

CHOICE LITERATURE.

THE LEGEND OF PADRE JOSE.

In the beautiful city of Monterey, close beside the old Franciscan convent, there stands a single stately palm, larger and more perfect in its growth than any other palm that you will find in all the country for miles around. It grows upon an odd corner of waste land—that very likely was the convent garden a couple of hundred years ago—and behind it, across the broad sweep of the tree-clad valley, the blue Sierra raises its jagged crest against the bluer sky.

Instinctively you know, as you look at this beautiful palm—with its waving, feathery branches reared high toward heaven, and its deep-set roots drawing strength from the ground that the good fathers long ago made holy by their prayers—that it has a story of some sort to tell; that a meaning attaches to its presence beside the convent wall; that it came there, back in the misty past, by no mere idle chance. But among the gentle folk of Monterey, you will ask in vain for this solitary palm's story. Culture and refinement somehow are at war with the sweet traditions which modestly, along quiet ways, come down to us from times of old. And so, if you would know the story you must seek it among the humble dwellers in the town. The *carregadores*, who carry heavy loads of other people's goods upon their shoulders; the *serenos*, who watch over the safety of the city in the still, dark hours of the night; the *lenadores*, who bring in wood, loaded upon yet more patient *burros*, from the mountains near at hand, or other of the children of toil. For all of these, knowing not of books, and busying themselves not with the serious thoughts and concerns which vex the souls of their betters, are learned in legendary lore. In these simple, trustful minds, illuminating them with a light that brightens the dark places of weary lives, the old stories live on through the centuries; passing from lip to heart, from heart to lip, and so to heart again, yet gaining always a more mellow beauty with the passing years. Therefore, it must be among the lowly folk of Monterey that you search for the story of the stately palm; and if your search be well sped, you will here told, in the gracious Spanish of Mexico—which is richer and softer, even than is the rich, soft Spanish of Spain—this legend of the Padre Jose.

Padre Jose was not bred to the Church from his youth. He was the son of the gallant soldier Don Diego de Vargas, and his profession was that of his father, the sword. When Don Diego was ordered up into the rebellious northern country—back in the year 1692 this was, before the father of the oldest man now living was born—Don Jose went also. And this although the day was named for the wedding, and the Dona Ana de Oñate, most beautiful of all the maidens in the realm of New Spain, was waiting to be his bride. As all the world knows, there was hard fighting during that campaign. For a dozen years the revolted Pueblos had stood out against their Spanish masters, and even Don Diego, with all his gallantry, and with all his soldierly skill, could not in a moment conquer them. There were battles at Santa Cruz de la Canada, at San Yldefonso, at Taos; even under the very walls of Santa Fe. But the campaign ended, and Don Diego drew his forces southward again for rest while the winter lasted, and yet the Spaniards were not conquerors. It was about the blessed Christmas season—the *noche buena*—that the sad news came to the Dona Ana, in the city of Mexico, that in one of these battles her lover had been slain. And so, no joyfulness being left in life, she entered the stern order of the Capuchinas. Passing into and so beyond the grave—as was that order's wont—she to the world was dead.

Through that new year, and through a great part of the next, Don Diego bailed with the Pueblos, and finally, having subdued them, he came gallantly home; and, a strange thing! with him came Don Jose, alive and well! Being taken prisoner in the fight on the *mesa* before San Yldefonso, he had been carried off into the mountains of the Sangre de Cristo and there held for near two whole years. His was a dreary home-coming, for his promised bride was wedded to the holy Church, and so was lost to him utterly. There was no light of hope left for him in the world at all. Terrible was Don Jose a raging agony. At last, in his fierce despair, he cursed the holy Church for severing him from his love. But God was merciful to this sinner, and, instead of consuming him in a moment in wrathful flame, sent to him a messenger of peace. That night the blessed Saint Francis appeared to him in a vision and told him that his dread sin would be pardoned and even, in the end, rest from his fierce sorrow would be given him, if he would devote his life to God's service in saving heathen souls. Therefore Don Jose entered the order of the Franciscans. Nor did he, as is the wont of those who enter the religious life, change his name. As Jose, he said, he had sinned, and as Jose would work out, in deeds meet for repentance, his full forgiveness. And as Jose is a name most holy in the Church there was none to cavi.

