

1934

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Recommended Citation

Campa, A. L.. "The Cell of Heavenly Justice." *New Mexico Quarterly* 4, 3 (1934). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol4/iss3/14>

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The Cell of Heavenly Justice

By A. L. CAMPA

I

“ALTO!” shouted the Mexican captain. The firing squad halted solemnly before the prison door and waited for the next command. In the dim light of dawn the outline of a sturdy adobe prison was almost indistinguishable. This *calabozo* had been designed in Spanish days after the colonial fashion of the times, with four-foot walls, no windows, and only one opening in front. That opening, now firmly closed, was a massive, rough pine door reinforced with heavy iron clasps and locked with a Moorish contrivance edged in jagged design. Over the door, carved on a weather-beaten cross beam was an inscription that the Mexican inhabitants knew by heart and respected almost religiously: *La Celda del Justo Juez*, “The Cell of Heavenly Justice.” The squad standing at attention waited for the man that in a few moments their muskets would send to eternity. These soldiers too knew the significance of the inscription on the cross beam. Five similar ceremonies had ended at this very prison door; an unseen hand had reached through the locked dungeon and robbed the law from the execution of justice. Five culprits had been found dead in the morning. This mysterious fate that overcame the guilty caused the *comandante* to have the inscription carved on the cross beam, and for fully two years it had served as a warning to the villagers that Heavenly justice was meted in the village of Encinal.

“El reo,” ordered the Captain in a low tone to the jailer. Raising his lantern to the Moorish lock, the jailer introduced a heavy iron key and set his light on the ground. Then, taking the key in both hands, he slowly turned it. Simultaneously a sudden force from within threw open the door, sending jailer and lantern sprawling on the ground.

"Ave María Purísima!" exclaimed the old *carcelero*, and before anyone knew or could realize what was happening, a crazed maniac with bulging eyes and dishevelled hair had thrown himself against the soldiers, panting and gesticulating wildly.

The soldiers pinned the condemned man by the arms lest he should become dangerous, and looked to the equally surprised captain for orders. The frenzied man was still wriggling and trying to say something that no one could understand. Only a fragment of a torn shirt and the upper portion of his cotton trousers clothed him. It seemed that his clothing had been torn from his body.

"Agua!" he managed to say. One of the soldiers, at the nod of the Captain, opened his canteen and placed it to the madman's lips. In the safety of armed men and with a breath of cool, morning air, the man's feeling subsided enough to talk, though still very incoherently and with visible traces of mental anguish. His bloodshot eyes had partly gone back into their sockets, but still maintained the wild look of a man who has just suffered the tortures of third degree. The soldiers relaxed and waited eagerly to hear the verdict of this unusual cell, while from the open door emanated the strong odor of charred cotton tinged with a peculiar stench of scorched flesh.

II

José Pacheco was an industrious youth in the village of Encinal in the state of Durango, situated in the northern part of Mexico. José lived peacefully, anticipating his marriage to Alicia Mondragón, an equally pleasant and industrious peasant girl in the *Hacienda* of Don Joaquín López Logroño. It was well known to the *rancheros* that José's wedding would take place as soon as the last load of corn had been gathered and placed in the cribs of Don Joaquín. The young eligibles constantly chided and bantered José with allusive and meaningful remarks that, though said in

jest, were too piquant for a groom-to-be, so José blushed and tried to change the subject of conversation.

"Have you noticed how slowly the corn ripens this year José?" some one would remark, and others followed with: "Cold weather should warm things up for you *mi amigo!*" "Yes, first the corn then the rice, and then what José?" With such talk, a bit brusque and yet quite innocent, the ranchers burst into hearty laughter at the expense of a prospective groom.

Today the young fellows were in higher spirits than usual. There was to be a big *fiesta* and *baile* on Saturday; one of those social affairs that Don Joaquín, in spite of his *mal genio*, sponsored to keep up the prestige of a wealthy *hacendado*.

All the village participated in these fiestas and the charming señoritas were afforded an opportunity to cast devastating smiles at the promising young *muchachos*. A trovador or two would be there to sing and compose *trovas* and *décimas* at the whim of some lovelorn youth or admiring suitor. But best of all, José would dance all night with Alicia. Now that he was engaged to her there would be no objection, and perhaps he would press her hand as they joined hands in a *cuna* or some other folk dance. After the fiesta he would see her home, though in the presence of her aunt, that omnipresent *dueña*, always in the way.

III

Few weeks had ever dragged on so slowly for José. But even so it was already Thursday, two days before the fiesta. Instead of going to the fields he had volunteered to prepare the thrashing floors. Every year the wheat was stacked in four round stacks around which was built a corral where the year's crop of colts trampled the grain out with their sharp, unshod hoofs.

