pronunciation of *reparto* (share-out) as *repartija*

II.5.9] *inland*] i.e. further west

II.5.12] *very few left alive*] the government's campaign to exterminate the indians was carried through in 1879-83.

II.5.21] *back to the Ark*] released from Noah's ark, it found food emerging from the Flood.

II.5.24] *mares on the threshing-floor*] grain was separated by trampling with hoofs.

II.5.27] *Io-ká*] pronounced *yo-KA* .

6

So time went on in its course, and alone as we were
we had nothing to hope for from those bloodthirsty indians:
the one who saved us when we came was the most friendly of them.

He showed he had a noble heart -- he'd have liked to be a christian --
it's our duty to be just and I don't hide his merits.
He gave us horses as a present and sometimes he came to see us.

Even if I wanted to I can't stand against God's will ...
He saved our lives, but -- ah Christ! I've wished many times
that he had never saved us and we'd never set eyes on him.

Anyone who receives a blessing ought never to forget it,
but a man who has to travel far through the troubles of his life
has things happen to him sometimes that are pretty tough to bear.

Little by little I'm coming to the sad part of the story.
When there's a bitter draught to drink your heart takes no joy in it ...
A black plague came into the land and struck down the savages.

*

Seeing so many die the indians grew desperate.
They shouted in a riot "christian make bad magic" ...
There wasn't a creature left in the tents that wasn't finished off by it.

The cures they use are secrets kept by the witch-women.
The indian wives don't know them except for a few very old ones,
it's the witch who tells them what to do with all kinds of tricks, the old hag.

And the patient has to undergo the terrible treatments they give,
because what they call remedies means thumping and squeezing him --
they grab hold of him by the hair and pull out tufts of it.

They do atrocious things to him that it's horrible to see.
The indian bellows with the pain of the tortures he's going through --
and they smear him with grease all over and put him out to cook in the sun.

And when he's lying there mouth up they make a fire all round him.
One of the women comes along and screams into his ear...
Some of them are such devils this game even cures them.

With others, they scorch his mouth even though he's screeching with pain --
they grab hold of him and squeeze him and burn his lips and teeth
with an egg that's good and hot out of some magic hen.

The indian knows what he's in for and he gives up all hope.
If he does manage to escape them he shoots off like a hare,
but the fever makes him light-headed and they bring him down with a spear.

It's a terrible kind of fever -- and though I won't argue this
nor lay claim to any wisdom -- we thought it must come from
the quantity of horsemeat that's eaten by those brutes.

*

There was a gringo boy captive -- always talking about his ship
and they drowned him in a pond for being the cause of the plague ...
His eyes were pale blue like a wall-eyed foal.

It was one of the old hags who ordered them to kill him that way,
and though he cried and pleaded there was no use resisting them --
the poor boy rolled up his eyes like a sheep under the knife.

We moved further off not to have to see such horrors.
Cruz was feeling the symptoms of the plague that was in full force,
and the idea was nagging at us to get back to our own land.

But destiny can turn against even the best of plans.
My blood runs cold to think of it ... The indian who had saved our lives
was struck down too, with an attack of fever and the plague.

When we saw how he was suffering we could have no doubts
of what his end would be -- and Cruz, always such a friend,
said to me, "Come on, brother, let's go and pay our debt".

We went and stayed beside him trying to help him get well:
they came to fetch him to treat him like the rest --
we protected him, and kept him from being killed.

The plague was growing worse and more and more people died:
we kept beside him doing what we could for him,
but after a few days' time his life came to its end.

The memory of it tortures me, my sorrow is reborn.
It brings the tears to my eyes -- there's no grief like this of mine ...
Cruz also was struck down very bad and never to rise again.

You can all figure for yourselves what I had to pass through.
I could do nothing except groan, and it made my anguish worse
not to know a single prayer to help him to a good death.

The plague turned poisonous on him, poor man, he cried out with the pain.
He entrusted a young son to me that he'd left back at home --
"He's been left all on his own, poor boy" he said to me.

"If you get back, find him for me" he said again, his voice half gone.
"There were just the two of us in the world -- he's already lost his mother.
Let him know how his father died and pray God for my soul."

I held him tight against my chest overcome by the grief.
What made him suffer most was to die there in heathen land...
Suffering cruel agonies he gave up his soul to God.

On my knees beside him I prayed for him to Christ.
The light went from my eyes -- I went into a terrible swoon --
I fell as if struck by lightning when I saw Cruz lying dead.

7

And so my brave companion died in my arms.
One who was worth so much, a man of such good sense --
He died there in the desert for his noble and compassionate heart.

And I -- with my own hands I myself buried him.
I prayed to God for his soul with my heart filled with pain;
and that patch of earth there was wet with the tears I shed.

I did all I could do -- there's no fault to reproach myself with,
nor any duty I left undone though I'd given in to grief...
His grave there is marked out by a cross I put up for him.

I went around from tent to tent and everything sickened me;
sorrow had got a hold on me, and given over to my sad thoughts,
every minute it seemed I heard Cruz calling out to me.

All we criollos -- some less, some more -- know the taste of bitterness:
the only comfort I could find for the misery I was in
was to go and throw myself on the ground beside his grave.

There I'd pass hours on end with nobody beside me,
with only God to witness me, and my thoughts fixed on
my wife and my children, my homeland, and my friend.

With such treasures taken from you, and lost in a strange land,
it's as if Time was in chains and that it's not moving on;
as if the sun stopped still to gaze at so much unhappiness.

I didn't know which way to turn, I was given over to my grief --
when lying there one day, coming from the windward side
I heard sounds of pitiful crying that caught my attention.

Groaning's not an unusual sound in the tents of the savages,
because that's a life of violence where they only settle things
by spears or blows of the knife, and bolas-shots, and brute force.

There's no need to swear to it -- believe what Martin Fierro says:
in my exile there, I've seen a savage who got annoyed
cut the throat of a little girl and throw her out to the dogs.

I've witnessed deaths by torture -- I've seen plenty of brutal crimes,
murders and atrocities that wouldn't enter a christian's mind:
for neither indians nor their women know such a thing as mercy exists.

I thought I'd investigate the cries that were reaching me.
I started straight away towards the spot they were coming from ...
The scene I came upon is a horror to me still.

It was a wretched woman with blood all over her,
and crying with all her heart like a Mary Magdalen ...
I saw she was a christian and that made it worse for me.

Cautiously, I crept up on the indian standing by her --
indians are always on their guard against any white man --
and I saw he was holding a lash that was wet with blood.

8

Later, I learnt from her just how things had been.
An indian raiding-band had come to her part of the country,
they killed her husband and carried her off prisoner.

Two years, she'd been there in that cruel captivity.
She kept beside her a little child she'd brought with her ...
The indian woman hated her and used her as a slave.

She'd have liked to make an attempt to run away --
the poor captive women have no one who'll ransom them --*
they have to stay and bear the torments until the end of their days.

From the moment she got there the indian woman, out of spite,
took pride in being cruel to her -- the indian man was a warrior,
he wore a necklace made of teeth from the christians that he'd killed.

She used to send her out to work and put her baby down nearby
shivering and crying in the early morning air,
tied up like a young lamb by its feet and its hands.

And she'd force her to toil like that, sowing, and gathering wood,
while she could see her baby crying -- and until she'd finished the tasks
the indian woman refused to let her give it milk.

When they hadn't enough work they'd lend her to another squaw.
"No one could imagine" she said, "nor ever believe
all the things a wretched woman has to bear, in captivity.

"If they see your child has grown -- as they don't know what pity is,
and they'll never take notice of pleading -- and if not that it's for something else --
they take him from you and sell him, or exchange him for a horse.

"And they're barbarous, as well, in the way they bring up their own.
I'd never seen such a thing -- they bind them to a board
and rear them that way, so they make the back of their head grow flat."

(This may seem a strange thing but nobody need doubt it.
With those brutish people in their vile ignorance
it's a thing to be proud of if their head grows to a point.)

The devilish indian woman who hated her so much
started saying one day, because a sister of hers had died,
it must have been the christian woman who had cast a spell against her.

The indian took her out of sight and started threatening her
saying she had got to confess it had been sorcery,
or else he was going to punish her by beating her to death.

She wept, poor unhappy woman, but the ruthless indian
in a fury, snatched the child from out of her arms,
and made her scream with pain at the first cut of his whip.

And that brutal savage went on lashing her --
every time he hit her he grew more and more furious,
and the wretched woman fended off the blows, as well as she could.

And he shouted at her, raging, *You no want confess!*
He knocked her down with a back-hand blow -- and to complete her agony
he cut the throat of her little child there, at her feet.

"It's not to be believed" she said, "such cruelty could exist.
No mother could have borne it -- that merciless brute
committed the crime calmly, right in front of my eyes.

"Christian people couldn't invent anything so horrible --"
she sobbed as she told me -- that inhuman fiend
tied my hands together then with the entrails of my child."

NOTE to II.8

II.8.3] *ransom*] captives were occasionally exchanged during a truce, if considered of enough value.

9

It had been her cries I'd heard in my solitude.
The moment I got to the place I took in how things were --
and when I saw the state she was in I didn't hesitate a second.

There she was, the poor captive, all covered in blood.,
with the marks of the lashes on her from head to foot --
the rags she wore were torn to pieces and showed the raw flesh through.

She lifted her eyes to heaven streaming with her tears.
Her hands were tied -- it was plain to see the agony she was in --
and she fixed a look on me as if asking me for help.

I can't say what it was went through my heart, at that moment.
The indian stood there haughtily with fury in his face --
one look was enough for us to understand each other.

He gave a jump like a cat and gained distance from me,
and he used this advantage like a beast stalking its prey --
he loosened his bolas and waited there, crouched on guard.

And though I'd gone there from curiosity and not to look for a fight,
I knotted my horse's reins and laid hold -- you can be sure --
on that weapon which can't misfire* ... and the fight to the death was on.

I could see straight off the danger I was in.
We stayed like that, not moving -- he watched me and I watched him:
I didn't trust the indian and he didn't trust me.

You have to keep your wits about you when an indian's crouched to spring:
in a position like that, he counts as four or five men --
he can leap like a tiger and catch you easily.

It was dangerous to go rushing in and dangerous to keep apart,
and still more dangerous to keep on waiting this way,
because some more of them might come and butcher me between the lot of them.

I've saved myself many times on the strength of being cautious:
in a pressing danger the least carelessness means death ...
If only Cruz had been alive I'd have had no need to take care.

When a man has another by him he grows in courage and strength.
fear vanishes -- he'll get out of any trap --
between us two we'd face, not one indian -- the whole tribe, if it came to that.

With things uncertain as they were and danger so close at hand,
needless to say, there could only be one way out of it --
and that was to kill the indian or else stay there stretched out myself.

And as time was passing and I had to do something soon,
seeing that he wouldn't budge I started moving, on a slant,
as if I was going to take his horse -- to see if that made him go for me.

It worked -- the savage didn't wait any longer -- he rushed at me.
You need to sharpen your wits fighting with an indian --
he was spurred on by the fear of finding himself left on foot.

Right as he rushed in to attack he sent two bolas-shots at me.
One of them touched me on the arm -- if it had hit square, it'd have broken it --
because the bolas are made of stone and come at you like a bullet.

At the first stroke of my knife the indian curled in a ball.
He was the craftiest savage I've ever met in my wanderings --
and on top of his tricks, he was pretty good at dodging the knife.

And he could handle the bolas skilfully, the brute!
He'd pull them back smartly and hurl them at me again
sending them whistling through the air, above my head.

He was cunning, curse it! like all the indians are.
It was my good fortune that he got blind mad as he fought ...
He'd feint with one of the bolas and hurl the other one at me.

Then, in the thick of the fight, I had a stroke of bad luck.
Just as I was on to him and he was moving back,
I tripped on my belt-cloth and I fell down flat.

The savage didn't give me time even to say my prayers.
As soon as he saw me on the ground he leapt on me like a flash ...
His bolas-shot came thudding right next to my head.

The indian wouldn't shift off me even to avoid the knife,
he thought he'd finish me off there without letting me get up again
and he didn't give me enough room even to straighten out.

I tried to move, but it was useless, he wouldn't let go of me.
I was using all the strength that comes to a desperate man --
but I couldn't even turn over beneath the weight of that brute.

Blessed be Almighty God! who can understand your ways?
You gave at that time, to a weak woman,
strength such as maybe even a man would not have had.

That poor woman, crying so bitterly, roused up when she saw my danger.
She ran towards us like an arrow, and forgetting her own pain
she gave a great shove to the indian that got him off the top of me.

It was this generous help from her freed me from that tight spot.
If not for her, the indian would have slaughtered me, for sure --
and her noble example made me twice as brave and strong.

As soon as I was on my feet we were at each other again:
there was no chance of a rest and the sweat was running off me --
I've never again found myself in a danger close as that.

And I didn't give him a breathing space, as you may all suppose.
I had all the more to do now, to stop the ugly brute
from hitting out with the bolas at the woman, out of rage.

In an indian's hands, the bolas are terrible, and very fast,
he can do whatever he likes with them, jumping round you like a goat ...
Silent, without saying a word, we fought on like wild beasts.

Never ever can I forget that duel in the desert we had:
I was playing for my life with that terrible enemy,
and standing there as witness a woman in distress.

The more he got enraged the calmer I was growing.
An indian's fury won't be spent until he makes a kill ...
At last, I cut one of the bolas-cords and I began to get the better of him.

He made my ribs crack with a shot from a bolas-stone, the devil,
and then as I gave a yell and went for him like a cannon-ball
the indian stepped back -- and slipped on the corpse of the little child.

My knowledge is not deep enough to explain that mystery.
As I see it, he was punished by the Divine Majesty:
when a thing is no accident it's inclined to be Providence.

As soon as he stumbled I pressed him harder still,
and though he found his feet again that slip was his undoing –
because I cut him in two places in that rush I made at him.

When he felt he was wounded he started to groan a bit,
but he was tough as indians come and his courage didn't break ...
Out of his throat there came a noise like the howling of a dog.

He was wounded in the head and the blood got in his eyes,
from another gash it fell and made a puddle where he stood --
he was splashing in it with his feet and still without weakening.

Three impressive figures we made, the group of us:
she in her mothers' anguish, me with my tongue hanging out,
and the savage like a raging beast let loose out of hell.

The indian had begun to realise he'd heard the order to massacre:
his hair stood on end and his eyes rolled round:
his lips shrank inwards every time he drew breath.

Closing with him once again I struck him a deep blow,
and when he felt he was badly hurt the indian -- frantic now --
let out a terrible scream... It echoed like the noise
the whole earth would make if it shook.

