

Mexico—Tierra Triste

SEAN NIALL and KATHARINE MANGAN

MEXICO is beautiful, it is tragic, it is comic, and it is very simply sad: beautiful with a monotonously melodramatic, spectacularly varied beauty; tragic as is tragic any spectacle of frenzied and senseless waste, devastation, and blood; comic in that, large and important though it is, it somehow remains opera bouffe, “a centro-American republic” in the humorous meaning of that term. But its principal characteristic is its sadness, the utter and overwhelming natural sadness of the Indian, who, except in the far south, is almost never gay; who has the same expression and behavior at his wedding and at his funeral; to whom innumerable fiestas, which might be so full of gaiety, of *alegría*, are merely occasions when he can lose his fear and loneliness in the communal comfort of a dumb close herd; and before whose stolid and sodden countenance the moros dance, the firework castles explode, and the cards of chance are dealt, without his ever being stimulated to a light smile or a lively action. Only in contests involving blood or danger does he seem moved, and then starkly by the stark nearness of death. For fascination with death is the core of his character. His only sparkle, that self-tormenting humor known as the *vacillada*, so keenly interpreted by Carleton Beals, is after all as adolescently feeble an escape as is his exclusively brutish drinking.

Sadness can be beautiful when it is suffused with mind and sensibility. One is often pleasantly startled in Europe by seeing, in a merest peasant, *un de ces terribles visages ravagés, d'un vieux Beethoven, d'un vieux Rembrandt*. But the Mexican's sadness — and if you will so call it,

beauty — is of a far more bovine kind. It is difficult to find many with even the animal beauty of the types collected by Eisenstein. Too many resemble his overseers and wicked hacendados, in an unhealthy and unappetising appearance, pock-marked or bloated or squint-eyed; women prematurely aged. In the cities one gets an impression of a small, scrubby, short-legged and very mixed race. The beauty they have is one in common with Negroes: the beauty merely of sex. The men look swaggeringly male, especially on horseback; the women, female, submissive hen-birds — which perhaps endows them with a special appeal for us androgynous modern whites.

We Americans, who keep our art, like our religion, carefully compartmented, tend to overestimate the simply natural qualities of all folk art, including the Mexican, which continues to exist in a rather debased and feeble form. In masks and floral decoration, textiles, pottery, leatherwork, the Mexicans are surpassed by many other races, who live too far from the United States to be taken up with all the ballyhoo and advertising, and inclusion in the wares of Gifte Shoppes, as has been so successfully done with the Mexican crafts. In festal dances and costumes, the Mexicans, whose sense of dignity and congruity is very slight, are surpassed by almost all European peasants who have preserved such traditions. But to us, who accept our machine surroundings without question, the indio's intimate and natural preoccupation that his utensils be agreeable to see and to touch is impressive.

We keep speaking of the indio, rather than of the Mexican, because Mexico *is* indio: upon that brown sea isolated white figures gesture and endeavor; but are swallowed effortlessly. Like many other phrases, Latin-

American sets up a false concept which only figures can dispel. Mexico is an Indian nation, slightly leavened by white blood. The whites, very generously estimated at one million fifty thousand, constitute but five percent of the population; it is the remaining fourteen million, divided roughly between eight million *mestizos* or mixed bloods, and six million pure Indians, who determine the basic characteristics of Mexico's daily life. Mexico is Indian.

The persistence of this race, considering its sanitary and economic conditions, past and present, is a miracle; but even miraculous persistence does not automatically set a race high in the human scale. For, denying ourselves all envious sentimentality about the "mindless instinctive child of nature," we find that the indio is, when not definitely feeble-minded, generally addlepated; he is, moreover, psychopathically dirty, suicidally lazy, not preeminently honest, and, worst of all, of a black, brooding, sullen, revengeful and sanguinary character. He is in love with death, which makes him very appealing to writers such as D. H. Lawrence. "The Indian way of consciousness is different from and fatal to our way of consciousness." We should have said that the Indian way was *unconsciousness* — which enables tourists to watch him living his life with the shameless curiosity of a visitor at a zoo. His lack of vitality is reminiscent of that doomed and fatalistic race the Arab, but without their noble air of bygone greatness. This is difficult material for even the wisest and strongest government to work upon, and the Mexican government, good as it sometimes is, can merit neither superlative; so that it is no wonder that government makes such halting and irregular progress.

