

Sources

Sebastian's Pride A fictional account on the yellow fever epidemic in Buenos Aires, 1871

By Susan Wilkinson (1)

Even though he was exhausted by the time he reached William's house, Sebastian could not sleep that night. His grief, both at Thomas's death and the certain imminence of his father's, was like a leaden weight in his breast. As he tossed restlessly throughout the night, he could not shake the image from his mind of his father whom he knew he would not see again; of Manuela, hollow-eyed and pale from exhaustion; or of William, grey from months of overwork. Robert Hamilton's words kept repeating in his mind. 'Well, Sebastian, someone has got to stay.' There was really no question about it. Since Manuela refused to go with him to the safety of Los Mistos while his father was still alive, Sebastian would remain in Buenos Aires and give his own services to the stricken city.

He joined the commission of citizens set up to run the city in the absence of the municipal government. Their main and most urgent task, he discovered, was the burial of corpses which, by decree, had to be buried within six hours of death. Every able-bodied man was needed for the digging of mass graves, for over a hundred people were dying every day. The cemeteries in the city were full. So, as an emergency measure, a new cemetery was opened in some farm lands outside of Buenos Aires - at Chacarita.

Initially, in an attempt to prevent panic, many denied that the epidemic was indeed of yellow fever. Noted doctors quarrelled bitterly with each other, some saying that it was yellow fever, others professing that it was typhoid or some other kind of fever. But whatever the doctors chose to call it, people continued to die. Some, like William, had begun to doubt that the fever was, in fact, contagious. Not knowing what caused it they were like sailors adrift in an ocean of ignorance.

As had been the fashion for treating all fevers less than two decades before, some of the older doctors, in their desperation, resorted to the old methods of bloodletting to regulate high fever, applying leeches to the temples and neck to allay headache, blistering the stomach to counteract vomiting, and painting the gums with mercury to produce an excessive flow of saliva deemed necessary in combating fevers. Not knowing the exact nature of the disease, they used the mercurial medicine on which they placed their reliance when all else failed - that favourite medicine among physicians, calomel. It irritated, and so purged, the bowels. Mixed with rhubarb and gentian, it dispelled the gasses that ballooned bellies. It induced salivation, and was supposed to have beneficial effects on the blood.

As William had predicted, whenever a case occurred in one of the crowded tenements, the inhabitants were evicted, which only served to spread the disease further and faster. As the epidemic gathered momentum, the porteños who remained in the city lashed out wildly at all possible causes. Some blamed it on the heat of the sun at mid-day and on the dews at night; others on excessive eating and drinking, constipation, or on any emotional disturbance, especially fear. Most agreed that yellow fever was caused by breathing impure air, and by the effluvia from the decomposing animal and vegetable matter in the streets. It was largely attributed to the wastes discharged by the slaughterhouses along the Riachuelo, to the over-crowded tenements in the poorer parts of the city, and to the fact that many of the streets that sloped down to the river were little better than open drains and sewers, for the worst ravages occurred in areas where the streets served as the city drains. It was recalled that the previous year exceptionally heavy rains had flooded all the low-lying areas of the city, with

the result that the latrines had overflowed into the streets and patios. No one was surprised that, as a result, the mosquitoes had been worse than ever that summer.

As preventative measures against the disease, sulphur was burned in the streets and exploded in pellets in every house at least once a day. Exposure to both the sun and to the night air was avoided, all windows were closed at night, and beds were rolled well away from any possible source of ventilation. All excitement, be it the physical excitement of lovemaking or emotional excitement, was strenuously avoided, for too much activity - pleasurable or otherwise - was deemed detrimental and would lay one open to the fever. All those who were exposed to the disease took steaming vapour baths to induce sweating, and so rid themselves of any impurities. And all who could do so left the city.

When William returned one evening and told Sebastian that their father was vomiting black blood and had passed the stage where recovery could be hoped for, Sebastian felt no emotion, only a numbing of all feeling. Taking a circuitous route, he purposely avoided passing the house on Calle Florida, lest the contagion infect him too. For the first time he understood the fathers who had bolted the doors against their infected wives and children, the sons who had turned their mothers out of the house. He knew then the fear for survival that overcame even the bonds of love and duty. Although a professed atheist, he marvelled at the courage and self-sacrifice with which the priests nursed the sick. They risked their lives ministering to complete strangers while he could not bring himself to go once to his father's bedside. He had no fear of a gaucho's *facón*, but disease, insidious decay and death, against which he had no weapon, terrified him. Venting his rage against his own cowardice, he wrapped a rag around his blistered hand and dug savagely from dawn to dusk, and those who saw him

remarked on the silent, one-armed man who did the work of three. Each night he returned to Calle Bolívar, stabled his horse, and dragged his feet wearily along the now almost silent and deserted streets and plazas, his back and arm aching from weariness and his dirt-engrained hand raw and bleeding. Normal life, as he once knew it, seemed to have become a dream - something that no longer had reality or relevance.

When José brought word to him at Chacarita that his father had died, Sebastian put down his shovel and returned to Calle Florida with him, averting his eyes from the coffin in the first patio. He found Manuela in the library. The sight of her, rigidly holding back her tears, made him momentarily forget his fears and his own sense of loss. Wordlessly, he held out his arm and wordlessly she went to him, burying her head briefly against his shoulder. He was conscious of the combined smell of their bodies-of his own stale sweat and the pungent sourness of hers. She did not weep, and he offered no word of comfort, for there seemed to be nothing to say. A bond of common sorrow drew them together in their separate grief at the death of Robert Hamilton.

Four hours later, towards dusk, the small funeral party followed the wagon bearing Robert Hamilton's coffin to the British cemetery. Neither Manuela, Sebastian nor William wept as the coffin was lowered into the grave, next to Thomas's. They stood stiff and silent while the old Negro José stood apart from them, his cheeks wet with tears and his eyes rolling in fear that night - with its fever-giving, toxic air - was approaching. And when the last shovelful of soil was flung on top of the coffin, they walked back, still without speaking, to the carriage.

Susan Wilkinson

Notes

1. From Chapter Ten of Susan Wilkinson's *Sebastian's Pride* (London: Michael Joseph, 1988). Set in Argentina in the nineteenth century, *Sebastian's Pride* is the story of Sebastian Hamilton who, with his two brothers, leaves England to settle on a vast estancia in the pampas. In 1871 a disastrous yellow fever epidemic breaks out in Buenos Aires in which Sebastian's father and elder brother die. Sebastian too contracts yellow fever, but survives.