

COVER PAGE

Lacewing Joins the Dance

Wally Parker

~ 7309 words

©1996 Wally Parker All rights reserved

Printed December 3, 2006

Lacewing Joins the Dance

Lacewing Blossom curled crosslegged in the great old leather chair beside the cheery fireplace, shook her curls to one side, glanced up again at the kitchen door, behind which, she knew, her mother was standing Masai-like with one foot tucked up against the opposite thigh, as she did when she was in a thoughtful mood, absorbed in rolling out the crust for her weekly pie, and carefully opened her dog-eared book, *The Adventures of Don Quixote*.

It was a fat thing, this book, almost a thousand pages long. You couldn't think about how long it'd take to read such a book. That didn't really matter. She was nearly halfway through now, intoxicated with the sun-browned fragrances of ancient Spain, listening to the clip-clopping hoofbeats of Don Quixote's horse Rocinante on the hard dust of the road to adventure, as much enchanted with the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance and his querulous but devoted sidekick Sancho Panza, as they had been with an even more remote time, a time so remote, in fact, that it may never have existed at all. And yet, their mad quest brought it to life. Well, Miguel de Cervantes brought it to life, with his pen. And now, beside the warmth of the little fire that chased away the last chill in the air of an autumn morning centuries later, Lacewing Blossom was bringing it to life again.

"I am Lacewing Blossom," she heard her small voice saying, as if it were coming from far away, "intrepid adventurer to the thither worlds, come over the sea and up the Rio Júcar in my trusty ship Bagel, looking for rare birds and giant talking turtles which stroll the forests in the company of princesses and magicians."

She pictured herself standing at the bow of her boat, one laced brown shoe planted firmly upon the gunwale, her long pale-yellow woolen stockings clasped by tweed knee-length knickers, her narrow shoulders framed snugly in a matching tweed jacket, her

effulgent tresses tucked up under her tweed cap. Like Washington crossing the Delaware, like Charlemagne astride the Empire, like the Valkyrie Brünhilde passing through the gate of Valhalla, she sailed onto the broad plain of La Mancha as conquering heroine. Not that she desired conquest or dominion or any such thing. For the mere and simple fact of being there, at the moment of discovery, was her aim and her triumph. Of course all the sentient inhabitants would recognize her magnificence – otherwise, they would quickly disappear – and she would greet them with magnificent *noblesse oblige*.

The riverbank near her mooring was deserted, so she set out inland, keeping at least half an eye peeled for any feathered creature as striking as a Quetzal, a Kiwi, or a Toucan, and half an ear cocked for a strolling minstrel with cow eyes and carapace singing a dancing tune.

And so it happened that as she strode over a rise in the rust-colored road and gazed down toward the fields below she chanced to see that infamous picaresque pair, who had commenced their journey quite early in the ruby glow of the ruddy Apollo, the irrepressible knight Don Quixote de la Mancha and his feckless squire Sancho Panza, who were at that moment facing off against three armed men who had in their thrall eleven women shackled together in leg irons and chains.

“Surely there can be no justification in the eyes of Almighty God,” Don Quixote was exhorting the captain of the guards, “for the treatment of fair Spanish women as if they were Turkish galley slaves.”

“Better sold to the purveyors of Algiers than to have failed in the upbringing of fine Spanish youth,” retorted the captain. “Not that it’s any of your affair, you moth-eaten old goat. For these slatterns allowed their children to run rampant in the streets like vandals and hooligans, and this is indeed their just reward.”

“You mean, do you not,” Don Quixote retorted indignantly, “that with all the resources at the king’s disposal you could not constrain mere children and so, seeking

more amenable victims, you have bound these damsels and carried them here to serve your swinish bidding? To arms, cowards!" And with these words the Knight of the Rueful Countenance lowered the stripped sapling that served as his lance and spurred Rocinante into an ungainly gallop, scattering the guards to both sides as knight and horse plunged through them and careered into the fresh-plowed field beyond, where Rocinante, sinking deeply into the soft earth, stopped abruptly, and Don Quixote soared over his mane and thudded into the plump soil, where he lay wriggling like an inverted turtle as they surrounded him with much cursing and disrespectful commentary.

Seeing that his master was as usual not seriously hurt, Sancho Panza withdrew a chisel and hammer from his saddlebags and, laying their chains upon a large rock, quickly cut the women free.

While all this was transpiring, Lacewing Blossom ran out into the field to help poor Don Quixote lift himself from the ground.

"Stand aside, lad," the captain ordered her, "for we mean to take this man as our prisoner for interfering with the king's road crew, and already he is in a predicament useful to us."