And at the end of the long struggle I lifted him on the knife:
I lifted up that son of the desert with the whole of his weight –
spitted through, I carried him and I only threw him down
when I could feel he was dead...

I crossed myself, giving thanks to God for having saved my life;
and the poor tormented woman, on her knees on the ground,
looked up to heaven sobbing in her grief.

I too knelt at her side to give thanks to my Saint,
while in her sorrow and despair, weeping bitterly,
she begged the Mother of God to help the two of us.

When she'd finished her prayer she got up, stately as a lioness,
and without stopping crying she wrapped up in some rags
the pieces of her baby that I helped her to gather up.

NOTES to II.9

II.9.6] *that can't misfire*] firearms were notoriously unreliable, unlike the knife (see also I.10.26)

II.9.19] *belt-cloth*] the *chiripá* (see I.7.20), a cloth looped under the legs, secured by a sash.

II.9.37] *the order to massacre*] i.e. no quarter given (see I.1.12)

II.9.41] *my Saint*] san Martín, also patron saint of the Argentine Republic, and coincidentally the surname of the Liberator,
José de San Martín.

After that, it was high time to get out of the desert.
They'd have found me out, and even though I killed him in fair fight
they'd have speared me through for sure to revenge the dead indian.

I gave my horse to the poor captive woman –
it was a colt I'd got hold of, and no matter where it was,
as soon as I whistled, it'd come and rub its head against me.

I got on the indian's horse, it was a black without a mark ...
When I'm well mounted there's no holding me --
and this was fast as a greyhound, trained to run with the bolas round its feet.*

Galloping over rough country there was nothing could bring it down.
They train them for that, and get them to go like streaks of light,
so they can ride right up to the ostriches and throw the bolas beneath the neck.

The pampa indians train a horse as if for fighting at close range:
it'll go like a flash of lightning at a touch of the indian's hand,
with a mouth so light it'll spin like a top and turn on the length of a hide.

They exercise them in the early morning -- it's a task they never miss –
and then they teach them to gallop in mud and loose sand:
that's why those animals of theirs are the best you'll ever see.

There's no danger of falling on a pampa indian's horse --
pucha! and as for racing it's a breed that never tires.
They tame them with the greatest care instead of letting them buck.*

They handle them gently to cure their ticklishness:
they'll spend hours on end at it and only leave the horse finally
when it's put its ears down slack and won't even kick any more.

They never use violence on them, because they treat a horse
with such patience, there's none to touch it -- they don't beat them, breaking them in,
and so by the end they're left with a beast that's already quiet.

And though I can sit a bucking colt and stir the dust to break it,
I'll adapt myself to the indian way ... They treat them patiently,
and the next day they can leave them with loose rein beside the tent.

And so, anyone whose aim it is to own a model horse
has to care for it tirelessly, and he's also got to see
that no one uses the whip on it or drags at its mouth when it's down.

Many people think they'll break a horse by cruelty and the whip –
and if they see it's an ugly-looking beast that shows signs of viciousness,
they'll lash its head tight to a stake till it pulls its neck out of joint.

They'll use all sorts of excuses and ways to get round saddling it:
they say it's to break the horse's will -- but any fool can tell
it's because they're afraid of how it'll buck and they won't admit to it.

The horse is an animal -- excuse me for mentioning it --
which has plenty of good sense and plenty of feelings too:
it's a creature that thrives on affection, and it's patience that conquers it.

A man who understands these things has an advantage over the rest.
It's good to learn-- because there are few horse-tamers worth the name,
and a lot of bunglers going round with a tamer's halter and rein.

*

As I told you, I came back with the woman as companion.
We travelled the whole night through, and we made our way
with Fate as our only guide to take us where it chose.

As for the corpse, I'd done my best to bury it in a stretch of grassland,
and after I'd disposed of it I covered it well with the grass
so as to take advantage of the time they'd take finding it.

When they noticed we were missing they were sure to follow us:
and when I made up my mind to come back, I'd resolved
from the bottom of my heart, to make it a fight to the death.

It's a very serious danger to cross the desert on the run:
a great many have died from hunger, because running that kind of risk
you can't even make a fire in case you'll be found out.

Only a man's good judgment can help him to survive.
There's no hope of being rescued, only God can come to your aid ...
It's a rare thing, in the desert, for a man to come through alive.

There's nothing but sky and horizon on the great green plain ...
Pity the man who finds he's lost or gets his direction wrong!
If anyone has a mind to cross it remember this advice:

Mark your course in the daytime as closely as you can:
travel without delaying and follow it steadily,
and if you sleep, lay your head towards the direction you're going in.

Watch very carefully where the sun comes up:
if there's a mist that hides it and you can't see it clear,
beware of moving then -- because if you get lost, you're done for.

God gave special instincts to every single living thing.
Man counts as one of them, and on that level plain
he's guided by the sun and the stars, by the wind, and by animals.

In the daytime, to hide ourselves out of sight of the savages,
we'd reach a stopping-place where there was some kind of shelter
and wait till nightfall to carry on with our journey.

We endured all kinds of hardships and misery:
several times we went without eating or only ate raw meat,
and sometimes, believe me, we kept alive on roots.

And after many days of suffering this danger and anxiety,
we came through safely, to where we could make out a range of hills --
and finally, we trod the earth of the land where the ombú grows.*

There was new sorrow in my heart for Cruz, as we stopped there;
and, humbly bowing to the will of Almighty God,
I kissed the blessed soil where now the savage no longer treads.

So in the end the mercy of God came to our aid.
What we must do is bear our trials with an unswerving mind ...
After all this suffering we reached the house of a ranch.

Straight away, I said goodbye to my sad companion.
I told her, "I'm off, it's no matter where, even though the Government gets me –
taking hell for hell, I'd rather have the one at the frontier."

I've come to the end of this story and I won't go on any more.
Give me leave to rest now -- my sons are with us here
and I'm keen to hear them tell us whatever they may have to tell.

NOTES to II.10

II.10.3] *with the bolas round its feet*] i.e. trained to keep going even with its legs entangled (see I.3.36)

II.10.7] *without letting them buck*] horse-taming as opposed to 'breaking' by gaucho methods – see I.2.9-12 and note.

II.10.27] *ombú*] (om-BU), the characteristic 'tree' (technically not one) of the pampa, with spreading fibrous roots and branches.

11

And so, while I take a swig to freshen my throat,
and the boy's busy tuning up and getting ready to play
I'll tell you how it was that we came across each other.

I'd gone up to one or two ranches, trying to find out something for certain –
thinking that after so many years things would have straightened out,
but all I managed to get clear was that the position hadn't changed.
So I went on as I was, keeping out of sight,
because it didn't suit me to stir up the wasps' nest.
You won't need to be told that in a reckoning with the Government
sooner or later they call on a poor man to pay the bill.

In the end, however, I was lucky as I met with an old friend
who could inform me about everything -- and the first I learnt from him
was that the Judge who used to persecute me had been dead for quite a time.
On his account, I've spent ten years of suffering --
and ten years is a lot of time for a man who's getting old.
And this is how I've spent them, if I'm not adding up wrong:
three years at the frontier, two living as an outlaw,
and five out there among the indians -- that makes up the ten I reckon.

This friend also told me I could go about openly,
things were all quiet now, the government didn't persecute you
and by now no one remembered about the death of the black man --
though even if I did kill him a lot of it was the darky's fault.
I was a bit reckless, that I'll admit,
but it was him drove me to it because he gave me the first cut –
and he cut me on the face, besides, which is a very serious matter.

The same friend assured me, by now no one gave a thought
to the man in the store that I'd left showing his guts ...
He came looking for me out of boastfulness, that was not my fault at all –
he challenged me of his own accord, and maybe he'd have killed me

if I'd been more trusting or just a bit more slow.
That was his fault entirely, because he started the thing.

And they didn't talk any more either, he told me positively,
about the time I came to have the fight with the troop of police...
That time it was self-defence and I was within my rights,
because they came to get me at night and in open country.
They went for me armed, they never cautioned me properly,
and started yelling out threats enough to frighten anyone --
saying they'd settle my accounts, and treating me as a bandit --
and it wasn't even their chief who said it, but just a nobody.
And this is not the way to settle things, it seems to me --
not with an innocent man, nor even less with a guilty one.

I was very pleased to hear news like this,
and showed my face anywhere I wanted, as any other man can do.
As for my sons, so far I've found only two of them --
and I give thanks to Heaven for this happy meeting.

I'd talked to everyone and made enquiries for them,
but nobody could give me any clue to their whereabouts.
By chance, the other day, I happened to hear
of a big race meeting to be held among several ranchers,
and I went along as one of the crowd even though I'd not a cent on me.
As you'll imagine, in that great crowd of gauchos, there were bound to be
many who'd heard by then the story of Martin Fierro --
and the boys were there also, in charge of some racehorses.
As soon as they heard my name mentioned they came along straight away
and told me who they were -- though they didn't recognise me,
because I was dark as an indian and they thought I looked very old.

The business of hugging and crying, and kissing
is best left to women, that's their kind of game --
men understand that everyone feels things in the same way,
so they'll dance and sing in public but cry and embrace privately.
All my sons have told me so far is that my wife has died ...
She went to the town, poor woman, in search of one of the boys,
and there she must have suffered endless hardships, for sure.
In the end she landed in a hospital, half dead --
and there she died soon afterwards, in that pit full of evils.
I swear to you, I'll never find comfort for the loss of her;
since I heard what happened I've shed many tears.

But let's leave sad things -- even though I've no cheerful ones.
It looks as if the boy's tuned up and is ready to start --
let's see how he makes out, and what we make of his performance.
They're strangers to you, but I've got confidence in them:
not because they're of my blood -- that would be the least of it --
but because ever since they were children they've lived a life of suffering.
They're keen spirits, both of them, they like to play with fire ...
Let's see their paces: if they run lame, well -- like father, like sons.

Martin Fierro's Eldest Son

It's true that a branch takes after the tree that it comes from,
 but what my mother used to say -- and I'll abide by her judgment --
 is that a son can never speak with his father's authority.

You'll remember that we were left with no place to shelter in,
 without a roof to stand under or a corner to creep into,
 without a shirt to put on us nor a poncho to cover ourselves.

It's a happy man who doesn't know what it means to live unprotected:
 I can tell you truthfully though everyone knows it well --
 ever since I was a child I've lived with no one to protect me at all.

Even the ones who give you help don't make your life any less hard.
 Maybe it's because there's no rubbing out what's written in your destiny --
 everywhere, they chase you off like a stray calf that's spoiling the crops.

So you live like the creeping things looking for a hole to hide in.
 An orphan is just vermin that nobody's sorry for --
 and when you've no one to guide you you're like a guitar without pegs.

I'll be sorry if what I'm saying goes for anyone listening here:
 I had no home, and no mother, no friends, no relatives --
 and when you've got no father everyone treats you like dirt.

One lashes out at you with a whip and another one knocks you silly,
 someone else smacks you in the face -- and when you've put up with all this
 sometimes you don't even find anyone who'll throw you a scrap.

And if they do take you in, they treat you severely as possible --
 they think it's a lot, maybe, when your skin's showing through your clothes,
 if they give you an old rag to cover your nakedness.

I grew up, then, as I've told you, naked sometimes and hungry too.
 I earned enough to live on and so the years passed by...
 When I grew a man, there were other kinds of torment in wait for me.

I beg you all not to forget the things I'm going to tell you:
 I learnt my lessons at the school of suffering
 and I've done plenty of thinking since I started in life.

If I don't do it correctly it's on account of my ignorance.
 I've no pretensions in coming here... and to cut things short, I'll tell you
 that I came to be on a ranch working as a hired hand.

The one who's boss always has the power to make a sacrifice of a poor man ...
 At a neighbouring landowner's one of the drovers got killed
 and they framed it on me -- but even so it came out true in the evidence.

You who are honest can imagine the shame and the misery
 that my soul must have been full of when I found myself, so young,
 already in the same state as men who poison their hands with crime.

There were two others accused as well in the case of the dead man,
but the matter didn't come out clear -- and to show how smart he was,
the Judge told us, 'You'll all go together, tied up fast as Christ.

'I'm going to send all three of you to the Justice Ordinary.'
He'd got it right, that Judge had, and so has anyone who threatens that --
ornery, that's the word for it, as I found out afterwards.

*

As I was saying, he sent us on to that Ordinary Justice
and we went, along with the evidence, to the prison for criminals
that they've given a new baptism now and call it Penitentiary.

No one told me the reason why it's got this name,
but I explain it this way -- they say *penitence-i-ary*
because of the *penance* every *day** that you suffer while you're there.

A criollo who gets into trouble is bound for plenty of suffering,
and no one will help him, either, if he's got no means of his own.
A gringo's more resourceful -- when he murders, he pretends he's mad.

I don't know how much time went by there in that sepulchre.
If no one hurries it from outside the case goes lingering on --
they've got their prey safe and they let the trial go sleep.

The prisoner has no idea which way the scales will tip --
but there's such a long delay that I can tell you for my part
a man who enters in that place leaves his hopes outside of it.

Without improving the laws they improve the punishment.
I've an idea whoever invented it must have had a curse on him --
however bad a crime may be that punishment is worse.

It's enough to crack in two even the proudest heart.
The prison guards are not really bad but they're more hard and dry, maybe,
than the very walls themselves where you groan in captivity.

It's not with fetters or with chains that you suffer the penalty,
but with a solitude and a silence that's so deep
it seems as if you're the only one who's left in all the world.

Even the proudest man, even old and long in the tooth,
would get to be worn down in that place, and his heart would wither up
when he found himself shut in all alone with his crime.

No one's a bull in that prison, in there, they're all quiet as lambs.
When he finds he's behind those bars, even the most arrogant
can do nothing except give in, and bear his imprisonment, quietly.

And I'll say to anyone who doesn't know what that cruel punishment is --
I who had to bear the chains of a fate that has no mercy --
Make the most of this experience of evil, on another's head.

Ah, you mothers who guide the steps of the sons born from your womb,
don't think I'm deceiving you, nor that it's an imposter saying this --
we who live on the land don't know what it means to be in jail.

Daughters and wives and sisters, whoever has a man she loves,
tell them that a prison is a fearful kind of hell
where you hear no other noise except the beating of your heart

In there, there's no sun in the daytime and the night has no stars:
there's no use in your protesting, they punish you, you're shut in,
and the tears you shed drop down on to those prison walls.

In that terrible loneliness, you can hear the beat that comes from your breast.
I know because I've suffered it -- if you're listening, believe what I say --
I should think that in Purgatory the souls must make more noise.

