

APPARATUS: DITCHES

(OUR neighbour Adelita, an unquenchable little Englishwoman in her sixties, who had married a Mexican ranchero, had the English habit of hospitality to lame dogs. Being English, she probably preferred dogs to humans, but any beat up homo sapiens got a welcome, too. Mexico is crowded with all kinds of strays in precarious conditions. Some walk on three legs and whine softly, some have three weeks' growth of beard and have walked 800 miles from the south in their only clothes, a shirt and a pair of pants, some angrily leave a servant's job in a big hacienda and then find they have no money and nowhere to go—except to Adelita's. This kept the place crowded. Pick up a sack in any corner of the patio and you'd find a distressed mammal sleeping under it, probably with pups.

When life for the workers became abnormally dizzy at La Rosa, many of us escaped for an hour or two to Adelita's, where the dizziness was at least different. Adelita, whose name is the Spanish diminutive of Edith, shared with me the strange mystery of Commonwealth citizenship, a state of being which cannot be interpreted in any American language. Along with a warm personal affection, this was a bond, although I was a colonial and therefore in some ways a bit cruder than the English English. One of the areas of being where my finer feelings were suspect was animals. Adelita had been told that New Zealand farmers sometimes kicked their dogs, and under questioning I admitted I had seen it happen—cows, too, and on occasion a horse. I knew that Welsh or Scottish shepherds might kick their dogs, too, but that was different. They knew their place and they ate their meals in the kitchen and not too many of them called the boss by his Christian name. So we left it at that, and it was only when she was under terrible pressure of over-population that she'd call on me to drown a litter of pups, saying she *knew* I wouldn't mind helping her in this way, because Ignacio (her husband) had such a kind heart and just hated doing it. I knew she wouldn't have asked me unless she'd been desperate, and I always did it for her, quickly, after looking carefully to see there was no destitute Mexican servant girl at the bottom of the litter.

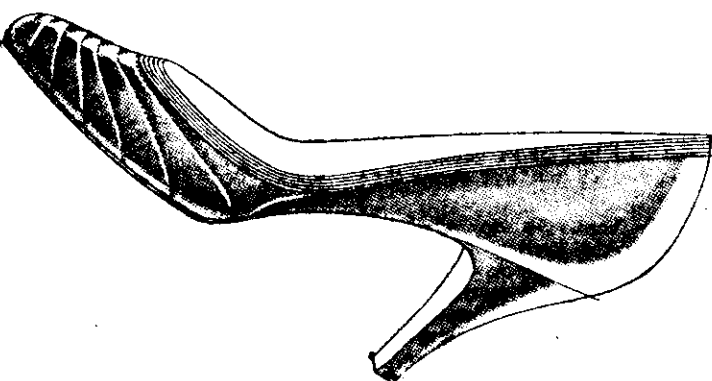
For a couple of weeks after one of these murders of convenience, Adelita,

who was the soul of kindness and hospitality at any time, offering her guests whatever she had in the house, would be especially solicitous of my physical welfare, and would send over cheese, or small pots of sour cream, or three brown eggs, with a note begging me to come over when I had time and sample a special preserve of apricots and honey. I always went over when I had time anyway, but it was on one of these particular occasions, while I was slurping through the apricots under a hillock of sour cream, that she read me a letter from Riddell, a gringo lame dog who pronounced his name with the accent on the first syllable. "He's a little mad, of course," Adelita said, "and he was so rude to El Profesor, but he was *such* a worker with his ditches."

Riddell's apparatus was ditches: for drainage in a wet climate and irrigation in a dry. As Adelita told it, most entertainingly, Riddell had several times lived at La Rosa, and each time had been delicately thrown out. The last time, he had put up at Adelita's for a while, after his expulsion, and still wrote to her at intervals, telling her where she should dig ditches on the ranch, and making angry comments on the state of world agriculture.

"When he was first at La Rosa," Adelita said, helping me to more sour cream, "it was at the end of winter, and the rain had made channels through all the roads and tracks—you know how it does. Riddell said he'd put this right, and dug ditches along the roadway. He worked and worked and worked. But he didn't know where to stop. You never saw so many ditches. People were falling into them in the dark. He was given another job, but he used to dig ditches after hours and early in the morning. It was his apparatus. Poor Riddell. When he was told to go the last time, he had dug a ditch right across a main road and one of the trucks nearly broke an axle. He was so angry when he came over here. He said El Profesor would ruin the place without him—Nachol!" She called as her husband came by. "Do you remember poor Riddell?" Ignacio flung his hands in the air and went off to the bodega muttering. Adelita shook her head: "Poor Riddell. He worked so hard while he was here, too. . . Do have some more apricots!"

—G. leF. Y.



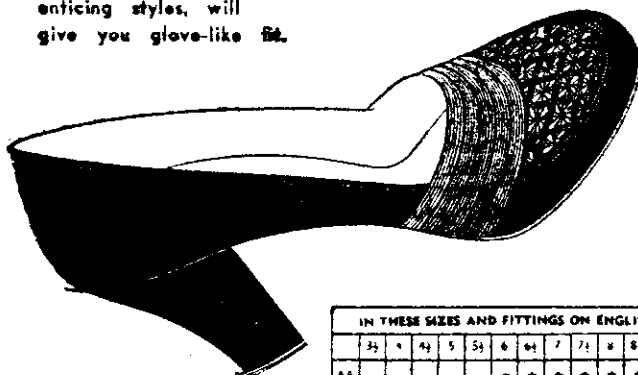
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