Gerd Nygårdshaug - sample from Mino's Story

Translated from the Norwegian by Steven T. Murray

CHAPTER 1

White as the heart of a coconut

The magnolia ridge southeast of the village shone a golden green in the low evening sunlight, and the mild, humid, almost unnoticeable breeze brought with it the slightly bitter fragrance of canforeira, camphor. In the midst of all this green towered the jacaranda trees in full bloom, resembling porcelain-blue lighthouses that attracted all the birds, from zopilotes and hummingbirds to toucans with their curious beaks.

After the swift and powerful afternoon shower a swarm of statiras, lemon butterflies, emerged from their shelter and flew over the village, lured by the strong fragrance of flowers and produce at the marketplace. It was hot, and the jungle was steaming.

"Get away, you little rascal, or I'll conjure up all the Oboyo and Kayimi spirits from the forest so they creep under your blanket at night and bite their poison into your body!" A thin old coconut-seller swatted his tattered hat at a little barefoot, half-naked boy

who slipped away like lightning with a warbling, mischievous laugh.

Mino Aquiles Portoguesa was six years old and had lost almost all his baby teeth. He hid behind the trunk of an enormous plane tree. He wasn't afraid of the coconut-seller in the least. None of the children was afraid of old Eusebio with the wheelbarrow, even though he was the one who scolded the most and yelled the loudest when the boys came too close to his coconut cart. They knew that deep inside he was a nice man. More than once they had managed to get a whole, uncracked nut from him. Not many coconut-sellers on the market square would give the poor kids whole coconuts.

"Minolito, come here! We found something!" His friend Lucas was calling him.

Mino dashed from the plane tree over to a stack of old produce boxes that stood in a corner of the square. Lucas, Pepe, and Armando stood there poking with a stick inside a wooden box full of rotten brown cabbage leaves. Mino looked into the box.

"Sapito," he said. "A little white frog. Look, it's trying to hide in the rotten cabbage. Don't hurt it, Armando."

Armando, who was ten and almost grown, tossed away the stick. Instead he took a piece of string out of his pocket and tied a professional-looking noose in one end.

"Now we'll hang it up and scare the coconut-sellers away from their carts. It's poisonous, I can tell you. My grandfather almost died when he touched a frog like this." Armando carefully lowered the noose toward the frog's head and then jerked it tight.

Lucas, Pepe, and Mino stepped back in fright. The frog dangled and

struggled, floundering with its long hind legs, and its glassy eyes took on a matte film. Armando shook with glee and laughed wildly as he held the animal far away from his body. But suddenly the frog made a sudden unexpected move and slapped against Armando's naked thigh. He howled and dropped the frog, which scuttled underneath the produce boxes and disappeared.

A fiery red spot appeared on Armando's thigh, as though he'd burned himself on a mujare bush. Lucas, Pepe, and Mino stared wide-eyed at the spot, waiting for it to start steaming and smoking and spread up Armando's thigh to his groin and on up his stomach and chest. Soon Armando would start to boil and bubble like a pink piglet over the fire, and then Armando would be dead.

Everybody knew that white sapos were dangerous.

But the spot didn't grow any bigger and Armando didn't turn paler. Soon his cheeks regained their color and his eyes were again as defiant as ever.

"Crap," he said, kicking the stack of boxes where the frog had vanished. "Crap. I'm going over to the pump and wash it off. Then I'm going to find some big fat coconut shells to take home to Mama Esmeralda." He took off like a whirlwind, racing between the produce sellers and disappeared beyond the plane tree. Pepe followed.

"He'll probably die tonight," said Lucas, grabbing Mino's arm. The two six-year-olds nodded ominously to each other.

[LINE BREAK]

Mino approached the edge of the woods cautiously. His bare feet sank deep into the reddish-brown, muddy soil in which Father Macondo had tried to plant taro, in vain. The withered bushes drooped forlornly toward the bare mud that could hardly be called soil. The jungle surrounded the village, leaving a strip of stinking marsh between itself and the tiny portion of soil that could be cultivated. But Father Macondo never gave up; he kept planting and planting.

Mino stopped and picked up a small branch that had fallen from one of the giant trees. It was just the right size and had the proper Y-shape. Then he took a mosquito net from his pocket that was sewn together to form a bag, a long sausage with an opening in one end. He threaded it elegantly onto the two prongs of the branch of the Y, and bingo, he had a perfect butterfly net. It was here, near the wall of the jungle, that the finest mariposas, or butterflies, gathered.

His father had told him that today he needed two big blue morphos.

Mino thought about the frog that had burned Armando. Armando must be down with a high fever by now. He was careful about where he put his feet; maybe there were more white frogs hidden in the brown mud.

A big orange argante flew up and settled on one of the withered taro bushes. Mino knew the names of most types of butterflies that lived in the jungle; his father had taught him everything that was in the big butterfly book. He cautiously crept closer to the bush, holding the net in front of him, and then with a quick swish caught the butterfly. With practiced fingers he hurried to squeeze the butterfly's thorax, just hard enough not to damage it, but enough so that the butterfly fainted. Then he took a little metal box from his

pocket, and soon the butterfly was locked inside with the cotton ball that was soaked in ether. That is how the butterfly died.

Every time he went out with the butterfly net, Mino felt like a hunter. He was a mighty hunter. None of his pals was allowed to come with him when he was hunting butterflies for his father. Because in his pocket he carried a deadly weapon: a tin box filled with poisonous gas. He and his father had a secret ritual every time he was sent out to hunt. "Minolito," his father said, and then a difficult term: "Ethyl acetate." Mino would have to repeat this phrase, and then they would both nod. After that his father would sneak into the bathroom without his wife seeing, and take a tiny piece of cotton from his mother's top dresser drawer, then they would both nod again and Mino would follow his father out to the shed. Hidden behind a beam under the roof, so high that his father had to stand on a box, was the bottle. The bottle with the Drops of Death. He would moisten the cotton ball and quickly put it into Mino's box. It retained the power to kill for many hours.

Mino had now come all the way to the first trees at the edge of the jungle. He looked around warily. To find the morphos he would have to go into the jungle itself. That was where the beautiful, metallic-blue butterflies of heaven lived. They were hard to catch. As a rule they flew very high, too high for Mino to reach them with his net. But sometimes they would drift down toward the clearings in the forest and alight on the ground. Then he had to creep up on them as cautiously as he could.

Mino knew that this was precisely the right time to catch morphos.

It was late in the afternoon. In an hour it would be dark, but this was the time when the morphos might come down from the treetops like shiny blue flakes and settle on the ground. His father would make ten times as much for a morpho as for a statiro or an argante.

The jungle was quiet and humid. Vapor rose up from the withered leaves he stepped on, and a small animal suddenly darted off in front of him: a tiny frog or verdigris iguana. Mino liked the jungle. He wasn't scared in the least, even though it was dim and sultry beneath the gigantic trees. But he never went so far in that he couldn't hear the sounds and shouts from the village.

