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Gin and Tonic Tales

from *Contos do Gin-Tonic*

by Mário-Henrique Leiria

translated by Jethro Soutar

The Wart

I was sitting at home when I heard my aunt go "Uff!"

I knew straight away that something was wrong. I went to check. A wart had appeared on her ear. It didn't look normal.

I immediately went and got my uncle, who's a brigadier.

"Let's go speak to the minister," my uncle said.

We went.

At first the minister wouldn't believe us. It just can't be, a thing like that just isn't normal. Of course it's not normal, but I've seen it, I said.

"In that case, it's best to pretend we know nothing about it," said the minister. "Have you stopped and thought about what this could lead to?" he went on, anxiously. "People will start asking questions, the wart will get worse, the anarchists, always ready to pounce, will take advantage of the situation, strikes will follow, everything will become a mess, the Powers will intervene, leading to war and who knows what else? No, we won't say a thing to anyone. We'll keep it secret. The State will compensate you."

I looked at my uncle, a brigadier as I've already mentioned, and I realised that the matter really was serious.

"Is it as important as that your Excellency?"

"More important, my friend, more important. The Fatherland is in grave danger."

I could tell it was decision time.

"If the Fatherland is in danger, I won't need a penny in compensation. That's how it goes with me. Anything for the Fatherland. I'll keep quiet."

We kept quiet.

A few days later my aunt received a letter written by the Emperor himself. Thanking her. Commending her.

She's still got the letter. And the wart.

As for me, I'm still sitting here at home. Keeping quiet.

Gin No Tonic

A bottle of gin
was troubling
the fisherman
the sole and the grouper
had not turned up
for dinner
what to do?
he phoned the minister
of Fisheries and Work
but the minister
was working
in bed
with a woman
and so
the bottle of gin
suggested discretely
why not
phone the president?
they phoned
the president of the nation
who at that moment
was busy
in bed
with a woman
at last
they found a solution
the fisherman
went to bed
with the bottle of gin

The Lozenge And The Snake

Mr Antunes woke up feeling great.

It was a lovely day and, what's more, it was a Saturday.

On seeing the sun coming in through the window, he decided he'd spend the day healthily, out in the countryside; he'd go and fill his lungs with fresh air and break free from the shackles of dreary city life, at least for a few hours.

He made himself an almost regal packed lunch. Like any good bachelor, Mr Antunes always took the precaution of overstocking his larder with canned food, cooked meats and sliced bread, and keeping the fridge full of drinks, in case of any emergency. He put his lunch into a wicker basket, the old kind with two side openings, the sort people used to use to go to market or carry turkeys around, and covered it with an old towel. Then he put half a dozen beers and a couple of sodas into a portable cooler before adding the finishing touch, a delightful bottle of whisky.

Once that was done, he folded up his Scottish rug, just the thing for the outdoors, and picked up a book. He carried everything out to the old pick-up truck, his faithful companion of ten years or more, still in remarkably good health and spirits. What a fine buy that little car had been.

He set off steering at will, driving and being driven, waiting to chance upon an inviting spot.

Once out of the city, he kept going straight ahead, watching factories go by, increasingly infrequently, smelling the air, increasingly clean, and feeling good, great, increasingly free.

He could tell a classic Saturday lay in store.

Time ticked on and Mr Antunes kept his eye out for somewhere to set anchor. Then a magnificent pine tree passed him on his left.

He pulled off the never-ending tarmac and went down a side track, a sort of trail which the car only just fit down. The wild path curved and once the main road was out of sight he pulled to a halt. This was the spot.

The pine trees discreetly went zzz zzz and the fallen needles looked delightful, with ants and wiggling bugs and everything.

He spread out the Scottish rug in a leisurely way, folding it in half to protect against any overly aggressive needles. He'd chosen a patch of ground at the foot of a sturdy tree trunk, so as to have something to lean against.

He placed the picnic basket to one side and the cooler to the other, then placed himself triumphantly in the middle. He stretched out with a sense of satisfaction he'd not felt in a long time. He settled down to read. Mr Antunes always liked a bit of culture on a Saturday.

But he couldn't resist. He put the book down and poured himself a generous whisky, with a drop of cold soda to liven it up. Then, treating himself to the occasional slow and savoured sip, he really cut loose; a foie gras sandwich with anchovies and capers for an aperitif.

