

LAND WITHOUT CHIMNEYS

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TO
PROFESSOR HELEN C. MORGAN,
MY FORMER TEACHER,
THIS BOOK
IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED.

LAND WITHOUT CHIMNEYS



CATHEDRAL, CITY OF MEXICO.

PREFACE.

THIS book is not sent forth to fill a long-felt want; nor does the author hope to convince all his readers to his way of looking at the social and religious problems of Mexico.

As a teacher of modern languages, the author went to Mexico solely for the purpose of mastering the language, but the remembrance of that enjoyable stay allured him like a bird of passage when the spring has come, and so he returned to study the people.

If what he has written will help any one to better understand our next door neighbor, his humble efforts have not been in vain.

CHAPTER I. THE SAN JUAN VALLEY.

DID it ever occur to the American reader that there lives a people numbering twelve millions, who know not the comforts of the fire-place, nor the discomforts of soot and chimney-swallows? And yet there lives just such a people at our very doors; just across the Rio Grande, in that strange land of romance and fiction, where the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries go hand-in-hand and never unite; where the variation in temperature is less than at any other place on the globe; where an ancient race live among the ruined temples and pyramids of a race they know not of; where the traveler finds mouldering ruins of hewn stone engraved with figures and animals that have no likeness anywhere else, except amid the ruins of Egypt; it is here you find the Land Without Chimneys. The land of Montezuma; the spoil of Cortez; the treasure-house of Spain; the modern Mexico, where fact and fancy so mingle with romance and fable, that we hardly know when we have reached historical data.

When the Spaniards reached Mexico in 1518, they found that the Toltec history, done in picture-writing, was the most reliable source of information obtainable in this strange fairy-land.

From these idiographic paintings we learn that the Aztecs, or Mexicans, entered the valley from the north about 1200 A. D. Before the Aztecs came, the valley was occupied by the Chicimecs, and before they had pitched their tents around their capital hill, Chapultepec, the Toltecs had ruled supreme.

The Toltecs, being exiled from Tollan, their ancient capital near lake Tulare, wandered a hundred and twenty years, until, in 667, A. D., they came to the bank of a river, where they founded another city which they called Tollan, or Tula, in honor of their ancient capital. The ruins of this ancient city lie twenty-five miles from the city of Mexico. During the reign of their eighth king, a famine drove the Toltecs south, whither many emigrated to Yucatan and Guatemala, where the Toltec language is still spoken. But before the Toltecs, there lived in Yucatan the Maya race, the most ancient in Mexico, whose tradition dates to the year 793 B.C., when they arrived in Yucan by water from Tulapam. Here tradition is lost until we examine the ancient ruins and pyramids of Uxmal and Copan, whose walls are nine feet thick and covered with the finest facades found in America; and then language fails us as we gaze upon the massive walls of the pyramid of Copan, containing twenty-six million cubic feet of stone brought from a distant quarry, whose base is six hundred twenty-four feet by eight hundred nine feet, and a tower one hundred eighty-four feet, built of massive blocks of stone, and surmounted by two huge trees rooted in its mold.

Within the inside are statues and hieroglyphics and inscriptions which tell to the world their history, but they speak in an unknown tongue, which may tell us of their Tulapam on the lost Atlantis. In despair, we give up the riddle of the first people of Mexico, and take a nearer view of the present inhabitants. The country is divided into three parts—the coast region called *tierra caliente*, where the tropical sun makes life a burden, and engenders that scourge of Mexico, *el vomito*, or yellow fever.

Midway between the coast and the mountain is the *tierra templada*, where the mean temperature is 68° F. The *tierra fria*, or

cold country, is the plateau which caps the crest of the Cordilleras, so different from the mountains of the rest of the world that a carriage road was built for eight hundred miles along the crest of the mountains, without the service of an engineer.

