

The Festival of Bullets

by Martin Luis Guzmán

Translated by Seymour Menton

The Underdogs captures the violence and brutality of the Mexican Revolution as Demetrio and his band of rebels clash with enemy soldiers. The following nonfictional account also depicts the savage and cruel character of the Mexican Revolution as Rodolfo Fierro orchestrates a “festival of bullets.”

My interest in Villa and his movement often made me ask myself, while I was in Ciudad Juárez, which exploits would best paint the Division of the North: those supposed to be strictly historical or those rated as legendary; those related exactly as they had been seen, or those in which a touch of poetic fancy brought out their essence more clearly. The latter always seemed to me truer, more worthy of being considered history.

For instance, where could one find a better painting of Rodolfo Fierro—and Fierro and Villa’s movements mirrored each other down to the last detail—than in the account of how he carried out the terrible orders of his chief after one of the battles, revealing an imagination as cruel as it was creative in death devices. This vision of him left in my soul the sensation of a reality so overwhelming that the memory of it lives forever.

That battle, which was successful in every way, had left no less than five hundred prisoners in Villa’s

hands. Villa ordered them divided into two groups: the Orozco volunteers, whom we called “Reds,” in one, and the Federals in the other. And as Villa felt himself strong enough for grandiose acts, he decided to make an example of the first group and to act more generously toward the second. The “Reds” were to be executed before dark; the Federals were to be given their choice of joining the revolutionary troops or returning home, after promising not to take up arms against the Constitutionalist cause.

Fierro, as might have been expected, was put in charge of the execution, and he displayed in it that efficiency which was already winning him great favor with Villa, his “chief,” as he called him.

The sun was beginning to set. The revolutionary forces, after breaking camp, were slowly gathering in the little village that had been the objective of their offensive. The cold, penetrating wind of the Chihuahuan plains began to blow and the groups of cavalry and infantry huddled next to the walls of the houses. But Fierro—whom nothing and nobody ever held back—was not going to flee from a cool breeze that at most meant frost that night. He rode along slowly on his short-rumped horse, with the edge of his sarape against the horse’s dark hair dirtied from the dust of the battle. The wind was hitting him smack in the face, but he neither buried his chin in his breast nor raised the folds of his sarape around his face. He carried his head high, his chest thrown out, his feet firm in the stirrups, and his legs gracefully flexed under the campaign equipment that hung from the saddle straps. The barren plain and an occasional soldier that passed at a distance were his only spectators. But he, perhaps unconsciously, reined his horse to make him show his gaits as though he were on parade. Fierro was happy; the satisfaction of victory filled his being; and to him victory was complete only when it meant the

utter rout of the enemy; and in this frame of mind even the buffeting of the wind, and continuing to ride fifteen consecutive hours in the saddle, produced physical sensations that were exhilarating. The rays of the pale setting sun, a sun prematurely enveloped in incendiary flames, seemed to caress him as they fell.

He reached the corral where the three hundred "Red" condemned prisoners were shut up like a herd of cattle, and he stopped a moment to look at them over the fence rails. In outward appearances those three hundred Huerta supporters could have passed for revolutionaries. They were of the fine Chihuahua breed, tall, lean bodies with strong necks and well-formed shoulders on vigorous supple backs. As Fierro looked over the small captive army and sized up its military value and bravery, a strange pulsation ran through him, a twitching that went from his heart or from his forehead out to the index finger of his right hand. Involuntarily the palm of his hand reached out for the butt of his pistol.

"Here's a battle for you," he thought.

The cavalrymen, bored with their task of guarding the prisoners, paid no attention to him. The only thing that mattered to them was the annoyance of mounting this tiresome guard, all the worse after the excitement of the battle. They had to have their rifles ready on their knees, and when an occasional prisoner left the group, they aimed at him with a determined air, and, if necessary, fired. A wave would then ripple through the vague perimeter of the mass of prisoners, that retracted to avoid the shot. The bullet would either go wide of its mark or bring one of them down.

