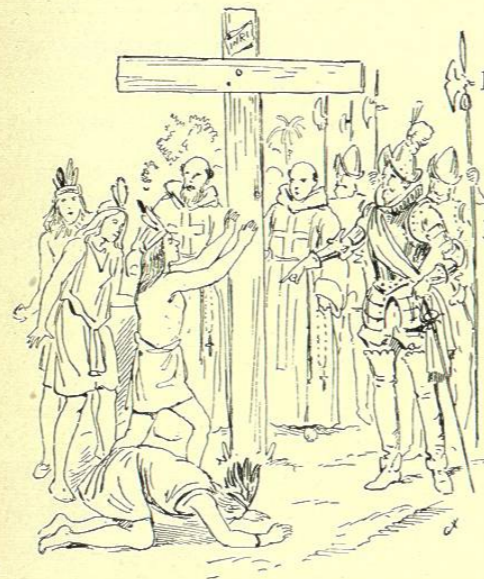


## CHAPTER XI.

## A GLANCE AT MEXICAN LITERATURE.



THE little that survives of primitive Mexican literature comes down to us from a period of barbarism, which, though clothed in external and material splendor, was destitute of intellectual culture and moral enlightenment.

It is hard to believe that the noble and poetic verses of Netzahualcoyotl, the most noted of early Mexican writers, had their birth and growth in the midst of such an environment.

This fact, however, but serves to emphasize another fact which the modern writers of Mexico so brilliantly sustain, which is, that the literary and poetic faculty is inherent in the Mexican race. And from those early days down to the present time we see the unusual triple combination of soldier, statesman, and writer. This statement receives its verification by a glance downward from the fifteenth century, when Netzahualcoyotl was the poet-chief of Texcoco, through a long list of warrior-authors to the brave and accomplished Guillermo Prieto, who has nobly served his country by both sword and pen.

The twelve Franciscan friars sent over after the conquest by the General of the Order, were men of profound learning, and may be

called the pioneers of Mexican literature. They attempted and accomplished one of the most stupendous undertakings ever conceived by the most enthusiastic philanthropist. They had not only to learn the language of the Indians to whom they came to preach, but to master, also, a great variety of dialects. This done, they formed of these vocabularies and grammars, leaving an invaluable heritage to their successors in this field of labor. By their patience and devotion they humanized a savage people and christianized a pagan nation.

Cortez compelled the natives to yield to him by force of arms, but his work was but the beginning of their subjugation; the friars completed the conquest by the milder but more potent agency of religion.

It has been related of one of these good brothers, Toribio Benavente, that coming one day to the town of Tlaxcala, and being unable to preach to the people because of his ignorance of their language, he pointed to the heavens, thus signifying his holy mission. The Indians were struck with the contrast between the humble dress of the friar and the gayly bedecked Spanish soldiers, and spoke of him pityingly as "*motolinia*." The good father, inquiring the meaning of the word, was told that it meant a poor person. "Then," said the friar, "this shall henceforth be my name." From that day he signed himself Motolinia, and was ever after known by that name.

The life of Father Bernardino de Sahagún affords a noble exemplification of the spirit of Christianity. With the exception of thirty years spent in his native Spain, his whole life was passed entirely among the Indians. For sixty-one years did he labor for their advancement and education. He was not a fanatic, seeking to convert by fire and sword, but the loving and patient



BERNARDINO DE SAHAGUN.

teacher. He wrote theological, educational, and historical works. The most noted among the latter is his *General History of the Affairs of New Spain*. He died in 1590, at the advanced age of ninety-one.

In his last illness he was removed to a hospital, but insisted on being taken back to the Indians, that he might breathe his last among the people he loved so well.

Bernal Diaz del Castillo, a companion of Cortez, wrote, fifty years after the conquest, *The True History of the Events of the Conquest of New Spain*. The name of this work is a correct exponent of its nature, for it is conceded by all who have seen it to be a faithful record of scenes and events by an eye-witness. No better history of the country and the times it deals with could be placed in the hands of our own school children. Its simple, charming narrative style would render it extremely attractive to the young. Its reproduction in our language would be an undertaking well worthy of some of our enterprising school-book publishers.