"Stuff a boot in it," Lacewing said, lifting the knight's head from the tilth and inquiring as to his condition. Just then Sancho Panza lumbered up, perspiring effusively and out of breath. The two of them raised Don Quixote to a standing position and Lacewing placed the dented brass chamberpot back on the knight's almost equally dented crown.

"Very well, then," said the captain. "I will take all three of you into custody for your rudeness."

"You will do no such thing," observed Don Quixote, "because the prisoners for whom you are responsible have fled, and you had better scour these hills for them lest on your return you suffer the same fate as you pressed upon them. And surely, when

you consider it, you will see that what I say is true, for a knight errant and his squire and a passing gallant lad will not be regarded as adequate compensation for your loss of eleven fructive seedbeds of his majesty's peonies."

The captain acknowledged with grim silence that this was so, and, perhaps unaware that the women were no longer chained together, and realizing that three unruly prisoners might slow his pursuit sufficiently to insure their escape, spat upon the ground and, followed closely by his wide-eyed underlings, stormed off in search of the human herd with which he had been entrusted.

"I am Don Quixote de la Mancha, knight errant, protector of the faith and defender of the divine Dulcinea del Toboso," the old warrior said to Lacewing, introducing himself, "and this is my squire, the redoubtable Sancho Panza, a man as good as any other."

"I'm Lacewing Blossom," Lacewing said, removing her cap, releasing her long tresses into the morning sun.

Don Quixote stepped back, aghast. "Upon my chamberpot!" he gasped. "Were you not a lad I'd swear you were almost as beautiful as my lady of Toboso, in whose service we ride."

"Thank you, good knight," said Lacewing demurely, "but I am not a lad, although you may regard me as such since it will certainly make things go more easily for us."

And thus it was decided that, so long as she kept her hair under her cap, the three of them should go together to seek adventure on the Spanish main road. And not long afterward they came upon three people who, by their garb, were a shopkeeper, a nun, and an alderman, and who, by their actions, were trying to instruct a scarecrow and a dog in the arcane arts of the mind, an enterprise which, upon Sancho Panza's inquiry, they gladly explained.

"We assembled this man of grass," the alderman said, "in order to see whether the

average person, the common peasant that is, can be instructed in the scholarly arts. The grass man is something less than a peasant, as you can plainly observe, because he has not the ability to talk. However, he does communicate with the dog, whose name is Ladra, and so we obtain our answers."

Lacewing thought the dog Ladra looked a great deal like her own dog, Boofer, who was also a sheepdog but who did not, so far as she knew, detect messages coming from bundles of grass.

"The bishops are unsure," continued the nun, "whether this program might engender some heretical departure from Church doctrine if the common people should accidentally learn to read, but we have so far proved, I think, that that refinement is not possible. The grass man seems to understand neither Latin nor any but the coarsest Spanish."

"But fortunately," concluded the shopkeeper, "even this illiterate bale of green hay can grasp those skills which commerce and industry value most."

Don Quixote allowed that he would like to see a demonstration of their technique, for he was not at all sure they were not abusing the straw man's dignity by subjecting him to the horrors of education.

"All right," said the nun, who had briefly been a schoolteacher in Madrid before she'd taken the Holy Orders, "let's begin with arithmetic."

The shopkeeper spoke directly at the fibrous green bundle. "How much is one and two?" he asked, enunciating carefully.

"Arf! Arf! Arf!" said Ladra, wagging his tail.

"See?" cried the alderman, who was also a broker of chattels and estates, "if we give each ambitious peasant a dog, *voila!* a whole new class of clerks and rentpayers."

"Now watch this!" cried the shopkeeper, warming to the demonstration. And, walking back some distance while the nun spread her habit to hide his activity from

their pupils, he placed two cardboard cartons on the field and in one he put a handful of rhubarb and in the other a shank of lamb. And then he sealed them both with glue, the odor of which made Rocinante visibly nervous.

"Now," said the nun, "I will whisper to the grass man which box the rhubarb is in." Which she did.

The dog Ladra, whose eyes, like Boofer's, were hidden beneath a forelock of shaggy gray hair, sat motionless for a moment and then, hearing no one admonish him against it, leapt forward and bounded across the field to the two cartons. Without a moment's hesitation and with great enthusiasm he began to rip open the one containing the shank of lamb.

"No!" cried the alderman, as the three would-be educators dashed toward the nearly oblivious dog, who quickly seized his prize. "That's for our stew! You've got the wrong box! Oh, dear."

But Ladra, who much preferred lamb to rhubarb, raced off with their supper, and while they were trying to persuade him to abandon it, which carried them far into the woods at the edge of the field, Rocinante and Sancho's little burro Dapple calmly dismantled and ate the grass man, who had been made of very good stuff indeed.

