

Sabrina Janesch

The Golden City

Rowohlt Berlin

544 pages / August 2017

Peru in 1887: Throughout the country, people are talking about one man and his incredible discovery. Augusto Berns says he has found the lost city of the Incas, and the news races from Lima to London and New York. But who is this man, the putative discoverer of El Dorado?

It all begins with a young boy washing gold in the Rhine, who loses himself in dreams of new worlds, who idolises Alexander von Humboldt and whose meeting with the famed explorer in Berlin leads to a momentous decision. Determined to find the Golden City, Berns embarks on the perilous journey to Peru where he becomes an inadvertent hero of the wars of independence, before beginning to gather the material he needs for his expedition while working as a railway engineer. Together with Harry Singer, an American, he climbs the Andes and battles his way through the deepest jungles before reaching a place more fantastical than anything he could have imagined.



Recent historical research has revealed that the fabled Peruvian city of Machu Picchu was discovered by a German explorer. In her rich and evocative new novel, Sabrina Janesch traces the remarkable journey of a forgotten explorer, recounting his fascinating story and constructing a narrative of enormous creative power that submerges its readers in an exotic world and explores what it means to live for one's dreams.

“The attraction of the imaginary is that we know it to be unattainable. But what if we unexpectedly succeed? What if El Dorado were suddenly reached? What happens to the man --in this case, the German adventurer Augusto Berns-- who presents to the world a cartography of its impossible desires? Sabrina Janesch has written a chronicle of such an adventure, part Märchen, part historical account, part a joyful paean in praise of our unbridled human curiosity.”

- Alberto Manguel

“Immaculately written, with spellbinding characters and an all-pervading richness, colourful and unforgettable.”

- Sten Nadolny

Born in 1985, **Sabrina Janesch** studied cultural journalism at the University of Hildesheim and polonistics at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. Her novel *The Cat Mountains* was published in 2010, with *Ambra* and *Tango For A Dog* following in 2012 and 2014 respectively. Sabrina Janesch has been awarded many prizes for her literary work, including the Mara Cassens Prize, the Nicolas Born Prize and the Anna Seghers Prize. She was a resident writer at New York's Ledig House and held the post of official writer of the city of Gdansk. Sabrina Janesch lives with her family in Münster.

SABRINA JANESCH – THE GOLDEN CITY (DIE GOLDENE STADT)

LIMA, CITY OF KINGS

With ink-stained hands and a pounding heart, Augusto Berns steps out of the Hotel Maury. It is seven in the morning, the night was short. The sun is already in the sky; its rays burn through the last fog banks and make the foothills of the Andes blaze brightly.

Berns rests his hands on his knees. Fine Pacific mist forces its way into his lungs, he breathes it in greedily, tastes salt and dust. He immediately feels thirsty. Patting down his three-piece suit for small change: How much is left? The coins are counted and slide back into his trouser pocket, then he sets off.

A horse-drawn tram crosses in front of Calle de Villalta, where Berns steps beneath the crown of a sprawling flame tree. Here, in the shade, he is overcome by one of those moments in which everything he has done over the past years weighs down upon his shoulders. He sits down on a nearby bench and waits it out, for half an hour, an hour. Some of the shops are already starting to open their doors, merchants are hurrying to the counting houses at the intersection with Calle de Nuñez. Bread vendors pass by with sinewy hairless dogs in constant pursuit, snapping at everything that falls from the carts.

All around Berns, the fire-red calyces of the flame tree sail down to the floor, a hummingbird whirrs over and hovers briefly in front of his face. Berns makes no move to drive the bird away. Once he is able to breathe more easily again, the weight lifting, he stands up and sets off in the direction of the city's main square.

The extensive grounds in front of the cathedral and the presidential palace are scattered with fan palms; doves swarm around the feet of pedestrians hurrying to the commercial streets and government buildings. One and two-horse carriages pass through the arcades and stands of the herbalists, scribes, fortune tellers, faith healers, sorcerers and monkey tamers.

Berns steers his way towards the fountain in the middle of the square. The taste of salt and dust still lingers on his tongue. He leans over, as though wanting to moisten his handkerchief, and cups a little water up to his mouth. Then he washes his hands. When Berns looks up again, he notices a woman in a veil next to him. She winks and asks what's in the fountain: the liqueur of heroes? So what opponents has he defeated so far today? She walks away laughing, a golden bracelet flashing on her wrist.

Berns remembers the investors, the capitalists he has written to. What if they don't show up tomorrow because he overlooked some important detail or chose the wrong moment? His insides cramp up at the thought, so strongly that for a moment he thinks the Panamanian fever is back.

A glance at his pocket watch: Still more than an hour to go. An hour until his meeting, that's nothing really – but thirty hours until Huacas del Inca, how can he bear that?

The kiosk on the corner of Calle Mantas stocks over a dozen different newspapers and magazines. Berns reaches into the display, scans the headlines of *El Nacional*, *El Comercio*, *El País*, *El Ateneo* and several other papers. He finds five articles reporting on him, Berns, and his discovery. His discovery! He lowers the paper, his gaze sweeping over to the foothills of the Andes. His palms moisten: it's the excitement, perhaps, or the blazing sun. He thanks the kiosk owner, gets his boots polished by a nearby shoeshiner, then eventually makes his way to Café Tortoni on Calle Valladolid.

Twenty centavos for coffee and a sugar doughnut, more than double the price of any other bar in the city. Berns drinks, then utters a barely audible sigh as he bites into the pastry. He orders a glass of iced water, lingers over the last sip of coffee for an eternity, dabs even the smallest crumbs of sugar from his plate.

Half an hour later, he turns into Calle de Espaderos, at the end of which is the Club Nacional. Coral trees line the main entrance; it can't be missed. Berns pauses in front of it, straightens his tie, and only then does he gather the courage to climb up the steps. He has been here twice already, yet on both occasions in the company of a club member.

In the reception room, Venetian lamps cast their glow across murals, cast-iron columns and Brussels rugs. The lobby stretches across the entire front section of the ground floor; marble steps lead to the rooms on the upper floor, a double door left wide open allows full view into the blue salon. There, gentlemen sit on upholstered chairs, smoking cigars. Berns narrows his eyes to slits, but is unable to identify at first glance anyone he knows.

Sitting, as usual, in a niche between the main entrance and the blue salon, is the porter Ignacio Ortiz, renowned for having no sense of humour and the facial expression of someone afflicted with a stomach ache.

"There's no public access today. A diplomatic visit. Do you have a written invitation, Señor?"

"Augusto Berns. I have an appointment."

"Is that so." The porter's gaze flits over Berns' suit, his bag, his hat; something doesn't seem quite right. He hesitates, not yet inviting him in. A group of elegantly dressed gentleman step into the

reception area behind Berns. They fumble demonstratively with their suit jackets and clear their throats.

There it is again, the thought of tomorrow, and the nerves return along with it. Berns runs his hand over his forehead, the voices from the salon become louder.

"May I ask with whom?"

Life stirs in the group at the far end of the blue salon. They are getting up from the upholstered chairs; if Berns isn't mistaken, the men are with the Bolivian delegation that arrived in the city yesterday. Amidst the stout, immaculately attired Bolivians, he sees the person he is here to meet. The group slowly makes its way towards the reception room.