Because there were few heathen aboutabouts, but more because he felt that he could be stronger in his faith and work if widely separated from his dead yet living love, Padre Jose asked to be sent out from the city of Mexico into some far corner in the land. And so it fell out that Padre Jose was sent to make his home in the old Franciscan convent here in the city of Monterey. Even in the first year of his service many were the wandering souls that his love and gentleness and great compassion brought safe to shelter in the good care of God.

Yet for a long while there was only sorrow in the heart of Padre Jose. His good works gladdened others, but himself they made not glad, for always rose up between him and happiness the memory of his lost love. This was a gentle, clinging nature—albeit a most gallant one, as his brave deeds of arms time and again had shown—and the need for a personal love was strong within him. There was a holy comfort in his love of the good God, and in his love of working for His dear sake, but this touched only the spiritual side of his nature, and left his human longing for something

real, that he might tend and cherish, and, if need be, spend his life for, all unsatisfied. While this blank in his being remained unfilled there was nothing to check the return of his love to the dear one who had passed from him into the bosom of the Church, of whom, even to think, as the poor padre but too well knew, was deadly sin. So his soul was wrenched and torn within him by this ever-recurring conflict between his holy duty and his human love.

Therefore it came to pass that the kind God, seeing how loyally the Padre Jose strove to do his duty, and how bitter hard that duty was to do, one day took pity upon him and lightened his heavy load.

Beneath the hot sun that beats down so fiercely here in the long summer time, making the air one quivering cloud of scorching heat, Padre Jose came slowly across the valley toward the town. He came from the little chapel of Our Lady of Guadalupe, over on the first of the four hills, and his heart was heavy, for few, and careless of its meaning, were the Indians who had come to his celebration of the mass. The distance from the chapel to the convent is but a mile—a trifling walk on one of the cool, crisp, October-like days which serve for winter here in Monterey. But beneath that summer sun even a strong man would have grown faint and weary—if he had not fallen outright by the way. The strength of Padre Jose was given so largely to the service of God that but little remained for his own needs; and so, midway in his weary walk, coming to a place where a tangle of mesquites cast a warm shadow—that yet, in contrast with the very sunshine, was refreshingly cool—he thankfully cast himself down upon the ground for rest.

Close beside where he sat was a field just cleared for planting, and along the (newly made *arroyo*) the brown water was moving slowly, and was giving great solace to the thirsty land. It is thought by some that the large field set about with *palmas*, on the slope below the chapel of Guadalupe, is the very field beside which Padre Jose rested that day. Whether this be the truth—as it well may be—or only a fancy, we may not know; but it surely is true that while the Padre sat there resting he saw lying in the dust of the wayside, where it had been carelessly tossed when plucked up from the ground a little palm tree scarce a span long—a thin, green shoot, rudely wrested from the place where it had begun its innocent, joyous life, and thus cast forth to die.

At first the Padre, worn by the heat and by the sorrow of his heart, thought not at all of the poor little palm on which his eyes rested idly. And when, presently, he perceived its presence, and understood its evil plight, there came for it no compassion into his heart. He even, for a little space, felt a cruel pleasure in watching it lie shivering there in the scorching sunshine, while he sat resting in the shade—so hard and bitter was his mood.

