**The Glass of Milk**

**Manuel Rojas**

**translated by William F. Colford**

 The sailor, who was leaning against the starboard rail, seemed to be waiting for someone. In his left hand he held a bundle wrapped in a piece of white paper that showed grease spots in several places; with the other hand he puffed on his pipe.

A thin young man came out from behind some freight cars, stopped a moment, looked toward the sea, and then continued walking along the edge of the dock with his hands in his pockets, unconcerned or lost in thought.

When he drew opposite the ship the sailor shouted to him in English:

"I say! Look here!"

The young man raised his head, and without stopping answered in the same language:

"Hello! What?"

"Are you hungry?"

There was a short silence, during which the youth seemed to be thinking; he even took one step shorter than the others, as if he were going to stop. But finally, smiling sadly at the seaman, he said, "No. I am not hungry. Thank you, sailor."

"Very well."

The sailor took his pipe from his mouth, spat, put the pipe between his lips again, and looked away. The youth, ashamed that his appearance should arouse feelings of charity, seemed to quicken his pace, as if he were afraid he might think better of his negative answer.

A moment later an impressive tramp with blue eyes and a big, blond beard, who was dressed out-landishly in ragged clothes and huge, broken shoes, walked in front of the sailor. The latter, without calling him over first, shouted at him:

"Are you hungry?"

The question had not even been completed when the loafer, looking with gleaming eyes at the package the sailor held in his hands, answered quickly:

"Yes, sir; I am very much hungry."

The sailor smiled. The package flew through the air and landed in the eager hands of the hungry man, who did not even thank him. Opening the bundle, which was still slightly warm, he sat down on the ground and rubbed his hands in glee as he saw its contents. A dockside derelict may not know English, but he would never forgive himself for not knowing enough to ask anyone who speaks that language for something to eat.

The young man who had gone by a few minutes before witnessed the scene from where he was standing a short distance away. He was hungry He had not eaten for exactly three days, three long days. And more from timidity and shame than because of his pride, he shrank from standing in front of steamer gangplanks at mealtime waiting for the sailors’ generosity in order to get some package containing leftover food or scraps of meat. He could never do that; he would never be able to do it. And when, as in the recent incident, someone offered him his leftovers, he would decline them heroically, but with regret, because refusing made him even hungrier.

For six days he had been wandering through the alleys and along the docks of that port. He had been left there by an English steamer from Punta Arenas, the port where he had jumped ship, abandoning his job as a cabin boy. He had spent a month in Punta Arenas helping an Austrian crab fisherman in his work. On the first northbound ship he had stowed away.

They found him the first day out, and sent him below to work as a stoker in the boiler room. At the first large port the steamer touched they set him ashore, and there he stayed like a package without a name and address, not knowing anyone, without a penny in his pocket, and without knowing how to work at any trade.

While the steamer was still in port he could eat, but afterwards. . . . The huge city rising beyond the alleyways lined with bars and cheap lodging houses did not attract him; it seemed like slave quarters, without light or air, and without the open grandeur of the sea: behind those high, straight walls people lived and died, stunned by the sordid struggle.

He was possessed by the terrible obsession of the sea, which twists the calmest, most orderly lives as a mighty arm bends a slender rod. Although quite young, he had already made several voyages along the coasts of South America in different ships, working at various jobs and tasks, all of which had practically no application on land.

After the ship left he kept on walking around, trusting to luck to find something just to keep him going until he could get back to his familiar way of life; but he found nothing. There was little activity at the port, and the few ships where there was work didn’t sign him on.

The place was full of professional vagabonds wandering around, unemployed sailors like himself who had jumped ship or were fugitives from the law; loafers resigned to idleness, who kept alive somehow or other by begging or stealing, counting the days like the beads of some grimy rosary, waiting for something extraordinary to happen, or not waiting for anything—men of the strangest and most exotic races and nationalities, even types in whose existence one does not believe until he has seen a living example.

The next day, convinced that he could not last much longer, he decided to try any means to get food. While walking along he came upon a ship that had come in the night before and was loading wheat. A line of men kept walking back and forth across a gangplank carrying heavy sacks on their shoulders from the freight cars up to the hatches of the ship’s hold, where the stevedores took over. He stood there watching for a while until he got up courage to speak to the foreman and ask for a job. He was taken on, and quickly joined the long line of loaders.