"You may indeed," says Berns, taking off his Derby and smoothing down his hair.

"Well?"

"I'm meeting the president."

"You don't say." Ortiz begins to rummage through his papers, but by now it's too late. The whispering of the men behind Berns ceases, for the delegation are now entering the lobby, and in their midst, a head taller than the Bolivians around him, strides the President of the Republic of Peru, Andrés Avelino Cáceres. All eyes are fixed on his imposing figure: the blue and white uniform with the epaulettes, the sweeping side whiskers, the slightly protruding left eye, the striking chin. The Bolivians' time is up, Cáceres has to get to his next appointment, but they are still talking to him. Cáceres smiles, in a presidential manner, Berns thinks.

"Señor el Presidente," says Berns. Only then does Cáceres notice him, laugh and break away from the Bolivians.

The two men embrace each other and clap one another on the shoulder.

"Augusto!" says Cáceres. "I was beginning to think you weren't coming."

"I was held up."

Ortiz suddenly seems to have found a lot of paperwork he needs to sort through. Then something evidently occurs to President Cáceres. He calls for attention, gathering the Bolivians in a semi-circle around himself and Berns.

"Gentlemen, do you know what a hero is?"

Silence. No one stirs.

"A hero is someone who is lucky. Who knows to surround himself with the right people. Even if you may not believe it – a hero never stands alone. When we defended Callao against the Spaniards twenty years ago, who saved my life? This man here! And after that, who explored this country like no other, mapping it and connecting its cities with the railroad? This man here! Who spent years in the mountains and in the jungle, where he made an unbelievable discovery? Gentlemen, this man here is Augusto Berns – a man of action, a doer, a great realist!"

PART I.

I.

RIVER GOLD

When he was a child, Rudolph August Berns almost choked to death on a fly that found its way into his windpipe. He would often sit for hours on end, his mouth wide open and eyes glazed over as legions of Romans passed by, crossing the Rhine at roughly the spot where the ferry to Mündelheim cast off.

The Romans – what a spectacular sight, each and every time! All of a sudden, the Rhine was no longer a listlessly-flowing river but a raging torrent, and beyond it, on the other side, instead of Mündelheim farmers there were savage Germanic tribes ready to defend their land, and Klipper Eu, down by the riverbank with his ripped coat and gold pan, was not Klipper Eu, but Gaius Julius. Gaius Julius and his men had conquered all of Gaul, but now they had come face to face with the river they had been warned about. *Rhenus* was the name of the water they now had to cross; the land beyond it was cursed, and whoever set foot on it, according to the legend, was doomed to death.

Behind Gaius Julius walked a soldier in a breastplate, carrying the Roman standard. The golden eagle glittered and shimmered in the sunlight. The trampling of hundreds of horses and men could be heard; a song sounded out from somewhere, curiously distant and unfamiliar. Some of the soldiers were leading horses that were laden with ornate caskets, they must have contained treasures, gold and silver coins heavy enough to tear a hole in a simple man's pocket – and strings of pearls, precious stones, gold rings, entire ingots!

As Gaius Julius rode onto the bridge, his cloak fluttered and billowed in the wind. "Barbaricum," he said with a frown. Even though he only whispered it, the word travelled all the way over to the apple tree in which Rudolph was sitting, staring down at the Rhine. Then Gaius Julius glanced back westwards and finally crossed the bridge over the river. Arriving on the other side, he turned around one last time and waved to Rudolph. It was a barely perceptible movement of the hand, unnoticed by the soldiers and the standard bearer; but Rudolph knew the gesture was intended only for him, across a distance of two thousand years, and that Gaius Julius could see him just as clearly as Rudolph saw Gaius Julius.

But before Gaius Julius could turn away again, to ride towards Germania with his cloak billowing, the fly came. The apple tree's overripe fruits lured swarms of insects. Butterflies, bees, wasps and flies thronged around the apples, straying up high to the branch where Rudolph was sitting. His arms were limp, his mouth dry, his gaze focused on another world; a world without flies, without indignant buzzing, without sudden pain and coughing fits.

Rudolph coughed his way down from the tree, probed his finger into his mouth and back into his throat, but there was nothing for him to get hold of, there was only breathlessness, wheezing – and suddenly Gaius Julius was there, grabbing him and pulling him up. Then came the blackness, which, after a while, transformed into his mother's voice, into something cool on the back of his head, yes, into the aroma of bean soup with bacon and even into the crying of his little brother Max. In the end, though, that too faded away, and all that remained was the legion's golden eagle, circling above Rudolph.

Rudolph August Berns was the first child of Johann Berns, a merchant, and his wife Caroline. The two had met in Solingen while the young man was travelling on business. He returned from that trip not only with some first-rate knives and other steelware, but also with the picture of a girl, who, as he assured his parents, couldn't possibly be more Protestant or domesticated. They married quickly. The young man wasn't exactly what the girl's parents had in mind, but he and his father ran a successful wine shop, and so they gave their blessing. The newlyweds moved into Johann's family home in Uerdingen. It was surrounded by orchards which had belonged to the Berns family for centuries. The Rhine, barely a stone's throw away, flowed past the prosperous little town, from which an ever-increasing number of factory chimneys soared up into the sky.

Johann and Caroline shared the upper floor of the house with Johann's father Wilhelm, who spent most of his time in the shop rooms on the ground floor. The mother had passed away long ago.

"The shop comes first," said old Berns whenever the couple asked him to join them for a meal. Usually the maidservant would take a plate down to the old man on the ground floor, where he ate hastily amongst the vats and bottles.

What would the Berns' wine shop have been without the old man, who watched over the activities and conversed with the customers? After a lifetime in Uerdingen, he knew everything and everyone, every parent, child, grandparent and house pet, even their ailments, partialities, hardships and sorrows. And yet they only thing they ever talked about was the wine.

Before too long, Johann Berns gained weight, grew a full beard and began to visit the local taverns more regularly. *Young Berns* became *Berns*, finally winning the admiration and respect of the other merchants. They visited him in the shop, invited him to dinner, and even old Melcher, the owner of the biggest distillery in Uerdingen, suggested a collaboration. From that moment on, Berns principally stocked brandies from the Melcher distillery, along with, of course, Uerdingen's juniper gin. Several dozen of the brown bottles stood at the ready on the shelf at all times; the workers passing by tended to be thirsty, and Berns was a good salesman. Business was better than ever. Only one thing was missing, and that was a son.

Rudolph August came into the world in the year of our Lord 1842. Named Rudolph, because his father wanted it so, and August, because that was the name of his mother's favourite brother. But even after just a few years, during which Elise and Max followed on, it became clear that Rudolph August had little of his uncle's temperament; nor did he resemble his pragmatic, rational mother. "Maybe he takes more after your side of the family," said Caroline doubtfully to her husband, but she couldn't really imagine it.

"Hans Head-in-the-Clouds," his grandfather named him, after a character from a book he had given the boy, which Rudolph had studied and quickly laid aside. He only treasured things he had found and discovered for himself. Only then, it seemed to him, did he really have any claim to them, only then were they his and real.