José had been repairing the corral around the stacks, but neither his eyes nor his thoughts were with his work.

His mind was dwelling on Saturday night and his eyes were fastened on the door of a small adobe house on the hill above. For the last half hour he had been watching the doorway with an occasional glimpse at the sun to see if he had judged the time correctly. At last a lithe-bodied servant girl skipped from the doorway with a large earthen jar, going in the direction of the spring. It was Alicia on her way to get the day's supply of water. At such times José managed to be within sight, and Alicia very conveniently chose the same hour for drawing water. Once they had met at the spring and had been surprised by other less fortunate girls who had no fixed hour for drawing water.

José, upon seeing his sweetheart, decided that he was very thirsty and would go to the spring for a drink, but just as he dropped his tools he heard the sound of hoofs. It was Don Enrique, the young son of Senor López Logroño, riding by. "Que suerte!" José would be content with the usual wave of the hand and a radiant smile from the distance. Being engaged to Alicia, he had the privilege of calling on her, but he was tired of carrying on a conversation in the presence of a *dueña*; he wanted to talk in the open, and alone by the spring as he had done once before. He went on working mechanically and soon lost himself in imaginative anticipation of the *fiesta* and of his forthcoming union with Alicia.

A few minutes later José was suddenly taken from his vagaries by what seemed to be the cry of a woman. He listened for the sound again, but apparently he had mistaken the neigh of a horse or the barking of a dog while lost in his musings. Then he remembered that Alicia had not returned from the spring, but his fears abated as quickly as they had arisen when he saw the familiar form carrying the earthen *olla*, like a Greek maiden he had once seen in a picture hanging in the *sala de recibo* of Don Joaquin. His heart went out to his beloved as he waved back and watched her disappear into her home. "Some day," thought José, "she will draw the water from the spring for me."

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The sun had run its course that day and with a fiery glow was slowly sinking in the horizon, thus ending the day's work for the farmers of Encinal, who, in the absence of a factory whistle to mark their working time, clocked themselves with nature's timepiece—the sun. Throwing his leather jerkin over his shoulders, José tilted a broad-brimmed Spanish hat over his right temple and started in the direction of the spring. Instead of following the usual path worn deep by years of use, he went directly to a hollow pine and searched it with his hand. Not finding anything, he smiled and went further below to a large rock by an overhanging ledge. Alicia was fond of playing tricks upon her sweetheart; she would hide her messages in different places just to increase José's joy upon finding them. Tonight he searched every possible place until dark and found no message, for Alicia had not left the message she had carried with her.

After a hasty supper, José called at the home of Doña Dolores, Alicia's widowed mother. They sat in the parlor with the rest of the family and talked about the year's crops, the early frost, and other subjects equally uninteresting to both lovers. José tried to catch Alicia's eye, but she purposely avoided his gaze. After a two-hour visit he bade the family good night. Alicia's usual firm grip was gone—it was a limp hand she offered her lover.

All night long José tossed nervously in bed. Had Alicia changed her mind? Had some other man won her affection, or had he done something he should not have? Numerous questions arose rhetorically in his mind, and Alicia's cold handshake and evading look hovered over him until dawn when he was able to doze off for an hour before day break. José was glad that the night was over, and with the day's work before him he could occupy his mind and forget the night's affair.

IV

Today as the men attempted to jest, they were met with no response from the usually jovial José. One of his closer friends came near to him as they pitched bundles of wheat upon the ox-cart and ventured: "What's the matter, *compañero*? Something wrong?"

"Oh, no!" answered José, forcing a smile.

It was impossible to see Alicia on her way to the spring this afternoon, for all hands were busy bringing in the wheat. If only he could see her now! José looked at the sun and judged by its height that Alicia would be on her way to the spring just now. Was someone else there to wave at her? "*Maldita suerte!*"

At last the *mayordomo* ended the day's work with a longed for, "*Vámonos!*" and the drivers started their teams with a vigorous "Arree buey!" The carts began creaking their homeward journey, bringing to a close another day. José threw a wooden-pronged pitchfork over his shoulder and left the field workers with a gay "*Hasta mañana, muchachos.*"

He quickened his step as he approached the hollow pine, and reached it almost at a trot. With hand outstretched he reached into the bosom of the tree and felt the message that he had missed the day before. Not waiting until he should get home to read it, he unfolded it and began to read avidly. Hardly had he read half of it when he turned pale, exclaiming in a loud whisper: "*Dios Mío!*" He crumpled the message in his fist and released it as he looked towards the closed door of Alicia's home. When he tried to read again his eyes had filled with tears of anger.

Then clenching a powerful fist, he said between his teeth with all the determination of justly aroused ire: "You damned *gachupín*, I'll make you pay for this!" The woman's cry of the preceding afternoon had been Alicia's futile call for help, and José had failed to heed it.