He was a small hunter, but he was a mighty hunter. Like the Oboyos and the Kayimis had been fifty years ago. They'd had poison arrows; that's what Armando had told him. But he had poison gas in his pocket. If he'd had a box big enough, he could surely have caught javelinas and armadillos. But they lived deep inside the jungle.

Mino caught one morpho, then he caught two. And just before it started to get dark, he caught a third. They were bigger than his hand and barely fit inside his box with their wings folded up. His father would praise him as a great hunter.

He hopped and sloshed through the mud and forgot that there were white frogs. He zigzagged through Señor Gomera's tomato patch and bounded over Señora Serrata's thriving manioc plants. Soon he had reached the plane tree where he'd hidden the bundle of coconut shells he'd collected from around the sellers' carts that afternoon. Then he saw Mama Esmeralda come sobbing toward the square holding a black cloth that she was waving all around.

Then Mino knew that Armando must be dead.

[LINE BREAK]

Before Father Macondo raised his spade and sprinkled a little of the rust-brown dirt onto the coffin where Armando lay, deep down in the hole, he said:

"The small hearts that suddenly stop beating, do not stop for God. In Heaven they will keep beating, and the blood that flows through them will rush with joy like the clear stream pouring over the cliff. Today Armando is living in the great halls of the Kingdom of Heaven. There is no crying there, no rags. No hunger that gnaws in little children's stomachs like raging ocelots. From up there Armando can smile down at us miserable peons planting in barren soil. But one day our time will come."

Mino held tight to his father's hand and thought about Father Macondo's withered taro bushes. Then he thought that Armando now lay so deep down in the earth that surely no ants or beetles could get to him. Then he shuddered and thought about the white frog.

"Papa," he whispered, looking up at his father, "are the frogs more poisonous than ethyl acetate?"

"Hush," replied Sebastian Portoguesa, placing a cautious hand over his son's mouth.

The priest scattered the dirt and Mama Esmeralda sobbed. She was Armando's grandmother. Nobody in the village knew who his parents were, or where.

The funeral was almost over, and Mino spied a flock of scarlet ibises flying toward the big river. The doctor had said that the frogs's poison wasn't very dangerous, but that Armando's heart had stopped because deep inside he had been so terrified. Fear made his heart stop and his blood cease to flow.

"Papa, why don't the butterflies have any blood? Don't they have hearts either?" He was still holding tight to his father's hand as they moved into the shadows of the cinnamon trees that still smelled fresh, surrounding the graveyard and the little white church with its two towers.

[LINE BREAK]

The house they lived in was not large. It was on the outskirts of the village, next to a little stream in which the water almost always stood still, except in the rainy season when it overflowed and almost reached the threshold of Señora Serrata's house, their nearest neighbor. Mino's grandfather had built the house of mud, straw, and sticks, and the roof was made of rusty corrugated tin. The house was one of the finest in the village because Sebastian Portoguesa went twice a year to buy whitewash and paint from Señor Rivera's store. Then Mino's mother would make big and little brushes from tarapo fibers, and then the whole family would paint and whitewash the house as they sang Bolivar's ballads with improvised lyrics. Mino's youngest brother, Teofilo, who was too little to paint, was tied to the clothes rack so he wouldn't fall over or drink from the whitewash

cans. Mino's mother, Amanthea, his brother Sefrino, who was four years old, and his twin sister Ana Maria, all joyously took part in this work. But Amanthea didn't sing. She hadn't uttered a sound in more than a year.

Sebastian Portoguesa made his living by collecting and selling butterflies. He had a contact in the district capital 200 kilometers farther down the big river, and every week he would send off a shipment with the local bus. He mounted the loveliest butterflies in small plastic boxes that had previously contained candy, which he bought from Señor Rivera at the store. Perfect creations, radiant with incredible colors and patterns. Jungle angels, Mino's father called them. The money he made was not so bad, and as long as Mino and Ana Maria gathered coconut shells from the sellers' booths at the market square, they could keep hunger at bay. There was seldom meat or fish in Amanthea's pots, but they did have a pig and seven chickens, as well as two tame mutum, the jungle turkeys that grew fatter each day on manioc peels and moldy rice.

Mino could sit next to his father for hours watching him prepare the butterflies. He never tired of studying his father's movements as he arranged the butterflies over the spreading board without touching the delicate wings with his fingers. He used pins and tweezers and transparent paper over the butterfly wings. He never stuck pins through the wings. But before the preparation began, a long, thin needle was stuck through the insect's thorax, which was what his father had told him it was called. Then the butterfly was fixed to the spreading board and the wings were arranged in the proper

position. Finally, when the butterfly was perfectly placed, the long, thin antennae were arranged in a nicely symmetrical V. That was the most critical point of the preparation, Mino knew. It took almost nothing to break an antenna, and then the whole specimen was ruined. And that could make his father explode with rage. That's why Mino held his breath whenever it was time to arrange the antennae. If it was an especially rare butterfly, Mino couldn't bear to watch. Then he would take a walk out behind the shed, waiting for a furious outburst from inside. But if it was quiet for a while, Mino would hurry back inside and smile happily when he saw his father, his whole face beaming as he held the spreading board up to the light so everyone could see the wondrous insect: A Pseudolycaena marias! A Morpho montezuma! Or a Parides perrhebes! Mino knew all the Latin names. They were magical and secret words.

Then the butterfly had to be set aside to dry for at least a week before it was placed in a plastic box with a cork bottom. Over the bottom his father would attach a white sheet of paper on which the name and family of the butterfly was written in his mother's neat handwriting. His mother had the nicest handwriting in the family.

Neither Mino nor his father could recall ever seeing anything more beautiful than a butterfly with outstretched wings, forever immobilized. The two of them agreed about that.

Mino's father had taught both Ana Maria and Mino to read. The authorities had promised that a teacher would be coming to the village soon, but so far none had appeared. Mino could read aloud from the big butterfly book, the words falling easily from his lips. In the

evening before Mino went to sleep, his father would often come to sit on his bed and tell stories from the four lives of a butterfly: life as an egg, as a larva, as a cocoon, and as a butterfly. The life as a butterfly was usually the briefest, seldom more than two months, but a jungle butterfly could have plenty of adventures in that brief time.

Mino's mother would stand in the doorway listening with a sad smile, but she didn't utter a sound.

No one in the village knew how Sebastian Portoguesa had come up with the idea of collecting butterflies, or where he had gained the knowledge to prepare them. But everyone agreed that Señor Portoguesa had found a wise and respectable occupation in this village where poverty and unemployment stuck to most people like the stickiest rubber sap, impossible to scrape off. And none of Mino's playmates teased him when he set off on his daily expedition with his butterfly net. He was a solitary but respected hunter.

