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QUAINT CORNER IN
OLD MEXICO

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*A Quaint Corner
in Old Mexico*





A LITTLE MEXICAN NURSE

Photo by Waite

Myers, Cora Bosworth (Glazier)

A QUAIN CORNER IN OLD MEXICO

... BY ...

MRS. PETER M. MYERS

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MRS. PETER M. MYERS

A QUAIN'T CORNER IN OLD MEXICO.

ONE may curse—under the breath and always mildly, of course—the dirt, the discomforts, the lack of good cooks and conveniences, and all that, yet there is that in Old Mexico which takes hold of the heart-strings and will not let go. It is the artistic, I suppose, the great patches of color everywhere, the softness and sweetness of the air, the superb views between mountain ranges, the broken and ever varying line of rugged hills against a matchless sky, the care-free life, the *mañana* spirit pervading everything. Dirt there is, a plenty, but it is of the most artistic sort; and poverty may be found without searching, but even that is far removed from the common-place by the brilliant color on every hand, and the politeness and gentleness of the people.

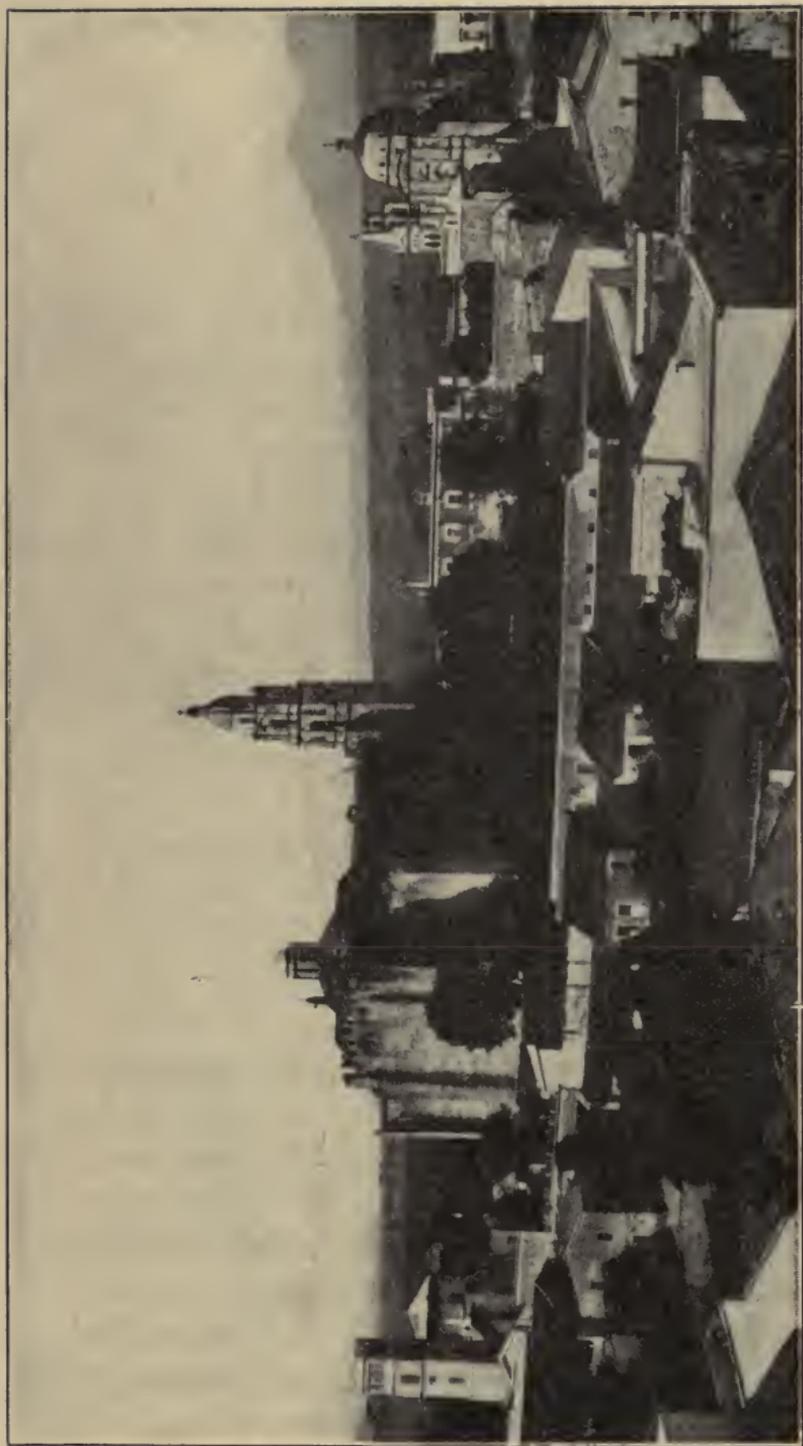
And the charm of all Mexico amounts fairly to intoxication in the capital of the State of Morelos, the little city of Cuernavaca. We all but stumbled upon the place one day, knowing only its name, that it had an altitude of five thousand feet, and a hotel kept by an American. To get to it one must first get to Mexico City, and from there start out some morning on a little train, drawn by a little engine, which winds and puffs its way up the mountains for fifty miles, through picturesque villages and a superb landscape. The fascination of this journey began with us in the railroad station in Mexico City, where we bought our breakfast of a Mexican woman with a kindly face and generous heart, and ate from a table set out in the station yard. Then we floated out into the Mexican sunshine—and there is no sunshine in all the world just like it—and became part of the gentle Mexican life about us.

