

The Man From Africa

Miguel d' Africa's enormous bear-like body shook and bristled at the suggestion that he might not achieve his desired ambition to build a grand hotel in the city of Horta.

“Only a fool would attempt such a feat,” the man had said, and with such insolence that Miguel had struck him, whereupon the man had immediately called for the police.

The police came, and let Miguel off with a warning, admonishing him not to repeat his error or they would be forced to arrest him. Imagine the nerve, to threaten Miguel, of all people!

Arrest me, he thought. When that imbecile was the one responsible? I merely attempted to set his head aright, after all. To dare suggest that Miguel's dream, one he'd

imported, carrying with him from the wars in Africa, where such dreams were no longer feasible. After all, it wasn't as if he was asking for the moon! A fine, large hotel here on the island where he had chosen to live with his wife, Charlotte, and their small intimate circle of friends, and where others from South Africa could come and stay and feel comfortable amongst like-minded folk, people who showed the same sensibilities and outlook.

Miguel d' Africa was not his name, it was not the name his wife or friends called him either, but it's what the Azoreans called him, since they couldn't pronounce his real name. The only thing anyone knew of him was that he was from Africa, and was built like a windmill, so the name had stuck.

He had arrived burning with energy, eager to accomplish a long list of tasks both large and small, like so many the islanders had seen come and go before him, swelled with goals, new ideas, and impatience, rushing this way and that, scrambling as if to set fire to the very ground he trod.

"I'm not a man to let others stand in my way," he informed one and all. "I have big plans and I will see them through to completion, be assured."

He burst in and out of every office in the city of Horta, asking the same questions: "Where can I find a property, a property where I can build a fine hotel? A hotel large enough, shall we say, with enough rooms to serve fifty, seventy-five, say a hundred guests? Who is the best builder on the island? Where can I find the supplies that'll be needed, staff to run it, and maids? We'll certainly need a good number of staff on hand. They will have to be properly trained. This will be no slovenly venture."

The poor man nearly went out of his wits with the responses with which his questions were met. “Why a hotel? Don’t we already have enough inns, pensões, and hotels here in Horta?” an impudent clerk in the city hall had the nerve to ask.

“These, why they are nothing,” Miguel d’Africa said, brushing the idea away with an impatient flick of one of his enormous hands. “No, I’m talking about a grand hotel, understand, three, perhaps four stories high, impressive, clean, and providing for the needs of the sort of clients I have in mind.”

The clerk appeared unimpressed. “Buying property can be a tricky business here on the island,” the clerk informed him. “Such affairs can be complicated.”

“Well, so uncomplicate them, then,” Miguel said, his anger rising with each new encounter. “I’m paying good money, after all.” He was sure it was all about money, that was the path to getting anything done, everyone with their hands out, wanting their palms greased.

He stormed out of the offices, and attacked the streets and sidewalks of Horta as if he was waging war with the stones beneath his feet. He stomped and stamped his boots as he raced one direction, then the other. The townspeople watched him come, and watched him go.

“How long do you think he’ll keep this up?” asked the rotund owner of the cheese shop, Paulo Coelho, who stood in the doorway of his shop, which contained but one single round of cheese, and gazed up the street in search of customers. Business was slow, but never mind, Paulo enjoyed watching the man from Africa, and he was not alone in that.

“Not long. They never do,” said Paulo’s friend, Marco Silveira, who loitered on the sidewalk smoking a cigarette and looking after Miguel d’Africa, who bustled past as if the devil himself was in pursuit.

Farther down the street a woman peered from her upper story window. “Hoo, hoo, look at him go,” she shouted to her neighbor across the street. “Who is he racing?”

“Perhaps his own shadow,” her neighbor answered. The two women had a good laugh at Miguel’s expense.

His inquiries concerning where he could find the best builders only led him in circles. “Paulo de Freitas might be your best bet,” a man in a café drawled, as though he had all the time in the world. “I remember he converted one of the old windmills into a house for some German fellow, over in Castelo Branco.”

“No, no, listen man, I need a company, a firm that can build a hotel, not a house. I’m not building a house, you hear, but a big hotel.” Ah, these people were so simple-minded. They knew nothing.

He was led to a company by the name of Mendes, but one look was enough to determine it was too small and inefficient for what he had in mind. It would likely take them several years just to put up a shed, much less a hotel. He was later directed to a company on the other side of Horta. Miguel wasted no time, but took a taxi there, only to find the business shuttered for the next two hours while the workers took lunch.

“Lunch,” he said in disgust. “No wonder no one has built anything of note here. These lazy people need a good prodding! I’ll get them moving.”

He came back later and spoke with the owner, to whom he explained his ideas.

“Is this something you can do?” Miguel asked, a rising note of uncertainty and mistrust in his voice.

