


With Much Gusto



by Herman Howard Matteson

DON RAMON AVILLA—every peon patriot in Sonora is a don at least—one hand resting upon the cantle of his saddle, stood glowering at General Jose Cuchillo.

General Cuchillo, unaware of his underling's malevolent look, walked slowly, pompously about a clustered group consisting of one young white woman, two little white girls, and a dozen Mexican and breed women and girls.

With languid, imperious hand, General Jose beckoned to the young white woman to follow him, when she, who, within the hour had become the widow of the young white ranchero, drew a sobbing breath, licked up with avid tongue and lips the brown powder that she had held secreted in a clenched hand—fell to the earth.

General Jose, both annoyed and chagrined, uttered a short laugh and walked on.

Madre de Dios! Good enough. Don Ramon's black eyes glittered.

Within a twelvemonth, the cutthroat band had had no less than half a dozen generals, chieftains. Each, until the unhappy choice fell

upon Jose Cuchillo, had justified the honor by acquiring a white woman.

Cuchillo had tried and tried, all but succeeded—failed. Which was a sign, commended Avilla, that the sun of Jose Cuchillo was toward the setting. It was high time that the band swore eternal fealty to a new chief, and that chief might as well as not be Don Ramon Avilla, with first choice of captives, first hand into the bag of loot.

Possession of a gringo white woman brought a man good luck. Besides the matter of luck, no small item to Avilla's skulking soul, his inclinations lay that way mightily, for he was beginning to find, with his elevation to the colonelcy, odious in the extreme the crude blandishments of the starveling camp followers who came fluttering about the bivouac like hungry crows in search of carrion.

Meditating thus, Don Ramon took a pace or two back and forth, lifted his head smartly, proudly. He was resolved. He would go upon a journey.

Before a ragged patch of tent—the army's commissary—Don Ramon proceeded to outfit, filling a leather bottle to the bubbling top with

the ardent drink called *pulque*, packing full two lizard-skin pouches, one with strong tobacco of Oaxaca, the other with dried leaves of the marihuana, or courage plant.

As an afterthought, he slipped a couple of greasy frijoles and a double handful of leached corn into the saddle-bag. Then he mounted, drove the long spurs into the horse's torn flanks, bore away toward the north.

Evelyn Warner, a dab of chalk across one cheek, her blue eyes zealously alight, was striving earnestly to impress upon the mind and soul of Pedro Torres the fact that six times seven is forty-two, and never forty-six. Pedro couldn't see it, which seems rather remarkable, for Pedro was anything but stupid, even though, at the age of twenty, he was struggling with problems of the second grammar grade.

Nor was Pedro stubborn, or intractable. Why, since her first request he had never once rolled or lighted a cigarette within the school's domain; further, with lofty magnanimity, he had foreborne to pack within the temple of learning the seven-inch bowie-knife with which, formerly, he had gone embellished.

Pedro was as one traveling in a Socorro sand-storm, from whom all nearer things of earth are hidden, but who is permitted to look upon the crest of the lofty peak ahead. That was it. Upon that high pinnacle, Pedro saw the yellow-haired school-teacher, with whom he was deeply, abysmally in love.

Of this fact, Schoolmistress Evelyn was all unaware, though she might easily enough have guessed it had not her own tender fancies centered upon the biweekly arrival of the Eastern mail. Even when Pedro began to appear garbed in his braided, black velvet coat—worn previously at bull-fights and upon fiesta days only—she never suspected, nor, when, to the coat he added the wide-brimmed, cone-crowned hat with the thick silver cord representing one season's toil in the cotton-field, did she remotely dream or suspect.

Evelyn, before she had started from the East, had heard that the Mexicans were cruel, treacherous. She didn't believe it.

Every morning her little, black-eyed folk—her scholars, except for three white children, were Mexicans or breeds—would come with dirty hands filled with offerings of ripe guavas, dates, or cactus-apple. When the bell dismissed them from their seats they would gather about her like bronze mountain butterflies hovering over a bush of sweet pedisporum.

