

The Enchanted Burro

By Charles F. Lummis

Lelo dropped the point of his heavy irrigating hoe and stood with chin dented upon the rude handle, looking intently to the east. Around his bare ankles the rill from the *acéquia*¹ eddied a moment and then sucked through the gap in the little ridge of earth which bounded the irrigating bed. The early sun was yellow as gold upon the crags of the *mesa*²—that league-long front of ragged cliffs whose sandstones, black-capped by the lava of the immemorial Year of Fire, here wall the valley of the Rio Grande on the west. Where a spur of the frowning Kúmai runs out is a little bay in the cliffs; and here the outermost fields of Isleta were turning green with spring. The young wheat swayed and whispered to the water, whose scouts stole about amid the stalks, and came back and called their fellows forward, and spread hither and yon, till every green blade was drinking and the tide began to creep up the low boundaries at either side. Up at the sluice gate a small but eager stream was tumbling from the big, placid ditch, and on it came till it struck the tiny dam which closed the furrow just beyond Lelo, and, turning, stole past him again to join the rest amid the wheat. The irrigating bed, twenty feet square, filled and filled, and suddenly the gathered puddle broke down a barrier and came romping into the next bed without so much as saying “By your leave.” And here it was not so friendly; for, forgetting that it had come only to bring a drink, it went stampeding about, knocking down the tender blades and half covering them with mud. At sound of this, Lelo seemed suddenly to waken, and lifting with his hoe the few clods which dammed the furrow, he dropped them into the first gap, and jumping into the second bed repaired its barrier also with a few strokes. Then he let in a gentler stream from the furrow.

“*Poco*, and I should have lost a bed,” he said to himself, goodnatureedly. Bias always took things easy, and I presume that is the reason no one ever called him anything but Lelo³—“Slow-poke”—for Indian boys are as given to nicknames as are any others, and the *mote* had stuck to him ever since its invention. He *was* rather slow—this big, powerful boy, with a round, heavy chin and a face less clear-cut than was common in the pueblo. Old 'Lipe had taken to wife a Navajo captive, and all could see that the boy carried upon his father's strong frame the flatter, more stolid features of his mother's nomad people.

But now the face seemed not quite so heavy; for again he was looking toward the pueblo and bending his head as one who listens for a far whisper. There it came again—a faint, faint air which not one of us could have heard, but to this Indian boy it told of shouts and mingled wails.

“What will be?” cried Lelo, stamping his hoe upon the barrier, and with unwonted fire in his eyes. “For surely I hear the voice of worn en lamenting, and there are men's shouts as in anger. Something heavy it will be—and perhaps I am needed.” Splashing up to the ditch, he shut the gate and threw down his hoe, and a moment later was running toward Isleta with the long, heavy, tireless stride that was the jest of the other boys in the rabbit hunt, but left Lelo not so very far behind them after all.

¹ Ah-say-kee-ah. Irrigating ditch.

² May-sah. Table land.

³ Lay-lo.

In the pueblo was, indeed, excitement enough. Little knots of the swart people stood here and there, talking earnestly but low; in the broad, flat plaza were many hurrying to and fro; and in the street beyond was a great crowd about a house whence arose the long, wild wails of mourners.

“What is, *tio* Diego?” asked Lelo, stopping where a number of men stood in gloomy silence. “What has befallen? For even in the *milpa*⁴ I heard the cries, and came running to see.”

“It is ill,” answered the old man he had addressed as uncle. “It seems that Those Above are angry with us! For this morning the captain of war finds himself dead in bed—and *scalped!* And no tracks of man were about his door.”

“Ay, *all* is ill!” groaned a short, heavysset man, in a frayed blanket. “For yesterday, coming from the *llano*⁵ with my burro, I met a stranger—a *bárbaro*. And, blowing upon Palomá, he bewitched the poor beast so that it sprang off the trail and was killed at the bottom of the cliff. It lacked only that! Last month it was the raid of the Cumanche; and, though we followed and slew many of the robbers and got back many animals, yet mine were not found, and this was the very last that remained to me.”