The boy spent most of his time sitting around daydreaming, staring fixedly at whatever it was that had seized his attention. If one were to jostle him out of this state to ask about his day or the reason why his trousers were dirty or about the money that had gone missing from the purse, one would hear the most outlandish things in response. Of dark horsemen, of will-o'-the-wisps that had lured him away, of ghostly spirits wanting to guide him to buried Roman treasures, of sea monsters, dragons and the like. Rudolph genuinely felt a mysterious connection to the legends of times gone by and their fabled riches. He was unable to explain it, either to himself or anyone else, but it sometimes felt to him as though the world in his head was more substantial than the one around him.

"Lies," said the mother. "Oh, come now," said the father. "The boy has an imagination, that's all!" But it didn't help. Nor did his assertion that creativity was at least as important a quality in a businessman as careful bookkeeping and the ability to think critically. The mother merely responded that he shouldn't go putting even more nonsense in the boy's head, for it was already bad enough.

Rudolph felt something bitter flowing down his throat. Perhaps this is what death tastes like, he thought. Bitter and sweet, and also a little like juniper gin. A jolt went through his body; he thought he opened his eyes and recognised his mother and father next to him on the floor. Max and Elise were there too, crying and hiding behind their parents' backs. Grandfather and Klipper Eu were sitting on the corner seat at the back of the parlour, Klipper Eu with a glass of brandy in his hand. His breathing still hadn't slowed back to normal, so quickly had he run to the Berns' house with the boy in his arms.

Everything seemed the same as always, and yet something wasn't right: his mother's hair, for example, which kept changing colour; the grandfather, who suddenly looked so young; the brother, who kept turning into the sister. And there was a soldier there too, sitting calmly on the mantelpiece, swinging his legs. Rudolph had never seen him before, despite the fact that he must have known every face in the Roman legion by now. There were narrow faces with high cheekbones, broad faces with strong chins, olive skin tones, deep brown, pale; legionnaires with black hair, blonde, brunette, there were all kinds. Most wore rounded helmets and chainmail tunics held together with large belts. But this soldier here? The peculiar gentleman on the mantelpiece didn't seem to be one of them. The deep-set eyes, the grey beard and the sharply-contoured nose would have drawn Rudolph's attention if he'd seen him before, and the man was wearing an elongate helmet with a wide brim. It ran into a spiky point at the front, and the top was resplendent with yellow and red feathers. Where had the man come from, and what was he doing on the mantelpiece? As hard as Rudolph tried, he was unable to open his mouth and ask him.

Amidst all the astonishment, it took Rudolph a while to realise that he had long since left his body and was now alongside it. How peculiar the sensation was! Without any effort whatsoever, he stood up, left his body behind him and studied the room: the couch, the cleanliness of which was immensely important to his mother, the embroidery work left on the window seat, the geraniums, their leaves a reddish tone on account of getting too much sunlight. This was the room as he knew it, but simultaneously there were another ten rooms – variations of the same room, other possibilities of itself. Sometimes it was incredibly tiny, then infinitely big, sometimes it seemed as though it had been painted onto a piece of paper, then the walls would bend like rubber. Suddenly the house transformed into the house of the Kradepohls next door, then into Melcher's villa, into Klipper Eu's cottage, then a circus tent, a Mongolian yurt, a mousehole – nothing was fixed, everything was possible.

"Reality," said the strange gentleman on the mantelpiece all of a sudden, "is in reality nothing more than the smallest common denominator of narrow minds." Rudolph now realised that the man couldn't possibly be a Roman. After all, his upper body was encased in a silver suit of armour, and instead of rough linen trousers, red striped fabric billowed out over tight-fitting boots. And then the

spurs! They made a clinking sound whenever they came into contact with one another. Suddenly Rudolph felt as though he had already seen the man somewhere after all, but the feeling evaporated before he could grasp ahold of it.

"I don't understand," Rudolph wanted to say, but he was overcome by another coughing fit. There it was again, that feeling of being in his own body: blood, flowing out of his nose and mouth, air, pushing into his lungs. He felt thin little arms clinging around his neck. Rudolph pushed himself up on his elbows, and only now did he really open his eyes.

First, he looked over at the mantelpiece. The strange gentleman had disappeared. Klipper Eu was still sitting in the corner, the empty glass before him on the table. Grandfather had fallen asleep. Max was still holding Rudolph tightly, so tightly that the father had to carefully loosen his grip. Rudolph nestled his head into the crook of his father's arm, which smelt of dust and curd soap. He recognised his mother over by the door, letting in Dr. Lewin.

"Is he breathing?" asked the doctor.

"He is," said Rudolph. Then he threw up.

Rudolph slept through the rest of the day. Later, he was told that he had been very lucky. The fly hadn't gotten stuck in his windpipe, but instead had been sucked all the way into his lung. Over the next few days, according to Dr. Lewin, Rudolph would cough it out bit by bit. As a precaution, the doctor prescribed him cod liver oil. And instructed him to keep his distance from flies and other insects for the time being.

"There you have it," said Rudolph's mother, after Dr. Lewin had departed with two bottles of cognac under his arm. "He's to keep his distance. Perhaps it's time you bring him into the business, Johann."

"Yes, perhaps it's time," said Johann Berns. Any other answer would have been futile. From tomorrow on, the boy would spend his days in the wine shop, or at least whenever Caroline was at home and could see from the parlour window whether he was roaming around the orchard or down by the Rhine. When Rudolph heard the news, a sob rose in his throat, and he had to concentrate very hard to stop it from escaping. He loved his father, but he loved his freedom just a little more.

It was a bit like with the kaleidoscope. Father had given it to him, and it had been Rudolph's favourite toy ever since. On the cover of the little cylinder there were drawings of children, riding horses or flying kites. But in their midst, bigger than them all, there was a child looking into a kaleidoscope. Rudolph sensed that this child knew and saw more than all the others who were immersed in their games. They were so intensely connected to their surroundings that they didn't understand that the world could take on countless forms and exist in multiple variations at the same time. And yet just a glance into the kaleidoscope was enough to understand. If one looked through the tube and rotated it a little, whatever one was looking at changed immediately, warping and taking on a new form. The play of shapes and colours was so rich and diverse that only a simple-minded person could be content with just one version.

Soon, of course, Rudolph didn't even need the kaleidoscope any more; he could make the world blur before his widened eyes whenever he wanted and study its countless other designs. And the things there were to see! Rudolph always felt a little pity when he looked at the other children in Uerdingen. They played catch and hide and seek and had no idea of the richness which surrounded them.

But then came the mother's order and his banishment into the father's business. The wine shop was an unbearably boring place for a boy like Rudolph. In truth, it was equally boring for a grown-up whose ambitions and interests extended far beyond Uerdingen and the Rhineland region. Ever since Johann Berns had expanded the wine shop and become a regular fixture at Melcher's distillery, life suddenly seemed unimaginative and predictable. Only the grandfather was still attached to the old shop rooms, complaining about any change.

It was as Rudolph said: "Here, even my head stands still." For while Max and Elise were allowed to play in the garden with the nursemaid, Rudolph was imprisoned in the eternal shadows of the oak panelling and brandy vats. Even the kaleidoscope, as hard as it tried, could do nothing with the brown and black tones which dominated here.

