

## PADRE AMBROSIO'S BEADS

By Clarence Patten.

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Padre Ambrosio sat on the mud bench in front of his modest whitewashed adobe house in the Indian village of Santo Domingo, his eyes dancing and twinkling. He smiled blandly to himself, and more than once with a mysterious air he placed his forefinger beside his nose, as if to make it the confidant of some pleasant secret. The sun had long ago gone below the mountains beyond the Rio Grande, and the mid-summer evening had become agreeably cool. About the doorways and upon the terraced roofs of the compact, populous little New Mexican town groups of people sat silent or gossiping in low tones. Except for the faint tinkle of a bell and the soft rustle of a fan, there was not a light sound among the houses.

The padre was more fully dressed than might have been expected of a priest who had said masses and, presumably, had nothing further to do that night than to get comfortably cool and go to bed. Stout riding boots showed below his black gown, and a broad brimmed sombrero lay on the bench at his side. His ample rosary, closely strung with beads, passed thrice around his neck, hung in folds on his chest, and the last loop, with the pendant cross, dangled below his round waist.

Old Anita, his Mexican housekeeper, evidently had theories of her own concerning the reasons of her master's obvious preparations for an outing, and as she looked from the small, square window upon her master she nodded her head, showed her two or three long, white teeth in a smile of mysterious meaning and recalled her girlhood, 50 years back, as she smoked her cigarette, which at each inhalation illuminated for a moment a wrinkled, parchmentlike face that would have befitted one of "Macbeth's" witches.

The dusk grew deeper, and the people almost with one movement drew into their houses to their slumbers. But the padre sat still before his door. His good humor had begun to be invaded by something like impatience, the effort to conceal that feeling led to drowsiness, and he was nearly asleep when three Indians of the village, one of them leading a burro, or ass, silently emerged from the shadows of the house walls and approached the nodding priest. They were attired after the manner of their tribe in white cotton tunics, buckskin leggings and moccasins, and about the long black hair of each was wound a red fillet. Padre Ambrosio opened his eyes and was wide awake in an instant.

In a low tone he accosted the comers: "Ha, Pablo, Nicholas, Miguel, I see you are here as you promised, and you have brought the burro for the saving of my weary steps. Well, lead on, I am ready."

The padre approached the ass, but the foremost Indian, whom he had called Pablo, stood by the saddle and barred the way. His face was set and stern and he addressed the priest in a voice which, though respectful, was grimly determined.

"Father," said he, "you know the conditions under which we are to make our journey."

The priest's countenance fell, but he answered in a manner that seemed somewhat forced, though it was cheerful: "It is well, my children. Your caution is excessive, but I will respect it and do your bidding. Proceed with what you have to do, and I absolve you for laying profane hands upon the sacred person of a priest."

The Indian who had spoken unrolled from his waist a long, closely woven sash, with which he thoroughly bandaged the eyes of the priest, drawing each fold tight and strongly securing the ends in place. The world was an abyss of darkness to the padre, when the Indian spoke again:

"Father, we will now fulfill our compact and take you to the place you have so long desired to see. But bear this in mind: Don't question what we tell you; do not speak, and remember that if you make one effort to release this bandage about your eyes we are all sworn, our priest though you be, to plunge our knives at once into your heart and leave your body in the caverns of the earth."

Whatever inward qualms the padre may have felt, he only answered heartily:

"My sons, I will conform in all respects to your agreement and your commands. Take me now to the appointed place."

Helped by the Indian, he silently mounted the ass. Pablo took the head of the beast, turned him thrice around, and then, holding the bridle, with his Indian comrades following, one on either side of the animal, he threaded his way among the houses, passed them out into the open country, and the party took its course toward the distant mountains.

Padre Ambrosio found it anything but pleasant or easy to keep his seat on the swaying, joggling, miniature burro which he could not see or control. As the Indians, increasing their pace, urged the ass into a trot and then a gallop, the padre, who dared not speak, could only cling to the pommel of the saddle and console himself with the reflection that he was on the road to the fulfillment of a long cherished desire.

Several persons already knew the story of the lost Spanish mines of New Mexico. In that region, as in other parts of Mexico, the Spanish conquerors enslaved the peaceful Pueblo or village Indians and put them cruelly to work in mines. The Indians rose at last in sanguinary revolt, destroyed or expelled all of the Spaniards and effaced every vestige of the mines which they especially associated with their oppressors. When in time the Spaniards returned to New Mexico as sheep and cattle raisers, the Indians alone knew where the hidden mines were, and this secret they have ever jealously guarded. Many stories have been told as to the richness of these lost mines and of vast hoards of bullion which the Spaniards hastily concealed when the insurrection broke out or which the Indians flung into the mines before they covered the entrances. But the Spaniards did not again venture to incur the chance of another Indian revolt by attempting to rediscover or to work any mine in New Mexico.

