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Three Decades on the Border

By Josiah H. Heald, D.D.





REV. AND MRS. JOSIAH H. HEALD

Three Decades on the Border

IT is permitted to old men to dream dreams. In mine I see a little adobe town on the Mexican border as it was more than three decades ago. A young Yankee minister had just arrived with his wife and three little folks. His hair was black and he was green, manifestly a tenderfoot. I, who am white-headed, sixty-five and sophisticated, feel a little sorry for him, and more so for his attractive wife. As I glimpse him across the years, I vow he is a stranger to me, although, strangely, I seem to remember all that befell him. He had come from a different world, one of schools and books, of men and women with high ideals. He had come to the Mexican border, where the rough edges of two civilizations met without blending—two civilizations neither of which was very civilized. I smile when I think of the new friends he made, most of them queer friends for such a man: Manuel, the Mexican peon; Rafael, the Yaqui; Guzman, the quaint fisher of men who had "plenty nets"; Don Jacobo, the polished Mexican gentleman of whom I can never think without a feeling of respect for his nation. Strange American friends also: B. J., the ex-Sunday School superintendent, turned saloonkeeper; M. F., the gentleman gambler; A. Y., who could sing like an angel and act like the devil; M. J., the meek little man who was the only male member of this frontier church, and who managed to lead a clean, courageous life in a naughty world. Women, too, good and wise—and otherwise. The faces of these and scores of others emerge for a moment from the mists of memory, then disappear. They are gone, most

of them long since dust. Some forty young men of those pioneer days died within a few years, some of them violent deaths. Life on the border in those days was hard on men.

The scene shifts. The young man is not so young any more. He is graying around the ears. The air of the tenderfoot is gone. He looks as tough as any other frontiersman as he rides a bronco or chases a pair of them over the hills and through the mountains of New Mexico. His friends now are Mexican sheepmen and shepherds, ranchers and bronco busters, small traders and saloonkeepers—friendly folk, sinners all, cheerful sinners for the most part, except at night, when passion blazes forth or the fires of remorse flare up. My dream is punctured by shots that may announce either a *baile* or a saloon brawl, and by the weird note of the Penitente *pito*, inciting the brothers to lay on the scourge. The missionary moves among these foreign-looking folk speaking in a foreign tongue, here to a little circle about the fireplace in a humble adobe home, there to a group in a store or market place, telling of the coming of the mission school bringing a new day for their boys and girls, eliciting the oft-repeated response, "I'm an ignorant man myself, but I want my children to have an education." There are groups of children in the mission school, their faces brightening with the light of knowledge and hope; there are the mission teachers always busy in instructing, counseling, warning, visiting the sick, fighting the pestilence. What women! So cultured, so consecrated, so self-forgetting, so resolute in their service of a humble people. Is it the glint of a tear in my eye, or do I see a halo about their heads? The man moves among them, aiding, encouraging, trying to take the brunt of the battle, yet feeling awkward and unworthy

in the presence of those who are holier than he. And there is always *the* woman, sharing his burdens and moving through his cares and toils like a swift shuttle carrying a bright thread of love and laughter through the dull warp of life.

The scene changes again. I see a ranch beside the Rio Grande, and gradually the buildings of a school seem to be growing up, as it were, out of the ground. Then I see the young people gathered from ranch and mountain village, and hear their halting efforts to "spik Inglis." I see the deepening marks of manhood and womanhood on their faces. They have caught the gleam and are following it. Our splendid José goes away to the war and to his "rendezvous with death" in some lone spot. No one knows his resting place. He may be the "Unknown Soldier" over whose grave I bowed in Arlington. Our Alberto, whom we rescued from a Mexican army minus a leg, minus morals, with a mind of flashing brilliancy in a wrecked body, saved for service, now down in old Mexico as head of the American Board College in Guadalajara; Matilde and Ysabelita teaching in mission schools; others of our boys and girls carrying on in village, town or ranch, some of them to form Christian homes; for among the industries at the Rio Grande Industrial School is that of making an excellent brand of matches.