When there were no customers in the shop, the father would read the serialized stories from the newspaper to Rudolph. Meanwhile, old Berns would bury his nose in the books and pretend he was checking them. His eyesight had, of course, long since become too poor for that. Of all the stories, one in particular awoke the boy's interest: the travel reports from Peru by Johann Jakob von Tschudi.

The reading out loud took a horrendously long time, because whenever his father got to a part he was particularly impressed by, he would lay the paper aside and run his hand through his beard, lost in thought. This made the little hairs on the left-hand side twirl up lopsidedly, a sight

Rudolph was already familiar with. "The man had guts," the father would often say, before glancing over at his elderly father and repeating a little more quietly: "He really had guts."

Most of the stories were about the wondrous conditions in the towns and villages of the Andes; of the seemingly inexhaustible silver mines and the hidden gold of the Incas. Gold! Many of the reports seemed fictional to Rudolph, as peculiar and limitless as his own daydreams.

"Can this really all be true?" he asked sometimes, and his father would slowly shake his head, run his hand through his beard again and say that it was very hard to check these things; so if you thought about it they were reasonable stories, whether they were true or not. But one thing was certain, he said, and this was that the man really had guts.

One day, Rudolph overheard a conversation between his father and old Melcher. The grandfather wasn't there; he was upstairs in his bed, Dr Lewin was there. The more frequently the doctor stopped by, the deeper the worry lines on his forehead became. Rudolph hadn't actually intended to eavesdrop on his father's conversation; most of them were quite boring, anyhow, and revolved only around the alcohol – but this one was different. Even the way Melcher had come into the shop and given the father a familiar clap on the shoulder. The father had immediately sent Rudolph away and fetched one of his best wines. Melcher, as everyone knew, hated spirits and only drank French white wine.

"That thing we spoke about recently," said Melcher, then took a sip. Finishing sentences was not something he was in the habit of doing. Then came the sound of rustling cellophane; the father had opened a packet of expensive fruitcake from France.

"I remember very well," Rudolph heard his father say. He was hidden behind the partly open door which led down to the stockroom. But was that really his father's voice? All of a sudden it sounded strained, agitated even. A little like Rudolph's own voice, only older, deeper.

"Have you spoken to your wife?"

Rudolph heard something fall to the floor. A meow from one of the cats, a clatter, the father cursing – and what he said in reply to Melcher didn't reach the door Rudolph was hiding behind. What was this about? Melcher put his glass down on the counter. He began to speak a little louder now, as if he were talking to someone hard of hearing. But Father had very good hearing. It was very rare for anything to escape him.

Melcher was getting louder and louder as he went on at Father, his voice cracking, it was hard to understand him. The general topic of the conversation, this much could be heard, was the world, better opportunities and bigger markets. Uerdingen! Who cared about Uerdingen!

"Melcher!" said the father eventually. "It's not the right time. Can't you get that into your head?"

Rudolph hadn't thought his father would dare speak to old Melcher in that way. Nor did he know what had been meant by the bigger markets. But he did learn one thing that day: that his father didn't talk to him about everything.

"Aren't you talking to me any more?" asked the father later, as Rudolph sat there by the door in silence for hours on end.

"No, I'm not. Can't you get that into your head?" retorted Rudolph. And because he couldn't bear the look on his father's face, he grabbed his cap and ran out of the house.

He briefly contemplated going to the Rhine, then decided against it. Instead of going down the road to the river he went up Niederstrasse, towards the market square. Until today, the square had always seemed so sprawling that whenever he set foot in it he felt lost. But something had changed. Melcher's voice was ringing in his ears: Uerdingen! Who cared about Uerdingen!

In order to get to the market, one had to go past the Herbertz Colonial Goods store. Rudolph paused in front of it. Sacks of coffee lay behind the window display; bars of chocolate towered up on a small table, and above it all, hanging from the ceiling, was a stuffed monkey. A real monkey! Its glass eyes were fixed on some indeterminate point outside the window display.

They could at least have put a piece of chocolate in his hand, thought Rudolph, turning around angrily. Then he plucked up his courage and went into the middle of the market square. Now he was stood directly opposite the Herbertz brothers' houses. Except, no, they weren't houses – they were palaces! Three identical, magnificent structures lined up alongside one another, with three palatial entrance gates and three cast iron balconies jutting out above. His family's home was distinctly more compact and modest. Rudolph pivoted around. The riches of the New World his father had spoken of came into his mind. Where would he find the space for *his* palace when the time came? After all, all the land was already built up, people were already living, selling and working everywhere. Perhaps Melcher was right, perhaps there were bigger markets than Uerdingen's out there somewhere.

The Herbertz brothers were amongst the richest and most important families in Uerdingen, Rudolph knew that. The eldest, Balthasar Napoleon Herbertz, had built the houses for himself and his two younger brothers. Rudolph wanted that too. Max and Elise would get the most beautiful and biggest houses in the square, he would take care of that. Max with his freckled face – he was always staring up silently at his big brother and trying to copy him in everything. And Elise: Elise was a delicate girl, the slightest gust of wind could pull her off her feet, she needed to be looked after.

It was easier, of course, to become rich and important if one had a name like Balthasar Napoleon. But *Rudolph August*? It was as though his parents hadn't given any thought to what path his life might take, as though they hadn't gone through all the conceivable scenarios. Probably they hadn't even been able to imagine that he might need a nicer-sounding name some day. Balthasar's parents, on the other hand, had certainly come up with something. And they had also had the idea of trading unusual foreign goods, not wine and cognac like everyone else. What was wrong with his parents? Rudolph didn't want to believe it, but perhaps his father, too, suffered from that strange ailment which afflicted most people over the course of their lives: of remaining rigidly in one's immediate surroundings, amongst everything one has always known. Beyond this, it seemed that nothing existed to them; nothing was seen, nothing discovered, nothing invented or concocted. To Rudolph, this always seemed like a disfiguring flaw; remaining primitively in the initial state, no matter how pathetic and pitiful that state may be.

He often lay awake at night. Even when his eyelids were leaden with tiredness and he could hear Max and Elise breathing steadily in their beds, he still couldn't sleep. The parents usually retreated to their bedroom soon after they had put the children to bed, and silence would descend upon the house. Then, Urdingi's time would come.

Urdingi was the old Uerdingen of the Merovingians. It lay not far from present-day Uerdingen – amidst the torrents of the Rhine. After floods and heavy winters with lots of ice drifts, the river had shifted its bed westwards, and so the Germanic Urdingi had sunk into its depths.

Rudolph imagined that one night, all of a sudden, before anyone had time to raise the alarm or save themselves, the Rhine had risen up over the village and filled every living being to bursting point with water. And because the river had cast its sediment out over everything and everyone, it all lay in exactly the same position today as it had all those hundreds of years ago.

From his bedroom window, it was only a stone's throw to the first Urdingi house, deep down in the water. Rudolph knew that the inhabitants of Urdingi came to life at night, and the more the night went on, the harder it became to determine which Uerdingen was more real: the Uerdingen of the Herbertz brothers or Urdingi, the Merovingian settlement. There were many similarities, Rudolph noted with amazement. The most important men of the village, for example, came together at the Germanic Thing assembly, similarly to nowadays at the Market; and in Urdingi, too, there was a family who owned a special hut and were richer than all the others.