Here the mean temperature is 63° F., and on account of the altitude rain seldom falls, and, where it does fall, the porous amygdaloid rocks absorb it so quickly that the plateau is a veritable desert, where the cactus and other thorny plants have taken possession of soil and rock alike. What adds more than anything else to its barrenness, is the utter lack of forest tree or green grass. Everywhere, for miles and miles of landscape, the eye meets only the bare rock and brown earth, with here and there the ever-present cactus and its kind.

What wonder is it that nearly all these plateau people are beggars, when the water for their very existence must be drawn from the locomotive tanks each day as the train passes? Far across the treeless plain they see the smoke of the locomotive, and from every adobe hut and straw-thatched jackal swarm the eager-eyed women, carrying the empty five-gallon cans of the Standard Oil Company, or their smaller *ollas* of burnt earthenware.

To supply that horde would be to disable the train, so the fireman fills a number and again mounts his engine amid the silent looks of anguish from the disappointed faces that plead more eloquently than words. Yet there are whole townships of this desert, fenced in with stone walls, and upon these haciendas the rancheros grow rich off their herds at the expense of the poor peons, and the source of their wealth is the prickly pear.

The thick, fleshy leaf is both food and water to the starving cattle. Where herds are small, the herder, with a huge knife or machete, cuts the cruel thorns from the leaves or singses them in a great bonfire; but on the vast estates the cattle must, from necessity, get their food without help. It may be curious to know how these leaves can furnish water in a country where it rarely rains. The reason is, the skin is so tough it does not lose any water by evaporation, and it is thus able to carry water a year or more without additional rain. This cactus grows to the height of fifteen feet, with innumerable branches armed with needles nearly as long as your finger, and it bears bunches of fruit about the size and shape of lemons, called *tunas*. This is the staff of life for the poor people on the plains, and without it, existence on the plateau, for man or beast would be impossible.

But this country was not always a desert. Before the coming of the Spaniards it was clothed in verdure, but "it was not like the plains of Old Castile," and so the reckless gold hunter turned the beautiful plateau into a Sahara, in which the silver mines now pay from eleven to sixteen dollars a cord for wood, brought on the backs of diminutive burros, and five dollars and seventy-five cents for a hundred and fifty pounds of corn.

It is purely a lack of thrift that no effort is now made to restore the land to its original inheritance. The eucalyptus tree of California has been tried in many places and thrives well, and with proper protection would soon grow a forest. The present wood supply is the mesquite, which never grows taller than a peach tree, and the average size stick of wood it furnishes is but little larger than a beer bottle. Yet, with all its scarcity, the locomotives use it, because coal from the United States costs twenty-one dollars a ton.

This wood is packed on the backs of dozens of little burros, and is carried as far as a dozen miles for delivery.

This is a land without chimneys, for two reasons: The climate is not cold enough to require fires, and if it was, the poor people would never be able to purchase wood. The little cooking that is done, is accomplished by little charcoal fires in braziers.

If all this country was a plateau, then my tale would not be told, but there can be no mountains without valleys, and it is these valleys that make Mexico one of the most delightful spots in this country. In the lovely valley of the noisy little San Juan River, rests the beautiful city of Monterey—"King Mountain."

Situated at the foot of the Sierra Madres, surrounded by cloud-covered peaks, there seems to be not enough room for its seventy-five thousand inhabitants, as it first bursts upon the vision through the towering masts of Yucca palms. It is wedged between "La Silla," Saddle Mountain, and "Las Mitras," the Bishop's Mitre; but this is only the first trick which this clear and illusive atmosphere plays upon the traveler from the lowlands.

The perspective seems unduly fore-shortened, and mountain peaks which are really twenty-five miles away, appear to be within an hour's walk. After your law of optics has been restored, you discover that no prettier spot could have been chosen for a city than that for Monterey.

Founded three hundred and thirty-five years ago, upon an elevation 1700 feet above the sea, the seasons are so nearly alike that December is as pleasant as May.