During the early part of the day he worked well, but later he began to feel weak. As he walked along with the load on his shoulders he felt dizzy, and would sway on the gangplank when he looked down between the side of the ship and the wall of the dock into the frightening chasm where the water, flecked with oil and covered with debris, gurgled softly.

At lunchtime there was a short rest; and while some of the men went to eat in the cheap taverns nearby and others ate what they had brought, he stretched out on the ground, pretending not to be hungry.

He finished the day’s work completely exhausted, covered with sweat, and down to his last ounce of strength. While the longshoremen were drifting away he sat down on some large sacks, waiting for the foreman. When the last worker had left, he went up to him; embarrassed and hesitant - though he did not tell him what the trouble was - he asked if they could pay him right away, or if he could possibly have an advance on what he had earned.

The foreman answered that it was customary to pay when the job was over, and that it was still necessary to work the following day in order to finish loading the ship. Another whole day! Moreover, they weren’t advancing a cent!

"But," the foreman told him, "if you need it I could lend you about forty cents . . . that’s all I have."

The young man thanked him for the offer with a sorrowful smile, and went away. Suddenly he was seized by a sharp sense of desperation. He was hungry, hungry, hungry! He was so hungry that it doubled him up, just as a blow with a thick, heavy whip might have done. He saw everything through a blue haze, and staggered like a drunken man when he walked. Nevertheless, he would not have been able to moan or cry out, for his suffering was neither acute nor oppressive; it wasn’t a pain, but a dull ache, an exhausted feeling; it seemed to him that he was being crushed by a great weight.

Suddenly he felt a kind of burning sensation in the pit of his stomach, and he stopped walking. He kept bending down, down, slowly doubling up like an iron bar being bent by force; he thought he was going to fall. At that moment, as if a window had been opened before him, he saw his home and the countryside around it, his mother's face, and the faces of his brothers and sisters: everything he loved and cherished appeared and disappeared before his eyes, shut with sheer fatigue....

Then, little by little, the giddiness went away; and as his burning stomach gradually cooled, he slowly straightened up. Finally he stood erect, breathing heavily. One more hour and he would fall senseless to the ground.

He quickened his step, as if he were fleeing from a new attack of dizziness, and while walking along he determined to go in and eat anywhere, without paying, ready to be shamed, beaten, jailed, anything. The important thing was to eat, eat, eat. A hundred times his mind kept repeating that word—eat, eat, eat—until the term lost all meaning and left him with a feeling of burning emptiness in his head. He had no intention of running away: he would say to the proprietor, "Senor, I was hungry, hungry, hungry. . . and I have no money to pay. Do what you wish."

He reached the first city blocks, and in one of them found a dairy It was a bright, clean little shop, full of small, marble-topped tables. Behind the counter stood a blond lady with a spotless white apron.

He chose that store. The street had little traffic. He could have eaten in one of the cheap taverns near the dock, but they were always full of people drinking and gambling.

In the dairy there was only one patron. He was a little old man with glasses, with his nose buried in the pages of a newspaper. He seemed motionless, reading there, as if he were glued to the chair. On his table was a half-empty glass of milk.

The young man walked up and down on the sidewalk, waiting for him to get out, little by little he was beginning to feel that burning sensation in his stomach again. He waited five, ten, as much as fifteen minutes. Tired, he stood to one side of the door; from there he looked harshly at the old man.

What the devil could he be reading so intently! He finally came to imagine that the man was an acquaintance who knew his intentions and had set out to frustrate them. He felt like going in and saying something rude to make him leave—an insult, or a sentence that would make him understand that a person had no right to sit there reading for such a small purchase.

Finally the patron finished his reading—or at least interrupted it. In one swallow he drank down the rest of the milk in the glass, got up slowly, paid his bill, walked over to the door, and went out. He was a little man, bent with age, who looked like a carpenter or a painter. As soon as he was in the street he adjusted his glasses, stuck his nose in the newspaper again, and walked off slowly, stopping every ten steps to read more carefully.