There were many large families – one of them numbered at least seven red-haired children –, a lunatic who was avoided by everyone else, a few elderly women who lived on the outskirts, and a family with three children and an old man, who lived right by the Rhine. Their eldest son – a strong boy, very bright, tall and never absent-minded – only had to step out of the door, go through the orchard and he would be right on the riverbank. There, he often met the lunatic, his best friend.

The boy's name was Thorleif, Rudolph knew that too. In fact, by now he knew Thorleif and his family very well. The father was a hunter and loved his children more than anything. He and Thorleif often went hunting together, roaming across the fields and talking to one another in their strange, guttural dialect. The mother was strict and kept things in order in the hut, as was probably to be expected. Thorleif's brother and sister were still little; he had to watch out for them, make sure they didn't get lost. He and his father were the men of the house. Life in Urdingi was peaceful. Thorleif grew up in the knowledge that someday he would be the leader of his village, win important battles, find buried treasure and discover land that no one before him had discovered. The others in the village seemed to know this too, and treated Thorleif with the proper respect. When he passed by the girls, they lowered their eyes; when he went through the forest, the birds fell silent, only to break out into song more powerfully and beautifully just a few moments later.

This was Thorleif, who had been promised an exciting fate from birth – but Thorleif lived in Urdingi, not in Uerdingen, like Rudolph.

The days when Father came down to the Rhine with him were among the best. They would set off shortly after sunrise. Rudolph carried the cast iron pan, the handle of which he had dismantled. He had told his mother that gypsies passing through Uerdingen had stolen it – along with a few jars of marmalade that had also disappeared from her kitchen. She hadn't believed a single word.

Father carried the basket containing three sandwiches and a bottle of brandy, a shovel and a pail. When he and Rudolph reached the river, Klipper Eu had usually been up and about on the gravel bank for hours already. He trickled the gilt flakes into an empty sardine tin.

"Panning for gold is like fishing," Klipper Eu always said. "You never know what you're going to get, and by the end your feet are cold."

Father was amongst the few who talked to Klipper Eu – or at least, he did when no one but Rudolph was around. He knew how much this strange man meant to his son. In the presence of other children, Rudolph had to make an effort and pull himself together, but with Klipper Eu he could be as absent-minded as he wanted. There was only good in his presence, Klipper Eu had never mocked or bullied the boy or pushed him around. He was a reliable friend.

Klipper Eu, Father had once told him, had sailed on a big ship for many years, not just on the Rhine, but in all the seas of the world. Eventually he had no longer been able to stand it out there anymore, and so he had returned to Uerdingen. But he hadn't been able to stand it here either, and so he had simply gone mad. When no other possibilities remained, Father had said, there was always that one: to go mad. Rudolph had tried to explain that there was always, at any given time, an inconceivable number of possibilities, but after a few incoherent sentences he had given up. One thing had become clear to him, however – that if he ever felt he had no other possibilities left, then he must be thinking about things in the wrong way. If one thought in the right way, one would always see the other versions quite clearly. "It's all a question of mindset," he had told his father, who had long since moved onto something else.

The gravel bank was the best place in the world. Situated by a bend in the river, it consisted of dark gravel and sand, heavier than the sand one found elsewhere. While Father set down the sandwiches and bottle in front of Klipper Eu, Rudolph pried the little vial out of his coat pocket. Melcher had brought it from the distillery for him one day. It was barely as big as Rudolph's thumb, had a bronze clasp, and was filled with glittering gold dust.

Rudolph propped the vial up against Klipper Eu's sardine tin. That was the start signal. Father began to dig a hole in the gravel with the shovel, and once he reached the layer of sand, he filled the pail with it. Rudolph took off his shoes, took a pan of sand and went down to the water. The rinsing was a tricky business. If the current was too strong, it tore all the materials out of the pan at once. If it were too weak, you had to do all the swiveling and sluicing yourself, and after just a short while it made your wrists hurt.

Klipper Eu made it look incredibly easy. His immense hands let the pan circle effortlessly in the water, as though it weighed nothing at all. He was also able to strip an entire pan very quickly – usually he was done before Rudolph had washed even the coarse, light sand out of his pan. Once there was only black sand left, his father would take the pan from him and wash it carefully. It was too valuable to be washed away by accident, he said to his son, turning his back on him. He was very skillful. Whenever he went gold panning with Rudolph, there would be some little grains of gold in the pan by the end – something which never happened when Rudolph went alone.

"Your father is a good man," Klipper Eu would say every time in commentary to this spectacle. "But when it comes to gold panning he doesn't know a thing." Rudolph protested, looking at the vial. When he questioned him further, Klipper Eu remained silent. He probably was as crazy as everyone said.

One day, Klipper Eu gave Rudolph a piece of fool's gold as big as a thumbnail, intercepting the boy in front of the Berns' front door.

"It ain't real," Klipper Eu commented quickly. "It just looks like it is. I know this place that's full of the stuff. But it ain't real."

Apart from the size, it really was almost impossible to see any difference between it and the particles of gold in Rudolph's vial. It shone a little more coolly, perhaps, and was more silvery -- but who would notice that? Certainly not a five-year-old, thought Rudolph. He wouldn't go to the shop with his father today, nor up to his apple tree. Today he wanted to surprise Max. The little boy had never been down to the gravel bank before! Just think how amazed he would be to find a piece of gold, beneath a stone which Rudolph would point out to him... Rudolph felt a tingling sensation in his stomach at the thought of it. Max would be very, very happy.

With the stone clasped firmly in his hand, Rudolph ran down to the gravel bank. He had the place all to himself. It was a Wednesday, market day, no one would think to go gold panning today. He needed to find a good hiding place for the nugget. It couldn't be too obvious – so as not to arouse Max's suspicion – but neither too out of the way, otherwise perhaps even Rudolph himself wouldn't be able to find it again. Above all, though, it couldn't be too close to the water, in case a part of the riverbank was suddenly pulled away. Rudolph found an objection to every spot; it felt as though there was no suitable hiding place on the entire gravel bank. Then he noticed that Klipper Eu had left his shovel lying next to a big stone. Perhaps that was a sign.

Rudolph picked up the shovel and carefully dug a little hole next to the stone. He squatted down, rummaged his hands around in it gleefully, and almost lost the fool's gold in the process. He got a grip on it again and whistled through his teeth. He was so preoccupied that he hadn't even noticed an elegantly-dressed gentleman approach him from the embankment. Perhaps he was out for a stroll? Because he really didn't look like a gold panner. Rudolph knew what he looked like: someone from Düsseldorf. The gentlemen who came to Uerdingen from Düsseldorf all wore cylinder hats, white collars and long black coats, with heavy gold rings glittering on their fingers.

"Well, what have you got there, boy?" The gentleman had come all the way down onto the gravel, and in his black patent leather shoes!

"Nothing," said Rudolph, rotating the fool's gold self-consciously in his hand.

"But I'm sure I saw something in your hand."

There was nothing Rudolph could do; he had to show the man.

"It's not gold," said Rudolph. "It's nothing, I didn't find it, I just wanted to... for my brother..."

