

The Mask of Zorro

Doctor Van Barrow shares the story of how he discovered the Mask of Zorro in a remote part of the Andes and his use of Peruvian pharmaceuticals.

In which petit-fours are eaten

Having devoured a number of petit-fours that promptly arrived courtesy of Sally, Miss Thimblebelly looks over at Doctor von Barrow, seated next to her. "My dear Doctor, I would be eternally grateful if you would share with us the story of how you discovered the Mask of Zorro in a remote part of the Andes. I admit I have a personal interest in learning more about your experiences, to which you alluded earlier, with Peruvian pharmaceuticals"

In which the young doctor secures a position aboard a ship and embarks on a Voyage of Discovery!

"Ah, yes, the Andes. It was my first voyage as Ship's Natural Philosophy Officer, you know. I remember it like it was yesterday.

"I had just completed my studies, after several years travelling to the various universities and courts of Europe, learning all about the natural wonder of the world, and the divine beauties within it. Sorry, divine beauty. In those days, of course, the only way for an academic to make his mark on the world was to act as scientific adviser on a voyage of discovery. Therefore, with my master's touching farewell still echoing in my ears ('Off with you, van Barrow, and may I never live long enough to see you take a chair in Amsterdam.' - sadly, he didn't) I set off for Barcelona to find a ship that would take me to the New World.

"To my dismay, I found the port crawling with would-be naturalists. It was with little hope, then, that I wrote my credentials on a board around my neck, as was the tradition, and stood at the port, waiting patiently for the selection parties to realise my obvious potential.

"Like breeding, a good education tells, and I found myself shortlisted for a position aboard the Espagbognola, which was bound for the West Indies. I found myself standing next to a tall, gangly, and unpleasant man, whose placard had been engraved by a master craftsman, rather than simply written on, like my own. His name, I read, was Ferdinando Grossotesta.

"'I do not know why you are 'ere,' he sneered. 'Ze position ees as good as mine.'

"'Well,' I said, 'I have studied at all of the great European universities: Amsterdam, Prague, Brussels, Paris, and Constantinople, I have visited all of the great courts, and have studied under a great and famous master. I am clearly the man for the job.'

"'I,' said Grossotesta, 'ave studied at Cambridge, Madreed and Barcelona. Furthermore, my uncle ees a member of the Admiralty. You may as well go back to Denmark or wherever eet was you came from, for the position ees, as I said, mine.'

"Fortunately, when the selection party made its next round, he was rolling on the ground, groaning and clutching at his privates, with swellings about his face. Believing him to be to be mad and diseased, and therefore unsuitable, and being impressed with my eloquent testimony as to my scientific credentials, and my strong constitution and good teeth, the selection party offered me the position, which I accepted gladly.

"As we left, I leaned over Grossotesta, and said to him, 'By the way, I didnae tell ye I had also studied at Glasgae'".

The doctor motions for another glass of wine. "I say, this storytelling is thirsty work."

Looking intrigued, Miss Thimblebelly tosses a silver coin onto the table and says, "I'll wager that you had not seen the last of this Grossotesta, and indeed that it was he who was responsible for some of your later, ahem, predicaments".

In which we meet a well-educated Spaniard. Diego's discovery

"The duties of a natural philosopher in the early part of a voyage of this type are not particularly involved. In general, the naturalist is left to his own devices, and often becomes something of an unofficial education officer. I spent much time in learned discussion with the ship's officers. "Due to the small size of the vessel in which we had embarked, I was to share a cabin with the Ship's second officer, a nobleman from a northern Spanish town, who was named Diego. Diego was a foppish sort, really, as was common among the Spanish aristocracy of the time, but I was struck with his remarkable knowledge of poetry, flower arranging and the principles of social justice. We spent many a long hour, therefore, discussing linguistics, botany, and governmental theory.

"One night, long into the crossing, as we were discussing the politics of colonialism while looking out over the starlit sea, the cabin being rather close and fresh ocean air being far more invigorating, Diego halted mid-sentence (he had been describing the produce of his family's holdings in the colonies - potatoes, Duke Peter, by now being their chief export) and reached for his spyglass.