For its problems are grave. Agrarian reform is sum-

marily imperative, for, until it is complete, arriviste generals can always find enough disaffected for a perpetual succession of devastating revolutions. Latifundia effeminized the declining Romans; of the Indians, who are of tougher stuff, it has made revolutionaries and bandits. Simultaneously, industrial penetration is producing excruciating difficulties. The miracle is, not that Mexico is disordered, but that it is not perpetual chaos.

It is easy enough to give the simple answers to these two main problems — let the communal lands, the *ejidos*, be redistributed; let the government attempt to limit industrialism to the country's capacity for peaceful absorption — but in practice the simplicity disappears in a maze of secondary complications. Of these the principal one is the character of the indio. An advanced liberal Mexican official, found, after careful tests, that a minimum of forty per cent of the Indian children tested were, in a medical sense, morons. He was still working desperately hard when we made his acquaintance, but showed a melancholy verging on defeatism — a characteristic combination by which one may recognize any realist liberal in Mexico. Only the well-to-do Cook tourist liberals see for Mexico a boundlessly rosy future.

Nor is it only intelligence which is lacking, but the most elementary common sense. To work for a month as did our landlord in one town, putting up a fence of cornstalks, *aguasol*, to preserve a garden from hens, and then, during a fiesta, to rent out the henyard as a parking-space for famished country burros who of course utterly devoured the fence, shows an inability merely to think.

This simple lack of the *sens des choses* can partly explain the prevalence of disease in Mexico. For example, at a fiesta in Tecapulco, where the water was so notoriously bad that even the country peons distrusted it, relatively

pure water from nearby Taxco was on sale, ladled from open tins by — a black leper. Real savages in Africa have more laws and organization in their villages. This is not a decayed civilization but a defective one.

Of Mexico's indescribable dirtiness, by contrast to which the back alleys of Naples are hospitably impeccable, the surer origin is in the indio's do-nothing sluttishness. Would that before our Stuart Chase had written, in speaking of fiestas, "arrangements must be made for toilet facilities, for the clearing of refuse . . . it all gets done," he had been forced to thread his way to our house down the adjoining Callejón de la Luz during the fiesta of Vera Cruz. Now laziness (Heaven and the new societies for the use of leisure know) is often an excellent thing; but to see a Mexican peasant, whose principal possession is free time, emerge from a sordid single-room house in which between five and twelve people live, eat, work and sleep, mingled with their domestic animals, to sprawl in sodden and sullen idleness on land from which adobe bricks are easily made, ten minutes' walk from a forest whence rough roof-beams may be cut, is to realize that this is no ordinary refusal to be hustled.

Indeed, this laziness is an abnormal and significant one. It is, of course, partly excused by the very diseases it creates — a vicious expanding circle. When one learns from a government physician that, at the very lowest estimate, thirty-six per cent of the inhabitants of his village have amœbic dysentery, always endemic there, he realizes that he cannot expect much alert activity from such spartan sufferers. As constant over-indulgence in alcohols as the pocket-book affords — and especially in the drug-like *pulque*, which, however much it may be necessary to the wildly unbalanced Mexican diet, is

surely one of the most degenerate, stupefying, and mind-rotting drinks ever conceived by the innocent brain of unspoiled savages, contributes its dismal share. Chronic sexual excess — a racial vice — further debilitates. And though no really trustworthy statistics are available on social diseases, they are probably as high as anywhere in the world.

But the real cause of this devastating laziness is a constitutional secret hatred of construction, a passionate love of death and destruction in which sadism and masochism are strangely blended. You will be told that the present indios cringe because of conquistador and hacendado oppression — and certainly that oppression was sufficiently brutal to produce cringing in any character. But they cringed long before that, we are certain: to their gods, their volcanos, and, most important, to their own stormy souls. For there is in them a need to fear, alternating violently with a resultant need to destroy. You may dismiss Aztec human sacrifices as a mere passing craze only if you have never lived intimately with the Indians; they exemplify, on the contrary, a *basic* thirst of the Mexican character, so that, for example, the extravagances of the penitentes need surprise no one. Death these Indians worship; destruction is to them better than food or drink or shelter. When they justly revolted, and seized the haciendas, did they apportion them among themselves? Did they live in them? They did not. They *burned* them! And as with buildings, so with other things. The noted case of the utter ruin of the great sugar-industry of Morelos can be duplicated again and again all over Mexico.

