

DO YOU REALLY KNOW MEXICO?

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The People Who Claim That "All Mexicans Are Lazy and Treacherous" Are the Sort of Folks Who Assure You That "French Are Immoral" and "Scotch Are Stingy"

Mr. Flandrau is a young American who has lived in Mexico for a number of years and knows both the people and the country at first hand. The following able and sympathetic interpretation of Mexican character and customs is reprinted from his book, "Viva Mexico!"

THE inability of people in general to think for themselves, the inevitableness with which they welcome an opinion, a phrase, a catchword, if it be sufficiently indiscriminating and easy to remember, and the fashion in which they then solemnly echo it are never more displayed than when they are commenting upon a race not their own. Sometimes this rubber-stamp sort of criticism is eulogistic in tone, as when, for instance, a few years ago it was impossible in the United States to speak of the Japanese without calling forth from some tedious sounding-board, who couldn't have told a Jap from a Filipino, the profound exclamation: "What a wonderful little people they are!" But more often than not ignorant criticism of a foreign nation is also adverse. For one nation cannot altogether understand another, and if it is true that "to understand everything is to pardon everything" it must also be true that unfor-giveness is one of the penalties of being misunderstood.

It is the vast throng of fairly well educated "people in general" who are forever divulging the news that "Englishmen have no sense of humor," that "the French are very immoral," that "all Italians steal and none of them wash," that "every German eats with his knife and keeps his bedroom windows closed at night," that "the inhabitants of Russia are barbarians with a veneer of civilization" (how they cherish that word "veneer"! and that "the Scotch are stingy."

The formula employed in the case of Mexicans runs usually something like this: "They're the laziest people in the world, and although they seem to treat you politely they are all treacherous and dishonest. Their politeness is merely on the surface; it doesn't come from the heart"—as does the exquisite courtesy we are so accustomed to receive from everybody in the United States, one is tempted to add, without, however, doing so. For what, after all, is the use of entering into a discussion with the sort of person who supposes that his own or any one's else politeness "comes from the heart," or has, in fact, anything to do with the heart? Politeness, of course, is, all the world over, just the pleasing surface quality we should expect it to be from the derivation of the word. Even in Kansas or South Boston we do not necessarily wish to die for the old gentleman whom we allow to pass through the doorway first, and the act of taking off one's hat to a lady scarcely convicts one of a secret passion for her. But it is odd what depths are demanded of Mexican politeness, which—except for the fact that there is much more of it—is, like our own, an outward "polish" and nothing else.

If, however, there is any thing valuable in politeness as such, the Mexicans have over us at least one extensive advantage. For in Mexico the habit of politeness in its most elaborate form is so universal that the very occasional lack of it in anybody gives one the sen-

sation of being not only surprised but somewhat hurt. If, for instance, a street-car conductor in taking my ticket should fail to say "Thank you," and neglect on receiving it to make toward me a short, quick gesture of the hand—something between a wave and flourish—I should realize that, as far as I was concerned, his manners had not risen to the ordinary standard, and wonder why he had chosen to be indifferent and rather rude. This naturally would not apply in the City of Mexico, where, as in all great capitals, the mixture of nationalities has had a noticeable influence upon many native characteristics. But in provincial Mexico—wherever there was a street car—it would be true.

In riding along a country road it is likely to be considered an example of gringo brutality if one does not speak to every man, woman and child one meets or overtakes. And completely to fulfill the requirements of rural etiquette, the greeting must be not collective but individual; everybody in one group murmurs something—usually "Adios"—for the especial benefit of everybody in the other. The first time I took part in this—as it seemed to me then—extraordinary performance my party of three had met another party of equal number on a narrow path in the mountains, and as we scraped past one another the word adios in tired but distinct tones was uttered exactly eighteen times—a positive litany of salutation that nearly caused me to roll off my mule. It is a polite sociable custom and I like it, but under certain circumstances it can become more exhausting than one would suppose. In approaching—on Sunday afternoon, toward the end of a long, hot ride—a certain little town (which no doubt is to-day very much as it was when Cortes 387 years ago mentioned it in one of his letters to Charles V), I have met as many as three hundred persons returning from market to their ranchitos and villages. Adios is a beautiful word, but—well, after one has said it and nothing else with a parched throat and an air of sincerity for the three hundredth time one no longer much cares. However, if you don't know the returning marketers it is safe to assume that they all know a great deal about you, and for a variety of reasons it is well, however tired one may be, to observe the convention.

With the pure-blooded Indians along the Gulf Coast there is, when they happen to know you, an elaborateness about your meetings and partings on the road that amounts to a kind of ritual. The sparkling conversation that follows is an ordinary example and an accurate translation of what is said. During its progress hands are grasped and shaken several times—the number being in direct ratio to the number of drinks your friend has had during the day.



