

The Fisherman from Chihuahua

By: Evan S. Connell - 1924

Santa Cruz is at the top of Monterey Bay, which is about a hundred miles below San Francisco, and in the winter there are not many people in Santa Cruz. The boardwalk concessions are shuttered except for one counter-and-booth restaurant, the Ferris-wheel seats are hooded with olive green canvas and the powerhouse padlocked, and the rococo doors of the carousel are boarded over if one peers through a knothole into its gloom the horses which buck and plunge through summer prosperity seem like animals touched by a magic wand that they may never move again. Dust dims the gilt of their saddles and sifts through cracks into their bold nostrils. About the only sounds to be heard around the waterfront in Santa Cruz during winter are the voices of Italian fishermen hidden by mist as they work against the long pier, and the slap of waves against the pilings of the cement dance pavilion when the tides run high, or the squeak of a gull, or once in a long time usually slowly to the edge of the gray and fogbound ocean.

The restaurant is Pendleton's and white brush strokes on the glass announce *tacos*, *frijoles*, and *enchiladas* as house specialties, these being mostly greens and beans and fried meat made arrogant with pepper. Smaller letters in pseudo-Gothic script say *Se Habla Español* but this is not true; it was the man who owned the place before Pendleton who could speak Spanish. From him, though, Pendleton did learn how to make the food and this is the reason a short fat Mexican who worked as a mechanic at Ace Dillon's Texaco station continued eating his suppers there. He came in every night just after eight o'clock and sat at the counter, ate an astounding amount of this food, which he first splattered with Tabasco sauce as casually as though it were ketchup, and then washed it farther down with beer. After that he would feel a little drunk and would spend two or three dollars playing the pinball machine and the great nickelodeon and dancing by himself, by inoffensively, contentedly, just snapping his fingers and shuffling across the warped boards often until Pendleton began pulling in the shutters. Then, having had a suitable evening, he would half-dance his way home, or at least back in the direction of town. He was a squat little man who waddled like a duck full of eggs and he had a face like a blunt arrowhead or a Toltec idol, and he was about the color of hot sand. His fingers were much too thick for their length, seemingly without joints, only creases where it was necessary for them to bend. He smelled principally of cold grease and of urine as though his pants needed some air, but Pendleton were not many customers during these winter months.

So every evening shortly after dark he entered for his food and some amusement, and as he appeared to contain all God's world within his own self Pendleton was not disinterested when another Mexican came in directly behind him like a long shadow. This new man was tall, very tall, six feet or more, and much darker, almost black in the manner of a sweat-stained saddle. He was handsome, silent, and perhaps forty years of age. Also he was something of a dandy; his trousers, which were long and quite tight, revealed the fact that he was bow legged, as befits certain types of men, and made one think of him easily riding a fast horse, not necessarily toward a woman but in the direction of something more remote and mysterious-bearing a significant message or something like that. Exceedingly short black boots of finest leather took in the cuffs of his narrow trousers. For a shirt he wore long-sleeved white silk

unbuttoned to below the level of his nipples which themselves were vaguely visible. The hair of his chest was so luxuriant that an enameled crucifix there did not even rest on the skin.

These two men sat at the counter side by side. The tall one lifted off his sombrero as if afraid of mussing his hair and he placed it on the third stool. His hair was deeply oiled, and comb tracks went all the way from his temples to the back of his thin black neck, and he reeked of green perfume. He had a mustache that consisted of nothing but two black strings hanging across the corners of his unforgiving mouth, ending in soft points about an inch below his chin. He seemed to think himself alone in the restaurant because, after slowly licking his lips, interlacing his fingers, he just sat looking somberly ahead. The small man ordered for them both.

After they had eaten supper the little one played the pinball machine while this strange man took from his shirt pocket a cigarillo only a little bigger than his mustache and smoked it with care; that is, he would take it from his mouth between his thumb and one finger as if he were afraid of crushing it, and after releasing the smoke he would replace it with the same care in the exact center of his mouth. It never dangled or rolled; he respected it. Nor was it a cheap piece of tobacco; the smoke ascended heavily, moist and sweet.