[LINE BREAK]

"Why don't we cut down the trees that block the sun? Why don't we kill the blowflies with kerosene and fire? In this village does no one have a head on his shoulders? Aren't we worth more than the cabbages that lie rotting in their boxes? Look at Señor Tico, who mounted a sharp machete at the end of his crutch, which he points at the throat of that pig Cabura every time he ventures into the marketplace. Is Señor Tico, even though he's a cripple, the only real man in this village who has a head on his shoulders? You heard what

Father Macondo said: The grandees up on the fertile savanna buy machines that are bigger than our church and that work faster than a thousand caboclos. They have taken all the land, and now they're taking all our work. We're nothing but stinking, rotten cabbages, we're vermin that scurry off when they pull on our tails!"

The coconut seller, whose booth was next to Eusebio's wheelbarrow, was standing atop two produce crates and waving his arms wildly. The flood of invective he hurled over the marketplace just before they would all pack up for siesta aroused great jubilation. Old Eusebio waved his hat and laughed up at the sun with his toothless gums. He pulled out a bottle of clear aguardiente, took a mighty swig, and handed the bottle to the speaker.

"More, Gonzo, more! Viva Tico with his machete on his crutch!"

"Miserable wretches!" Señor Gonzo coughed from the potent sugarcane liquor, but went on: "Hasn't the government promised us work and food and a school? But what do we have? Nothing. Our houses are sinking deeper and deeper into the mud, the whitewash and plaster are flaking off, and the timbers are rotting. Our patches of land are exhausted and the new trees we plant have moldy green bark and produce no fruit. If we find a new, fertile plot the grandees show up with their fine documents with wax seals, and the armeros stick the muzzles of their guns between your eyes and lead you off in chains to the rat-holes in the district capital! What ever happened to Señor Gypez? Or Señor Vasques and his son? After they were forced to drink the piss of that pig Cabura they were thrown in a truck and taken away. That's how it always is, and we press our heads into the

mud that gets deeper and deeper after each rainy season."

Mino climbed up on the church wall under the cinnamon trees so he could get a better view of the commotion in the square. Lucas followed him, but first he deposited his turtle safely between two stones in the wall.

"Looks like Señor Gonzo is on the rampage again. He's standing on some crates and waving his arms," Mino whispered.

"Señor Gonzo isn't an angry man, I know that. He gave me a whole nut yesterday," said Lucas firmly, squinting importantly.

"He's not angry at us. He's mad at that pig Cabura."

"Everybody's mad at that pig Cabura."

"Come on," said Mino, hopping down from the wall. "Let's sneak over to where Señor Gonzo is standing. Maybe he'll give us a nut if we clap at what he's saying."

But Lucas stayed on the wall, afraid that someone in the crowd might step on his toe, which had swollen up after Señora Serrata's cat bit him.

Mino squirmed past the gesticulating and shouting produce sellers until he was standing right near Gonzo. He clapped his hands loudly and hoped that Señor Gonzo would notice. But the speaker turned his gaze out over the crowd far above Mino's head, intoxicated by his own words and his boldness. And he was still taking swigs from toothless Eusebio's shiny bottle. His speech grew more and more vehement.

"What are we going to do with these pigs who eat their own offspring, eh? Well, we're going to whet the biggest and best kitchen knife we have and stick it in their throats until their cursed blood

spurts out red onto the ground, and then we'll hang we'll hang the pig cadaver over an anthill way inside the jungle. That's what we're going to do, right? The next time I walk by Cabura's grubby office I'm going to hawk a big loogie right at his military boots, and then I'm going to shove his carbine aside and pull out his poisonous yellow nose-hairs one by one and tell him that we don't need American lackeys to take care of the land that our forefathers ripped from the grasp of the jungle!"

Suddenly nobody was applauding or shouting. An ominous silence had fallen over the square. The speaker standing on the crates looked around in confusion, and then his eyes fixed on a point a bit to the left of the plane tree. There the crowd parted, and three men in burgundy and yellow camouflage suits with bandoliers and carbines locked and loaded came marching over to Señor Gonzo, whose face had gone gray. He stood there silently mouthing words as his eyes were suddenly brimming with tears.

Mino grabbed onto the thigh of the closest produce seller when he saw who was coming: It was Sergeant Felipe Cabura himself with two of his soldiers. Los armeros.

Señor Gonzo up on the crates had frozen in midair in defiance of gravity and several other laws of nature. His arms and one foot were on their way down from the crates, but the angle of his body made descent impossible. He seemed suspended like that for so long that everyone later said it had seemed like an eternity.

Felipe Cabura kicked the crate on the bottom with such force that Señor Gonzo fell on his back onto Eusebio's wheelbarrow, where he lay

among the shiny green coconuts with the whites of his eyes turned up to the mild blue sky. Then Cabura went over to the wheelbarrow. He grabbed his heavy carbine by the barrel and brought it down with all his might. The gunstock struck a coconut that cracked and sprayed grayish milk all over the closest terrified onlookers.

"Fresh nut," he said, taking aim with his carbine for another blow.

A coconut just to the left of Señor Gonzo's head was smashed open and the milk sprayed out.

"Another fresh nut."

The third blow from Sergeant Felipe Cabura's carbine struck Señor Gonzo in the middle of his nose with terrible force, and red drops rained over the produce sellers.

"Rotten nut," he said. Then he turned on his heel and marched back the same way he had come with his two soldiers, while Señor Gonzo's skinny legs stuck up from the wheelbarrow, twitching in the final convulsions of death.

Mino let go of the produce seller's leg and ran off as fast as he could. He tripped and fell, got back up and kept running. He didn't stop until he stood beside his father's work table in the shade of the banana tree. His mother was hanging up clothes on the clothesline nearby.

"The p-pig C-Cabura smashed Señor Gonzo's head like a coconut," he stammered, out of breath.

Preoccupied, Sebastian Portoguesa looked at his son. Then he put aside the spreading-board with a half-prepared Anartia on it and lifted Mino onto his lap.

"Minolito," he said.

After he'd listened to his son's stammered account, he stood up and walked to the marketplace. He didn't come back until two hours later, when he sat poking at a steaming plate of mung beans and manioc seasoned with chile and green bell peppers that Ana Maria placed before him. Amanthea, his wife, who had borne four healthy and well-formed children, stood in the doorway and stared in fright down at the hard-packed earthen floor.

"Where's Minolito?" he asked, his voice cracking.

"Playing with Teofilo and Sefrino behind the shed," Ana Maria said.

"Tonight you will hear the story of the Oboyo chief and Mariposa Mimosa," he said.