After he'd hoisted Don Quixote back into his saddle, and handed him again his sapling, Sancho Panza retrieved the rhubarb from the unopened box, and it turned out to be a good thing, for him at least, that he had. As they struck out again he walked alongside Dapple and let Lacewing ride, which she enjoyed very much, and they were all in high spirits, perhaps because they had finally encountered people who seemed even sillier than themselves, and also, Lacewing mused, because the Knight of the Crestfallen Countenance had not hurled himself pell-mell at anyone and thus remained, for the moment, uninjured.

This was soon to change, for as they gained a gentle crest they spied below them a

small party of men in white coats trotting along the road, chattering among themselves like a gaggle of geese and creating quite a stir of dust in the process. Lacewing saw that they were carrying a stretcher upon which lay the body of a man, quite unclothed save for his silken breeches, lying on his back while one of their party knelt, seemingly in midair, athwart the man's hips and repeatedly hammered his fist upon the supine sternum while another, running before the litter, kept trying to kiss the man's face.

This scene set Don Quixote off at once, because, as Sancho Panza explained later, they had encountered a very similar situation previously and it had come out rather badly.

"It's a mutiny, at least, and possibly worse!" Don Quixote cried, raising his tree trunk, pulling down his pasteboard visor and spurring Rocinante excitedly onward. "These deceitful bearers are attacking their lady in the sedan, to whom they owe their allegiance, if not their lives."

As usual, he fell upon them unawares, for they were quite preoccupied, and white coattails went flying everywhere, as did the tormented cargo of the stretcher, which was flung onto the road by the force of collision with the galloping Rocinante. It bounced end-over-end like a log.

Lacewing inspected the body. It was cold, gray and rigid. The men in the white coats staggered over to her, rumped and limping. "Are you insane?" one of them asked. "You've killed this man!"

Lacewing stood up. "Not unless we did it yesterday," she said. "He's as stiff as old roadkill."

Sancho Panza trotted up then, looking a bit dismayed.

The men in the white coats, which were now profaned with dirt and greenish stains from their tumbles, all spoke at once.

"We were taking him to the hospital."

"We're doctors."

"He's very wealthy."

"We could've revived him."

"If he died in the hospital we'd get huge fees."

"I know!" one piped up, looking at Lacewing. "You could take his place on the litter. We'll hide him under you. Then after we get admitted, you can leave and we'll tell his family he died there after heroic emergency treatment."

"Yes! Yes!" they cried.

"Before you do that," Sancho interrupted, "could you take care of my master? He seems to have broken something."

"What?"

"Does he have any money?"

"I'm not a psychiatrist."

They stood around Don Quixote, who was lying very awkwardly against a gnarled old oak tree, a great bruise on his forehead and a strange flexibility in his left forearm.

"It's broken."

"Of course it's broken. Either that or it has two elbows."

"The little fat guy says he's impecunious."

"What's that mean?"

"Can't pay."

"Well, then, maybe it's just sprained."

"Could be it *does* have two elbows."

They looked at Sancho and Lacewing, and at their corpse yellowing itself in the noonday sun on the plain of La Mancha.

"Probably nothing," one of them said to Sancho, raising the palms of his hands with a shrug, and, white coats aflutter, they recovered the litter from the side of the

road, lifted and lowered their ripening patient upon it, and scurried off again toward the hospital.

Lacewing, fortunately, knew it was *not* nothing, and she helped Sancho tie a splint of oak sticks along the arm to hold it straight.

"I'm exhausted," Don Quixote said. "Let's have lunch."

It was then that Sancho Panza discovered all their food was gone from his saddlebags.

"Those hobbled harlots, for whom your worship gallantly risked injury and death, stole all our food," he lamented.

"Surely, Sancho, you must be mistaken. A lady does not dip her fingers in a gentleman's rucksack, and these maidens were very highly bred."

"Bred frequently, perhaps," Sancho said scornfully, for he was very fond of eating, "but not likely by men of exalted rank."

The three of them decided to rest and perhaps take a brief siesta in the shade of the old oak tree, and Sancho was glad he'd thought to snatch the shock of rhubarb that Ladra had spurned for the alderman's leg. He might have mentioned something about having it, especially since everyone was hungry, but he did not.

And not until Don Quixote fell asleep, which happened quickly, and Lacewing seemed thoroughly distracted as she lay on her back, gazing up into the leafy twigs looking for unusual ornithopters, that he withdrew it from his doublet and dared to take a bite.

The rhubarb was very crisp, and it made a loud ripping sound, culminating in a pop. Don Quixote awoke with a start.