"'Doctor, 'ave a look at zis!' he said, handing me the spyglass. I looked through the device in the direction he indicated, and saw, to my surprise, a Portuguese Man O' War!

"'Heavens,' I exclaimed, 'that is a remarkable spyglass. Why, I can clearly make out the flag and distinctive topsail, and ze rest of ze... the rest of the ship is still below the horizon!' I handed it back to Diego.

"'Ah, yes,' said Diego, 'zey are trying to stay beyond the range of our lookout. Eef our spyglass was a regular one, we would not be able to see zem, but mine ees a family 'eirloom, made by ze finest of Swiss artisans, and can see around the 'ole world on a clear day. Eef you look, you can see ze Capitan... Buenos Dias! Eet ees Capitan Mendoza, ze evil Spanish exile! Why ees 'e capitaning ze Portuguese ship? See for yourself, doctor!'

"'Why, yes,' I said. 'It is indeed the villainous Captain Mendoza! And next to him I see... why it's Grossotesta! His connections must have reached farther than I thought, to have been appointed Natural Philosophy Officer on a Portuguese ship of all things, and so quickly! I hope that he bears me

no ill will.' But I knew even then that his professional jealousy of me would not be easily extinguished.

"Diego turned to me with a grave expression. 'Doctor, zere ees zomezing I must tell you. We are not on ze voyage of discovery zat you may 'ave zought we were. We are on ze much more important mission - ze capitan, 'e 'as a map, a map zat shows ze location of ze ancient City of Gold! Ze Espagbognola, she is not bound for ze Carribbean Sea, but for ze Andes! Eet was supposed to be zis beeg, beeg zecret, but Capitan Mendoza and ze Portuguese Keeng 'ave rumbled us! We are een ze most terrible danger!'"

A wager is made on the ship

"I would wager, good doctor, that the sight of the Portuguese was more of a shock to you when they drew up to board you than it was when you first saw it in you spy glass!"

Duke Peter rests and elbow on the table, gesticulating with his hand at Doctor Barrow.

"For as you know, the Portugeuse are named so after a jellyfish, having bred and trained them for generations. Their ships in fact are giant jellyfish, with long tapering tentacles leading far down into the water."

"I have on good authority from a certain definitive work on the subject..", the Duke does not glance in Lady Kathryn's direction too much, " that not only are these extraordinary long tentacles extremely articulate and used to walay ships, but they also secrete one of the deadliest poisons known to man!"

Pushing a silver coin towards the doctor, the Duke proclaims, "I wager you have a quite strange tale to tell on how you escaped them!"

A fantastic flight - A battle of wits - A battle - A mysterious flight

"His Grace is correct," says the Doctor, "in that the Portuguese Man O' War was, in fact, a Portuguese Man O' War. The crew quailed at the sight of its approach - our sturdy Merchantman, while an admirable vessel, was no match for the pride of the Portugese fleet.

"Diego, I said, 'would you happen to have any cow dung on board?'

"No, doctor,' he said, 'Eet ees considered bad luck by ze men.'

"Then there is nothing for it. We will have to board the Portuguese ship before it reaches us, for the venom of the Portugese Man O' War is the 34th deadliest known to man. The galley of the Portugese ship will be well stocked with the antidote, for otherwise sailing upon her would be madness. We cannot hope to stand against them without it.'

"But 'ow are we to reach ze ship before eet reaches us?' asked Diego.

"Gentlemen, I said, 'Prepare a cannon!'

"But Doctor,' said a common sailor, 'surely ze cannon ees useless against ze rubbery skeen of ze Man O' War!'

"Quite so, my lad. You must also fetch me some rope, some leather straps, a piece of netting, the spare sail, and such of the ships railings that are not vital to prevent us from falling overboard at inopportune times. I will put the mechanical teachings of Aristotle, Arithmetes and Da Vinci to good use. I shall build a flying machine!'