You count the endless hours and that torments you still worse --
in your misery, you're reckoning up each tear as it rolls down,
counting the number of heartbeats in the time it takes to dry.

In there the wildest man gets tamed, the strongest gives way, in there:
the silence of it is so deep that you'll be able to hear
even the sound of the footsteps of Death, when he comes along.

Even right inside a man there's a change takes place.
Stuck there in that prison, from looking at nothing so long
there's born and stays marked in him the idea of what perfection is.

I thought about everything, my mother, and my brothers --
a man who has entered in there may have the most worthless memory,
but it draws him pictures faithfully of everything he's seen outside.

Anyone who has lived free to ride wherever he wants
pines and grows desperate when he finds himself shut in there:
it's a living torture that breaks down the wildest soul.

There in that narrow prison which I could never grow accustomed to,
I was always crying out -- What I'd give to have
a horse to ride and the pampa to gallop on!

But you're fenced around at all times and mourning continually.
They've invented the punishment of shutting you in the dark --
and you're there as if you were tied to a stake of iron, that can never break.

There's no sad thought that doesn't come to torment a prisoner:
beneath the ceaseless pain of it he bows his head in the end,
because a time of trouble always has sorrow for a sister.

The tears go rolling from his eyes but they don't lighten his sorrow:
through an unending struggle without a moment's peace
his soul's eyes are gazing at the happiness he longs for.

There's no comfort can penetrate behind the walls of that place.
Even the toughest kind of man, even though he's harder than nails,
once he's stuck in that hell, will suffer and groan and cry and stay quiet.

Your heart's full of desperation so that it's ready to burst,
but there's nothing to do but bear it even though you find no rest --
in such agony, it's a happy man if he knows how to pray.

A man who knows a prayer to say can lift his heart to God --
he's forgotten by the world groaning there in his distress,
and it makes a sorrow deeper when there's no one to pity it.

*

With this cruel anguish and bitter suffering,
my hair started to turn grey after a very few months...
A thousand times in there, I regretted not having learnt to read.

Rage is the first that comes to you and after that, melancholy.
In my misery, I had nothing to bring me comfort or relief
except to water the floor of that place with my tears, by night and day.

Other prisoners' families used to come and visit them.
Nobody came to visit me while I was shut up in there --
who'd take the trouble to go and see a man with no friends in the world?

I call a blessing on any gaoler who has a merciful heart!
I know there can't be many who would be able to claim it,
because if they have any pity their duty is to hide it.

My tongue could never manage to describe all I endured ...
When you're stuck in there imprisoned, the keys and walls and locks
become so graven into your eyes you see them even in your sleep.

Mate isn't allowed, they don't allow you to talk,
they don't allow you to sing to lighten your misery --
and as the most terrible hardship they don't even let you smoke.

When justice is severe as this it comes near cruelty.
A wretched man who's in that place grows fevered and delirious,
because there's no worse agony than that eternal loneliness.

We'd talk to the bars on the windows just for the pleasure of speaking,
but they'd order us to keep quiet and we'd have to submit to it,
because it's better not to annoy people who can punish us.

So you bear your troubles in silence, unable to say a word,
and in these sort of conditions you turn into an animal --
as you're deprived of the chief gift that was given to men by God.

It's beyond my understanding what the reason can be
for depriving a prisoner of the most precious gifts
that God in his goodness and justice granted to humanity.

Because I suppose -- though I'm ignorant -- that out of all the good things
which were given to proud man by the Divine Majesty,
speech is the first of them and friendship is the second.

And the law's a very severe one that for a crime or fault
can inflict a man with a punishment that's so cruel and inhuman
it deprives him of a blessing which he received from God.

The loneliness unnerves you -- the silence is horrible.
This is the worse torment of all, to be afraid all the time --
and in a close prison such cruelty goes too far.

For all you know you'll leave that place only to go to your grave.
A man in trouble needs to find another being by his side,
because it's always good to have companions in bitterness.

Someone wiser than me could find a better reason than this:
I'm not one who goes deep into things, and this makes it clear for me –
they gave companions to the Lord when they nailed him to a cross.

And, deep in the darkness where my understanding moves,
something in my heart resists this torment without a name --
because one man cheers another, and talking consoles your grief.

What I've said here should be carved on your minds as if it was on stone.
And even though I've suffered so much it's right I should admit
that the man who's in command of that place is not far short of a saint.

And the rest of them are good men, as well, they act by his example,
but for all that, the conditions there are none the less terrible –
think of it, and you'll all understand the meaning of my complaints.

And keep a place in your memory as carefully as you can
for the things I've described to you as clearly as I could:
you'll have a lot to suffer if you doubt the truth in me.

And if you take notice of my words there'll be no dungeons full.
Keep on the right side of the law and always remember this --
I've not put in too many arguments, more likely not enough.

And with that I'll take my leave -- you must make allowance for me.
The story of an unlucky man is something no one should forget:
if you've lived your life in a prison you don't have much to relate.

NOTE to II.12

II.12.17] *penance every day*] the pun in the original is between *penitenciaría* and *penitencia diaria* (daily penance).

Martin Fierro's Second Son

Don't anybody question the things I'm going to tell you.
I've made up my mind to do it even though it's a tough nut to crack –
the heart can tell what it wants, but the tongue won't help it out.

For ten years we've been enduring the hardship misfortune brings,
wandering among strangers with no home of our own,
being forced to put up with a power of injuries.

If that's the kind of life you lead you're everybody's slave --
take away the head and chief and the children that he supports
scatter apart -- like the beads do when you break a rosary.

So I got on as everyone has to until, at the end of her days,
an aunt of mine heard about my fate and took me to live with her --
and there I stayed peacefully with everything I could want.

I had nothing at all to worry about, and no need to work either,
I spent the time just lazing around like a boy who's soft in the head --
but it's quite true what the song says, good things don't last for long.

Her care and her affection were all set on me.
She loved me as if I was her son with real tenderness,
and she named me the inheritor of all her property.

The Judge came along in no time as soon as the old lay died.
He told me, "I'll be taking care of the goods she's left to you --
it's a fair-sized cattle herd and a couple of flocks of sheep."

He was a man who had a way with words, and knew more laws than a lawyer does.,
He told me, "You're a Minor, and on account of your age
you can't be in charge of property -- I'll appoint you a Guardian."

He made out a list of all there was, because he knew his job well;
and after he'd cooked the pudding according to his plan,
he put a man in charge of it and took me away with him.

Before very long, my poncho was full of holes as a sieve.
My chiripá was worse -- and though it takes a lot to make me feel cold,
soon I was left without a rag whether it was cold or hot.

And in this wretched condition one month went past the next:
the Judge never said a word and poverty took care of me --
when I saw myself like that I used to remember my aunt.

How much time I spent there I couldn't say for sure,
but after living in that way like a horse that no one owns,*
I was put in charge of the Guardian who had to look after me.

NOTE to II.13

II.13.12] *a horse that no one owns*] the original Spanish saying was "like a Moor (*moro*, i.e. slave) without a master"; the Argentine changed the meaning of *moro* to "(black) horse". See note at I.3.13.

An old man took me away with him who soon showed what he was made of.
 You could see from the face on him he was a kind of wild animal --
*Viscacha** was what they called him and he was a foul-mouthed old thief.

As to what the Judge was after, I've an idea, and I'm not wrong.
 but I won't refer to this point nor go digging his secrets up ...
 My guardian was one of the old sort which there aren't many left of now.

An old fellow, always up to tricks and with the build of a bull,
 He rode around on a dark roan always, mixed up in Lord knows what schemes,
 with his feet hooked like a parrot's from the stirrup between his toes.*

He went around surrounded by dogs which were the only things he cared for.
 There was never a time when he had less than half a dozen of them --
 he'd kill other people's cattle to get meat for their food.

Night after night we used to skin some beast from the neighbourhood,
 and leaving the rest of it where it was he'd hoist the hide behind his saddle
 and sell it to the owner of a store for mate and tobacco and drink.

A greater old swindler than he was I've never come across in my life.
 Taking that hide he'd stolen he used to fix up a deal of sale --
 and the store-man and he between them composed the certificate.*

He was a great one for volunteering work, and at sheep-shearings, you should have seen him,
 he got furious as a wild animal if one of the sheep got cut --
 but this didn't stop him from lifting a fleece or a pair of shears.

One day he gave me a tanning that sent me crying for help,
 because I'd hurt a puppy at some Basque women's place --
 and when he left, he stole some leather straps, he was sly as a fox at that.

"You son of a bitch" I said to myself, "for hurting me this way
 you'll see, as soon as I catch sight of half an opportunity,
 I'll break your habit of cutting hair* off other people's mares."

Because I killed a viscacha another time, he swore at me:
 I'd gone and told him about it, and I'd hardly spoken, when he said,
 "Don't let me hear the name of those creatures" -- and got furious at me.

Seeing him worked up like that I thought it best to keep quiet.
 "If he's taking offence," I said to myself "he'll make me pay for it."
 I could see they put him in a rage and didn't mention them any more.

One evening, he came across a whole lot of broken-down mares.
 After he'd got a few of them down he was busy cutting their manes --
 I saw the owner coming, but didn't open my mouth.

The man came up in a fury and fell on us like a flash.
 He threw himself straight off his horse whirling his whip around,
 and he caught my guardian right away with a lash across his back

Don Viscacha couldn't decide which direction to run in,
 till he finally got to mount his horse, and the whip scared him so,
 he crammed his hat down and made off without stopping to explain.

Maybe you'll be thinking this would have cured the old man.
Not a bit of it -- but what he did, taking more care from then on,
was hobble them in the day-time so as to cut the hair at night.

And this was the man they'd chosen to be in charge of my future state!
He was always up to something wicked, and all the people round
said he was a criminal, not to be borne on account of the damage he did.

When the Judge appointed him and gave him me as a guardian,
he told me it was a gentleman who was going to take care of me,
and teach me to earn my living and give me an education.

But what was I supposed to learn alongside that dirty old tramp
who lived like the leeches in the marsh, fierce as a tero bird,
who wouldn't work and was a petty thief, and loud-mouthed as a boar.

He didn't own any property, either, nor any goods that you could see
except for a cart that was rotting away, and the walls without a roof
of a half-ruined cabin that he used as his lair.

After being out all night it was there he'd go and rest.
I wanted to discover what he'd got hidden away,
but I'd never been able to do it -- he wouldn't let me go inside.

I had a few old blankets that had been thicker once,
and with no more than my naked skin, the old man, who was a fiend,
sent me out to sleep in the open even when it was freezing hard.

As a young man, he'd been married (although I can't believe it)
and a friend of mine told me that out of pure rage and spite
he killed his wife by beating her for serving his *mate* cold.*

And being widowed on account of this he never got married again.
It wasn't easy to come across any woman who'd want him --
they were all afraid of meeting the same fate as the first.

He always dreamed about her -- because of his crime, I've no doubt --
and the cursed old devil used to say, the time when he was ill,
that she was calling out for him, screaming right out of hell.

NOTES to II.14

II.14.1] *Viscacha*] a burrowing rodent, common on the pampa (see note at I.6.16). Viscachas were known for thieving.

II.14.3] *the stirrup between his toes*] a knot of leather gripped by the toes left bare by raw-hide boots (see I.11.9).

II.14.6] *certificate*] of ownership of a slaughtered animal.

II.14.9] *cutting hair*] horse-hair fetched high prices (see I.4.15).

II.14.22] *serving his mate cold*] a grave offence.

He was always in a bad temper, he'd never talk to anyone.
He'd amuse himself by poking the fire and drawing brand-marks with his finger --
and as soon as he got a bit tanked up, he'd start giving me advice.

It's as if I could see him now, with his old woollen poncho round him.
After he'd taken a good swig he'd start off talking like this:
"Don't you ever stop off at a place where the dogs don't look well fed.

"The first concern a man has is taking care of his own skin.
You help yourself to my advice, pay attention to what I say --
the Devil's wise because he's a devil, but wiser still because he's old.

"Make friends with the Judge, don't give him a chance to complain of you,
and when he chooses to get annoyed what you have to do is lie low --
it's always good to have a post to go and scratch yourself on.

"Don't ever get on the wrong side of him, because he's the one drives the team.
Sitting up there on his driver's seat none of the oxen acts wild --
he gets the nearest one with the short goad, and the leader with the goad on the beam.*

"Even the most high and mighty of men, with more prickles than a thorn-tree,
gives way when he's in trouble and is soft as a butter pat --
in a drought, even wild cattle come down to the water-hole.*

"Don't go changing your hiding-place, you be like the mice,
stay quiet in the same corner where your life began --
cows that change their pasture are late at calving-time."

And always keeping on drinking, sitting there like a rock, the old man
used to tell me, "Don't you forget, Fierro, that a man should never trust
in the tears of a woman nor in a dog that limps.*

"You've no call to get upset even though the world falls apart.
The thing a man has most need of according to what I've worked out,
is the memory a donkey has -- it never forgets where to eat.

"You leave heating the bread-oven to the person who owns the dough.
As for me, there's nothing worries me, I act deaf to the whole lot --
the pig lives fat as anyone and it even eats its own young.

"A fox that's already had a run can smell things out from afar.
Don't you be hurried, if you want to do what suits you best --
the cow that chews the cud longest is the one who gives the best milk.

"A person who finds his own dinner had better eat it quietly.
So don't you even as a joke call attention to what you've got --
if an animal runs on the skyline it's got no chance to escape.

"I go wherever it suits me and I never lose the track.
You take my example and you'll keep your belly filled --
take a lesson from the ants, they never go to a tub with nothing in it.

"Don't envy anyone, because envy means a lot of unhappiness.
When you see someone else make good don't you go and get in his way --
each little pig to its own teat is the proper way to feed.

"That's how a lot of people feed, while it's the poor who pay for it.
It's true there are some like young lambs who take it gently, right from the tip --
but others are greedy as yearlings and suck in the whole lot.

"If you want a quiet life make up your mind to live single.
But if you should want to get married with this warning let it be:
it's a hard job to keep a woman that others have a fancy to.

"A woman's a kind of animal that I won't start describing here.
She'll always like a strong man, but watch out how you choose --
because she's got a heart that's slippery as the belly of a toad."

And snuffling from the liquor, he'd tell me, "You're a young colt,
you're only just cutting your eyeteeth, but it's an old bull telling you this --
don't you ever let any man get his knife out before you do.*

"Weapons are things we need to have, but nobody can tell when.
So, if you're going out, and specially at night,
wear your knife so that when you want it it comes out ready to cut.

