WATCHFUL WASHING: A MEXICAN STORY OF LOVE AND EDUCATION: BY MARY DOTY ALDEN

The García family had moved back from Agua Prieta to Douglas once more. It was not a hazardous trip to make, nor a difficult one, in the days just before the Mexican upheaval, when the whole country lay threateningly somnolent, like the sea just before black clouds begin to gather. The García family did nothing unusual in crossing from Agua Prieta on the Mexican side, to Douglas, on the United States side. The towns are little more than a mile apart, and the Mexicans crossed and re-crossed whenever dissatisfaction or a longing for change and possible betterment struck them. In the United States the telling advantage, work for all the men of the family in one of the three great copper smelters, was offset by several disadvantages, the biggest of which was, to the simple Mexican mind, the persecution of education and social uplift. All the children must be sent to school. This meant the loss of all labor from usually not less than six children up to the age of sixteen, a terrible calamity. And as if this were not enough, the teachers from the Mexican school pried into the very heart of the family life itself, desecrated the sanctity of the home with impertinent visitations and embarrassing questions, not more than half understood, and more sinister thereby, and left with these impressing and amazing words ringing in the outraged ears of the family.

"More soap—more water—more air—more light—more clean!"

Dios! It was too much! At this point the García family worm was given to turning, and the Garcías would pick up their few treasures, load what they could not conveniently carry upon the back of a borrowed, sad-faced little burro, and turn their faces toward Mexico and freedom!

But here were drawbacks, too. One’s children might work in the fields all day long unhindered; one might shut one’s windows tight and keep them shut all through the cold weather, in peaceful security; one’s sensibilities were not outraged by tactful though persistent suggestions that one apply soap and water below the face and above the hands, upon parts which Heaven had ordained inviolate from such sacrilege—all this was glorious freedom, but the tortillas, the chile, the tamales were not forthcoming! The comfortable assurance of trading in eight hours of work in the Copper Queen smelter for its equivalent in groceries at the Copper Queen store was lacking. The battle was wont to be fierce, if short; liberty, betrayed by the craving of the inner man, succumbed before the tyranny of "culture." The García family regretfully packed their household treasures upon the
back of the sad-faced burro, and sorrowfully turned their faces from Mexico and freedom!

So they came back to Douglas, hungry and hollow-eyed. Lucio García and his grown son, Manuel, went to work at the smelter; tortillas, chile, and tamales appeared in quantities cheeringly sufficient; and the higher education once more laid firm hands upon the seven progeny of the house of García under the age of sixteen.

Scarcely had the mouse-colored burro, looking out mournfully from beneath the shadow of his mighty burden, halted at the door of the 'dobe hut which was to be the new home of the Garcías, before Guadalupe Cruz, breathless and a little late, sank into her seat, at the beginning of the afternoon session. As soon as she could speak, she burst out excitedly,

"Mees Miller—Maestra, Perciliano García—she is coom back!"

Miss Miller was the principal. She taught the highest room in the Mexican school—the fourth grade, it was. She tried to do her duty. Earnestly she labored for the souls, but more particularly for the bodies of these Mexicans. She sighed at Guadalupe's announcement as she realized that she must, as soon as school was out that evening, round up the García offspring and see that they were all in school next day. It was just a year since they had left Douglas the last time. All the good work she and her teachers had spent upon them would be irretrievably lost by now, all to do over again!

When she approached the García home at four o'clock, she found a group of children awaiting her arrival. They had known well enough that she would be there that night, and were on hand in a body, waiting in pleased anticipation, determined to see and hear as much as possible. Miss Miller exhibited a surprise as shocked and pained as if she had not known they would be there.

"Run, all of you! Go home at once!" she commanded severely.

They moved off obediently, getting out of sight with an obliging deference. The children enjoyed the school and were sincerely eager to please all their "maestras." They let Miss Miller get quite within the door of the hut before they gathered close again.

The door stood open, knocking was an unnecessary formality. Miss Miller stepped inside the main room, stood peering about until her eyes became accustomed to the darkened interior, and she could see that there was no one but herself in the bare room with its hard-packed earth floor, and then she called.

"Mrs. García!"

No reply but a faint rustling in the room beyond. She approached the door, calling again,
A MEXICAN LOVE STORY

"Is that you, Perciliano?"

There was another muffled rustling sound. Then Perciliano García appeared in the open doorway, smiling shyly.

Miss Miller returned the smile. Perciliano was the oldest of the García girls; she had always been pretty, and now a year older, she was lovely. Her dark eyes sparkled softly, there had always been a little responsive, smiling light in them, Miss Miller remembered, and her smooth dark skin was flushed a delicate rose, shading into clear olive. She was embarrassed, and stood shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

"Are you glad to be back, Perciliano?" asked Miss Miller.

"Sí, Maestra," the girl murmured.

This was the truth. The tamales she had eaten for her dinner were still vividly in mind.