Of the famous Bishop of Chiapas, Father Las Casas, much has been written. His two historical works were for a long time condemned to oblivion, but have been lately revived. He was a true friend to the Indians, and did all in his power to protect them from the cruelty of their conquerors. His defense of the Aztecs is the subject of Para's great painting.

Father Olmos was one of the earliest writers. Arriving in 1524, four years after the conquest, he was one of the first who made a grammar of the Mexican tongue. He also wrote several other works, most, if not all, of which are lost to us. The manuscript of his grammar lay for a long time in the Paris library, and was at length published in 1875.

Under the name of the manuscript of Zumarraga, two important chronicles were written at the request of Don Juan Cano, the son-in-law of Montezuma, for the purpose of eulogizing that monarch so that the King of Spain might return to Doña Izabel (the wife of Don Juan) the birthright of which she had been dispossessed.

Muñoz Camargo was an Indian chronicler whose principal work is the *History of Tlaxcala*, which, though local in name, is very general in its information.

Oviedo was the first chronicler of the New World. He wrote the *General and Natural History of the Indians*, in fifty books, of which the first nineteen were published in 1535, and were again printed in 1547, and afterward appeared translated into other languages.

Ixtlilxochitl was the original chronicler of the Texcuxanas, and few writers enjoy his fame and reputation. He became an author so as to study the interpretation of the ancient paintings. In his closing years he officiated as court interpreter to the Indians; he died about the year 1648.

Friar Augustin de Vetancourt, of the Franciscan Order, contributed many valuable works and treatises on Mexico and the affairs of his day and time.

Carlos de Sigüenza was one of the most erudite students of his period, and a native Mexican. He made an earnest study of the traditions of the early Mexicans, especially those that bore traces of Biblical origin or intimations of Christianity. He died a learned man, and his works are a high literary authority.

The valuable researches and records of these historians could never have been made but for the work of their predecessors, who rendered inestimable service to history by recording facts gleaned from the "wise men" who had formed the councils of the deposed Indian monarchs, and from the chiefs able to interpret the "picture writings" which then formed the national records and literature.

After a period of prostration the revival of letters began in Mexico toward the close of the seventeenth century. The impetus was inaugurated by Clavigero, Veytia, and Guma, noted historians, and Boturini, a great collector of hieroglyphics and manuscripts.

The next period was distinguished by the advent of such luminaries as Quintana Roo, Ortega, Galvan, and José Joaquin Fernandez, who rose upon the literary horizon amid the storms of civil dissensions.

This brings us down to the present time—that of our own contemporaries,



LAS CASAS.

whose productions are actually better known and appreciated in Europe than by their American neighbors.

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Like New York, the Federal Capital of Mexico is the center towards which all the genius of the provinces, whether literary, artistic, or scientific, gravitates. For there, as in the metropolis of the United States, all brain-workers expect to gain, at least,

appreciation, while many hope to win renown.

The principal cities of Mexico, such as Toluca, Morelia, Guadalajara, Guanajuato, Puebla, Merida, and many others of like size, have their literary associations, but *El Liceo Hidalgo*, at the capital, ranks highest; and is, in fact, intended as a National Institute. It was established on the 15th of September, 1849, and has known many vicissitudes during this time, but of late years it has renewed the original designs of its founders.

On each recurring Monday evening the society meets at its handsome hall, and it is then the brilliant genius and flowing wit of the members may be fully enjoyed. Scientific essays and literary productions are read before this Lyceum, and nothing that is unsound, unscientific or weakly sentimental, can escape the censorship and rigid criticism of such able men as Riva Palacio, Ignacio Altimirano, Vigil Pimentil, Juan de Dias Peza, Juan Mateos, Ramon Manterola, Ireano Paz, Francisco Sosa, and others.