"People who don't know how to save things stay poor even though they work.
However they dodge, they'll never escape that back-lash poverty brings --
if you're born with a fat belly, you'll never change by squeezing it in.

"Wherever the winds blow me I'm easy there as in my own home.
When I happen on something sorrowful I take a swig, to cheer myself up --
it suits me to get myself wet both on the outside and in.

"You're only a chicken, and you've need of all these arguments.
Don't you ever go and forget my advice and what I've taught you:
I've learned my lesson from cockfights -- never to fight without spurs."

With these bits of advice, and others (which I've got stored in my mind
and which I won't dig up just now) he carried on with my education --
until in the end he'd fall asleep lying there in among the dogs.

NOTES to II.15

II.15.5] *goad on the beam*] a long beam protruding from the top of a waggon, with a goad on its end which the driver could operate with a pulley.

II.15.6] *water-hole*] on a ranch this could be from a well.

II.15.8] *nor in a dog that limps*] as an example of a proverbial saying widely diffused, see Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, Act I scene ii: *Grant I may never grow so fond / To trust man on his oath or bond, / Or a harlot for her weeping, / Or a dog that seems a-sleeping...*

II.15.18] *get his knife out before you do*] literally, "beat you to where the knife is." Gauchos' long knives were worn stuck in the sash, at the back with the handle forward towards the right hand.

16

When the old man fell ill and I saw he was getting worse,
and he looked as if there wasn't even a hope of him getting any better,
I brought a wise-woman* along to him to see if she could make him well.

As soon as she saw him, she said to me, "This one won't stay the course.
I don't give him much time to go -- he's going to show us something strange,
because there's a Tabernacle come out under his arm."

-- As the saying goes, always in any herd there's one cow with a missing horn...
Sure enough, someone standing by the door started shouting out straight away,
"Tabernacle! what a fool you are -- a tubercule you mean".

At this interruption the singer answered right back,
"If you ask me, this is not the time for outsiders to butt in.
A *tabernacle*, mister, was what the *culandrera* said."

The stranger had another go and lashed out at him again.
"There goes the second shot you've missed -- see you and I win hands down -- *
cu-ran-der-as is the proper name for women who make *cures*."

"Too many fingers in one pie won't work," the singer replied,
"and I'll tell this vulgar person who thinks he'll join in and interfere
that I didn't think I'd come here to talk to a learned society."

And if I'm to go on telling you the story of my guardian,
I'll ask this Professor here to let me stay ignorant --
because if you're weaving, you'll always find another weaver who's better at it." --

As I was saying ... he kept on being ill and got worse-tempered every day.
I'd lost my nerve by this time and spied on him from a way off --
the old man's mouth was like the mouth of a man who has been condemned.

There, the two of us, we went through the terrible winter nights.
He was cursing the Eternal Father and the blessed saints as well,
shouting out for the Devil to take him off to hell.

It must have been a great sin that could torment as much as that.
When he saw a holy relic it sent him all jittery
like when they throw holy water on someone who's possessed.

I never went within reach of him because he was treacherous,
and when I heard this awful blasphemy, if I gave him anything
I passed it to him from a distance off the end of a stick.

I said, it'd be better if I leave him on his own
with his cursing and blaspheming and let him go on that way
until Death comes along and carries off this heretic.

When he was past speaking I tied a bell to his hand,
and when he saw the grave so near him he scrabbled at the wall
and there he died, surrounded by the dogs -- and your humble servant.

NOTES to II.16

II.16.1] *wise-woman*] *curandera*

II.16.5] *win hands down*] literally, "I take the bank and win on the first card", one of many images from card games translated approximately, as at II.1.4.

II.16.6] *learned society*] see note at I.3.7, etc.

I was caught by a terrible fear of him after I saw him dead.
I called the Mayor, and along he came right away, accompanied
by three or four of the neighbours to take charge of the affair.

"Ah, blessed soul," said one old man with a kind of a twisted face,
"the only wish I have is that God may have pardoned him --
I knew he had quite a little herd of young calves that he'd stolen."

"That's very true," the Mayor said, "that's how he first came to settle here. As long as I live I'll never forget the tricks that he got up to -- until in the end they were obliged to forbid him slaughtering.

"As a young man he was a great rider, there wasn't a horse would throw him. Breaking in a colt, he'd have no need of another man beside him -- he'd shut himself in the corral and mount and gallop it in there.

"He was on bad terms with everyone -- it was an old habit of his letting his sheep mix with other flocks, and when they were sorted out he'd take the biggest share of them -- and then he'd come and complain."

"God preserve the poor soul," a third man went on at once, "he was always stealing sheep, he was an expert at that -- he used to bury the heads of them* and afterwards sell the skins.

"And, what a way he used to behave sitting around the fire! When all the men were there together he'd grab the mate-pot -- 'I'll play this hand on my own' he'd say, and not offer it to anyone.*

"If he was putting meat on to roast (poor soul! I can see him now) first he used to put a curse on it just before it was ready, and after that he'd spit on it so that no one else would eat it.

"The one who cured him that habit of spitting on the meat was a mulatto, a deserter, who went around with him as his friend. A devil of a one for fighting -- *Barullo** was what they called him.

"One evening when he did it as he was accustomed to, up got the mulatto in a rage and shouted 'You filthy old man, you dirty swine, I'll teach you to go spitting over the meat!'

"With his knife in his hand he leapt at him over the top of the fire. A quick mover that darky was--- *pucha!* -- at the same time as he sprang he aimed a stab of the knife at him which another man fended off.

"Barullo had got warmed up by now and wanted to go on with the fun. The wool on his head was bristling as soon as the fight began -- the old man managed to get to the door and made good use of his shanks!

"From that time onwards, he was cured of that devil's habit of his. He didn't come back in again -- he crawled into a hemlock clump, he went without his supper and stayed there hiding all night."

That's how the people there were talking, and I was standing nearby, and when I heard what I've just told you, even if he was an old rogue, I thought, What a rosary this is they're praying for the dead!

Next, the Mayor started to make a list of all that was there, pulling out hundreds of odds and ends and leather straps and old rags, a terrible lot of old harness that was no good for anything.

Out came lassos, and halter-reins, plaited leathers, and tethering-ropes, a whole lot of whip-lashes, girths, hobbles, and twisted hide, a fair supply of head-stalls and a heap of money-belts.

There were reins for lunging and bits, and broken stirrups, bolas, and spurs, and saddles, some kettles, some cooking-pots, and a great bunch of fastenings from girths that he'd cut off.

Out came several cattle-bells, awls, and strips of hide, and knives,
quite a number of sheepskins, a mountain of old saddle-blankets,
a lot of boots without pairs to them and endless numbers of metal rings.

There wore cans of sardines, a few skins of deer,
some ponchos full of holes -- and in the middle of this terrible mess,
there even appeared an inkpot that had been missing from the Court.

The Mayor said, very solemnly, "This is beyond all words.
He must have collected things like an ant ... I must tell the Judge about this,
and then just let him come and say we're not to pursue the case!" *

I was fairly astonished to see what was going on.
Among themselves, they were saying some of the things belonged to them --
but I had a pretty good idea that these were all Alleluyas.

And when they hadn't a corner left to investigate,
and they were tired with ferreting around and working with no results,
"Come on, let's go" the Mayor said, "I'll have him buried later on".

And even though it wasn't my father who'd been the owner of that ant's heap,
he came over all kind, and told me in a very friendly way
"You shall be the inheritor and, you'll take charge of all this.

"The matter will be taken care of all in the proper manner.
I'm going to name one of these present to be Executor --
things aren't like they were in the old days without any law and order."

Blessed God! I thought -- so here I am going round like a beggar,
and they appoint me to be the heir of all these old bits of junk ...
The first thing I'd like to know is what's happened to my herd of cows!

NOTES to II.17

II.17.6] *bury the heads*] to hide the identification marks on the ears.

II.17.7] *not offer it*] the mate-pot is customarily passed round the company.

II.17.9] *Barullo*] "rough-up".

II.17.20] *not to pursue the case*] Viscacha had presumably been "protected" by the Judge.

18

As I was saying -- off they went to arrange for the burial.
It gives me the horrors to think of it ... I started to scream and cry
when I found myself all alone in that place with the dead man, and the dogs.

I took out my holy scapular and hung it round the sinner's neck,
and as there's infinite mercy to be had from the Lord,
I prayed for the blessed soul of him who had been my guardian.

There was no calming the anguish I felt at being there all alone --
I gabbled through a rosary as if it had been my father there,
kissing the scapular my mother had given me to wear.

Mother, mother, I was crying out, wherever fate may have brought you now --
these tears I'm pouring down, you'd surely shed them for me
if you could see your son in this place and all he's suffering.

And while I was shouting out like this and finding no comfort in it,
just so as to add to my terror and torment me even worse
at that very same moment the dogs began to howl.

God preserve any one of you here from suffering anything like it.
What with the corpse and that howling, there wasn't much more needed, I swear,
for me to be driven crazy with that terrible scene all round..

Old women used to say then -- the ones who had second sight --
that when dogs are howling, it's because it's the Devil they see.
I believed in this explanation, like ignorant folk always do.

There I left that collection of rubbish to be eaten by the mice.
And as someone who's left an orphan lives according to his own free will,
I picked up my belongings and I deserted that nest.

I heard afterwards that a man came that afternoon, and buried him.
Nobody went there with him, they didn't even give him a wake --
and when the next day dawned, there he was with one of his hands sticking out.*

And the gaucho who did the burying has told me as well --
it terrifies me to think of it, it's a thing that gives me the horrors --
he told me that the dead man's hand had been eaten by a dog.

Maybe I was to blame for it because I was scared and ran off.
When I came back afterwards, I heard -- and I can tell you this for sure --
that for fear of it, the neighbours wouldn't go near that place.

All the filthiest vermin made the cabin their lair,
and this will make your hair stand on end, it's enough to stagger your mind --
an owl stayed there hooting, the whole of that night long.

For a long time I couldn't tell was going to become of me.
The few clothes I was wearing were nothing more than rags,
and every night I was dreaming about old men, and rubbish heaps, and dogs.

NOTE to II.18

II.18.9] *one of his hands sticking out*] a superstition about unshriven corpses. As at I.7.32, there was no coffin.

I went around living as I pleased like a horse no one owns.
That was the best time, maybe, that ever I've been through --
I wouldn't even go near the Judge's place for fear of a new guardian.

He'd told me, "I'll take care of the question of your property.
It will all be kept safely for you, the cattle and the flocks as well,
until your thirtieth birthday when you'll reach your Majority." *

And while I was waiting for the time that's fixed by the law, to come,
as poor as a young lizard and caring for nobody,
I wandered around beneath the skies like a bolas with no rope to swing it.*

Like this, in all kinds of hardships, I grew up to be a man.
By suffering so many miseries I learnt a lot of things --
till finally I was the victim of an unfortunate love affair.

Out of so many to choose from this is the toughest part.
Unhappy, with no one to turn to, I grew completely delirious,
and the cause of all my torments was a widow, who'd have none of me.

A man may weep for ungratefulness without any foundation for it:
he'll blindly accuse the woman who's causing him the pain,
and in the woman herself, maybe, there's nothing to warrant it.

When I was suffering the worst from the cruelty of my fate,
begging the powers of heaven to take the pain away from me,
they told me of a fortune-teller who cured complaints of that kind.

I went through fears and longings, but in the end I made up my mind.
I plucked up courage and off I went to where the fortune-teller lived --
and to see if he could cure me I gave him all the money I had.

As I started to tell him my troubles I went red as a tomato,
and I felt as if I was choking when the hermit said to me, "Brother --
someone has given you a love-potion, and it was done in a drink of *mate*."

"They must have been trying to cast a spell to get you out of the way."
After this, he started waving an ostrich-feather over me,
and he told me "The gift of healing was given me from the Cross."

He told me, "You must put a curse on everyone that you know.
Like that, the one who's harmed you will very soon be revealed --
but you must curse the whole lot of them, dead as well as alive."

And he instructed me to kneel down on something the widow had worn,
and to go saying my prayers in front of a plant of Rue --*
"Make no mistake about it, that's a cure for passions," he said.

As soon as I could, I went and stole a scrap from the widow's clothes.
I found the rue-plant, and at its foot I did my praying, laid out like a cross --
but even after this, I tell you, friends, I wasn't cured of my pains.

Another time he instructed me to eat a certain kind of thistle.
I don't see the point of this remedy, but hoping to relieve the pain
off I went to the thistle patch to scratch my face all for nothing.

And I thought I was getting better with all these medicines.
There were moments when my sufferings died down just a bit --
but then if I met the widow I was all on fire again.

Once more, when I consulted the great wisdom of this man,
he got well paid, the swindler -- and the prescription he gave me was
to hang three grasshoppers round my neck on a thread, like a rosary.

Finally, the last time I went to see him, for my sins,
he told me, "No-- it's not the case that my wisdom has lost its power.
I'll get you back in, good health again -- we won't let that woman win.

"And just you have faith in the remedy, because this Science is no joke.
You don't understand one jot of it... Without letting anyone see
cut three curls from the head of a black man, and have them boiled in milk."

By now, I was getting mistrustful about this devilish cure.
and I said, None of this is relieving the passion that's got hold of me --
better let the chicken stay alive even if it's got the pip.*

So I let myself go on as I was, till on a later occasion
I got a sermon from the priest -- to help with my cure, no doubt --
telling me that the widow was in the care of the Church.

This is what he said to me, and I've never forgotten it.
"You must know that her late husband gave order in his Will
that nobody ever afterwards should propose to marry her --
and she gave her word to it while he was still alive.

"And she has to keep her promise because that's the will of God.
It's forbidden for you to keep trying to see her any more,
because if you disobey this the two of you will go to Hell."

After a warning like that one it was all up with me.
I could see a bad card coming up,* and kept away from the widow then --
it cured me better than the grasshoppers, and the rue plant, and the black man's curls.

Afterwards a friend informed me that the priest had told the Judge
that I was an obstinate hard case and a delinquent youth,
and they should throw me out of the district because there was no saving me.

Maybe it was through this piece of advice and with no more reason required,
nor giving any other excuse -- they grabbed me suddenly
and sent me out to the frontier in the next contingent of troops.

I've cured myself of wanting to go chasing after widows.
I'm as poor as I could ever be but I think I'll go back, sometime,
to see if that Judge can tell me what's become of my sheep and my cows.

NOTES to II.19

II.19.2] *your Majority*] legal majority was in fact 25.

II.19.12] *Rue*] a plant known for its disgusting smell, thought to be aphrodisiac or the reverse.