"Nonsense," said the gentleman. He took the nugget out of Rudolph's hand and held it up in front of his right eye.

"How remarkable... Where exactly did you find it?"

"No, sir," stuttered Rudolph in confusion. "I didn't! It's nothing, it's just a stone that Klipper Eu gave me!"

He felt the sudden urge to burst into tears. He could already feel his throat tightening. The gentleman simply wouldn't accept what he was saying.

"Where's it from, boy? How much do you want for it? Come on, tell me!"

It was hopeless, the gentleman just kept talking. As though he couldn't even hear what Rudolph was saying. The desire to cry became stronger and stronger. It was already contorting Rudolph's mouth, his nostrils were flaring – but then something strange happened: the man put the nugget in his coat pocket and pressed a thaler into Rudolph's hand. Then he hurried away up the embankment.

Rudolph stood there on the gravel bank for a while, staring at the money in his hand. He still couldn't completely grasp what had happened. What would become of his present for Max now?

Only after considerable time had passed did he reach a new decision. As soon as his shoes had dried off, he would go to the Herbertz Colonial Goods store and buy Max the monkey.

To begin with, there were rocks and intermittent gravel banks beside the river to walk over, but after just a mile Berns and Singer had to resort to clambering along the cliffs that overhung the Urubamba. The cañon was now so narrow that the riverbank didn't even offer enough space for trees or shrubbery to grow; only agave plants and flowing Spanish moss held fast to the slopes. The snow-covered peaks of the Cordillera Vilcabamba towered high above the men's heads; up there, somewhere, was the Yanama Pass they had crossed during their first expedition. Ahead of them, the Urubamba looped its way around the precipices. The first of these seemed to run directly up to an insurmountable rock face, where the water raged and foamed against the granite – it would be impossible to clamber along.

To Berns, the crossing of the pass suddenly seemed relatively straightforward. Now he understood why all those before him had gone across the pass and avoided the bend in the river. A glance back revealed that Singer, too, was clinging onto the sheer granite, with one leg braced against a cactus. Noticing that Berns had paused for a moment, he stopped. Then he heaved himself forwards; stones broke away from the rock face and hailed down into the floods.

"We have to turn back, there's no way through!" Singer forced out the words.

"There *has* to be a way!" panted Berns. For a while he inched his way onwards, one hand and foot at a time. It felt as though hours passed by. Then Berns heard stones crashing into the water, heard Singer cursing. He turned around just in time to catch a glimpse of his widened eyes.

Berns yelled out for him to hold still. But Singer was already tumbling down into the river. Weighed down by his rucksack, he immediately went under. The rucksack, the cursed rucksack, he had to get it off him! Berns threw off his own bag and jumped in after it.

The water, the cold, penetrating to his bones. His boots filled with water at once, his clothing became heavy – even his hat was pulling at his neck by the tie. An undercurrent caught hold of his legs, making any coordinated movement impossible. Berns was wrenched around, swallowed water, spat it out again, was dragged beneath the surface.

One or two river bends later, he managed to surface again, spluttering. Not far from him, in the middle of the river, he could make out some rocks – and Harry Singer, who had been washed up against them. Berns let the current carry him towards his friend, then grabbed him beneath the arms. About three hundred foot further on, there was a safe strip of riverbank. And the cañon was beginning to open up; the edges of the forest stretched all the way down to the river on

the right bank, while the granite rock face was also falling back a little, sloping down progressively towards the Urubamba.

If only I could get ahold of one of the vines hanging down into the water, thought Berns. But Singer was a tall, heavy man, much taller and heavier than Berns himself. And little by little his legs were going numb, the cold creeping ever deeper, and the undercurrent was tugging at him relentlessly.

Then Singer groaned, his right arm twitched. He was alive. Berns grabbed him a little tighter and pushed away from the rocks. The current pulled both men along with it at once. Berns reached his arm out towards a vine, but missed. Suddenly he felt the overwhelming urge to laugh, all the whirling around them, the spluttering and surging and splashing ... The foam of the water turned into the coastal fog of Callao, and Colonel Inclán's voice sounded out from the thundering of the Urubamba, screaming something to Berns, his voice crystal clear. Berns tore his eyes open and began to paddle with his arms. The fog became river water once again, and the Urubamba, with all its might, spat him and Singer out onto the embankment. They were saved.

That damn vine, thought Berns, once he came around. Can't I even manage to grab a vine? Then he sat up with a start: Singer! But Singer was lying next to him, spitting water.

One of the rucksacks had gotten stuck downstream, on the fallen flowered stem of an agave plant; Berns pulled it out of the water, using the last of his strength. Once he saw that it was his own, he closed his eyes for a moment and uttered a heartfelt prayer of thanks.

Berns and Singer trudged away from the riverbank and towards the edge of the forest. Berns had spotted what he thought was a group of houses between the trees and the mountainside; as they came closer, he saw that it was actually the ruins of a small Inca settlement and an abandoned hacienda. Alongside the loam building of the hacienda stood a jacaranda tree, its violet flowers blanketing the façade. An orchid twined its way up and across the cast-iron balcony. Berns didn't hesitate for long before leading Singer into the house. Trails of moss and lichens hung from the damp walls inside; an emerald-green tapestry which swayed to and fro in the play of light and mist that filled the rooms.

"Are we alive?" asked Singer through chattering teeth. "Did we make it?"

"It's not entirely impossible," said Berns. The fever must be setting in, he thought. He tried desperately to remember which backpack he had put the little vial of quinine powder in. All of a sudden he was gripped by wild, unbridled fear, and in his despair he screamed at Singer. His partner's eyes glazed over. Only once the last flicker of consciousness had ebbed out of them did Berns stop in

shock and let him slip down to the floor. Then he undressed Singer and himself and made a fire beneath the window. He hung the sopping wet clothing up next to it. Singer began to stir again; Berns pulled him close to the fire, then searched through the contents of his backpack. Eventually he found the glass vial containing the quinine powder, along with a small bottle of brandy. He slapped Singer around the face until he opened his eyes, then poured both down his throat.

The compass was full of water, their provisions sodden. They would be able to live off them for a little while, but before long everything would go mouldy. Nonetheless: the rifles which they always hung over their shoulders had survived the unexpected swim, as had the sketchbooks which Berns had wrapped in caoutchouc rubber by way of precaution. Once he had assured himself that Singer's breathing was regular and even, he grabbed one of the books and left the house.

Berns clambered up a fallen wall onto the roof of the hacienda and sat down on the load-bearing beam. The shock was still so deep-seated that he could barely formulate a clear thought. Concentrate, he reprimanded himself, otherwise everything will be in vain. If this hacienda had once been inhabited, how had its owners transported away their wares? But no, the hacienda was of secondary importance. Over there, the ruins which stretched out alongside the hacienda... what had they once been? A workers' settlement, Berns presumed, nothing but uniform little houses crouched in rank and file. They stood parallel to the river, only the last row curved down the incline. What used to be there: a fortress?