"I just heard my arm breaking," he said, his huge eyebrows coursing into the sinuous furrows that stretched across his brow.

"I assure you, your worship," Sancho said, "that event happened long ago. It's

only a memory, a flashback. Just ignore it, if you think of it again, and try to sleep for a little while.”

Still staring up into the thicket of branches that shaded them from the midday sun, Lacewing flopped an arm over and opened her hand, palm up, at Sancho’s feet. “I heard it, too,” she said. With his pocket knife, Sancho cut her a stalk. And then another.

“What makes you do it, Sancho?”

“Do what, Moskita?” For that is what he called her: “little fly.”

“Wander around with the Knight of the Doleful Countenance, getting into crazy situations and wreaking havoc on the countryside.”

He shrugged. “He asked me. And I was able to put aside my more urgent affairs for a while. And he promised me an island of my very own, where I could rule like a caliph and eat better than some dogs.”

“Uh-huh. And how will a man as batty as he is...” She looked at Don Quixote, his eyes closed, covered by scaly vein-riven lids, slumbering as innocently as a babe, his long yellowish-gray beard already almost as sparse as the hair on his head. “How will a man, even one so distraught with virtue and righteousness as this good knight, acquire an island to give you?”

“Aha!” Sancho said, “this is where a stranger to our country cannot understand. For it happens in knight-errantry that one must occasionally conquer dragons whose lairs are the outposts of great fiefdoms, or vast moors, or lovely islands, and when one has slain such a beast one is entitled by the laws of chivalry to exercise dominion over its lands and the people who inhabit them. This is well-known to all who have even a passing acquaintance with the great courtly romances of our day.”

“Uh-huh. And what if you never meet such a dragon? Or what if it kills your master, God forbid?”

“Well, I would say, based on our adventures to this point, that a dragon cannot be

far in the future. We have seen just about everything else. And as for my master's valor, well, you have witnessed for yourself that he is utterly fearless."

She thought to mention that he was utterly incompetent as well, but it seemed unkind and she did not. "Uh-huh," she said. "Well, suppose you get your island, Sancho? What will you do then?"

He shrugged again. "I don't know," he said, a little sadly. "I can sell a lot of the inhabitants into slavery, and raise some money that way, for I see by my own experience that this is a very sound way of acquiring wealth. But after that what will there be to do? What do kings do? Eat, I guess. I'll make all the leftover natives work as chefs, and serving girls."

"That doesn't, pardon my saying so, sound like much of a plan. But I suppose on the other hand it's perfectly adequate."

"I am a poor man. Poor men do not have plans, Moskita. They have dreams. They do not need plans, as you say, because their dreams are not going to come true. But even so they have dreams, and that is why I am here. Because this is my dream."

"Well," she said, "I salute your dream, Sancho. And now perhaps we should awaken the Knight of the Droopy Countenance and head on down the *camino real*."

And so they did, although Don Quixote, still dizzy from the bump on his head, could barely hold on to Rocinante with one hand. Soon they came into sight of a small farm, where they turned in seeking water and perhaps a bite to eat.

A huge grim-faced woman stood next to a freight wagon by the entrance to a root cellar, flanked, if that is the word, by four clerks scribbling things in large notebooks. As the knight and his squire rode up, Lacewing walking beside them, Don Quixote tipped his bedpan. "Good day, mistress and sons of this fine estate," he said. "Is your master about anywhere?"

"I am Santa Ava Arroz, and these are my four factotums," she replied. "And who

might you fools be?"

Just then the farmer, his face set in weary resignation, emerged from the root cellar, bearing a hundredweight of potatoes in a large sack.

"The harvest on this farm was ten sacks of potatoes, your saintliness," one of the factotums said, looking up from his notepad. "The tithe is one sack, herewith delivered."

Santa Arroz looked at the farmer, bent under the weight of the sack. "Put it on the wagon," she said. Slowly, almost painfully, he heaved it upon the numerous sacks already piled high above the wagon's sides.

She spoke again. "Surely you have seed for planting next year."

"Yes, publican, I do."

"Enough to raise another ten sacks?"

"Yes, publican."

"Stop calling me 'publican,' you impudent dirt-eater. I am his majesty's fulfillment manager. I take no pleasure in it. In fact, I take no pleasure in anything. Not even in assessing you yet another sack, against next year's crop."

"But..."

"Bring it or I'll add a third sack for arguing and wasting my time."

As the farmer retreated into his root cellar for yet another sack of potatoes to donate to the coffers of the king, a large ill-humored wasp stung Rocinante on the rump, and the great steed charged forward, bowling over the tax collectress and tipping the wagon full of produce onto the four factotums, who had been comparing notes on interest rates when they disappeared beneath a dusty cascade of bulging burlap bags.

