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El Santa

BY PAT M. ESSLINGER

He had been pleased to find this tiny plot of earth near the great Almacén Sears on which to build his hut of cartons and tin, but today he was more than pleased; he was filled with shaking wonder. He looked out the leaning doorway into the mist of the sunrise and glanced from the rounded hill of the three crosses beyond the red rooftops to the long flat roof of the great Sears. From his own door he could see the Christmas tree and the hanging bulbs. And today at the great glass window, the great Almacén Sears would unveil El Santa. That was all the young people had spoken of for days; and even to him, used to the promises and delays of Caleños, the wait had seemed long. So much longer than usual. But today the great canvas curtain that hid the window would be drawn aside and there would sit El Santa. José Mariá had seen the figure as it was carried in and had enjoyed two days of fame with his hints of what El Santa would be. Now the rest of them would see for themselves.

Of course Erliño and the others had seen pictures of Santa Claus in the papers glued to the columns of the newspaper building and in placards at Navidad time, but this was different. This was El Santa, a life-sized figure in a glass window that was said actually to move and was brought all the way, in a huge crate, José Mariá had said nodding wisely, from Los Estados Unidos where people were used to such things.

And today Erliño would be late to the silver factory where he spent the day fitting tiny chunks of raw emerald into tiny silver baskets; today he would wait to see El Santa.

The church beyond the great Sears began to play its record of the bells for seven-o'clock mass. How the sound carried across the valley and re-echoed from the rounded hill of the three crosses. And his wife had not yet roused herself or sent the children down to the river or water. Being only five months pregnant should not have made her so sluggish. She even complained once of the distance of the

river for her washing. He had silenced her with a fierce look, and she had said no more.

But he was irritated on this morning that was so bright and important. The children should have left by now with their pails or he would have to go to the great Sears and then to the silver factor without washing himself. He turned back into the darkened stall interior of the hut to hurry his wife.

The woman shook off the pile of larger rags that were the bed clothes and went to the crate table. Her belly sagged noticeably under the faded straining cotton print; her eyes were dark circles as she gave each child a broken chunk of panela to suck on his way to the river. Erliño didn't try to explain to them how important this morning was. He wanted to shout at them to hurry, to run to the river and back. But he said nothing. What could they understand?

He returned to the leaning doorway and watched the sky clear sparkle around the edges of the clouds as the mist swept from the red-tiled city into the distant mountains. He watched and only half heard the bell-record sound and sound again.

As the record began a fourth time in the clear stillness of the city he was on his way down the hillside, washed, his tie knotted carefully. And as the needle-scratch stopped, Erliño was standing before the gleaming glass window of the great Sears. There were many others at the window before him, others whose wives had not been as slow this morning as his had been. But it did not matter. No one had yet seen El Santa.

He watched as the orange curtain bulged. He could feel his own quickened heartbeat and that of the others packed closely around him staring into the gleaming window. The curtain fluttered heavily again.

Then a quick intake of breath somewhere in the crowd, and the canvas swung back.

There he sat, enthroned on a glittering snow chair, his face circles of red cheeks and crinkled eyes and a great wreathing smile above a snowy beard. El Santa. His huge red stomach healthy and happily full, and his red-mittened hands resting on sturdy red knees. He was more than life-sized; he was a great vision of red and white and polished black boots.

And suddenly he began to move. His head tipped back and his great stomach began to shake, his hands raised and lowered on his knees, and he began to laugh, "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho." His head tipped

urther back, his hands raised higher and came down on his knees, and he continued to laugh, "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho."

Erlño found himself smiling. The laughter was so happy and El Santa so joyful. "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho." Erlño stood a few minutes longer even though he was already late; he smiled at the round laughing face. He wanted to store every detail for his day in the dusk of the silver factory. El Santa was everything he had hoped. Never before had he, or the rest of Cali, seen in real life and in his own city a mechanical figure that moved, and even more wonderfully, laughed by itself. "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho," the voice boomed, and Erlño smiled. Now he could go content to the greasy workbench and fit tiny hunks of raw emerald into the tiny silver baskets.

