

CHANNING ARNOLD AND FREDERICK J. TABOR FROST
THE AMERICAN EGYPT: A RECORD OF TRAVEL IN YUCATÁN
(1909)

II. Mexico City and the Mexicans

No one disputes the yea or the nay of Porfirio Díaz, maker of Modern Mexico. . . Porfirio Díaz is an autocrat. He is an autocrat fiercer, more relentless, more absolute than the Tsar of Russia . . . He has played for the regeneration of his country. He has played, but it is too much to say he has won. Nobody could win; but he has chained the bloody dogs of anarchy and murder, chained them successfully for so many years that there are some who forget that he has not killed them outright. . . . Only the other day a veteran Anglo-Indian officer gravely asked us, "What is the exact position of Mexico in the United States of America?" We simply gasped: words failed in such an emergency. Before Díaz came, Mexico's history was one of uninterrupted rapine, murder, and sudden death. Out of a morass of blood he has made a garden: out of robbers he has made citizens: out of bankruptcy he has made a revenue: out of the bitterest civil strivings he has almost made a nation.

He is nearly eighty: he is as upright as a dart: he has the face of a sphinx with a jaw which makes you shudder. He rarely talks, he still more rarely smiles He rides unattended in the Paseo: he comes down to the Jockey Club in the afternoon, and the members just rise and bow, and the President picks up his paper and sits quietly at the window reading But his power is literally limitless. The Mexicans do not love him: nobody could love such a man. The lower classes fear him unreasoningly; the upper classes fear him too, but it is blended with a lively sense of what he means to Mexico.

But there are fiercer exhibitions of autocracy at which people only hint, or of which they speak in whispers. There is no Siberia in Mexico, but there are the equivalents of banishment and disappearance for those who would challenge the authority of the Mexican Tsar. Even criticism is tyrannically repressed. There is a Press, but the muzzling order has long been in force, and recalcitrant editors soon see the inside of the Penitentiary.

Such is the arbiter and autocrat of Mexico. What, then, is the state of the country politically, and what will be her future? Mexico's great weakness is that she is not a nation. There is no true national feeling, and a moment's thought will show that the circumstances of her population forbid the existence of such. On the one side you have the Spanish Mexicans, the white population, representing the purest European blood in the country. They are but some 19 per cent, of a population of twelve million odd. Among them, and among them alone, is patriotism in its highest sense to be expected or found. On the other side you have the vast mestizo class the half-castes some 43 per cent, and then the purer Indians, forming the remaining 38 per cent. Of these three classes the characteristics are sufficiently marked to destroy hope of any welding or holding together.

The potential wealth of Mexico is almost limitless, but the indolence of the Mexican nature is inimical to its development. Under the iron rule of Díaz the country has advanced, it is undeniable, in every direction. Railway enterprise has opened up unheard-of possibilities in outlying States; banking, though still crude, is becoming a feature of Mexican commerce; municipal life is assuming that beneficent tendency which it has for years possessed in most European countries; drainage and sanitation are receiving official attention, and the welfare of the people is a plank, and a big one, in the present policy.

But American capital is rolling in, rolling in like an inexorable tide of Fate. You have only to be in Mexico a day or two to realise how irresistibly the country is sinking into the power of the American investor, and how vain and the more vicious because of their vanity are the efforts of Mexicans to avoid looking upon the Gorgon head of Yankee hustle which is destined to turn their somnolent national life, such as it is, into stone.

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