

THE LAUGH IN THE DESERT¹

BY PEDRO PRADO

THE manager of Manto Verde mines was a fat man starving for company and conversation. At first Otamendi avoided him; the man inspired him with a feeling of vague discomfort. But after spending the whole day with his theodolite out on the parched ridges under the blazing sun, and interminable hours afterward in his dark hut making calculations, where else was he to go?

The manager was conscious of Otamendi's secret aversion, but he felt sure of his victim. During their second breakfasts, before the lethargy of repletion and the scorching heat of midday drove them to their siestas, he would talk a steady stream between one course and another, and between one mouthful and another, with a sort of insatiable loquacity that left him scarcely time to bolt his food. And after listening to these long monologues Otamendi found a siesta more indispensable than ever.

If the young engineer had not been homesick and depressed by his isolation and loneliness he might not have conceived so strong an antipathy for his fat and garrulous host, since the man was, after all, both intelligent and original. But in his present mood the fellow's pock-marked face, decayed teeth, bristly brows, and bloodshot eyes filled Otamendi with morbid loathing.

The manager's name was Menares; his given name may have been Pedro, or Juan, or Diego, or something else — Otamendi, in his dislike of the fellow,

always forgot it. Nevertheless, the engineer's attention was caught now and then by an original remark that seemed to betray considerable delicacy of sentiment in his rough and vulgar host. On such occasions he would try to learn something about the man's life, but Menares skillfully evaded his inquiries. For in the same way that we wrap up fragile articles in cotton batting until they make big parcels, so Menares seemed to have wrapped up a subtle and sensitive spirit in his gross and enormous body.

One noontime when the heat weighed like lead on the galvanized iron roof, when the shadow of the boulders outside shrank and shrank and finally vanished, when the sun's shafts were so intense that they seemed almost to collide in a sort of dazzling darkness, the two men sat silent, stewing in their perspiration. Otamendi stared through the dusty reddish windows across the glare of the parched, tawny desert. Suddenly Menares broke the silence, and without other preface said: 'I'm used to feeling the mood of the people around me. Don't try to hide your dislike.'

'What's that?' asked Otamendi, stammering with surprise.

'Nothing. Don't be disturbed. I don't care how you feel as long as you listen. But you must do that. I've got to talk. I understand and I pardon anything except a refusal to hear what I say.'

'But, Mr. Menares —'

'No buts. Your obvious aversion has

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made you my debtor, and it's only fair that you should pay what you owe. I shall make you pay it by telling you a story, to the point, about us men who live in the desert. Have another glass of wine? One more? No? Or do you prefer the *pajarete*? Ah, very well. To your health, then, Friend Otamendi. Now listen: Do you know, that's not bad wine!' And the fat man clicked his tongue. 'Well, now, I'm going to tell you of a case just like our own.'

'Why do you talk that way? I never —'

'That's all right, Señor Otamendi. Can't you see that this is just a little stratagem of mine to compel you to pay better attention? Have you offended me? When? Quite the contrary. I'm extremely grateful for your company. You seem like an old friend. I was merely joking. Did you think I was serious? Come on now, I don't want you to get that idea. Why, you have n't drunk all your wine! We can't have that. I'll join you.'

And fat Menares, after drinking another glass, broke out into a roar of laughter. 'See how I bluffed you. Don't tell me I'm no psychologist. There is no better way to get the attention of a true gentleman than to make him think he has offended you. Now listen, listen as a favor. Why have you got up? Cigarettes? Here, I have them.'

'Thanks, I've stopped smoking, but my legs were asleep,' explained Otamendi, stretching himself lazily.

Fat Menares also rose, a little disturbed, and carefully making his way around the table placed himself directly in the doorway. Once there his eyes sparkled. His victim was trapped. A sigh of satisfaction escaped him, and he took several heavy pulls at his cigarette, so that for a minute or two afterward his words were enveloped in smoke.

'Listen, and draw your own conclu-

sions, my young friend. When I was doing my military service in Arica Regiment, stationed at La Serena, — I am talking of twenty years ago, — my lieutenant, Casares, and I, and a corporal named Padilla were ordered to reconnoitre on horseback the country between that point and Copiapó, with a view to marching the whole regiment with its artillery and baggage train overland to the latter point. Do you know the mountain country one must cross to get from La Serena to the Huasco Valley? Have you ever passed that great desert vestibule that stretches from Vallenar to Copiapó? No? Well, you're lucky. You can't imagine, then, the job they had laid out for us. It was a trip of I don't know how many kilometres — six hundred, or perhaps seven hundred. But you must have covered every foot of it on horseback to appreciate what real thirst, real hunger, real longing for shade and verdure, are. In those days we had no railway up the coast. Our orders were, moreover, to take a short cut instead of detouring along the sea, to find watering places, and to select sites for supply camps.'