“*Pero*, Don ‘Colás!” cried Lelo, “your burro I saw this very morning as I went to the field before the sun. Paloma it was, with the white face and the white hind foot—for do I not know him well? He was passing through the bushes under the cliffs at the point, and turned to look at me as I crossed the fields below.”

“*Vaya!*” cried Nicolás, angrily. “Did I not see him, with these my eyes, jump the cliff of two hundred feet yesterday, and with these my hands feel him at the foot that he was dead? Go, with your stories of a stupid, for—”

But here the alguazil, who was one of the group, interrupted: “Lelo has no fool’s eyes, and this thing I shall look into. Since this morning, many things look suspicious. Come, show me where fell thy burro—for to me all these doings are cousins one to another.”

Nicolás, with angry confidence, accompanied the broad-shouldered Indian sheriff, and their companions followed silently. Across the adobe-walled gardens they trudged, and into the sandy “draw,” whose trail led along the cliff and up among the jumble of fallen crags at one side.

“Yonder he jumped off,” said ‘Colas, “and fell—” But even then he rubbed his eyes and turned pale. For where he had left the limp, bleeding carcass of poor Paloma only twenty-four hours before, there was now nothing to be seen. Only, upon a rock, were a few red blotches.

“What is this!” demanded the alguazil, sternly. “Hast thou hidden him away? *Claro* that something fell here—for there is blood and a tuft of hair upon yon stone. But where is the burro?”

“How should I hide him, since he was dead as the rocks? It is witchcraft, I tell you—for see! There are no tracks of him going away, even where the earth is soft. And for the coyotes and wildcats—they would have left his bones. The Gentile I met—*he* is the witch. First he gave the evil eye to my poor beast, that it killed itself; and now he has flown away in its shape to do other ills.”

“It can be so,” mused the sheriff, gravely; “but in the meantime there is no remedy—I have to answer to the Fathers of Medicine for you who bring such stories of dead burros, but cannot show them. For, I tell you, this has something to say for the deed that was done in the pueblo this morning. *Al calaboz!*”

Half an hour later, poor Nicolás was squatted disconsolately upon the bare floor of the adobe jail—that simple prison from which no one of the simple prisoners ever thinks to dig out. It is not

⁴ *Meel-pah*. Field.

⁵ *L’yah-no*. Plain.

so much the clay wall that holds them, as the authority of law, which no Pueblo ever yet questioned.

“Colas’s burro” was soon in every mouth. The strange story of its death and its reappearance to Lelo were not to be mocked at. So it used to be, that the animals were as people; and every one knew that there were witches still who took the forms of brutes and flew by night to work mischief. Perhaps it was some wizard of the Cumanche who thus, by the aid of the evil ones, was avenging the long-haired horse-thieves who had fallen at Tajique.⁶ And now Pascual, returning from a ranch across the river, made known that, sitting upon his roof all night to think of the year, he had been aware of a burro that passed down the street even to the house of the war captain; after which he had noticed it no more. Clearly, then!

Some even thought that Lelo should be imprisoned, since he had seen the burro in the morning. And when, searching anew, they found in a splinter of the captain’s door a long, coarse, gray hair, every man looked about him suspiciously. But there was no other clew—save that Francisco, the cleverest of hunters, called the officials to a little corner of the street, where the people had not crowded, and pointed to some dim marks in the sand.

“*Que importa?*” said the gray haired governor, shrugging his shoulders, as he leaned on his staff of office and looked closely. “In Isleta there are two thousand burros, and their paths are everywhere.”

“But see!” persisted the trailer. “Are they like this? For this brute was lame in all the legs, so that his feet fell over to the inside a little, instead of coming flatly down. It will be the Enchanted Burro!”

“*Ahu!*” cried Lelo, who stood by. “And this morning when I passed the burro of Don ’Colas in the bushes, I saw that it was laming along as if its legs were stiff.”

By now no one doubted that there was witchcraft afoot, and the officials whose place it is were taking active measures to preserve the pueblo. The cacique sat in his closed house fasting and praying, with ashes upon his head. The Cum-pa-huit-lawen were running here and there with their sacred bows and arrows, prying into every corner, if haply they might find a witch. In the house of mourning the Shamans were blinding the eyes of the ghosts, that none might follow the trail of the dead captain and do him harm before he should reach the safe other world. And in the medicine house the Father of All Medicine was blowing the slow smoke across the sacred bowl, to read in that magic mirror the secrets of the whole world.