But such wicked feelings as these could not long find harbour in the Padre's breast. Soon a sense of great shame, and of horror at his own sinfulness, came over him, and he rose up, praying that he might be forgiven, and that he might, with God's good help, save the little palm's life. Through the blistering sunshine—forgetful that his hood had fallen back from off his tanned head—he carried the sorrowful little tree to the *arroyo* and plunged it into the refreshment of the slow-moving brown water; and held it there, tenderly, until the pitiful limpness vanished from the tiny leaves and there was something of the firmness in the pale green stem. And he felt that this mourning thing, now made joyful, was offering its thanks to him. Then, in some suit moss that he found beneath the grove of mesquites, well wet, so that a grateful dampness might be had for the rest of the hot walk, he enwrapped it lovingly—and so set off for the town. Not until he sat resting in his still cool cell, the little palm meanwhile having been planted in rich moist earth in the convent garden, and carefully shaded from the sun until its strength should come again, did Padre Jose realize that in lightening the troubles of this poor forsaken tree he had for a brief space wholly ceased to feel the weight of his own. And as he prayed there, in the shady stillness of his cell, the thought came into his heart that God, in His infinite goodness and mercy, had sent him this little palm that he might have something to love. Being yet upon his knees, he prayed from out of the depths of his simple, trustful soul that this good gift might be his, and that the little palm might live.

And the palm did live. From day to day, from week to week, as Padre Jose tended it lovingly and faithfully, praying the while for its well-being with the same trusting faith that he was wont to pray for the saving of heathen souls, it grew and flourished, and it rejoiced in the strength of its regained life with a visible gladness that was reflected into and that gladdened his own sorrowing heart. When the weariness of his labour rested heavily upon him; when a dark despondency seized him and the thought weighed upon his soul that his work among the heathen was in vain, and that should he die no one would have been the better for his life or would be the worse for his death—then stealing in upon this darkness of sorrow would come the sweet consciousness that the palm lived—and loved him and depended upon him. And the other, the human love, that so wretched and tormented him, and that could not, in its very nature, be cast out of his being, was tempered and chastened by this pure love. When, in the early morning, and again in the evening's dusk, he came to his palm and ministered to its wants—giving it draughts of sweet water, heaping rich earth about its roots, pruning away its too luxuriant leaves so that its life might be concentrated and strengthened for a more vigorous growth—the memory of his early, passionate love would come back to him—but comfortingly, being purified. And as he went about his holy work by day, the thought of the little tree that loved him and that waited for his return at night, upheld and strengthened him.

The palm, for its part, repaid the care that Padre Jose gave it by growing as never palm grew before. Its slim stem became thick and sturdy; its gracious leaves spread out in a feathery crest, and everywhere upon it were the signs of a rich, abundant life.

So the months slipped silently away, and were lost in the depths of the passing years, and the palm shot up and became a beautiful tree; and because of its existence there came to be, if not happiness, at least a refreshing love that

bred peace in the heart of Padre Jose. And so was fulfilled the promise that God made to him, speaking by the blessed St. Francis in the vision.

Thus more than a score of years passed on. Through all this time the Padre Jose gave of his strength freely to his holy work, and many heathen souls were saved which, but for his zealous labour, surely would have been lost. His palm had long since outgrown his care for it, and now, in its turn cared for him—even as his sturdy son, being come to man's estate, might have cared for him had it pleased heaven to satisfy his human love. It was a noble tree now; and against its foot he had made a seat, where he would come in the early morning, and again as the sun went down, for rest and comforting. And the palm, awaying a little in the evening breeze, would press its trunk against him lovingly, and soft whisperings of its thankfulness for the life that he had given it would come down to him from its rustling, feathery leaves. When he was sad, thinking of the weariness of life and of all the sorrow that there was therein, the palm leaves rustled to him mournfully in echo of the mourning that was in his heart. Yet, imperceptibly, the tone of their murmurings would change, bringing into his heart more and more of brightness.

At other times, when the memory of his lost love on earth would come back to him and fill him with a dreary sadness, the palm would whisper of its own love and faithfulness. It would tell of its bitter sorrow as it lay in the scorching sunshine by the wayside where he found it cast out to die, and of its joy when his hands gave it water to drink, and shielded it in the cool, damp moss, and gave it, too, there in the convent garden, a safe refuge where it might rejoice in its new-found life.