Luís de Resendes sat back in his chair oblivious to the doubt that was expressed in Miguel d’Africa’s tone of voice, and, chewing on a pencil like a schoolboy, put his mind to thinking. “Well, I can tell you that, yes, certainly it can be done.” His expression, however, exposed a certain amount of hesitation.

“Are you sure? It is something you’d be capable of building?”

“Of course, of course. Yes. No problem, really, provided, you know, that the proper building site is found. Nothing is more important, after all, than location, and then the supplies—it would involve a large amount of money, you understand?”

“Yes, of course,” Miguel said, irritated by the insinuation. “That’s no problem. I have plenty of money.” He ground his teeth at the mention of money. Who did these people think they were dealing with?

Luís de Resendes smiled, his stubby, fleshy fingers the only part of his body that moved, aside from his obsequious mouth uttering its ceaseless, “Yes, yes, of course, of course, no problem, I assure you.”

He’s grown fat and lazy, Miguel thought. Too much food and drink, too much sitting around while others do his work for him. Nothing I hate worse than laziness and softness. Miguel prided himself on being a hard man, grown tough during the struggles in South Africa, and later hiring himself out as a mercenary in the wars in Angola and Mozambique, fighting with machetes if need be, or more often with machine guns that blasted the enemy to shreds. Killing grown men, young men, and even boys had been no different than shooting rabbits or wild boar.

“Yes, the question of supplies,” Luís drawled, as if each word had to be made anew from scratch before it could be uttered.

“Well, what of it?” Good God, Miguel d’Africa thought, he is so damned slow. Move that fat arse of yours, already!

“They will have to be shipped in.”

“Shipped in from where?”

“Some things would need to come from São Miguel, some from Portugal. Maybe Canada. It’s expensive to bring things in by ship. We have nothing here, you see”

“Yes, I see, all right. Well, I’m determined to change all that.”

Luís smiled and nodded. “Of course, *senhor*, of course.”

Miguel left. Nothing here. He would fight to change that! A lot of things would need to change. These people were simple, like children. They had to be shaken up. They might be perfectly content to live fifty years behind the times, the word *amanhã*—tomorrow always on the tip of their tongues, but that wouldn’t do. Not for what he had in mind. He bristled at the way they took their sweet time with everything. They’d grown used to moving slowly; an island of sleepwalkers. He would have to wake them up.

Miguel d’Africa asked round in the shops, demanding to know where he could find servants, or, if not servants, then maids.

“I’ll need a small army of trustworthy, submissive maids,” he said, before adding, “Maids who are not adverse to hard work, and who are honest.” His wife, Charlotte had a terror of thieving maids, and claimed they had to be watched with a proper vigilance, as they all possessed a perverse propensity to steal.

The people Miguel d’Africa questioned shook their heads. “It’s difficult to find maids these days,” they told him. “Most young people leave the islands, or don’t care to do that sort of work.”

He couldn’t believe his ears. In a rage he again stormed out to crisscross the city, trying to show that he was the one in charge, not the city, not the island, certainly not these ridiculous people who he would bend to his will. While Miguel tended to his business affairs, Charlotte, made inquiries of her own. She scolded him for asking round about maids, as that was her task.

“I only asked to find out if it was possible to find them here,” he said. “We need to know, for otherwise we’ll have to import them.”

But Charlotte knew that one had to meet the right people first, and ask the right questions. It was a matter of subtleties. One needed maids who were obedient and servile, yes, and while her biggest fear was that they would steal, one also needed maids who could keep their mouths shut, who wouldn’t go about whispering intimacies of the families they served—maids who knew their place. People spoke of equality these days, as if there was no difference between people, as if they were all the same.

She shuddered at the thought.

Much to her dismay Charlotte found few people whose society qualified: a Danish gentleman, a German couple, a French woman, a Canadian man. None were what she would call perfect, but she discovered that they shared hers, and her husband’s sensibilities; two Americans were also a possibility. They were sociologists or some such thing. She invited them to one of her soirées, so they could be properly looked over.

Gail, the American woman, telephoned Charlotte, after confirming that she and her husband would attend.

“We have two friends,” Gail said. “We were wondering if we could invite them?”

Charlotte was taken aback and gasped. She hadn’t expected this. She did the inviting, not others. “Who are these people?” she finally stammered.

“Americans,” the woman answered. “Their families are from the islands. They’re spending some time here, reconnecting with their roots.”

A prolonged silence followed. “I don’t think so,” Charlotte said, agitated. She would need a pill for her nerves.

“No?” The sound of surprise. “We know them, they’re nice people.”

“I’m sure they are. They’re just not our kind. You know what I mean.”

“Okay,” Gail said.

