

inquiries and research into the strange role of toadstools in the early cultural history of Europe and Asia.

Thus that June evening found us, Allan Richardson and me, deep in the south of Mexico, bedded down with an Indian family in the heart of the Mixeteco mountains at an altitude of 5,500 feet. We could stay only a week or so: we had no time to lose. I went to the *municipio* or town hall, and there I found the official in charge, the *sindico*, seated alone at his great table in an upper room. He was a young Indian, about 35 years old, and he spoke Spanish well. His name was Filemón. He had a friendly manner and I took a chance. Leaning over his table, I asked him earnestly and in a low voice if I could speak to him in confidence. Instantly curious, he encouraged me. "Will you," I went on, "help me learn the secrets of the divine mushroom?" and I used the Mixeteco name, *'nti sheeto*, correctly pronouncing it with glottal stop and tonal differentiation of the syllables. When Filemón recovered from his surprise he said warmly that nothing could be easier. He asked me to pass by his house, on the outskirts of town, at siesta time.

Allan and I arrived there at about 3 o'clock. Filemón's home is built on a mountainside, with a trail on one side at the level of the upper story and a deep ravine on the other. Filemón at once led us down the ravine to a spot where the divine mushrooms were growing in abundance. After photographing them we gathered them in a cardboard box and then labored back up the ravine in the heavy moist heat of that torrid afternoon. Not letting us rest Filemón sent us high up above his house to meet the *curandera*, the woman who would officiate at the mushroom rite. A connection of his, Eva Mendez by name, she was a *curandera de primera categoría*, of the highest quality, *una Señora sin mancha*, a woman without stain. We found her in the house of her daughter, who pursues the same vocation. Eva was resting on a mat on the floor from her previous night's performance. She was middle-aged, and short like all Mixetecos, with a spirituality in her expression that struck us at once. She had presence. We showed our mushrooms to the woman and her daughter. They cried out in rapture over the firmness, the fresh beauty and abundance of our young specimens. Through an interpreter we asked if they would serve us that night. They said yes.

ABOUT 20 of us gathered in the lower chamber of Filemón's house after 8 o'clock that evening. Allan and I were the only strangers, the only ones who spoke no Mixeteco. Only our hosts, Filemón and his wife, could talk to us in Spanish. The welcome accorded to us was of a kind that we had never experienced before in the Indian country. Everyone observed a friendly decorum. They did not treat us stiffly, as strange white men; we were of their number. The Indians were wearing their best clothes, the women dressed in their *huipiles* or native costumes, the men in clean white trousers tied around the waist with strings and their best serapes over their clean shirts. They gave us chocolate to drink, somewhat ceremonially, and suddenly I recalled the words of the early Spanish writer who had said that before the mushrooms were served, chocolate was drunk. I sensed what we were in for: at long last we

were discovering that the ancient communion rite still survived and we were going to witness it. The mushrooms lay there in their box, regarded by everyone respectfully but without solemnity. The mushrooms are sacred and never the butt of the vulgar jocularity that is often the way of white men with alcohol.

At about 10:30 o'clock Eva Mendez cleaned the mushrooms of their grosser dirt and then, with prayers, passed them through the smoke of resin incense burning on the floor. As she did this, she

sat on a mat before a simple altar table adorned with Christian images, the Child Jesus and the Baptism in Jordan. Then she apportioned the mushrooms among the adults. She reserved 13 pair for herself and 13 pair for her daughter. (The mushrooms are always counted in pairs.) I was on tip-toe of expectancy: she turned and gave me six pair in a cup. I could not have been happier: this was the culmination of years of pursuit. She gave Allan six pair too. His emotions were mixed. His wife Mary had consented to his coming only after she had drawn from him a promise not to let those nasty toadstools cross his lips. Now he faced a behavior dilemma. He took the mushrooms, and I heard him mutter in anguish, "My God, what will Mary say!" Then we ate our mushrooms, chewing them slowly, over the course of a half hour. They tasted bad—acrid with a



HOUSE where mushroom sessions took place is built of adobe, has thatch "dog-ears" over gable ends. Door, lower right, leads into ceremonial room.

rancid odor that repeated itself. Allan and I were determined to resist any effects they might have, to observe better the events of the night. But our resolve soon melted before the onslaught of the mushrooms.

Before midnight the Señora (as Eva Mendez is usually called) broke a flower from the bouquet on the altar and used it to snuff out the flame of the only candle that was still burning. We were left in darkness and in darkness we remained until dawn. For a half hour we waited in silence. Allan felt cold and wrapped himself in a blanket. A few minutes later he leaned over and whispered, "Gordon, I am seeing things!" I told him not to worry, I was too. The visions had started. They reached a plateau of intensity deep in the night, and they continued at that level until about 4 o'clock. We felt slightly unsteady on our feet and in the beginning were nauseated. We lay down on the mat that had been spread for us, but no one had any wish to sleep except the children, to whom mushrooms are not served. We were never more wide awake, and the visions came whether our eyes were opened or closed. They emerged from the center of the field of vision, opening up as they came, now rushing, now slowly, at the pace that our will chose. They were in vivid color, always harmonious. They began with art motifs, angular such as might decorate carpets or textiles or wallpaper or the drawing board of an architect. Then they evolved into palaces with courts, arcades, gardens—resplendent palaces all laid over with semiprecious stones. Then I saw a mythological beast drawing a regal chariot. Later it was as though the walls of our house had dissolved, and my spirit had flown forth, and I was

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