The senselessness of Mexican crimes of violence also testifies to this passion for destruction. So frequent are they that the second section of all the great dailies is

devoted exclusively to them. Indeed, were there ever a country in which the carrying of arms should be prohibited, it is Mexico; and the government could well imitate the Italian in this matter, though since the *machete* is a tool as well as a weapon, outlawing of firearms would be only half the battle. No doubt the native inclination of the indio to violence has been aggravated by the long revolutionary terror through which Mexico has passed, when every man's hand was against one, and murder, rapine, and arson were released and justified by an inexhaustible flow of sanguinary patriotic oratory. One would say that the greatest producers of such oratory, the generales and politicians, carried this violence to a fine art, were it not so summarily absurd to use "art" in the same sentence with these colossally ignorant pouter-pigeons. About them practically all writers on Mexico can be in angry accord, since they fail to meet the only test in which men of their ilk might hope to shine: glamor. Even their ephemeral glitter is of a pretty sordid kind. There are none who are not monsters, not merely of vanity, but of vulgarity, not one whose political crimes seemed justified by his elevated tastes.

And yet, tragically, until the passage of many difficult years, it were absurd idealism to suppose that any man can rise in Mexico to a permanent position of sufficient power to do great good without finding it necessary en route to engage in alliances and practices which must constantly return to plague him. By the time he has gone through that mill, how much of his original lofty intention remains even to the highest type of man? Compromise is the slow poison of character; yet those in Mexico who do not compromise become only dead saints, like the late great Felipe Carrillo Puerto of Yucatán. There are intelligent old men in Mexico City today

who will swear to you that the notorious Porfirio Diaz started with the highest principles; and certainly the later Don Plutarco Elías Calles was not precisely the same Elías Calles who left his school-teaching to win justice for the exploited laborers of Baja California!

The speculation and crookedness which is condoned in the bureaucratic system down to its smallest details, reaches grotesque proportions. It would remind one of the pre-war Ottoman Empire were it not that in Mexico, unlike countries where corruption flourished under an admitted despotism and in a quiet atmosphere of senile paralysis, this inefficiency and viciousness of officials is rendered the more exasperating by a pretence of efficiency and above-board modern methods, and a specious imitation of the regulations of other countries. To a visitor, who cannot afford to be harassed in small ways, it is irritating to find that, for instance, he has been sold a bogus automobile license by the responsible licensing authority, or that the official who has just assessed upon him a spectacular fine is simultaneously the special lawyer who, properly feed, can argue himself into abating it. No matter what unpredictable misfortune may occur, there is no prospect whatsoever of remedy through legal channels; and the only hope is string-pulling.

This corruption is even more serious to those who have to make their living in Mexico, and it utterly disheartens the handful of honest men connected with the administration who struggle to improve the condition of the country. These high-minded people are constantly reduced to shame-faced apologies for their fellow-countrymen, who are always ready to knife them behind their backs for the sake of money or "glory." Highway robbery would be more honest and more reasonable than the ways in which petty officials procure money by child-

ishly transparent cheats and threats. The whole Mexican attitude to regular methods of earning a living (in which he shows no belief) contributes to this. His repugnance to steady toil and impatience with his habitually small wages make him pin all his faith to a stroke of luck that will make him rich at one blow, either from a trick or a pure gamble. It is hard to imagine that systems of savings or insurance have any success there. It is a part of the same spirit which makes him regard the Lotería Nacional as an "investment," which also makes him, when he sees others who have ploddingly or otherwise amassed some wealth, seek at once to invent some pretext for taking it, some tax or fine; failing to achieve this he at least hopes to frighten others into bribing him to leave them alone. Energetic young men join the army, as they always regard it as the likeliest avenue to spectacular success.

With such leaders (exceptions are few, though, fortunately, highly placed), it is no wonder that the incredibly malleable peons are led to comparative chaos. One cannot too much belabor the fact that Mexico is a *pseudo*-democracy. Not only is the Mexican electorate in general ignorant for what or whom it is voting, or marching, or, indeed, dying; but its votes have usually not even anything to do with the announced electoral results. There is no grasp of issues. Mexican history shows broad blind groping trends: they are trustworthy. Zapata, for example, headed a genuine agrarian revolt. But contemporary politics! Manifestations! It is hardly too much to say, though it saddens to say it, that for a *tostón* per man, plus free *tortillas*, a few communal bottles of *mescal*, and a resounding speech, an agitator may still collect a demonstration of practically unlimited numbers, to cheer any particular name told its members.