Berns stood up, naked still, and turned around. In the distance, half concealed by a hill, he was able to make out a parapet. A fortification, he thought, nothing too out of the ordinary, but nonetheless. Then he noticed something else, and immediately forgot about the hacienda and the parapet. The slopes and sides of the mountain, they were covered with walls and terraces! Almost all the way to the summit, the Incas hadn't left out a single inch of land; they had bordered every last bit with their walls, creating what looked like enough cultivation areas to nourish an entire city.

The holy city, El Dorado?

Berns, for a moment not knowing whether to cry or shout for joy, flung his sketchbook away from him in a wide arc and buried his face in his hands. He sat there like that for a while, completely motionless. Then he jumped down from the roof, retrieved his sketchbook and went to check on Singer and the fire.

Three days passed before Singer's fever subsided. Monosyllabic and with sunken cheeks, he sat by the fire, looking at a copper-toned kingfisher which had settled on the windowsill, then eventually said that it would be best if they turned back. Their provisions would soon run out, the compass was no longer working, and God alone knew how many rapids the Urubamba still had

to offer. Back? asked Berns. Via the path they had taken to get here? Singer didn't say a word. He knew just as well as Berns that there was only one route they could take, and it lay ahead.

Beyond the next bend in the river, they stumbled across an opening in the rock face. The men stared into the gap in surprise and conferred. When Singer noticed that Berns was hesitating, he clapped him on the shoulder and went in ahead.

Once the opening was behind them, they tilted their heads back and looked up. A valley lay before them, the likes of which neither had ever seen before. The land had towered up and transformed into steep walls of granite; stone needles rose out of the river, soaring many thousand feet into the sky. Swathes of mist spread out in between. It was impossible to study their peaks, because as soon as they managed to get a clear look at one, the next strand of fog came and obscured it.

"What is that?" asked Berns. "The end of the world?"

But Singer didn't answer. He had spotted an Andean bear, sitting on a fallen avocado tree and watching the two men intently. The bear let Singer come so close that he even tried to touch it with his outstretched hand. Only when Singer could feel its furry hackles beneath his fingertips did the bear clamber down from the tree stump, make its way leisurely around a heliconia plant and disappear into the jungle.

"Did you see that?" asked Singer. The men headed onwards, past sprawling laurel, camphor and mahogany trees, the crowns of which formed arch-like groves. Again and again, Berns and Singer stopped in their tracks to look up in silent awe. Wondrous woven canopies of vanilla orchids hung down from the branches, exuding a sweet aroma; if one turned one's head a little to look at them, their yellow-and-green pattern seemed to move and change as though in a kaleidoscope.

On one occasion, Singer almost stumbled over a tapir that hadn't considered it necessary to get out of the men's way. On another, Berns walked into an especially buoyant branch that whipped his hat from his head. When he leaned over to get it and looked up again, he realised that it was actually the body of an anaconda that had wrapped itself around the branches of a queñua tree. Its head rested close to the tree trunk; its body looked so thick and stolid that Berns even dared to run his fingers along its black flecks. What kind of country was this? he asked himself, not knowing what to respond.

Even Singer, who had been so lackluster and downcast as they had set off from the hacienda, suddenly seemed lively. The teak trees in particular had caught his attention, and when he

spent almost half an hour studying a particularly large specimen, Berns asked if he had decided to become a lumberjack.

The mist lifted a little and sunbeams fell into the narrow valley. Berns estimated that they only had a few hours before the sun would disappear behind the granite needles. They waded through a small river which flowed into the Urubamba, then came into an area where the valley widened a little. The meadows which stretched out alongside the riverbank allowed them to make quick and easy progress. There was just one thing Berns was unhappy about: ever since they had stepped into the valley, it seemed as though all traces of the Incas had been wiped away; there was nothing to suggest that this area had ever been inhabited.

Beneath a waterfall, however, Berns and Singer made a discovery: in the midst of a large, blooming garden, there were numerous huts, and smoke was rising from one of the roofs. People, here! While Singer looked relieved beyond measure, Berns was a little disappointed. But it can't hurt to exchange stories, he thought to himself. And if the opportunity of spending the night should arise, then all the better.

They paused and conferred. They didn't have much they could give the inhabitants as a gift. For the first time, Berns found himself regretting the fact that Pepe wasn't with them. Had he ever been to this region, he wondered? Berns contemplated whether he should get out Max's knife. But before he could conclude the thought, he heard a scraping and clicking sound. Singer had broken off the nugget which served as the visor of his Winchester. It lay there in the palm of his hand, shimmering.

"Well, it's not like we're going to need it for hunting," he said. "Here you just grab yourself a tapir and ask whether it might oblige to having its rear end held over the fire."

Berns wasn't in a joking mood. He remembered the directions Pepe had given them when they had encountered the first settlement in the jungle. Shouldn't they handle this in exactly the same way? Singer rubbed the nugget clean on his chest; it began to sparkle at once. Together, they walked towards one of the huts. While they were still hesitating about stepping into the small arbour in front of it, a boy broke away from the shadow of a snakewood tree and greeted them in Quechua. He was naked apart from a pair of red trousers which reached only to his knees; his skin was a deep, rich copper tone.

He's been watching us the whole time, thought Berns. Does he think we're dangerous? Berns and Singer slowly pulled off their hats and returned the greeting. Berns asked the boy his name. Singer, whose Quechua was worse than Berns', held back a little.

His name was Melchor, the boy answered. He lived with his parents and his grandfather in this settlement, which was called Mandor. There were about a dozen families here.

Down here in the valley they cultivated bananas and sugarcane and cacao; up above, in the mountains, quinoa and amaranth, and their llamas and alpacas grazed there too. The others were with the animals right now; grandfather and he were spending the month alone at the bottom of the valley.

Berns nodded attentively, repeated the word he had learned: *Mandor*, and then said that he and his partner would be greatly honoured if Melchor and his grandfather would allow them to spend the night here. They were on a journey and in a tight spot, as it were. They had managed to escape the floods of the Urubamba with their lives, but many of their provisions had been lost.

Melchor looked back and forth from Berns to Singer in amazement.

"The Urubamba gave you back?" he asked eventually. He wasn't sure if he had understood the white men correctly; their Quechua was the strangest he had ever heard!

Berns suddenly realised why Melchor was hesitating. He stretched out his arm and invited Melchor to touch it. They weren't mountain spirits, or *pishtacos*, but human beings of flesh and blood.

Melchor ran his hand across Berns' scarred forearm, pausing briefly at his wrist. Then the boy smiled and said that his grandfather wasn't here right now, but would be back soon for sure. That was grandfather's hut, over the back – they should go and wait inside, perhaps there would still be some soup.

Melchor led them past lilies and kantuta bushes to the biggest hut. The men ducked their heads as they entered and sat down in the half darkness; there were no windows, and the only light came through the door opening. Melchor lit a fire and laboriously lifted a pot onto its mount. As the flames blazed up, the twilight inside the hut faded away. There were blankets, barrels and tools of different kinds piled up in the corners. In amongst them, on the bare ground, guinea pigs scuttled to and fro. The wood of the doorframe was dark and weather beaten; the logs used to make it must have been chopped a long time ago. Singer rubbed his eyes. Berns, however, was wide awake.

"Have you and your grandfather lived here a long time?" he asked the boy, who was wiping out two bowls with a cloth that was caked in dirt.

"Of course, always."