V

The carefree, happy atmosphere of Encinal had assumed a gloomy air. It was the day before the fiesta, but now the big *baile* was out of the question. All the village had turned out for a different purpose. Court was being held in one of the large halls in the home of Don Joaquin. The judge, a bald-headed, blue-eyed Castilian, peered over his glasses at the crowd that overflowed the room, requesting silence before passing sentence. Then looking down at José he repeated the words that the defendant fully anticipated:

"I condemn you to die at sunrise!"

In another room of the enormous home of López Logroño lay the only son and heir of the family, with a knife thrust dealt by the hand of an irate lover who sought to avenge the shame brought upon his sweetheart. In twenty-four hours a rejoicing, carefree girl had been robbed of the only possession she cherished, her honor; a jovial, happy lover had turned assassin, and the name of a noble Spanish family had run out in Durango.

Now José was to spend the night before his execution in that awful Cell of Heavenly Justice. Would the cell live up to its tradition? Would he be found guilty in the eyes of that unknown judge? That was the question in the minds of all his friends, as the crowd dispersed at the end of the trial.

VI

It was dark when the jailer returned. He swung the massive *portón* on its rusty hinges and placed a lighted candle in the center of a rough, colonial pine table; then turning to the prostrate form sitting on the earthen floor, the old man said in a half-entreating tone, "There, *amigo*, a candle for your prayers tonight. "*Buenas noches.*"

What a sudden turn all of José's plans had taken! Soon he, too, would be gone from this world; gone from the

life of his loved Alicia. He was not remorseful in the least for what he had done. If he had it to do over he would do no different. José's eyes wandered around the empty room. He shuddered at the utter barrenness of the cell. A wooden table and a candle was all the company he had. Soon that candle would melt away like the hopes of a happiness he had once entertained.

In the stillness of the night he heard the baying of Don Joaquin's hounds. He strained his ears eagerly to catch any sounds about him; even that would be company! He heard a foot fall; someone was moving outside! His heart began to pound excitedly in his chest. A messenger of death! Again, it might be Alicia coming to say a last good-bye. But no, it was merely a hallucination.

José was getting nervous. As he walked around the cell, his shadow, large and imperfect, followed him along the wall. He thought of saying his prayers and glanced at the candle; it could burn for an hour more yet. Once more he sat down and watched his bare feet. Such disgrace!

For a moment José forgot Alicia and began to speculate on the mysterious death that had taken such a heavy toll. Would he, too, lie outstretched with a cadaverous grimace on his face or would he live to face the firing squad. He could see the barrels ominously pointing at him and waiting for the command of execution. FUEGO! José started as the word "fire" went through his mind, and remembered that he had not said his prayers. He would try. He got on his knees determined to prepare for his last. Impossible to start! A bit of dirt sliding along the wall caused him to jump to his feet expecting to find a ghost or an apparition, ready to take his life. José had heard so many stories about how condemned men had died in this cell. A second and heavier stream of dirt rolled along the wall and caught his attention to a crack in the wall close to the ceiling. From that crack the dirt continued to roll as though pushed by some moving object.

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In a moment more José's skin had tightened about him with a cold chill that covered his body with gooseflesh. An enormous scorpion was trying to come down the crack, but could not gain a foothold. Six inches of its enormous hairy body was fully in view as it clung to the fissure in the wall. Finally it ventured completely out along the uneven mud plaster, and continued to crawl. José looked about the room for a rock or a stick to hurl at this venomous spider, but the cell had been carefully cleaned out of every loose particle.

Halfway down the wall the scorpion lost its hold and fell the remaining distance to the earthen floor with a dull thud. Its menacing pincers went up immediately like the horns on a Texas longhorn, as it raised its greyish belly on four pairs of bony legs. José kept his eyes riveted on it and watched every move. Twelve inches of the most vicious spider known lay before him! The scorpion charged. José ran around the table. Again and again the spider raised its lance to deal the fatal blow, but the elusive prey jumped over it. More determined than ever, the scorpion tried to approach José by moving cautiously towards him. More than once José had thought of stepping on the ugly monster, but the thought of touching such a dangerous hard-shelled creature with his bare foot was too revolting. The nocturnal spider snapped its pincers in defiance and made for its prey poised on the tips of its stout legs. José backed slowly watching his chance for a spring. Step by step he kept retreating until inadvertently he ran against the wall and stumbled. The scorpion saw his chance and charged, but José resorted to a *machicuenta*, turning over his head with a handspring that cleared him fully six feet across the room. "*Caramba!*" he exclaimed. "That was too close a call!"