"Good day, Don Carlitos. How are you?"
 "Good day, Vicente" (or Guadalupe or Ipifigenio). "Very well, thank you. How are you?"
 "Thanks to God, there is no change! How are Don Guillermo and your mamma?"
 "Many thanks, they are as always." (A pause.) "The roads are bad."
 "Yes, señor, very bad. Is there much coffee?"
 "Enough."
 "I am coming to pick next week." (He really isn't, and he knows I know he isn't—but the remark delicately suggests that there is no ill feeling.)
 "Come when you wish to. Well, until we meet again."
 "Until we meet again—if God wishes it. May you go with God!"
 "Many thanks, Vicente" (or Ipifigenio or Guadalupe). "Remain with God!"
 "Thank you, señor—if God wishes it." Toward women we are everywhere

accustomed to a display of more or less politeness, but in Mexico, under the ordinary circumstances of life, men of all classes are polite to one another. Acquaintances take off their hats both when they meet and part, and I have heard a half-naked laborer, bent double under a sack of coffee berries, murmur, "With your permission," as he passed in front of a bricklayer who was repairing a wall. Even the children—who are not renowned in other lands for observing any particular code of etiquette among themselves—treat one another, as a rule, with an astonishing consideration. Once in the plaza at Tehuacan I found myself behind three little boys of about six or seven who were sedately strolling around and around while the band played, quite in the manner of their

French. In his original opinion of the French. And Aunt Lizzie, who paid a dollar and a half for a trunk strap at the leading harness shop of Pekin, Ill., and then had it stolen at the Laredo custom house, will all her life believe that the chief occupation of every one in Mexico, from President Diaz down, is the theft of trunk straps. This sounds like trifling—but it is the way in which one country's opinion of another is really formed.

A discussion of the comparative honesty of nations must always be a futile undertaking, as a considerable number of persons in every country are dishonest. I know for a fact that when Aunt Lizzie alighted at Laredo to have her trunk examined she saw the strap "with her own eyes," and that some-



AN OUTDOOR SLEEPING-PORCH IN MEXICO

Photo by Paul Thompson.

elders. One of them had a cent, and after asking the other two how they would most enjoy having it invested, he bought from a dulcero one of those small, fragile creations of egg and sugar known, I believe, as a "kiss." This he at once undertook to divide, with the result that when the guests had each received a pinch of the ethereal structure there was nothing left for the host but two or three of his own sticky little fingers. He looked a trifle surprised for a moment, and I thought it would be only natural and right for him to demand a taste of the others. But instead of that he merely licked his fingers in silence and then resumed the promenade where it had been left off. However, the general seraphicness of Mexican children is a chapter in itself.

One of the most amusing manifestations of the state of mind known as "patriotism" is the fact that every nation is thoroughly convinced of the dishonesty of every other. From end to end of Europe the United States is, and for a long time has been, a synonyme of political and financial corruption. We are popularly supposed to be a nation of sharks who have all grown fabulously rich by the simple, effective method of eating one another—and everybody else—up. This is not perhaps the topic the French Ambassador picks out to expound at White House dinners, nor does it form the burden of the Duke of the Abruzzi's remarks on occasion of planting a tree at Washington's tomb. It is merely a conviction of the great majority of their fellow countrymen at home. On the other hand, very few persons with a drop of Anglo-Saxon blood in them can bring themselves to admit—much less to feel—that the "Latin" races have any but a shallow and versatile conception of honesty and truth. It is a provision of nature that one's own people should have a monopoly of all the virtues. Uncle John, who was given short change for a napoleon by a waiter at the Jardin de Paris, is more than sus-

where between the border and her final destination it miraculously disappeared. On the other hand, I always leave everything I own scattered about my room in Mexican hotels, because I am lazy, and various articles that I should regret to lose I have sometimes forgotten to pack, because I am careless. But nothing has ever been stolen from me in Mexico, and when I have requested the innkeeper by letter or telegram, "Please to send me the two diamond tiaras, together with the emerald stomacher I inadvertently left in the second drawer of the washstand," they have invariably come to me by return express—neither of which experiences (Aunt Lizzie's and mine) proves anything whatever about anybody.

The question of "laziness" would be easy to dispose of if one could simply say that just as there are honest and dishonest Mexicans, there are indolent and energetic Mexicans. But somehow one can't. Many of them are extremely industrious, many of them work, when they do work, as hard and as long as it is possible for human beings to bear fatigue—and yet of what we know as "energy" I have seen little or nothing. For whatever may be the word's precise definition, it expresses to most of us an adequate power operating under the lash of a perpetual desire to get something done. In Mexico there are many kinds of adequate power, but apparently the desire to get anything done does not exist. The inhabitants, from peon to professional man, conduct their affairs as if everybody were going "to live," as Marcus Aurelius says, "ten thousand years!"

Among the lower classes, even leaving out of consideration the influence of a tropical and semi-tropical climate, it is not difficult to account for this lack of energy. No people whose diet consists chiefly of tortillas, chile, black coffee and cigarettes are ever going to be lashed by the desire to accomplish. This is the diet of babies as soon as they are weaned. I have heard proud

mothers at country dances compare notes, while their men were playing monte around a kerosene torch stuck in the ground.

"My little boy"—aged three—"won't look at a tortilla unless it is covered with chile," one of them explains.

"Does he cry for coffee?" inquires another. "My baby"—aged two and a half—"screams and cries unless we give her coffee three and four times a day." It is not surprising that a population perpetually in the throes of intestinal disorder should be somewhat lacking in energy.

