



# TRANSLATORS' RINCON de TRADUCTORES CORNER



“Christmas Eve in the Hills of Jaruco”

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## Introduction

**“Nochebuena en las lomas de Jaruco”** is the true story of Colonel Alfredo Lima Tardiff and one of his major exploits during Cuba’s War of Independence, better known in the United States as the Spanish-American War (1895-1898). The future officer tried to enlist before the start of the conflict in 1895 and, when accepted, rose rapidly in the ranks, receiving a field-of-battle commission as Colonel for bravery while leading his cavalry unit. When the United States joined the Cubans in the war against Spain after the explosion of the cruiser “Maine” in the harbor of Havana, Cuba, American troops often fought alongside the rebels, as in the famous Battle of San Juan Hill in Santiago de Cuba, in which Col. Lima’s cavalry was involved along with Teddy Roosevelt’s “Rough Riders.”

This account was narrated verbally by the Colonel to his son, Robert F. Lima Rovira, who then told it to his own son, Robert Lima Millares, who gave it written form and presents it here translated into English as “Christmas Eve in the Hills of Jaruco”. The story has been published in its original Spanish form in *Linden Lane Magazine* (Ft. Worth, TX; Winter 2020, 39:4, pp. 30-35).

### About the translator

**Robert Lima** is a Cuban born (1935) prize-winning American poet, internationally known literary critic, bibliographer, playwright and translator. He was twice knighted in Spain. His poems have appeared throughout the U.S. and abroad in periodicals, anthologies, broadsides, the Internet, and in his poetry collections *Fathoms* (1981), *The Olde Ground* (1985), *Mayaland* (1992), *Sardinia / Sardegna* (2000), *Tracking the Minotaur* (2003), *The Pointing Bone* (2008), *The Rites of Stone* (2010), *Self* (2012), *Por caminos errantes* (2014), *CELESTIALS* (2015), *Cancionería Cubana* (2017), *Ikons of the Past. Poetry of the*





*Hispanic Americas* (2018), *Writers on My Watch* (2020), and *ODYSSEY* (2021). His critical studies include works on Lorca, Valle-Inclán, Borges, Surrealism, esoterica, folklore, and comparative drama. He recorded his poetry in English and Spanish for Hispanic Division Archives of The Library of Congress.

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## CHRISTMAS EVE IN THE HILLS OF JARUCO

### *Prelude*

*This is a true account of the deeds of a hero of the Cuban War of Independence, Colonel Alfredo Lima Tardiff. During the struggle for freedom from Spain that lasted from 1895 into 1898, his name was enough to put the Spanish Army into a state of fear wherever he confronted it. His area of operation was in the heart of the Province of Havana, where never a day passed without an encounter with the enemy. Greatly outnumbered, he and his men survived only through his military acumen. Jaruco, the place of this account, was one of the most fortified places the Spaniards had in Cuba. The only man who fought his way into the fortress was General Antonio Maceo, and he had with him the entire force he commanded. ... The Cubans lay siege to the fortified town and set it aflame. But, previously, three men had entered by stealth...*

The Cuban rebels, the *insurrectos*, as the Spaniards called them, were scattered about the terraced hills, commonly called the *Escaleras* or steps, overlooking the valley and the Spanish-garrisoned town of Jaruco.







It was high noon on Christmas Eve. The sun was ablaze in the blue and cloudless sky. The *insurrectos* were depressed. The feast of *Nochebuena*, Christmas Eve, would pass and they would not be able to celebrate it in the traditional way. Except for a few *boniatos*, the sweet potatoes picked from a nearby field, there was nothing else in their camp to eat or with which to toast the birth of the Christ Child.

Late that same morning, perched high above the valley, the rebels spotted a twenty-five-mule pack-train heading towards the fortress of Jaruco. They imagined that the barrels strapped to the mules contained fine wines and that the caravan was also loaded with cases of delicacies, nuts, and *turrones*, the special nougat confection of the season. Their spirits lifted as they saw the possibility of hijacking the convoy of mules but soon realized that it was so heavily guarded that they could not attack it successfully. In near despair, the Cubans saw the mules ride quietly through the valley and enter the gate of the fort.

Since the arrival of the caravan at Jaruco, the boisterous singing of the soldiers at the fort could be heard from the camp of the *insurrectos*. The rebels could only dream of better days when they had feasted on *lechón asado*, the ubiquitous roast piglet, with their families at *Nochebuena*.

Sitting around a roughly-made table, in a broken-down hut, a typical countryside *bohío*, was the general staff of the *insurrectos*. The General, his eyes partly closed, his straw hat bearing the Cuban flag hanging from the back of his neck, was talking to his officers. "There must be a way," he was saying. "There has to be a way to get some of those supplies from the Spaniards!"

One of the high-ranking officers offered to take Jaruco by storm if he could have a thousand men. Another wanted only five hundred and some good cannons. They all had big plans but they had only two hundred men in their unit, not enough to confront the large force at the fortress.