"The men were dubious, but I knew the art well. In no time I had manufactured a crude but

serviceable flying machine. Placing the device astride the cannon with the netting hanging over its mouth, Diego and I - for I would not ask another man to risk his life on the machine, and my friend would not let me go alone - took our places in the harnesses. I signalled the gunner to fire, and my creation was launched!

"Propelled by the motive force of the cannonball, we flew towards the Man O' War. I had not had time to implement a feasible landing system (though I'll warrant the cunning use of wheels, ropes and springs would be the way to go) but the soft consistency of the Man O' War meant that our landing was surprisingly comfortable. With Diego's agile sword defending us, we made our way to the galley, where we were confronted by none other than Ferdinand Grossotesta!

"'Ah, eet ees the Norwegian,' he said. 'I knew zat you would be coming 'ere, and so I awaited for you. I weel challenge you to a battle of weets - we will see who's brain ees the stronger.'

"With no time to lose, I demonstrated the strength of my brain in the Glaswegian manner, and searched the galley for the antidote. It appeared, however, the Grossotesta had hidden it, and so I was forced to brew up a new batch from the raw materials I had to hand (though why they were in the galley, I cannot speculate). When finished, we headed back on deck, to find the Portuguese ship's tentacles wrapped around the Espagbognola! Our men were fighting valiantly, but they were succumbing to both the insidious poison of the tentacles and the numbers of the Portuguese.

"Diego led the way back to our ship, my own arms full of bottles of the antidote. As I administered the antidote to our fallen men, I was surprised to see the tentacles withdraw. The Portugese ship departed with great haste, and our damaged ship was in no condition to pursue.

"It was then that Diego came running up to me. 'The voyage, she ees lost! Mendoza, 'e 'as kidnapped ze capitan, and 'e 'as stolen ze map!'"

"Doctor," says the Contessa, "once again, I am impressed by your craft. But surely such a powerful antidote was not without side-effects. These things never are. I'll wager that the intermittent after-effects of the drug on the behaviour of your saliors caused you no end of trouble before you reacehd your goal."

The wonders of the New World - Two very singular modes of transportation

"You are quite correct, Contessa," continues the doctor. "The unforeseen side effects of the antidote were to have dire consequences for our crew. "The Espagbognola was in a bad way. Her captain was missing, her crew were demoralised and her very structure had been severely damaged by the tentacles of the Portuguese ship. It took us quite some time to reach shore - fortunately we had been close to the coast before we were attacked, or we should have surely sank. We found shelter in a bay, surrounded by impenetrable jungle, and prepared to repair the ship. I eagerly hopped ashore with my notebooks, sketchpad and sample cases - the ship's mission may have been in doubt, but my own was still achievable. While Diego and the First Officer (who went by the name of Domingo) organised repair crews, I spent hours in rapture at the wondrous diversity of nature. I sampled the most exquisitely exotic berries and herbs. I saw snails the size of dogs, crabs with spears as well as claws, that would eat their prey as we would our meat with a knife and fork. There were birds of all colour and hue, strange seven-eyed Cats with orange and purple fur... but I bore you with talk of these

natural marvels.

"On returning to the ship, I was dismayed at the lack of progress that the men had made on the repairs. Why, if anything, the ship was in worse condition than when I had left! The reason for the poor progress became apparent when I observed the men in action - some were hopping, others were using only one hand, still others were simply standing with blank expressions on their faces. The problem soon became apparent - while the antidote had cured the poison, it had effected their minds to the extent that they each believed their poisoned limbs had actually dropped off! "Diego was close to tears in his frustration. To improve his morale, I proposed an expedition down the coast in one of our longboats to determine the fate of the Portuguese ship. He heartily agreed, and the next day we set off with the most able-bodied men we could find.