On his way home at dusk he stopped again before the great window to see the great red figure slapping its knees and laughing. The crowd was even larger than it had been in the morning, and the "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho" rang out merrily, sounding above the record of the bells for evening mass. Erlño knew that the great Sears had closed, and now he admitted the fear that he had not worded throughout the day. A needless fear, for they had not silenced El Santa and had not dropped the orange canvas over his happy face and laughter.

Across the heads of the people gaping at the shining window, Erlño watched a few more minutes, then he trudged upward slowly. When he reached the door of his own home, he could still hear the laughter of El Santa as clearly as if he stood beside the great Sears. "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho." He smiled as he ducked into the angled doorway.

Later that night he awoke briefly beside his heavy wife and heard the laughter in the single room. He went back to sleep with the sound against his ear. "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho."

The next morning he was late and did not have time to stop by the great Sears on his way to the silver factory, but it was no matter, for he had heard the happy laughter while he washed himself, and he knew that El Santa would be there when he returned that night.

The crowd was larger still in the night outside the great Sears as Erlño paused on his way home. Barefooted children had pressed themselves against the window and had locked their grimy fingers to the window ledge not to be shoved aside as they stared and listened to the wonderous figure that moved and laughed. A woman with two children beneath a covering of newspapers huddled in the shelter of the great glass doorway beside El Santa.

Erlíño stood behind the crowd that shifted and moved; he stood alone and drank in the gleaming red and white and black boots, for he knew that the talk before the huts again that night would be of El Santa. José Mariá was no longer the only one who had seen El Santa.

At last he turned away to ascend the hill behind the great Sears, the laughter following his footsteps on the dirt path, and he felt almost as if El Santa had seen him leave the crowd. And as he sat at the crate table and waited for his wife to spoon out the steaming rice and boiled plantains, he smiled in the candle flame that seemed to dance to the laughter of El Santa.

Later when he rested on the earth beside his shack and smoked the cigarette whose paper was sweet and wet in his mouth, he talked quietly to the others, pausing each time the clear laughter of El Santa soared from the window of the great Sears. "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho." And each smoker shook his head with awe at the wonderful object sent down from Los Estados Unidos where people were used to such things.

When the last evening record of the bells sounded into the hills of the three crosses, the small group beside the hut stood, waiting for the "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho" to begin again, to finish again, the ground into the dirt the last damp stubs of their cigarettes. They said the same "hasta luego" that they said every night after the last needle was lifted from the daily record of the bells, they turned to their own huts filled with the familiar stench of their own children and sleeping women, and the laughter followed them.

For the next three days Erlíño stopped each morning to bid a silent "buenos dias" to El Santa and each evening he paused before his climb up the hillside to see the happy glowing face.

But the sixth morning he awoke with a headache, and somehow the laughter of El Santa was not as joyful in the smoky haze of the room. He had not slept well. He tried to stifle the lessening of pleasure he felt as he splashed the river water sharply into his face and heard the "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho."

The headache persisted throughout the day and his eyes began to sting from the fine silver dust that sifted around him as he sat among the tiny chips of emerald. And in the evening when he passed the lighted window of the great Sears, he saw that the crowd was less. He paused only briefly for himself. The bright red, the glittering white hurt his eyes, and he could barely force a smile as El Santa

hrew back his head and slapped his knees with delight. "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho."

The seventh morning his headache had gone only to be replaced by a groggy slowness in his brain. And that day at the silver factory two tiny silver baskets had to be sent back to him to be rearranged with the slivers of emerald rock. The foreman had not looked at him when the closing bell was rung in the dusk.

As he walked slowly past the great Sears after work, he tried to ignore the annoyance that forced its way into his mind. But no one should laugh that much. Life was not so happy every day.

That evening while his wife dished out the heaping wooden spoons of rice and plantains, she murmured a soft "caramba" and put one palm against her temple as the laughter came into the open doorway. But Erliño could not allow a mere woman to speak against El Santa even if he could not silence his own thoughts, and he lashed out at her as the "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho" filled the little room.