Up, up we climbed, through the clear bracing air, to the top of the mountain, ten thousand feet, at Tres Marias, where we made our luncheon of tortillas and queer sandwiches, composed of many peppery and unknowable things. Then began the descent, a drop of five thousand feet in less than twenty-five miles—sliding, curving, winding our way down the mountain, through banks of wild flowers, and trees festooned with brilliant orchids, and air sweet with the scent of pines and millions of blossoming things.

With every turn of the little wood-burning engine, as it threaded its way through the hills, we caught different views of Cuernavaca, gleaming in the noon-day sun, her red-tiled roofs beckoning us on, and suggesting something of the fascination within the old walls. Suddenly, with a quick, gliding turn, we came to the station which we supposed yet miles away, and here suffered our first and only disappointment, in the commonplace red wooden station buildings—such as might be found in any out of the way town in the States. What disenchantment to the searcher after the strange and picturesque, even though the service within is most perfect! Fortunately these buildings are a mile out of the city, and the only wooden structures in the place.

It is only a very few years since Cuernavaca saw the little railroad trailing its way out of the mountains. Then she looked up for a moment, and went on with her dreaming. How could she—who had stood there through the centuries, serene and beautiful, the very home of romance and sentiment and all that is soft and sweet—how could she pay attention to things of commerce? To dream was much more to her liking, and fortunately for us she is dreaming still.

Stepping from the train, we heard a little babble of soft voices—no screaming, no con-