Suddenly the fat Mexican kicked the pinball game and with a surly expression walked over to drop a coin into the nickelodeon. The tall man had remained all this time at the counter with his long savage eyes half-shut, smoking and smoking the fragrant cigarillo. Now he did not turn around- in fact all he did was remove the stump from his lips- but clearly he was disturbed. When the music ended he sat motionless for several minutes. Then he lifted his head and his throat began to swell like that of a mating pigeon.

Pendleton, sponging an ashtray, staggered as if a knife had plunged through his ribs.

The Mexican's eyes were squeezed shut. His lips had peeled away from his teeth like those of a jaguar tearing meat, and the veins of his neck looked ready to pop. In the shrill screams from his bursting throat was a memory of Moors, the ching of Arab cymbals, of rags and of running feet through all the marketplaces of the East.

His song had no beginning; it had no end. All at once he was simply sitting on the stool looking miserably ahead.

After a while the small fat Mexican said to Pendleton "Be seeing you, man," and waddled out the door. A few seconds later the tall one's stool creaked. He put on the high steepled sombrero as though it were a crown and followed his friend through the door.

The next night there happened to be a pair of tourists eating in the back booth when the Mexicans entered. They were dressed as before except the big one's shirt was lime green, and Pendleton noticed his wristwatch- fastened but not to his wrist but on the green shirtsleeve where it bulged like an oily bubble. They took the same stools and ate fried beans, tacos, and enchiladas for half an hour, after which the short one who looked like his Toltec ancestors gently belched, smiled in a benign way, and moved over to his machine. Failing to win anything he cursed it and kicked it before selecting some records.

This time Pendleton was alert; as the music ended he got ready for the first shriek. The tourists, caught unaware, thought their time has come. When they recovered from the shock they looked over the top of the booth and then the woman stood up in order to see better. After the black Mexican's song was finished they all could hear the incoming tide, washing softly around the pillars of the pavilion.

Presently the two men paid their bill and went out, the short one leading, into the dirty yellow fog and diving, squeaking gulls.

"Why that's terrible," the woman laughed. "It wasn't musical." Anyone who looked at her would know she was still shuddering from the force of the ominous man.

Her husband was too frightened and laughed. "Somebody should play a little drum behind that fellow." Unaware of what a peculiar statement he had made he formed a circle of his thumb and forefinger to show how big the drum should be.

She was watching the door, trying to frown compassionately. "I wonder what's the matter with that poor man. Some woman must have hurt him dreadfully."

Pendleton began to wipe beer bracelets and splats of Tabasco sauce from the lacquered plywood counter where the men had been eating.

"We're from Iowa City," the woman said with a smile.

Pendleton had never been to Iowa City or anywhere near it even on a train, so he asked if they would like more coffee.

"Those two fellows," her husband said, "do they come here every night?"

Pendleton was seized with contempt for this domestic little man, though he did not know why. He walked stiffly away from their booth and stood with both hairy hands on his hips while he listened to the sea thrashing and rolling in the night.

"Who?" he demanded. "Them two?"

The couple, overpowered by his manner, looked at each other uneasily.

On the third night when the Mexicans sat down at the counter Pendleton said to no one who spoke English, "Tell your buddy no more yowling."

"Tell him yourself," the Toltec replied. "Eight tacos, four beers, and a lot of beans, man.

"What do you think this is, buster, some damn concert hall?"

For a moment the little Mexican became eloquent with his eyebrows; then both he and Pendleton turned their attention to the silent one who was staring somberly at the case of pies.

Pendleton leaned on his hands so that his shoulders bulged. "Now looky, Pablo, give him the word and do it quick. Tell him to cut out that noise."

This enraged the small man whose voice rose to a snarl. "Pablo yourself. Don't give me that stuff."

Pendleton was not angry but set about cleaving greens for their tacos as though he were furious. While the blade chunked into the wood beside his thumb he thought about the situation. He did not have anything particular in mind when all at once he slammed down the cleaver and with his teeth clenched he began bending his eyes toward the two.