Otamendi sat down again with a look of resignation on his face.

'We left La Serena on a foggy morning. I was in high spirits, as was natural for an eighteen-year-old youngster starting on a long trip that promised all sorts of adventures. I felt very grateful to the major for selecting me — so grateful, indeed, that I forgot to think of Lieutenant Casares's reputation in the army. He was famous for his rudeness and brutality, and had already passed forty without receiving a promotion, because of that reputation. He was stubborn as a mule, strong as an ox, and savage as — I don't know of an animal with which to compare him.

'Nevertheless, I saw that fellow really moved by emotion once on this

trip. When I got back and told about it none of my fellow officers would believe me. I think you will, though, Friend Otamendi, because you're having a somewhat similar experience.'

Otamendi lifted his eyes with interest. Menares's last words had been spoken in a high falsetto, as if his voice were breaking with emotion. Yes, his bloodshot eyes were actually moist. To tell the truth, he had been drinking liberally of the Huasco wine they called pajarete. Seeing himself detected, Menares burst into raucous laughter and hurriedly resumed:—

'The only time when we saw even the ghost of a cloud was on leaving La Serena. After that the sun scorched as if its rays were focused by a burning glass. The first day out, after consulting our military map, we gave up the idea of following a trail and headed first for Alta Gracia Gulch, and later in the day followed up another deep valley with a dry boulder-strewn bed. On the colossal ridges that hemmed us in on either side we saw no trees or vegetation except at rare intervals a solitary cactus or a withered thorn bush. Everywhere else the steep ascents were strewn with broken stone, as if the brown ridges were enormous leather ore-sacks that had burst and disgorged their contents. We did not catch a glimpse of a living creature, even a bird, except now and then a vulture flying so high that it made a mere speck in the sky. I rode on listlessly, scorched even through my light clothing by the sun, and half blinded by the glare. When we halted at night and stretched out on the parched ground, we avoided touching the heated stones; and long after sunset the cliffs still radiated heat like an oven. Our poor horses, half starved and half dying of thirst, — what little they had to drink was more sand than water, — made no effort to graze, because the search for herbage was obviously so

futile, but stood stupidly motionless when unsaddled, hanging their heads with fatigue.

'In a couple of days, through the Lieutenant's oversight, miscalculation, or obstinacy, we found ourselves without a crumb of food or a drop of wine. Late that night we came to Los Choros River. It makes a fine show on the map, but it proved to be nothing but a broad, stone-strewn valley, practically waterless. Fortunately, however, we found a little trickle half hidden among the huge boulders, and this probably saved the lives of both ourselves and our horses'

Otamendi's face had assumed a good-natured grin, with which he tried to hide the fact that he was half asleep. But his corpulent companion tolerated no such pretense. He lifted his voice, and, emphasizing his words to arouse his drowsy companion, continued: 'Just imagine it, Friend Otamendi. Three days, our horses worn out, our brains frying under our heavy military caps! At two o'clock, faint from lack of food, wild thoughts of murder crept into my brain — for Lieutenant Casares had been heaping insults on me all day long: "Aspirante Menares, have n't you any eyes to guide your horse? CAN YOU HEAR ME?"'

The fat manager roared the last few words at the top of his voice in imitation of the Lieutenant.

'What's the matter?' exclaimed Otamendi with a start.

'Don't be stupid. When will you get some sense?'

Otamendi blushed with embarrassment, not knowing whether the last remark was intended for him or whether it was a part of the story. But he smiled placatingly. Menares gloated.

"If you're going to stray like that you'd better get out and be done with it," Lieutenant Casares roared. I fingered my revolver. The unconscious

fool rode ahead of me and Corporal Padilla behind. But I was so crazed with heat, hunger, and anger that I did n't care a continental whether the Corporal saw what I did or not. I pulled my gun desperately. Then I recalled that it was not loaded. I was just sticking cartridges in the chamber, as many as it would hold, when Corporal Padilla shouted, "A house up there! Up there on top! I see a house and smoke!"

"I looked up without returning my pistol to the holster. Yes, in the remote distance, half hidden in a fold of the ridge that rose as abruptly as a wall from the valley bottom, were some white structures looking like the buildings around a mine-head.

"There is a little smoke," observed the Lieutenant in a more human tone of voice. We had previously passed one or two ruined cabins and bits of wall around deserted mines, but they had all been long since abandoned, and had only added to the loneliness of the solitude.

