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Lower California

Lands of Mystery

One by one the ancient lands of mystery are yielding to the curiosity and determination of man. We now know all that is worth knowing about the North Pole; the blank spaces upon the map of Africa, once so fascinating to the school boy, have almost vanished; there is a good hotel, with hot and cold baths, upon the Zambezi, and a trolley line is projected along the Congo; tourists invade Lhassa and Timbuctoo; steamships traverse the Niger and the Amazon; even the mysteries of the Gulf of California have been penetrated at last.

Until a few years ago the island of Tiburon, far up that grim gulf, was peopled, in popular legend, by a race of hideous cannibals, who grabbed each visitor as he landed and conducted him at once to their stew pans. No white man, venturing upon the sinister shore, ever came back. The hardiest renegades of the mainland were not bold enough to go after the gold said to be waiting the prospector in the Tiburon hills.

But one day an American college professor, a mild and weak looking fellow, decided to give Tiburon a thorough looking over. The Mexicans and miners of the region refused without thanks his invitation to go with him, but a couple of other college professors, apparently with the valor born of ignorance, joined his expedition. He traversed Tiburon from end to end—and all he found worth mentioning was a herd of goats! Not a cannibal was encountered or any other man—and not a sign of gold. Thus passed a land of enchantment. Today Tiburon is filling with Mexican settlers and they are raising watermelons upon its hot beaches.

The great peninsula of Lower California, that stupendous rampart of mountains, 750 miles long, between the Gulf of California and the Pacific, was once a land of mystery too. The early Spanish navigators, though they landed upon its shores, seldom penetrated far into its wild interior. And even today, though it has a population of 50,000 and many fine ranches, it is still largely an untracked wilderness. The mountain peaks rise to 10,000 feet, there are vast areas of waterless desert, it is a hot and cheerless, albeit a picturesque and romantic country. Until recent years, it is probable, no man had ever made a serious effort to explore it.

But now comes Arthur Walbridge North, an American, with an elaborate account of the whole peninsula. He has traversed it from Cape San Lucas to the American border; he has scaled its high mountain and penetrated its lush valleys; he has chased its wild animals and had converse with its native Indians, and out of his observations and adventures he has made a thick book called “Camp and Camino in Lower California.”

A camino, it should be explained, is a high-road, and in Lower California there are three of them, the Gulfo, the Sierra and the Pacifico. They were blazed by the early Spanish settlers and missionaries, and they once connected the scattered missions of the peninsula in three long chains. But most of those missions are now ruins, and so the old caminos have grown faint, and

when Mr. North essayed to traverse the Sierra Camino Real, he found it difficult and exhausting work. The traveler who would follow in his footsteps, he says, needs plenty of provisions and ammunition and must carry drinking water with him. Even thus and then, and with stalwart, long-hoofed burros to carry his packs, he will be lucky if he gets through without facing death more than once.

The Mission Of Santa Maria

In the mountains towering along the Gulf shore Mr. North found the old road entirely obliterated. "Occasionally," he says, "I saw heads and skeletons of mountain sheep, but I fell in with no human beings and found no signs of their recent presence. I suffered from dizziness and nausea." Thirst, too, added to the terrors of the journey, and it was with a sigh of relief that the explorer came upon the ruins of the ancient mission of Santa Maria, overlooking the blue Gulf, with its two acres of level ground and its cool spring.

A gaping hole in the adobe wall of one of the buildings told a curious story. It was made in 1893 by a mysterious American from San Francisco. He came down alone and hired a Mexican to guide him to the mission. Then, after spending a day or two in making measurements and calculations, he sent his guide away. When the latter returned there was that hole in the wall, and the American had a pack-load of something very heavy.

Spanish gold? Who knows? In 1747 the Dona Maria de Borja, Duchess of Gandia, left the Jesuit Fathers 62,000 pesos for mission building, and some of the money paid for the Santa Maria Mission. Perhaps the rest of it was hidden in the mission wall. At all events, the American seemed satisfied with his quest, and returned home in high good humor, guarding well that mysterious and heavy pack.

Desolate Hill Ranches

Here and there Mr. North happened upon the lonely, desolate homes of rancheros. Some of these princes of the wilderness owned estates of 100,000 acres, and one of them was actually lord of 1,000,000, but their homes were "usually mere jacales, or huts with thatched roofs and stake-and-mud walls.

"The limitations of their larders accorded with the poverty of their houses. With cheese, dried beef, milk, beans, tortillas, wild honey, coffee and salt on hand they considered themselves well provisioned. Flour and rice were luxuries."

But in the open there were antelopes and mountain sheep, not to mention rattlesnakes and other vermin. The flesh of the mountain sheep turned out to be "a cross between a juicy mutton chop and a fine, thick porterhouse steak." And here and there Mr. North encountered astonishing evidences of civilization—fine American ranches in the hills, for example, and even a squad of policemen. These cops were commanded by an extremely polite Mexican officer, who spoke English fluently. They were traversing the desert in search of a gang of bandits.

On two occasions Uncle Sam has had Lower California in his hands, but both times he has given the peninsula back to Mexico. The first time was in 1847, when Yankee marines, aided by New York volunteers, landed upon its shores and defeated the defending army of Mexicans and Yaqui Indians. That was one of the great victories of the Mexican War; but as Mr. North says, it has been forgotten, for the invaders were afterward recalled, and Lower California sank back into the dull barbarism of a remote Mexican province.

Walker's Republic

In 1853 that desperate adventurer, William Walker, shipped out of the Golden Gate in the little filibustering ship Caroline, with 46 men aboard and plenty of arms and ammunition. Landing at La Paz, he captured the town, ran up a flag with a two stars and proclaimed the birth of the Republic of Lower California and Sonora. At an election held next day, Walker was chosen president of the new nation, and at once appointed all of his followers to high office. Before the end of the year 230 recruits from the United States among whom "a man under six feet tall was a rarity," joined him, and early in 1854 this little army fought two battles with the Mexican troops at La Grulla and San Vicente and defeated them both times.

Walker now offered to turn the whole peninsula over to the United States, but the powers at Washington, though eager to accept, were apparently afraid to do so. Instead, they sent surrogates to intercept Walker's recruits and provision ships, and pretty soon his situation became desperate. But he did not surrender to the Mexicans. That was not Walker's way. On the contrary he attempted a retreat up the peninsula all the way to the American border, and what is more, he accomplished it. At the very gates of the United States a Mexican force attacked him, but he drove it back and marched across the line with banners flying, yielding up his sword to Captain Barton, U.S.A.

A trial for filibustering followed, but a humorous jury found Walker not guilty. Fate had even greater adventures in store for him. He was destined to set up other republics in Nicaragua and to die a soldier's death at Trujillo.

(Source: Iowa State University, Parks Media Center, Microfilm Collection)