II.19.19] *let the chicken...*] a well known Spanish proverb, a favourite of Sancho Panza (*viva la gallina, aunque sea con la pepita*).

II.19.23] *a bad card coming up*] literally "see its foot".

Martin Fierro and his two sons, among the crowd of people there,
continued joyfully celebrating that happy day.
For ten years, cruel ones, they had been separated,
and now they'd found each other again they were filled with joy.

Just at that moment, someone from outside
who had come to join the party, asked to be let in.
It was a stranger, a fine-looking young man --
he'd only recently been going round the neighbourhood.
Some people said he'd come from the frontier,
or won a heap at the last races from the owner of a store.
But he went around in rags, with no decent clothes at all --
his worn-out saddle-blanket was a proof of how poor he was.

He asked a blessing from the guest of honour --
and without telling his name, announced frankly that
the only name he went by was that of *Picardía*.^{*}
He asked leave of the company to tell his story,
and told them that very soon they'd find out who he was.

Right away he picked up the guitar -- people settled themselves to listen --
and, soon as he'd tuned the strings, "Picardía" began to sing.

NOTE to II.20

Picardía: "trickery".

Picardía

I'm going to tell you my story, so please excuse a lot of talking from me:
and I'll say by way of beginning -- though it's sad to do it this way --
I lost my mother before I knew enough to weep for her.

I was left abandoned, and I could never find out
Who the man was who gave me life -- so since very small
I flew around like a little bird searching for things to eat.

Maybe it's on account of the Service* which takes so many men from their homes,
or else on account of the war* -- which is a pretty weighty reason --
but a great many children in this land have just poverty for their mother.

And so, with her driving me on, who knows what I might have done,
and even though it's to my shame there's something I must warn you of --
as my mother's name was *Inocencia*, they called me *Picardía*.^{*}

A man took me to live with him to look after his sheep,
but he complained of me all day and beat me like a madman --
and he never gave me even an old blanket or two.

He used to keep me out on the land from daybreak until night,
and hundreds of times it happened that one of the lambs would die –
they were eaten by *caranchos*, but it was me who paid for it.

Very soon I'd had enough of being treated so cruelly.
I made a quick getaway in search of a better life,
and I went off towards Santa Fe with a troupe of acrobats.

The chief tightrope-walker took me on to teach me the trade.
and I was soon learning to do a dance on the wire --
but then they made a fool of me and I didn't care for that.

One day when I was doing my dance, there was a hole in my pants.
They kicked up such a row, laughing at me, that it made my foot slip –
I fell off the tightrope and nearly broke my neck.

And so I found myself once again not knowing where to go.
I was thinking of going back, when luckily for me
some aunts of mine turned up who wanted to take me in.

I settled down in no time with these relatives
who'd been quite unknown to me before -- they were very kind ladies, too,
but the worst ones for praying I've seen in all my life.

By the first bell of the angelus they'd started the rosary.
Night after night, they had a whole calendar of saints to say,
and a lot of women from the neighbourhood used to come there too to pray.

As long as I live I'll remember the things that happened to me there.
because I used to start getting it wrong, and at every word I'd slip –
as if whenever I knelt down the Evil One got into me.

It was just like a Temptation what I experienced,
and I never will forget all the sufferings I went through
because I wasn't able to say "Articles of the Faith".

Next to me I had a mulatto girl who was a native of those parts.*
She knelt down close beside me just like a guardian angel --
but she was a devil, that darky girl, and it was her who was tempting me.

"Repeat" my aunt would say to me "the Articles of the Faith."
I tried to speak, and I choked on it -- it was all too hard for me –
I looked at the black girl, and what I said was "Articles... of Santa Fe."

My aunt let me have the box on the ears that I'd seen coming my way.
I tried to get it right this time -- I caught the black girl's eye –
and once again what came out was "Articles of ... Santa Fe".

I could pray the whole day through without any trouble at all,
but at night-time I couldn't do it no matter how hard I tried –
that's why I think it must have been that someone was tempting me.

One stormy night I saw the black girl and started to shake with fright.
Her eyes -- it gave me a terrible scare -- they were like a lightning-flash ...
And when I had to say "Saint Camilo" I said "Saint Camomile".*

One of the aunts went for me with her feet and the other one with her elbow ...
After treating me that way, even though I've a tender heart
I sent both those old women down to hell along with their prayers and all.

And another time, when as always the dark girl was haunting me,
the first thing I knew was that my aunts pulled out a great tuft of my hair,
while we were praying for the Extirpation of all the heresies.

That devil of a black girl had got me all on edge,
and what had happened to me was, when I got to "extirpation"
I put in "ex-tripe-ation" instead -- and they fell on me without a word..

That memory, and the bruises, lasted me for days.
I used to dream about *heresies* they were going to *extirpate*,
and what I prayed for was always the *extirpation* of my aunts.

And on they went with their rosaries never stopping, night after night,
and on they went with their muttering, Blesseds and Cremos and Trinities ...
I got tired of all these tongue-twisters, and in the end I made a move.

NOTES to II.21

II.21.3] *service*] military service at the frontier.

war] with Paraguay (1865-69) or the campaign against the indians.

II.21.4] *Inocencia* (Ino-CENcia), "innocence"

Picardía (Picar-DIa), "wickedness", or rather "roguery" – "Trickster" might be nearest.

II.21.6] *caranchos*] large carrion birds.

II.21.7] *Santa Fe*] province, and its capital, west of Buenos Aires.

II.21.15] *of those parts*] i.e. from Santa Fe ("Holy Faith"), hence the confusion with "Articulos de la Fe" (Articles of Faith).

II.21.19] *Saint Camomile*] the original pun is with *Camilo* / *camilucho* (a ranch worker, slang for coward).

22

I went around like a rolling stone*, and poorer than a rat.
As soon as I earned any money some kind of trouble started up,
so I said, Time to head homewards, crane -- even though you've just one leg.*

It was quite a few years, and they were hard ones, that I'd spent in those parts:
the things I'd learnt from them made up my stock in trade ...
As soon as I got back, they enrolled me into the National Guard.

The training I'd done was at playing cards, and gambling was my career.
I made a regular treaty and I fixed up a crooked game*
with the owner of an eating-house who took his part in the plot.

I'd set myself carefully to the marking of a pack.
He'd keep it in the cash-box wrapped up as if it was new –
and you're carrying half the handicap if you know where the best cards are.

It's making a very big mistake for anyone to rely on luck:
someone smarter than he is will get him, who'll pluck him bare straight off,
and send him away so that he can't fly because he's got no feathers left.

Some very good games can get going with a partner who's in the know.
Other people's money stays with you, and their clothes and the coins off their belts –
there'll always be fools with their hands full who turn up at these gatherings.

There are plenty of lawful dodges that a gambler knows how to use.
It's not everyone who's wise to the things you can do with a card –
and with a well-placed double-deal you can beat the best of them.

Sometimes you'll pretend to be careless and let the top card show:
the other man stakes his life on it, and he's certain to get hooked –
because you're showing one card, and you'll play the one under it..

Playing *monte*,* you can never afford to leave off your preparations.
You have to sharpen your fingers, too, for this kind of work.
and find yourself a low seat that gives you the light at your back.

If you're playing bank, take the light side and give your opponent the shadow.
Adapt yourself to who's against you in all games of cards --
it's very important at all times to keep your eye well in.

Your opponent keeps his eyes open but no one sees if they're blind.
Give a fool rope, and in no time he'll let himself get caught –
a sucker soon starts thinking he knows all about the game.

There are some very innocent people who go out playing cards.
Once they get agitated it'll happen time and again
they'll lose turning up in ones or threes -- let them win some, and they'll take the bait.

If you're not in the know, you won't win even if you pray to Santa Rita.*
At cards, you can tell a donkey as soon as he sits down,
and playing with me it was certain death -- they couldn't win at hide and seek.

At *nines* and at other games I've got quite some advantage,
and whenever I'm the dealer there's no way out – because
I can deal from the middle of the pack or slip the top card underneath.

At *truco** I'd put the wind up even the craftiest players.
When I manage to get the advantage I can hold the cards in stacks,
time after time -- the ace of spades or threes, or a natural for sure.

I know how to take care of my money and I do it well as anyone.
You can't afford to lose your head if you're going to play for cash ...
If a game of *monte* got going, the owner of the place joined in.

A fixed deal, or a whole pack of cards -- I can handle it without a hitch.
There's not one card I don't remember from the time they're first turned up –
as soon as they're on the table I can tell which'll lose and which win.

You can find yourself in trouble for these sort of tricks, as well,
but I don't get blamed for it because I do it artistically,
and even if they run through the discards the secret won't be found out.

If I was asked to a game of dice I'd never be short of
a loaded one to play with -- if they were smart, the same each side –
even pass them one the same face all round all without their suspecting.

I could load a *taba** expertly because I know how to handle them,
I wasn't a fool at billiards -- and as a last word on this theme
I'll tell you, I wasn't even above gambling with knucklebones.

I won't deny that gambling is a vice with a wicked end --
anyone who lives as a gambler is out to catch a fool,
and everyone knows it's robbery to play with a man who's blind.

And I'm saying this so openly because I've given up gambling now.
But I can tell you for certain, speaking as one who was in the trade --
it's harder to learn to be crooked than it is to learn honest work.

NOTES to II.22

II.22.1] *rolling stone*] literally "like a ball".

get home, crane...] cranes stand on one leg, and were said to fly inland at the approach of a storm (a Spanish proverb).

II.22.3] *a crooked game*] the technicalities are translated approximately.

II.22.6] *coins off their belt*] or "buttons" of silver or gold – traditional dress.

II.22.9] *monte*] (two syllables) a game of chance with a bank, players betting on cards turning up in a certain order.

II.22.12] *ones or threes*] alternatives in *monte*.

II.22.13] *Santa Rita*] a patroness of hopeless causes.

II.22.14] *nines*] an old form of baccarat.

II.22.15] *truco*] still the most popular Argentine card game, involving skill, bluff, and a language of its own.

II.22.19] *loaded* etc] these false dice all have special names.

II.22.20] *taba*] cow's knucklebone used as dice for betting.

22

There was an Italian,* a peddler, who went around with a man with a harp,
he also fell into our trap without any trouble at all –
I got hold of him at *thirty-ones* and let him see my hidden score.*

He started off acting innocent thinking he'd use this advantage;
he thought it was going all his way but he got himself bogged down --
Saint Lucy* took his sight away and left him with empty pockets.*

You should have seen him, all upset crying for his bits and pieces.
He win by cheat said the gringo, and his tears went rolling down,
while I gathered up in a poncho the whole of his stock-in-trade.

There he stayed, with his pack a lot lighter, sobbing away in despair.
He'd swallowed the hook – maybe because it was Sunday that day,
and that class of gringo doesn't have a saint in heaven on his side.

But this kind of easy money didn't do me much good.
The Devil never dozes, and on my trail there came
a flat-nosed fool,* always scheming, who was head of the district Police.

He came to see me, in order to claim the fine that I'd incurred,
Because gambling was prohibited ... and to the guard-room he'd make me go ...
In the end, out of all I'd won I had to give him half.

I started to take against him for these high-handed ways.
It's true that I'd won what I had by sharp practice, that I'll admit --
but what he won from me was only on the strength of his authority.

People said he'd been on the run for some crime, for a long time,
but that an obliging friend of his had put him right with the Judge --*
and a short time after, they made him officer of the troop of police.

He always kept himself busy doing his district rounds --
he never caught any criminals, but he brought back a pack-horse load
of lambs and chickens and turkeys that he'd collected as he went.

Taking advantage as far as that shouldn't have been allowed.
He did the same thing month after month, and the local people used to say,
This flat-nose with his bribes has brought back the Tithes again.*

He cracked himself up as a guitar-player and even at inventing songs.
One night I found him singing away sitting on the bar-counter,
and I said, "What a cele-bray-tion... I was hoping to hear someone play."

Flat-nose sent a look at me as if held eat me alive.
He didn't leave off singing and pretended he hadn't heard --
but he'd understood by then that I'd got no time for him.

One evening, I was paying a visit when Flat-nose came along,
and I said loudly, so as to annoy him, "This lady *knows*, that's *flat*... *
you can't make mate if the water's cold" -- and the half-breed got the joke.

He had things all his way at the Court-house, and as held been stung by this,
he answered right back at me -- "Just as soon as I get the chance
you're going to find out who I am and I'll make you drink it hot!"

*

And on account of a woman the affair got more tangled still.
Flat-nose was keen on her -- and she was a real fine girl,
built with a body like an ox and with a very tender heart.

One day I found her kneading bread -- she was looking wonderful --
and I said to her "I'd be very pleased to give you a hand with your work,
and so, if you'd like it, lady ... I'll bring some bones to help heat your fire." *

Flat-nose was also on the scene sitting there just for decoration.
She could see he wasn't pleased at this, so, to avoid a fight
she answered me, "If that's what you want put them there right by the oven."

That's how the skein got tangled and so did his feud with me.
He declared himself my enemy, and with this compliment I'd paid him
he was just waiting for the moment to get me into trouble.

And I could see, the devil, he was watching me spitefully,
looking out for the best way to trip me up with a noose --
and good men can only live as long as the wicked ones allow them.

There's no one so free he's not caught in the end, nor so wild he won't be tamed --
so after that incident, I kept quiet in my corner, like San Ramón *
who gets thrown aside after they've prayed to him as soon as the baby's born.

NOTES to II.23

II.23.1] *Italian*] actually "Neapolitan" -- fair game for mockery as are all "gringos" in the poem.
thirty-ones] here (not as at II.1.4) a billiards game, in which each player was dealt a secret number to be included in
his score.

II.23.2] *Saint Lucy*] patron saint of eyesight.
empty pockets] a double meaning: his own pockets (or travel bags) and the pockets on the billiards table.

II.23.5] *flat-nosed*] ("ñato"): both a physical description (probably of a half-Indian) and derogatory, but can also be
affectionate.

II.23.8] *put him right with the Judge*] the same as happened to Cruz (see I.12.3-5).

- II.23.10] *tithes*] the tax paid to the Church, in operation during colonial times, abolished 1822.
 II.23.11] *cele-bray-tion*] a "hidden word" insult: in the original, *moqueando* (snivelling) hidden in *como que ando* (just passing by)
 II.23.13] *knows... flat*] the original "hidden word" is *ñato* in *Doña Toribia* (the hostess's name).
mate... cold] see II.14.22.
 II.23.16] *bones...*] cattle bones and dung were used as fuel; the offer is obviously suggestive.
 II.23.19] *oven*] this would be a rounded clay oven, separate from the house; also possibly a double meaning.
 II.3. 19] *noose*] the more skilful method of lassoing an animal's front legs.
 II.23.20] *San Ramón*] patron of childbirth.