Padre Ambrosio loved to hear the tales of the lost mines and to weave day

dreams of the disposition that he would make of the treasure could he only find out where it was. He would use it, of course, wholly for the advancement of the church, but his gift of riches inestimable would surely be recognized by promotion, and his thoughts traveled down a pleasing vista of the coming years in which he figured successively as vicar general, bishop and at last as archbishop of the New Mexican see, and he swelled with complacency as in fancy he heard himself called "your grace." The subject possessed his mind, and often he was brooding over schemes to acquire these hidden riches when his simple parishioners supposed that he was absorbed in pious meditations. Many a time during his pastorate of nine years at Santo Domingo had the padre vainly questioned members of his flock about the old mines. The old men of the village admitted that the locality of certain rich mines was known to their tribe, but they also told him that an immemorial vow was exacted of every Indian that the secret should never be revealed to a white man. Often had the padre begged that his eyes only might be satisfied with a sight of these treasures, but as often had he been refused.

But his pertinacity had at last succeeded, and he had been informed that under certain conditions, exacted to prevent his return to their locality, he should be permitted to see the famous lost mines of the Gorrillos. He had eagerly accepted the offer, and thus he found him in the attitude, remarkable for a priest, of sitting blindfold on the back of a donkey guided by Indians sworn to take his life if he made one false move, joggling off in some direction unknown to him, and—to say nothing of his sense of constant peril—suffering much discomfort from the hardness of the saddle and the jolting trot of the beast beneath him.

Time goes slowly and distance seems long to a man who cannot see whether he is traveling, and the padre's longing to dismount grew uncontrollable. Not daring to speak outright, he began to murmur prayers in a tone hardly audible and let his voice increase in distinctness as he murmured piteously: "Our blessed Saviour into the gates of Jerusalem rode upon the back of an ass. Is it meet that I, one of the least of his followers, should proceed in as much state as he did? I should in all humility dismount and walk."

The only notice that his conductors paid to his pious hint was to quicken the burro's pace until the clattering of hoofs and the rattling of the saddle as the priest bumped up and down drowned the timid sound of his voice.

At last the party came to a halt, and the priest was assisted to dismount. Without delay the Indians hurried him along on foot, and he now realized very forcibly that they were making their way by a devious route up a steep and very rough mountain side. Sometimes his guides would stop for a whispered consultation in their own language, and by their movements he surmised that they were retracing a path by landmarks. When they told him to halt or to go on, he observed that their voices had none of the subservience that characterized the speech of his parishioners when in the village, but had become commanding and peremptory. The father, being fat and short-winded, found it hard to keep up with the pace at which his conductors went.

Occasionally an admonition from one of the Indians told him that he was treading the edge of a precipice and had better be careful where he stepped. Sometimes he struck his shin against a sharp rock or suppressed a shriek of pain as he ran into a Spanish bayonet plant, with the sensation of being transfixed by a score of needles. He was out of breath. He felt that he could not always keep his footing in places where a misstep would probably cost him his life. More earnestly than he had ever desired the treasure he now wished himself at home, but his guides urged him on, and he dared not speak. At last, exhausted and despairing, he sank to the ground, feeling that he could go no farther, but fortunately just at this time the Indians also were ready to stop. They now seemed to him to move about trying to locate some spot which at last they found. He could hear them removing stones and making preparations, the nature of which he could not determine. Then one of his guides raised him and led him forward until there came upon him a sudden flash of light. He realized at once that it was daylight and was in haste to get indoors from a cavern. He shrank back, fearful that he should fall into unknown depths, but immediately he was caught up by the arms and collar, lifted clear from the ground, and the next moment he was dangling over hollow space. His guides drew his hands together, and they closed on a notched pole. He felt for the pole with his feet and struck it.

"Down, down," said the voice of Pablo in a tone that admitted of no remonstrance.

The poor padre felt that he was going blindfold straight into the bottomless pit, but there was no help for it, and with groans and fervent prayers he clung to the pole and let himself be lowered slowly downward. He went down, clinging for life, he went until his feet at last struck a rocky bottom. His guides were soon by him, and he was taken by the hand and led along a wet, slippery, rough passage, his feet splashing in water and sometimes tripping over heaps of stones. Presently the party stopped, the Indians untied the bandage from his eyes, and he looked about him, blinking in the light of a torch held by one of his conductors.

