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# Gold, Horse, and Man

*Rafael Felipe Muñoz*

SINCE THE railroad line ended in Casas Grandes, the Villistas\* who were going to Sonora got out of the trains, taking their thin horses from the cars, saddling them, and starting out for Cañon del Pulpito.

The Mexican plain was hidden under a thick coat of hard snow that creaked beneath the shoed hooves of the animals. Sometimes they slipped and fell on the damp mattress, white and unending. The riders scrambled up, but if the horse stayed down in the icy mud, they would close his nostrils and his mouth with their hands so that, in one supreme effort to free himself and breathe, the animal would achieve his feet.

How poor a friend to man is the snowy earth, beautiful only in those allegorical paintings of Christmas Eve. You cannot see the ground you tread. The big boulders on the road hardly make a wave in the crust of crystalized confetti under the zero weather. The men on foot make false steps and fall on their

\* Followers of Francisco “Pancho” Villa.

hands and knees, their guns sink in the snow. Their knapsacks containing food for the week get all wet. And little splinters of ice enter in the openings in their clothes. You have to cuss to keep warm.

No dry wood can be found to make a fire, nor a bare stone to sit down on and rest awhile. Even under the broad branches of the pines, cedars, and oaks there is snow, with no place to spread out a blanket and lie down. Even when the snow has ceased, the wind keeps on shaking down the flakes that are caught in the branches, so it is always snowing underneath the trees. And the thaw is even more cruel than the storm: it is colder. And almost always the wind tears at the ends of your muffler, the tail of your coat, the bottom of your cape and pierces you through to the skin.

“Don’t give up, boys! Keep on, and you’ll find out it’s worse further down the road . . .”

The scattered remains of the once splendid Division of the North, the few who had not given out after the battles of Celaya, kept on going ahead, “looking for the worst,” with a shrug of their shoulders that said, “Aw, what the hell!” and a contraction of the lips that held only disdain for life, and a challenge to death.

A short trot from Casas Grandes there is a big lake, but not very deep, scarcely more than a large marsh where the wind does not even make waves as it skims the muddy surface. It seems like a smokey crystal where, under a few feet of water, the black and wrinkled mud looks like the skin of a gigantic beast sleeping in the lake. In some places, where the water is less deep, the zero weather has covered the marsh with a crust of ice.

The majority of the column went on, preferring to take the long way around on solid ground rather than attempt to cross

the suspicious calm of those dark waters. But one group of Villistas, six or seven, well mounted on strong horses, with thick leather leggings that came half-way up to their hips, and winter clothes among which the characteristic red sweaters were not lacking, decided to take a short cut straight across the lake.

Heading the group was a tall man with his Texas hat in a point cocked on his head like a railroad man. A clean-shaven dark face, raven hair almost like bristles, straight and stiff; the mouth of a hunting dog; powerful hands, erect body and big-muscled legs that gripped the flanks of his horse like claws of eagles. His name was Rodolfo Fierro. He had been a railroad man and afterwards a bandit, the little finger of the Chief of the Division of the North, a brutal and implacable assassin, a sharp shooter whose index finger never tired of pulling the trigger.

“Horses walk better in water than in snow,” he said, and dug in with his spurs. The animal gave one leap and landed in the lake lifting up a fan of water with each hoof, then went ahead swinging his feet and paddling with noisy joy. “Men that are men and who ride horses that are horses, come with me! Let’s go!”

Five or six others followed him with the noise of waterfalls. Fierro travelled loaded down with gold. American twenty-dollar gold pieces known as “Bull’s Eyes” filled a snakeskin belt the bandit wore a little below his cartridge holder: gold in the stuffed pockets of his pants, gold in the bosom of his shirt that fell over his tight belt, gold in his saddle-bags filled to the bursting point, gold in canvas sacks hanging from the head of the saddle. A bandage of gold, a breastplate of gold! Pounds and pounds of gold!

When they were on solid ground the horse did not appear to feel the weight of that enormous man on his back. The animal did not look as though he carried so tremendous a load,

prancing like an English saddle horse lifting his front feet level with his chest.

But at a hundred meters, a hundred and fifty, two hundred meters from the edge of the lake the horse began to weary at not finding solid ground beneath his iron hooves, of putting his feet down in black slime, thick and jelly-like. Even when the water had not yet reached the level of his belly, he no longer lifted his feet in the air. He went ahead steadily, but slowly, straight but weary, panting like an engine. From his open nostrils, two big black holes, streams of thick steam came out. His upraised ears seemed to sense a mysterious sign of danger rising from the water churned into concentric circles losing themselves in the distance.

“General, this is a pretty hard road for these horses,” one of his companions ventured to say. “Better we turn around and go back to the other bank.”

“What the hell you mean—turn around? I’m tired of riding through this damned puddle. If you’re afraid, give up and turn around! And be careful not to take a bath!”

He gave another dig with his feet into the belly of the horse. The points of the spurs tore his skin, releasing little threads of blood, and the animal rose up on his hind legs, almost vertical. Fierro held onto the bow of the saddle, put his head on the animal’s neck, and with a closed fist struck the horse between the ears.

“You dirty mule!”

The horse came down on his four feet and now the water touched his belly. The man’s feet, stuck to the sides of the animal with implacable spurs, were well-underneath the water muddied by the kicking hooves.

