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## Last Train from Cuernavaca

*By Lucia St. Clair Robson*

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Christmastime, 1913: Grace Knight's elegant hotel in Cuernavaca is the place to see and be seen. Mexico's native and foreign luminaries flock there to dance to the new beat of ragtime under the ballroom's twinkling electric lights.

Outside the city, violence is looming. Federal soldiers raid the hacienda of Don Miguel Sanchez, hunting for followers of the charismatic rebel, Emiliano Zapata. In a hailstorm of rifle fire, sixteen-year-old Angela Sanchez's life changes forever. She takes her father's Winchester carbine, gathers the survivors, and rides off to join Zapata's army.

Grace and Angela are two very different women. But both will do anything to protect the people?and the country?that they love as they are swept up in a Revolution that almost destroys them.

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## **Last Train from Cuernavaca** By Lucia St. Clair Robson Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

### Review

“Best Living Fiction Writer.” ?*True West Magazine*

“Exciting and lyrically written, *Last Train from Cuernavaca* brings the past to fascinating, fire-breathing life... Add rich characters, unforgettable scenes of bravery, and two beautiful love stories, and you'll know why no one writes historical fiction better than Robson.” ?*Gayle Lynds, New York Times bestselling author of The Book of Spies*

“Robson writes with a fluidity and honesty that drew me firmly into the women's struggle for dignity and freedom, and she rendered the beauty of Cuernavaca and the surrounding countryside with such acuity that I fell in love with the place.” ?*The Huffington Post*

“*Last Train From Cuernavaca* is a gripping story that takes us deep into tumultuous years of Mexican history that few Americans know about. We need more books like this.” ?*Thomas Fleming, New York Times bestselling author of The Secret Trial of Robert E. Lee*

“Robson is at the full height of her literary powers in *Last Train from Cuernavaca*, which demonstrates her matchless skill at distilling superb research into a compelling story.” ?*Roundup Magazine*

“To read Lucia St. Clair Robson is to learn while being thoroughly entertained. *Last Train From Cuernavaca* puts us through the tragic violence and political treachery of the Mexican Revolution and its consequences so intimately that we feel hunger, lust, thirst, grief and saddlesores, and admire anew the awesome durability and courage of the people of Mexico--especially the women.” ?*James Alexander Thom, national bestselling author of Follow the River*

### About the Author

LUCIA ST. CLAIR ROBSON was born in Baltimore, Maryland, and raised in West Palm Beach, Florida. She served in the Peace Corps in Venezuela and has lived in Japan and Arizona. She has written nine novels, including *The Tokaido Road*, *Shadow Patriots*, and *Ride the Wind*, which won the Golden Spur Award. Robson lives near Annapolis, Maryland.

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### 1A CAKE WALK

Captain Federico Mart  n loved everything about women, but this was the first time he had fallen for a pair of pale English hands. Their owner sat so upright and Anglican on the piano bench that it could have been a church pew, but her long, supple fingers harbored no piety. They chased the syncopated lilt of the “Maple Leaf Rag” across the keys like sprites on a spree. Her fingers were so sure, so swift, they flouted assorted laws of classical mechanics, gravity, drag, and human fallibility.

A score of couples danced the Cake Walk and the One-Step under hundreds of tiny lights strung like stars across the 383-year-old ceiling beams of the Hotel Colonial’s ballroom and restaurant. The Hotel

Colonial was one of the few places where Cuernavaca's foreign community and its elite Mexican society mingled. Christmas of 1912 was six weeks away, but they could always find something to celebrate. Most of the dancers sported the latest fashions, but several men wore the dark blue dress uniforms of the Mexican Army.

Captain Mart  n wore the same uniform, and he thanked his own lucky stars that Colonel Rubio had chosen the Colonial as lodging for himself and his aides. The colonel was a difficult man, to say the least, but now Rico counted himself fortunate to be one of those aides. This was his first visit to the hotel where he would billet while in Cuernavaca, and he liked what he saw.

The glossy toe of his knee-high cavalry boot tapped in rhythm with the music. With arms and ankles crossed he leaned a shoulder against a tiled column next to the piano. He swirled a snifter of cognac in the palm of one hand, while his dark eyes followed those runaway fingers more closely than the dice in a game of hazard.

With her deft hands, the piano player would make a fine thimble-rigger. She could have held her own among the shell game experts he had seen fleecing suckers in Harvard Square. Federico imagined her shuffling the three walnut hulls with such speed that no poor sap could guess which one hid the dried pea.

What intrigued him most about her was the contrast of those devil-may-care hands with the ramrod line of her spine, the intensity of her concentration, and the gleam of two pearly teeth biting her lower lip. And such a voluptuous lower lip it was. Rico wouldn't have minded nibbling on it himself.

One of the waiters had referred to her as *la Inglesa*, so he assumed she was British, and aristocracy, too, by the refined air about her. She had hiked her long skirt up several inches, freeing her feet to work the piano pedals. Her slim ankles looked English enough, but a spatter of freckles across her nose and a mass of hair the dark amber of aged whiskey hinted at an Irishman somewhere in her family's woodpile. Her hair had probably started the day pinned in a fashionable heap on top of her head, but a gaggle of locks had slipped their tethers. They danced around her neck as she played.