“We shall see you Saturday night.” Charlotte hung up the phone. She wondered if she’d been wrong, after all, about the American couple. Blond haired, blue-eyed, and fair-skinned, they’d seemed fine, but now this? The last thing she wanted was people actually from the islands—as maids or other staff, yes, but certainly not as guests. What could the woman have been thinking?

• • •

Gail, the blond-haired, blue-eyed American who spoke with Charlotte had mentioned the *soirée* to her American friends, Laura and Daniel Silveira. Laura had been ecstatic. “I’ve never been to a *soirée*,” she’d exclaimed, elated by the concept. Now Gail had to call them and inform them they were not permitted to attend.

“Lucky them,” Gail’s husband, Bob said. “Do *we* really have to go?”

He made a sour face and his shoulders drooped. He dreaded a night of inane conversation with people who had nothing to say and who gave him the heebie-jeebies.

“Look at it as an anthropological opportunity,” Gail said. We may never get another chance to observe people like this in their element.”

“We should be so lucky.”

“We ought to at least have a look,” Gail said. She phoned Daniel and Laura, who they had met at the Café Internacional and had befriended some weeks earlier.

“They turned you two down for the soirée. Seems you and Laura, uh, aren’t right,” Gail said, clumsily.

“Aren’t right?” Daniel asked. “What does that mean?”

“I told her you and Laura had family here, and she said you weren’t their kind of people.”

“Really!” Daniel said. “Because our families are Azorean? So, this is what it’s like to experience racism on the other foot.”

“What do you mean on the other foot?”

“Well, to the Azoreans we are just Americans, never mind our connections to the islands. They don’t give that too much consideration.”

“I see.”

“Are you and Bob still going?”

“I wouldn’t miss this for all the world,” Gail said. “Bob doesn’t want to go, but I’ll twist his arm. The woman clearly has no idea that we’re Jews. I think it’ll be quite illuminating to observe these people where they’ll feel free to be themselves, with no inhibitions. Nothing to hold them back.”

“I wish I could be a fly on the wall,” Daniel said. “Report back to me, please. I had no idea such things still went on.”

“You’d be surprised,” Gail said. “People see blond hair and blue eyes and the last thing they think of is the possibility of that person being Jewish. It’s how a few Jews managed to escape the Holocaust. That and using their wits.”

“And luck,” Bob said dryly.

“Yes, and luck, too. Now, I wish I hadn’t told her that you and Laura have family here.”

“Not to worry,” Daniel said. “I don’t think we’re missing out on much, outside of a few hours of being uncomfortable. You’ve got me curious, though. You be our eyes and ears.”

Meanwhile, Miguel d’Africa showed no sign of slowing down, although he also had very little to show for his constant activity.

Then, after weeks of getting nowhere, there was finally a breakthrough. He found a large property, after going through a ridiculous process of obtaining certificates and paying fees, and filling out forms from this office and that, and to make it even sweeter, he successfully purchased the land for half of what he had expected to pay.

Now his tone changed. He walked through town standing even taller, proud that he had showed these people that he could indeed accomplish something! He was a landowner. A man of importance. He went to taverns and cafés and bragged to anyone who would listen how easily he had swindled these people of their own land.

“For nothing, I tell you,” he said. “What a steal.” He went to Peter’s Café and told the foreign sailors the story of how he had taken advantage of the islanders, laughing as he downed his whiskies, one after another.

In the meantime Charlotte held her Saturday night soiree, and watched her latest maid, Maria-the-something-or-other, with an ever-vigilant eye. She had already fired two: one for laziness, the other for taking some change that she had left on the dresser.

“They’ll all steal if given half the chance,” Charlotte informed her acquaintances. “You can’t turn your back on them for a moment.” The others murmured in assent, and clucked their tongues to show their disapproval.

All the individuals Charlotte and Miguel d’Africa had invited were there, including the young American couple, Gail and Robert. It went off without any serious glitches. The appetizers and the champagne, the light conversation of people who believed the same things, thought the same way, who wished to preserve their vanishing way of life.

Charlotte showed off her favorite dress, lime-green with short puffed sleeves that ended in white lace. The dress trailed after her, and was commented on by everyone in attendance. The evening was a success.

The Americans had little to say, and Charlotte later remarked that they were not only remarkably dull, but perhaps simple in the head as well, for they had contributed nothing in the way of conversation the entire night.

Miguel d’Africa submitted the mountain of forms the government required in order to build his hotel on the land he had purchased. A friend he had known in Africa,

Van Rooyen, drew up extravagant plans for the building, and Miguel dreamt of the day when it would finally be built.

He could see it rising above the meager languid skyline of Horta. The Hotel d’Afrique would be a monument. A citadel to this new world that Miguel and Charlotte, Van Rooyen, and their other friends would build, like having a slice of their old beloved South Africa as it used to be, here for them to take refuge in.

