TRACES OF THE FRANCISCANS IN CALIFORNIA

WHAT would have been the result if the Franciscans of Spanish California and the Puritans of Plymouth Rock had exchanged continent-sides on coming to America? For one thing we should have missed the most superb and harmonious type of architecture known to the new continent—the architecture of the Old Missions—an architecture that even in its ruin claims for itself a kingly lineage.

Only the Spaniard had the feeling for beauty traceable in those massive structures raised out of the bare earth in noble stretch and curve, below their mother-mountains. And this beauty-loving Spaniard (had his caravels found anchor at Plymouth Rock) could never have uplifted these mission pillars and domes on our Atlantic Seaboard, owing to the lack of tamed Indian allies, whose patient unrecorded work made possible his architectural achievements in California.

The Puritans would not have carried to California the tradition of court and corridor, of tower and parapet. Their dealing with the Indian would have called for no large structures. Their conscience, dulled to beauty as was Milton's after he turned from L'Allegro and all her lovely train, would have approved only such bare, bleak buildings as the old Marblehead Town House where "much treason was hatched up against King George;" or, at best, a simple stiff little temple like the Bruton Parish Church of Virginia, where the Indian maiden Pocahontas was baptized.

The Franciscans came to California in 1769, led by Father Junipero Serra, once a doctor of philosophy in the College of Majorca, Spain. They were not flying from persecution, but were proceeding under the commission of Spain to colonize and Christianize
the long-waiting Spanish province of Alta California. They proceeded from Mexico—two parties by land and two by sea—under a tremendous contagion of enthusiasm, caught on the worldly side from Galvarez, the inspector general sent out from Spain “to examine and reform all branches of government”—a contagion caught on the spiritual side from the saintly Serra, a friar as eager to shelter and save savages as a Pizarro to destroy them.

All Spain was in a blaze of exaltation. At last their northern lands were to be peopled with Christian souls! Cathedral bells rejoiced through the night; rockets soared to the stars; guns thundered to the hills. Ladies vied with one another in flinging their gold and silver ornaments into melting pots whence strong hands molded the bells for the mission towers. So with a great passion of joy in the hearts of the planners (if not always in the hearts of the humble workers) with the feeling of a great work to be done and the sense of being followed by the eyes of a watching nation, the Franciscans set to work at their beautiful home-making in the Upper California.

During all the last half of the eighteenth century, through all the troublous times of the American and the French Revolutions, there on that halcyon western shore, the Franciscans were building and dwelling in pastoral peace and simplicity. Four missions were founded in 1776, the year that old Saint Paul’s of New York began its eventful life. From the mother mission erected under the San Diego palms in 1769, on to the last straggling structure built among Sonoma’s vines in 1824, a sweep of seven hundred miles, twenty-one missions were built, separated, one from another, by the leagues of a day’s journey.

The mission architecture everywhere followed the Spanish-Moorish type—one-story buildings ranged about a rectangular open court, the rooms being surrounded by a corridor rising from massive arches.
Occupying one corner of the court, stood the cathedral or chapel, which was built of stone quarried out of the neighboring hills. The walls of the cathedral were frequently five feet thick, and the structure was dimly lighted by small square windows high up the sides, placed high perhaps as a safeguard against the attacks of unfriendly savages.

The mission San Juan Capistrano (named in honor of a warrior-saint of the Crusades) was perhaps the most magnificent of the missions—the one most nearly approaching the Franciscan ideal. The span of this stone church was one hundred fifty by one hundred feet. It was in the form of a Latin cross, and carried five superb domes, eighty feet from ceiling to floor, the foremost dome being surmounted by a massive tower. The five-foot walls were built of irregular stones held in place by cement. The inner arches and cornices were made of soft sandstone. Inside the cathedral were the five deep arches of the roof, the hollowed niches for the statuary, the receding panels of the walls. Four of the ancient bells still hang in place. One bears the quaint inscription,

*Ruy Elas made me.*

*Hail, Mother most pure!*

*San Juan, 1796.*

In the book of deaths which lies beside the book of marriages and the book of baptisms in the little library, you may read the tragedy of the Cathedral’s ruin. Six years after its joyous consecration, an earthquake one Sunday morning hurled the Roman tower down upon the front dome, and both fell crashing into the church killing forty communicants, mostly Indians. And there on the floor still lies the heap of rock and clay undisturbed since before the battle of Waterloo. The old altar still stands. High above it on the ledges and cavities of the broken roof the swallows build in the delicate air. Tufts of wild tobacco flare insolently from the hundred crevices in the crumbling walls.
The old baptismal font, whose waters have fallen on ten thousand heads, is still in the baptistry where Indian hands first built it. In the present chapel, the old-time dining-room, the ancient confessional is still in use, and in the new sacristy, stored in cedarn chests, are gorgeous vestments, silver holy water bowls, croziers, candelabra, golden chalices and cruets, bells and book-rests, all made by hand and more beautiful than any work of these latter days.

