

May 1865: The voyage to Brazil

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[Among the most cherished stories in Barcellos family lore is the adventure of Francisco Barcellos, the author's great-great-grandfather, who was known on the island of Terceira as "Mestre Francisco." The *apelido* "Mestre" ("master" or "maestro" or "teacher") was in recognition of the man's reputation as a "*faz todo*," that is, a "does everything." As a jack-of-all-trades and an apparent master of several, Francisco sought his fortune in Brazil. Everyone in today's Barcellos family knows the story about the break-down at sea of the transport vessel and how Mestre Francisco stepped into the breach and saved the day. This fictionalized account of the voyage to Brazil was originally penned as deep background for the novel *Land of Milk and Money* but did not survive the final editorial cut. An earlier version was published on RTP's Comunidades blog through the courtesy of Dr. Irene Maria F. Blayer.]

The shriek of splintering wood shattered the afternoon stillness. The passengers and crew of the *Bella Flor* felt the deck shudder momentarily under their feet before the vessel settled back to a passive rolling with the Atlantic's swells. Smoke continued to pour from the steamship's stacks, but the paddle wheels were motionless and so essentially was the *Bella Flor*. Passengers were making the sign of the cross and some of the women began to weep.

António Gabriel "*Mestre*" Francisco turned to his wife Diolinda.

"Now they'll have to listen to me," he told her.

Diolinda squeezed his hand.

"I pray that they will," she said. "The children and I will go below and say the rosary."

"*Mãe!*" protested ten-year-old Candido Paulo, their eldest child. He didn't want to squeeze back into their lower-deck cabin with his mother and his three siblings, but his mother was firm as she herded her brood toward the narrow stairs that would take them below decks.

António went looking for a crew member.

The captain and the executive officer of the *Bella Flor* were conferring on the bridge when a deckhand appeared.

“Message for the captain, sir!” he said.

“Yes?” said the captain.

“It’s another message from the passenger named Francisco, sir. He’s volunteering his services again, sir.”

“‘Again?’” echoed the captain. “He’s done this before?”

“Begging your pardon, sir,” said the executive officer. “This passenger claims to be a skilled craftsman and has been putting himself forward since the initial incident. He’s an islander we picked up during our stop in the Azores. I informed him that the crew would handle the matter and thanked him for his concern. It didn’t seem necessary to bring it to your attention, sir.”

“Ordinarily I would say you did the right thing, Number One,” said the captain. “Unfortunately, however, it appears that the crew is *not* handling the matter.”

The captain turned back to the deckhand.

“Please fetch this man—did you say ‘Francisco’?—fetch *Senhor* Francisco to the bridge. I wish to confer with our *soi-disant* skilled craftsman. Let’s see if he is what he says. The Lord knows we need one right now.”



The crewman led António Francisco onto the bridge.

“Sir! Here is *Senhor* Francisco.”

“Thank you,” said the captain. “You may go.”

He regarded his passenger, a wiry man in his mid-thirties with dark wavy hair and dark eyes. The executive officer had said that Francisco was an Azorean, and he looked the part.

António Francisco looked back at the captain, bemused by the uniform that sported as much elaborate tailoring as would suit the admiral of a fleet. He kept his face expressionless. Perhaps the outfit was not the captain’s fault. Perhaps the shipping

company that owned the *Bella Flor* thought to impress their passengers with comic-opera uniforms for their senior officers.

“*Senhor* Francisco,” said the captain, “I regret to share with you the information that our vessel is in difficulty. Since you have repeatedly volunteered to help us resolve the problem, I presume you have discerned the difficulty for yourself.”

“Yes, *capitão*,” Antônio replied. “We have been adrift for ten days now. All of us heard the noise of the accident. The same noise followed the repairs. We heard much splintering of wood, no? I think maybe you have wooden gears with many broken teeth in your drive train, yes?”

“You judge correctly, *Senhor* Francisco. Furthermore, ship’s stores are able to supply material sufficient for only one more repair effort. As you may appreciate, splintered wood is impossible to salvage and the next attempt must succeed. Either that, or we are adrift until good fortune miraculously brings another vessel alongside to rescue us. We are already overdue at Rio de Janeiro, but we cannot expect anyone to be actively looking for us yet. What gives you the confidence to put yourself forward as someone who can repair our vessel? Are you some kind of nautical engineer?”