VIEW TO THE WEST—SHOWING CATHEDRAL AND CHURCHES

Photo by Cox

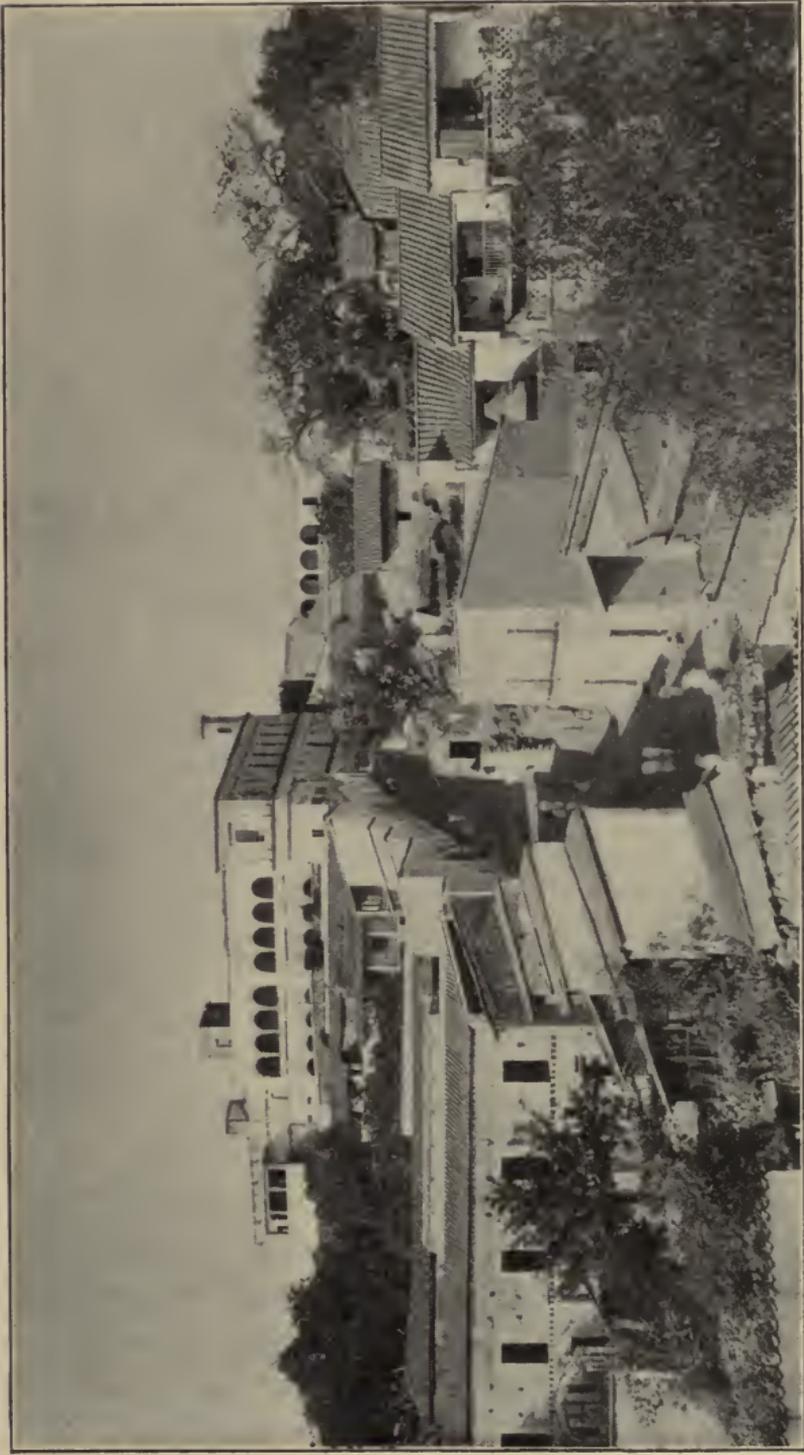
fusion, no wild scramble for luggage—and were given our choice of riding into the city in a coach or one of the tiny street cars, drawn by mules. We chose the red coach, with four mules, driven by a cochero who wore a gorgeously embroidered sombrero and glove-fitting trousers, and were galloped madly over the cobble-stone pavements, down through the narrow streets, and drew up with a flourish in front of our hotel by the plaza. This hotel is one of the oldest buildings in Mexico, its windows heavily barred with iron, its walls three feet thick, and having in one corner little loop-holes, from which, in the days of war and siege and conquest, the approach of an enemy might be detected. In those far-off days Cuernavaca dreamed some dreams which were not all pleasant, but she has forgotten them, in the peace and contentment of now. This old building lends itself charmingly for hotel purposes, with its spacious rooms, red stone floors, wide corridors and beautiful patios, with their fountains and ferns and tropical plants.

We found our way into the big lofty entrance, and here there was delightful unconcern as to our arrival—no office, no hurrying bell-boys, no ambitious porters, no haughty hotel clerks. It was more like entering a church after the service had begun; and when a little later we were shown to our rooms—large enough to stow away whole families—we settled down in great content, and rejoiced over the quiet and restfulness. There are queer old stairways leading to the roof, and from there we had our first entrancing view of the city and valley, with their marvelous setting of mountains and hills; here and there cane-fields of living green, clusters of royal palms, and great patches of the exquisite Bougainvillea, trailing the glory of its purple blossoms over

graceful arches and tiled roofs, and old courtyards, and lighting up old walls.

Here is one of the best views in all Mexico of Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl, those two incomparable peaks, which lend so much fascination to the landscape. "Popocatepetl and his Bride" they call them; and the Aztecs knew them as the royal lovers; and so they seem, as they stand guard over the beautiful valley—he with head erect, mighty, superb and silent, she splendid and serene, in her glistening mantle of white. Sometimes the blue hills and low flying white clouds weave garlands of lilies and forget-me-nots, and throw them about this royal pair; and sometimes, in the evening lights, they both forget their majesty, and are all gentleness, and when the last rays of the sun change them from one glory to another, the hearts of those who look on them are filled with strength and peace.

