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OLD COMPADRE

by
Eva J. Kinnison

It was in the year 1924 that Old Campadre first came to work for us, at the Inter-ocean ranch, near Oracle, Arizona.

My husband and I -- we had only been married a year then, had driven to Mammoth, where Campadre was living with friends until he could find work. He had worked for twenty years for his last employer, and his integrity was his only "want ad". He had been well recommended to us as being loyal, honest, and not only a hard worker, but capable of handling cattle as no one else could in that part of the country. Augustine Balles was his name, but he was known up and down the San Pedro River as "Old Campadre"--Everybody's Friend. The Indians and Mexicans alike welcomed him with open arms to their casetas.

Driving to Mammoth, a matter of about thirty minutes from Oracle, we arrived about noon, as we would be more likely to find him there at that hour.

The little hogan where he was staying was surrounded by big cottonwood trees, which threw their inviting shade over the entire place. Chickens pecked around the yard and on the doorstep lay a large yellow striped cat, indulging in a bath. And dogs! I counted five in sight, and heard the un-

E.J.K.

Page 2

mistakable noises of a litter of puppies, although I couldn't determine their whereabouts. As the car came to a stop three little brown children scampered toward us, eager with excitement, and anxious to see the big car, and to climb, unrestrained, around and over it. For these people have little reserve. A shiny new curiosity is to be handled and felt and absorbed through all senses.

A middle aged Indian woman came to the door to see what we wanted. Indians seem to know instinctively of the presence of guests, for I have seldom found it necessary to knock or otherwise announce my coming to one of their homes. She was tall and gaunt looking; her wide flowered skirts fluttered in the breeze, and her straight black hair was skinned back tightly from her head. A small child peeped from behind the voluminous folds of her petticoats.

My husband walked over to her and addressed her in Mexican, the language which all natives here understand and speak, whether they be Yaqui, Pima, Papagoes or Mayas. A wide smile spread over her face, her teeth flashing white against the dark skin. "Compadre? Si. Ahorita viene," she chattered in a shrill voice, so fast that all her words seemed completely blurred. With an air of grand flourish she invited us to enter her house and wait. I, being so unused to their ways and means, was delighted with her naive hospitality.

The adobe house we entered was cool and dark after the bright glare and heat of the sun. We were introduced to every

E.J.K.

Page 3

member of the household that happened to be present, starting with the oldest and finishing with the youngest, even the tiny ones shaking our hands in meek embarrassment. The great-grandmother, a little old woman, so wrinkled and dried up as to look absolutely mummified, had resumed her squatting position in front of a crude fireplace, where she was busily engaged in cooking something in a skillet, holding it over the hot coals in the fireplace. My eyes had gradually become accustomed to the semi-darkness, and I could somewhat satisfy my curiosity as to the interior of the little caseta. Nothing startling or novel met my eye. Indeed, it was probably not unlike any poor shack to be found anywhere among our own people, who live in poverty. The place had no floor; that is, no wooden floor, but the hard packed earth, still damp from a recent sprinkling, served its purpose unusually well. In the far corner of the room was a good sized iron cookstove. The kitchen utensils--there were but a few--hung on pegs from the wall. A large bunch of red and green peppers, which the Indians use so liberally in all their foods, hung close by the stove, items of necessity, yet singularly attractive, lending a bright splash of color to the rough 'dobe walls. A long table, covered with blue checked oil cloth, was really the only piece of furniture that the room could boast of, and even that was rough and homemade. Benches took the place of chairs at the table. And I, perched on a box and trying to look as comfortable as though sitting in a big easy chair, was having the thrill of my life. It seemed as

E.J.K.

Page 4

though our hosts and hostesses were inspired with nothing more important to do than to watch us with childlike naivety. The great-grandmother, or rather "the ancient one", as the others called her, was unlike the others in that her attitude was one of polite indifference. Finishing her task at the fireplace, she proceeded in a slow manner to a spot close by my side, where, after assuming the same squatting position, she started working on a basket that was half finished. It was not from any undignified curiosity such as moved these of the younger generation that she chose to sit close to me, but because that was where her materials lay.

There is no one, I am sure, who does not admire the beautiful hand-made Indian baskets. And here was my chance to see, first hand, how they were woven. The old gnarled fingers were surprisingly swift and nimble in their work. As if feeling the intentness of my gaze, the "ancient one" looked up at me and grinned. I had another shock. She was absolutely toothless. The sight of that face--so seamed and wrinkled it appeared, as though she was looking through a dark, fine net--did something to me. It took me back hundreds of years, as though I were gazing on a lost race of people, lost traditions. Now I could understand her indifference. These modern people of hers. So removed from her customs--customs over a hundred years old, now. The customs she had known had no place here, where the young children chattered the English they had learned in the white men's schools. No wonder she dwelt within herself. What

E.J.K.

Page 5

stories she could tell--this "ancient one".

Now the swarthy young men, two of them, came in from work for their dinner. Rosindo and Onofre were their names. Chile con frijoles. Chile con carne. Tortillas. Coffee. The women never sit at the table with the men, but stand by to fetch and carry. However, I seemed to prove an exception, for they insisted we sit down and eat. I had not expected this. I looked with a few misgivings at the huge dishes of food. Nothing to inspire one's appetite, certainly, on this hot July day when it was a hundred and five in the shade. To have refused, however, would have been disastrous. I had to remind myself that I was with the most sensitive people in the world. They would have felt that their friendly hospitality had been scorned. Of course, we were living in this country, and there would be many a time when we would need the men to help with a round-up. Best always to do the friendly thing; it would forestall future misunderstandings due to lack of cordiality. So I found myself sitting at the long table, and, surprisingly enough, enjoying the food I had so scorned in my mind. My husband was eating with great relish. I daresay he had eaten a lot worse a good many times out of the chuck-wagon.