"We rowed for several hours, and just as we were about to turn back, we rounded a head to see the most remarkable sight! For there, we saw the entire Portuguese ship dragged up upon the beach. With the aid of Diego's spyglass, I could make out Mendoza, gloating over our own bound Captain. I also saw Grossotesta, bellowing orders to the crew. They appeared to be gutting the poor beast, and sewing up it's..." the doctor reddens, and glances around the room, "... it's posterior orifice." Then, I saw them light a fire, and the enormity of Grossotesta's plan struck me. Directing the crew to pull the mouth over the fire, the Man O' War's now empty floatation bladder filled with hot air. Why, Grossotesta had made the dreadnought into a giant airship! The cunning of the man!

"Diego directed a hasty retreat to the Espagbognola. When we arrived, we were met by a triumphant Domingo. 'Ze men,' he said, 'ze men 'ave captured ze native!' I inspected the specimen. He was a portly man, with skin of a dark red colour, and he was wearing three pieces of wood, indelicately disposed. He offered me a small lozenge. 'Why, thank you,' I said, and was about to pop it into my mouth when Domingo stopped me.

"'Do not!' he said. 'Zome of ze men, zey 'ave eaten zis lozenge.'

"'What happened to them?' I asked. Wordlessly, he pointed to the very tops of the trees. Again borrowing Diego's spyglass, I followed his indication. Clutching the tops of the trees with both hands (except one man, who desperately clung with his feet while his hands hung limp) were five of the men. They were floating, and were it not for their strong grips, would have drifted away on the wind!

"A plan of equal cunning to Grossotesta's struck me. 'Diego, Domingo, fetch me a longship, some rope, and five men. You sir, native. Do you have any more of these lozenges?' With some effort, I explained myself to the man, who we called Benny. He presented me with a bag of the strange confections. 'You must explain to me how these are made,' I said. With great haste, I tied each of the men to the longship by the leg ('Not zat one, zir,' said one, 'for she 'as fallen off. '), and fed each of them a lozenge. Diego, Benny and I stepped into the longship, and we cast off into the sky!

"'Zose Portuguese weel not escape from us!' said Diego as we launched. 'We weel pursue zem to ze Lost City! We weel rescue ze Capitan! And we weel not return wizout a fortune een gold!'"

The Contessa wagers on Lozenges

Contessa Barbara looks horrified. "But Doctor van Barrow! The Man O War must have deteriorated rapidly under such coditions, while the lozenges swallowed by your own men (I'll wager) took many hours to work through their systems before the effects even began to wear off. To get down you must have had to cut loose the sailors from your boat! How did you arrange for their safe recovery to the ground? Did your arrangements slow your pursuit, or did you track down the floating sailors at some later stage?"

"Ah, Contessa, an astute observation, and one which occurred to me at the time. However, it appeared that the pickling action of the salt water of the ocean had rendered the jellyfish quite impervious to even the humid atmosphere of the Amazon jungle, whereas the problem with our own men was, ahem, quite the reverse of that which you describe. In fact, in order to keep the strange, buoyant gasses holding them aloft from escaping, we were forced to resort to rather desperate measures. I would rather not describe these measures in mixed company, but suffice it to say that I have never been more impressed at the devotion of a Spaniard to his duty."

The doctor somewhat reluctantly pushes forward his gold coin.

"Now Doctor, I think you must be leading us somewhat astray here so that your story flows better. For surely the escape of the gases from the sailors was hardly an issue - except as a matter of manners, of course. I confess, I have some experience with a product similar to the lozenges you describe and I know that the effect is accomplished primarily by means of antigravity. And as for the jellyfish, it was not - surely - exposure to the Amazon air that was its downfall, but degradation of the flesh due to the accumulation of toxins in the poor creature once its - ahem - posterior orifice was closed. Even if the *Cassipeia* was dead, the normal processes of its cells would have continued to produce such byproducts for some hours."

The Contessa firmly pushes the gold coin back across the table, together with another from her own supply.