"*No debe cantar,*" said the little one hurriedly, wagging a negative finger at his companion. "*No más.*"

"All right, by God," Pendleton muttered as though he understood. He wished to say something in Spanish but he knew only *mañana*, *adiós*, and *señorita*, and none of these seemed to fit. He resumed work, but doubtfully, not certain if the silent one had heard either of them. Without turning around he explained his attitude: "People come here to eat supper."

Abel W. Sharpe, who had one been county sheriff and who now lived in a retirement home, came through the door alone but arguing harshly. He took a stool beside the tall Mexican, looked up at him twice, and then ordered hot milk and a waffle. While he was pouring syrup into the milk the nickelodeon music stopped and the black Mexican did it again.

At the first note the old man jumped off his stool and crouched several feet away, a spoon in one hand and his cup of sweet milk in the other. "Can't hear nothing," he said angrily at Pendleton. "The bastard deafened me."

The Toltec, who was playing pinball paid not the least attention because he had lighted four pretty girls which meant he probably would win several games. His friend, now motionless, sat on the stool and gazed ahead as though he could see clear into some grief-stricken time.

Not until the eighth or ninth night did Pendleton realize that the restaurant was drawing more customers; there would be half-a-dozen or so extra for dinner, maybe more.

Then there came a night when the Toltec waddled in as usual but no one followed. That night the restaurant was uneasy. Things spilled, and while cleaning up a table Pendleton discovered a menu burned through and through with cigarette holes. By ten thirty the place was deserted.

Pendleton said, "Hey, Pablo."

The Toltec gave him a furious look.

"All right," Pendleton apologized, "what's your name?"

"What's yours?" he replied. He was insulted.

"Where's your buddy?"

"He's no friend of mine."

Pendleton walked down the counter behind a damp rag, wrung it over the sink, and then very casually did something he never even thought of doing: he opened a bottle of beer and indicated to the Mexican that it was free.

Toltec, though still aggrieved, quickly accepted the gift, saying, "I just met the guy. He asked me where to get some decent food."

Pendleton wiped a table for a while appeared to be idly picking his teeth. When he judged enough time had gone by he said "Got tired of my grub, I guess."

"No, tonight he's drunk. Man, he's out of his skull."

Pendleton waited a couple minutes before saying, "He looks like a bullfighter I saw once in Tijuana called Victoriano Posada."

This proved to be a shrewd inquiry because after drinking some more of the free beer the fat Mexican remarked, "He calls himself Damaso."

Pendleton, wondering if some other information would follow, pretended to stretch and yawn and smacked his chops mightily. He thought that tomorrow, when the tall man arrived, he would call him by name.

"Know what? He goes and stand by himself on the sea wall a lot of times. Maybe he's getting ready to knock himself out."

"Tell him not to do it in front of my place," Pendleton answered.

Through the screen door could be seen a roll of silvery yellow fog with the moon just above it, but the sea was hidden.

"These Santa Cruz winters," Pendleton said. Opening the icebox he chose a beer for himself and leaned against the counter, far enough away that his guest might not feel the friendship being forced. Peeling off the wet label he rolled it into a soggy gray ball which he dropped into a bucket. "Singers make plenty money, I guess."

The Mexican looked at him slyly. "What are you talking about?"

Pendleton, after scratching his head, yawned again. "Huh? Oh. I was just thinking about what's-his-name. That fellow you come in here with."

"I know it," the Mexican said, laughing. For a while Pendleton studied his beer and listened to the combers, each of which sounded as if it would smash the door.

"Feels like something standing up in the ocean tonight," he said. "I could use a little summer."

"You want the town full of tourists? Those sausages? You're crazy. You're off the rocks."

Pendleton judged that the Mexican was about to insult the summer people still more, so he manipulated the conversation once again. "Somebody told me your friend got himself a singing job at that night spot near Capitola."

"Look," said the Toltec, patient, but irritated, "I just met the guy a couple of weeks ago."

"He never said where he's from, I guess."

"Chihuahua, he says. That's one rough town. And full of sand. That Chihuahua- it's no place."

Breakers continued sounding just beyond the door and fog now stood against the screen like a person.

"What does he do?"

The Mexican lifted both fat shoulders.

