

THE INDIANS IN MEXICO.

In the Appendix we find an interesting article by Mr. James Pascoe, on the social and spiritual condition of the Indians.

The Indians form three-fourths of the entire population of Mexico, and are divided into three distinct classes : 1st, the subjugated tribes ; 2nd, the Pinto Indians of the Tierras Calientes ; 3rd, the untamed Comanches, Apaches, and others. At present, I will speak only of the subjugated tribes, as being most numerous, most important, and as those who are likely to be first brought under Gospel influence. These Indians are the broken-down and despised remnants of the old Aztec, Texcucan, Tlascaltecan, and other nations, who, only three hundred years ago, were the ruling powers in Mexico. Three centuries of the withering influence of Romanism have sufficed to degrade these noble tribes to the level of beasts of burden ; stamping out almost every spark of liberty or virtue, and steeping them in superstition, ignorance, and fanaticism of the grossest kind. These tribes still retain their ancient dialects, although, in many cases, corrupted and mixed with many Spanish words ; but still they are so distinct that an Indian of one tribe can not understand the dialect of another ; and the gulf that separates the Spanish-speaking Mexican from the Mexican or Otomi, or Mazahua-speaking Indian, is as great as that which divides the English and Chinese.

As a rule, the Indians have their towns apart from the Mexicans, and the lands belong to the whole community, each man having a right to cut fire-wood or boards, etc., and to sell them, or to till any part he pleases ; but no one can sell land without the consent of the whole town. Also, each man is obliged to render general services, gratuitously when required, and the expenses of religious festivals are defrayed from a general fund, to which all contribute. The Mexican Government has endeavored to break down this system of clanship ; but the Indians, generally, have been shrewd enough to evade the laws and remain in their old ways.

These towns are not grouped in any order. Here will be a town of Indians, speaking Mazahua : close by may be another of Spanish-speaking Mexicans ; a little farther on a village of Otomies—this medley being seen in the neighborhood of all large cities, and each town preserves its distinctive language and customs, and even style and color of dress—the women of one town adopting one uniform shape and color of garments. But, at a greater distance from the cities, we find large districts occupied wholly by Indians of one tribe or another. The Indian lives generally in a rude hut of shingles, or of sun-dried bricks, and roofed with shingles or grass according to the supply at hand ; but such huts are low-roofed, the bare earth the only carpet, and wind and rain finding free entry by a thousand openings in walls and roofs. The one room serves for every purpose, and often

affords shelter to pigs and poultry, as well as to the family. The staple food is the maize cake (tortilla), the Indian very rarely tasting animal food—many not once a month, and thousands not once a year. Their costume is also simple. The men wear a simple shirt and a pair of cotton drawers ; the women, a thin chemise, and a colored “*enegra*” (skirt) rolled around their waist ; and the children, as a rule, in unhindered freedom. A “*petate*” (rush mat) for a bed when obtainable, and a “*zerape*” (blanket) as overcoat by day and bed-clothes by night, complete the Indian’s outfit. These Indians supply the towns with poultry, vegetables, pottery, eggs, mats, and other similar corn materials, which they carry for many leagues.

For instance, an Indian starts from his home loaded with goods weighing, on an average, five arrobas (one hundred and twenty-five pounds) and sometimes eight arrobas, and will travel a week, and often two or three weeks, before disposing of his wares. He calculates how many days the journey will last, and takes a stock of tortillas to last the whole time, allowing six tortillas a day, which he divides into three portions of two tortillas each, for morning, noon, and evening meal. And this is his only subsistence. So ignorant and stubborn are these Indians that they oftentimes refuse to sell their goods on the road. I have seen many carrying fowls, for instance, to sell in Mexico City ; I have met them a week’s journey from Mexico, and have proposed to buy the entire lot at the same price they hoped to realize at their journey’s end ; but no, he was bound for the city, and all my arguments were vain : not a chick would he sell. This has occurred on various occasions. Charcoal, plants, &c., are all supplied to the towns by the Indians, and it is astonishing to see their patient endurance. A man will spend, at least, four days in the mountain burning the charcoal ; then carries it on his back a day’s journey, sometimes more, and then sells it for thirty-seven cents, thus realizing from six to seven cents a day. In the same way the poor creature fares with all else. If he sells planks or “*vigas*,” he has first to pay for liberty to fell timber, if he happens not to belong to a town rich in forests. Felling the tree and hewing out the log with his hatchet occupies a day. In four days he has got “*vigas*” ready. The whole family is then assembled, and the logs are dragged down to the plain and placed on two rude wheels, also the work of the hatchet. The donkey is now hitched on, and husband, wife, sons, and daughters, each lending a hand, away they travel, one or two days’ journey to the nearest city. On reaching it, they must pay an entrance-fee, generally only three cents on each log ; and at length they sell their logs at thirty-seven cents each, and oftentimes for less.

The Mexican cannot do without the Indian. Farms would be deserted, lands untilled, cattle unattended, and the markets entirely deserted, were it not for the poor, patient, despised Indian. Worse still, the poor Indian is the staple food of the cannon, and without him the Mexican would be unable to sustain his revolutions.