

*The Seventh  
Acolyte Reader*



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# Old Spanish Customs

by Alan Edward

*"In central Andalucia, north of the Guadalquivir and high among the pine-forests and sierras, an ancient puberty ritual is still commonly enacted. On his thirteenth birthday, a boy is conducted to a spot in a clearing hallowed by centuries of use; there a growing sapling is split and the boy is lifted and passed naked through it thrice, marking thus his passage from childhood. The sapling is cut and re-planted, symbolizing the hope that the boy, like the young tree, will grow up straight, strong and healthy. The ceremony, known as the **llegada**, or 'arrival', is normally in the hands of the local 'Wise Woman', still a powerful custodian of folklore and the healing arts; a male relative of the boy usually assists with the ceremony."*

Brundle stopped reading and looked up.

"It's quite a full account. Have a look if you like – though you probably know all about it anyhow."

"Not really." The boy turned the book around, then ran his fingers along the lines, mouthing the words silently.

His English was coming along. But then, he was the main reason why Brundle's temporary post at the English school in Los Santos de Maimona had prolonged itself for a year and seven months. And, even after this time, there was still that catch in his breath, the tightening behind his third shirt button when the boy asked him a question in class, when that wondrously dark pair of Hispanic eyes were lifted to his in puzzlement, in inquiry, in delight at having a correct answer.

His Emilio. Though 'his' was pushing it a bit. Indeed, if possession were in question, the object was surely Brundle; even at break-time, he took his lunch out to the playground just to watch his graceful *innocente* play football, to watch him leap, bounce and dive, to marvel at the turn and twist of those nimble, tight-clad, blue-jeaned hips...

Ah, Emilio. And now – wonder of wonders – those lingering moments in the classroom after the others had gone. Brundle was under no illusion here. It had been made clear that the reason for this wondrously heightened motivation was a proposed family visit to

England. Yet, to contemplate for an hour each day the slender, slightly grubby finger moving on the page, the smooth fall of black hair across the olive brow and softly curved cheeks, the white, even teeth... The reason was, quite simply, a technicality.

Yet Brundle was a little surprised when one day the boy, closing his book, lingered for a moment and then, slightly pink, asked quickly, "Senor Brundle, will you come to my *llegada*?"

Brundle sat quite still; the image that came instantly made him blink, draw a quick breath, swallow.

The boy, misinterpreting, said, "Oh, you do not have to, Senor. But we can ask a friend, or a teacher, or somebody... if you like."

And which of the three was Brundle? Best not to ask. "Of course – I'm flattered," he said. And so it was that he had got the heavy leather-bound book on Old Spanish Customs from the library.

The boy finished reading the passage.

"It's just like that?" asked Brundle.

Emilio handed the book back; he nodded.

"Won't you be... shy?"

The boy flushed again, then said, "Well – is nearly all family, really." He hesitated. "Senor Brundle. I – I wanted to ask..."

"Yes?"

"If – if you help me, perhaps? You see, I must read too. I should have a re- re- oh, the word I forget."

"A rehearsal?"

"Yes, I want to do good. Tomorrow I bring the book?"

"Of course. We can go through it here after class."

Emilio hesitated, looking round the classroom. "Tomorrow yes. But – but is too bright here."

"Eh?" Brundle was puzzled.

"Is too many windows. If we can go where there is curtains we can do it just on the day. You know. And then I be – I be not shy with you. Is okay?"

Brundle sat down for a moment. The wonder, then, was to be manifest even sooner than he had imagined. Though whether he would have been able to wait for a whole week was questionable. He nodded, then at length he said, "My office upstairs would be fine. We can draw the curtains there."

Monday evening. Boy with book bounded upstairs, boy grinning cheerfully. "Hope you got warm in room, yes?"

Emilio thumbed through the book and found the page. "I stand on log, I read, then they lift me through the tree, then I read again. Then we have party. Is good."

"How many will there be?"

"Maybe fifty. We are big family." The boy pulled over a low stool. "This is log. And now – is big moment."

He unzipped his anorak and pulled it off, next his T-shirt. Then, a little pink-cheeked, he looked at the man, hesitating, momentarily bashful.

"You help me?" he asked quietly.

You bet.

"If you like," said Brundle. Emilio sat on the stool and Brundle untied and tugged off his trainers, then his socks.

"On the stool, then."

He skimmed off Emilio's T-shirt, then the boy unbuttoned his jeans and Brundle peeled them down... Football-brown knees shading to petal-pale thighs which (purely anthropological note) go *all* the way up. The boy slid his hands into his underpants and stopped, looked at Brundle again.

More help needed. Sliding his own hands in a comfortable distance, Brundle gently skinned the sun-ripe fruit, cupped palms slithering deliriously, right the way down.

"Step out, then," said Brundle hoarsely. It had been *bound* to look as good as all the rest – especially seen at a distance of fully eight inches, but that subterranean electric shock he hadn't quite expected. He quickly turned and folded the boy's few clothes on a chair.

"Senor... you – you tell me something?"

"Yes, of course."

"But – you look first, Senor."

"Yes?" Brundle looked up, a little puzzled, then moistened his lips again.

"You – think they laugh at me, Senor, no?" asked Emilio, a little pink-cheeked.

Brundle hesitated for a moment, then fetched the book and brought it over and handed it to the boy. "Do your reading, *chico*. I can't answer for the others, but speaking just for me, Jeremy Brundle, I hope it's a long reading – very long."

Emilio's dark eyes were fixed on him for a moment or two, then the color in the boy's cheeks deepened. "So I read now," he said quietly, "just for you, Jeremy Brundle."