He wondered if she was a guest here and if she was married. Not that the latter mattered. He had enjoyed the company of more than a few wives of careless husbands, but he had never laid siege to an *Inglesa* before.

Two years ago, against the wishes of his highborn family, Federico had joined the workers' rebellion ignited by Francisco Madero. Heaven knows, under the aging dictator Porfirio D  az, Mexico's workers had much to rebel against. The insurgent forces had prevailed and sent D  az into exile. Rico thought often about the day when, along with 100,000 of his cheering countrymen, he watched Madero installed as president.

Now, however, the prospect of peace gaped like a long yawn for him. Seducing *la Inglesa* would provide an amusing diversion. As easy as a cake walk.

Rico had no doubt about the outcome of his campaign. The high collar on his tunic framed a strong jaw, a sensuous mouth, and an aristocratic nose. He had a physique that didn't require a tailor for uniforms to fit perfectly. He didn't have to see his reflection in the piano's polished surface to know he was handsome. In his twenty-nine years, uncounted numbers of women had told him so, beginning with his Zapotec nurse when he was all of three minutes old.

The music brought him back to the present. *La Inglesa's* right hand flickered through a long glissando before coming to rest, like a bird gliding in for a landing. The dancers applauded, then made their way back to the roast beef and parsleyed potatoes delivered by a bevy of white-coated waiters.

“Joplin was right,” Rico said.

“I beg your pardon?” She looked up and Rico saw that her eyes were as deep blue as delft porcelain and just as cool.

His heart jilted her hands and fell boot heels-over-epaulets into infatuation with her eyes. He didn’t realize yet that his plans for seduction had turned on him like an ungrateful cur. When *la Inglesa* stood up she could almost look straight into his own eyes. He noticed that most of her height was legs.

“Scott Joplin,” Rico said. “He claimed he could ‘shake de earth’s foundations wid de Maple Leaf Rag.’”

He expected her to exclaim in surprise that a soldier in the Mexican army not only spoke English, but American Negro dialect as well.

Instead she gave him a smile that was cordial, but noncommittal. “And you are? . . .”

“Captain Federico Mart  n at your service,” Rico clicked his boot heels and bowed smartly.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Captain Mart  n. I  m Grace Knight.”

Grace. *Gracia*. Perfect. God Himself must have named her.

She extended her hand in greeting, but instead of shaking it he raised it to his lips and kissed her fingertips. That didn’t seem to surprise her either. Did men kiss her hand on a regular basis? If they did he had a sudden urge to floor them for it.

Charm had always worked for Rico. This woman’s immunity to it caught him off guard. He was trying to think of his next move when a crash came from the Colonial’s maze of back corridors. It sounded like breaking pottery, probably in the kitchen. Shouts followed, but not in any language Rico recognized, and he spoke six of them. The shouter’s gender was also a mystery.

“Please make yourself at home here, Captain Mart  n,” said Grace. “Now if you’ll be so kind as to excuse me.” She nodded and hurried off toward the commotion. The long curve of her skirt looked like water flowing.

Rico listened intently as he watched her go. He thought the distant shouting might be Chinese, but he still wouldn’t wager serious money on whether the source was male or female. And Rico would wager serious money on just about anything.

“Rico! We’ve been waiting for you.” Another blue uniform with captain’s bars called to him in Spanish from the doorway of the Colonial’s cantina. “Hurry up! They’re ready to play.” From the bar came the rarest, most beautiful sound in Mexico, the chime of ice in glasses.

Before he joined his friend, Juan, Rico glanced over his shoulder in hopes that Grace Knight would reappear. She didn’t. The piano looked like it missed her, too.

Juan led him through the fog of tobacco smoke toward a table at the rear. On the way he gestured to Lu  s, the barman, to keep the cognac coming. Rico detoured to ask for a bottle of whiskey, a small glass, and a tumbler of ice.

“When did ice become available?” he asked Juan.

“Don’t they have ice in El Norte?”

“Yes, but this isn’t El Norte.”

“We can’t have the *chilangos* drinking warm whiskey.” Juan used the less-than-affectionate term for people from Mexico City. “There’s a new ice plant at the de Leon bridge. The flow of water produces electricity. Don’t ask me how. Welcome to the twentieth century, my friend.”

Juan turned his chair around, straddled it, and introduced Rico to the two lieutenants at the table. They would be today’s lambs for the gaming slaughter.

While one of the lieutenants shuffled the cards, Juan said, “So, you’ve met *Mamacita*.”

“The Englishwoman?”

“None other.”

“Does she work at the Colonial?”

“She owns it.”

“I don’t remember a hotel here.”

“*Señora* Knight came on the train from Mexico City with that piano lashed to a flatcar. She bought this place just after you left for El Norte five years ago.” Juan leaned across the table to bring the lieutenants up to date. “My friend went to college in the United States and returned *agringado*.”

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