In this dark picture some heroes stand out, notably

teachers and doctors—splendid men, keen and competent, who for small reward work intensely hard under pioneer conditions. Where roads are impassable for an auto, doctors cover great distances on horseback, inoculating whole villages against small-pox and typhoid, dealing with accident cases from the mines; and operate often without nurses or experienced anesthetists to help them, constantly faced with every dangerous disease known to medical science from typhus to leprosy, struggling perpetually to keep their surroundings surgically clean, teaching people how to prepare safe food, how to sterilize the bottles they bring for medicines (in a town where there is not a single qualified druggist), and lecturing in the square on social hygiene. One may find them devoid of humor, but one cannot but admire their seriousness. Most are cheerfully pessimistic: “My patients do not come to me until they have both feet in the grave.” But enough of such doctors will save the country if anything can. It must be remembered that Mexico, in general, is dirtier than any part of southern Europe.

No agricultural community can afford the fantastic costs of American doctoring, hospitalization, and dentistry. Still, a few simple improvements could be made without harm, such as, for one example, the removal of lepers from the public streets. Some major ills could be stamped out and some hygienic knowledge disseminated. At present the water-supplies are a menace and, with them, many of the best fruits and vegetables in a raw state. To an American, it is a strange country where one dare not touch a salad. Perhaps before the question of doctors comes the question of water. It is scarce. But even where it is pure enough to be bottled at source as mineral water it is contaminated running above the cobbled streets in pipes that do not join properly. The

question of conserving the rainwater that falls in summer, and its use for irrigation, is an important one, as well as re-forestation, which has already been taken up by the government.

Every other difficulty is naturally complicated by the struggle which has been going on since 1800 between the Church and liberalism. This is one of the really tragic wastes of Mexico. There is no doubt that the Church has been in many ways a civilizing and beneficent force among the Indians. If anything can cure them of their perpetual blackmindedness, it is the Church with its colorful and cathartic ceremonies and with its undoubted power, its elsewhere proven flexibility. In spite of the far from unenviable record it had during the middle vice-regency, one might hope that the Church, seeing the historic error of its anachronistic policy, might, in conjunction with a government more realist than fanatic, again take its honorable place in the country's life. But it is probably now too late: for not only are the present dice bloodily cast, but, even more important, the past record, written and visible, piles up its irrevocable cumulative effect. It is inevitable that a Mexican student become anticlerical, for, as he reads his country's history, and finds the Church almost invariably identified with the forces of reaction, and often of bloody reaction, as in the case of Huerta, he must automatically, by sheer cumulative association, absorb anticlericalism as an integral part of liberalism. Hence the Church is, in the eyes of the present government, guilty until proven innocent. And, to tell the truth, it has rarely disappointed this cynicism. It is very doubtful whether any permanent compromise can now be arranged: probably the Church must accept its penance of poverty and banishment, to return again (since Mexico is still, and will for many years remain, a deeply re-

ligious country) chastened and purified. It is sad to think of the exquisite churches powdering away, of the ritual dances passing from memory, of an incredibly miserable people deprived of the consolation of a visible faith; yet, looking farther back, it is equally sad to think of the lot of peons on the Church's haciendas and in the Church's mines, of the clerical party's recurrent and shocking betrayals of the Mexican cause, of the blood spilled by a stubborn inability to recognize the irresistible mutations of time.

Closely linked with the Church, and dying with it, is the hacienda system. That it should have failed is one of the saddest commentaries on human nature, for, since the indio is quite incapable of self-government, a benevolent paternalism should have been the ideal system. Alas, the history of the hacienda-system is the history of all paternalism: the fathers were greedy, selfish, and irresponsible. In their destruction the great landlords have proved again that no ruling class can endure which is unwilling to accept the responsibilities of rule together with its privileges. In our own country, northern industrialism deliberately destroyed southern agrarianism on a comparable paternalistic pattern, but in Mexico, where it was an ally, not an enemy, of industrialism, it fell of its own internal rottenness, a rottenness of callous and light-hearted inhumanity.

Yet, essentially, any Mexican government must for generations be purely paternalistic, for democracy is a comic mockery in Mexico. We have shown that the majority of the people are totally unfitted at present to take any share in the government. Of those who ought to know better most have no interest whatsoever in the interests of their country. It remains to be seen how much can be done with the government as it now exists, ham-

pered by the enmity of the Church and without real control over many outlying parts of the country due to inadequate communications and the melancholy necessity of leaving in power unworthy administrators because they are political allies or would prove dangerous enemies. And let it not be forgotten that its first task, and an achievement which brings many attendant benefits, is simply to maintain itself. For, aside from its selfish ends, this does at least produce a continuity of effort, and comparative peace and order, the lack of which Mexico has suffered grievously since the fall of Díaz.