Her every kindness they flashed back at her out of sparkling, grateful eyes. Upon their soft tongues, her name, Señorita Evelyn, was as a phrase from a lullaby.

From these children, she, gentle born and bred, was learning true courtesy and politeness. A little fellow, no higher than her waist, would fly down the aisle to retrieve for her a pencil that she had dropped.

When the gringo teacher would have a drink from the porous, cooling jar, some witch of a child would first scrub out the drinking-cup with the corner of a bright, ragged serape.

And Pedro. To her lightest request, he would sweep her a bow, accompanied, at first, before he had much English, with a ceremonious “con muchísimo gusto,” which, as time went on, he would declaim variously as “with muchísimo pleasure,” or “con much gusto.”

Evelyn began to fidget over Pedro, not because he stared at her so owlily, but because he wasn't learning his lessons. Day after day he went down to inglorious defeat before the table of sevens and employed his geography solely as a covert from behind which he might peer at Evelyn.

“You must, must study, Pedro, study hard.”

Pedro laid a brown hand over his heart.

“With much gusto, Señorita Evelyn.”

But Pedro didn't study, save to meditate, without impiety, how very like her golden hair was to the hair upon the head of our Lady of the

Angels in the mission chapel.

He didn't study, and he didn't, and had to stay after school, which was as severe as punishing an Indian with a bottle of mescal.

She stepped around a desk, to point out pertinent facts touching the multiplication of nine by seven, and found Pedro upon his knees, both her hands clasped in his own. Then, as a caballero of old Spain might have made his plea, Pedro poured out his heart.

He loved her. For her, he would spill his blood like December rain. He would be her true caballero, he would, he would.

Gently, wishing that Jimmy Haworth, of Galena, Illinois, might have borrowed some of Pedro's Latin fire for his wooing, she withdrew her hands. Why, Pedro was but a boy; she was old, very old.

Pedro was not a boy. Would he not, come blessed day of Santa Barbara, be twenty? She old? Angels never grew old. Then his soft, black eyes became the hard, glittering eyes of a wronged rattler. Had she, then, a lover, a caballero?

None thereabouts, certainly.

Pedro arose to his feet, set a bit more jauntily the velvet coat about his shoulders, marched out with the stride of a grandee. Beside a clump of Turk's head cactus, where, during hours of instruction he was wont to secrete the long-bladed bowie, he sank to the earth from sight, tried the edge of the blade against his thumb, slid it into its sheath.

No lover thereabouts. But somewhere, a lover. No matter. There were hopes.

He'd win yet this angel of the golden hair; he'd learn the accursed table of sevens, eights, and nines; he'd slit the throat—

Clattering hoof-beats sounded from the cañon trail which led to the Mexican line a mile south. A gay serape fluttering from his shoulder, resplendent in the gaudy uniform of a bandit colonel, a rider dashed up alongside the tile step of the adobe school-house, threw the reins over

the horse's head, dismounted, entered.

There came sound of a smothered scream. The bandit reappeared, a squirming bundle wrapped about in the serape in his arms. He was in the saddle, the bundle before him. The cruel spurs stabbed the horse's flanks. He was away, speeding down the cañon trail.

Leaping from rock to rock like a goat, the naked blade in his hand, Pedro ran after, screaming threats, blistering oaths. Where a tiny monument marked the limits of the United States, Pedro stopped, stared at the cloud of dust that lay ahead on the edge of the desert.

The desert!

Back Pedro ran with all speed to his own adobe house, yanked a canvas water-bag from a rafter, filled it from the cooling jar, tore down the trail, across the line, into the waste of hot sands.

Hour after hour he pressed on, following the deep hoof marks of a horse, that any momentary flurry of hot wind might obliterate forever. The distance between the marks of the reaching forefeet and the spurning hind feet, began to lessen.