After the long period of darkness that he had endured it was several seconds before Padre Ambrosio could get accustomed to the light, but at last he saw clearly and looked helplessly in the faces of his wild companions, and then about him with much dismay and distrust. But his trepidation was quickly melted into mingled interest and delight at the remarkable scene in which he found himself. Sides, bottom and roof were of jagged rock just as the miners had left their blasting and hammering on the day of the great massacre a century and a half before. But nature, working in silence and darkness during the long intervening time, had turned the rough cavern into a grove of beauty. Stalactites, snowy white, hung from the roof and every projecting point of the sides, making a Gothic setting like marble. The seepage of water from mineral

veins had left upon the walls an iridescent stain of every glowing hue with tints as changeable as the shaven upon a peacock's neck and a thousand times more variegated. The padre forgot his fatigue and fear and gazed enchanted. The utmost that he had imagined of the glories of the lost mines was realized in the appearance of the objects about him. His delight was increased when his guides led him to a side of the cavern where he saw imprisoned between walls of rock a wide vein of crumbling silver ore of great richness. Then one of the Indians pointed to a pile of massive bars stacked up like cordwood, and handing him a knife motioned him to scrape the surface of them. He did so, and beneath the tarnish and discoloration was revealed the glittering surface of true silver.

"El oro," said Pablo, pointing to where lay, retaining still the shape of the box that had rotted from around it, a pile of gold bullion that to the priest's eager eyes seemed like a king's ransom. Padre Ambrosio lifted one of the bars that had lain there so many years in undimmed brightness, admired its weight and color and held it, reluctant to let it go. But the Indians were uneasy and eager to get away from the place. The padre's glancing over the gold came to a sudden end, for Pablo motioned him to drop the bar, and putting the bandage about his eyes shut him from the sight of the grotto and its alluring treasures. The poor priest sighed grievously at the thought of leaving the place empty handed, and, most unwilling, he was led back along the passage to the shaft.

If anything could have been more dreadful than his descent into the mine it was the dragging of his corpulent person out from it, and pitiable indeed were Padre Ambrosio's sips and struggles as he groped his way up the unsteady notched pole in such mortal terror of a fall that for the time being he forgot the scratches and contusions that he had sustained and the punishment that his night's ride and his wetting would probably give him. At last he gained the earth's surface, and once in the upper air he flung himself down in mingled exhaustion and relief.

While the Indians covered the entrance to the mines and restored everything about it to its customary appearance, the priest had time to collect his thoughts and prepare to put into effect a cunning plan that he had matured before leaving his house. When the Indians came to him and the party moved down the mountain, Father Ambrosio in an absent manner loosened the end of his rosary and let fall a bead, then another and another, and so on down the mountain side he marked the route by beads. When he had remounted the burro, he continued to lose his beads so industriously that when he was set on the ground at his own door and the bandage removed from his eyes he had not one left.

In the daylight—for the eastern sky was red when they re-entered Santo Domingo—he looked eastward over toward the Gorrillos mountains and exultingly thought of the line of beads which marked the route back to the mines and planned how he should in a day or two follow it back accompanied by a force of 20 Mexican attendants and a train of mules with which to secure the treasure that he had so shrewdly rediscovered. He first wanted to get inside the house, to laugh at by himself at the success of the scheme by which he had outwitted the simple Pueblo Indians.

Old Anita, who was always early astir, was baking tortillas under the open shed thatched with cornstalks which in summer served as kitchen. She looked up, saw the padre standing by the door and nodded her head more positively than she had done the night before when she had noted his preparations to depart.

"Well, well," she said to herself, "what can the padre have been doing and where has he been? Oh, dear, how dreadfully splashed, muddy and torn his gown is, and he looks ready to drop with weariness. Why wouldn't he stay and be comfortable at home? And what has become of his fine rosary? Oh, dear, oh, dear."

With the good padre was a dismal sight after his riding and climbing and blindfold groping in the damp recesses of the buried mine. Hat, face, gown and boots were impartially plastered with mud, and his appearance was fatigued and unkempt to the last degree. He realized at once that daylight was in haste to get indoors from a cavern. He shrank back, fearful that he should fall into unknown depths, but immediately he was caught up by the arms and collar, lifted clear from the ground, and the next moment he was dangling over hollow space. His guides drew his hands together, and they closed on a notched pole. He felt for the pole with his feet and struck it.

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