"Just traveling through?"

The Mexican lifted both hands.

"Where is he going?"

"All I know is he's got a pretty good voice."

"He howls like a goddamn crazy wolf," Pendleton said, "howling for the moon."

"Yah, he's pretty good. Long time ago I saw a murder down south in the mountains and a woman screamed just like that."

Pendleton opened the icebox for two more beers. The Mexican accepted one as though in payment for service. For some seconds they had been able to hear footsteps approaching, audible after every tunnel of water caved in. The footsteps went past the door but no one could be seen.

"Know what?" There was an old man washed up on the beach the other day."

"That so?" said Pendleton. "Everything gets to the beach sooner or later."

The Mexican nodded. Somewhere far out on the bay a little boat sounded again and again. "What a night," he said.

Pendleton murmured and scratched.

"Know something, mister? That Damaso, he ain't no Mexicano."

"I didn't think so," Pendleton lied.

"No, because he's got old blood. You know what I mean? I think he's a gypsy from Spain, or wherever those guys come from. He's dark in the wrong way. He just don't feel *Mexicano* to me. There's something about him, and besides he speaks a little Castellano."

Both of them considering this.

"What's he howling about?" Pendleton asked. "Some girl?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Then why the hell does he do it?"

But here the little Mexican lost interest; he revolved on the stool, from which only his toes could reach to the floor, hopped off, and hurried across to nickelodeon. Having pushed a nickel through the slit he studied the wonderful colors and followed the bubbles which fluttered up the tubes to vanish; next he dialed "*Tuxedo Junction*" and began shuffling around the floor, snapping his fingers and undulating so that in certain positions he looked five month pregnant.

"Who knows?" he asked of no one in particular while he danced.

The next night he again came in alone. When Pendleton mentioned this he replied that the dark one was still drunk.

And the next night when asked if the drunk was going into its third day he replied that Damaso was no longer drunk, just sick from being so, that he was at present lying on the wet cement having vomited on his boots, that probably by sunrise he would be all right. This turned out to be correct because both of them came in for supper the following night. Toltec, smiling and tugging at his crotch, was rumped as usual and smelled human while his tall companion was oiled and groomed and wearing the white silk again. A good many people were loitering about the restaurant- every booth was full- because this thing had come to be expected, and though all of them were eating or drinking or spending money in some way to justify themselves, and although not everybody looked up at the entrance of the two Mexicans, there could be no doubt about the situation. Only these two men seemed not to notice anything;

they ate voraciously and drank quite a few beers after which the Toltec began playing pinball and Damaso remained on the stool with his long arms crossed on the counter.

Later the nickelodeon lighted up. When at last its music died away there was not a sound in the restaurant. People watched the head of the dark man bow down until it was hidden in his arms. The crucifix disentangled itself and dropped out of the top of his gaucho shirt where it began to swing to and fro, glittering as it twisted on the end of its golden chain. He remained like that for quite some time, finally raised his head to look at the ticket, counted out enough money, and with the sombrero loosely in one hand he stumbled through the door.

The other Mexican paid no attention; he called for more beer, which he drank all at once in an attempt to interest a young girl with silver slippers and breasts like pears who was eating supper with her parents, but, failing to win anything at this or again, at the machine, he suddenly grew bored with the evening and walked out.

The next night he entered alone. When asked if his companion had started another drunk he said Damaso was gone.

Pendleton asked late in the evening, "How do you know?"

"I feel it," he said.

Then for a while Pendleton stood listening to the advancing tide which had begun to pat the pillars like someone gently slapping a dead drum. After taking off his apron he rolled it up, as he always did, and put it beneath the counter. He untied the sweaty handkerchief from around his neck and folded it over the apron, but there his routine altered; before pulling in the shutters he stopped at the screen door and looked out and listened, but of course did not see or hear any more than he expected.

Sharply, the Toltec said, "I like to dance." And he began to do so. "Next summer I'm really going to cut it up. Nothing's going to catch me." He read Pendleton's face while dancing by himself to the odd and clumsy little step he was inventing, and counseled, "Jesus Christ, he's gone. Forget about it, man."