The meetings are well attended and appreciated, not only by the cultured part of society, but also by many of the plainer and less educated of the population. Not infrequently bevyies of ambitious



*V. Riva Palacio*

college boys are numbered among the most attentive listeners to all discussions and debates, giving expression to their enthusiasm in rounds of applause. But the pleasure of these reunions is greatly diminished to the stranger who finds himself seated so as to look at the guests on the opposite side of the room, and the only view he has of the speaker is obtained by twisting his neck and looking in a sidewise direction. However, the aim of the society is of a pure and lofty nature, its sole ambition being the encouragement and development of native talent, and right royally is it succeeding, so that it matters little as to how or where one sits.

The name of Vicente Riva Palacio occupies an exalted place in the history of his country. It would seem, therefore, an act of injustice to place him only among the writers, when he has played so grand a part among the gallant heroes in "grim-visaged war." For, from the age of twenty-three to the present time, he has filled almost every place of honor that could be bestowed upon him by his people. A man of brilliant genius and liberal ideas, he enjoys the reputation of being the most humorous and versatile of Mexican writers. It is somewhat surprising that, although by profession a lawyer, we yet find him, also, a statesman, a leading politician, a soldier, a poet, a journalist and dramatist, and in each position he has reached high distinction.

As a politician, he has filled acceptably not only the office of Governor of several States, but has also been Justice of the Supreme Court and Cabinet Minister. From 1870 to 1879 he was Minister of Fomento (public works, commerce, industry and colonization), during which time he used signal efforts for the development of the country in the extension of railways and telegraph lines, the improvement of public buildings and roads. Like others of his countrymen, he has suffered imprisonment, but his confinement was cheered by the muses, and some of the sweetest poems he ever penned was when behind the prison bars.

As a writer, his works are not only extremely popular in his native land, but throughout the whole of Spanish America. By request of the

Federal Government, he edited the national history entitled "*Mexico á travers de los Siglos*" ("Mexico Viewed through the Course of Ages"). Among the most popular of his novels is that of *The Hill of Las Campañas*, which is a thrilling and faithful account of the last days and execution of Maximilian.

At this time Riva Palacio is enjoying the honor of Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary from Mexico to the court of the noble Queen Christina of Spain. As his time is not fully absorbed in his diplomatic duties, he is now writing a historical *brochure*, and will also soon publish a volume of Mexican legends in verse.

General Palacio's magnificent mansion is the grand center and rallying point of all toilers after lore, and it is there his courtly hospitality shines resplendent, dispensed with equal impartiality to all, whether they be distinguished and acknowledged in the world of letters or only humble aspirants for fame. They here meet together, a common brotherhood, and among them all the host is himself the most brilliant and witty.

An entertainment, probably not excelled intellectually and socially by any given in a private house during the winter, was the *Velada Literaria* (Musical and Literary Reunion), given by General Palacio on the first night of the New Year, and of which he had previously given me a hint.

The house throughout was a grand scenic illumination, of which the center was the *sala grande*, with its brilliant assemblage of elegantly dressed people. Diamonds shimmered and flashed, adding to beauty which might be sufficient of itself, the charm that jewels and the accessories of wealth can give, and lighting up the faultless Parisian toilets.

Several ladies were present whose jewels summed up from \$100,000 to almost double that amount.

An unusual feature was the reading of a beautiful poem by Señora de Flaquer, the editress of *El Album de la Mujer*—the only paper at the capital edited by a woman and devoted to the interests of women.

All the leading writers of the city were present, and each one read an original poem written specially for the occasion. With something of the enthusiasm of the time, I recall a charming poem by Juan de Dios Peza. His rich, soft voice is wonderfully effective; its sonorous intonation and smooth inflections, added to the eloquent gestures of the reader, carried his hearers along with rapturous enjoyment.

But Altimirano, Francisco Sosa, Juan Mateos, and others, as they stepped before the audience with dignified and graceful bearing, received an equally hearty greeting.