The soft treble, with its gentle Mediterranean accents, rose and fell in the room like an enchantment. When Emilio had finished, he handed the book back to Brundle, but appeared oddly reluctant to get off the stool. Which was okay with Brundle; such a living sculpture could occupy the center of his room for a millennium or two, no problem.

The boy shifted from one foot to another.

"Senor Brundle, you mind if I ask you something else?"

"Course not."

The two exquisitely sensitive barometers of Emilio-emotion were distinctly cherry-bright now.

"The last year – at my brother's *llegada*, the Wise Woman, when she lift him, she – she touch it..." – he pointed – "...and when she touch it – you know..." – another expressive movement of the finger – "...and – and everyone laugh. You think, if she touch mine, that happen with me? Then perhaps they – they laugh too at me – and I am most shamed, Senor Brundle."

"I don't see why," said Brundle, then continued carefully, "In any case, everyone's reactions are different, you know. In your case, if anyone were to – well, what I mean – *has* anyone – *does* anyone...?"

"Oh no. Well, just my mamma, when she bath me. But is different."

"Quite."

The boy looked at the carpet. "But if it was the Wise Woman, or – or maybe – someone else, you think...?"

Brundle, slowly, crouched on to one knee. "It is prudent, I think, to check for such eventualities well in advance."

"Eh?"

"Like so..." Brundle lightly brushed with his fingertips, up and down. The boy gasped, his toes splayed, his entire body tightened like a bowstring.

"Was it like this?" Brundle asked.

"Was – w-was more."

Brundle cupped his hand; it slid up and down; his other hand moved behind the boy; the fingers stroked, searched, caressed....

"Si, si!"

"Yes, I certainly do!" murmured Brundle. "Perhaps – perhaps one should have a word with the Wise Woman, eh?"

The boy shook his head decisively; Brundle had dropped his hands, but they were taken in a tight grip and pulled back again.

"*P'favor, p'favor!*" breathed the boy.

Brundle lowered Emilio to stand on the floor; then he knelt again, one hand on the boy's rear cheeks to press him against his own thigh, then his right hand took a firmer grip and moved vigorously. While the other slid up, down, then a finger entered the warm cleft, turned, twisted...

Emilio jerked, ah-ed. His arms clamped round Brundle's neck.

"*Si, si – mas, mas!*"

Both the man's hands worked hard. The boy groaned, laughed, shouted, writhed, thrashed, then suddenly he shrieked and convulsed – once, then again. The arms had tightened like a vice, then they and the boy's whole body relaxed, infinitely slowly. The arms kept hold for a moment longer, then the boy gave Brundle a hard wet kiss.

"Another Spanish custom of which I greatly approve," said Brundle. "And before I get up and fetch you your pants, one for you – right here..."

Emilio giggled. "An English custom?"

"*Our* custom – from now on. If you like."

"If I like? *Cla-a-ro!*"

The ceremony was on a warm pine-scented afternoon, the site an oval clearing in the forest two kilometers above the town. There trestle-tables had been set out, lanterns flickered in the surprisingly gloomy corners between the trunks, a long barbecue crackled and smoked, *rioja* flowed extravagantly. The English 'professor' was an honored guest: steaks from the barbecue were pressed upon him, wine was poured, his hand was shaken and his back slapped.

At length... A hush as a freshly-washed Emilio, hair combed, was led out in a long ceremonial robe. In a moment he was divested of the robe and then – a pale, nude, exquisitely slim wood-elf – he stood on the tree-stump, faintly pink-cheeked, while an old crone, doubtless the Wise Woman, brought him the leather-covered volume of ritual. As Emilio stood, Brundle heard a faint murmur – of approval? – from the women around him. One of the younger women said something indistinguishable and two of them giggled, but they were reprovably hushed by an elder. Emilio read the passage evenly, and faultlessly as far as Brundle could discern, in the soft Andalusian dialect that he was only beginning to understand. A moment later, as in the old ritual, the boy was gently lifted by the crone and an older brother and passed three times through the split sapling amid muttered mumbo-jumbo from the woman and clapping from the celebrants, most slightly drunk by now.

Then the crone lifted Emilio on to the stump again. Her voice rose to

a half-chant, half-wail, then she leaned forward and her fingers began purposefully to stroke, brush, stroke...

Brundle, not knowing he did it, slowly rose to his feet.

The old woman's action had its effect. The crowd laughed, cheered and clapped; more wine was poured. Emilio's eyes sparkled; he was flushed again, though not now, Brundle thought, with embarrassment.

The old woman's gnarled right hand took a tight grip, then her wrist began to move energetically; her other hand slid behind. Brundle craned; she had crooked her index finger; surely it was not where his had been yesterday....

Others around Brundle had stood as well. In the hard, practiced and relentless hands of the old peasant woman, the boy writhed, jumped, sobbed, whistled, hollered. And, in a matter of seconds, he clamped his arms round the old woman's neck, whiplashed, and a banshee-scream rang through the clearing, then another...

The crowd clapped, cheered, roared.

"*Bravo! Que guay!*"

Corks popped, glasses clinked.

"Bravo, bravo!"

Very slowly Emilio straightened. The Wise Woman was still mumbling – something about seed and Mother Earth – and doing something peculiar with a handful of grass.

But the boy's oddly bright eyes met Brundle's over the row of heads in between them. He grinned. Wickedly.

And at last Brundle realized that the boy had known all along. The 'rehearsal' had been well planned – very well indeed.

Cheeky monkey. He would have to deal with him severely tomorrow.

Which he did.

His arm was stiff for quite some time afterwards.