The sunsets, viewed from the hills or some old roof, are among the living pleasures of Cuernavaca, and our only regret was that we had not eyes to see in all directions at once, and that most people would chatter even in the presence of such splendor, when God himself would speak to them if they would only listen. How gratefully we remembered a stranger, who used to stand on the old roof with his hat in his hand, in the most reverent attitude, as if receiving a benediction, while he drank in the wondrous beauty. One evening a white-haired man—one of the saints still on the earth—approached the stranger and asked: "Do I understand, sir, that you take off your hat to the sunset?" "Yes, sir," answered the stranger, softly; "it is the least I can do." A great quiet fell upon us, and the beauty of the sunset was multiplied. The blue hills surrounding the valley are the crowning glory of this



A WINDING STREET SHOWING CORTES PALACE AT TOP OF HILL

Photo by Cox

whole enrapturing scene—part of them rugged and barren and broken—and only those who are familiar with barren peaks can conceive the beauty of the opalescent tints these hills take on, beginning long before the sun has set, and holding clear against the sky until the last light has faded and the stars are out.

And here, from the old roof, began the enchantment which continued to grow and strengthen with every hour of our many months in this quaintest of cities. The place is so rich with historical interest, so ancient, so unique, so full of charm and witchery, that one hesitates to even try to tell the truth about it. It is a part of Italy, a little of Switzerland, much of Spain, somewhat of Palestine, yet altogether of Mexico, but having an originality and character quite its own. The streets go rambling everywhere—narrow, curving, jagged, winding, turning abruptly, ending perhaps in a church or a patio, or perhaps nowhere at all, even as they began. Everywhere we turned, everything our eyes rested upon, revealed something still more picturesque, some yet more refreshing, satisfying view. Perhaps no description fits Cuernavaca so well as that given by Mark Twain to a New Zealand town: "People stopped here on their way from home to heaven, thinking they had arrived." They certainly began stopping in Cuernavaca (or Quauh-nahuac, as it was called in those days) long before 1521, for it was then an old and flourishing city, when Cortés and his band of Spaniards and Tlascalans came over the mountains one day, on one of their conquering expeditions. Seeing the treasure before them, they crossed the barranca, marched into the city under fire of the little garrison, made a bonfire of many of the buildings, and proclaimed the place as theirs. Cortés must

have carried a very convincing way with him, for a little later, so historians tell us, the caciques not only admitted the city belonged to Cortés, but apologized for even attempting to hold it against him. It is not to be wondered that he selected this beautiful spot for his home after he should have conquered the rest of the country.

Possibly in Cuernavaca Cortés left a stronger impress of himself than anywhere else in Mexico, although it was not until six or seven years after he had taken the little city that he came back to it to live, and began to make it a fit place for such a Conqueror's home. In the meantime he had settled his turbulent domestic affairs by strangling his wife, Doña Catalina, up in Coyoacan. Some chroniclers of that day said Doña Catalina died of asthma, but other and later writers boldly asserted that Cortés strangled her, and his mother-in-law tried to have him hanged for her daughter's death. The hanging did not take place, and seven years later he married a second time, and brought his bride with him to Cuernavaca.

The stately cathedral, with its quaint domes and old bells, its towers and crosses, built by Cortés between 1529 and 1531, can be seen long before the city itself is more than a speck on the plains, and is one of the most picturesque buildings in the Republic. Its massive iron-studded doors and entrances are still in good condition, and the interior is not materially changed; while its loftiness and splendid outlines suggest something of the largeness and artistic nature of the man who built it.

Attached to the cathedral is a seminario, and a hospital, and also the Bishop's house, with its beautiful garden; and near by is another wonderful church, built by Cortés about the same time, and with domes and entrances so artistically



ON THE WAY TO MARKET

Photo by Waite



OLD CHURCH IN CATHEDRAL YARD



CORNER OF RUINS OF TEOCALLI AT XOCHICALCO

beautiful as to defy description. All these structures are enclosed by a high wall, with quaint copings, and crosses surmounting the entrances. A few years ago all these buildings and the rich time-painted wall were to be freshened up and made to look nice and new, by a coat of white-wash and vegetable dyes; but some reverent American interfered in time, and saved to us the exquisite tints and matchless colorings which only the centuries could produce.

The palace, built by Cortés at about the same time with the churches, and occupied by him as his home, still retains its original lines, except a too modern tower recently added—and is now used as the State House, the prison, court-house, police head-quarters, and for other municipal purposes. It too has its little plaza and garden, and from its upper balcony a beautiful view of the valley and mountains.