Before we had finished, Augustine arrived. He was a short, rather insignificant looking Indian. Clad in dark blue Levis and a faded blue shirt, he didn't seem to me at all the spectacular figure I had expected from much that I had heard about him ever since I had first arrived at the

Inter-ocean. He wore the necessary boots--even these were worn and dull looking, and the wide brimmed cowboy hat--but I had expected something much different from this Mayo Indian, whose blood also bore a strain from the Spaniard. I confess I was somewhat disappointed. The only thing, as I was to learn later on, that marked him for his Mayo blood, was the habit he had of carrying a dirk in his boot. He talked Mexican, Maya, Apache, Yaqui. All languages that are akin but nevertheless different.

It did not take me long to realize, however, that Augustine was different. I have never seen such politeness or gallantry as that old Mayo was capable of. He fairly swept the floor with his sombrero when he first met me. And right there we were friends. He was the kindest of persons, that is to the ones he called "amigos", the others he had little time for. From the first I was "Patrona", never anything else. He delighted in doing little things to please. Riding ahead of us on the trail, he never failed to cut away the brush that overlapped the trail, to make it easier going for me, who, after all was only a beginner in this western life. If he chanced to be on hand to saddle my horse, it was always with a particular pride that he carefully chose the nicest and brightest blanket for my pony. Once he made me a beautiful horse-hair bridle with fancy colored tassels that hung gracefully from the horse's head. And I, in return, often invited him up to the house for pie or other fancy pastries, of which he was so fond.

If he liked me, he worshipped my husband. I have never ceased to marvel at it. He could not stand near him without an arm thrown affectionately around him. Or he would pat him on the back, talking and gesticulating wildly at the same time.

A strange life was his. Born in a regular jungle, at Huatabampo, in Sonora, Mexico--down by the Rio Mayo. Huatabampo is a very small village, Navajoa being the closest railway station.

His father was a Spanish Don from the old country. His mother, a Mayo Indian, was a maid on the large hacienda which belonged to this Spaniard who was to become his father. The black-haired Indian girl was sent back to her tribe in the jungle at Huatabampo shortly before Augustine was born. There he was reared, or rather I should say he "grew up" until he arrived at the age of nine, when he was sent back to the Hacienda to be trained as a cabellero, starting with the humble duties of a stable boy. Until then he had worn no clothes save a loin cloth, sometimes not even that. He had eaten nothing but crudely prepared foods, his corn having been ground with a stone metate; he had lived in a jungle teeming with tiger, peccary, monkey, ant-eaters, snakes, and the infinite host of the tropical forest.

And this was his land--Mexico! A land of surprises, a land of extremes, a land of mystery and of sun. You may tread the burning sands of a tropical desert with the wet of

perpetual snow of towering mountains still upon your shoes. You may take a single railway journey of thirty-six hours in which the people you see at the railroad station will be dressed in four different weights of clothing. It is a land of the inordinately rich and the abjectly poor; a land of perpetual snow and of unending summer. Everywhere you turn there is contrast, high lights and deep shadows.

And here, along the Rio Mayo, where the bright blue sky looks down on a tangled mass of trees and flowers, in the midst of a deep tropical forest, was where Old Compadre was born.

This mixture of Spanish and Indian blood, such as was Augustine's ancestry, is common among the peon population. The little mother of Augustine (she was but a child when he was born and now a dim memory to Old Compadre) was one of an old and now obscure tribe of Mayos. From where did they come? "Quien sabe?" as Augustine used to say, with a characteristic shrug of his shoulders, in those moments of confidence when he would become dreamy-eyed--relaxed--lost in another world of thought, carried back through a haze of years to his childhood. Memories, we all cherish. Pictures of a dark-skinned lad of seven came before me as he talked. A brave lad, during the constant warring between the Mayos and Yaquis. Fierce tribal fights between fearless Indian tribes. Even the Mexicans did not dare interfere, or even cross into their country.

Then, at the age of nine, taken into custody by his

E.J.K.

Page 9

father, not, however, as a recognized son, but as a peon, to work out his living as the others did on the big Hacienda.

But it was not a life of eternal hardships. They had their fun, these people of Mexico. Their fiestas--music. And how they loved it, even the peon participating with great gusto. It is as much a part of them, this love of music, as is the heaven and earth. It is bred in them of long generations back.

Old Compadre came to the United States as a young man in his thirties, I think, from what he has told me. He doesn't really know the date of his birth, only that he was two years old when Diaz was elected for the first time. Diaz was President of Mexico for thirty-four years, his first term being in 1877. Thus, figured by this scale, Old Compadre is fifty-seven years old. His hair is grey, now. His eyes, once blue, have faded to an indefinable shade of grey. But Augustine is as wiry and agile, as good a rider as he was ten years ago when he first came to the Inter-ocean Ranch. Born to the saddle, thus will he die. A real caballero.

I could recount many of the personal, kind acts that he has performed for us, and with the interest of the ranch always his first concern. But I cannot go on-- and on:

Old Compadre--Everybody's friend--yet in himself, he lives alone--strange--silent--always Indian, which means, always alone. Seldom does he reveal those intimate thoughts. I think perhaps my husband is the only one to whom he confides, and this only after years of being almost constantly

E.J.K.

Page 10

together--working side by side, sharing the same fare, the same troubles about the ranch. All this went in toward the building of a genuine friendship.

Perhaps it was when riding together on the lonely trails, or standing night watch over some cattle enroute to town, that Old Compadre would unbend and talk. By the glow of the campfire or by the light of the stars, with the distant lowing of the cattle the only break in the stillness of the night. Only then does he reveal the thoughts back of those inscrutable eyes.

From where did he come--Where will he go?

As for me, I hope he will be with us always.

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