24

I had quite a job escaping him a number of different times.
 He was a real toady and he turned the Judge against me
 till finally he caught me one day, during the Elections.

On that occasion, as I recall, there were several lists going round,
 and the various opinions couldn't get to agree ...
 People said that in order to win it, the Judge was doing some pretty strange things.

When we were all met together, Flat-nose came and made a speech;
 and with a lot of fancy talk he said, "Things would be in a bad way
 if everyone thought he'd vote for a different Candidate."

And right there he tried to take away the list that I was holding.
 But I wouldn't let him have it, and he shouted, "Anarchist –
 you've got to vote for whichever list the Committee orders you!"

I thought it was an insult being treated like that;
 and as once you've taken a high line it's not easy to climb down,
 I told him, "I don't care who orders -- I'll vote for whoever I like.

"If it's at a gambling table or an election stand,
 I'm equal with everybody -- I respect those who respect me,
 but no one's going to interfere with my voting paper or my cards."

Right away, the police troop fell on me with their swords drawn.
 And though it was all a dirty trick I decided to give in,
 and I didn't resist them, because that day would have meant the end of me.

Flat-nose had caught me broadside-on and he made the most of his chance.
 Ever since I had that experience I keep out of where I don't belong –
 I went off for a ride in the pillory, and all for some candidates.

It wasn't from weakness that I gave in to such a scandalous injustice.
 What that incident did for me was make the scales fall from my eyes –
 I saw we can't move any more than a dog with a stick tied to its neck.

And after those elections that racket of theirs carried on.
 It turned out a tangled mess of a sort you wouldn't believe –
 because Justice is a lady...and where she rides is up behind whoever's most cunning.

After a very few more days -- maybe so as not to waste time and not to let anyone get away -- they called us all to a meeting in order to raise a Contingent and send them to the frontier.

The gauchos got suspicious, people there were terrified -- the military force went out and brought back a few poor devils who had got caught in the round-up, tied together like partridges.

"This a miserable lot," said Flat-nose loftily.
"I rounded them up without warning, they couldn't get away -- and I had orders to bring in anything that was able to walk."

When the Commandant came along, "God help us!" everyone said. He got there and fixed his eyes on us -- I was doing my best to look stupid -- he had a sentence ready for each one and stuck him right down on the list.

"Stand up straight!" he said to a black man, "and stop trying to hide when you're the most troublesome devil in this whole neighbourhood. This is a service I'm doing you -- that's why I'm sending you off."

and to the next....

"You don't take care of your family, you don't give them enough to live on. You go visiting other women, and what you need, my lad, is to spend some time at the frontier to teach you to do your duty."

and to the next...

"You're another hard case-- when it's time for you to vote we have to send and fetch you, you think you're above the law, you're an *unsubordinate*, you are, and I'm going to put you straight." *

and to the next...

"How long is it since you've been going about round here? How many times have you shown up when the Court summoned you? I haven't seen you a single time -- you must be up to no good."

and to the next...

"Here's another trouble-maker who spends his time in the local store making speeches night and day turning people into Anarchists. You're going in the contingent -- that's what you get for those tricks."

and to the next...

"You've been keeping pretty well out of sight since the last lot went off, and the authorities have never got you to vote -- when they send to fetch you, you move off over the next boundary."

and to the next...

"You're always lazing around you've no money and no job. You've never done military service and you've not voted even once. Off you go -- that's the way to stop you going around spreading trouble."

and to the next...

"You, give me your enrolment papers, I'm going to keep them for you.
This stays in my possession, you'll collect it afterwards.
This way, if you're a deserter, anyone can turn you in."

and to the next...

"You think because you're exempted you can get above yourself.
You never came in for the voting when the elections were on...
Exemptions won't do you any good, I'll deal with you by the rules."

And so, one by this excuse, and the next for another reason,
the end of it was that the whole lot, without one going free,
one by one they went across to stand together in a corner.

And there were the poor sisters and the mothers and the wives,,
pouring down their tears of sorrow in their loving tenderness –
but there's no help for things like this in any tears shed by love.

It means nothing that there's a mother lamenting or in despair,
or that a man has to leave his wife completely destitute –
they have to keep quiet, or it's clear they'll be smashed once and for all.

Because they'll start getting into debt to one neighbour or another,
and as it's true of the male sex that if they don't walk, they fly – *
I can imagine, poor women, they must have to go carefully.

A lot of them went to the Judge to help them out of this fix.
He gave them the slip -- and just to show how innocent he was,
he told them, "You must be patient, because there's nothing that I can do."

So there they remained, imploring this figure of authority;
and, after a fair amount of talking, the Judge said,
"I'm washing my feet, like Pilate -- * this is the Commandant's affair."

Seeing people so helpless was enough to break your heart.
There was one mother who went away with two or three children or more,
riding behind and in front of her, and nothing in the saddle-bags.

Where will they go, I wondered, to die of poverty?
Poor things, if they complain about this set-up, they're right –
because there's quite enough evidence to justify their suffering.

NOTES to II.25

II.25.17] *if they don't walk, they fly*] i.e. they'll move one way or another.

II.25.19] *washing my feet*] the Judge is probably more cynical than ignorant of the gospel.

When it came to my turn I said to myself, Now I'm for it --
and though I'd not done anything much I was scared, I don't know why:
I can tell you, I was standing there with a prayer for help in my mouth. *

He told me I was a vagrant a gambler, a hopeless case,
that ever since I'd come to that district I'd been lazing around chasing women,
and that I must be a bandit like my father had been before.

Now it may be a person has a fault that he doesn't cure himself of,
but nobody's pleased to be treated in that kind of way --
I could tell it was Flat-nose who'd given him the information.

But I started to get curious, seeing he was telling me
in such a positive manner that my father had been a bandit --
it followed he must have known him while I didn't know who he was.

I undertook to discover it -- I made vows to Jesus Christ --
finally, light dawned on me and I learned to my delight
that the man who had given life to me was the valiant Sergeant Cruz.

I knew all about his story, I had it fresh in my mind.*
I knew that once when Cruz had gone out with a troop of the police,
he'd gambled his life courageously in defence of a brave man.

And now I pray God in his mercy to keep him in his glory.
His story will be kept alive in the heart of his son --
when he died he gave me his blessing and I bless his memory.

I made a vow to mend my ways and I truly succeeded in it.
I can say in any company that even if I've had my faults
I've cured myself of all of them since I found out who I was.

If you know your duty as a son you'll take after your own kin.
Anyone who grows up at his father's side and has no respect for him
deserves to suffer the hardships of misfortune, as a punishment.

By making efforts constantly I learned how to mend my ways.
I managed to forget them all -- except that, for my sins,
I wasn't able to get rid of *Picardía* -- the name I'd been given.

A man who has a good name is spared from a lot of unpleasantness;
so out of all this meandering don't forget this warning I give --
it was by experience that I learned a bad name can't be rubbed out.

NOTES to II.26

II.26.1] *a prayer for help*] *con Jesus en la boca*.

II.26.10] *Picardía*] see II.21.4. "Tricky" or "wicked" could be the nearest translation.

II.26.6] *I knew all about his story...*] in *The Return* people already know the first part of the story (a device also used e.g. in *Don Quixote*). See II.11, when Martin Fierro meets his sons.

I've done service at the frontier in a militia force
and not for lawful reasons as anyone might do.

The way my unlucky number came up to send me off for a bad time there
was through the scheming of that Flat-nose who was after me for so long.

So I suffered the cruel punishment out there in that hell
all because of some bad feeling from a petty official.

I won't go repeating the complaints of what you suffer there --
they're things that have been said often before, even forgotten, they're so old.

Always the same hard labour and hardships for the men,
it's always the same kind of service and the same way of not getting paid.

Always dressed in tatters, with no clothes, always poor,
they never pay you a copper cent nor ever give you a rag to wear.

It may finish you, but you go through with it with no pay and no uniform;
you can make the best of scrag meat or else -- make the worst of it.

Because if you try taking a high line or don't act extremely willing,
they give you a penance of staking-out* enough to send you mad.

The men go around like beggars without a glimpse of a peso piece.
because they've adopted the custom of owing you whole years of pay.

They're always talking of how much it costs and they're spending a fortune out there --
well, I've not seen a coin of it in all that merry time.

It's a strange sort of service beneath the gun and the lash
without ever our learning what kind of a face God gave to the Pay-master.

Because if he comes to inspect the troops he's off again like a bullet --
he's good as a will o' the wisp* at getting lost to sight.

And on top of that, when he does appear it's as if it had all been arranged --
he arrives with months of back-pay for men who aren't there any more.

They couldn't fix it better if they did it purposely --
when I arrived, it was with the pay of the contingent before.

Because they're sure as judgment at finding men who aren't there,
and as for the poor man who is there, he can die in poverty --

till, after putting up so long with the hard way they've treated him,
either he deserts, or they kill him -- or they send him off without pay.

And that's the way the pudding's cooked -- because it's a fact by now
that a gaucho has no rights of his own, and no one lifts a hand for him.

The men there live in such misery! you should see them, when there's a parade --
everyone's clothes all fluttering like a lot of little flags.

They burden you every way they can -- and at the end of this long trail
when they do let you go, it's dressed as if you were going for a swim in the sea.

If they've given you anything to wear they take it back again --
your poncho, your horse, your saddle-blankets, you have to leave them all behind.

And the poor unfortunate soldiers returning home to their fate
leave the place looking like Longinuses* without enough to cover themselves.

It made me truly sorrowful just to see them in that state --
the best equipped among them all was like a stick of hogweed without its leaves.

Just recently it happened with the winter rough as it was,
they sent them off to travel home without any clothes and on foot.

It's so harsh the way they're dealt with, even at a time like that
they don't allow them a broken-down horse so as to get back to their homes.

They treat him as if he was a heathen! and they complete the punishment
by not even giving him a paper to prove the service he's done.

So he's obliged to go back home poorer than he went away --
and of course, at the mercy of anyone who wants to conscript him again.

And then don't let him ask about the property he left behind --
his wife will have sold, out of hunger, for two what was worth ten.

And as they're in a conspiracy to block him at every turn,
don't let him start reclaiming it because that's a waste of time.

And then, if he goes up to a ranch-house, to ask for meat,
they're down on him right away with the law against vagrancy.

And by now it's time, if you ask me, to stop sending any more contingents.
If the Government needs men let it pay for them, and that's that.

And the conclusion I come to for all my ignorance,
is that with us, to be born on the land is like a kind of curse.

And I'll say, though it's not my place to say what nobody else has said,
that our Province* is a mother who doesn't care for her own sons.

They can die out in the hills somewhere in service of the law --
or else live like oxen, ploughing so that others can eat.

And while I'm at it, I'll say also, because it springs from my heart --
that if you don't take care of your countrymen you're no true patriot.

NOTES to II.27

II.27.8] *staking-out*] see I.5.13-15. Martin Fierro's account of frontier experience is more personal than Picardía's.

II.27.12] *will o' the wisp*] *luz mala* ("evil light") as at I.7.33.

II.27.21] *Longinuses*] Longinus is the bare-legged Roman soldier in pictures of the Crucifixion.

II.27.32] *our Province*] i.e. of Buenos Aires

This devil of a tongue of mine is running away with me...
I'm giving you an eyewitness account of what I saw at the frontier.

I know the only thing to do if you want to make the best of things
is to say Amen to the lot of it and laugh at the whole affair.

If you've got no mattress to sleep on you'll lie down anywhere --
a cat finds its way to the fireside and he knows what's good for him.

And in spite of my manner of speaking it ought to be clear from this
that everyone always does his best to get as comfortable as he can.

This poor sinner here went through it like the rest --
but I ended up as Orderly and in some ways had a better time.

Because even though the hardships there are enough to drive you mad,
there's always a warmer fire near the one with the officer's badge.

From that time onwards I managed to look after myself a bit better,
because I got myself into a place next to the Adjutant.

He gave himself plenty of airs -- he used to spend all his time reading --
people said that he was studying to be received as a Friar.

Although they made such a fool of him, I never saw him get annoyed.
He had eyes that were turned upwards just like the eyes of a saint.

He was delicate, and he slept on a bed -- * and I don't know why it would be,
but everyone there detested him -- *The Witch* was what they called him.

The only duty he ever did, and the only orders he had
was taking in the rations of provisions and luxuries.*

I found my way to his fireside as soon as he sent for me,
and he took me with him right away to carry out his commission.

The soldiers, like the devils they are, don't let any chance go by --
and when they saw us together they started smacking their lips.

And they used to say around the fire as a nasty sort of joke,
What with *Picardía* and *The Witch* they'll see us right with the rations!"

And I didn't do badly, as my officer knew how to look after himself ...
I'll tell you what used to happen where this business was concerned.

People said there was an agreement between the wholesale dealer and *The Witch*,
and that he took the worst goods they had -- very likely, he was no fool.

And that in the quantity, besides, he nibbled a bit more off,
and that for every ration they used to deliver him half.

And that his method of doing it was like a man of real common sense --
signing the receipt afterwards (you'll have guessed) for the full amount.

But in an army camp there's bound to be these sort of dissatisfactions....
Let me go on with my story -- or the History of the Rations.

The Witch used to receive them as I've said, in his own way --
we'd load them up, and everything gets handed in at the officers' mess.

And there without stinting they all take out the amount that's due to them,
keeping back, as it's reasonable, a bit extra for good measure.

Then off go the rations to the Headquarters and they're received by the Commandant,
and he too, without any stinting took as much as suited him.

Like this, something small to start with ends up smaller still, naturally.
Then what's left is handed over to the Officer for the week.

Spider, spider, who caught you?
-- *Another spider just like me.*

This one hands it on to the Sergeant -- the small amount that's left --
and he like a man of foresight always takes a bit over-weight.

I'll never end this story if I stick any more details in...
The Sergeant summons the Corporal to be in charge of the distribution.

He also takes first helping, with no scruples about that --
no one's going to check up on him if he takes less or more of it.

So with all these bites taken out of them, and all these stops on the way,
by the time they reach the soldiers there's hardly any rations left.

There's no more of it than holy bread! and it's a common thing
that you have to put several together even to make a little stew.

They tell you things are the way they are as the Stores are in charge of it.
Maybe -- but so little of it what they give's not enough to go round.

Sometimes, it seems to me and it's only fair to say it,
all that used to reach us were the crumbs that had got left in the sacks.