Our heroes in pursuit! - More wonders - A reversal of fortune - A dilemma

"I can assure you, Contessa, that the tale I tell is the unvarnished truth, just as sure as I am sitting here. When one is familiar with Spanish sailors, as I have no doubt your excellency is, one knows that the inadvertent escape of gases is **always** an issue. You are correct in some small regard, however. I did not have the proper equipment for a thorough examination of the internal organs of the sailors, but my observations showed that even after the men had expelled enough gas to land the craft, they were still remarkably buoyant, necessitating that they be tied together in a bundle, with the bottom-most man's boots filled with rocks, lest they all float away on a stiff breeze. I surmise that the action of the stomach on the pills caused the production of the floating gases, while the action of the liver produced the levitating action. It made for a wonderfully efficient, if uncouth, way of raising or lowering our vessel at will, but caused complications on the ground. "But I get ahead of myself. For several days we pursued the floating Portuguese Man O' War, our men propelling our boat by the means of a swimming action, and eventually we left behind the green trees of the Amazon jungle for the rocky foothills of the Andes. These mountains are every bit as majestic as those of the Himalayas, and even more full of natural diversity. As well as supplementing our diet with tubers, fruits and herbs from the landscape, we saw tiny goats with horns of brass, spiderwebs of astonishing intricacy and size, hung between canyons, a strange beast that looked like one might get if one put a puppy in a cannon... but I digress once more. Diego kept us out of sight of the Portuguese ship, keeping us on course by means of his marvelous spyglass. I also set about learning Benny's language, while at the same time instructing him in the use of a civilized tongue. I was hampered to some extent by the rather uncivilized tongues of the sailing men, but Benny proved an apt pupil - for a savage, he showed a remarkable mental agility.

"Eventually, Diego turned to me and said, 'Ze Portuguese ship - she ees losing altitude. Surely, zey cannot be landing? We can not be close to ze Lost Ceety already?'

"'No, Diego,' I said, 'By all accounts, the Lost City is on the other side of these ranges. I wonder...' And then, on a change of breeze, the stench hit me. 'Diego! I know why they are landing! Grossotesta must have gutted the jellyfish inexpertly! While the pickling action of the salt water would have prevented the humid atmosphere of the jungle from destroying the skin, the continued action of the internal cells has produced poisons that are destroying the vessel from within!'

"'Zen we must also land, and rescue ze Capitan. Wizout 'is map, we cannot 'ope to find ze Lost Ceety.'

"'Wiz respect, zir,' said one of the sailors from above, 'We are een no condition to mount an attack on ze Portuguese. We cannot ztand on ze ground wizout ze floating and, I 'ave no leg, Manuel, 'e 'as no 'ands, and Inigo, 'e was ztruck across ze face and cannot zee. And zere ees only ze ten of us,' (we had rescued the original floaters) 'where zey 'ave a seexty or more. And we 'ave been sweemeeng zrough ze air for zeveral days now.' "While Diego was remonstrating with the men ('Count ze legs, zere ees uno, dos!' 'No, zir, zat one, she 'as fallen off!'), Benny tapped me on the arm. "'I know where de lost city is, ' he said. 'It is called by my people de City of Despair, Woe and Sorrow. It is protected by de spirits of dese things. I can take you dere, but I do not dink we should go dere. It is de bad place. Bad, bad mojo.'

"You can, of course, see the enormity of our problem. Should we risk the lives of our ill-prepared crew in a desperate attempt to save the captain, or should we have Benny lead us to our goal while the Portuguese were held up with repairs to their ship? The decision was no easy one, I can assure you."

The Doctor turns to Sally. "I say, my dear, are there any more potatoes? I'd like them cooked after the French fashion, if I may."

In which our heroes find the lost city, and the treasure it contains!

"It came to pass," continues the doctor, "That we reluctantly decided to leave the captain to the mercy of the Portuguese. We did fly over the camp, and, taking care to keep out of musket range, yelled to the captain that we would be able to fulfil his mission without the map.

"'Go!' he yelled in response, 'And recover ze treasures of ze lost Ceety for ze glory of Ezpana!'