Chewing away in satisfaction, he heard footsteps and turned his head. Someone was coming down the path. Mr Antunes watched as a man approached, dressed in shirt sleeves, whistling.

Somewhat annoyed, Mr Antunes prepared himself to be civil.

"Good day," said the newcomer, as he came to a stop by the pine tree.

"Well then, a very good day to you too," replied Mr Antunes, with his mouth full, trying to smile and chew at the same time.

The intruder sat down on the end of the rug. Mr Antunes thought this a bit much but, what the hell, it was Saturday and the sun was shining.

The stranger looked straight at Mr Antunes, studying him carefully. He raised his left index finger and asked in a calm voice:

"What's your name?"

Blimey! Mr Antunes didn't like it, he didn't like it one bit. These people obsessed with asking stupid questions! But he replied:

"Antunes. Ricardo Gouveia Antunes."

"Three names?"

Oh no, thought Mr Antunes. I've got a right one here!

"Yes, were you hoping for more?"

"No, no. It's just that it isn't regulation. Why Gouveia Antunes?"

"Oh, you know, something to do with my mother, and my father, who'd have thought it!"

Sarcasm seemed the best way to go.

"Your mother and father. Curious, very curious, fascinating even."

The intruder seemed lost in faraway thought. So Mr Antunes made a decision. He would counter-attack. And so he asked, mockingly:

"And what might Sir's name be?"

"Today my name's Cananaro."

Hang on a minute, there's something funny going on here, thought Mr Antunes. But the other man, the Cananaro of today, didn't give him a chance to dwell upon it.

"Sir is eating?"

Mr Antunes realised he'd been rude. But this questioning business, the whole thing had disorientated him.

"Ah, of course, yes I am. Can I offer you anything? There are some good ham sandwiches in there. And beer. No need to stand on ceremony."

"No thanks, it's my day off the one after tomorrow. Today I can't, you understand. The only reason I asked was to find out whether you've paid the tax."

"The tax? What tax?"

By now Mr Antunes wasn't sure what to say or do.

"The Gruka tax of course. Unless Sir has come from Rovir or Tronka. You follow me?"

No, he did not. Mr Antunes snapped. Saturday it might have been, but he wasn't putting up with this.

"Look mate: I've got nothing to do with any tax, never have done, never will, not the Gruka tax nor any other, nor anything else for that matter. I haven't come from Rovir or Tronka and I don't want ever to come from either of them. And my name is Ricardo Gouveia Antunes, three names like you say and seem not to like. You got that? Am I making myself clear?"

"Calm down, calm down please," said Canonaro, "no need to get angry, all is not lost," and then he sat there on the rug and smiled at Mr Antunes.

Antunes didn't know what to say. He was left dumbstruck, still chewing the remains of his sandwich, though he no longer felt like drinking his whisky.

The other man reached into his back trouser pocket and took out a little box, like one of those cheap Japanese transistor radios. He spoke into it, his voice measured.

"Send the collections car. Yes, 27-Gruka. It does seem urgent, yes, let's call it urgent."

He put the box back into his pocket and then fell to staring at the trunk of the pine tree.

Mr Antunes was just about to stand up when he heard the sound of an engine.

Up the narrow path came a truck, an old model that looked as if it was from the 1930s, the sort that used to be used for removals, with an iron grill on the back like a cage. It ripped to shreds the lower branches of the pine trees, which were still going zzz zzz, and then it stopped, right there, next to Mr Antunes' pick-up. Two middle-aged men got out, dressed in shirt sleeves and wearing berets. One of them had an enormous moustache that drooped down, sad and ancient looking.

Mr Antunes was left surveying the scene without knowing what to do. And on a sunny Saturday to boot!

The two men from the old truck headed over to the supposed Cananaro and awaited instruction, glancing indifferently at Mr Antunes.

“Take him away. He was eating, he hasn't paid the day tax, he has three names and he was reading when I got here. Put him in the hot bath. Then we'll see.”

They grabbed hold of Mr Antunes by his arms, one on either side. Mr Antunes offered no resistance. They took him over to the truck and put him in the cage on the back.

When they closed the grill Mr Antunes looked around him and he heard the pine trees, distinctly heard them, gently going zzz zzz.