And they make excuses for that hell that sends you fairly mad,
by saying they give so little because the Government won't pay for it.

But I don't understand this and I won't try to work it out.
I'm nothing but ignorant... I don't learn, but I don't forget.

What we are made to endure is all the dirtiest treatment --
kept down by the whip in civil life and in the army by the sword.

Another hell is the clothing store -- if they do give it out, it reaches you
in winter, with the summer clothes, and in summer with the winter ones.

And I can't discover the reason nor the explanation in this --
but they say it comes already arranged from somewhere higher up.

And you're obliged to suffer the hardship of your fate --
a gaucho is only an Argentine when they want to have him killed.

This must be true, I don't doubt it, and that's why some joker said,
"If they're going to kill them soon enough, what do they want with clothes?"

And this wretchedness, that's gone on so long, never gets to be put right.
everyone who goes there lets it stay just as they found it.

And you'll find people cruel enough to say deliberately,
you should treat the gauchos the same as wool -- that's kept in place by beating it.

And you're forced to endure it, even though the cup can hold no more....
It seems the gauchos must have some sin -- and this they're paying for.

NOTES to II.28

II.28.10] *slept on a bed*] a real bed (made from hide on a frame) was a luxury. A gaucho slept on the ground --see II.31.

II.28.11] *luxuries*] mate, sugar, tobacco.

Picardía told his story and then kept quiet --
meanwhile everyone was happy celebrating this new meeting.

But by a coincidence -- the kind that's never far off --
among all the white folk there happened also to be a black man:
one who was well known as a singer and thought a lot of himself.
And in an unobtrusive manner, pretending it was quite by chance --
as anyone's easy to recognise who wants to start a competition --
he sat down quite calmly, picked up his guitar,
and gave a sweep to the strings. He was full of fine airs, that darky,
and to leave no doubts about it he started clearing his throat.

Everyone there understood what the black man intended:
it was a clear challenge aimed at Martín Fierro himself,
made with a lot of arrogance and in a very insolent manner.
Fierro took up his guitar, since he was always willing --
and with a silent crowd all round them, the two of them began to sing.

NOTE to II.29

a competition] i.e. a singing competition, the *payada* that follows, a contest of wit and invention.

Martin Fierro

So long as there's still sound in the strings and I can still find the beat,
I won't get left behind without playing hard for the stake --
and I've sworn that no one will ever steal an easy game from me.

Pay attention, then, if you're listening -- and keep quiet if you've just come to stare.
I'll ask you all to forgive me because it's plain to see
that a person can't be free from faults if he's not free from temptations.

They call a singer a good one if he's better than the worst;
and when two find themselves together, even though they're not the best,
it's their duty as singers to sing in counterpoint.*

A man has to show what's in him at the right opportunity.
He'd be wrong to refuse it when it's a thing he knows how to do --
although there are those who take a pride in having to be persuaded.

As a young man I was a singer -- that's a thing that's often said --
but bad luck has her favourites and she's always after me ...
From that time onwards it's my own misfortunes I've sung.

And now I'll try to recapture those years of happiness.
I'll see whether I can forget all the sad changes I've seen ...
So anyone who feels confident -- tune up, and we'll start to sing.

Tune up and we'll sing together, we're not afraid to stay up all night;
the audience is waiting -- and to make it worth their while
we'll play the strings till they're groaning and the candles are burnt out.

And whether the singer who takes it on has someone backing him, or no,
he needn't wait for me to run off no matter how much he knows --
turn by turn, like chain-smokers, we'll keep going till it's light.

And if you like, we'll continue till the day's gone past as well.
I used to be accustomed to singing whole nights through --
anywhere you went, in those days, there were fancy singers around.

And if there's anyone here who won't venture to follow the party on,
or if he can't sing well enough to win -- I'll tell him without flattering,
he might as well go and play on a sponge or with strings made of wool.

El Negro

Your Honours -- I am nothing more than a poor man with a guitar.
But I give thanks to heaven that when the opportunity comes
I'm able to face a singer who'll give this black man a trial.

I've got some white about me too because my teeth are white.
I know how to live among other folk so they don't look down on me --
a person who goes around in strange parts needs to be cautious and quiet.

My mother had ten sons and nine of them weren't bad.
Maybe this is why I'm protected by Divine Providence --
because in a nest of hen's eggs the best of all is the tenth.*

Black folk are very loving although they don't boast about it.
There's nothing equals their affection nor their tender care --
they're like the *macá* bird,* that raises its young ones under its wing.

But I've lived free, not depending on anyone --
I've always moved across the skies like a bird without a nest:
and whatever I know, I learnt it because I was taught by a Friar.

And I know well as anyone why it is the thunder sounds,
why it is there are seasons of summer and winter time,
and I know too where the waters come from that fall from the heavens above.

I know what there is in the earth when you reach its very centre,
the place where gold is found, the place where iron is found,
and where the volcanoes live that roar and spit out fire.

I know about the depths of the sea where the fish were born,
I know what makes a tree grow and what makes the whistling winds --
things that white men haven't heard of this poor black man knows.

When they pull my rope, I pull likewise, when they slacken I slacken too.*
You'll get what you want, don't you worry, anyone who invites me to sing --
to find out whether someone's lame the best way is to watch them run.

And if I'm doing wrong coming to this gathering
to set myself up as a singer, I'll ask your pardon out aloud --
because you never find one fault without a worse one being there too.

There's always some profit to be got from what a singer has to say,
and he ought to be given a hearing even if it's a black man who sings –
if people are ignorant, they can learn, and if they're wise, learn some more.

Beneath even the blackest forehead there are thoughts and there is life.
Listen quietly to me, people, don't reproach me for anything –
the night is black, also, and it has stars that shine.

So, then, I'm at your service and you can start sounding me out
if you'd like me to give you answers even though it's in a rough kind of speech –
as for learning, I don't know even the J because it's round.*

Martin Fierro

Ah, black man, if you're so wise you've no need to hesitate.
But you've swallowed the hook -- and so keeping up your accompaniment
you're to tell me directly what is the song of the Sky.

El Negro

They say it was of my colour that God made the first man,
but the high-and-mighty white men -- the same as invite him to sing –
don't even remember to give him a name and only call him black.

The white men paint the devil black and the black men paint him white,
but if the face is white or inky doesn't speak for or against –
when he made man, the Creator didn't make two different kinds.

And having given this warning, which comes in place just now,
I'll see, Sirs, if I'm able from the little that I know
to answer to you clearly what is the song of the Sky.

Even in the greatest silence the heavens weep and sing.
They weep as the dew falls, they sing as the winds blow,
they weep when the rains fall, and they sing when the thunder roars.

Martin Fierro

God made both white and black men and he didn't say one was better.
He sent them the same sorrows beneath one and the same cross –
but he made light, also, to tell the difference between colours.

So nobody need feel injured, there's no call to take offence;
everything has to be called by the name that belongs to it,
and there's no disgrace to anyone in what he received at birth.

And that's why I like a singer who won't get worried or miss the mark ...
And if your wisdom includes in it what the deepest of wise men know,
then tell me what in the world is the song of the Earth.

El Negro

The thoughts I have are poor ones and I've scanty reasoning,
but when it comes to giving a reply my ignorance won't hold me back –
even a stone will give out sparks if it's struck by the steel.

And I'll give you an answer from my small abilities.
A song in the Earth is formed by so many mothers' pains:
the groans of people who are dying and the crying of those who are born.

Martin Fierro

Negro, I can tell you've brought us a voice that's in good shape.
You're a true man, and I'm not surprised to see you doing so well –
among singing-birds, it's only the male who's the one with song.

And since you came into the world with a destiny to sing,
don't let yourself get worried, don't act too big or too small ...
What you've got to do now is explain to me what is the song of the Sea.

El Negro

Nobody claims to imitate the voice of the singing-birds,
and no one ought to boast of a gift that comes from another's hand –
because the magpie learns to speak but only the female learns.*

So come and help me win this challenge, all my ingenuity.
It costs me plenty to answer, but answer it I must ...
In my reply I'll tell you what is the song of the Sea.

When the storms are raging the Sea which encloses all things
has a song that terrifies you as if the whole world shook --
it seems that it's complaining of the way the earth squeezes it.

Martin Fierro

This time you'll need to show us all the wisdom you've got:
your only chance of winning is if you're in league with a saint ...
There is a song the Night has and you're to tell me what it is.

El Negro

As the cautious man said to the bold one, Don't gallop, there's holes in the ground –
I'll answer you in a humble way -- the Night has for its song
those noises you hear without knowing where it is that they come from.

They are the secret mysteries that are hidden by the dark,
they are the echoes that answer back your voice if you shout aloud,
like an endless lamentation that comes from I don't know where.

Only the Sun can penetrate the shadows and conquer them:
from different directions mysterious sounds are heard –
they are the souls of those that have died who are asking us for prayers.*

Martin Fierro

Black man, by these replies of yours I'm sizing you up already,
because you've a talent for singing and you're learned on top of that –
when you're giving an explanation even shades don't pass you by.

But an honest man does his duty by saying things he's certain of,
and on that score I'll warn you that we two are here to sing --
and in the peace of God we'll leave the souls of those who are dead.

And the good advice of the cautious man isn't needed in this game,
because the words of a singer are always carefully weighed ...
And now I'd like you to tell me where it is that Love is born.

El Negro

To such an obscure question I'll do my best to reply,
although it's a lot to expect from a poor black cattle-hand –
but the beginning of wisdom is to know your own ignorance.

The bird loves in the skies that he moves through wherever he will,
and, at the end of his flight, if he perches on a bough
he'll call with his happy song to his loving companion.

The wild beast loves in his lair where he is king and lord,
it's there he sends out so furiously those terrible roars of his –
because the wild beasts don't sing of it, the wild beasts roar of love.

The fish with its pretty colours loves at the bottom of the sea,
and men love fiercely -- all things love that are alive --
it's from God that life is given and wherever there's life there's love.

Martin Fierro

You're a smart one, darky, and I like what you've just explained.
I'm beginning to respect you though I laughed at you at first ...
And now I want to ask you what you understand by the Law.

El Negro

There's a great deal of learning that I'm not able to reach...
Ever since I learnt to be ignorant I'm not surprised at what anyone knows –
but no one who invites me to sing is going to find me a light weight.

I'm no very smart singer and I've very little skill,
but when it's my turn to sing I put up a good fight for myself --
because I'm like a mate-pot, I work when they open my mouth.

Since you're choosing what questions you fancy you're choosing the thorniest kind,
but that doesn't worry me so much and I'll answer you in my own way:
the Law is made for everyone but it only rules the poor.

The Law is a spider's web -- that's how I see it, though I'm ignorant.
It's not feared by the rich men, and never by the ones in command --
because the big flies break out of it and it only catches little ones.

The Law is like rain -- it can't fall the same everywhere.
The one who gets wet may grumble, but it's a simple matter --
the Law's like a knife, it doesn't hurt the one who's holding it.

A sword is what people call it* and this name suits it well.
The ones who control it, they can see whereabouts they're going to cut --
but it falls on whoever's underneath and cuts without seeing who.

There are plenty of learned Professors and I don't doubt they know a lot.
I'm just a poor rough black man and don't understand much of this --
but every day I can see their law is like a funnel, with a big end and a small.

Martin Fierro

Black man, I'll tell you once again I've taken your measurement.
You've got plenty out of life and I'm enjoying our encounter --
I can see you've got enough capital inside you, for this game.

And so now I'll tell you -- because it's my duty to do it,
and it's doing truth an honour to give way before what's true --
you've got darkness on the outside of you but inside you've got light.

No one must ever say that I imposed on your patience:
and as a fair exchange, if you want to put any questions to me,
you've already got my permission and you can start right away.

El Negro

Don't you stick now, tongue of mine, don't let this worry you.
Nobody hits without missing first -- and even if your good name's at stake,
when you're sailing of your own free will you've no right to fear the sea.

I'll put my questions to you since that's what you invite me to do ...
And you'll have won this competition if you can explain to me
the nature of Time, and Measurement, and Weight, and Quantity.

The victory will go to you if you know how to answer this.
It's my duty to warn you fairly, so don't be surprised at it,
up to now there's been no man has known how to explain them to me.

I want to know and I'm ignorant because it's not in my books,
and your answer will be able to serve me as a guide
as to why the Everlasting Lord created quantity.

Martin Fierro

Negro, you hit the mark neatly as a *carancho* lands on its nest.*
I can see you're well prepared but you'll find I'm ready too --
we'll see if I give you an answer and if you'll admit defeat.

There's one sun and one world and a one and only moon:
so you see, God never created any Quantity at all.
The Being of all beings only made Unity --
and the rest is what man has created after he learnt to count.

El Negro

We'll see if another question gets a good answer from you.
The being who created life must keep it in his records,
but I'm ignorant of what motive he had to make Measurement.

Martin Fierro

Listen closely to the argument I'll give from the little I know:
Measurement was invented by man for his own good.
And don't be surprised at the reason -- it's an easy one to guess --
God only needed to measure one thing and that was the life of man.

El Negro

If your wisdom doesn't fail you now I'll grant you the victory.
A man whose profession is singing has to learn all of these things...
And now, I want you to explain to me what is the meaning of Weight.

Martin Fierro

God keeps among his secrets the secret containing this,
and he commanded that all weights should always fall to the earth.
And to my way of understanding, since there's good and bad in the world,
the reason for Weight was for weighing the sins of mortal men.

El Negro

If you can reply to this question consider that you've won.
I can acknowledge the better man ... So answer me right away
when it was that God made Time, and why he divided it up.

Martin Fierro

Black man, I'm going to tell you as far as my knowledge goes.
Time is only the delaying of things that are to come --
it never had a beginning nor will it ever end,

because Time is a wheel, and another wheel is Eternity.
And if man divides it up he only does it, I guess,
to know how much he's lived so far or how much he's got left to live.

Now I've given you my answers -- but a good start's not enough to win.
If you've got another question or you've forgotten anything,
I'm always at your service to clear up any doubts.

It's not out of pride I'm doing this nor because I want to boast,
but you need to be determined when you've got to fight to win ...
And I'll invite you to sing on the subject of the work of a cattle-hand.

So, black man, start preparing all your wisdom contains --
and without a slip of your tongue you've to tell me what work's done
according to the weather in the months with R in them.

El Negro

No one ought to take advantage of a person's ignorance,
and though anyone can put me down who's got more art than me,
I'm not going anywhere to get myself hit on the head.

I made it clear, when it comes to reading that I'm as round as a J –
I've no shame at being defeated, but I'll tell you plain,
I won't stand for it if anyone tries to kick me around.
It's a fair law that the slowest is the one to lose the race --
and that's what happens to anyone when the competition's between
one singer who's only medium sized with another who's full grown.

