

Spring 1985

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Recommended Citation

Horton, R. L. (1985) "Saint Ferdinand Strikes Back," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 24 , Article 52.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss24/52>

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Saint Ferdinand Strikes Back

The Church of Our Lady Sin Peccado was built on top of a mosque. Carved over the entrance is an expression in Arabic: "Life is much shorter than death." The church is five blocks and one plaza from the great Cathedral of Seville, one of the largest in Europe and the final resting place of Saint Ferdinand and Christopher Columbus. The Church of Our Lady has, in addition to a bell tower, a clock which the local people say is correct at least twice a day.

The bell hangs outside the tower and is rung by a life-size cast iron statue of Saint Ferdinand, patron and savior of Seville. When the hour occurs, a wooden door in the tower opens and Ferdinand, pulled along a track by a chain, follows a short catwalk to the bell, which he strikes with the crozier in his right hand.

The clock was maintained by Juan Rozas. Juan was sixty-eight years old and, were it not for the clock tower, would have had no place to sleep.

Juan's tiny monthly pension lasted hardly three weeks. After tobacco, wine, and the bullfights, there was very little money for food. In exchange for a steeple over his head Juan kept the clock running. Near the end of the month, Juan lived on oranges which grew freely on many trees in the neighborhood. At the cafe across the street on the Pedro Corral, Juan could count on someone standing him to a glass of calvados and some barnacle tapas. And he had a place to sleep.

It was not so important that the clock always be exactly correct, only that it keep moving, so that on the hour Saint Ferdinand, the guardian angel of Seville, would come out of the bell tower and strike the hours. When the hours were struck, everyone in the neighborhood knew that things were as usual, which was the way they liked them.

Keeping the clock running was not difficult. The mechanism consisted of weights and counterweights. Once a day, when the weights descended almost to the floor, Juan pulled down the counterweights and the system was recharged.

Juan's problem had begun five months before, on the twelfth of January, the day his brother Carlos died. On this day Saint Ferdinand refused to budge from the tower. Juan tried to push open the wooden door. Finally, using an iron bar that stood in a corner, he pried the door open. Still Saint Ferdinand wouldn't move. Juan went out on the catwalk with his steel bar and struck

the bell. As the next hour approached, Juan pried at Saint Ferdinand but he refused to move. There seemed to be nothing else to do, so Juan went out the door and again struck the bell.

Juan studied the pendulum and weights. He noticed how they were connected to gears with trip levers, and these gears turned other wheels which in turn turned other gears. Somehow related to all this were pulleys and chains which reacted to the gears and every so often turned some gears of their own. On and on the wheels and gears rose toward the ceiling of the clock tower. There was no good reason why Saint Ferdinand had ever worked. Carlos, the best blacksmith in Andalusia, had forged most of these parts by hand thirty years before, when the clock had been overhauled. Because of Carlos' excellent work, Juan was chosen to be the keeper of the clock of Saint Ferdinand. And now his benefaction, his free room, was in jeopardy. Juan had never really considered any of this before. Only that the weights descended and the counterweights ascended. Carlos had taken care of everything else.

If Juan reported this malfunction, the authorities would send a clock repairman, who in turn might recommend a real maintenance man. While he thought, Juan went out every hour and struck the bell. At the end of the first day of Saint Ferdinand's retirement, Juan decided the clock was too fast. So he added more weights to the counterweights, and the whole system slowed down. The next day had only eight hours. Juan sat in the cafe across the street and watched the clock as he sipped his complementary calvados and ate his barnacles.

After buying Juan a drink, a neighbor would inquire, "Ah, my friend, and how is it with our patron saint?"

Raising his glass toward the open door through which Saint Ferdinand could still be seen in the tower, Juan said, "What the centuries have done cannot be undone overnight."

When the hands on the clock drew near the hour Juan would rise, saying, "I must go and see if Saint Ferdinand is any better." He would cross the street, enter the church, climb to the clock tower, strike the bell, and return to the cafe.

After five months of striking the bell eight times a day, Juan was ready marry Carlos' widow, Maria Garza. It was the duty of the next of kin to assume family responsibility, and Maria in her lovely home could use some looking after. The poor woman was losing her eyesight. She had picked and fed Carlos a pound of toadstools, thinking them morels. Juan sent a message to Maria, asking permission to call on her the following Sunday for the purpose of taking over his rightful family obligations—once the mourning period had ended, of course.

Juan hated to travel. The farthest he had been was Cadiz, a seaport 150 kilometers from Seville. But now he realized he hated having to be in the same spot eight times a day, ringing the bell every three hours. What could one do in three hours? Certainly one could not go to the bullring and see more than

one corrida. One could not sit and enjoy a glass of wine with friends without having to jump up every three hours and strike the bell. One might as well be a statue in the tower like old Ferdinand.

By return messenger came a basket with cheeses, bread, two bottles of Montilla, and a note from Maria saying she would be honored to receive Juan on Sunday.

Juan cut off chunks of bread and cheese and washed it down with the wine. It was nearly midnight. He slumped down onto his bedroll and looked around the tower as though for the last time. Everywhere he looked were empty bottles and orange peels. Ah, he thought, how can a person live in a place like this? He was exhausted from bell ringing. The day's calvados, followed by the two bottles of wine, made his tiredness just bearable. If it weren't for tomorrow and more calvados and Maria's fine house, and fine wines, and delicious chesses. . . . If there were any clocks in Maria's house, he was not tending them.

His glance fell on Saint Ferdinand. "And, you, my lazy friend. What will you do when your loyal slave, Juan, is gone? You will go back to work. You will work or they will come and make you work. Everyone is not so softhearted as Juan. You will move or they will take that iron bar and they will stick it right up. . . ." Juan began to laugh. "Yes, my friend, then you will move."

It was after twelve. Juan got the iron bar out of the corner and climbed up onto the landing. As he passed Saint Ferdinand, he gave him a rap on the head and told him to enjoy his siesta.

Juan went out the door and gave the bell a tremendous blow. His fingers stung. The bar seemed to be vibrating in his hands. The bell had never sounded better. Even Juan's feet were tingling. Beneath his feet something was moving. He looked down and the chain drive was advancing. He turned and Saint Ferdinand was coming out of the doorway. The crozier in his right hand was drawn back in the striking position.

Saint Ferdinand came right at Juan. There was nowhere to go. Saint Ferdinand stopped as the bottom of the cast iron statue dragged itself up onto Juan's sandaled feet, crushing most of his toes. Juan screamed in agony and dropped his iron bar. The crozier came down, just missing Juan's head. In panic, Juan dived over the low railing and hung upside down, suspended from the tower only by his mangled feet.

Saint Ferdinand struck the bell eleven more times. Then the statue reversed itself and went back into the clock tower, as Juan fell sixty feet to the cobblestones below.