But in spite of everything, a curse seemed to have fallen upon the peaceful town. Lucero, the third assistant war captain, did not return with his flock, and when searchers went to the *llano*, they found him lying by a chapparero bush dead, and his sheep gone. But worst of all, he was scalped, and all the wisdom of that cunning head had been carried away to enrich the mysterious foe—or the soul and talents of an Indian go with his hair, according to Indian belief. And in a day or two came running Antonio Peralta to the pueblo, gray as the dead and without his blanket. Herding his father’s horses back of the Accursed Hill, he sat upon a block of lava to watch them. As they grazed, a lame burro came around the hill grazing toward them. And when it was among them, they suddenly raised their heads in fear and snorted and turned to run; but the burro, rising like a mountain lion, sprang upon one of them and fastened on its neck, and all the herd stampeded to the west, the accursed burro still perched upon its victim and tearing it. Ay! a gray burro, *jovero*,⁷ and with a white foot behind. Antonio had his musket, but he dared not fire after

⁶ Ta-hee-ke.

⁷ Ho-vay-ro. Blaze-face.

this witch beast. And here were twelve more good horses gone of what the Cumanche robbers had left.

By now the whole pueblo was wrought to the highest tension. That frightful doubt which seizes a people oppressed by supernatural fears brooded everywhere. No man but was sure that the man he hated was mixed up in the witchcraft; no man who was disliked by any one but felt the finger of suspicion pointing at him. People grew dumb and moody, and looked at each other from the corner of the eye as they passed without even a kindly "*Hina-kú-p'wuu*, neighbor." As for work, that was almost forgotten, though the fields cried out for care. No one dared take a flock to the *llano*, and few went even to their gardens. There were medicine makings every night to exorcise the evil spirits, and the Shamans worked wonders, and the medicine guards prowled high and low for witches. The cacique sat always in his house, seeing no one, nor eating, but torturing his flesh for the safety of his people.

And still there was no salvation. Not a night went by but some new outrage befell. Now it was a swooping away of herds, now some man of the wisest and bravest was slain and scalped in his bed. And always there were no more tracks than those of a burro, stiff-kneed, whose hoofs did not strike squarely upon the ground. Many, also, caught glimpses of the Enchanted Burro as they peered at midnight from their dark windows. Sometimes he plodded mournfully along the uncertain streets, as burros do; but some vowed that he came down suddenly from the sky, as alighting from a long flight. Without a doubt, old Melo had seen the brute walk up the ladder of Arnbrósio's house the very night Ambrósio was found dead in the little lookout room upon his own roof. And a burro which could climb a ladder could certainly fly.

On the fourth day Lelo could stand it no longer. "I am going to the field," he said, "before the wheat dies. For it is as well to be eaten by the witches now as that we should starve to death next winter, when there will be nothing to eat."

"What folly is this?" cried the neighbors. "Does Lelo think he is stronger than the ghosts? Let him stay behind those who are more men."

But Lelo had another trait, quite as marked as his slowness and good nature. When his deliberate mind was made up there was no turning him; and, though he was as terrified as anyone by the awful happenings of the week, he had decided to attend to his field. So he only answered the taunts with a stolid, respectful: "No, I do not put myself against the ghosts. But perhaps they will let me alone, knowing that my mother has now no one else to feed her."

The flat-faced mother brought him two *tortillas* for lunch; and putting her hands upon his shoulders, looked at him a moment from wet eyes, saying not a word. And slinging over his shoulder the bow-case and quiver, Lelo trudged away.

He plodded along the crooked meadow road, white-patched here and there with crystals of alkali; jumped the main irrigating ditch with a great bound, and took "across lots" over the adobe fences and through the vineyards and the orchards of apple, peach and apricot.

In the farther edge of the last orchard stood a tiny adobe house, where old Reyes had lived in the summer-time to guard her ripening fruits. Since her death it had been abandoned, with the garden, and next summer the Indian congress could allot it to any one who asked, since it would have been left untilled for five years. The house was half hidden from sight—overshadowed on one side by ancient pear trees and on the other by the black cliffs of an advance guard of the lava flow.