Fierro rode up to the gate of the corral. He shouted to a soldier, who let down the bars, and went in. Without removing his sarape from his shoulders, he leaped off the horse. His legs were numb with cold and weariness; he stretched them. He arranged his two

pistols. Next he began to look slowly over the pens, observing their layout and how they were divided up. He took several steps over to one of the fences without letting go of the reins. He slipped something out of one of the saddle bags into the pockets of his jacket and crossed the corral at a short distance from the prisoners.

Actually, there were three corrals that opened into one another, with gates and a narrow passageway between. From the one where the prisoners were kept, Fierro went into the middle enclosure, slipping through the bars of the gate. He went straight over to the next one. There he stopped. His tall, handsome figure gave off a strange radiance, something superior, awe-inspiring, and yet not out of keeping with the desolation of the corral. His sarape had slipped down until it barely hung from his shoulders; the tassels of the corners dragged on the ground. His gray, broad-brimmed hat turned pink where the slanting rays of the setting sun fell on it. Through the fences the prisoners could see him at a distance, his back turned toward them. His legs formed a herculean compass that glistened: it was the gleam of his leather chaps in the late afternoon light.

About a hundred yards away, outside the corrals, was the officer of the troop in charge of the prisoners. Fierro saw him and signaled him to come closer, and the officer rode over to the point of the fence closest to Fierro. The latter walked toward him. The two began to talk. In the course of the conversation, Fierro pointed out different spots in the enclosure in which he was standing and in the one next to it. Then he described with hand gestures a series of operations, which the officer repeated, as though to understand them better. Fierro insisted two or three times on what seemed to be a very important maneuver, and the officer, now sure about his orders, galloped off toward the prisoners.

Fierro then turned back toward the center of the corral, studying once more the layout of the fence, and other details. That corral was the largest of the three, and the first in line, nearest to the town. On two sides gates opened into the fields; the bars of these, though more worn—from greater use—than those of the farther pens, were of stronger wood. On the other side, there was a gate that opened into the adjoining corral, and on the far side the fence was not of boards, but was an adobe wall, no less than nine feet high. The wall was about sixty yards long, twenty of which formed the back of a shed or stable, with a roof that sloped down from the top of the wall and rested on the one side on the taller end posts of one of the fences that bordered on the open fields and on the other, on a wall, also of adobe, which came out perpendicular from the wall and extended some fifteen yards toward the middle of the corral. Thus, between the shed and the fence of the adjoining corral, there was a space enclosed on two sides by solid walls. In that corner the afternoon wind was piling up rubbish and clanging an iron bucket against the well curb with an irregular rhythm. From the well curb rose two rough forked posts, crossed by a third, from which a pulley and chain hung, which also rattled in the wind. On the very top of one of the forks sat a large still whitish bird, hardly distinguishable from the twisted points of the dry pole.

Fierro was standing about fifty steps from the well. He rested his eyes for a moment on the motionless bird, and as though its presence fitted in perfectly with his thoughts, without a change of attitude or expression, he slowly pulled out his pistol. The long, polished barrel of the gun turned into a pink finger in the fading sunlight. Slowly it rose until it pointed in the direction of the bird. The shot rang out—dull and diminutive in the immensity of the afternoon—and the

bird dropped to the ground. Fierro returned his pistol to its holster.

At that moment a soldier jumped over the fence into the yard. It was Fierro's orderly. He had jumped from such a height that it took him several seconds to get to his feet. When he finally did, he walked over to where his master was standing.

Without turning his head Fierro asked him:

"What about them? If they don't come soon, we aren't going to have time."

"I think they're coming."

"Then you hurry up and get over there. Let's see, what pistol have you got?"

"The one you gave me, Chief. The Smith and Wesson."

"Hand it over here and take these boxes of ammunition. How many bullets have you got?"