Our distinguished host read a poem full of dramatic effect, based upon the tales of the pirates of the Gulf.

*Francisco Sosa*

A most weird and peculiar effect was added to this reading by a piano accompaniment composed and dedicated to the author by a señorita, a musician of great celebrity. The voice of the reader and the tones of the piano flowing in admirable accord, now moved the audience to tender sympathy, again aroused soul-thrilling emotions or blood-curdling horror at the will of poet and musician.

Among the many brilliant renderings of musical compositions, was the remarkable performance on the violin of two boys of twelve and thirteen years. Without book or break they played throughout the music of *Il Trovatore* with marvelous technique and admirable expression.

The exercises of the evening closed with a superb banquet given in the *comedor grande*. The flow of wine was only equaled by that of wit. The Mexicans seldom indulge to intoxication; their frequent potations "cheer but not inebriate"—only add brilliancy to their conversation without clouding the intellect.

In all that elegant assemblage I was the only American guest present, of which distinction I was justly proud, and endeavored to wear with becoming dignity the honor of being the sole representative of our great nation.

My embryo book was made the subject of many kind toasts drunk to its success, and the hope was expressed that its effort toward bringing in friendly contact the two nations, would be appreciated by my own people.

One of the most erudite and brilliant of the *literati* in Mexico is Ignacio Altimirano, who is also an eminent jurist, and was at one period a judge of the supreme court. Altimirano is a corresponding member of the Spanish Institute, also of several literary societies in France, England, and Germany.

He is a pure descendant of one of the Indian races. He won the prize in his municipality in Oaxaca, and his education was completed at the "Instituto Literario" at Toluca. On going there, some one observing his marked Indian parentage, laid his hand kindly on his head and said: "Nothing will ever come from this brain." The utter fallacy of the prophecy is too well known, both in this country and in Europe.

The most popular poet in the republic is the venerable Guillermo Prieto, who may justly be styled "the Mexican Béranger." He has also been called the Robert Burns of the republic, and, like the Scottish poet, he sings the songs of the people. Identifying himself with them in feeling, he is able to express their every emotion, and in

their own tongue. Not even the despised *leperos* are neglected, but with that exquisite "touch of nature" that he possesses, he finds and acknowledges kinship with these degraded pariahs. Guillermo Prieto is not merely a poet; he has served his country on many battlefields, and was the chief counselor of Benito Juarez during the most perilous days of Mexico's national existence.

Prieto's *Romancero Nacional*, published about a year ago, is a collection of historical incidents related in verse, and is so highly appreciated that the Federal Government has ordered it to be used in all the national colleges.

Even now, at the advanced age of eighty-one years, Señor Prieto holds the position of Professor of Ancient and Modern History in the Military College at Chapultepec, and has not only compiled a history of Mexico, for the cadets, but has written an excellent work on political economy for the instruction of his pupils.

"The Mexican Longfellow" is Juan de Dios Peza, whose exquisite poems are best appreciated by the aristocratic and cultivated classes. Señor Peza has now in press a volume of Indian traditions.

The distinguished philologist, Don Francisco Pimentel, is also a *littérateur*, but, with a noble and holy object, has devoted the greater part of his life to the study of the native Mexican languages, and now speaks twelve of the Indian dialects. Señor Pimentel has greatly encouraged the study of the Nahuatl and Otomíe languages in the Government School of Agriculture, because he fully coincides in the opinion of the great educator and philanthropist, Señor Herrera, who maintains that the only way to elevate the Indian races is to learn their native dialects and then go to their *pueblos*, or tribal settlements, to instruct them in those matters most essential to their mental and moral development. Señor Pimentel is a member of various scientific and literary societies in France, Germany, and the United States.

Alfredo Chavero, although more generally known in Europe and in this country as an archæologist, is not only a literary man but an eminent lawyer, and is to-day president of the Chamber of Deputies. His