Melchor poured soup into the bowls and handed them to the two men. They were so hungry that they gulped the food down greedily.

Berns felt the warmth spreading out through his stomach. As he leant back against the wall, something pressed into his back: a wooden shelf. On it stood a tin can, and next to it, if he wasn't mistaken, were four impressively sized lumps of gold. He stared at them, speechless, then kicked against Singer's boot and gestured towards the shelf. Singer grabbed the biggest nugget, held it

up in the firelight, rubbed it and ran his metal spoon along its side. Then he breathed in sharply: it was real! Real gold! They could leave the nugget from the Winchester in Singer's bag without a second thought; someone who had this much gold would only laugh at such trivialities.

The boy, who had ladled two tumblers full of chicha from a barrel, turned around to the men.

"Melchor," said Berns, in a husky voice, "you don't happen to know where this gold came from do you?"

"No, I don't," said Melchor, putting the cups down in front of the men. "Grandfather always fetches the gold when we need it. Only he knows the place of the gold."

Berns thought he must be hearing things: the *place of the gold*?

Melchor, who hadn't noticed the excitement his statement had unleashed in Berns, repeated once more that only Grandfather went up there, no one else.

Up there, thought Berns, *up to the place of the gold*. The holy city, of course, it had to be! He, Berns, had been right with his contemplations and theories, El Dorado was in the Cordillera Vilcabamba, at the upper course of the Urubamba. No wonder El Dorado had never been found by any of the large expeditions – the path here wasn't suitable for many men, but only one, two at most.

"The place of the gold," repeated Berns in Quechua. Now he had to concentrate to see clearly, had to fight against his excitement and the laughter trying to push its way up and out of his diaphragm. The place of the gold! Berns jumped up, nothing could keep him on the ground now. He grabbed Melchor by the shoulders, thanked him, thanked him again and again, from the heart, from both of their hearts, no, from *all* the beating hearts in the world! But now he, Melchor, had to go fetch his grandfather – could he do that? For him?

Melchor stared in confusion at the white man, who was shaking with emotion – then nodded and dashed out of the hut.

"Did you hear that?" asked Berns. To be sure, he translated what the boy had said. Singer was still standing in front of the shelf, inspecting the clump of gold. "Unbelievable," he said. "This gold has been melted down. There must be a forge out there somewhere."

Once Melchor's calls for his grandfather had become more distant, Berns and Singer began to explore the room. Next to the barrel of chicha lay a bundle of blankets on some stacked logs. Berns reached for one of the corners and pulled the blankets to the side. There, in the middle of some ruby-red woven cloths, an over-sized human skull came into view. A distinctive crack ran across the left temple.

Something flashed behind the skull. With the tips of his fingers, Berns pushed it to the side. Beneath another cloth, a golden corner was peeping out; the edge of something considerably bigger. At Berns' touch, the cloth slipped off as though of its own volition, revealing a breastplate of solid gold.

"Singer," said Berns tonelessly. He had never seen anything like it. This was more than just adornment – whoever had worn this armour was *dorado*, golden, a supernatural being; he was the son of the sun, a holy man, perhaps even: El Dorado.

Singer propped his rifle against the wall and grabbed hold of the breastplate.

"Singer, you idiot," hissed Berns. "Put it back down!"

But it was as though Singer had been hypnotised, he hadn't even heard Berns. How heavy the breastplate was, how comfortably it lay in his hands...

"Listen, Berns" said Singer. "I suggest we grab the breastplate and the gold and find some other place to spend the night."

"Have you lost your mind?" said Berns. "We need these people. Put it back!"

"This is more gold than we've found in all these years." Singer was still holding the breastplate tightly in his grip.

"It's an investment, Singer. And one that will pay off."

"This might be our only opportunity to –"

Berns wrenched the breastplate out of Singer's hands and put it back in its place next to the skull; voices could already be heard approaching the hut. The men quickly sat back down; Berns noticed, too late, that he had forgotten to pull the blankets back over the skull and the shield. But by then Melchor and his grandfather were already stepping into the hut, there was no time to put it to rights.

A hunched man with tied-back, snow-white hair came in ahead of Melchor and greeted the two strangers in broken Spanish. He introduced himself as Lucho Arteaga; this was his hut, he said. Berns bowed so deeply that he could see the man's naked feet – that tanned, almost stony skin the American Indians got from walking around barefoot in the sierra for years on end. This man, Berns was sure of it, knew every summit, every precipice, every rock in the region -- and every ruin too.

"Don Arteaga," said Berns, taking out his Solingen knife. He hesitated briefly, then decided to continue in Quechua.

"Please accept this humble gift from the forge in my home town." As he spoke, he laid the knife in Arteaga's hands, thinking of Max, who he hoped would forgive him. Arteaga inspected the knife and expressed his thanks.

We need an excuse for why we're here, for what we're doing here, contemplated Berns. A good one. What could it be? He thought feverishly.

"We're land surveyors from the road building authority," he said eventually. "We're drawing and measuring the valleys of the Cordillera Vilcabamba. Could you perhaps help us? The government would be very grateful to you."

Lucho Arteaga agreed to let the men stay in one of the smaller huts for the next few weeks. It stank appallingly of the family of possums that had taken up residence there, and creepers and vines traversed the room. But it had a sturdy roof and wasn't far from the waterfall, where they could get water to drink and wash.

Berns knew that Arteaga was suspicious of them. It would be pointless to ask him for information, and even more so to question him directly about the place of the gold, which Melchor had spoken of so openly. The very same day they arrived, the old man took the breastplate away from the pile of blankets, and soon there was no sign of even the tin can or the lumps of gold. Instead, the skull now took pride of place on the wall-mounted shelf. In response to the cautious question as to whose it was, Arteaga answered that it was the skull of his great-grandfather: a man who had always warned the family about strangers.

Berns frowned with concern when he heard that: presumably there had been a succession of pillagers making their way through the sierra on the hunt for quick riches? Looking for gold that allegedly was lying around on the ground, waiting to be picked up? Of course he had to protect the land of his ancestors from such a thing, no matter what the cost. Berns looked visibly troubled.

He wanted to tell the old man how they had triangulated the route from Juliaca up to Cuzco, but he didn't have the words in Quechua. So he began to tell about himself instead: that he was from a faraway land and loved Peru very much. That even as a little boy he had studied the history of his, Arteaga's, ancestors. Sometimes these ancestors had seemed closer and more familiar to him than his own. Did Arteaga believe in reincarnation?

Arteaga's face darkened when Berns said the Quechuan word for soul. Without giving an answer, he busied himself making tea, and so Berns thanked him once more for his hospitality and retreated.

That evening, Berns heard Arteaga call his grandson Melchor into the hut and speak to him agitatedly. The rush of the waterfall was too loud for Berns to be able to make out the words, but he still understood.

"He didn't believe your story," said Singer, who had meshed together a sleeping mat from the vines. "Land surveyors from the road building authority? Why didn't you say we were in the timber trade? That, by the way, is something that would really be worth it here."

"I had to come up with something quickly," said Berns. After all, Singer could have said something too. But no, he just stood around grabbing everything he could get his hands on. It was no wonder the old man didn't trust them!

Translated by Jamie Searle Romanelli, June 2017