"Having taught Benny enough elementary geometry, algebra and calculus to enable him to function adequately as navigator, we traversed the treacherous mountains from the safety of the air - though the odd wind currents gave our crew some discomfort. Finally, through Diego's spyglass, we saw a glint of reflected light - we had found the Lost City of Gold!

"With no small amount of elation, we guided our vessel to the city and disembarked, and quickly found sufficient rocks to weigh down our men. ('Zere ees no need to feell up zat boot, zir, for ze leg, she 'as fallen off.') As we gathered our bearings, we noticed something strange about the buildings.

"'Ze buildings,' said Diego, 'Zey are not made of ze gold! You ztupid nateev, you 'ave brought us to ze wrong lost ceety!'

"'Not true,' said Benny. 'Dis is de Lost City of de Gold. It was called de City of de Gold because dis is where de Gold come from - de gold in de mines run out, city is abandoned, and we lose it.'

"'Nevertheless,' I said, 'This is still a remarkable find. Why, it shows that Benny's people have not always been savages, but once ruled a society as advanced as any in Europe.' I paused. 'Well, at least as advanced as France, perhaps even Belgium.'

"But zere ees no gold!' said Diego, 'Our mission, she 'as failed after all!'

"Dere is still some gold,' said Benny, 'In de temple of de Spirits of Despair, Woe and Sorrow. Nobody take de gold. Is bad, bad gold.'

"Excellent,' I said, 'Benny, lead us there at once.'

"The Temple was an impressive one - it had been this edifice that we had seen glinting, for it was, in fact, entirely built of gold. It was covered in shocking reliefs showing the black-cowled spirits, performing a variety of tortures and team sports. Some of them were decidedly... inventive. "'De spirits,' said Benny, 'My people say dat dey are de defenders of dis place. Dey say dat dey will rise up to attack evildoers, and will devour de souls of de unjust.' He paused. 'But den, my people always say dings like dat. Dey be having too much of de strange medicines.'

"We spent several days just looking for a way into the temple, and several more working our way through the strange maze in the temple's interior. There were treasures beyond counting! Golden plates and cutlery, weapons, armour, racks, undergarments... the list goes on! As we explored we loaded up our longship to overflowing with all sorts of beautiful artworks. And then we entered the final chamber - to see the towering idol of the spirit of Despair! It has armed and armoured in a most fearsome fashion! I took down its sword and shield, and threw the black silken headdress to Diego. I will admit that I entertained some notions of return to Holland to live in comfortable retirement, but I knew I could not really give up my academic calling so quickly!

"As we were preparing to leave, however, we saw a sobering sight - on the other side of the canyon were Mendoza and his crew!

"Ow did zey get 'ere so fast?' said Diego. Benny pointed. 'Dey wid de bad, bad tribe. Dey been led here.'

"Of course!' I said, 'They have made contact with the natives. I should have known Grossotesta would have made it his first order of business after they lost the airship to secure local aid. Still, this may yet work to our advantage. Benny, fetch as many gold plates as you can. Diego - hold this shield, and polish it up. Now the sword. And put on that cowl, and make sure it covers your face. Now, stand near the rope bridge over the impossibly deep canyon - they'll have to cross that to get here. You know what a superstitious lot sailors are, and if they have been fraternising with the savages, they will already be full of fear of this place. We will yet win the day, without a shot being fired, or a blow being exchanged!'

"Diego took up his position. As the Portuguese approached the bridge, Benny and I used the golden plates from a hidden position to reflect the sunlight on Diego and his shining accoutrements. He must have looked frightening indeed!

"He stood up boldly and yelled: 'Behold! I am ze guardian of zis place! You weel not zurvive! I weel keel you all and eat your zouls! Zere weel be no zurvivors! For I bear ze shield of Dezpair! I wield the zword of Woe! And I wear ze mask, ze mask of Zorrow!'

"Our ruse worked - the natives turned and fled, followed by the Portuguese sailors!"

Duke Peter checks his notes

"That may very well be, as human beings are easily frightened from treasure - however, beasts are

not.”