In this sacristy, lurking in dark closets, are wooden statues of the saints, their faces enameled in brilliant cosmetic, their eyes still bright and sharp. The old-time pictures of Stations of the Cross are gone from Capistrans. But at the Mission San Fernando a set remains; and it is worth a long journey to gaze on their monstrous drawing and gruesome coloring, all so devoutly wrought in honor of the Saviour’s passion. Crude as little Johnnie’s sketches on his first slate, daubed in primary pigments, made of clays and crushed flowers, colors still painfully vivid after a hundred years of Time’s erasing, still the pictures show a rudimentary art-sense, and a certain feeling for perspective and values. The old Indians of this mission still remember the Indian artist who all one summer was painting these pictures outside the chapel door.

Leaving the Cathedral, you come upon the court in and near which went on the work-a-day life in the mission. All about this pillared court runs a portico whose roof made a promenade, affording a survey of the country for miles around. At Capistrans, the front of the rectangle adjoining the Cathedral made the apartments of the padres. These rooms were mere cells with floors of colored clay, each cell containing a narrow bed, with a stretched hide for a mattress, and a mission blanket for a covering. Passing down the front of this rectangle of buildings, you come to the guest rooms and the library.
Missions, by the way, were in their time the only taverns in California, and friend or foe might hide and break bread in them at his own desire. It was esteemed a discourtesy to pass without dismounting; and, in the first pastoral days, a handful of unreckoned silver was always left in the guest's chamber to relieve his need if his purse was light. A fresh horse, too, always waited exchange for his jaded one.

Books were few in the library, each padre, under the order of Father Serra, had brought three volumes: a missal, a book of devotions and a book of history—little short thick volumes, bound in sheepskin, caught in hasps or tied with thongs, printed in Latin or Spanish, and with no date later than 1700. Many of these quaint old books are yet on the shelves, covered with dust but readable still.

Next to the library came the quarters of the unmarried overseers and soldiers. Rounding the corner and going down the sides, you come to the shops where smiths, cloggers, carpenters and cooperers plied their crafts and taught the redskinned apprentices—all working together on clear days in the open square. On Saturdays, each man was given a dole of soap and required to take a bath. On Sunday afternoons the open square was the theatre for games, bull-fights, and rude miracle plays.

About the southeast corner were the women's quarters, where the wool was carded, spun and woven, where the clothing was made, and where, under charge of a trusty matron, the Indian maidens were kept secluded until their early marriage. The rooms along the rear were for the mission produce—beans, peas, tallow, soap, wine. The granary was around the next and last corner; and adjoining it was a small dark room used for a donjon. The dining-room joined the church buildings. A walled garden, into which no woman might ever step, was near the padres' apartments. Here under
these tall still palms, beside a murmuring fountain, the friars could retire into silence to meditate and to pray.

Moving among the grey quiet of the crumbling halls and courts, you find it hard to imagine the busy thronging life of other days. First into that old life came the day of the founding. Here stood a motley sheepskin-shirted crowd of guards; here crouched a gasping "multitude of pagans," Indians from the hills around; here passed to and fro a few sandaled padres in coarse grey gowns of serge girded with hempen rope. Many Indians that day were written in the book of baptism; and they and the padres began at once the long work of building San Juan Capistrans by the Sea.

They began but with the rudest tools, and with no skill save only that which springs from heart’s desire. The women and children dug the clay and fetched it in their reed and willow baskets. Then came the making of the bricks, the tiles and the adobes, the kneading of the clay with the wild oat straw, and the slow baking in the rude kilns or in the hot beat of the coppery sun. There was the cutting and the carrying of the rushes for lath-work fastened by leathern thongs. There were long expeditions to the far mountains to fell trees for beam and rafter; there were swift home-comings with the unwieldy timbers. Ceremoniously blessed by a padre in the forest, the timbers, one by one, were lifted to the patient backs of a line of Indians and, transferred from relay to relay, the timbers were not allowed to touch the earth until deposited on the mission grounds.