The young man waited until he was out of sight, and then went in. For a moment he stood at the door, trying to decide where to sit down; finally he picked out a table and went toward it. Halfway there he decided against it, stepped back, bumped into a chair, and then sat down at a corner table.

The lady came over, wiped the table top with a cloth, and with a gentle voice in which there was a trace of a Castilian accent, asked him "What will you have?"

Without looking at her he answered, "A glass of milk."

"Large?"

"Yes, large."

"Just milk?"

"Is there any sponge cake?"

"No, just vanilla wafers."

"All right, vanilla wafers."

When the lady turned away he rubbed his hands on his knees in cheerful anticipation, like someone who feels cold and is about to have a hot drink.

The lady returned and placed before him a big glass of milk and a plateful of vanilla cookies; then she went back to her place behind the counter.

His first impulse was to drink down the milk in one gulp and then eat the cookies, but immediately he thought better of it; he sensed that the woman’s eyes were fixed upon him, watching him curiously. He did not dare to look at her it seemed to him that if he did so she would become aware of his frame of mind and his shameful intentions, and he would have to get up and leave without tasting what he had ordered.

Slowly he picked up a vanilla wafer, dipped it in the milk, and took a bite; he drank a sip of milk and felt the burning sensation, which had returned to his stomach, diminish and disappear. But at once the reality of his desperate situation rose before him, and something hot and clutching rose from his heart to his throat. He realized that he was going to sob, to sob loudly; and although he knew the lady was looking at him he could not choke back or undo that fiery knot which was growing tighter and tighter. He fought it off and as he did so he went on eating rapidly, fearfully, afraid that weeping might keep him from eating.

When he finished the milk and cookies his eyes clouded over; something warm rolled down his nose and fell into the glass. A terrible sobbing shook him from head to foot. He rested his head on his hands, and for a long time he wept: he wept with sorrow, with rage, with a longing to weep as though he had never wept before.

He was bent over, weeping, when he felt that a hand was stroking his tired head and a woman’s voice with a soft Castilian accent was saying: "Cry, my son; cry...."

A new wave of weeping flooded his eyes with tears, and he cried as forcefully as he had at first, but now not with bitterness but with joy, as he felt a great coolness flood through him, putting out that hot something that had clutched his throat. While he wept it seemed to him that his life and his feelings were being cleansed like a glass beneath a stream of water, and were regaining the brightness and firm texture of other days. When the spell of weeping passed and he was calm again, he wiped his eyes and face with his handkerchief. He raised his head and looked at the lady, but she was no longer looking at him: she was looking out into the street at some far-away point, and her face was sad.

In front of him on the table was a fresh glass of milk and another plate heaped high with wafers. He ate slowly, without thinking about anything, as if nothing had happened, as if he were in his own house and his mother were that lady behind the counter. When he finished, it had already grown dark and the store was lighted by an electric bulb. He sat there awhile, thinking about what he would say to the woman when he went out, but nothing appropriate occurred to him.

Finally he rose and said simply, "Thank you very much, senora: good-bye."

"Good-bye, my son," she said.

He went out. The wind from the sea cooled his face, still warm from weeping. He walked aimlessly for a while, and then went down a street that led to the docks. It was a lovely evening, and huge stars were beginning to shine in the summer sky.

He thought of the blond lady who had treated him so generously, forming plans to repay her and make it up to her in some worthy way when he had money; but these thoughts of gratitude vanished with the warmth of his face until not one was left, and the recent events faded away and became lost in the recesses of his past life.

Suddenly he was surprised to find himself singing something in a soft voice. He straightened up joyfully, and strode along with vigor and determination. He reached the shore and walked up and down buoyantly, feeling himself reborn, as if his scattered inner forces had been reassembled and consolidated. Then the fatigue from his work began to rise in his legs with a slow tingling sensation, and he sat down on a pile of sacks.

He looked at the sea. The lights from the dock and from the ships shone over the water in a red-gold band, shimmering softly. He stretched out on his back, looking up at the sky for a long while. He did not feel like thinking, or singing, or speaking he felt alive, and that was all.

And he dropped off to sleep, with his face turned toward the sea ….