Furthermore, they are a religious or, rather, a superstitious people, given to observing as many of the innumerable feasts on the calendar as is compatible with making both ends approach—one hesitates to say meet. The entire working force of an isolated ranch will abruptly cease from its labors on hearing from some meddlesome passerby that in more populous localities the day is being celebrated. That it is may or may not be a fact, and if a supply of liquor cannot be procured there is no very definite way of enjoying unpremeditated idleness. But a fiesta is a fiesta, and every one stands about all day unwilling to work, unable to play—the prey of ennui and capricious tempers.

Possibly it is mere hair splitting to draw a distinction between laziness and lack of energy, but although climate and heredity will abide and continue to restrain the lower classes from undue continuity of effort, even as they still do the wealthy and educated, it is not fantastic to believe that education and a more nourishing, less emotional diet (both are on the way) will stimulate in the Mexican people some of the latent qualities that will absolve them from the popular reproach of laziness.

SOMEBODY once wrote an article—perhaps it was a whole book—which he called "The Psychology of Crowds." I did not read it, but many years ago, when it came out, the title imbedded itself in my mind as a wonderfully suggestive title that didn't suggest to me anything at all. Since then I have had frequent occasion to excavate it, and, without having read a word of the work, I am convinced that I know exactly what the author meant. Did he, I often wonder, ever study, in his study of crowds, a crowd of American tourists in Mexico? What a misfortune for his book if he neglected to! They are, it seems, composed of the most estimable units of which one can conceive; the sort of persons who make a "world's fair" possible; the salt of the earth—"the backbone of the nation." And yet when they unite and start out on their travels a kind of madness now



and then seizes upon them; not continuously, and sometimes not at all, but now and then. Young girls who at home could be trusted on every occasion to conduct themselves with a kind of provincial dignity; sensible, middle-aged fathers and mothers of grown-up families and old women with white water-waves and gray lisle-thread gloves, will now and then, when on a tour in Mexico, go out of their way to do things that make the very peons blush. The great majority of tourists are, of course, quiet, well-behaved persons, who take an intelligent interest in their travels. It is to the exception I am referring; the exception by whom the others, alas! are judged.

The least of their crimes is their suddenly acquired mania for being conspicuous. At home, in their city side streets, their humdrum suburbs, their placid villages, they have been content for thirty, fifty, seventy years to pursue their various decent ways, legitimately observed and clad appropriately



The Mexican Is So Polite That We Think That He Must Be Insincere—He Is Not Lazy, but He Has Practically None of the American's Eternal Desire to Get Things Done

to their means and station. But once arrived in the ancient capital of Montezuma many of them are inspired in the most astounding fashion to attract attention to themselves. On Sunday afternoon, in the crowded Paseo, I have seen, for instance, in cabs, undoubtedly respectable women from my country with enormous straw sombreros on their heads, and about their shoulders those brilliant and hideous "Mexican" sarapes—woven for the tourist trade, it is said, in Germany. All the rest of the world was, of course, in its Paris best, and staring at them with amazed eyes. In Mexico the only possible circumstance under which a native woman of any position whatever would wear a peon hat would be a hot day in the depths of the country, were she forced to travel in an open vehicle or on horseback. As for sarapes, they, of course, are worn only by men. The effect these travellers produced upon the local mind was somewhat analogous to that which a party of Mexican ladies would produce upon the mind of New York should they decide to drive up Fifth Avenue wearing policemen's helmets and variegated trousers. Only Mexican women would never do the one, while American women frequently, from motives I am at a loss to account for, do the other.

Then, once in a small town to which large parties rarely go, I saw half a dozen men and women suddenly detach themselves from their crowd on being told that a certain middle-aged man, bidding goodby to some guests at his front door, was the Governor of the state. At a distance of from ten to fifteen feet of him they deliberately focussed their kodaks on the group and pressed the button. Afterward I asked one of the men with whom the Governor had been talking if the Governor had commented upon the matter. "Why, yes, was the reply. "He said, with a shrug, 'Obviously from the United States,' and then went on with his conversation."

ONE source of dissatisfaction to travellers for whom foreign travel has always meant Europe is that there are so few "sights" in Mexican towns. By "sights" I mean the galleries of sculpture and painting, the palaces and the castles, the frescos, the architectural fragments, the tombs, the relics and the interminable museums crammed with a dead world's junk, over which the conscientious may exhaust their necks and backs. European cities even as comparatively small as Stockholm and Copenhagen possess museums where, guidebook in hand, people remain for whole days examining ugly, labelled little implements fashioned in the stone age, the bronze age, the iron age, and every other city has among other treasures a few miles of minute, Dutch masters before which to trudge, too weary to appreciate their marvelous skill or to realize their beauty. But in Mexican towns there are none of these things, and the traveller whose days have not been mapped out for him and who is not in the habit of strolling, of sitting in churches, of shamelessly idling in parks and plazas, is likely to complain of a lack of occupation. It is difficult for him to accept the fact that the most notable sight in Mexico is simply Mexico.