"About fifteen dozen today, Chief, that I've been able to scrounge up. Some of the other men found lots of them, but I didn't."

"Fifteen dozen? I told you the other day that if you kept on selling ammunition to buy booze, I'd put a bullet through you."

"No, Chief."

"What do you mean: 'No, Chief?'"

"I do get drunk, Chief, but I don't sell the ammunition."

"Well, you watch out, 'cause you know me. And now you move lively so this stunt will come out right. I fire and you load the pistols. And mind what I tell you: if on your account a single one of the Reds gets away, I'll put you to sleep with them."

"Oh, what a chief!"

"You heard what I said."

The orderly spread his blanket on the ground and emptied out the boxes of cartridges that Fierro had just given him. Then he began to take out one by one

the bullets in his cartridge belt. He was in such a hurry that it took him longer than it should have. He was so nervous that his fingers seemed all thumbs.

"What a chief!" he kept thinking to himself.

In the meantime, behind the fence of the adjoining corral the soldiers who were guarding the prisoners began to appear. They were on horseback, with their shoulders showing above the top fence rail. There were many others stationed along the two other fences.

Fierro and his orderly were the only ones inside the corral: Fierro with a pistol in his hand, and his sarape fallen at his feet; his orderly squatting and lining up the bullets in rows on his blanket.

The leader of the troop rode up through the gate that opened into the next corral and said:

"I've got the first ten ready. Shall I turn them loose for you?"

"Yes," answered Fierro, "but first explain things to them. As soon as they come through the gate, I'll begin to shoot. Those that reach the wall and get over it are free. If any of them don't want to come through, you shoot them."

The officer went back the same way he came, and Fierro, pistol in hand, stood attentive, his eyes riveted on the narrow space through which the prisoners were going to break out. He stood close enough to the dividing fence so that, as he fired, the bullets would not hit the Reds who were still on the other side. He wanted to keep his promise faithfully. But he was not so close to the fence that the prisoners could not see, the minute they came through the gate, the pistol that was leveled at them twenty paces away. Behind Fierro the setting sun turned the sky a fiery red. The wind kept blowing.

In the corral where the prisoners were herded, the sound of words grew louder, words that the whistling of the wind destroyed, like those used by herders

rounding up cattle. It was a hard task to make the three hundred condemned men pass from the last to the middle corral. At the thought of the torture awaiting them, the whole group writhed with the convulsions of a person in the grip of hysteria. The soldiers of the guard were shouting and every minute the rifle shots seemed to gather up the screams as with a whirl.

Out of the first prisoners that reached the middle corral a group of soldiers separated ten. There were at least twenty-five soldiers. They spurred their horses on to the prisoners to make them move; they pushed the muzzles of their carbines against their bodies.

"Traitors! Dirty bastards! Let's see how you can run and jump. Get a move on, you traitor!"

And in this way they made them advance to the gate where Fierro and his orderly were waiting. Here the resistance of the Reds grew more intense; but the horses' hoofs and the carbine barrels persuaded them to choose the other danger, the danger of Fierro, who was not an inch away, but twenty paces.

As soon as they appeared within his range of vision, Fierro greeted them with a strange phrase, a phrase both cruel and affectionate, containing both irony and hope:

"Come on, boys; I'm the only one shooting, and I'm a bad shot."

The prisoners jumped like goats. The first one tried to throw himself on Fierro, but he had not taken three leaps before he fell, riddled by bullets from the soldiers stationed along the fence. The others ran as fast as they could toward the wall—a mad race that must have seemed to them like a dream. On seeing that well curb, one tried to find refuge there: he was the first one hit by Fierro's bullet. The others fell as they ran, one by one; in less than ten seconds Fierro had fired eight times, and the last of the group dropped

just as his fingers were touching the adobe bricks that by a strange whim separated at that moment the zone of life from the zone of death. Some of the bodies still showed signs of life; the soldiers finished them off from their horses.