Good! Pedro had been watching for the sign, for, in the desert, a good man, with a burning purpose, will overhaul a horse.

On Pedro went, and on until the darkness hid the hoof marks from his sight. Then, on hands and knees, he felt out the direction of the tracks, ran a distance, located the tracks anew, then on.

For several miles, until the spent horse began to stumble, Don Ramon spurred the wretched beast unmercifully. Then, for fear the animal would drop down for good, the bandit dismounted for a brief breathing spell, and lifted the girl to the earth.

"*Señorita* got knife, poison?" he demanded, padding with his hands about her person.

Her face flamed at the indignity. Ah! If only she had had poison—or knife.

Don Ramon took a gulp from the leather bottle of pulque, rolled himself a cigarette, half of tobacco, half of the dried courage-plant, also called variously, "the liberator of sin," "loco," or "wild hemp."

The man's eyes began to glow like moistened match-heads in the dark, and, swelling to the mad exhilaration of the pulque and the loco, he took a few strutting steps back and forth.

Bowing with mock gallantry, he lifted the girl to the horse's back, mounted, urged the beast forward.

Again the horse began to stumble. Darkness was falling. Avilla reined in.

"We eat now food," he said, "rest *un poco*, go on."

From the saddle-bag he searched forth greasy frijoles, a handful of leached corn, spread his serape upon the sand for a cloth. Seating himself, he proffered the leather bottle to the girl.

She refused. The don took a generous drink, a bite of a frijole, and laid out the lizard-skin pouches preparatory to rolling another cigarette.

She knew something about this loco, or Mexican opium. Until she had peremptorily stopped the practise, some of the children even had chewed it as other children chew gum. She had heard of Mexicans, maddened by overindulgence in the weed, when no human victim was at hand, running amuck, slashing horses and cows with their knives—anything to shed blood, to kill.

The frenzy of a loco drunk, soon over, is followed by stupor, sleep. But in that period of madness what unspeakable devilry might not be done. She'd risk it. She would have to.

Leaning slightly, she began to feel about her in the sand. At last she found it, a stone no larger than her thumb.

Watching for her opportunity, she flung the stone, struck the horse upon the neck. It plunged, ran forward a few steps, the Mexican

after it, cursing vilely.

In an instant she had seized the pulque bottle, had emptied into it all the loco she could gather in her hand. Then she shook the bottle vigorously, placed it back upon the *serape*.

Avilla, seating himself once more, took a pull at the bottle, a bit of frijole, lighted his cigarette. In the flickering yellow light of the vesta match, his eyes looked like black points. Again he offered her the bottle, laughed at her refusal, took another drink.

Presently he leaped to his feet, began to pace back and forth nervously. As he came to a stop, standing over her, she arose, backed away a step.

Now, courage. Oh, for the sharp, long-bladed knife of Pedro, a hatpin, anything.

"Señorita, I—"

"Please," she stammered, searching desperately for some time-saving subterfuge, "please, I—really, if you will give me just a taste of the pulque, I feel very ill."

"*Perfectamente!* Stupid pig that I forget the *Señorita*. Pardons a million."

In playful simulation of self-punishment for his neglect, he struck himself upon the chest, handed her the bottle. She tilted it to the lips, pretended to drink, handed it back. Don Ramon drank after her, and drank again.

"*Señorita!*"

He was leaning toward her, fumbling in the darkness to find her hand.

"Please," she protested. "I am feeling wretchedly ill and weak."

She drew her cold fingers from his hot grasp, shrank back.

"Cruel, *Señorita!* One kiss—one!" He came lurching toward her, flung both arms about her. Striking, thrusting him away, like a fury sinking her teeth into the back of the hand that grasped her arm, she fought free of him.

Again and again she broke away from him, to be seized anew. But she was young, vigorous, armed with a strength inspired by terror

supreme.

