

The Tale of the Toreador

by George Albert Leddy

**IF YOU WANT TO READ OF MOONLIT DELLS,
OF ROSES RED, OF VIOLETS BLUE;
THEN LOOK ELSEWHERE, DON'T LINGER HERE,
THIS BALLAD IS NOT MEANT FOR YOU.**

*This is the story I heard one night, by the man who stumbled in;
With the old bandanna 'round his neck, and he ragged scar on his chin;
And the cowhide boots with copper snoots, and an empty gut within.*

Let me sit here awhile by the fire, it's cold as the devil tonight.
I've mushed all the day through the mire; I'm sick, and I long for a sight;
Of some face that will smile at the meeting, some voice that will ring with a cheer;
Some hand I can clasp in a greeting, of a soul who will welcome me near;
For a man from the trails who will pity, another who's down on his pins;
Who will buy me a drink, then I'll tell you, of a world and it's many sins;
A world that is not for the weakling; a world, that's a world for men.

There's a land where the hot sun is heartless, where the sands seem to glory in pain.
They that know it, they hate it, they curse it; and yet, they will go back again;
Like the dog that is whipped by the master, the critter once burned by the brand;
The outcast, the dope-fiend, the drunkard—will return at the word of command.
'Tis the spirit of those who have perished; the call is: "Come share in my fate!"
'Tis strange, but somehow 'fore you know it, you're back in the land that you hate;
Back, and you stick, and you linger; you ponder, you wonder, you wait.

Such to me was the curse of that Hell-land, it held me a miserable slave;
All its horrors were joys in my madness, my hopes were as dark as the grave.
But God, it was wild and I loved it; its vastness, its freedom, its ways;
The flair and the glare of the dance-hall; the women, the wine, and the maize;
The cards, and the dice, and the betting; the 'truce' that is held by the gun.
Well if groping with death is a pleasure, then I've had my share of the fun;
Playing, and betting, and cheating; to win, then to lose what I'd won.

In the midst of that music and laughter, the whirl and the twirl of the dance;
Shown a face that was bright as the morning, a little of love in the glance;
That I met, and I knew she was waiting; the dance done, I called her aside;
It was love, and her promise she gave me; on the morrow, I'd call her my Bride.
But a Half-breed, green-eyed in his passion, had followed us into the street;
There a shot in the dark told his story—my Sweetheart lay dead at my feet.
Stilled was her heart so loving; stilled was her voice so sweet.

Then the wild cries-of-hell were around me, I tried to explain it at first;
But I soon saw that pleading was useless, the Half-breed had left me his curse.
Soon the blood-thirsty crowd had me silenced, my lips were as dumb as the dead.
They had quickly prepared for a lynching, a rope was thrown over my head.
But Two Gun, the sheriff, then entered; I cried, "I am innocent, Sir!"
"He's a liar, he killed her, I saw it!" was howled by the Mexican cur:
A cur, a fiend, and a liar; a sneak, and a murderer.

I was locked in a jail—God have mercy—on those who had been there before;
Some were living apart from their reason, some rottin' there on the floor.
There were smears on the wall where in anguish, some battered their heads so to die;
And the hair and the brains marked a tombstone, o'er forms that were withered and dry.
On the floor of the den crouched a madman, making love to a skeleton-frame;
Of some woman who'd once queened the dance-hall: in the end, a prison, and shame;
Shame when her beauty had vanished; pride while her beauty had reigned.

While I sat there to me it was Heaven, compared to the noise from without:
Those drunken crazed half-breeded devils, who circled my prison about;
Who thirsted my blood like a wolf-pack, who yearned for my heart as their pay;
But my comrades within were companions, I loved them ere morning was gray.
When the rats came to feed on a carcass, I frightened them off by the score;
To the skeleton, I sang some ragtime; he grinned, so I sang him some more.
Sang with the heart of a victor; sang till my throat was sore.