"I have always remembered the climb up to this house as the most perilous ride of my life. What a trail! I had to lean forward till my chin touched the horse's mane to keep from slipping off behind. I could feel the panting sides of the poor beast throb between my thighs, and it seemed as if we should never reach the top. It tired me more than if we had gone on foot. The higher we got the farther off the house seemed to be. Finally, however, we saw that we were coming near. A man came running down to meet us. He was quite young, and thin as a rail. I have never been welcomed so joyously elsewhere in my life. He helped us to dismount. Seeing that we were stiff with riding, he offered us his arm. He circled around us like a fawning dog. We discovered that he was here all alone, guarding the provisional im-

provements of the mine. Work had been stopped because the company had run out of funds. You may remember that big mining boom on the Santiago Stock Exchange — in 1906, if my memory does n't deceive me. . . ."

"Yes, in 1906," assented Otamendi, in order to say something.

"The young fellow brought chairs and boxes for us to sit on, and inquired eagerly whether we preferred beer or wine. Beer or wine! Imagine our astonishment. Yes, yes, we should be delighted. Beer first. We were dying of thirst. And did he have anything to eat?"

"What! Had n't we had breakfast? He'd have something ready in a jiffy. His storehouse was well supplied — pâté de foie gras, salmon, goat cheese, ham. If we would wait a little while he'd have some roast kid. There were wild goats back in the mountains, which he hunted now and then for fresh meat. We had come at a lucky moment, for he had shot a young kid the day before. So we dined like kings. Nothing was lacking, not even canned milk for our coffee — except bread; he had no bread, but to make up for that he served ten different kinds of biscuits. But he rattled on so incessantly while he was serving us that the testy Lieutenant finally burst out: "Good, good. You'll drive us crazy with so much stuff. Just calm down and don't talk so much." The thin young fellow took Casares's rude admonition as a joke, and bustled about with a high treble laugh.

"What about the horses?" Corporal Padilla whispered to me.

"The mine guard divined what he was saying, and made more than ten trips with a pail, which he filled from a tiny stream at the back of the house, before our mounts had quenched their thirst. Between trips, laughing constantly, he asked us what was happening in the world.

'We were busy eating, half starved and dead tired. How were we to answer? Our brief replies disappointed him. He looked cast down for a moment, but he was a man of resource. He commenced to make up his own answers from our gestures of negation or assent, and kept talking constantly while we waved our hands like somnambulists. Soon he had recovered his high spirits again, and his interminable laughing and chattering became fearfully wearisome. Lieutenant Casares grew more and more irritated. When the young fellow, in his excitement, began to slap us on the shoulders to emphasize his words, the Lieutenant seized him and roughly thrust him away.

'I watched curiously to see what would happen during the moment's silence that followed, but the fellow, who had brought up in front of a bottle, grabbed it and began to fill our glasses as if he took Casares's brusqueness for a joke or a direction. Then, without interrupting his hysterical giggling, he brought out cigarettes.

'Casares was at a complete loss; I didn't know what to do; and Padilla was completely absorbed eating his cheese.

'Finally, disconcerted by our stolid silence, the young fellow changed his tone and began to talk in a studied way, as if to entertain us. Imagining from the Lieutenant's rough manner that he might have said something foolish, he started to tell us stories — ancient anecdotes that he garbled horribly.

'“If you don't know something newer than that, you'd better shut up,” the Lieutenant finally roared in exasperation.

'“Something new? New stories? I'll show you!” And the young fellow darted out into the neighboring room, returning with a fat leather-bound notebook, which he thumbed over

rapidly, as if trying to make up his mind what to select. I could see that it contained a collection of anecdotes written out with a pen. “This one about Saldaña, the country greenhorn, is awfully funny. No, no, the German stories are better. Yah, yah, yah! This one about Don Otto — you'll find it bully.”

'Lieutenant Casares gazed around the room the personification of futile wrath. Finally, fixing his eyes on me, he shouted, “Aspirante Menares, what are you staring at me for?” and began to call me down savagely for nothing at all.

'But our would-be entertainer paid no attention. He evidently considered our wrangling none of his business. Good Lord, Otamendi, if you could have heard the fellow! His horrible imitation German dialect; that young shrimp playing off a Dutchman. First of all, he read that moth-eaten tale about selling the sofa. Then the one about Don Otto trying to buy a dog. And he laughed uproariously at every one of them. Then he turned over some pages and began to read to us — what do you imagine? — conundrums! “Why is a pipe like a crazy Dutchman?”

'At last Casares could contain himself no longer. Drawing his revolver with a gesture of exasperation, he yelled, “Shut up, or I'll kill you!”

'The young fellow stammered, and then, laughing like a madman, began to look for more anecdotes as aged as the others. He had n't read two words when the Lieutenant fired in the air. Instantly the book fell from the poor fellow's hands, and I witnessed a scene that I shall never forget. Doubling up in his chair and bending over the table, he buried his face in his arms and began to sob like a child.