Don Quixote, fortunately, fell off Rocinante just as they were passing over the prostrate Santa Arroz, who broke his fall as gently as a corpulent cloud. She cursed in a grand fury as the old gentleman tried to lift himself from her unwilling embrace. In the confusion, recognizing a singular opportunity to refill the larder, Sancho Panza caught

each of the four factotums in a sack, gagged each with a potato, and tied the necks shut tight. Then he dragged four sacks of potatoes into a nearby shed and closed the door.

Santa Arroz raged on, kicking and cursing, but the Knight of the Downcast Countenance, unable to use his broken arm and burdened with various pieces of ill-fitting armor, could not lift himself from her ample bosom until Lacewing helped him up, which, to tell the truth, she was not quick to do.

Once everyone had regained their feet, Sancho informed Santa Arroz apologetically that her four factotums had hurriedly departed the scene on horseback, telling him that the noonday sun marked the beginning of the Feast of Saint Zero, the patron saint of accountants, and that they were entitled to the day off, and asking him to convey this news to her as soon as might be practicable. They had, however, he went on, left their books of account, and from these records she was able to determine, after Sancho and the farmer had helped her right and reload her treasure-wagon, that all the day's collections were indeed aboard and that the king's ransom was intact.

After she drove away, urging her team, with its bounteous burden, onward toward the next farm, they returned to the farmer two of the sacks which Sancho had hidden, and from the third they filled Dapple's saddlebags with enough potatoes to last them a month or more. The fourth sack, they discovered, was actually filled with rhubarb, of which the three adventurers, having had their fill earlier, took but a few crimson stalks.

As they passed the next several miles along the dusty road beside the emerald fields beneath the chrome yellow Spanish sun, Don Quixote instructed Sancho Panza and Lacewing Blossom, whom he too now addressed with affection as Moskita, on the artful philosophy of knight-errantry and courtly love.

"We are instructed by our Lord to love our neighbors as ourselves," he said, "but in actual practice none of us can. Each of us though is able rather easily, perhaps rather too easily, to love someone who we believe is vastly beautiful. We do not mean by this,

as gentlemen of knight-errantry, to consummate such a relationship, nor even to derive from it any of the usual satisfactions of carnal love. Indeed, we make of our ladies hallowed icons of the purest sort, whom we should not dare in person to approach, let alone to fondle."

"Unless they beg us to," Sancho suggested.

"Certainly not!" Don Quixote recoiled. "Sancho, your concept of womanhood has not evolved beyond the rude customs of your limited experience, but I tell you that a great lady, and certainly any lady worthy of such a knight as I, could not even imagine such wanton behavior as you allude to."

"Perhaps so," Sancho shrugged.

"A knight-errant honors his lady with the innocent love demonstrated by his championship, which requires that he go abroad in the land, carrying her banner into combat with those very forces which dishonor all love and hence all womanhood. Thus does my lady Dulcinea serve God, that in her blessed name I keep the world which is beneath her sacred dignity free of the stain of sin."

"That's very generous of you," Lacewing said, "and yet I must marvel at the chaos your efforts create. It seems that everywhere we go things are spilled and people are scattered, not least yourself."

The Knight of the Melancholy Countenance pondered this for a moment as they walked along. "A knight-errant cannot hope for too much in his life of adventure," he said at last. "He must serve in faith and never ask a sign from those he loves of approval or desire. He cannot evince doubt or anxiety, fear or despair. He cannot expect that life will be orderly or sedate. His mission may seem the utmost foolishness to all the world, and yet he must persevere, loving God and his lady with all his heart and without the slightest ambition for personal reward."

Just then a large, dark brick building became visible to them not far off, and

Sancho surmised it might be a factory of some sort because of its size and grimy appearance and lack of windows. As they entered its courtyard a friar emerged and greeted them. He eyed Don Quixote with skeptical curiosity.

“We have no facilities available to house the mentally deranged,” he said.

Don Quixote drew himself up straight in the saddle. “I am Don Quixote de la Mancha, knight-errant in the service of my lady Dulcinea del Toboso. And what manner of establishment is this that has no capacity to care for the damned?”

“We are a refuge for persons of excessive years,” the friar said, speaking not to Don Quixote but to Sancho and Lacewing. “This building used to house an orphanage, which has since been relocated to Cadiz, to serve the unintended aftermath of the ill-fated Armada. Here we provide assistance to those whose souls are soon to join the Lord.” He folded his hands across his ample belly. “You will understand that we cannot succor those whom reason has abandoned, for it is well known that the Lord has no further use of them.”