But it came to pass, at the end of many years, that a pestilence fell upon the city—a deadly fever that rose up from the earth and that caused many to die, such a fever as never before was known, and, mercifully, never since has been known here in Monterey. In every house was the shadow of death. The fathers of the convent were assailed in good works among the sick; and even, that they might have more time to save the living, they forbore for a season to say masses for the dead. Only each morning and each night the townsfolk in whom was left strength to walk, came to the church of St. Francis, and there, together with the good fathers, sent up their prayers that the pestilence might be stayed.

And when the deaths grew many, and there was sore need for yet more nurses for the sick, the convent of the Capuchinas opened its doors, and the holy nuns came forth and gave their aid. (The Holy Father gave them grace and fullest absolution when, in the after years, their prayer for pardon went to Rome.) The blessed presence and sweet gentleness of these saintly nuns brought comfort into many a stricken house in that most dreary time. But—such was the division of their work among the sick—the Franciscans and the Capuchinas rarely met.

Faithful was Padre Jose in caring for the sick, and in comforting in the name of the blessed saints those whose sickness was even unto death. Almost his only rest was the little space, morning and evening, when he sat beneath his palm. And being, after his many years of zealous labour, but a frail man, and going thus constantly into those places where the pestilence was at its worst, the time came when he himself felt that the fever had him in its hold; and his heart was gladdened, for he knew that now his rest would come.

Close upon the evening of the third day, feeling then that his release was near, he asked that they would carry him out beyond the convent walls into the garden, and place him in the seat beneath his palm, and leave him there.

Beautiful is the evening in Monterey. When the sun has sunk beyond the crest of the noble Sierra, a great burst of red and golden glory leaps up in the sky and for a long time hangs quivering there above the mountains. Clouds of gorgeous colouring float beyond the Sierra and outline its somber, jagged ridge against their rich splendour, and through the clefts between the peaks, broad rays of light shoot out across the valley, and bathe the farther mountains in a liquid flame. And even more beautiful, or, perhaps, only differently beautiful, is the time, a little after this, when the glorious magnificence has vanished from the sky, and in its place have come subdued, delicious colourings—echoes of the splendour that has passed away.

And Padre Jose, sitting beneath his palm, with the fever quite gone from him—for it had done its work—thanked God in his heart that this most perfect earthly beauty should be his last sight of earth. It was a fit prelude, as he whispered to the palm his head resting, as for years he had been wont as he sat there to rest it, against the palms long trunk—for the sight yet more beautiful, being heavenly, that would be his so soon. Dreamily he whispered his thankfulness for all that the palm had been to him; for all its constant tenderness and love through these long years. Then the cool evening wind which sweeps down from the mountains at the end of the hot days, and brings with it a most delectable refreshment, passed softly through the palm leaves, and made again the old, sweet story of the palm-tree's gratitude and love. And, possessing none of the selfishness that goes with it, indeed, it be the very essence of, all human love, the palm-tree murmured its own joyfulness that the time had come when the one whom it loved so truly would cease to be acquainted with sorrow, and would know only the perfect happiness of an endless, holy peace.

Then the Padre whispered again, or it may be that this only in his heart, his longing to see the Dona Ana yet once more before his eyes forever closed to things of the earth. And, lo! as thus longing rested upon his soul, there came to open the gate of the convent garden—being led thither, surely, by God's grace—a holy nun; and looking on her face the Padre Jose knew that for the little time of life yet left to him the love that he had lost was found!

So she sat beside him, beneath the palm, stroking his cold hand lovingly, yet with a love chastened by long suffering of love's lack and now sanctioned because it welled on, anew toward one upon whom rested visibly the hand of death. Together they talked the long years which, in their