'Lieutenant Casares, considerably agitated, and imagining that the fellow must be hurt, rose quickly, and without

abandoning his brusque manner shook him and made him lift his head. "Have n't you sense enough to let us rest a minute? Can't you see what a fool you're making of yourself, when we've come here more dead than alive? And now you're crying. Have you been hurt?"

"Pardon me, Señor Lieutenant," said the young fellow, his face wet with tears. "No, no, Lieutenant, I'm not hurt. It was silly, very silly, but I've been here alone so long. I've been so starved for a chance to talk and laugh. . . ." And when he said this he burst out into a long, shrieking laugh so violent that the tears ran down his cheeks and he fell twitching to the ground. There he lay writhing on the floor, frothing at the mouth like an epileptic.

Casares paced up and down the room like a bear in a cage. Corporal Padilla jumped to the boy's assistance and lifted his head. His forehead was bleeding where it had hit a table leg when he fell. Padilla bathed it with water and fanned him with the copy book. When he began to breathe more regularly and opened his eyes we heard him mutter: "Juan! Juan!" Whom was he calling, if he lived alone? When he recognized us he blushed scarlet.

"What did you say?" I asked him.

He made no answer, and did not

utter another word; but rising up, in-different to the blood that was still flowing from his forehead, he walked slowly out of the cabin and seated himself on a box outside the door. There he sat bowed over in silence.

Lieutenant Casares suddenly stopped pacing up and down and shouted in his loud, hoarse, parade-ground voice: "To horse. Let's get out of this." I heard him ask the poor fellow how much we owed him for the breakfast, but the latter never as much as lifted his head. I wanted at least to bid him good-bye, but a certain feeling of delicacy prevented me. He watched us mount our horses without making a move. We descended the steep trail in gloomy silence. As we turned a bend in the trail I thought I heard a shout, and looked back, but I could not see the house or the young fellow. As I slowed up my horse Lieutenant Casares passed me. I saw his eyes were filled with tears, and he said: "Aspirante, don't you think I'm a brute?"

'Yes, those were his very words.'

When he had finished his story, Menares sat silent for a moment. The young engineer hardly knew what to say. After a moment his host added: 'Have another glass of pajarete before your siesta, Friend Otamendi. It will make you sleep better.'

VIRGINIA WOOLF¹

BY DUDLEY CAREW

CONTEMPORARY novelists offer the hardest nuts criticism can be called upon to crack. By what standards are we to judge them? What traditions are we to call in to establish or refute them? What prophecies of the future can we indulge in for their attack or defense? Can the wish, to a certain degree, be the legitimate father to the thought? Are we justified in reading into the experiments of our own time a significance that coming generations may refuse to acknowledge, or can we be forgiven if our sense of the past prompts us to dismiss the present literary rebellion, a rebellion blatantly obvious in the novel, as criminal lunacy? These are questions everyone who reads the novels of Mr. James Joyce, Mr. Ford Maddox Ford, Mr. D. H. Lawrence, and Mrs. Woolf must necessarily ask himself.

For Mrs. Woolf, indeed, the prospect is almost bright, for, if we incline to leniency and the view that contemporary novels must be judged in relation to their own time and all the circumstances dependent on that time, then she herself has an adequate defense in her own lecture published under the title of *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*. In that she states with an admirable boldness that human nature changed in 1910, that a new morality grew up from the shifting of the emphasis from the Church to the clergyman, from the house to the landlord, and from the mass to the individual. Even if Mrs. Woolf is a little out in her dates and 1914 was a more crucial

year than 1910, she is surely right in her argument that the solid security of life that rested on Church, property, and democracy has broken up, now that we think in terms of clergymen, landlords, and communists, or, to use her own illustration, that Mrs. Brown, the old woman in the opposite corner of the railway carriage from whom all novels spring, has ceased to be Mrs. Brown the supporter of the Church, Mrs. Brown a member of the leisured class, Mrs. Brown who votes Conservative, and has become Mrs. Brown who is in love with the curate, Mrs. Brown who owns two cottages in Somerset, and Mrs. Brown who is tired of politics generally. What we have lost, in other words, is a Mrs. Brown who could be relied upon to move with dignity and assurance through a two-volume novel, and what we have gained is a Mrs. Brown inclined to skip kittenishly from page to page and liable to come to an abrupt halt at any moment. It is a case of the roundabouts and swings, with Mrs. Woolf claiming for her swings of individuality that no staid roundabouts of institutionalism could possibly provide the same thrills, the same animation, and the same sense of danger as they do. The Edwardians, as she calls them, — to wit, Messrs. Wells, Galsworthy, and Bennett, — tried in vain to shut Mrs. Brown up in their pet theories of social evolution, social justice, and social splendor; the Georgians, with Mrs. Woolf at their head, have set her loose to ride in taxis, take tea in Camber-

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