And then came another group of ten, and then another, and another, and another. Fierro's three pistols—his own two and that of his orderly—alternated with precise rhythm in the homicidal hand. Six shots from each one, six shots fired without stopping to aim and without pause, and then the gun dropped on to the orderly's blanket, where he removed the exploded caps, and reloaded it. Then, without changing his position, he held out the pistol to Fierro, who took it as he let the other fall. Through the orderly's fingers passed the bullets that seconds later would leave the prisoners stretched lifeless, but he did not raise his eyes to see the men fall. His whole being seemed to concentrate on the pistol in his hand, and on the bullets, with their silver and burnished reflections, spread out on the ground before him. Just two sensations ran through his bones: the cold weight of the bullets that he was putting into the openings of the cylinder, and the contact with the smooth warm surface. Over his head one after another rang out the shots of his "chief," delightfully engrossed in his target practice.

The panic-stricken flight of the prisoners toward the wall of salvation—a fugue of death within a terrifying symphony in which the two themes of the passion to kill and the infinite desire to live struggled with each other—lasted almost two hours.

Not for one moment did Fierro lose his precise aim or his poise. He was firing at moving human targets, targets that jumped and slipped in pools of blood and amidst corpses stretched out in unbelievable postures, but he fired without any emotion except that of

hitting or missing. He even calculated the deflection of the bullets caused by the wind, and corrected it with each shot.

Some of the prisoners, crazed by terror, fell to their knees as they came through the gate: the bullets made them keel over. Others danced about grotesquely behind the shelter of the well curb until the bullet cured them of their frenzy or they dropped wounded into the well. But nearly all rushed toward the adobe wall and tried to scale it by climbing over the warm, damp, steaming heaps of piled-up bodies. Some managed to dig their nails into the dirt on the top of the wall, but their hands, so actively clutching for life, soon fell lifeless.

A moment arrived in which the mass execution became a noisy tumult, punctuated by the dull snap of the pistol shots, muted by the immense voice of the wind. On one side of the fence could be heard the shouts of those who were trying to flee from death only to die; on the other, those who resisted the pressure of the horsemen and tried to break through the wall that pushed them on toward that terrible gate. And to the shouts of one group and the other were added the voices of the soldiers stationed along the fences. The noise of the shooting, Fierro's marksmanship, and the cries and frantic gestures of the dying men had worked them up to a pitch of great excitement. They greeted with joyful exclamations the somersaults of the falling bodies; they shouted, gesticulated, and laughed uproariously as they fired into the heaps of human flesh in which they noted the slightest evidence of life.

In the last squad of victims there were twelve instead of ten. The twelve piled out of the death pen, falling over one another, each trying to shield himself with the others, as he raced ahead in the horrible race. In order to go forward they had to hop over the piled-

up corpses, but that didn't prevent the bullets from hitting the mark. With sinister precision they hit them one by one and left them halfway to the wall, arms and legs outstretched, embracing the mass of their motionless companions. But one of them, the only one left alive, managed to reach the very top of the wall and to clear it. The firing stopped suddenly and the gang of soldiers crowded into the corner of the adjoining corral to see the fugitive.

It was beginning to get dark. It took the soldiers a little while to focus their vision in the twilight. At first they could see nothing. Finally, far off, in the vastness of the semidark plain they managed to make out a moving spot. As it ran, the body bent so far over that it almost seemed to crawl along on the ground.

A soldier took aim. "It's hard to see," he said as he fired.

The shot died away in the evening wind. The moving spot fled on.

Fierro had not moved from his place. With his arm exhausted, he let it hang limp against his side for a long time. Then he became aware of the pain in his forefinger and raised his hand to his face; he could see in the sunlight that his finger had become somewhat swollen. He rubbed it gently between the fingers and the palm of his other hand. And there he stood for quite a while engrossed in the gentle, soft massage. Finally he stooped over and picked up his sarape, which he had taken off at the beginning of the executions. He threw it over his shoulders and started walking to the shelter of the stable. But after a few steps he turned to his orderly:

"As soon as you're finished, bring up the horses."
And he continued on his way.