“We were hoping to refresh our water bags at your well,” Sancho Panza said.

“And perhaps to share your table, if you’d be so inclined,” Don Quixote added. “I would be pleased to regale you with many tales of my own knight-errantry, wherein I have rescued many maids from the jaws and talons of evil, and slain many men and monsters in the process, and served the aims of God and man through my quest on behalf of the lovely Dulcinea, my Lady of Toboso, whose honor it is my privilege to defend and to whose glory my life is dedicated.”

“Fill your canteens if you must,” the friar sighed, “although the water is low this time of year and a bit sour. Unfortunately, we have no food to offer you because not two hours ago we were attacked by an army of amazons who ransacked the grounds and carried off the last of our meagre food supply.”

Beside the well they encountered two of the inmates of this establishment, a gaunt

Andalusian man named Plácido and a small mestizo woman named Maria.

“Who is the master of this castle?” Don Quixote asked Plácido.

The old man’s black eyes, half-hidden beneath wisps of gray hair that fell over his forehead, stared emptily at the knight, then at Sancho, then Lacewing. “The devil,” he said.

Maria laughed a small, shy, tittering laugh. “But don’t worry,” she said reassuringly, “he isn’t here. He never comes here. He has a mansion on Majorca.”

“Well,” asked Lacewing, “what kind of place is this?”

“I think of it as an elder-orphanage,” Maria said, laughing.

“If dying people were as interesting as monkeys,” Plácido added, “it could be a circus. We play cards with a deck that’s missing the six of clubs and the three of hearts. Nobody minds. Some people don’t even notice. The amazon women took our face cards, so now we’re missing those, too. Maybe we’ll just deal a card to each player and the one with the biggest card will win. Why not? There’s really nothing to gain, and equally there’s nothing to lose.”

“You were assaulted by an army of amazons?” Lacewing inquired.

“This morning three women came here,” Maria said. “Hardly an army. Their ankles were bound with iron bracelets, which they persuaded the blacksmith to remove. They took all the face cards from our deck because one fancied herself a gypsy fortuneteller. And they took the last of our rhubarb.”

The friar joined them at this point and interrupted their little tête-à-tête. He told Plácido and Maria that too much exposure to the sun would soften their brains, cause eruptions of their skin, and hasten the disintegration of their ragged clothes. He told Don Quixote and Sancho Panza and Lacewing Blossom, somewhat imperiously, that their continued presence on the premises endangered the peace of his sanitarium and the welfare of his tabescent guests.

Don Quixote was thoughtful. "Pardon my asking, dear friar, but what use has the Lord for those from whom compassion has fled?"

"Perhaps, oh Knight of the Shellshocked Countenance, if they are not too afflicted with cruelty, He employs such wretches to care for those who squat over their bedpans rather than sit under them."

Despite this slight to his sombrero, Don Quixote ordered Sancho to give most of the potatoes from Dapple's burgeoning saddlebags to the residents of this windowless place.

As Plácido and Maria carried the potatoes back into the *enfermería*, Don Quixote bade the friar farewell. "You are perhaps fortunate, friend acolyte, that amidst the parched and swirling madness of life you have found this sweetly rational oasis of death. For my own part, though, I find the open road a more charitable hostelry."

The friar smiled and folded his hands again, as he was wont to do, across his ample middle, clearly the product of greater gustatory pleasure than usually accompanies a diet of rhubarb. "Well, then, sir knight," he said, "I wish you godspeed on your journey, and your squire and your squire's squire as well."

And so Don Quixote, stiffly dignified in the saddle of the indefatigable Rocinante, and Sancho and Lacewing, both now borne by the placid Dapple, newly lightened of his potatoes, walked slowly from the shaded courtyard of the sanitarium into the hot, torpid air of the Spanish afternoon.

They had not gone too far when they noticed, in a broad valley beside the road, a large hacienda which Don Quixote quickly identified as the estate of a nobleman. "I believe we are overlooking the vineyards of the redoubtable Macarena de Cuba," he said.

Sancho shrugged. "It appears to be some sort of public place," he replied, "for I see many carriages there."

“Buyers, no doubt,” Don Quixote said, “who will carry the wine to the great cities of the north. And I am sure, Sancho, that the arrogant Santa Arroz did not bother to impress her tithes in this place, for it is well known that taxes levied on grapes are collected from the purses of ordinary men.”

