

THE LEPEROS, PEONS, AND BEGGARS OF MEXICO.

Leperos, derived from the Castilian *lepra* (leper), is not pure Spanish, nor does it denote a class afflicted with the loathsome disease of leprosy; but it is applied to a class than which it would hardly be possible to imagine one more repulsive or disgusting. The traveler who sees them—and they are found every-where in the towns of this country—must fain hope that no human beings like them are to be found in any other lands of the earth. They wear little clothing, and that little, unless it is of leather, is apt to be in shreds and tatters. If it is of leather it may have served to cover the wearers as long as the children of Israel wore their garments. Their hair, if sometimes cut, is certainly never combed; it is long, and matted, and full of vermin. It is impossible, in looking at them, to imagine that they ever washed face, feet, or body. They are completely encased in a thick and hard crust of dirt. Their complexions are very dark, or that is the color of the dirt covering them, their teeth alone are clean and bright, and what with their wild eyes and famine-pinched features, their expression is savage and altogether wolfish. If they are women they will often have two or three little half-naked, sometimes wholly naked, children trotting after them or fastened to their backs. They are the most miserable-looking creatures I ever saw wearing the human form. To see one such creature would be shocking enough, but to see them by thousands is a sad sight indeed. Their haunts in the city of Mexico are the canals and the markets, and especially the pulque shops there and in all towns. They live on what a civilized man would revolt at as no better than offal. They spend their lives in drinking pulque (which is as much the national drink of the Mexicans as lager beer is of the Germans), quarreling, and stealing. There is nothing on which they will not lay their thieving hands if they get a chance. The superintendent of telegraph construction on the road between Vera Cruz and Mexico told me that, despite all their vigilance, they not infrequently had the wire of their lines stolen and carried off, sometimes by the mile! How large a proportion of the ten millions of the Mexicans in the country are *leperos* I do not

know. The numbers are certainly very large, and their presence in such numbers must greatly affect and depress the civilization of the country.

Another and perhaps larger class of the population is made up of what are called *peons*. These are day laborers, and while they are industrious, and in general not morally base, they are in other respects about as degraded as the *leperos*. They are ignorant, very poor, and in reality a servile class. Having often heard it said that they were slaves I took pains to make careful inquiry into the facts of their condition. While the wages of all of this class are very low—only about thirty cents a day—yet such of them as are out of debt are virtually free, though they seldom care to leave the place where they have lived and labored, since they have strong local attachments. But many of them are not out of debt, but all their lives long are in debt, and these are in a condition which lacks nothing but the name of being a condition of slavery. Indeed, the very definition of the word *peon* is that of a laborer held in servitude until a debt is discharged, and, as often the debt is never discharged, the bondage is life-long. Debt is often incurred through the tender sentiments. A young man wishes to marry. He has not a cent of money laid by, and hence to meet the necessary expenses of his wedding, a large item in which is the enormous fee of the priest, he must borrow money. He cannot do this without selling his labor in advance, which amounts to a selling of himself for the sum of the money borrowed until full payment is made. As he can earn but a few cents a day, and must support himself and family out of this miserable pittance, it often happens that for years, and sometimes happens that for life, the debt and the servitude remain. The condition of the *peon* class is thus one of far greater ignorance, poverty, and hopelessness than that of the freedmen of the South. They are not likely to be raised above this servile condition until and only as the whole people are elevated. And when this takes place it will doubtless involve the breaking up and the distribution among many owners of the *haciendas*, or immense landed estates into which the country is now divided. If it is the curse of Ireland that the land of the country is owned and held by a few persons, much more is this the curse of Mexico. There are in Ireland but little more