The orderly was gathering up the exploded caps. In the next corral the soldiers had dismounted and were talking or singing softly. The orderly listened to them

silently and without raising his head. Then he rose slowly to his feet. He gathered up the blanket by its four corners and threw it over his shoulder. The empty caps clattered within like a dull rattle or jingle.

It was dark. A few stars glimmered, and on the other side of the fence the tips of the cigarettes were also glimmering. The orderly started to walk heavily and slowly and, half feeling his way, went to the last of the corrals and then returned leading the horses by the bridle—his master's and his own; across one of his shoulders swung the haversack.

He made his way over to the stable. Fierro was sitting on a rock, smoking in the dark. The wind whistled through the cracks in the boards.

"Unsaddle the horse and make up my bed," ordered Fierro. "I'm so tired I can't stand up."

"Here in this corral, chief? Here. . . ?"

"Yes, here. Why not?"

The orderly did as he was ordered. He unsaddled the horse and spread the blankets on the straw, making a kind of pillow out of the haversack and the saddle. Fierro stretched out and in a few minutes was asleep.

The orderly lighted his lantern and bedded the horses for the night. Then he blew out the light, wrapped himself in his blanket, and lay down at his master's feet. But a moment later he got up again, knelt down, and crossed himself. Then he stretched out on the straw again.

Six or seven hours went by. The wind had died down. The silence of the night was bathed in moonlight. Occasionally a horse sneezed nearby. The radiance of the moon gleamed on the dented surface of the bucket that hung by the well and made clear shadows of all the objects in the yard except the mounds of corpses. They rose up, enormous in the stillness of the night, like fantastic hills, with strange and confused outlines.

The silvery blue of the night descended on the corpses like the clearest light. But imperceptibly that light gradually turned into a voice, a voice equally unreal as the night. The voice grew distinct; it was a voice that was barely audible, faint, painful, and dying, but tenuously clear like the shadows cast by the moon. From the center of one of the mounds of corpses the voice seemed to whisper:

“Owl! Owl! . . .”

Then it was silent and the silvery blue of the night became only light again. But the voice was heard a second time:

“Owl! . . . Owl! . . .”

The heaped-up bodies, stiff and cold for hours, lay motionless in the corral. The rays of moonlight penetrated them as though they were an inert mass. But the voice sounded again:

“Ow. . . . Ow. . . . Ow. . . .”

And this last groan reached the spot where Fierro’s orderly lay sleeping and brought him out of sleep to the consciousness of hearing. The first thing that came to his mind was the memory of the execution of the three hundred prisoners; the mere thought of it kept him motionless on the straw, his eyes half open and his whole body and soul fixed on the lamenting voice:

“Ow. . . please. . . .”

Fierro tossed on his bed.

“Please. . . water. . . .”

Fierro awoke and listened attentively.

“Please. . . water. . . .”

Fierro stretched out his foot and nudged his orderly.

“Hey, you. Don’t you hear? One of those dead men is asking for water.”

“Yes, chief.”

“You get up and put a bullet through the sniveling son of a bitch. Let’s see if he’ll let me get some sleep then.”

“A bullet through who, chief?”

“The one that’s asking for water, you idiot. Don’t you understand?”

“Water, please,” the voice repeated.

The orderly took his pistol from under the saddle and, clutching it, got up and left the stable in search of the corpses. He was shivering with fear and cold. He felt sick to his soul.

He looked around in the moonlight. Every body he touched was stiff. He hesitated without knowing what to do. Finally he fired in the direction from which the voice seemed to come. The voice was heard again. The orderly fired a second time. The voice died away.

The moon sailed along on the endless space of its blue light. Under the roof of the stable Fierro slept.