"Is your mother here?" Miss Miller continued.

Perciliano nodded mutely.

"Please call her—I want to talk to her."

Perciliano disappeared in the gloom of the inner room. There was a subdued murmur of voices, a laugh, and she appeared again, followed by her mother, thin, worn-looking, brown, but amiably smiling. Miss Miller knew from experience that this amiability was the hardest thing she had to combat. It was impregnable, absolute. Mrs. García, like most of the other Mexican mothers, spoke no English, but her smile was unfailing.

Miss Miller bowed and smiled.

"Tell your mother that I am glad to see her back, Perciliano," she said.

The girl addressed her mother. Mrs. García continued to smile cheerfully.

"And tell her I shall expect to see you and all the rest of the children in school tomorrow," she continued, repressing determinedly her rising ire at the smiling, dumb immobility before her.

Perciliano translated in a few staccato words. To this her mother replied with a quick sentence.

"My mother say me too beeg to go to school," Perciliano interpreted with a deprecatory smile.

"No," Miss Miller spoke with firm assurance, "you are just fifteen. You must go to school another year."

Not for nothing did she keep all the statistics she could gather about her pupils.

Perciliano smiled submissively.

"Sí, Maestra," she replied.

"Tell your mother you must go to school, too," Miss Miller commanded.
A MEXICAN LOVE STORY

Mrs. García received the news stolidly, smilingly.
"You must all be in school at nine tomorrow—you, too, Perciliano. If you are not there I shall come for you. Tell your mother."

Perciliano obeyed. No cloud darkened the smiling placidity. As usual, Miss Miller fled, routed by a smile.
"Adiós," she called hastily, and stepped from the house.

The interested listeners outside scattered.

But the García children would all be in school, Miss Miller was sure. Her threat to come for Perciliano, if she failed to appear, was sufficient.

They did come, all seven of them, and were placed in the rooms where they had been before they left. Docile as ever, they were, most of their English forgotten, but glad to be back. School, where one came regularly and did so many diverting and interesting things, was far pleasanter than the aimless, hungry life in Mexico. There was never any doubt which the children preferred. It was the parents who made the trouble for Miss Miller and her teachers.

That night Miss Miller lay awake for some time, thinking of the Garcías, Perciliano particularly. How, how could the child be raised from the contented filth in which she lived? Miss Miller closed her eyes, at last, with one ray of hope lighting her perplexity. Perciliano was docile, bright, eager.

The next night Miss Miller kept Perciliano in after the others had gone.

"Perciliano, dear, come here," she called.

The child came, uncertainly, but trustfully smiling. Miss Miller took a small mirror from her drawer, and laid it upon her desk.

"Will you unbutton the neck of your dress a little?" she asked gently.

Perciliano, blushing a dusky rose, obeyed wonderingly.

"I want to show you something, dear," continued Miss Miller.

She held up the glass and turned Perciliano's face until the girl could see the side of her cheek in the little mirror. She softly touched the clear olive skin.

"Isn't it pretty and clean, Perciliano?" she asked.

The girl laughed amusedly.

"Si, Maestra," she conceded tolerantly.

Miss Miller turned back the collar, one button of which had been discreetly unfastened. The pink of Perciliano's cheek deepened.

"Now look, Perciliano," commanded Miss Miller.

Perciliano surveyed her exposed neck interestedly.

"Heem black," she said, with an amused little ripple of laughter.
A MEXICAN LOVE STORY

School was so entertaining.
“Perciliano, wouldn’t you like to have your neck as lovely as your cheek is?”

She nodded and rubbed her cheek appreciatively.
“Heem pretty,” she said.
Miss Miller rose from her chair.
“Come, dear, I’ll show you how to make your neck pretty, too.”
She led the way to the lavatories, and Perciliano meekly followed.
Fifteen minutes later a Perciliano pinkly flushed, particularly about the ears and neck, followed Miss Miller back into the schoolroom. Once more she surveyed her cheek and neck critically in the hand mirror.

“Now doesn’t your neck look pretty, too?” asked Miss Miller triumphantly.

Perciliano nodded slowly, a pleased smile playing about her lips.
Miss Miller nodded to herself in satisfaction.
“And, dear,” she said gently, “your whole body will be lovely and pink and white, just like that, if you’ll only wash it.”
Perciliano looked at her with wide, interested eyes, but she said nothing. Miss Miller was content, however.

“Now, run along home. Good-night.”

“Adios, Maestra,” and Perciliano was gone.
Left to herself, Miss Miller smiled, as she thought,
“Well, I may make the child vain, perhaps, but a little vanity will be a good thing, if it removes some of the dirt.”

Outside the schoolhouse, Perciliano was speeding homeward. She was going as rapidly as her dignity permitted. Unconsciously, young womanhood had come upon Perciliano and put to flight the careless, boy-like abandon of a year before. Now, though she was anxious to get home, she did not run, she walked sedately. And she was very happy, Maestra had said she was pretty.