A cobble-stone road from Cuernavaca to the little pottery village of San Antone is said to have been built by Cortés, and to be the one over which he moved his army. Be that as it may, the road begins near the old cathedral yard, and spans the barranca over a Romanesque bridge, with wonderful arches, under which goes rushing a mountain stream, and along the sides of the barranca grow banana trees, and many strange plants and flowers. The road climbs and zigzags its way up past another old church, which stands in the middle of the one street of the little village; and out of this street, if a little venturesome, one may find entrancing walks and rambles, little suspected by those who keep to beaten paths.

Some three miles to the east of the city is an hacienda once owned by Cortés, and now belonging to his descendants. The original buildings, still in good condition, are now used as a sugar refinery and aguadiente factory, and are most quaint and rambling and spacious.

We were told of many other things which Cortés owned, or built, or did, and our credulity was somewhat taxed; but there is so much that is authentic, so much that shows the character of the man, we were willing to accept a little more than the truth for the sake of picturesqueness. One thing is certain, whether in religion, or the building of a cathedral, or a church, or a palace, a road or a stone wall, or the structures on an hacienda, Cortés showed plainly that his ideas in these things were as magnificent as those he held in regard to the conquest of a country.

In the old church-yard surrounding the Cortés cathedral is held every year the unique service of blessing the animals. It is a moveable feast, and the stranger within the city is fortunate to find out its date in time to witness the ceremony. On the day appointed, early in the afternoon the people begin to congregate in the spacious yard, bringing with them their household and pet animals. Here we saw blue sheep, pink and blue cats and dogs, purple pigs, green goats, yellow doves; horses covered with gold paper stars and tied with bands and bows of flaming red silk; cows, burros and mules, all painted and trimmed in many hues; whole cages of birds, little chickens, ducks and goslings, trimmed up with gaily colored papers; parrots painted and be-ribboned in all the colors; turkeys, geese, and even old hens and roosters, in such holiday attire as must have astonished them, accustomed though they must be to brilliant colors. Finally little space is left, and soon after the bells strike the hour of five, the entrance to the old church is thrown open, a priest appears on the threshold, and the people make a rush for the door, holding their gorgeous animals up to catch the holy water sprinkled over the multitude.

It is in the little village of San Antõne that



SCHOOL CHILDREN OF SAN ANTONE



IN THE BORDA GARDEN

Photo by Cox

practically all of the Cuernavaca pottery is made—every hut and house an individual factory—and we never tired of watching these patient people at their work, the potters and their clay. It seems marvelous that with their primitive utensils they can accomplish what they do. Many of them have no utensils at all; and one young girl, who sometimes sat all day long under a canopy made of a red zerape and a straw mat, used only a piece of broken glass and a horse-hair. With the horse-hair (one end in her teeth) she deftly trimmed the top of each piece, and with the glass smoothed down all rough edges. She worked lovingly over her molding, and seemed to take much pride in each completed piece as she set it out on a board, ready for the firing. The process of making this pottery, from the time of pounding the clay until it comes in white heat from the firing pit—which is also a most primitive affair—is a study in care and patience, as well as art.

But these quiet, gentle folk are always artistic. Whether in the wearing of a sombrero, zerape, or a reboso, the making of pottery, or building a stone fence, or the carrying of heavy loads, or even in the piling of mud bricks, it is always with them consummate art—the more so because it is so unconscious.

Architecture in Cuernavaca to-day differs so little from that of centuries ago that it is almost impossible to tell a new building from the oldest, except perhaps by the thinness of its walls or the newness of its tiles. Directly the mud bricks are in place, and covered by a coat of plaster, and colored by the vegetable dyes, the building takes on a general look of age, and fits in and becomes a harmonious part of its ancient surroundings. Few new houses are built, and when one is started, its progress is so slow that it takes on more the appearance of a ruin than anything

else. These houses are a riot of soft rich colors, and are set at all angles, and no angles at all, straying off down the sides of barrancas, or rambling cheerfully up the hills, in delightful irregularity. The interiors, however, remain strangely dark—as if windows were impossible and undesirable.

Not far from the city is the hacienda and country home of Maximilian and Carlotta, with its buildings and gardens and church. We rode out to it one morning on horse-back, paying twenty-five centavos for entering the enclosure, but there is little to be seen there now, except the bare walls of the old home and a queer swimming pool at the side of the house, with steps leading from the door down into the water.