[LINE BREAK]

"Beyond the big river, behind the far ridges, deep inside the selva, the great jungle, lived the powerful Oboyo chief Tarquentarque, who had seven wives and thirty-four sons, but not a single daughter. That's why every evening he sat by the fire complaining as he drank big bowls of fermented cassava that his wives and numerous sons kept bringing to him. Eventually his belly was so big and heavy with cassava that it hung all the way to the ground, and he dragged it along like a sack when he went to the riverbank and sat down on a mangrove root. He sat there all night complaining, while his stomach pitched on the water surface, attracting big schools of piranhas, which greedily tried to chew holes in the huge, tempting paunch that

floated there. But the skin of the chief's belly was so tough and strong that the piranhas' teeth, sharp as awls, couldn't penetrate it. That's how Tarquentarque would sit, night after night, grieving that he had not a single daughter."

Mino blinked his eyes. His father's voice was calm and monotonous, and the comforting sounds from the edge of the jungle a hundred yards from the house wrapped a warm, soothing blanket around the three children, who pressed close to each other in the wide bed they all shared. Teofilo had his own box over in a corner and was already asleep.

Mino closed his eyes tight and saw the horrid face of Sergeant Felipe Cabura when he rammed the butt of his carbine down into Eusebio's wheelbarrow. Coconut milk and blood. But soon the image slid away. His father's colorful description of the jungle chief's sorrow and the fluttering beauty of the Mariposa mimosa that held the chief enchanted became fixed in the six-year-old's imagination and drove off the evil experiences of the day.

When Sebastian Portoguesa finished his story and attached the mosquito net over the bed, he saw that his son had slipped into the world of sleep without torturous and painful thoughts that might bring on nightmares and feverish visions.

He turned to his wife who was standing in the doorway. Amanthea Portoguesa had undone the knot of hair at the nape of her neck. The bluish-black hair spread out over her shoulders, framing her delicate face in a cloak of boundless sorrow and frozen desire. She moved her lips, silently forming a word as her husband held her close and

cautiously stroked her back. It had been like this for over a year.

[LINE BREAK]

Mino was almost nine years old the first time he heard the sound. He was chasing a beautiful feronia across a clearing in the jungle. The pale pink butterfly with black spots had a tendency to alight high up in the trees, too high for Mino to reach with his net. So he had to throw twigs to scare it into flying on and maybe settling lower down on a tree trunk.

He stopped. What was that strange sound? A deep, ominous rumble that rose and fell, mixed with the excited shrieks of the egrets fluttering around the crowns of the trees overhead. It wasn't an animal. It sounded like a machine that roared as it moved up the magnolia ridge. He stopped and listened. It had to be a machine, but what was a machine doing there? How had it gotten there? He forgot the feronia and ran as fast as he could back to the churchyard wall, where he knew that Lucas and Pepe were teasing the giant ant that was always busy with some inexplicable task in the crevices between the stones.

Lucas and Pepe were sitting there dangling their legs over the wall.

"Listen!" Mino shouted.

"You think we're deaf?"

All three of them stood atop the wall, peering over the green treetops, up the gentle slope that could hardly even be called a

ridge. But it distinguished itself from the endless sea of forest as a little rise on top of which grew magnolia and camphor trees. During those rare times of year when the wind blew from the east, the old people in the village who had bronchitis and mucus in their throats would gather with their chairs in front of the church wall. There they would sit with their mouths open, gulping down the healing fragrance of the camphor trees carried to them on the wind.

There was nothing to see, but the rumble rose and fell, rhythmically and monotonously.

"Maybe it's an airplane that crashed and is up there roaring in torment," Pepe guessed.

Then Señora Serrata came over with her skirt full of taro and stood there staring. After her came lame Drusilla's grandfather. Finally a whole crowd of grownups and children stood at the church wall, wondering about this strange sound that had erupted so suddenly, drowning out the thousand other sounds that everyone knew but didn't hear every day.

"It's probably Don Edmundo who's invented some infernal machine to scare the daylights out of us!" exclaimed an old man. Don Edmundo was the closest neighbor to the village. He owned a huge tract that stretched from the fertile savanna down to the river and beyond, how far nobody knew, through the jungle toward the town. Once Don Edmundo had claimed that he also owned the land the village was built on, but then a violent ruckus arose, scythes and machetes were honed sharp, protest delegations were sent to the district capital, and crowds of kids and old women took along pigs and chickens and whole sacks of

manioc. They camped out on Don Edmundo's private and very luxurious patio, where they howled and argued and carried on for several nights, so that the powerful landowner finally retracted his unfortunate words and was forced to sign a document that Father Macondo placed before him, in which it stated that he had no claim on the village land.

The theories of the mysterious rumbling were many and elaborate, but when the afternoon bus drove into the square and stopped in front of Señor Rivera's veranda after having struggled along the crooked, muddy road for two hundred kilometers from the district capital, Elvira Mucco, the daughter of Señor Mucco who cultivated the most beautiful gardenias, recounted the following story:

Just where the road curved around the muddy pond, behind the big stone where Don Edmundo had vainly refused to permit Señor Rivera and Father Macondo to plant sergata trees, several huge machines were now spewing steam and exhaust. A large part of the jungle all around had been chopped down and cleared, and the area was swarming with Americanos in white hardhats, yelling and running about with measuring tapes and binoculars and other odd instruments. In the middle of it all they were digging in the ground. A terrible machine was pounding and hammering a steel girder into the ground. Elvira Mucco had seen all this when the bus was forced to stop for almost half an hour while they removed a stubborn tree from the road. She related this with great difficulty, since her errand in the district capital had been to have some painful teeth pulled from her upper jaw. She added that both of Don Edmundo's sons were there, along with <u>primera</u> Lazzo. They looked ridiculous with mud on their faces and wearing white hats.

Many people had gathered around the bus, listening to what Elvira Mucco had to say. Father Macondo clasped his hands behind his back and looked somber. Señor Rivera kicked a tin box, which scared a dog lying in the shadow by the veranda steps. Louis Hencator, the backup bus driver, who was normally so calm, spat in disgust.

"Oil," said Señor Rivera.

"Oil," replied Father Macondo.

"Oil," everyone whispered as they stood around the bus.

"Oil," said Mino, poking Lucas in the side.

[LINE BREAK]

The noise from the magnolia ridge continued. People stopped from time to time and listened, looking up at the hill and shaking their heads.

And suddenly one day they could see a tower sticking up among the trees. The shiny steel glistened in the sun. Almost everybody in the village except for Sergeant Felipe Cabura and his armeros, had gathered near the churchyard wall. Mino helped Pepe find a safe hiding place for his two turtles, so that nobody would mistakenly tread on them. The men spoke to each other in low voices, and Mino could see his father gesticulating excitedly to Señor Hencator and Señor Mucco.

"The forest belongs to the village!" Father Macondo burst out all of a sudden. "They've cut down a bunch of our trees without even asking us."

"Right over there we could have planted an excellent taro field," a

produce dealer piped up.

"Yes, and there's good soil for growing seranga right over there," another agreed.