The scene widens. The man, whoever he is (sometimes I fancy he is myself, and then I think he can't be—dreams are queer), the man is traveling over great stretches of country, visiting little churches here and there, organizing and reorganizing, helping and encouraging. They call him Home Missionary Superintendent. And, pray, what is that? A bishop? Not exactly. True, he does the work of a bishop and then some, but enjoys neither the honors nor the emolu-

ments of a bishop. He remembers the words, "One is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren." The churches are few and far between, but as he traverses the vast stretches, the great panorama of mountain and desert refreshes his soul. He has learned that the seemingly vacant spaces are not empty, but full of the works and presence of God. He searches out the little pioneer churches, desert plants struggling for existence against hostile forces of incalculable strength. There were seven churches of our order in Arizona and about as many in New Mexico, like the seven churches of the Apocalypse, *so* like! Oh, what churches! So weak and yet so strong! Forever needing to be saved themselves, and yet the salvation of their communities. The superintendent never knew when he waked up in the morning how many of them might be left alive. How the candles flickered and guttered on the seven candlesticks and yet never went out—save one. For ever there walked among the candlesticks One like unto the Son of Man.

Slowly, oh, so slowly and painfully, the churches grow in number and strength, sensing the power and potency of the church of the living God and wheeling into line of leadership. The hard old frontier days are passing. Gradually law and order evolve from chaos. Gambling is outlawed, the lurid red light districts abolished, the menace of the gilded saloon done away with. Out of vast territories two great commonwealths emerge and proudly take their place in the sisterhood of the states. Whatever may be the future of New York and New England, with their incoming tides of foreign peoples, these new states, notwithstanding their large Mexican population, thanks to the mission schools and churches, are and ever will be *United States of America*. Some day, mayhap, a New Eng-

land band will go from Arizona and New Mexico to carry back the gospel of a living Christ to the regions from which they received it, and kindle anew the fires of faith in the fine old colonial churches that stand deserted on the hilltops.

As he dreams of these things, the man thanks God for that dark but kindly Providence that flung him out into a great, wild, new country to sink or swim, survive or perish, and to have some part, however humble, in building up its institutions; yet he feels unspeakable regret that with such vast needs and opportunities he has done so little. The toil has been long and hard. I perceive that the man has become white-haired and looks old and tired (by which I know he can hardly be I, for I don't *feel* white-headed nor old, only a little tired). May not the laborer feel entitled to rest at the end of the day, even though his task is but partly and poorly done? The fight has been long and hard. I perceive that he bears scars, not always of victory, but often, alas, of defeat. But is not a soldier entitled to honorable retirement at sixty-five, even if he hasn't won all his battles?

And when the final roll call comes, I wonder what is going to become of an old Home Missionary Superintendent. What place for him in the next life? He would get terribly tired of "loafing around the throne." He might even make a nuisance of himself and start something, like attempting to organize or reorganize the heavenly hosts. I wonder if in the other world there won't be some regions beyond, where the saints are not too numerous and too good, and where he might find something to do. Surely the hosts of little children and millions of immature souls that pass over yonder will need ministering to.

Then there are the "Spirits in prison." Our Lord

went and preached to them; why not his follower? It would be a tough job, but he is used to that. I hope there will be some fitting task for him in the great hereafter. ¿Quien sabe? ¡Ay de mi!

A gentle shake aroused me. The cheerful face of *the woman* was bending over me. She said, "Wake up, Josiah, you were dreaming and moaning something in Spanish. Wake up! You know, you are sixty-five today." I looked up into her smiling face and then out of the window where the morning sun was shining joyously on the desert. And I thought that with love and sunshine, and a little more worth-while work to do, life is good, even at sixty-five!

Dr. Heald has just retired, at the age of sixty-five, from the Superintendency of the Southwestern District, but will continue to devote part of his time to overseeing the Mexican Home Missionary work.

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