One night, coming in from the Cortés hacienda, we heard strains of martial music, and turning our burros in the direction, found the funeral services for a soldier being held in the little chapel of the Maximilian home. What could be more tender or fitting than a funeral at the close of day? Here the glorious sunset, the quaint surroundings and the hour lent themselves most sweetly to the scene, and with the military music, the dirge, the chanting of the service, made a picture to moisten the eyes and soften the heart. As the soldiers carried their comrade on their heads to the tomb near the church, followed by the dark-robed priests and the band, we turned our little donkeys toward the city, and recalled the words of another soldier, who carried his arms bravely and laid them down long since: "Give him a march with his old bones; there, out of the glorious sun-colored earth, out of the day and the dust and the ecstasy—there goes another faithful failure." And as we entered our own quiet patio, we wondered how it was possible for anyone to die in Cuernavaca,

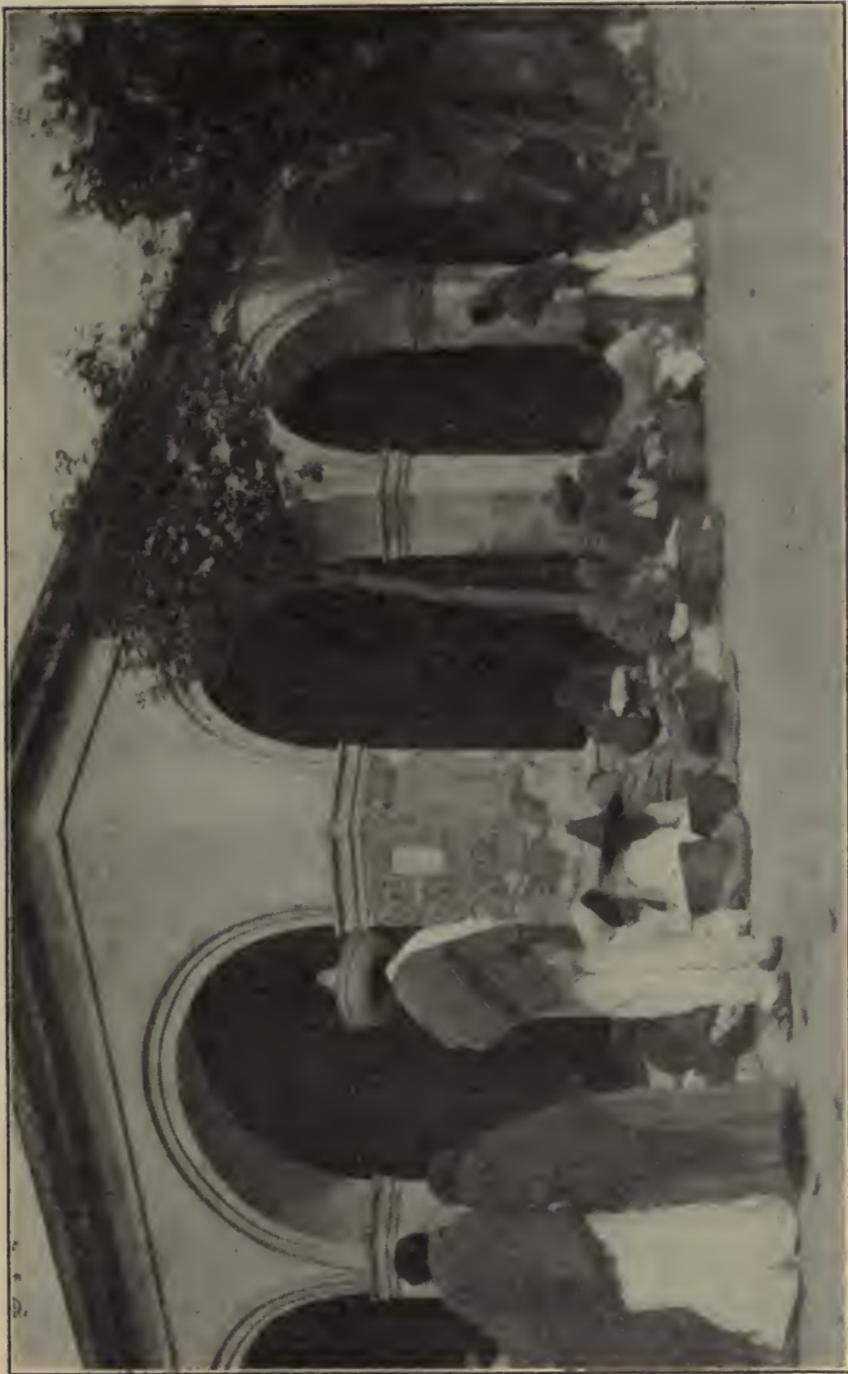


Photo by Cox

UNDER THE PORTALES ON MARKET DAY

for it seems the place in which one should easily and naturally live on forever.