“Be careful, General! Your horse’s going down!”

“You’ll get out by the skin of your teeth.”

“Don’t move because he’ll get stuck . . .”

“Give your damned advice to a bunch of women! I know what I’m doing!”

A tremendous battle began to take place: the horse against the mire, and the man against the horse. The other riders did not dare come near them. They had formed a semi-circle five or six meters off. The animal snorted desperately and with vigorous movement succeeded in lifting one foot out of the water, sending it down again with terrific force. But he could find no resistance on the muddy bottom and each time the powerful pull of the muscles that lifted his feet became less effective. His hind legs began to go down and soon his tail was in the water, moving violently as if it were an oar covered with bristles.

The rider struck the horse with both fists again and again, leaving the reins hanging on the saddle, shouting the vilest of oaths and kicking the animal furiously in the belly with his spurs. Now the water was foaming and muddy, and red with blood that poured from the flanks of the horse.

“Better you get down, General . . . and I’ll lend you my nag . . .”

“Lend it to your grandma! She needs it worse than I do.”

But the time came when the animal could not pull his feet out of the mud. He must be up to his knees in it, because now the water half covered his body. He stopped still a moment, snorting as if in answer to the insults Fierro kept heaping on him. The man thought about getting off. He bent down toward the saddle-bags, level with the water, and took out two sacks of gold on either side. He also took the two sacks tied to the head of the saddle and, throwing them over his left shoulder, lifted his right leg over the back of the horse and put it down into the water, trying to touch the bottom; but his foot sank into the mud like butter, and he remained hanging onto the bow of the saddle with his left leg tangled up in the stirrup.

He felt a sudden fear, a terrible fear of being stuck there forever with his horse and his gold! He turned his eyes toward his men in anguish. They were all too far off to give him a hand, and they remained motionless for fear of experiencing his same misfortune. The rest of their column a ways off on the edge of the dark smooth lake like a smoked glass, continued their dragging march across the snow, each one preoccupied by his own thoughts, looking down at the road to avoid the boulders and pitfalls, never directing a single glance at the group that had dared to start out straight across the surface of the water.

“Come on, fools! See if you can’t do something. . . . Or do you expect to leave me here stuck in the mud? Get a move on, you, gimme a hand!”

But the men did not move. For several meters around the sinking horse and the rider pale with fear, the mud was churned to foam by the desperate efforts of the animal to get out of danger. And whoever might dare go near them would fall prisoner, too, to the deep, soft mud. So the other riders limited themselves to the giving of advice.

“Don’t move much. . . .”

“Get up on the saddle. . . .”

“Throw off the weight you’ve got on you. . . .”

“Try to swim out. . . .”

One took out his pistol and fired off the six bullets in its chamber to let the distant column know of the danger in which Fierro found himself. Immediately the troops detoured and came down to the edge of the lake. With their binoculars, the leaders saw a horse sinking into the water and a man fighting for his life. Several riders tried to come to his aid. They advanced on their horses, breaking the thin surface ice—but, after a few steps they saw that there was danger for them, too, so they went back.

In the middle of the pool, the horse kept on kicking and straining in the mud, but soon his saddle was under water, and only the animal's head and neck showed. Fierro was kneeling on its back, pale as death. His eyes bulged with fear. His left arm still supported four bags full of gold.

"A rope. . . Throw me a rope! . . . I'll give a sack to anybody that helps me get out of here."

A bit out of compassion but largely out of interest in his offer, the group of Villistas took the lassos hanging from their saddles and began to swing them in big circles around their heads. The horse finally went under entirely, with a terrific snort that split the water; his strong lungs sent up a stream of bubbles that burst in blobs of mud. The man was standing on the saddle now, hatless, with the sacks of gold held tight to his breast, splattered with mud from head to foot, his legs heavy with a slimy crust that covered him to the waist.

"Hurry, hurry . . . my horse has gone to hell."

Five ropes whizzed simultaneously through the air with a single whistle. But due to bad judgment or else that the ones who threw them had but little desire to see themselves in danger as well, all fell short as Fierro, without dropping his gold, tried to grab at the ropes with his right hand. This made him lose his balance and he fell in to the water. He came up entirely covered with slime, waving his arms, now free of their heavy burdens. His face had lost nearly all human semblance. He wanted to say something but, half smothered by the mud in his mouth, he only succeeded in giving forth a guttural yell like an orang-outang in the jungle. A few moments later he began to sink slowly. He dropped his arms and stood with only his head up, yelling.

The Villistas pulled in their ropes quickly and threw them out anew, but once more they fell short. Soon Fierro's head was

level with the water and then it, too, went down. His arms came up, holding the snakeskin belt full of gold, as his last offering for salvation. Then everything disappeared beneath the water that once more took on the aspect of a smokey glass, without waves, hardly rippled by the wind.

Very slowly, with the greatest precaution, the witnesses of the tragedy went back toward the bank. A Japanese officer who accompanied the Villistas returned to Casas Grandes to look for a launch to drag the lake in search of the body.

The column kept on in the snow, and when the sun came out they camped in a wood. Cutting off some branches of pines and cedars, the Villistas half swept away the snow in places under the biggest trees, and lay down to rest.

Remembering the drama, some said, “Too bad about the gold!”

Others, “Too bad about the horse!”

But nobody said anything about the man.