Out on the plain you must have seen a man who has lost his way *
going round in circles, desperately, not knowing which way to turn ...
Just the same thing happens to a poor singer who's lost the game.

The trees too are set groaning if there's a gale lashing them:
so now if my complaints burst out in a bitter way, it's because
the night that defeat brings is very long and very sad.

And from this day onwards I call Heaven to witness me --
I'll come right out and say it -- if my heart should be inspired
I won't sing for the glory of it but just to console myself.

When he's got no more to hope for a man's life turns to despair.
It's no good setting your heart on things that don't last long –
if a poor man finds any happiness it's a sure sign of grief to come.

And this sad lesson will last me as long as I live.
Even though I may find some comfort I'll never again take flight –
if you're not born to reach the skies it's no good raising your sight.

And now I'll beg all you who are listening will give me leave to say
that when I made up my mind to come here it was not only to sing,
but because I've got, besides that, another duty to be done.

I've told you that from my mother there were ten children born.
But the first of them is no longer alive -- the one who was best loved of all –
he died by foul means at the hands of a drunk in a brawl.

And we were left like orphans the nine brothers who remained.
Ever since that day, believe me, we've mourned him without relief –
but we've never ever come across the man who murdered him.

And the bones of that dear brother can be left to rest in peace.
I've not come here to disturb them -- but if the right occasion comes
I trust to God that this account will be settled as it ought.

And if we sing against each other again to make an end of this --
for all that I respect you, if you agree, we'll sing
on the subject of the unjust deaths that certain people bring about.

And so at this point, your Honours, by way of parting I'll say
that the brothers of the dead man are still very much alive --
they have not forgotten that murder and they're keeping all this in mind.

And whatever is going to happen is so deep a mystery
that it's not for me to come forward and act the prophet here –
you'll all find out afterwards what destiny has in store.

Martin Fierro

At last you've shut your trap after all that chattering.
I'd started to have a suspicion seeing you get so high flown
that you were holding in a mouthful and were shy of spitting it out.

And now we know just where we stand that's enough polite conversation.
There's no need to be anxious about finding the right occasion –
I can see by now there another sort of party starting up.

I can't tell what's going to happen, I'm not a prophet either,
but I'll follow my right road steady on to the end –
everyone's bound to carry through the law of his destiny.

First it was the frontier through a judge persecuting me,
after that were the indians -- and now for a change of scene
here come these blackamoors to cheer up my old age.

His mother brought ten into the world which not every woman could do,
and maybe she'll lose all the ten in the same circumstances --
the *mulita* has a litter of nine and all of them just the same.

I've never been able to get along with any low coloured man --
they generally turn vicious when they get their temper up –
they start to act like spiders, always ready to bite.

I've known a whole lot of black men and all of them fighters too:
some of them were pretty sharp with their eyes and the way they'd move ...
If I live to do it -- curse it! I'll give them a good ... tale to tell.

But every one of us has to haul in the yoke he finds himself in.
I don't go looking for fights these days -- I've no pleasure in arguments --
but dark shadows don't frighten me nor shapes that come looming up.

I thought I'd done skinning the carcass but there's still the tail left to do –
and it looks as though I'm not finished yet with this happy gathering --
because this is what they call hitting a nail that's already gone right through.

NOTES to II.30

II.30.3] *counterpoint*] in the *payada* the two singers improvised and answered each other's chosen themes. A central activity in gaucho tradition – a legendary *payador* is Santos Vega, who could only be defeated by the Devil. Subjects for improvisation could range from practical to metaphysical, with proverbial sayings called into play. Tiscornia's edition of the poem traces most of the more abstract themes in this canto to old Spanish folk-dramas and riddles.

II.30.13] *tenth*] no popular superstition explains this. Tiscornia attributes it to ten as a mystic number, or the larger tenth bead in a rosary.

II.30.14] *macá (maCA)* a slow and cumbersome river bird that takes its young on its back while swimming.

II.30.19] *pull... slacken*] an image from the technique of lassoing.

II.30.23] *J because it's round*] a deliberate variation on "O because it's round", as at verse 77.

II.30.36] *magpie*] *urraca*.

II.30.42] *souls that have died*] first sign of an ulterior motive in the challenge

II.30.56] *a sword*] as in figures of Justice blindfold, holding scales and a sword.

II.30.65] *carancho*] the carancho drops precisely on its nest from flight (see I.9.1).

II.30.79] *lost his way*] see I.10.21-23.

And after this exchange of words whose intention must be plain by now –
the bystanders succeeded in stopping a fight starting up:
they got between them, and things stayed quiet.

Martin Fierro and the boys avoided the argument:
they mounted, and riding slowly, to show they weren't leaving from fear,
they reached the edge of a stream and there they got down.
They unsaddled the horses and sat in a circle,
talking among themselves about endless little things --
as separation breeds a large family of stories to be told.

There they spent the night by the light of the stars --
as that's a curtain for your bed you can find wherever you are,
and a gaucho, better than anyone knows how to make himself comfortable.
His saddle-blankets make the mattress, his saddle the pillow,
there's the sheepskin for softness, and to keep himself from the dew
he'll cover himself with his poncho or a blanket, right over his head.
He'll keep his knife beside him, as that's a wise precaution;
with the bridle and whip to hand, and the horse close by
which he's tethered safely by burying the lasso-ring –
though using the lasso for tying up gives a bad idea of a man.*
Like this, he'll sleep peacefully the whole night through;
and if it's a good way off the track, as caution indicates,
you can snore stretched out at your ease safe as under your own roof.
You won't find bed-bugs on the ground -- and it's a proper-sized bed
that nobody can refuse you, and won't lead to arguments.
Besides that, you can spend your nights any way you please –
and you'll spend each one of them just as well as the one before.
And then the birds will wake you as soon as it gets light –
because sleep won't get a firm hold on you when you've gone to bed with no supper.

And so it was -- that night then was a joyful time for them all:
because everything seems happy when there's happiness in your heart.
As they couldn't live all together on account of their poverty,
they decided to separate, and that each of them would go
and find a place somewhere to make a living for himself.
And before they scattered to start a new life --
there in that solitary place Martín Fierro spoke
to his sons, and to Cruz's son, wisely, in the following way.

NOTE to II.31

a bad idea of a man] because there is a special supple rein normally used for tethering (the lasso being harder, liable to be spoiled or to hurt the horse).

Martin Fierro

A father who can advise you is more than a father, he's a friend.
 So it's as a friend I warn you to be on your guard in life:
 you can never tell what corner your enemy's lurking in.

A life full of misfortunes was the only school I ever had,
 so don't be surprised if sometimes I make mistakes in this game –
 you can't expect to know very much if you never learnt anything.

There are some men who have their heads full up with the things they know:
 wise men come in all sizes, but I don't need much sense to say
 that better than learning a lot of things is learning things that are good.

No kind of work is any use if it won't teach us anything.
 A man has to see how things are in one glance, right away:
 the first thing you have to know is to know when you're giving offence.

Don't sum up all your hopes in any one heart ever:
 in the worst of troubles put your trust in God –
 among men, in one only, or with great caution, two.

Shortcomings aren't like land is, they don't have boundaries.
 Even the best men have them, and it's right I warn you of this:
 anyone with defects of his own should overlook them in others.

If a man is your friend never leave him in the lurch,
 but don't ask him for anything, nor depend too much on him:
 the truest friend, always, is to behave honorably.

It's a bad thing to be attacked either by fear or greed:
 so, don't upset yourselves over perishable goods –
 don't show off your wealth to rich men and never fail the poor.

If you respect other people you'll get by, even with indians.
 A man needs to be discreet to save himself from annoyances:
 among weak men, act cautious, and with brave ones, keep cool.

The Law is that we have to work because we need to buy.
 Don't let yourselves in for the suffering that a wretched condition brings –
 a lot of blood runs from the heart of a man who's obliged to beg.

A man has to work in order to earn his bread,
 because Poverty's keen to get at you in a thousand different ways –
 she knocks at everybody's door, and if it's a lazy man's, she goes in.

Never threaten any man, because no one's a coward then.
 A person who makes foolish threats won't take long to find this out –
 because there'll be one danger on hand and another lying in wait.

To overcome dangers and get you out of the deepest pit,
 I tell you this from experience -- more than by swords or spears
 you'll be helped by the confidence that a man has in himself.

A man is born with the astuteness that has to serve him as a guide.
Without it he'd go under -- but in my experience,
in some people it turns to discretion, and in others, dirty tricks.

If a man's a good worker he'll make the most of the right occasion.
And be sure to keep this in your minds -- if I don't mistake the comparison --
the right occasion is like iron, you have to strike while it's hot.*

A man may lose a lot of things and sometimes find them again,
but it's my duty to inform you, and you'll do well to remember it,
if once your sense of shame gets lost it will never again be found.

Brothers should stand by each other because this is the first law.
Keep a true bond between you always, at every time --
because if you fight among yourselves you'll be devoured by those outside.

Show respect to old people, there's nothing brave in mocking them;
and if you're among strangers be very careful how you go,
because anyone in bad company is taken to be the same kind.

The stork, when it gets old, loses its eyesight, and then
all its young children undertake to care for it in its old age --
you can learn from the storks with this example of tenderness.

If someone does you a wrong, even if you think no more of it,
always keep on your guard -- because it's sure to follow
that the one who acted wrongly will speak evil against you.

No one whose job is to obey has an easy time of it,
but if he's proud he only increases the hardships he has to bear --
if you're the one to obey, then obey, so the one who's boss can act well.

Do your best not to lose either time, or your self-respect:
as you're men with power to think use your judgment when you act --
and keep in mind that there's no vice which ends as it began.

The carrion bird with its hooked beak has a taste for robbery,
but a man with powers of reason will never steal a cent --
because there's no shame in being poor but there is in being a thief.

Man does not kill man, nor fight just out of vanity.
You have, in my misfortunes, a glass to see yourselves in --
the greatest wisdom a man can have is to know how to control himself.

Blood that is spilt will never be forgotten, till the day you die.
It makes so deep an impression -- in spite of myself, I can't deny it --
that it falls like drops of fire into the soul of him who shed it.

At all times, it's always drink that's the worst enemy.
I tell you this out of love for you, and take care to remember it:
a man who does wrong when he's drunk deserves twice the punishment.

If you find yourselves mixed up in a brawl, always move further on.
Don't take a high line about it even though all the right's on your side --
it's on the chins of poor men that barbers learn their trade.

If you give up your heart to some woman that you love,
don't act in any way that does the woman wrong --
a woman who's been treated badly will always ruin you in the end.

If singing is your profession make sure to sing from the heart.
Don't tune your instrument just for love of your own voice,
and make a habit of singing about things of consequence.

And I'm giving you this advice which cost me a lot to learn,
because I want to guide you -- but I don't know enough
to give you the discretion which you need to follow it.

I've thought over these things and many more in the times when I was alone.
You can be sure there are no errors and nothing false in this advice --
it's out of the mouths of old men that the true sayings come. *

NOTES to II.32

II.32.15] *while it's hot*] Hernandez reverses the original Spanish proverb ("no good beating on cold iron").

II.32.31] *out of the mouths of old men*] reversing the saying in the Bible ("out of the mouths of babes...")

33

After this, the four of them turned towards the four winds.
They made a promise between them which they were all to keep --
but as they swore it a secret I can't tell you what it was.

The only thing I can tell you -- and don't anyone be surprised,
because a man is often obliged to do things in this kind of way --
they all made an agreement to change their names from then on.

They had no bad intentions in doing it, I've no doubt --
but the naked truth is, it always is the case
that anyone who changes his name has got something guilty to hide.

*

And now I'll put down this instrument that I've used to entertain you. *
You must all of you allow that I kept at it faithfully --
this is a knot like a quill button* which nobody can unravel.

I've carried out my duty and now I'm over the worst,
but I'll tell you for good measure -- so my countryman will understand --
if I need a longer rope to my noose I've a good few coils still in hand.

And with that I'll take leave, without saying when we may meet again.
People who want things certain always cut where it's soft --
but I cut the hard way and that's how I'll always do it.

An eagle makes its home in a nest and a tiger in the wild forest,
a fox in a the lair of another beast -- and as his fate is uncertainty
only a gaucho lives wandering wherever chance may lead him.

He's a poor orphan, and he's the one who gets crushed by destiny --
because no one makes it their business to stand up for his kind --
but the gauchos ought to have houses and a school and a church and their rights.

And some day this accursed mess will be brought to an end.
I don't see it an easy job, because the racket's made worse
by the ones who act like carrion birds* and stand over the carcase and scream.

But God will make it possible for these things to be put right –
though it's important to remember, to make a good job of it,
that when a fire's for heating it has to come from underneath.

If the man on top does what suits himself he's within a law of his own:
be wary of his favours -- even of someone using his name --
the shade's always dangerous beneath a tree with poisonous sap.*

If a poor man's the least bit careless they crack down on him with the whip;
but I understand the way things are and the conclusion I've reached is this:
the gauchos are the thin leather that gives the best thongs to make rope.

And you must all have faith in what my tongue declares to you:
so don't misunderstand me, there's no stain of greed in this --
there'll be no leaking roof on the cabin that has this book in it.

I've been working hard and long so now give me leave to rest!
This is the point I stop at and I refuse to go on ...
This makes thirty-three cantos which is the same age as Christ.*

So keep a hold of these words which I say as I come to the end:
I shall carry on with this work of mine till I bring it to its close –
that is, if my wits or my life don't end by failing me.

And if my life should fail me, you can all be sure of this:
when that takes place, the gauchos even out in the desert land
will feel a sadness in their heart when they hear that I am dead.

Because the sorrows that I've told are those of all my brothers too,
and they will hold my story proudly, within their hearts:
my countrymen will keep me for ever in their memories.

Memory is a great gift and a very fine quality:
and people who think in this story that it's them I've been getting at –
keep in mind that forgetting evil is a way of remembering, too.

But no one need feel offended, as I don't trouble anyone.
And if I sing in the way I do because I think it's right that I should –
it's not to do evil to anyone, but to do everyone good.

NOTES to II.33

II.33.4] *to entertain you*] Fierro and Hernandez merge at this point.

quill button] i.e. of quills woven into an intricate knot.

II.33.9] *carrion birds*] *chimangos*

II.33.11] *poisonous sap*] actually "the tree with milk", traditionally the fig tree.

II.33.14] *thirty-three cantos*] a mystical number, as with the thirteen cantos in part I.

fin

the end