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Chimbote

by Richard Wilding

Peru, 1846

We arrived at the small fishing village of Chimbote after four months of non-stop unplanned travel, the only purpose of which was to put as much distance as rapidly as possible between us and Quito, between us and Alciabades, whom we had abandoned dazed, gagged and tied to the church door.

Yolanda had ridden away on her Chestnut mare. Sitting astride it, long straight back, broad shoulders and hair like a wavy black waterfall, she looked every inch a princess. I on the other hand cut a lowly figure, a cross between a pauper, a fool and a footman on my absurd mule which plodded on beside her. But that wretched mule, being carnaptious and bloody-minded, decided that rather than walk at a pace slower than a man's, as it had done for the entire journey to Quito, it would keep pace with the mare as if to prove itself its equal. Whatever wilful thoughts passed through its dull mind, the result gave us some semblance of progress through the journey's endless combination of steep mountain passes and terror.

Finally free of the mountains, we arrived at the coast and took lodgings in a fisherwoman's small cottage. Chimbote swam against the natural current of human affairs. Here, the women were the masters. With their strong, tanned squat bodies swathed in many layers of multi-coloured skirts and shawls, small black hats perched on their heads like cats, babies slung around them in papooses, they rowed out to sea each dawn, returning at noon to unload their catches, talking, shouting and no doubt profaning like Southwark dockers.

Meanwhile their dainty menfolk, no taller than their wives yet as thin as beanpoles, ambled around the village with no obvious purpose either knitting or playing melancholic tunes on their pipes while looking out to sea. It was the most absurd of places though I must admit that when we arrived with Yolanda high on her mare and I low on my mule, we did appear to fit in.

They were a friendly people. In England, I have noted that the arrival of a stranger is greeted with a defensive fear, as if the newcomer's sole intention is to rob, or worse. But in Peru, where the nearest village might be twenty miles away, they treat strangers quite differently, welcoming them with an open heart and open arms, huge smiles lighting up weathered leathery faces. Quechua is their tongue and to my ears it was, I am ashamed to say, merely a noise. Happily Yolanda had a basic grasp of it and so we were able to make ourselves understood.

We had been in Chimbote for no more than three weeks, recuperating and beginning to make a plan for what we might do next. We were seated side by side on a rock when our landlady called out to us, in Quechua, "There is a man tracking you. He is three days away. He is travelling with an orange monkey in a cage."