In the western part of the city are the homes of the wealthy; beautiful houses in shaded gardens where tropical birds and flowers have their home, and where spraying fountains and living streams of water remind one of the tales of fairy-land. Just beyond these homes is the Bishop's Palace, the last fortification to succumb to the American army of invasion when the city was taken. Around the palace are many cannon, some half-buried beneath the soil, and one with the unbelched shot still imbedded in its throat where, for fifty years it has lain in mute testimony of that unequal struggle which General Grant called "The most unholy war in all history."

Across the valley, three miles as the crow flies, are the famous hot springs of Topo Chico, at the base of a mountain of black marble, which, in building material, shows a beautiful stripe of alabastine whiteness.

It was here the daughter of Montezuma and the élite of the Valley of Mexico came to bathe and chase dull care away, after the whirl of the court in the capital city of Tenochtitlan, long before the coming of the white man.

At a temperature of 106° F. the water bursts forth in a heroic stream that bears testimony of the intense fires that hurl it forth.

This reminds us that there is hardly a city in Mexico that has not its hot water baths, and it need not excite surprise, when three of the loftiest volcanoes in the world stand guard over the valley; Orizaba in the east and Popocatepetl and Ixtacihuatl in the south, the highest standing 17,782 feet above the sea.

The water of Topo Chico, after serving the baths, is carried through the valley in irrigating ditches. Leaving the horse-cars

which brought us from the city, we are enticed across the beautiful meadows to a grove of palms and tropical flowers, and find ourselves at the lofty walls of an enclosure which at first gives the impression of a penitentiary, but which you afterwards learn is a “Campo Santo,” or cemetery.

We walk around the forbidding walls until we come to a massive iron gate, and through its opening we see a forest of wooden crosses which tell their own tale, but the sexton will tell another.

“A relic of by-gone days was he,
And his hair was white as the foaming sea.”

He had dug a row of twenty-four graves, twenty-three of which were open, but the other was filled to the brim with bones and scraps of clothing taken from the others. A peep into these revealed cross-sections of leg-bones here, two ribs and a hand there, with a jawbone or a vertebra lying in the bottom. The sexton explained that a person may rest in peace for the period of five years, and if, after that time his relatives do not pay a tax on his grave, his resurrection day will come to make room for newer tenants and better renters.

And so on for a hundred years or more they will begin at the gate and dig graves and collect taxes until they reach the rear wall, and then start over. If everybody paid, the yard would remain intact and the sexton would have to start a new farm; but with the average Mexican, the cost of remaining alive is a far more serious question than remaining dead for an orthodox resurrection.

He much prefers using his spare cash during those five years in buying masses from the priest to get the soul of his late departed

out of Purgatory, and if he succeeds in that, the bones may go; so every five years he is prepared to see his friend's lodging aired and let to new lodgers. The wealthy rent tombs which are built in the outer wall, and here they can peep through the glass doors and see the dust of their fathers sifting down upon the ashes of their grandfathers to the third and fourth generation. The sexton was not very careful in removing his renters, and would leave a leg in No. 7 and carry the other remains to 24. I asked him if that would not complicate matters a little in the final resurrection. He assured me that Purgatory was the place to right such small matters, and if the priest was paid enough he would get them all together. That reminds me of a wealthy man who died, and the priest, with an eye to business, called upon the son of the late departed, and impressed upon him the urgency of paying for enough masses to take his father's soul from Purgatory. The son asked how much would do it. The priest, after a careful calculation said: "He was a pretty hard case and no less than five hundred dollars will move him," and the son paid the money.

After a while they met again. "And how is my father getting along?" asked the son. "You see," said the priest, "your father was in the middle of Purgatory and I had to move him a long way, but I have him towards the outer edge now, and I think two hundred dollars more will pass him out." The money was paid without protest, and this so encouraged the priest that he resolved to make one more deal.

"And how is my father now?" was asked when they met again. "Well, I have him right at the edge of Purgatory with one foot over the line, and I think another fifty dollars will pass him into heaven."