José began to realize that he could not overcome his enemy without a weapon. Ah, the table! He would pick it up and drop it on the spider. But like a flash it struck him

that the candle was good for only a few minutes more. To move the table was to extinguish the candle; and that was suicide just now. He could already feel the scorpion's pincers closing upon his flesh and the sharp sting of the poisonous lance. To be left in utter darkness with this spider was fatal. Something had to be done immediately. José became desperate. He began to shout. "*Socorro! Socorro!*" But the village was asleep and too far to hear his cries of agony. In a moment he would go mad. The spider would have him at its mercy. His body would be numb with the deadly poison and he too would be found stretched upon the floor like his predecessors.

José tore at his shirt trying to find something to hurl at the stubborn scorpion and brought a piece of cloth that fell limply at his feet as he threw it at the creature. He looked once more at the candle that, like a clock of old, seemed to measure the span of his existence. Only an inch of it was left. Then a happy idea came to him. He would try it as a last resort. His hand went over his shoulder and tore a large piece of shirt from his back. To the farthest corner of the room José taunted the spider, and then jumping over it ran to the table. Before the spider could get to him he had placed a piece of his torn shirt over the flame, and in his nervous hurry had almost smothered the flame. He dodged another pass and running by the table once more he picked up the burning rag.

Now José was armed with a weapon. Scorpions succumb easily to heat, even to the heat of the sun, and José knew it. Like a *matador* holding out his *muleta* to a furious bull, the young peasant waited for his adversary to charge. The scorpion was met every time with the suffocating breath of burning cotton. It charged no more. Now José was on the offensive. He taunted and followed the spider's retreat, singeing it with the burning cloth. More cloth was needed now that his shirt was gone, so he tore part of his trousers. At last the spider moved no longer and José

threw the remaining cloth over it, watching its wriggling as it cooked in the slow fire of his own clothes.

The suffocating smoke dried José's throat. The combat had completely covered him with perspiration and the sting of charred cotton was burning his eyes. A flickering flame hardly discernable through the thick smoke sputtered and went out, leaving the cell in total darkness with the stench of a cooked scorpion.

A feeble glow in the middle of the room showed the funeral pyre of what once had been a menacing spider. The last bit of cloth had been consumed, leaving the strong fumes without an outlet in that almost air-tight dungeon. José, hardly aware that the battle was over, kept his eyes riveted where he had seen the last of his adversary, expecting it to rise once more in the darkness and renew the attack. What if the scorpion had been only temporarily overcome with the heat and smoke! Instinctively, he felt in his shirt pocket for a match but his hand touched naked flesh—his shirt lay scattered in ashes around the room. His only hope for light was the crevice under the door, but it was hardly daylight.

Like a man whose avenues of escape have been completely cut off, José began to feel the oppression of being hemmed in. He was loath to feel along the wall for a loosely set adobe lest he should place his hand upon a squirming spider. Scorpions had become an obsession to him. In the dark he would become an easy prey to a scorpion's lance. He imagined he saw hosts of them coming down the walls to attack him. For, thought he, where there is one, surely there must be another, and another, and another. Good God! If he could only run out of this fatal dungeon; it reeked with smoke and hungry, bloodthirsty scorpions! The bitter fumes had dried José's throat and now he could hardly swallow. A drink of cool, fresh water from the spring out of the gourd from which he used to drink on a hot summer's day when returning from the fields. Oh, how

he craved such a drink! But no, he bit his tongue in desperation and not even the flow of saliva would respond.

The suffocating air added to the discomfort of the poor prisoner. He approached the door with a mind to tear it down, but the massive prison *parton* remained impassive to the lunges that José made against it. The heavy bolts outside would not yield to such light weight. In the moments that preceded the dawn José would lose his mind and die from sheer exhaustion and mental agony. His eyes, red and swollen, were smarting and watery. His hair, disheveled and wet with perspiration, completed the picture of a madman.

At last the first signs of dawn began to show in the east though unseen to the prisoner in the cell. The crowing of a cock, too, made no impression on him now, for José felt a ringing in his head and drunken dizziness as he still clung to the door, his only hope. Panting for breath he stood moving his feet mechanically up and down to warn approaching scorpions that he would trample upon them with his bare feet.

A dog barked. Someone was moving about in the village. José listened and his ears caught the sound of marching feet. Thump, thump, thump. The firing squad! Anything for a breath of fresh air. The marching was clearer and nearer. The condemned man heard the command that stopped the march abruptly. Then the sound of a key finding the keyhole gave him a ray of hope though his throat was parched and his eyes bulging out of their sockets.

José waited crouched at the door. At the first sign of movement he lunged against it, bounding into the open air and into the arms of the firing squad. Like the knights of the preceding century the soldiers received the verdict of trial by combat and all the village abided by the decision of the Cell of Heavenly Justice.