The next morning the headache had returned. He had awakened many times in the night to hear the laughter in the molding darkness, and the sound had given him no pleasure. In the morning he watched the sunlight wash out the last dingy traces of the night and wished that he might watch the sun in silence and listen only for the scratching record of the bells. And that night as he passed the great Sears, he saw that the crowd around the lighted window was small, that the people seemed to stare numbly at the moving figure laughing, "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho."

He did not go into the darker night of the hutside after his evening meal; he did not want to hear the voices of the others drowned by the laughter. And the following dawn he awoke in the sweating blackness to feel dislike for the laughter that surrounded him, paused, and began again.

On the ninth day he did not pass the great Sears on his way to or from the silver factory, nor on the tenth day did he look at it as the laughter echoed against the hill of the three crosses and he took another path down the hillside.

It was on the eleventh day when his morning coffee tasted of corch on his tongue that he was forced to admit something more than dislike for the laughter. He mulled painfully upon it as he worked among the tiny green emeralds and the tiny silver baskets. The laughter was lessening his appetite, was ruining his evenings of talk and his occasional bottle of aguardiente, was disturbing his love-

making beneath the ragged cloths of the bed. The bloom of pleasure had become a nettle that sprouted and grew in his mind until it crowded out all else but thought of the laugh.

On the twelfth day he realized he could bear the laughter no longer.

On the thirteenth day he knew that he must destroy El Santa. The great Sears would keep the laughter of El Santa until the eve of Navidad, the night of El Niño, and perhaps they would want the laughter that now brought no joy to the darkness of the hills until the night of the kings, another twelve days after. Erliño slowly and carefully counted the days on his fingers dusted with silver powder. And he knew that he must stop the laughter.

On the fourteenth morning he looked once more at the great Sears with the clean sunlight spread over its flat tiled roof. "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho" rang out into the morning, and Erliño's pleasure in the sun faded. He knew that El Santa must be silenced that night.

The day was long. Endless rows of delicate silver baskets waited on the bench for their chunks of crude green emeralds, but Erliño was strangely glad that the day would not seem to end. He saw in the silver baskets the laughing face of El Santa.

When the closing bell had rung at last, and the other factory workers had gathered up their fitted tin pails, empty and stained inside with grease, Erliño lingered. He carefully lit one of the precious sweet papered cigarettes and looked at the sky. He smoked the cigarette until he could feel the heat on his lips and until the stub was too short to hold without touching the glowing ash. Then he dropped the bit of hot paper and tobacco into the black gutter, and moved slowly away from the dark wall of the darker factory.

As he walked slowly by the river bank that cut through the center of Cali, he looked for a stone. He did not see the huddled people on the river bank; his eyes searched for a stone. At last he saw the one he wanted. A large smooth rock, half polished by the river, that took two hands to lift. He cradled it in one arm, steadying it with the other hand.

He carried it carefully to the sidewalk opposite the great Sears and sat down to wait. He knew that the great Sears was a powerful master and that he had no money to pay for the property of the great Sears. The "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho" from the window encircled him as he sat in the night.

He waited until finally only the stars, the feeble streetlight, and

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They were watching El Santa. He carried the stone before the lighted window and listened a final time to the laugh. Then he lifted the stone above his head and threw it with a grunting force into the glass window.

He had one moment of complete triumph as the glass of the window shattered into long strips that slid into each other and down to the cement walk below, as the great stone smashed beyond into the metal and plaster head of El Santa and toppled it to the floor. Erliño took a deep shuddering breath as the laughter stopped and the headless figure in brilliant red and glittering white paused.

Then the mittened hands raised off the knees and slapped down again as from the severed mechanical throat issued forth into the night, "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho."

✻ Born at Grass Creek, Wyoming, PAT ESSLINGER is a special lecturer in English at Louisiana State University. He received his Ph.D. from Tulane in 1960, and has published short stories, book reviews, and critical articles in many magazines. The writer who has meant the most to his development is Sean O'Casey.