Mexico is attempting health for its people and their education. Simultaneously with this, it should certainly disseminate as widely as possible knowledge of birth-control, since the people in their poverty are terribly over-burdened with those little brown babies that so soften Mr. Chase's economic heart that he fails to mention the resultant undernourishment, misery, and mortality. Agricultural schools are doing good work. Agrarian reform is summarily imperative, and the keystone of all policy, for on it depends the economic welfare of the country. The communal lands, the *ejidos*, must be redistributed now that, with so much blood and violence, the haciendas and plantations have been not merely broken up but ruined. So much destruction has there been that in the state of Morelos it was impossible to find a country house that had not been burned. The land has been the basic cause for the revolutions. And division of lands has been talked of for too long. The government should reduce its still rather pretorian army; and it *must* somehow control those irresponsible politicians who, in return for giving it its present power (for comparative good, as it happens), permit themselves, in their own provinces, unspeakable license.

It was indubitably the intention of the present government, originally a benevolent despotism based upon a party, the P N R, which then genuinely expressed the ideals of the revolution, to improve the lot of the indios willy-nilly, while simultaneously endeavoring to train them for self-government. At its inception, it courageously fought an engulfing northern industrialism, instituted agrarian reforms, and started popular education of a sort never previously dreamed of in Mexico. Whether it still essentially retains those ideals, or whether they are a front behind which the same old expediency plays for its petty stakes, is a matter for immediately future events to show. Lázaro Cárdenas has a fine honest record; but so once had Elias Calles.

Mexico is too near the United States to have a free hand in what it undertakes. The "policy of the good neighbor" is a fine phrase; but it loses some of its specious friendliness if your neighbor happens to be the banker who owns the mortgage on your house. It is fatuously academic to discuss the possibility of controlling the crescent industrialization of Mexico when it is already in a position of economic, hence political, vassalage to the United States. One needs only to look at Cuba to realize that Marines, in the Nicaraguan style, are a clumsy and outmoded method of exerting pressure. As a Mexican official remarked to the writers: "We can no more than keep step with the feeble liberalism of the United States; a step beyond it, and we are deluged with polite notes. A real revolt in Mexico, genuinely basic reforms, would mean disguised intervention, *buen vecino ó no*."

A logical prognosis is hopelessly unfavorable. It is hard to foresee for Mexico anything better than a rickety continuance of the present rickety existence — with luck, it may be spared more and bloodier revolutions —

coupled with a gradual penetration by and spiritual collapse to American industrialism. Mexicans, especially *mestizos*, are fascinated by mechanical toys and the noisy panoply of progress, and towards success, they have no spiritual reserves: if a thing is successful, it is good. All this stems, apparently, from really deep self-distrust. The indio will degrade his art or food without a qualm to meet tourist taste.

The future of Mexico? Certainly agrarian reform cannot be stopped; no more, on the other hand, can the penetration of Yankee-imperial industrialism. There will be more blood, more destruction, more heartbreaking waste, more sadness in this saddest of lands, this *tierra triste*. Anyone who lives any time in Mexico, studying its history and mingling with its people, not buoyed up by roseate preconceptions, knows that the only answer is the Mexican's own, given with a still living hope, and with an incomparable patience: "*Quién sabe, señor, quién sabe?*"

Crisis in the Dance

LINCOLN KIRSTEIN

THE PRESENT situation in theatrical dancing demonstrates so many interesting relationships that an analysis may be useful not only to habitual spectators of the dance but also to those equally interested in music and painting, since painting and music, to a considerable degree, are responsible for this situation. There is today a pronounced and increasingly widening division in dancing intended for use in our theaters. We are not occupied in this article with folk or social dancing except as its forms are theatricalized, or in dancing for healthful or religious reasons. Roughly speaking, the division in the dance is between the supporters of the traditional ballet and the so-called "modern" or "concert" dance. The balletomanes feel that the moderns are interlopers, diletante usurpers and ephemeral fanatics. The moderns believe that ballet holds only dry-rot, technical desiccation, the forms of a decadent bourgeois culture. Half-truths resident in both attitudes are the source of passionate debates stemming more frequently out of personal and accidental predilection than from a sensitive historic or dialectical viewpoint. The ballet was the spring-board of the modern dance and the results of its reaction may be found to be nourishing the ballet to a greater degree than the modern dance is itself developing in experiment.

Ballet, or the traditional descent of the classic form of stage dancing, has a four hundred year old logical arising and expansion paralleling in visual art the growth of orchestral music. Its birth in late mediaeval Italy, its activity in the French Renaissance, and its flourishing in the imitation of French Court opera houses all over Eu-