The only officer who had not spoken so far was a small young man, who looked more like a boy than a member of the general staff; it was Colonel Alfredo Lima Tardiff. He was so small that his fellow officers never paid much attention to him outside of the battlefield, where the small officer always turned out to be a big warrior. Three years earlier, he had tried unsuccessfully to join the *insurrectos*, but was refused on account of his age and size. Finally, he succeeded in being admitted into their unit, but only to take care of the horses. He knew that he had to earn the respect of the rebel band.

His opportunity came soon thereafter. During the height of a protracted battle, the young man joined the fight, machete in hand, and did so well that he was accepted as a regular soldier among the *insurrectos*. A few more battles and there were chevrons on his sleeves; eventually, he became an officer and, three years later, a full Colonel for his bravery in the field of battle as a cavalryman.

He knew the grounds so well that, at the height of a battle, he could disappear with his men through the hidden paths of the mountains and the Spaniards were unable to follow him. This created an almost magical aura about him and his men. His mounted regiment was feared and avoided, but his attacks always came unexpectedly, when the Spaniards least expected him to be around. His charges at the point of the machetes became legendary in Cuba.

When all the officers had stated their plans and had been rejected one by one, the Colonel rose from the stool, his *taburete*, and walked meekly to the General's table. "General," he said softly, "if you let me pick a couple of men, I'll bring some mules from Jaruco."

Everybody, including the General himself, burst out laughing, making fun of his bravado. Despite being belittled by the scorn, the Colonel did not lose poise. He waited until they calmed down and then addressed the General again, but this time his voice was strong and firm: "The trouble with all of you is that you want to use force instead of brains to enter Jaruco. That would cost the lives of most of our men, and success is doubtful. I want permission to try a plan I have, and I'm certain it will work. I'll enter the





fort on horseback with my men; we'll be dressed in the Spanish uniforms we've confiscated. We'll work out how to get out and when we do it will be with some mules, wine and *turrón*."

A movement of the General's hand stopped the laughter of his staff. He looked thoughtfully at his Colonel and said: "I believe you are right in that, Colonel. You have done so many things during the time you have been under my command that I'd be disappointed if you did not succeed in what you are proposing. Pick your two men and... God be with you."

Nestor, one of the General's adjutants, was playing cards on the table with the only pack that there was at the camp, and it was so worn and bent that it was miraculous how he could play with them. When the Colonel was about to excuse himself, Nestor said in a mocking voice: "Chico, don't forget to bring me a new pack of cards."

The Colonel turned to face him, responding: "I'll try to do so, Nestor."

A moment later, he was gone. He went to his men and picked Pancho and Cesareo; took them a little way from the *bohío* and explained his plan to them. The men, who worshiped him, cheered loudly, and running to the corral, donned the Spanish uniforms stored there, saddled three horses and started on their way down the slopes, making a big circle around Jaruco to approach the fort by the side gate. It was getting dark by then, as the setting sun was hiding in the mountains, leaving only shadows in the valley where Jaruco lay. When they were a short way from the gate, the three started singing to the tune of Pancho's guitar and acting as if they were drunk. The sentinel was looking straight at them but hearing such drunken singing waited until they were closer to stop them and ask them for the password. Almost at the gate, the sentinel shouted his warning: "*Alto! ¿Quién vive?* Stop right there and say the password! Stop or I'll shoot all of you!"

The trio sang still louder and kept on coming until they were in front of the gate. Then a hoarse, alcoholic voice answered: "Come and open the gate! How dare you keep Colonel Navarro and his adjutants waiting!"





The sentinel, caught by surprise at the mention of the notorious Spanish officer's name, replied: "You must be completely drunk to talk about the Devil himself on a holy night like this."

Instead of answering, the trio started their singing again, but this time they sang and played an obscene song that the Spaniards had made up about their Colonel Navarro. The sentinel, tired of it all, finally threw the gate open and, cursing every one of them, let them pass.

They kept on the main street for a short time until they were out of sight of the sentinel and then turned sharply into a deserted alley. The drunkards composed themselves, drew their machetes and setting their horses at a trot, traveled quickly around the populated section to the rear of the stables where the mules were kept. Dismounting from their horses, they saw with delight that the Spaniards had been in such a hurry to taste the wines that they had not unloaded twenty of the mules.

Seeing a light in the front room, they calmly approached the window and, looking inside, saw four soldiers playing cards. It was the night watch, supposedly on duty while the rest of the troops enjoyed the drinks and delicacies of *Nochebuena*. The Colonel came to the door, opened it gently and walking in, his two men right behind him, surprised the guards. A moment later the four men lay on the floor, dead. The Colonel took the cards from the table without even wiping the blood off them and put them in his pocket. Now they went to the corrals and tied all the mules head-to-tail and led them out into the deserted alley.

Pancho took up his guitar again and, while the other two waited in the darkness, made his way to the same gate where they had entered the fort, singing aloud. When he was near the sentinel, he distracted him with drunken babbling. The sentinel, cursing again, started to open the gate to get rid of the drunkard, when a machete stroke felled him. The Colonel and Cesareo rushed the mules out and made a clear getaway.