"Maybe we can ask to have some of the oil to sell to the gas stations down in town," old Olli Occus suggested.

"The oil is ours, all the oil is ours!" Señor Rivera asserted.

"Don't talk so loud," Father Macondo warned him, holding up his hand. "Maybe we could do something. There are plenty of people here in the village who don't have any particular job at the moment because Don Edmundo bought huge machines to do his sowing and harvesting. Maybe we could talk to the American jefe so that there would be work for everybody who wanted it. Then we could ask for a school to be built in exchange for all the trees they cut down. In the long term, maybe the oil they find up there will make our village richer than it is now."

There was excited and eager muttering when Father Macondo finished speaking. And almost instantaneously it was decided that a delegation should be sent to talk with el jefe americano. With Father Macondo leading the way, five men set off.

Mino and Pepe had been standing on top of the churchyard wall. When Mino turned to climb down, he saw one of Cabura's armeros coming out of the shadow of a cinnamon tree.

[LINE BREAK]

A beautiful Morpho peleides came fluttering down from a treetop and

alighted on a rotten trunk right near where Mino was waiting with his butterfly net. As it now sat with its wings folded up it was almost impossible to see. The colors on the back of its wings blended in well with the surrounding vegetation. But Mino had seen it, looking like a glistening blue flake before it landed. Cautiously he crept closer, and with a sure-handed motion he flipped the net down over it. Soon it lay dead and still in Mino's tin box.

Mino blinked his eyes, peering among the foliage, tree trunks, and lianas. There was a strange, peaceful, and at the same time exhilarating light inside the jungle. And the smell was strong, from flowers, from rotting leaves and branches, from earth and fungus. He could stand still, quiet as a mouse, and just look and listen: hundreds of birds in the treetops above him, thousands of different insects buzzing, the rustling of countless lizards and basilisks, ants of every size in frenzied activity on the jungle floor, beetles, larvae, and spiders. And almost none of the trees were the same. There were hundreds, thousands of different types, and if he scratched the bark, a different color would ooze out with a new and unique smell.

So many strange creatures, Mino thought. So many elegant butterflies there must be in the world! Could they all be in the book that his father owned? Maybe there were more that hadn't been discovered yet. Imagine if one day he came home with a really fine butterfly that wasn't in any of the books! What if he were the first one to find it? How much money he would earn! Money to build an extra room onto the house so that he and his siblings could all have

their own beds.

Sebastian Portoguesa gave his son a kindly look as he eagerly opened the box with the day's catch. Two excellent morphos and many fine ones from the Heliconidae family. Mama Amanthea brought a platter of steaming carvera and placed it before her son on the table. She stroked his hair, smiling, but said not a word. Mino set to work on the fragrant vegetable dish.

As he ate, Señor Portoguesa gazed proudly at his son. Then he looked over at his wife.

It had been almost four years now since Amanthea Portoguesa had uttered a complete sentence. In the past year she had managed to speak individual one-syllable words, but that was all. Twice Sebastian Portoguesa had made the long, expensive journey down to the district capital with his wife to visit el médico psicólogo. After the last trip he thought she had improved a great deal; her eyes looked livelier and she managed to say a few words. Over several months he had saved up enough money to make another trip. He wanted his wife to recover completely after the terrible, humiliating incident she had been subjected to one late afternoon four years before. It had turned Amanthea Portoguesa into a mute, wandering zombie with a vacant look in her eyes.

She and two other women, old Esmeralda and Señora Freitas, had been walking along the road collecting anonas that had fallen from the trees. Amanthea had spied a nice big anona tree a short distance inside the jungle, and she went in to gather up the fruit that was lying beneath it. She soon had her skirt full of fruit and hurried

after the other two, who were on their way back to the village. Just then a jeep with four armeros came down the road heading for the district capital.

Before the altar in church, Señora Freitas and old Esmeralda, holding their crucifixes in their right hands pressed to their breasts, were able to give their accounts at the earnest request of Father Macondo. They had turned around and watched the jeep as it rolled by. It screeched to a stop beside Señora Portoguesa as she stood by the side of the road with her skirt full of anona fruit. All four armeros had hopped out of the vehicle and surrounded Amanthea, who let go of the hem of her skirt so that the fruit rolled onto the dirt road. Then they dragged her over to the jeep and held her tight. They stripped off all her clothes and lay her across the hood of the jeep. Three men held her down as the fourth had his way with her. Then they changed places until they were all done. At first Señor Portoguesa screamed, but suddenly she fell utterly silent. When the jeep drove off she was lying by the side of the road/in the ditch, bloody and silent. With great effort they helped the violated and shamed woman back to the village and her home.

This was the account that Señora Freitas gave in the church four years ago.

Sebastian Portoguesa sighed, waving off some irritating pium flies and went back to preparing the butterflies. Mino was done with his meal, and was told to run over to the produce market to gather up coconut shells from the vendors, who would soon be packing up their stalls and carts. His brother Sefrino, who was now six years old, had

eaten the berries from a turquesa bush and was in bed with nausea and a fever. Mino's twin sister helped her mother with the wash, while the youngest member of the family, four-year-old Teofilo, was counting the ants he was pinching to death as they entered through a crack in the doorway.

And up on the magnolia ridge, the huge machines roared on.

[LINE BREAK]

"Then the lovely Mariposa Mimosa came flying, with yellow stripes on its wings and big blue antennae. It alighted on the stomach of unhappy Tarquentarque and tickled him with its wings. The Oboyo chief tried to wave it away, but Mariposa Mimosa kept coming back. It seemed to be enjoying the big belly of Tarquentarque floating on the surface of the water.

"'Why do you have such a big stomach, mighty chief?' asked Mariposa Mimosa in its delicate, melodic voice.

"'Because I drink so much cassava,' rumbled the chief.

"'And why do you drink so much cassava, mighty chief?' Mariposa Mimosa hummed.

"'Because I'm sad,' replied the chief with a chuckle because the butterfly was tickling him so much.

"'Why are you sad, mighty chief?' the yellow-striped butterfly wanted to know.

"'Because I have thirty-four sons, but not a single daughter,' the chief lamented, rocking his belly back and forth. 'I wish I had a

daughter as beautiful as you, butterfly, but I know that will never happen.'

"'It can happen, mighty chief, if you follow my advice.'

"Then the sorrowful chief became very curious."

Mino lay half-listening to the fairy tale, which he'd heard before, as his father told it to his brother Sefrino. He tried to think his own thoughts, not letting himself get distracted by the story. He didn't really know what it meant that los americanos now wanted to take up the oil from the earth. But why hadn't they come and asked the village, asked Father Macondo for permission, before they chopped down the trees? Father Macondo and some other men from the village had been up to talk to el jefe, but they had come back looking dejected. And many of the men who were usually so quiet had shouted and said bad words about both los americanos and los armeros. That was a dangerous thing to do, Mino knew that. He remembered quite well the time three years before when the pig Cabura had cracked open the coconut-seller Gonzo's head like a nut. Gonzo had been talking too loudly. And the pig Cabura now had at least ten armeros around him; six new ones had arrived in the village in the past week. They drove around in two jeeps, yelling and screaming and chasing the chickens and making nasty faces at the youngest kids, who ran crying to their mothers' skirts.