“No, sir,” replied Antônio, “but I know materials and machinery—especially wood. I am known on Terceira as ‘*mestre*’ or ‘master’ for my skills, which I am putting at your service.”

“Very well, *Mestre* Francisco,” said the captain. “I will have you shown to the paddle wheels, where you will have full access to their enclosure, including the gears, drive train, and the paddle wheels themselves. My executive officer will escort you. The XO will report back to me with your plans, however, before you are to do anything, which is contingent on my prior approval. Is that understood?”

Antônio gave the captain a small bow.

“Yes, *capitão*. You are most generous, *senhor*. I will discuss matters with your executive officer and will wait for your command.”

The captain turned to his executive officer.

“Take him below, Number One.”



“Here we are, *senhor*,” said the executive officer of the *Bella Flor*. He pulled a hatch aside, admitting them into an enclosed space amidships. It was a wide compartment that opened on either side to the paddle wheel enclosures. From below came the sounds of the water lapping against the ship and the motionless paddles. The men could hear a quiet creaking as the ship rocked gently with the Atlantic’s low swells.

“We are next to the engine room,” continued the officer. “These shafts and gears can be engaged to propel the ship forward, to let the paddles idle in free-wheeling mode, or to back water and slow or reverse the ship’s motion. It is a British design that was adapted and implemented in a shipyard in Oporto when the *Flor* was refitted fifteen—maybe sixteen—years ago.”

António Francisco cast his eyes over the gears, gap-toothed with their shattered wooden cogs. As much as he liked wood as a building material, António questioned the wisdom of making it the principal component of the ship’s drive mechanism. Steel was used sparingly and economically to reinforce the gears. No doubt the owners of the *Bella Flor* had saved money, but now their cargo and their passengers would be late in making port at Rio. If they arrived at all.

The executive officer watched António closely as the islander peered through the mechanism and examined the gears from different angles, occasionally rocking them back and forth. He waited patiently until António finished his inspection and stood up straight, turning toward the officer.

“What do you think, *Mestre* Francisco? Can you fix it?”

“Of course,” said António. “I can fix it. I will get my tools. Please to have your men remove the broken cogs. I will be able to use some of the fragments. Also have them bring up the wood remaining in ship’s stores and lay the pieces out for my inspection. I will begin immediately.”

“Very well,” said the executive officer. “Once I report to the captain, I am certain it will be as you say, *mestre*.”



Never before in his young life had Candido Paulo Francisco worn shoes for so many consecutive days. At his mother's insistence, all of the children were in boots or shoes and bundled up with multiple layers of clothing. All the rest of their worldly belongings were packed in two steamer trunks in the ship's hold.

Now at last Candido Paulo had a good excuse to set his shoes aside and employ all twenty digits in his father's service. He sat on the deck with a length of cargo net stretched between his toes while his nimble fingers wove cord through the interstices to tighten the mesh. Generations of Candido Paulo's forebears had similarly worked on their fishing nets on the beaches of Portugal and its islands. The boy was fashioning a mesh bag for his father's use in the ship's drive chamber. António would need something in which to hold some tools and materials while he worked. When nothing more suitable came to hand, he had set his son working on a swatch of cargo net. The boy was pleased to do it and it would serve.

His father was nearby, the remaining lumber from the ship's stores arrayed about him. António sorted out the short wooden blocks intended for use as gear cogs and grouped them into sets for the gears that drove the ship's paddle wheels. He also had a collection of splintered wood consisting of the remains of the shattered cogs that the crew had pried out of the shorn gears. He picked out some of the more substantial chunks and went to work with his one-handed splitting maul, reducing them to a pile of sharp-edged shims of varying lengths and thicknesses.

Candido Paulo brought his handiwork over to his father. He had added the finishing touch of weaving a cord through the perimeter of the netting for use as a drawstring. António placed a stack of his newly created shims in the center of Candido Paulo's tightly-woven mesh, added the maul, and pulled on the drawstring, gathering up the net into a bundle. He fastened it to his belt with a short length of cord. The bundle dangled at his side from his waist to his knee.