Return

On his way home
after ten years work
on the military ring road
he thought
this isn't for the best
it would be better to go back
to being able to leave home
go back to looking
for any kind of work
that would allow him ten more years
of not having to be
at home

Reproach

After being executed
and finished off with a shot to the back of the head
he got upset
and felt compelled
to tell
the major
in charge of the firing squad
that had executed him
to please
pay attention
I don't want to have to repeat
this reproach
the next time I'm condemned to my death
and given my final words
to cry out
in conviction
one last *viva a revolução*

Tropicalia

We are always rather on our guard when in the South American tropics, it can't be helped. We carry around a sort of European Cartesian baggage, even if unwittingly. The tropics couldn't care less, like some unknown and extraordinary machine designed to keep annoyingly prickling us. Bugs that wiggle, plants that devour space, people who devour anything, cities that appear out of nowhere, from a bygone era, reaching out with their tentacles for olive oil, caviar, shoes, *néspera* fruit and anything else. Not to mention the straw hats, incredible rivers and 300 million ravenous, constantly evolving people.

But what I find most upsetting, have always found alarming, are the appearances and disappearances.

One day I went home for lunch. I opened the door, checked the post and went into the kitchen. I prepared the usual, a sausage and a gin and tonic, with no tonic, as it should be. Still chewing, I went out on the terrace to get some air and admire the sky scrapers that blocked my view on all sides.

It was the tenth floor. And wham, there it was, propping itself up and staring at me. An elephant, right there on the terrace.

I was rather alarmed, naturally. But when all is said and done, who am I to allow myself be alarmed about anything? I went back inside and had something else to eat.

Back at work that afternoon, I began to warm to the idea. There was no doubting an elephant would make a solid, mighty, appropriate and maybe even respectable companion for a bachelor.

When I went home for the pre-requisite evening meal, I decided to check again. I went out on the terrace and the animal was still there, calmly fanning itself with its trunk. So I did what had to be done. I went straight back inside and got two cane chairs, a straw mat and an old bamboo blind from under the kitchen sink. I knew him well, or so it seemed to me.

I bid him good night and went inside to watch TV. I had my usual few drinks, went to bed and slept content.

The next day, morning just having broken, I went back out on to the terrace full of joy. There was nothing there. The animal had gone, it had disappeared. The elephant that had brought me such hope had vanished.

I was furious. It wasn't right. I made for the door and set off to complain.

I jumped into the first taxi I saw and told the driver to head for the Department of Lost and Found.

Once there, I went straight over to the official in charge, who was sitting behind a counter reading the paper, evidently very busy.

"My elephant's disappeared," I blurted out, genuinely hurt and aggrieved.

"What colour is it?" he asked, unconcerned but courteous.

"What? Grey of course."

"Ok, I'll make a note of it. But who knows, maybe Sir didn't give it enough to eat!"

"Two cane chairs, a straw mat and a bamboo blind, does that not sound like much to you?"

"Don't get angry, there's no point getting angry. He'll come back, you'll see."

All things considered, the official was right. The situation was as it was.

I went home, poured a gin and waited. That's just how it was in the tropics. Things appeared and they disappeared.

In the meantime, as I've gone about my business, a lovely brunette, seven bottles of gin and a packet of arrowroot biscuits have appeared.

The elephant still hasn't.

Such is life.

Evocation

Footprint in the sand
still outlined
like some distant sign
awaiting only
the expected arrival
of full tide
to then depart
rocking boat
empty like a conch
abandoned amongst the debris
recalling
the absent face
of a woman
wrapped in seaweed
with sun marks
up to the shoulders
from a time now forgotten
woman's smile
gently disappearing
behind a sand dune
like the little schooner
parting
the powerful sun

all the demons
singing from your hand
the sea
solitude

Ceasefire

He was the son of an Earthling and a Saturnian. He had pointy ears like a wolf, and a smile like frozen ammonia.

He was logical and objective.

He was called up for the Great Colonial and Patriotic Solar War.

He refused to go.

He was sent to be a hero in Procion-5.

He said no.

They insisted.

He put an H bomb next to Everest and pulverised the Earth.

Then he left. For Procion-5.

The above extract was translated by Jethro Soutar.

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