Out a few miles from Cuernavaca are some rare old ruins of teocallis, where the Aztecs made their human sacrifices—some to the east near El Parque, and those of Xochicalco, to the west. Those near El Parque are perched high on a cliff, commanding a wonderful view of the valley; while those of Xochicalco are even more beautifully situated, and much more accessible. These latter must have once formed quite an imposing and important temple, and one which was expected to last through the ages, for the blocks of stone are massive, and the curious figures on them are exquisitely carved. Here also are underground caves, with something like an oven, and a chimney reaching to the top of the hill. This may have been the place where the feasts were prepared which Prescott tells us were served at the conclusion of these sacrificial ceremonies—the principal dish being a slave well roasted. The accounts of these atrocious rites are more believable after a visit to these ruins, where so much art and time and skill and expense were lavished on the temples where they were held; but it seems a little far-fetched to call them “Temples of God.”

Perhaps the most fascinating thing about Cuernavaca is her matchless climate; certainly it enhances all her other charms. Sheltered by the mountain ranges from the winds that infest Mexico City and the plains, with an altitude of five thousand feet; on the edge of the tropics, with all the fruits and advantages of the tropics, and none of its discomforts, it is indeed an ideal place. Occasionally a cold wind creeps over the mountains for a day or two, in December and January, but it is rare indeed, and for the most part the days are like our best June weather in

New England and the middle West. The rains begin in June or July, and every day or evening through the summer there is a shower; but these showers only clear and freshen the air, cool the streets, and make the place still more delightful. From December to June it is never necessary to plan one's day with reference to the weather, for so surely as one awakens at all it will be to sunshine and soft dry air.

Unlike most Mexican cities, Cuernavaca has an abundance of water the year round, supplied from numberless mountain streams. There are fountains in the streets and patios, and at the side of many of the streets little streams go rushing and rippling over the stones. In these cold streams by the roadside the women do their washing, putting the clothes dripping wet on the ground to dry. And herein is the marvel, that out of this environment of ice-cold water, stone wash-boards and dirt, the clothes come snowy white and spotless—so exquisitely done as to make one dread to wear them again, for fear the miracle can never be repeated.

The little plaza in Cuernavaca is like most plazas in Mexican cities. Here all the space between the walks is filled with flowers, oleander trees and crepe myrtle, and many of our own home flowers grow in the friendliest way along with strange plants and flowers whose names we could never learn to pronounce. Of course the band-stand is here, and whether the same custom prevails in other places in Mexico I do not know, but in Cuernavaca, on all national holidays, the little band goes to the plaza early in the morning, marching through the streets at the very first peep of day, playing the national airs and arousing patriotism and joy in the dullest soul. The church bells ring violently, the band continues to play, and the fiesta day is ushered in, to go its accustomed way.

The old market place is across from the plaza, and from the roof of our hotel we could look down into the very center of this quaint, queer place. In the middle of it is a large fountain, around which much of the life clusters, and all about are queer booths and corners. Except in the more pretentious booths, the wares are spread out on the cobble-stones, under a shade made of straw mats, deftly fastened to a tripod, so as to revolve and catch the sun's rays at any angle. On the two principal market days—Mondays and Thursdays—this is a busy, crowded place, full of color. Indeed it is a fascinating place then, and on a bag of corn or a bundle of palmetto mats, we sat through joyful hours, watching the strange life, and sometimes wondered that these people are called lazy. To carry on as much selling in most places would mean pandemonium, but there is no noise here—a little hum of soft voices perhaps, but no mad endeavors to gain buyers. They are too polite for that; yet never have I seen venders pay more strict attention to business, while the weight of the loads they carry on their backs, in getting their wares to and from the market, is almost incredible. They bring them from miles around, over the roughest and stoniest roads and up and down many steep hills; but silently they come, and silently they pack up their loads again at night, and glide away.