Mino didn't like the new noise coming from the magnolia ridge. It was evil. But when his father had almost reached the end of the story about Tarquentarque, he pushed aside the difficult thoughts and carefully followed along with the tale. This was how it was supposed

to be.

[LINE BREAK]

The following year big changes occurred in and around the village. More happened that year than in the past fifty years, according to Señor Rivera speaking from his veranda. But none of what happened was good.

First of all, one delegation after another was sent from the village up to the oilfield to plead the case of their ownership of the area, then to secure work at the new enterprise for the people who were able to work. But it was all in vain. True, three men received offers of jobs, but they turned them down because the twenty-seven others did not get any. El jefe, the American, whose name was the ridiculous D.T. Star (whom Father Macondo immediately dubbed Detestar), was not accommodating in the least. He claimed that the forest, that the whole area, belonged to Don Edmundo. He showed off a brand-new document with seals and stamps and the signature of the President, confirming this claim. Another equally imposing document showed that his company had bought the rights to oil extraction in the entire region -- actually in the entire province. When Father Macondo showed them his documents, which also boasted several stamps and signatures, including that of Don Edmundo, D.T. Star merely laughed derisively, tore the documents to bits, and threw them to the floor in front of the village delegation.

As far as work in the forest and payment in compensation for the

trees, the villagers had nothing much to gain there either. Special workers were needed. Most of the work was done with complicated machines. D.T. Star didn't need untrained illiterates. And the forest? Compensation? Didn't Don Edmundo own the forest? They had already paid him for it. Don Edmundo had received a substantial sum.

Barefoot and with drooping heads the delegation returned to the village. But in church Father Macondo spoke vehemently, and in language that had never been heard by anyone in the village before.

Among the produce sellers on the square, times were also dismal. Four of them, including Eusebio with the wheelbarrow, had been forced to give up. They were the ones who sold sergata fruit and wild turnips. The best spot to gather them had been razed by the Company's bulldozers. The benches around the gigantic plane tree in the square grew more and more crowded with the unemployed. For many the main occupation of the day was slapping pium flies and chewing green coconut. Now and then some aggression was relieved by spitting a juicy clot of coconut after Cabura's men, who patrolled the square more and more often with their carbines.

"Shoot me!" yelled Señor Tico one day, raising his crutch toward an armero. "Shoot me, shoot a cripple, then you'll at least have done something to satisfy the pea-sized lizard brain that's sitting behind your nose!"

With that the armero raised his carbine, flicked off the safety, and shot eighteen holes in Tico's body. At least ten of the wounds were fatal.

The kids that gathered coconut shells at the square didn't have an

easy time either. It was rare for Mino and Sefrino to come home to their parents with a full bundle. So eventually several of the children were sent out into the jungle to see if they could find any wild turnips, sergata, or windfall fruit. The task was not without danger. Señor Mucco's youngest daughter, Teobalda, got separated one day from the others in her group. For four days they searched and shouted for her, but in vain. Teobalda never came back. And Pepe, Mino's best friend, fell from a rotten anona tree and broke his leg. He had to use crutches for the rest of his life.

More and more often D.T. Star would come to the village to see Sergeant Felipe Cabura in his office. Nobody knew what they talked about. But the results of these visits became evident to the villagers at once, since each time an empty bottle was flung out of Cabura's window onto the street. The label on these bottles was always the same: Old Kentucky Bourbon. Five Years Old.

[LINE BREAK]

One day as Mino went deep into the jungle on paths only he knew, hunting for the rarest of the rare butterflies, an idea struck him that was so momentous and frightening that he had to sit down on a gigantic branch that had fallen from the top of a metador tree.

The idea was this: The pig Cabura and D.T. Star were good friends. They had probably known each other a long time. It was probably Cabura who had told D.T. Star that there was oil in the ground right near their village. The pig Cabura was therefore to blame for the

misfortune that was befalling their village. He also had power over all the other armeros who were terrorizing the villagers. The pig Cabura was a murderer. The pig Cabura would end up destroying the entire village. Therefore the pig Cabura must be killed.

He sat on that branch deep in the jungle, while an army of sauba ants marched across his left foot, and he listened to the snuffling of a javelina in the nearby bushes, as a serpico butterfly miraculously alighted next to his tin box with the ethyl acetate, which he had placed on the ground at his feet. There and then ten-year-old Mino Aquiles Portoguesa made an especially important decision: He was going to kill the pig Sergeant Felipe Cabura.

When he had thought the idea through and made up his mind, he smiled at the play of light in the treetops far above, cautiously picked up his net, and elegantly captured the rare serpico butterfly.

*

Far underground, somewhere below the long street Rue du Bac in Paris, possibly right under the incredibly narrow and somewhat shabby Hotel Fleury, two men were sitting in an oddly furnished room that only the two of them and three others even knew existed. The room was not shown on any blueprint, and the entrance and route down to the room was so complicated and ingeniously designed that not even an alley cat familiar with the terrain had a chance of finding it. The room was

international territory, and one of the five who knew about it was the security minister of France, though he seldom visited.

Messieurs Urquart and Gascoigne sat facing each other, each in a deep, comfortable easy chair. Between them was a table-like glass surface on which round and square fields were marked in red, green, and blue, with letters and numbers written inside. The glass surface was practically covered with papers, and an overflowing ashtray had been placed in the middle.

The room was quite big, and along the walls were mounted fax machines, monitors, telexes, and modern data equipment. The lighting was very pleasant, reminiscent of subdued daylight.

Urquart was the older of the two, almost sixty, with a serious, chiseled face and deep, clear eyes behind a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. His thin hair, combed straight back, was held in place by gel. He wore an elegant dark suit, a light-colored striped shirt, and a neutral tie. Gascoigne, on the other hand, was dressed far more casually. He had on light-colored trousers with a matching acrylic sweater. He was also younger than Urquart, hardly past fifty, a bit on the plump side, with a ruddy face and a relatively good-natured expression.

On the street, Urquart and Gascoigne would slip perfectly into the crowd.

Gascoigne ground out his cigarette, placed his forefinger on a green field on the tabletop, and a monitor came to life on the wall beside them.

"The Athens to Istanbul train," he said with a nod.

"Who's going to take her?" Urquart flicked away a bit of dust from the left-hand lens of his glasses.

"A Greek civilian named Nikis. He'll drive her straight to the airport at Komotini. A special plane is waiting."

"How long do you think we can keep her in the garden house?"