She fell to her knees upon the serape. Her groping hand found the leather bottle. Into his face and eyes she dashed the fiery stuff.

Screaming with pain, his hands clapped over eyes that were as two burning coals, he ran blindly back and forth.

Evelyn was gone. Heedless of the barbed cactus that pierced her thin shoes, she ran, ran until it seemed her heart would burst from her bosom. At last, when she could no longer run, she fell, lay panting upon the sand.

Her ear close to the earth, she listened. Away in the distance, she could hear the bandit calling to her, cursing, then babbling senseless, whirling words.

At length his voice was still. She struggled to her feet, pressed on, ignorant of all direction, but on, away from what lay behind.

For miles she fought her way, her feet and ankles bleeding from the cactus through which she blundered. Then, as the sun arose like an inflamed eye to peer along that waste of sand, and spines, and horrid, creeping things, her heart sank.

When she should have been traveling north and east toward the line and safety, she had been going south and west, deeper still into the bandit country.

Summoning, from the uttermost parts of her being, her last vestige of strength and resolution, she set forth, making a detour to avoid the spot where the bandit had pitched his temporary camp. By this time of the morning the lethal effect of the loco would have worn off, leaving an aftermath, of nervous irritability, more dangerous than its exhilaration.

Up, up, climbed the flaming, red eye, changing to yellow, to an incandescent-white. The world, under that terrific heat that grew and grew still hotter, must become, it seemed, a waste of fire.

The desert rabbits, pocket mice, kangaroo rats, hovered in the precarious shelter of

elephant wood, their sides heaving, their red mouths gaping piteously.

On her knees, with bleeding, spine-torn hands, she dug desperately to find roots of the desert water-nut plant. She found a pitiful few, swallowed the drops of hot, acrid fluid.

Further on, but slowly, oh, so slowly. She was getting dizzy. Things were turning black.

Her last thought was a realization that if she lay out in that destroying sun, it would be the end.

Crawling into the shelter of an elephant-bush, she fell forward upon her face—unconscious.

Some one lifted her head gently, poured blessed drops of water into her parched mouth.

“*Gracias, Madre de Dios!*” exclaimed a fervent voice. “Opens now the blue eyes! More water! There!”

Pedro, his face the color of the dead, bleached branches above him, was leaning over her. There was a clean hole through the black velvet jacket, which was stiff with dried blood.

He was breathing rapidly, shallowly, with a terrifying rattling noise. He let her head sag back upon the sand, for he had not the strength to support it.

“Listen, *carita mia*,” he said, pointing weakly to the north, “keep the sun at your back—a league on—you are safe. All night,” he panted, “I trail the hoof-tracks. This morning I came upon him—raving. *Madre de Dios*, how he rave. *Muchishmo* we fight. There, and there—and there, with much gusto, my knife finds his buzzard flesh.

“Me, twice, he stab, here, and here. Does he die? No. He falls to the earth. I take the *riata* from his saddle.

“With my bloody knife I cut it in pieces four. One foot of the *carne envenenada* I tie to root of tough yucca—the other foot to another—one wrist to a third—a wrist to a fourth—there he lies—crucified—like a thief, but without a cross. He lives an hour, a day

maybe, more—perhaps. *Quien sabe?*”

He shoved the broad-brimmed hat from his sweating brow.

“Then I find her, *carita mia*, *Madre de Dios*, I find her. *Gracias*, Lady of Heaven, that for a space, I serve her—her *caballero*—with much gusto, I serve her. Go, now, *carita mia*—take the water-bag—a league—”

He lopped over onto the sand, but still smiled up at her bravely.

“It is soon ever,” he whispered. “Go now. Santa Margaret bless the golden hair of her—Santa Ysobel bless and keep the two blue eyes—Santa—”

A spasm shook his breast. The lips opened dryly. He crossed himself. The hand fell limply across his chest.

The caballero soul of Pedro Torres had taken flight.