Their timing was perfect; shortly after their exit, somebody discovered the four dead guards and sounded the alarm to close all gates. A few shots sounded dangerously close to the raiders, but by the time the Spaniards realized fully what had happened, the trio and their caravan had melted into the pitch darkness of the Jaruco hills.

The Colonel could get around the trails, the *Escaleras*, with his eyes blindfolded, so he did not have much trouble in finding his way back to the camp of the *insurrectos*. As soon as they dismounted and tied the mules, he approached the General's hut, went quietly inside and sat in his *taburete*. They all stared unbelieving, yet reaching for their weapons, at the Spanish officer who had intruded so silently. Their concerns eased when Nestor addressed the Colonel in his usual mocking voice: "Well, *Chico*, did you bring my cards?"

The Colonel put his hand in his pocket and, drawing out the cards, threw the bloodied deck on the table. The officers jumped to their feet, but Nestor laughed out: "Don't kid me, I know you, you had this pack with you all this time."

Smiling, the Colonel answered: "*Amigo* Nestor, perhaps anybody can hide a pack of cards, but it will be a very good magician who can hide twenty loaded mules."

Hearing this, the General jumped to his feet, grabbed the Colonel by the lapels and asked: "Is it true?" At that moment, Pancho and Cesareo, who were waiting at the door, came in and explained modestly what had happened since they had left four hours earlier. There had been a lightning strike, they all marveled. All the officers rushed out and upon seeing the mules loaded with the items, started cheering and hugging the three heroes.

That Holy Night, the *insurrectos* had a big *Nochebuena*... thanks to the brave little Colonel and two daring soldiers who trusted and followed him on a dangerous mission into enemy territory.



### *Aftermath*

*Colonel Alfredo Lima Tardiff went on to fight in many other battles, leading his cavalry to numerous victories, including the famed battle of San Juan Hill, where he and his men fought alongside the Rough Riders of Theodore Roosevelt.*

*Upon the insurrectos' victory over Spain in 1898, the retired hero was honored by the new government with a series of appointments, including Consul of Cuba in Los Angeles. The famed actor Charlie Chaplin, center, dedicated the photograph below to him, who is standing slightly behind the actor's right.*







## *Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner*

Disponibles en/available at: <http://cervantesobservatorio.fas.harvard.edu/en/translation-corner>

1. RT/TC 001 (2019). "A Letter of Federico García Lorca to his Parents, 1935". Author: Federico García Lorca (Spain); Translator: Christopher Maurer; Genre: Letter.
2. RT/TC 002 (2019). "Like a Night with Legs Wide Open". Author: José Alcántara Almánzar (Dominican Republic); Translator: Luis Guzmán Valerio; Genre: Short Story.
3. RT/TC 003 (2019). "In the Parks, at Dusk" and "I Only Think of You". Author: Marina Mayoral (Spain); Translator: María Socorro Suárez Lafuente; Genre: Short Story.
4. RT/TC 004 (2020). "The Guide through Death" and "The Fat Lady". Author: Guadalupe Dueñas (Mexico); Translator: Josie Hough; Genre: Short Story.
5. RT/TC 005 (2020). "The Case of the Unfaithful Translator". Author: José María Merino (Spain); Translator: Erin Goodman; Genre: Short Story.
6. RT/TC 006 (2020). "The Guerrilla Fighter" and "May as Well Call it Quits". Author: Albalucía Ángel Marulanda (Colombia); Translator: Daniel Steele Rodríguez; Genre: Short Story.
7. RT/TC 007 (2020). "Miguel Hernández' Speech to His Companions in the Ocaña Jail". Author: Miguel Hernández (Spain); Translator: Constance Marina; Genre: Speech.
8. RT/TC 008 (2020). "On the Road to Houmt Souk". Author: Soledad Puértolas (Spain); Translator: Francisca González Arias; Genre: Short Story.
9. RT/TC 009 (2020). *Rincón de Traductores / Translators' Corner – Volume 1: Compilation 2019-2020*. Various Authors; Various Translators.
10. RT/TC 010 (2020). *Waiting for the Revolution: Cuba, the Unfinished Journey* (excerpt). Author: Gustavo Gac-Artigas (Chile); Translator: Andrea G. Labinger; Genre: Chronicle.





11. RT/TC 011 (2020). “A Bad Girl”. Author: Montserrat Ordóñez (Colombia);  
Translator: Clara Eugenia Ronderos; Genre: Short Story.
12. RT/TC 012 (2020). “Claudia and the Cats”. Author: Ivanna Chapeta (Guatemala);  
Translator: Lindsay Romanoff Bartlett; Genre: Short Story.
13. RT/TC 013 (2021). *Song of Being and Nonbeing*. Author: Santiago Alba Rico (Spain);  
Translator: Carolina Finley Hampson; Genre: Poetry.