With the first streak of dawn came the Sheriff, with a posse to drive off the swine;
Who were waiting to swill-down my life-blood, who swore it was their life or mine.
There were shots, there were howls, there were curses; foul oaths that I feign to repeat.
Then the bolt, it was drawn, and the sunlight, streamed 'cross the floor at my feet.
Oh God! how in hatred, I cursed it; it's brightness had brought me once more;
To the life that was cursed with my badness; I loved the black dungeon much more.
Its horrors had filled me with pity; a pity I'd ne're felt before.

Then my trial was a stern, and a short one; I told them the story all through;
But the Half-breed, he called me a liar; and swore that he saw, and he knew.

But the Sheriff who sat in my judgment, was fair and I saw in his glance,
That he doubted the words of the Half-breed, and decided to give me a chance.
Then he spoke, and his voice was a challenge: "To prove that your story is true,
You will fight the Mad-bull in the bull-pit—to win, means your freedom to you."

To freedom, to light, and to gladness; or to live, and to suffer anew.

Well the news it spread fast like the fire, that lowers the grass on the plains;
That herds the wild cattle together, that fires the blood in their veins;
That stampedes them on to the river, that hurls them on into the flood;
Then stops at the banks; its fiery fangs, shoot out o'er the river like blood.
Well such spread the news of the bullfight, the arena was jammed to the gate;
I stood all alone in the bullpit; awaiting, in silence, my fate:
In wonder, in joy, and in gladness; in horror, in madness, in hate.

Well my soul seemed to die, then awaken, in a land that is strange, and afar;
I saw not the glare of the bright-lights, I saw not the things as they are.
It was dark and I stood in a valley, by a deep raging river of blood;
Where the rapids were raging and roaring, o'er the bones that were lodged in the flood.
On the banks all around was a gathering, of Skeletons, grinning and bold;
And there among them a face I remembered, smeared with the curse of a soul:
Sneered, and blanched, and frightened; trembling, painful, and cold.

There are men with the minds of an adder; they crouch, and they crawl, and they spring;
They hiss, and they spit, and they poison; they slink, and they cringe, and they sting;
They grin, and their grin is a challenge; they sneer, and it drives you insane;
Till your soul is o'er pregnant with hatred, and your heart is a-deadened to pain.
Such was he whom I saw in my madness; who tempted me sorely until;
My soul it was filled with a badness, my heart was a-longing to kill:
Gruesome, morose, and despairing; helpless, hopeless, and still.

When the Devil arose from the river, and drew back the gates of the flood;
From whence came a monstrous critter, lashing and splashing in blood.
His tail lashed his sides, and he bellowed; I stood like a man in a spell;
What I saw was a terrible demon, with eyes like the windows of Hell.
In a moment, the brute was upon me; his hot breath was singeing my brow.
But I fought, God, I fought like a demon; I fought like I'd always known how;
I fought and—Oh God, how I loved it!—the blood of the beast in my veins;
Had filled me with longing to conquer, I felt a strange joy in my pains:
A joy, a pride, and a glory; the honor a fighter gains.

Again and again, he would charge me; again and again, I would score;
Till the point of my sabre struck squarely, his eye was a pool on the floor.
He bellowed, he pawed, and he snorted; my foot struck the slime, and I fell;
Then he bounded—his foot struck my chin there—see the cloven-foot brand-of-Hell.
Then the crowd wildly roared, “Kill the critter!” I shot, but the bullet went higher;
And the maggots grew fat on the carcass, of the Bastard that called me a liar.
Now his bones they are white on the desert, blanched by the hot sun’s ire.

The Bull seemed to know he was conquered, he slunk back again to his pen.
My mind cleared, and once more I was living; a man, in the world of men.
Then the hoots, and the sneers, and the snarling; the curses, the taunts, and the jeers;
Of the Mexican hounds who were longing, to see me torn-up by the steer.
But I fled from the glare of the bright lights—pray God, I’ll go back never more!
But today, if you go there, they’ll tell you—*The Tale of the Toreador*.