Gascoigne threw out his hands. "Two hours -- two days. Impossible to know. Merde. I hope she sings like a nightingale."

A telex chattered its arrival. Urquart tore it off and read the message aloud. "Confirmed," he said. "The fly will soon be caught in the web and the world can breathe easier."

The conversation between Urquart and Gascoigne, in international territory far below street level of the Rue de Bac in Paris, took place precisely four thousand three hundred eighty days after the ten-year-old Mino Aquiles Portoguesa had decided to kill the pig Cabura.

*

Pepe was squatting next to Mino. His crutches were much too big.

"Are we going to paint the skull on the turtle today?"

Mino shook his head. He had asked his best friend to come with him down to the pond in back of Señor Serrata's house. Behind a tight bunch of reeds Mino had made a little place for himself. There the dirt was tamped down hard, and he could sit in peace and quiet on some flagstones he had laid out, studying the frogs that croaked on the big

Victoria water-lily pads floating on the water. The pond was full of the strangest wriggling things living out their own complex existence.

Mino needed help. He had to have help to kill the pig Cabura, so he would have to tell Pepe about his plan.

"We're going to kill the pig Cabura," he said all of a sudden after they had sat down.

"Really?" Pepe's face lit up. "That's a great game, Minolito. We'll pretend to kill all the armeros. That frog over there, for instance, can be the pig Cabura. Can't you see it looks like him?" Pepe laughed and pointed at the frog.

"Don't be silly," Mino snorted, "I mean for real. You and I are going to kill Cabura. Kill him so he lies there dead and can't take another breath." Then he told his friend about his plan and all the ideas he'd had in the forest.

Pepe turned pale. His eyes were wide and round as saucers. He splashed the water with a stick. Then he studied his foot -- the one that had broken in so many places that it would never heal again.

"Ca-Cabura and los-los armeros. . . are dangerous. We'll never pull it off," he whispered.

"Sure we will." Mino tossed his head. "It's not difficult. It's much harder to catch and kill a serpico butterfly, I'll tell you that. But you can't tell anybody about this, not a single person. You don't talk in your sleep, do you?"

Pepe shook his head energetically.

Then Mino told him exactly how they were going to kill the pig Cabura and save the village from being destroyed by Don Edmundo and

D.T. Star.

[LINE BREAK]

Señor Gomera's tomato patch was the best in the whole village. No one grew as many tomatoes on their bushes as he did. Four neat rows of ten bushes each meant that he could take two full baskets to the market square every day. Señor Gomera had a little secret. He had discovered quite by accident that when miamorates, a variety of nightshade, grew around the tomato bushes, they produced more than twice as many tomatoes. The only problem was that this type of nightshade was very poisonous. But since nobody would ever dream of eating miamorates, it didn't make any difference.

Now it so happened that one of Sergeant Cabura's armeros, a man with a crewcut and a bull neck who went by the name of Pitrolfo, owned a dog. A skinny German shepherd that did not like people and was mostly kept locked inside a fenced area behind the barracks. But once in a while this armero would take the beast out, tie a long sipo, or rope plant, to the dog's collar, and take him for a walk. Sometimes he would let the dog run free, and then all the kids in the village were shooed indoors and the doors locked.

One day Pitrolfo thought it would be a good idea to let his German shepherd loose, and the dog ran straight to Señor Gomera's burgeoning tomato patch. At first he just sniffed around, then he pissed systematically on eight or nine plants. And then something happened that was to be Señor Gomera's great misfortune: The dog suddenly began

gobbling down large quantities of the small white flowers on the miamorates plants. After that he quickly pissed on four or five other tomato bushes. Then he lay right down and began to howl pitifully. Pitrolfo put down his carbine, took out his whistle and blew it. He was trying to call the dog back to him. But the German shepherd lay stiff as a board among the tomato bushes and howled. He turned over on his back and flailed his legs in the air. The howling grew weaker. Pitrolfo gave up blowing his whistle and went over to the dog. Just as he got there, the beast writhed in violent convulsions, wheezed once, and lay still. The German shepherd was stone dead, killed by eating Señor Gomera's miamorates.

Pitrolfo's eyes almost popped out of his head when he saw the dog lying there dead. Then he discovered a half-eaten miamorates in the animal's mouth. He looked around and roared some vile oaths, then fired seventeen shots from his machine pistol into the closest tomato bush.

Most of the people in the village had stayed indoors when they realized that Pitrolfo was going to let his dog loose. When they heard the shots coming from the tomato patch, they knew that something especially awful was going on. The produce sellers swiftly packed up their stalls and crept in behind tomato crates or found a spot in the deepest shadows. In a moment the whole village seemed to have died out.

Mino and Pepe, who had been spying on the pig Cabura since morning, were sitting up high in a tree behind the building where Cabura had his office. From there they had a good view of how fourteen armeros

with Sergeant Cabura in the lead held their rifles ready to fire as they stormed toward Señor Gomera's tomato patch. They were going to Pitrolfo's aid, since something had made him fire off seventeen shots.

The next hour was extremely upsetting for most of the villagers. After Sergeant Felipe Cabura and the rest of the armeros figured out what had happened in the tomato patch, Pitrolfo began gesticulating wildly. The dog's body was taken back to the barracks and placed inside the fence, where it remained, eventually attracting huge swarms of flies. Then the armeros spread out through the village, going with terrible resolve to every single house and kicking on every door.

"Who is the owner of this pestilence-infested tomato patch?" they roared.

"Will the owner of the python plants step outside immediately!" came the order.

The villagers remained silent, and the armeros were met with cautious head-shaking everywhere.

Señora Gomera lived in a little house near the middle of the village. She and her husband shared the house with the Perez family, who ran a small laundry. When she heard kicking and shouting at the front door, she pressed little Maria, eight months old, firmly to her breast and timidly opened the door. Two armeros asked her brusquely if this was the house of the owner of a certain tomato patch.

Señora Gomera nodded. She was incapable of lying to anyone.

As soon as the armeros had located the tomato grower's house, the whole troop assembled outside, with Sergeant Cabura in the lead. There was a tremendous uproar, and little Maria uttered heart-rending

screams as her mother was dragged out into the street.

The whole village knew instantly that the Gomera family had suddenly become the target of the armeros' rage, although no one really knew why. The produce sellers emerged from the shadows and crates, doors opened, and people came out into the streets. Slowly but surely they formed a silent circle around Señora Gomera and the infuriated armeros.

A short but agile man stepped forward from the circle and walked right up to Sergeant Cabura. It was Señor Gomera. He asked politely what was the meaning of all this. If they wanted something from him they should have come to the market square where he tended his vegetable stall, instead of frightening the daylights out of his wife and baby daughter.