One of the most picturesque sights to be seen anywhere in Mexico is this stream of pilgrims, the peons in their white linen suits and big sombreros, men, women and children, as they come and go over the hills to and from the market, bare-footed or wearing leather sandals, and moving along over the stones with a free, swinging motion, as soft and gliding as their language—indeed the walk of some of these Indian women, in its freedom and gracefulness, reminded

me of the low, slow flying of a bird. They all carry heavy loads, so that their backs bend under them, but never yet have I met one so heavily burdened but that I caught a cheerful greeting. "Good afternoon," we say, and they answer: "Good afternoon, *Senorita*. How do you do? I hope you are well; *adios*"; and frequently supplement this with "Go you with God," or some other gentle wish, and all with a smile and the most pleasing cordiality—indeed these greetings were so pleasant and so sincere that we sought more pilgrims that we might get more of their greetings; and however polite we might be, these peons by the wayside were always more than a match for us.

One afternoon as we wandered out over the hills after a shower a superb rainbow spanned the valley, each end resting at the foot of the mountains. Band after band of these white-clad pilgrims, with heavy loads on their backs, and driving their little burros in front of them, passed through the end of the rainbow, stepping fairly on the bag of gold, and were lighted up as with a great glory. On they glided, carrying their loads as if they were so much joy—all unconscious of the glory they were passing through—but to us it was as if we had caught a glimpse of the pathway of life illumined. Perhaps we too are unconscious of the glory we are passing through.

The Borda Garden, beginning almost across the street from the cathedral yard, and completed sometime in the eighteenth century, is both historic and beautiful. In the palace connected with the garden Maximilian and Carlotta lived, and certain delectable places in the garden are now pointed out as the favorite haunts of Carlotta: Here she rowed on the lake, there she bathed in the pool, or yonder walked in the cooling shade. It was an exquisite spot in which to



FOUNTAIN IN BORDA GARDEN

Photo by Cox

dream of a splendid empire for the man she loved so madly.

This garden is one of the things in Cuernavaca with which Cortés seems to have had nothing to do; but the garden has a look of age which might carry it back far beyond his time, and it has a quaintness and charm of its own, with its many old arbors, fountains, shady walks, tropical plants and trees, and cool miradors overlooking the barranca. Among its fountains is one peculiarly artistic and oriental—one of the quaintest to be found anywhere. The entire garden is enclosed by a massive wall, on which rose vines climb, and stray along out over the top, giving a hint of the loveliness within. The entrance to the garden is by the side of another old church, with cracked walls and an exquisite dome, and old bells hung on wooden cross-sticks.

Cuernavaca has her electric lights, and water-works, public parks, and numerous hotels; and there are shops and shop-windows, portales, pulque-shops and pawn-shops, and other evidences of a city of some twenty thousand souls; but the streets are deserted by ten o'clock in the evening, the patio entrances are closed, and silence creeps down from the mountains and envelopes the town. Except for a straggler now and then, and the gendarmes who blow their whistles at stated intervals, and occasional barking of dogs, few sounds are to be heard. There are no wagons in the town, to rattle over the stones before daylight, for all "teaming" is done on the backs of burros, and on the little mule-cars, which make a few trips each day to the railroad station. The few coaches are seldom in evidence about the plaza until after the breakfast hour, so one's morning sleep need not be interfered with.

Nowhere is it so easy to be happy as in Cuernavaca—that is if one is equipped with a disposition to be happy anywhere. The atmosphere, the

life, the language, are all so soft and sweet as to bar out inharmonious things, and the sojourner will do well to give up to the enjoyment of unlimited and constant sunshine, queer sights, every thing different from every other place or life. It is indeed the most perfect environment for living the simple life happily.

But it would be easy to talk on forever of Cuernavaca, and yet give no adequate idea of her charm. The walks and views are so many, so varied, and so soul-satisfying; some new delight reveals itself constantly; the door to yet another rare old patio is left ajar, disclosing always more of the beautiful Bougainvillea, sometimes hanging lovingly over a fountain, or clinging to the old tiles, or filling the branches of a tree; some still quainter corner comes unexpectedly into view; a yet more enchanting walk is stumbled upon by following out some of the rambling streets, while the familiar ones grow more and more dear, and the thought of leaving it all makes a heavy heart.

The shadows were lengthening one day as we climbed the mountains toward home, and as we looked longingly back to the little city, we gave thanks that there the strenuous life cannot be lived; that the place is still unspoiled by tourists, and that whoever lies down to sleep within her quaint and quiet patios must wake to sunshine and gladness so surely as the morning breaks.

Cuernavaca! The "horn of a cow" you may be, as the literal translation of your name tells the world, but you are more! You are the City of Delight, where just to be alive is joy enough! You are the Valley of Content, where only soft winds blow! You are the Spirit of Peace, and to know you is to know the Queen of Dreamland, and to wish to dream on with you forever! Adios! Adios!