It was years before the buildings were completed—cathedral, court and corridors; years before the mountain waters were led in aqueducts to fountain and field; years before the orchards and ranches were set apart by cacti hedges and adobe walls spiked with crooked cattle-horns.

At each mission the neophytes were numbered by hundreds. Punctuality, order and in-
dustry were virtues sorely needed by the Indians, hitherto as irresponsible as squirrels; so a system of signals and bells regulated the movements of the day. The morning angelus summoned high and low to rise and pass to prayers. After this came breakfast, each neophyte bringing his close-woven basket for his portion of atole or parched barley mush. Bells then summoned all to their work—the artisans to their shops, the herdsmen and tillers to the fields, the women to their cloth and basket weaving; the alcade of each department giving his orders in semi-military style, the mayor-domo watching over the little industrial monarchy. At eleven, bells rang for a dinner of mutton, beef and succotash. At two, labor was resumed until the peal of the evening angelus. There was an early supper of maize; and later on there were vespers in the chapel.

Churchly decorum was enforced by beadles, and the women sat apart from the men after the fashion of the Plymouth meeting houses of that day. The Indians proved to be quite skillful in church music, and travelers speak with praise of the old Gregorian chants by the young barbarians who made their own instruments and copied their own score upon sheepskin pages, printed in heroic notation visible across the chapel.

It was in the main a beautiful pastoral life. Industry was made the law in place of idleness; responsibility pushed aside savage vagabondage; a concept of the living God (however crudely held) took the place of unclean fetishism. The Indians were converts in name at least, carrying on the duties assigned to them. They were not a keen-brained race, and though docile, were brutish and lazy and made little progress toward the state of gentes de rason, or reasonable beings fit to populate the pueblos. So when the politicians of Mexico, with an itching palm for “the Pious Fund,” conspired to give the Indians political rights, the Indians were found all unready for citizenship. Knowing neither
savage nor civic art, more helpless in their last stage than
in their first, they fell into dissipation or back into barbar-
ism, and the little cycle of missionary effort seemed a mis-
take of love.

The mission regime, however futile it may have been, however formal and external its religious training, seems to have touched upon some of the best educational and sociological thought of our time. It made use of the wisdom Spain had learned from her Roman conquerors: the wisdom of taking the conquered into full partnership. The ideas of daily contact of supe-
rior with inferior; the ideas of community of property and co-operation in labor; the ideas of the union of manual labor and mental drill—all those were rudely exemplified in the mission life.

With the passing of the tempo-
ral power from the padres, began the decay of the mission architecture. Vandal men, wandering cattle, and the rav-
ages of rain and wind and sun have all joined to break and beat the structures down to dust. But the mission architecture is not entirely lost, for it is springing up into fresh life in some of the newer artistic structures of the West. The California buildings at the Chicago-World's Fair revealed to many the charm of this Spanish-Moorish design. And Stanford University, after searching the world for a beautiful and fitting housing, chose the mis-
sion type for a model; and now the low home-like build-
ings around Stanford's pillared court, with their roofs of red tile above the green palms make perhaps the most unique and pleasing college structure in the world.

So perhaps the greatest legacy left by the Franciscans is their chain of stone and adobe buildings, noble even in their ruins. "One large and sev-
eral smaller things, bound well together—a monarch with a lovely train—this makes a harmony in architecture," says Ruskin. And here, at every mission in the pastoral solitudes, the cathedral rises in austere dignity with an
attendant group of minor buildings carrying on the cathedral lines.

Beautiful and harmonious is this architecture, built of humble materials, shaped with rude tools or patient handicraft, all planned in loving sincerity by unskilled builders who had joy and faith in their work. It has the fine harmony that springs from the seizure of the simple means at hand, and from the echo of form to use. Ornamentation was not often attempted, but, huge and bluff, every building was in daily use and with proper care would have stood far into the centuries. These buildings have also the beauty that rises from adaptation to environment. Balanced, unified, symmetrical, crowning gentle mesa or valley slope, they are of the never failing proportions that seem to multiply and melt into the mystery of the changeable hills beyond—hills sometimes tawny and soft as deer-skin, sometimes rich in color as the burnt summer-hues of Persian praying rugs, sometimes irised like the rosy lilac of the wild dove’s breast. Built of the earth, these old structures seem at times as if not made by man but by Nature. For they repeat in long stretches and long swells the contours of the girdling hills about them, and give back their color tones of buff and dun and tan and warm purple and rusty red. Indeed, under the wizarding of the night they seem as if they had dreamed over the dim fields since antiquity, even as the Sphinx has brooded for centuries over the grey sands of Libya.