As he passed the ruined hut Lelo suddenly stooped and began looking anxiously at a footprint in the soft earth. "That was from no moccasin of the Tee-wahn," he muttered to himself, "for the sole is flatter than ours. And it comes out of the house, where no one ever goes, now that Grand-

mother Reyes is dead. But *this!* For in three steps it is no more the foot of a man, but of a beast—going even to the bushes where I saw the Enchanted Burro that morning”—and all of a tremble, Lelo leaned up against the wall of the house. It was all he could do to keep from turning and bolting for home—and you need not laugh at him. The bow-case at his side was from the tawny mountain lion Lelo had slain with his own hands in the canons of the Tetilla; and when Reftigio, the youngest medicine-man, fell wounded in the forefront of the fight at Tajique, it was Lelo who had lumbered forward and brought him away in his arms, saving his life and hair from the Cumanche knife. But it takes a braver man to stand against his own superstitions than to face wild beast or wilder savage; and now, though Lelo did not flee, his knees smote together and the blood seemed to have left his head dry and over-light. He sat down, so weak was he; and, with back against the wall, he tried to gather his scattered thoughts.

At that very moment, if Lelo had turned his head a very little more to the left and looked at one particular rift in the thorny greasewoods that choked the foot of the cliff, he might have seen two dark, hungry eyes fixed upon him; but Lelo was not looking that way so much as to the corner of the cliff. There he would have to pass to the field; and it was just around that corner that he had seen the Enchanted Burro. “And there also I have seen the mouth of a cave, where they say the ogres used to live and where no one dares to enter”—and he shivered again, like one half frozen. Then he did look back to the left, but saw nothing, for the eyes were no longer there. Only, a few rods farther to the left, and where Lelo could not see for the wall at his back, the tall, white ears of a burro were moving quietly along in the bushes, which hid the rest of its body. Now and then the animal stopped and cocked up its ears, as if to listen; and its eyes rose over the bush, shining with a deep, strange light. Just beyond was the low adobe wall which separated Reyes’s garden from the next—running from the foot of the cliff down past the old house.

To go on to the field needed even more courage than to keep from fleeing for home; and stubborn as he was, Lelo was trying to muster up legs and heart to proceed. He even rose to his feet and drew back his elbows fiercely, straining the muscles of his chest, where there seemed to be such a weight. Just around the corner of the house, at that same moment, a burro’s head, with white ears and a blazed face, rose noiselessly above the adobe fence, and seeing nothing, a pair of black hoofs came up, and in a swift bound the animal was over the wall—so lightly that even the sharp Indian ears not fifteen feet away heard nothing of it.

But if Lelo did not notice, a sharper watcher did. “*Kay-éé-w’yoo!*” cried a complaining voice, and a brown bird with broad wings and a big, round head went fluttering from its perch on the roof. Lelo started violently, and then smiled at himself. “It is only *teconlôte*,” he muttered, “the little owl that lives with the *túsas*,⁸ and they say he is very wise. To see where he went.

The boy stole around the corner of the house, but the owl was nowhere to be seen, and he started back.

As he turned the angle again, he caught sight of a burro’s head just peeping from around the other corner; and Lelo felt the blood sinking from his face. The beast gave a little start and then dropped its head to a bunch of alfalfa that was green at the corner. But this did not relieve Lelo’s terror. It was Paloma—dead Paloma—now the Witch Burro. There was no mistaking the *jovero* face. And plain it was, too, that this was no longer burro-true, but one of the accursed spirits in burro shape. Those eyes! They seemed, in that swift flash in which they had met Lelo’s, to be sunk far, far into the skull; and he was sure that deep in them he saw a dull gleam of red. And the ears and head—they were touched with death, too! Their skin seemed hard and ridgy as a

⁸ Prairie dogs.

rawhide, instead of fitting as the skin does in life. So, also, was the neck; but no more was to be seen for the angle of the wall.