“With that amount of gold in the area, it seems obvious to me that the natives have good reason for their fears of the place. Habeum Auris Abundum leads to one particular problem, or so I was taught by my tutor in legends, now known as Saint George. It leads to Malleum Draconis Epidium ”

He pushes forward his second silver coin.

“I would wager, my dear doctor, that it was not Diego who frightened off the natives and the Portuguese. It was in fact, a huge, red (the dominant species colour) Dragon, of the fire breathing sort. Having been awakened earlier by your to-ing and fro-ing with the treasure it was guarding, it chose at that moment to leave its lair in the impossibly deep canyon and rear up behind Diego ready to pounce. It was this that frightened them off, and if it was not for the bright lights I am positive that Diego would have been swallowed immediately!”

In Which things happen

“Ah, yes. The dragon. I was just getting to that.” The Doctor punctuates his sentences by gesturing with his french potatoes at the Duke. “There was, as you say, a huge, and red, dragon. It did, as you say, lair in the impossibly deep canyon. It had been, as you say, disturbed by our gathering of gold, and so it did, as you say, rear up behind Diego.”

The Doctor pauses for thought. “I’ll warrant that Diego, dressed up in that frightful black cowl, and armed as he was with the awe-inspiring golden armaments, bellowing as he was in such fearsome tones, would have been sufficient to frighten off the superstitious Portuguese sailors. Nevertheless, what began as an uncertain retreat became a decided rout as the dragon reared, belching flame from its cavernous maw, and we never saw ought of the Portuguese crew again.

“Mendoza, however, was not so easily cowed. With the most fearsome of scowls, he drew his sword, and crossed the rope bridge, closely followed by Grossotesta. Seeing him, Diego threw off his impressive but impractical golden sword and shield, and drew his own blade, though he retained the mask. At this point, the dragon, reared up as it was behind Diego, leaned forward to pounce. However, it was dazzled by the sun’s reflection from Diego’s shield, and paused momentarily to blink. Realizing our friend’s mortal peril, Benny and I took the opportunity to pelt the beast with golden plates! It roared in anger, and launched itself into the sky!

“Mendoza had the look of a man possessed. Angered at the loss of his mission, when he had victory in his grasp, he sought only our deaths. Without preliminaries, without the exchange of taunts and witticisms that are the mark of a civilized duel to the death, he charged Diego. A thrust, a parry. Diego opened with Bonetti’s defense – only fitting, considering the rocky terrain. Mendoza, naturally, countered with a Capo Ferro, forcing him back. Fortunately, Diego had studied his Agrippa, and recovered. All the while, the dragon circled, waiting for the right moment to strike!

“I looked over towards Grossotesta. He raised his arms protectively over his head, but I signaled that I meant him no harm. ‘I was most impressed with your use of the Man O’ War as an airship,’ I said.

“‘Zank you,’ he said, ‘but eet waz nuzzing. But your flying machine – zat was inspired!’

“‘Oh, only the application of some elementary mathematical theory,’ I replied modestly. ‘I was not expecting you to make contact with the natives so quickly – why, you must have quite the silver tongue, and in an unfamiliar language, no less!’

""You are most kind,' he said. 'I must ask you – 'ow did you make zose men float like zat?'

""Ah, but I can not take all of the credit for that at all – that was the work of my friend Benny there, using a surprising concoction of native medicines.'

""Ze nateev zat ees throwing ze rocks at ze dragon to keep eet from eating ze combatatants?'

""Yes, that's him. Stout chap, a real find. Almost as intelligent as a Belgian, you know.' We turned our attention back to the fight.

""Do you fancy ze wager on ze battle?' asked Grossotesta.

""Certainly,' I said, 'I'll have ten pesos on the Spaniard.'

""You are on!' said Grossotesta, 'and I shall 'ave ze... 'ang on!'

“Diego was using his smaller frame to advantage, leading his foe up the stepped slopes of the temple. Once at the top, he ducked and weaved in the most impressive display of swordplay I have seen, before or since. But even as Diego's greater agility kept him out of the range of Mendoza's strong thrusts, the bigger man's strength meant that Diego could not hope to close in for a finishing blow! The battle continued back down the side of the temple.