Waiting for official responses from all the government offices was difficult, given the pace of Portuguese bureaucracy. Miguel d’Africa wrote letters to them asking what was the delay. He telephoned daily demanding they speed up the process.

“You cannot stand in the way of progress,” he shouted. If they responded at all it was to inform him that they were awaiting certification from Terceira, São Miguel or Portugal.

Gail called up Laura and Daniel after the soirée, as promised, and arranged for her and Bob to meet them at the Café Internacional.

“So?” Daniel said, when they had sat down at one of the tables.

“Just what we thought,” Gail said.

“I still can’t believe they wouldn’t let us come,” Laura said, with wounded pride.

“My family is one of the best families on the island.”

“Careful now,” Daniel said. “You’ll start sounding like them.” Laura glared at him. She had an inclination to brood in silence, wielding it as a bludgeon when necessity required.

“We just sat there and listened and observed,” Gail explained. “Among the Germans, the Dane, the Canadian, the French woman, and the South Africans, there was one common denominator we heard over and over again.”

“What was that?” Laura asked.

“How happy they were to have found a place where there are no Jews, and no Blacks,” Bob said. “Or colored races, as I heard more than once.”

“Unbelievable,” Daniel said.

“That and their mistrust of the Azoreans they employ,” Gail said. “That was their other topic of conversation. Charlotte doesn’t trust them, says they all steal and are treacherous. Miguel finds them all lazy and incompetent, etcetera, etcetera.”

“Yes, but for the islanders living here this would be their own sweet little paradise,” Bob said. “Apparently, there’s a number of Africans who, since apartheid has been on the way out over there, would love to come to a place like this. That’s what they’re banking on: a steady ready-made supply of dissatisfied South Africans ready to find a haven here.”

“It sounds like all those thousands of Confederate soldiers, men, women, children rebels who fled the United States after losing the Civil War and founded their own colony in Brazil,” Daniel said. “The problem is that without the islanders they’d have no one to wait on them, no one to look down their noses at.”

“The fly in the ointment,” Bob said.

Miguel d’Africa got nowhere. Every day he stopped by the offices, and every day he walked away empty-handed.

Weeks went by. Then months. The islanders noticed a change in the white man from Africa.

“He is slowing down,” a shopkeeper said, after Miguel walked past.

“Yes, I think so,” said his neighbor, a tailor. “*Mornança* has caught up with the devil, no?”

The other man nodded. “It catches up to everyone sooner or later.”

Time revealed no progress or change. The papers were on someone’s desk, in some office, in some place, awaiting a final stamp or signature. “It will happen,” the clerks and lawyers, and whomever else Miguel consulted, reassured him again and again, not wanting to disappoint or upset the man, who appeared so extremely volatile, and somewhat unhinged.

“When?” he stormed. “When will it happen?”

“Give it time,” he was told. “Don’t worry. It’s just that things always move slowly on the islands, and between here and the mainland.”

What, was there a black hole between here and Lisbon that swallowed all hope, all ambition and aspiration?

Gail and Bob met with Laura and Daniel, who were about to leave Faial and return to America.

“What’s the latest with your African friends? Anything new?”

“Well, we haven’t been invited to any more soirées,” Bob said.

“They must have their suspicions,” Gail said. “Maybe somebody informed on us. They’ve found out there are at least two Jews here. Who knows? Or maybe they just figured out that we’re not their kind of people, too.”

“We heard from someone in the city hall that the property Miguel d’ Africa thought he got for such a steal is in truth the old city dump,” Bob said. “The land is worthless. He’ll never be permitted to build on it.”

“He doesn’t know?” Daniel said.

“Apparently not. Seems no one has the heart to tell him.”

“Ah, my. Poetic justice,” Daniel said, shaking his head.

“Good,” Laura said. She’d never forgiven being rejected as not good enough to attend the couple’s soirees.

The two couples clinked their glasses together in a toast to the island that had defeated the would-be conquerors.

“Oh, and I heard Charlotte has fired another maid for stealing,” Gail added. “Poor woman. At this rate she’s going to run out of people available for hire.”

The man from Africa struggled against the forces that worked to slow him down. He blamed the islanders and the island itself.

“My God, the air here is thick as soup,” he was heard saying. “It’s no wonder it’s so difficult to get anything done. You can barely move in this atmosphere of sea mist, fog, rain and this damned volcanic soil. It’s like pea soup!”

Miguel d’ Africa still managed to make his way to the various governmental offices. He made his rounds to the post office, and the cafés, in search of any tidbit of news, but he moved slower now, and sat for longer wherever he stopped, sometimes lingering for many hours, gazing off at something only he could see beyond the horizon.