“O no!” said the son. “You don’t know my father. If he has one foot in heaven, St. Peter and all Purgatory can’t keep him out and so I will save this fifty dollars.”

As the sexton and I talked, a funeral procession entered the gate, consisting of two men and two women of the poorer class. On the head of one man was a dead child stretched upon a board. The other came to the sexton for instructions. He pointed them to a row of thirteen small graves, dug about two feet deep and two of them were filled with the bones from the others.

The child was taken from the board and chucked in, but was found to be several inches too long for the grave, so its head was bent up until the pall-bearer could gouge out enough dirt to admit the body straight, and then enough dirt and bones were raked in to cover it a foot and a half. Meanwhile, the women sat upon neighboring graves, chatting and smoking cigarettes until the grave was filled. Thirteen minutes after they had entered they were gone, leaving the sexton and myself alone with the dead. Within ten minutes another procession entered, preceded by a company of priests with lighted candles, followed by a hearse with a velvet covered coffin. Behind the hearse walked a procession of young men with lighted candles, and then I knew a man was dead, for no women attend the funerals of men.

On entering, the body was taken from the coffin and buried, and the coffin returned to the undertaker. Wood is too scarce in Mexico to buy coffins when a rented one will do as well, and besides, it would give the sexton too much trouble in his impromptu resurrections if he had to dig through hard wood boards.

If you should ask these people why they dig over and over a few acres of enclosed ground when just outside there are leagues and leagues of ground that will not grow anything else but a good crop of graves, they would shrug their shoulders and say: “*Quien sabe?*”—who knows—with that untranslatable gesture which forbids other question. Should you ask the tax collector, he might look over his balance-sheet and give you an answer about how much it takes to run the government.

Nothing better illustrates the stature of these people than the death of an American. He was a conductor, and the railroad employees determined to give him an orthodox Christian burial, but no coffin could be found long enough, so he was put into one with both ends knocked out. Then came the inspection, and official announcement and permit, and enough red tape to consume two whole days and all the patience of the American colony, and involved enough writing to have chartered the city.

All cemeteries are reached by mule car; and for those who cannot afford a hearse, a funeral car and as many empties as are needed, are always to be had. The funeral car is painted black or white, with a raised dais to support the coffin, and in a sweeping gallop the cortege is soon at the cemetery gates on schedule time.

All head-boards and grave-stones are embellished with the ominous black letters R. I. P. They tell me that is Latin for “May he rest in peace;” but I think they ought to add, “For five years.”

The cathedral in all Mexican cities is the one place of attraction. The one here was used as a powder magazine during the Mexican war, and the walls still bear the grim ear-marks of cannon balls.

The finest church here is Nuestra Señora del Roble, which is old, but seems never to be finished, and thereby hangs a tale.

No church property is taxable here until it is finished, so the astute priests rarely finish one. There are churches here whose foundations were laid three hundred years ago, and as you stand in the grand nave, bits of stone falling around you will be the only evidence of the workmen two hundred feet above.

The stone used is almost as porous and as light as chalk, and responds readily to the chisel for ornamentation, but hardens on exposure. These building blocks are nearly always two feet square, and are built into the wall rough, and with scaffolding built around; the stone-mason, with mallet and chisel, will work for years, creating an ornamentation that is a joy and beauty forever. Patience here is a cardinal virtue, and time has no value whatever, and to their credit, be it said, that these decorators are artists, and their work is beautiful. A man will begin work on a hundred year job with as much *sang-froid* as though it was to last a month.

A workman will take an intricate pattern of wall-paper, and, with a paint-pot and brush, will spread that design over ten thousand square yards of surface, and at a distance of ten feet you cannot detect his work from genuine wall-paper. The perspective is so deceptive in one church in Monterey, that you almost run into the rear wall before you are aware that the long aisle is a painted one. You must stand or kneel in the churches, as no seats are provided. One church in Puebla is the only exception. Most of the churches are bedizened with cheap gew-gaws and tinsel, which gives you an impression of a child's playhouse.

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