As they drew near the place, an odor greeted them which suggested to Sancho, and Lacewing as well, that this was no winery but perhaps a great livestock yard or even an abattoir. As it happened, they soon discovered it was a zoo. Nevertheless, the sweet stench that filled the air seemed only to put Don Quixote ever more firmly in mind that the owners of this establishment had been denied the purifying experience of sacrifice to the depleted treasury of his overextended majesty Philip II, and he made preparation to rectify this injustice.

“But how shall we persuade the keepers of this place to turn over their proceeds to us?” Sancho asked incredulously.

“The pox,” said Don Quixote enigmatically, and with that he urged Rocinante into a gallop and swept through the crowd of onlookers like an avenging angel, crying, “The pox! The pox!” The crowd reeled at first, and then, hearing his words and observing the extraordinarily animated strangeness of him, people fled in all directions, some tumbling into any available carriage, some running as fast as their feet would carry them. By the time Sancho and Lacewing arrived, no one else remained on the premises.

“Your lordship is a genius,” Sancho cried admiringly. “Even the keepers have departed the grounds.”

“But,” Lacewing asked, “won’t they return when they see us here?”

“Perhaps by then we shall have completed our mission and be gone,” Sancho speculated. “Whatever it is.”

“We shall first collect the tax,” Don Quixote said, “which these scurrying pismires have avoided by surrounding themselves with creatures who by rights are the house

pets of the Lord. I therefore declare, in the name of my most virtuous and compassionate lady Dulcinea del Toboso, that one pair of each of these creatures shall be taken and returned to the wilderness, where God may once again enjoy them.”

And so Lacewing and Sancho went about the zoo, liberating from each enclosure a pair of each of the animals, one male and one female, except that in some cases, as with the pandas, they could not distinguish one gender from another and simply allowed the first two who came to the gate to go free.

Meanwhile, Don Quixote went to the toll booth and gathered up one coin in every five, remembering the formula enunciated at the potato farm, which had been the practice ever since that imperious barbarian fop, Sir Francesco Ducky, had scuttled the entire Spanish fleet.

The animals, used as they were to the confinement and feeding routines of the zoo, were easily herded into a motley flock, roaring and bleating, flapping and scrabbling, lumbering and prancing.

Contemplating this horde, Sancho Panza became distressed. “Oh, God!” he lamented. “What ever shall we do with such a congeries of creatures?”

“We could take them to my *barca*,” Lacewing said. “It is on the river not far from here and will provide shelter for them, if they all behave themselves.”

The keepers, seeing this spectacle and suspecting foul play, but fearing the pox more than any damage these interlopers might do, skulked on the hillsides beyond the zoo and waited.

“Done, then,” Don Quixote said. “We will take them to Moskita’s ship. And we had better begin.”

And so, their purses jangling with ducats, the three adventurers began to encourage their cacophonous collection of couples toward the river Júcar, which was not an hour’s journey off.

Along the way they encountered a woman who was sitting by the side of the road, weeping.

"What evil has befallen you, dear lady?" Don Quixote asked kindly. "For I am Don Quixote de la Mancha, protector of the gentle sex, and I shall avenge you forthwith."

"Oh, great sir," she wailed, "I am bereft of hope, for I have lost my cock, Chanticleer, the greatest swordsman in all the empire."

"He must be nearby," answered the Knight of the World-weary Countenance, "for a cuckold is never found far from the fold, and neither his blade nor his arm is any match for mine."

"He is not a cuckold, nor even a cuckoo, such as yourself, dear knight, but a cock-a-doodle-doo, and he can slice your wattles fifty times before your sword has cleared its scabbard. But a wicked necromancer has stolen him from me and now in the pits of the Pyrenees he works his magic for another and I am left with neither cock nor purse, like a eunuch cast out from the Casbah."

"Well, then, come with us, for as you can see we have many cocks, and hens and rams and ewes and many other creatures as well, which we are taking to their new home on the banks of the Júcar, and if you will help us we shall reward you well."

The woman considered them, the wild-eyed knight and the sad-eyed squire and the bright-eyed boy (or was it a girl?) and the carnival of animals they drove before them. "Why, thank you all," she said, "and I *will* accept your kindness, for after all these years of rendering lifeless scores of cocks I think it will be pleasant to earn my bread succoring the lambs of God."

And so off they went again, howling and chirping, oinking and chattering, mooing and purring, laughing and singing along the road in the late afternoon sun toward the little ship Bagel, called by the natives *El Barca Buñuelo*, which lay at anchor along the peaceful banks of the Júcar.