"Bem feito," he told his son. *Well done.* The boy beamed.

"Put your shoes back on, son. There are splinters everywhere."

Candido Paulo sat down on the deck and reluctantly did as he was told. He brightened, however, at his father's next words.

"Come with me. You will be my helper, yes?"

“*Sim, senhor!*” *Yes, sir!*



The cylindrical steel power shaft had been decoupled from the drive mechanism of the paddle wheels. The shaft would start turning if the engineer in the boiler room engaged the clutch, but paddle-wheel gears would remain idle while Antônio was working on them. The wooden gears were banded with steel reinforcements, gaping holes in their circumferences showing where their broken teeth had been extracted. The whole assembly looked like a scaled-up version of a clock’s inner workings.

Antônio shrugged off his suspenders and unbuttoned his shirt. He pulled it off and handed the shirt to Candido Paulo. He pushed the sleeves of his long-johns back to his elbows and pulled the suspenders back over his shoulders.

“Look at this, boy.”

Antônio slapped his hand several times against the gear that would normally have engaged the power shaft. It spun freely and rapidly on its axle.

Candido Paulo was standing to one side. From his vantage point, the empty holes for the gear’s teeth began to blur together, making a darker band in the middle of the gear’s circumference. The dark band wobbled back and forth with a slow oscillation that was almost hypnotic. The boy peered at it, wondering what he was supposed to see. Then his eyes widened and he jerked his head, looking toward his father.

“It’s moving, *Pai*,” he said. “I mean, the holes. They wobble back and forth.”

“Exactly,” said Antônio. “It’s out of true. The wooden gears on this old tub are warped with age and use. You see them wandering—just a bit—from left to right and back again as the wheel spins. I suspect it is the same for all of the gears. If they are all out of true, there will be a twisting of the teeth when they mesh and try to turn. If it’s too much, they break. That is what I must repair.”

“How will you do that, *Pai*? You can’t work the steel parts, can you?”

“No, son. But I can remount the cogs and adjust them so that they are nevertheless in alignment.”

Antônio patted the mesh bag dangling from his hip.

“My tools are here. These tools and a good eye will suffice. Go fetch the first set of replacement cogs. We will fix this first one together as a test. Then I will climb inside and see what I can do with the others.”



It took almost two days. Antônio lived among the gears for the entire time. He would unship each gear in its turn so that it revolved freely. One by one he replaced the missing cogs and spun the gear to check the alignment. Periodically he reached into his bag for a thin wooden shim. He'd place it carefully next to an errant cog and use the flat end of his maul to tap it into place. Then another spin to see if the alignment had been corrected. More tapping, if necessary. More spinning. When the spinning wooden cogs blurred into a steady and unwavering band under his watchful eye, he'd remount the gear and move on to the next. Candido Paulo hovered nearby, fetching materials as his father requested them. Crewmen brought lanterns as the day gave way to evening.

A plank and some ropes provided a crude scaffold that enabled Antônio to dangle in the open spaces above the water as he worked the ends of the drive train closer to the paddle wheels. Diolinda periodically appeared with a basket of provisions, which Candido Paulo would deliver to his father, who ate sparingly.

Antônio's body was trembling with exhaustion and his eyes were rimmed with red when he climbed out of the congeries of gears and reconnected the power shaft. Anxious crewmen were watching. The executive officer was among them.

“I am done, *senhor*,” said Antônio. “Please to tell the captain.”

Candido Paulo gave his father the shirt he had discarded the day before. Instead of putting it back on, Antônio wiped his face with it, the thick fabric rasping against his growth of beard.

They waited, sitting on the deck, looking at the power shaft from the engine room. Most of the loitering crewmen were gone, presumably reporting to their posts. A couple remained, though, their eyes on the drive mechanism.

A whistle sounded. It sounded again. A loud mechanical clash was heard from below decks. The engineer had engaged the clutch.

The shaft was slowly beginning to turn, applying power to the gears. The gears were moving. Antônio appeared relaxed, but Candido Paulo was holding his breath.

They heard the slapping of the paddle wheels against the water. The *Bella Flor* was starting to move. Candido Paulo started to breathe again.

Father and son looked at each other and smiled.