"Olé!" Sergeant Cabura roared. "Olé! Pitrolfo! Here you have the poison maker! Here you have the shameful vermin who allows poisonous plants to grow next to his fresh red tomatoes. Holy San Giovanni knows whether he is cultivating this poison with plans to mix it into our soup one fine day. Pitrolfo! What do you want us to do to this son of a sow who killed your fine dog Caesar?"

Pitrolfo sneered and waved his rifle in the face of Señor Gomera, who ducked but the sharp edge of the gun sight tore off one of his earlobes. Blood dripped down onto his clean white shirt.

"Do? Ha! Do? What do I want to do with this lizard? Well, I'll tell you: He must eat two big fistfuls of his own poisonous plants. And if he doesn't swallow them all, we're going to cut off his dick and balls!"

A murmur passed through the crowd. The women began to sob. Father Macondo made his way forward along with the old doctor, Pedro Pinelli.

"Listen," he said, holding up both hands to Sergeant Cabura. "The doctor here tells me that it could be fatal to eat that much of this plant. Be reasonable, Sergeant Felipe Cabura. Does a human being have to die because a dog mistakenly ate poisonous plants in a field and died? No righteous God would approve of Pitrolfo's revenge."

Sergeant Cabura gave a coarse laugh and shoved the priest and the doctor back into the crowd. Then he ordered an armero to gather up a big bunch of miamorates. They tied poor Señor Gomera's hands behind his back, and they sat him down on a crate right outside his own front door. Seven armeros guarded him, all with weapons locked and loaded and pointing at his head. Señora Gomera ran sobbing into the house with her little Maria.

The muttering from the crowd surrounding this dreadful scene began to sound ominous. The circle around the armeros and poor Señor Gomera closed in, and some of the armeros looked visibly nervous, waving the muzzles of their rifles at those who stood nearest. The armero who was sent to the tomato patch came back with his arms full of poisonous plants.

"In the name of God and the Holy Mother I beg you to stop this, Sergeant Felipe Cabura!" Father Macondo had again stepped forward to beseech the leader of the armeros. And once more he was scornfully driven back at gunpoint by brutal hands.

Señor Gomera sat on the crate with his lips pressed tight, obstinately staring straight ahead. But his face had turned a pale

gray. Pitrolfo scraped together a fistful of miamorates leaves and squeezed them into a ball, then held it under the chin of Señor Gomera, who suddenly opened his mouth wide to snatch away the ball before Pitrolfo even had time to force it into his mouth.

Utter silence descended on the crowd. Even the armeros stopped fingering their bandoliers and rifles. They were all staring at poor Gomera. His cheeks were bulging, and if it weren't for the tragedy everyone was anticipating, the whole scene would have looked rather comical.

"Chew it!" Pitrolfo suddenly yelled.

And slowly Señor Gomera began to chew. He chewed and chewed. First his left cheek bulged out, then his right. The whole time he stared at Pitrolfo with great hostility.

"Swallow it!" Pitrolfo bellowed.

Señor Gomera stopped chewing. For a long moment he sat and glared at the executioner in front of him. Then he swallowed.

A sigh went through the crowd.

The unfortunate man fell backwards off the crate and began to spin around on the dry clay soil like an insect that couldn't right itself, like a fly with no wings. Faster and faster he spun, then the tempo slowed until finally he was lying utterly still. His lips were caked with green foam.

Father Macondo and Doctor Pinelli rushed forward and knelt down by Señor Gomera. The armeros stepped back and Pitrolfo muttered something about one fistful should be enough.

Señor Gomera was carried into the house.

High up in the tree, with a good view of everything that had happened, Mino said to Pepe: "Now do you see why we have to kill the pig Cabura?"

[LINE BREAK]

The miracle happened: Señor Gomera did not die. The old doctor saved his life by sticking a plastic tube down into his stomach and sucking out all the miamorates poison that was still there. But he did turn half-blind and almost deaf, and he lost the ability to recognize anyone's face in the village. Even his own wife and little Maria seemed to be total strangers to him. He still went around doffing his hat to his neighbors as he politely introduced himself, stating his father's full name. He no longer knew that he grew tomatoes, and even though his wife patiently took him to the marketplace where he had his stall, he flatly refused to sit there among strangers and sell tomatoes that weren't even his.

Every single day, from morning to night, as soon as they were done with their chores, Mino and Pepe would spy on Sergeant Cabura. Eventually they knew all his habits and daily routines. What time he went to the toilet to take a piss, where he put down his carbine, which hole he fastened his bandolier in after taking his siesta, when he received orders by telephone from the district capital, and above all when D.T. Star came to visit with more bottles of Old Kentucky Bourbon. Five Years Old.

After these visits empty bottles would fly out of his window like

hail, and the pig Cabura would often fall into a deep sleep in broad daylight in his own chair in his own office, with his feet up on his desk. He would sleep off the booze with his mouth open, snoring loudly as the drool ran down his chin onto his uniform. Then Mino and Pepe could safely climb in over the windowsill in the back of the building and slip giant ants down the back of his neck. Once they put as many as fifty-three ants inside Cabura's military shirt. Still, he never woke sooner than an hour after the last ant was deposited.

This convinced Mino and Pepe that their plan would succeed.

[LINE BREAK]

Pepe was sitting on the churchyard wall dangling his feet. He had loaned his turtle to Lucas. He was waiting tensely for Mino to arrive. Today was the day. Today the village would be liberated from its cruel tyrant. The pig Cabura was going to die.

Yesterday he had once again been visited by D.T. Star from the Company, who had left him at least five bottles of Old Kentucky Bourbon. Five Years Old. In all probability, then, Felipe Cabura would fall into a deep, intoxicated sleep at precisely quarter past two. Without being disturbed by giant ants, this drunken nap would last at least three hours.

Mino came running, looking excited, his cheeks flushed.

"Come on, Pepe! Mama Amanthea is at Señor Rivera's store, and Papa has gone to meet the bus with a box of butterflies!"

Pepe carefully slid down from the wall, grabbed his crutches, and

hobbled after Mino who trotted off ahead of him. This was phase one of their great plan that was about to be implemented. It would take place in Sebastian Portoguesa's tin shed.

"There it is, Pepe! The bottle of ethyl acetate! A deadly poison, a hundred times more dangerous than miamorates." He pointed at a bottle standing on a beam up near the ceiling.

Mino nimbly climbed up and brought down the bottle. Then he slipped out of the shed and returned with a big, rusty tin box with a lid. Inside it was a yellow rag torn from one of Sebastian Portoguesa's old shirts.

Carefully and with the greatest respect, Mino removed the cork from the bottle of fluid. Pepe stepped back, eyes wide. Then Mino poured a healthy splash into the tin box with the rag. He held his nose and hurried to put the lid back on. Then he climbed up and returned the bottle to the exact spot where he'd found it.

Phase one of the plan was done. Now he just had to hide the tin box with the Drops of Death in a safe place and wait until after two o'clock.