And as they drew near to the river, whose sweet fragrance wafted to them on the warm evening breeze, they encountered yet another traveller, a handsome man of experience who had squandered his family's fortune by underwriting the hulls of that Invincible Armada which now lay slowly rocking in the dark currents at the bottom of the Atlantic. "Today I am reduced to selling indemnities which protect shepherds against attack by wild boars," he said longingly. "But, alas, people are so inured to catastrophe, and shepherds are so poor in any case, that it is very hard to sell them insurance against the ravages of a beast that has not been seen hereabouts since the underground knight Sir Jean du Clottes rounded them all up for bacon during the Crusades."

"Well, come with us, then," Don Quixote said, "for we can use another herdsman and another lusty voice, and I see that the lady Gallina looks upon you with approving eyes."

Indeed, the lady Gallina had shed a tear at the underwriter's tale and was gazing raptly upon him, and he, whose name was Cobardo Marinero, agreed to join them, whereupon they proceeded thence to the river, although Cobardo and Gallina spent most of the time looking into each other's eyes instead of herding the animals and so Sancho and Lacewing had to spend their time chasing after the more rambunctious critters who strayed into the fields and the stragglers who lagged behind on the road.

When they arrived at Lacewing's *barca*, they let the animals go aboard, and rather inexplicably, just as in Noah's day, there was room for every one of them. Cobardo and Gallina went aboard as well, and it was agreed that the lovers should drift serenely downriver toward the Mediterranean and find along the way some sanguine spot where the animals might be put safely ashore.

The three intrepid adventurers stood along the bank of the tranquil river and waved goodbye as Gallina lit candles in the cabin and Cobardo strummed on his guitar

and the little ship drifted slowly away into the shadows.

It had been a long day and evening was fast disappearing. Sancho Panza knew of an inn nearby, and, weary but pleased with their work, they made haste to reach it before nightfall. And just as the alizarin sun sank beneath the pulsating ochre sky into the velvet-draped bier of the Sierra Morena, they arrived in the well-kept courtyard, where, to their surprise, they were greeted effusively by the arithmetically accomplished sheepdog Ladra who reminded Lacewing of her own shaggy-eyed friend Boofer.

The innkeeper accepted a few ducats from Don Quixote's purse, which was still heavy although they had given Cobardo and Gallina a handful of silver for the maintenance of their menagerie, and the innkeeper's wife accepted an apronful of potatoes which she agreed to cook for them for their supper, and they all went inside except for Sancho who took Rocinante and Dapple to the manger for some well-earned flakes of hay.

As it happened, the publican Santa Ava Arroz was staying there, and Don Quixote and Lacewing encountered her at table about the same time that Sancho was stealing from her wagon a saddlebag's worth of potatoes and releasing the hapless four factotums from their dusty confinement, for which kindness they repaid him by pummeling him roundly about the ears. Then, keenly recalling the curses which Santa Arroz had heaped upon them and their ancestors throughout the hot afternoon while she laboriously calculated the relative values of potatoes and rhubarb, apples and oranges, doubloons and ducats, they vanished into the darkness.

Inside, at the long supper table, the great lady herself was seated beside a Basque poet named Pablo, whom she found fascinating not least because he paid the innkeeper with gold pieces-of-eight which he claimed to have earned by reciting his verses for a one-legged pirate named Largo Juan de la Plata.

Supper consisted of boiled potatoes and stewed rhubarb, and endless carafes of

sweet honey-colored Madeira wine, of which neither the innkeeper nor the bruised but ebullient Sancho Panza could consume enough. Afterward, as Don Quixote slept open-mouthed in his chair, the two drunken gentlemen sat on the hearth by the crackling fire and roared their approval as the crafty Basque, repeatedly refilling her glass, strummed love songs on his mandolin to the intoxicated Santa Arroz, whose burgeoning purse he meant to rob in more ways than one.

Seeing that Lacewing was tired, and believing her a lad of tender years who ought not observe such rowdy goings-on, the innkeeper's wife took her to a pleasant little bedroom, tucked her under the covers, gently kissed her forehead, and whispered goodnight.

"Lacey!"

"Wha...?"

It was her mother's voice. What was her mother doing in Spain? In a rustic wayside on the gently sloping plain of La Mancha? In the sixteenth century?

"Were you dreaming?"

"No," Lacewing protested vainly, with a little mock pout. "I was reading."

Her mother laughed. "Not even you can read with your eyes closed," she said.

"Would you like a piece of pie?"

"Mm, what kind?" Lacewing asked drowsily, stretching her downy arms, trying to smile through a yawn.

"Guess."

"Well, it can't be apple, because you made that last week. And it can't be blueberry, because they're out of season."

Her mother chuckled. "You'll never guess."

Lacewing grinned teasingly. "Rhubarb!" she exclaimed, the fun of it glittering in her eyes.

Her mother seemed struck with amazement.

“Boofer told me,” Lacewing confessed, and they both laughed.