“The dragon had in the meantime ceased trying to eat Diego or Mendoza, and had focussed its full attention on Benny. On seeing this, the plucky native showed a surprisingly French approach to warfare, and turned and ran. The great beast's mighty wings thumped the air as it gained altitude and then it swooped! Benny ran past us at a truly impressive pace, and the dragon's claws missed Grossotesta and I by mere inches!

""Are you not going to do anything?' asked Grossotesta.

""I am afraid not,' I said. 'I am fresh out of ideas. I have never encountered a dragon before, much less fought one, and if I were to try and help Diego, I fear I would only get in his way. I don't suppose you have any suggestions?'

“He shrugged, and we both watched helplessly as Benny leaped heroically into the chasm, with the dragon so very close behind him. By this stage, Mendoza had lured Diego out into the middle of the rope bridge. There, the larger man's superior reach gave him the advantage. But the bridge rocked and swayed, and I thought with every swing and thrust that one or both of the men would plummet to their dooms.

“But Diego's luck had changed. A cunning feint, a lunge, a twist and a riposte, and he plunged his sword deep into the villain's leg. Mendoza stumbled to his knee, and his sword tumbled from his grasp. He bowed his head in a gesture of surrender. Triumphant, Diego turned to wave and it was then, then that I saw with horror that Mendoza had drawn a pistol from his belt!

“Everything happened so quickly! I cried out to warn my friend, but too late! A shot rang out, and he toppled and fell into the chasm!

“I was distraught – I had lost my two closest friends, and now would find myself at the mercy of Mendoza and Grossotesta (who, at least, wasn't *such* a bad chap after all). I wandered, disconsolate, over to the edge of the precipice. As I looked over – could it be? Yes! It was!

“I felt for sure that my eyes were deceiving me – there was Diego, clutching at his arm, standing on the dragon! The dragon had billowed to twice its normal size, and was now entirely spherical. It fluttered its wings quite helplessly – built for gliding and swooping, they were quite ineffective at propelling this new, unexpected shape!

“It rotated to face me, and its mouth opened – but instead of a jet of red-hot flame, out crawled

Benny, disheveled but very much alive! The dragon had got far more than it bargained for when it had swallowed my native guide – for hung around his belt had been his pouch of lozenges! The heat of the dragon's internal system had caused the gases so produced to expand – turning the whole monster into a large, scaly balloon!

“Mendoza looked on in awe. Diego threw back his cowled head in a hearty laugh, and as he did so, the last of Mendoza's strength left him. The villain fell to the bridge, unconscious, and then rolled off into oblivion.

“Wasting no time, I threw a rope to Benny, who tied it around the dragon's neck. I dragged the huge – but very, very light – beast over to our longboat, and secured said boat to the dragon. Grossotesta, with no further prospects in the Andes, elected to return to the Espagbognola with us. We gathered the men, who were most grateful to have something else doing the lifting for our return voyage.”

The doctor swirls his port reflectively. “There is little more to tell. We found the ship in good repair for the return to Spain. Grossotesta acted as deputy natural philosophy officer, and we collaborated on the book describing our discoveries, which I believe is once more in print. Benny returned with us, and now holds, I understand, the chair of Experimental Geography at Madrid University. Don Diego de la Vega eventually returned to the New World to manage his family's colonies, where he tells me that the legend of 'Zorrow', or as it is known by the colonists, 'El Zorro', is particularly popular – why, apparently El Zorro has been seen in the colony, righting wrongs and fighting evil men! The imagination of these people! I do know that Don Diego kept the mask, to remind him of our adventure and of our time together.

“As for me, this little adventure was but the start of my academic career – plenty more adventures awaited me! But that, my friends, is another story, and shall be told another time. My, my, it's getting late, isn't it? Don't scowl so, Phineas, you always sleep in till midday anyway.”

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