There are men who die at seventy without having lived so long or suffered so much as Lelo lived and suffered in those few seconds. His breath refused to come, and his muscles seemed paralyzed. This, then, was the Enchanted Burro—the witch that had slain the captain of war, and his lieutenants, and many more. And now he was come for Lelo—for though he nosed the alfalfa, one grim eye was always on the boy. So, no doubt, he had watched his other victims—but from *behind*, for not one of them had ever moved. And with that thought a sudden rush of blood came pricking like needles in Lelo's head.

“No one of them saw him, else they had surely fought! And shall I give myself to him like a sheep? Not if he were *ten* witches!” And with the one swift motion of all his life, the lad dropped on one knee, even as hand and hand clapped notch to bowstring, and, in a mighty tug, drew the arrow to the head.

Lightning-like as was his move, the burro understood, and hastily reared back—but a hair too late. The agate-tipped shaft struck midway of its neck with a loud tap as upon a drum, and bored through and through till the feathers touched the skin. The animal sprang high in air, with so wild and hideous a scream as never came from burro's throat before, and fell back amid the alfalfa, floundering and pawing at its neck.

But Lelo had waited for no more. Already he was over the wall and running like a scared mustang, the bow gripped in his left hand, his right clutching the bow-case, whose tawny tail leaped and fluttered behind him. One-Eyed Quico could have made it to the pueblo no faster than the town slow-poke, who burst into the plaza and the porch of the governor's house, gasping:

“The Enchanted Burro! I have—killed—him!”

Fifteen minutes later the new war captain, the medicine men, the governor, and half the rest of the men of the pueblo were entering Reyes's garden, and Lelo was allowed to walk with *the principales*. All were very grave, and some a little pale—for it was no laughing matter to meddle with the fiend, even after he was dead. There lay the burro, motionless. No pool of blood was around; but the white feathers of the arrow had turned red. Cautiously they approached, till suddenly Francisco, the sharpest eyed of trailers, dashed forward and caught up the two hind legs from amid the alfalfa, crying:

“Said I not that he tipped the hoofs? With reason!”

For from each ankle five dark, naked toes projected through a slit in the hide.

“Ay, well bewitched!” exclaimed the war captain. “Pull me the other side!” And at their tug the belly of the burro parted lengthwise, showing only a stiff, dried skin, and inside the cavity a swart body stripped to the breech-clout. Alongside lay arrows and a strong bow of buffalo horn, with alight copper hatchet and a keen scalping knife.

“*Sácalo!*” ordered the war captain; but it was easier said than done. They bent the stubborn rawhide well apart; but not until one had run his knife up the neck of the skin and cut both ends of Lelo's arrow could they haul out the masquerader. The shaft had passed through his throat from side to side, pinning it to the rawhide, and there he had died.

When the slippery form was at last dragged forth, and they saw its face, there was a startled murmur through the crowd; for even without the long scalp lock and the vermilion face-paint, there were many there who would have known the Cumanche medicine man, whose brother was the chief that fell at Tajique. He, too, had been taken prisoner, and had taunted his captors and promised to pay them, and in the night had escaped, leaving one sentinel dead and another wounded.

The Enchanted Burro was all very plain now. The plains conjurer, knowing well by habit how to play on superstitious fears, had used poor Paloma as the instrument of his revenge—hiding the carcass and drying the skin quickly on a frame with hot ashes, so that it stood perfectly in shape by itself. The bones of the fore legs he had left in, to be managed with his hands; and in the dark or amid grass, no one would have noticed the peculiarity of the hind legs. He had only to pry open the slit in the belly and crawl in, and the stiff hide closed after him. Thus he had wreaked the vengeance for which, unaccompanied, he had followed the Pueblos back to their village. In the cave behind the greasewoods were the scalps of his victims, drying on little willow hoops; but instead of going to deck a Cumanche lodge in the great plains, they were tenderly buried in the old churchyard, restored to their proper owners.

After all these years there still are in the pueblo many tales of the Enchanted Burro, nothing lost by the re-telling. As for the skin itself, it lies moth-eaten in the dark storeroom of the man who has been first assistant war captain for twenty years, beginning his novitiate the very day he finished a witch and a Cumanche with a single arrow.