She was nearly home, when a voice, calling her name behind her, suddenly stopped her. She turned, and saw a tall young man running up to meet her. He was dark, handsome, with shining black eyes smiling down at her, the parted lips displaying two even rows of white teeth.

For a moment Perciliano stood smiling uncertainly, and at this the youngster laughed aloud, joyously,
“Perciliano García, you don’t know me!” he teased.
For no reason at all Perciliano blushed, then a light broke over her embarrassed wonderment.

“Why—why—it’s José Cordova,” and she joined mirthfully in his laughter at her expense.
A MEXICAN LOVE STORY

They spoke in their native tongue, the soft, corrupt Spanish of the Mexican peon. And they stood out there in the sunshine, and laughed and laughed, just for the pure joy of it.

"Oh, Perciliano," José gasped at last, "not to know José, who sat by you two years in the school and pulled your hair, and put the pencils down your back!"

He paused suddenly and looked down at her wonderingly.

"But how did I know you?" he asked; "you are changed, you are so big now, so pretty! I would never dare pull your hair now."

He spoke with simple frankness. Perciliano blushed a little deeper rose, and her eyes shone happily.

"Now, now, you must not be silly," she admonished shyly, trying to keep the corners of her mouth from curving upward. She started on toward home, he beside her.

"You are not in the school now?" she inquired.

José laughed proudly.

"Me? No! I have worked in the smelter for a year now. I don't have to go to school any more."

"I like the school," Perciliano said, "I am sorry you are not there."

José replied quickly.

"Oh, but so do I. I learned to speak English there, and to read, and, oh—to do many things that are good. But now I am nineteen years old. That is time to work, not sit in schools."

Perciliano nodded gravely.

"Nineteen, that is old," she said.

José laughed.

"Old enough to get me a wife," he said.

Again they laughed, long and merrily, at the delicious joke of it.

By this time they had reached Perciliano's house. She stopped in the doorway.

"Oh, but I am glad you have come back, Perciliano," José spoke impulsively.

"Perciliano!" the warning call came from within.

She turned quickly.

"Adiós, José," she called softly over her shoulder, and disappeared.

The next morning Perciliano seemed restless. She waited impatiently until the mad breakfast scramble for tortillas was over, until the men were off to the smelter for their eight hour shift, and the children scattered one place and another, carrying out their own ends. Then she approached her mother, who was busy piling the few remaining tortillas on a cracked plate.

"Mother—" Perciliano hesitated; "may I have some soap and water in the wash-dish?"
A MEXICAN LOVE STORY

Mrs. García stopped her work and looked up frowning.
“What for?”

Perciliano looked down at her feet shamefacedly.
“To—to—wash,” she murmured.
“Haven’t you washed your face and hands?” her mother questioned.
“Yes,” Perciliano stammered, “I meant—wash all over.”

The expected outburst came.
“Dios! I knew it! Those schools will kill us all yet! Wash all over—with the weather so cold we cannot open the door! Who put that idea into your head?”

Perciliano was too embarrassed to put her mother off with an evasion.

“Mees—the Maestra,” she murmured.
“Si, the Maestra, the Maestra! She would have us all in our coffins if we did what she asked!”

Mrs. García raised a warning hand and uttered her ultimatum with ominous calm.

“Now, Perciliano, if I hear any more about washing—washing all over—back you go to Mexico, to your uncle Rafael!”

The threat was effective. Perciliano said no more, nor did she make any further attempt to commit her heinous offense against men and the angels.

Miss Miller, as the days passed, watched Perciliano’s arm and neck closely, hopefully. There was no change, and at last she shook her head and shrugged her shoulders cynically.

“What’s the use?” she thought; “they are all alike.”

It was early March, and in Arizona spring was already in the air. At recess the little bare-legged Mexicans frisked about the schoolyard with joyous abandon, in the Mexican huts the doors were left wide all day long, the stuffing, which had kept every breath of cold air from penetrating into the damp ‘dobe houses, was pulled out of the windows; Mexico, in a word, burst from its chrysalis. Though there are few trees in Douglas to bud, except those planted by man; though there are no delicate wild flowers to peep through the grass in all that vast expanse of semi-desert, nevertheless spring was everywhere—in the soft, yielding soil, usually hard as cement, in the budding of the scraggly, low mezquite, in the delicious softness of the air, and in the heart, particularly in the heart of Perciliano!

At four o’clock Perciliano’s heart sang as she came joyfully forth from Miss Miller’s room. School was delightful, Miss Miller was kind, her English was improving wonderfully, and José—José met
A MEXICAN LOVE STORY

her every night at the schoolhouse door and walked home with her!

On this particular night Perciliano had stayed in to speak with Miss Miller for a moment. Her feet scarcely touched the stone steps as she flew down. She lifted up her head and let the wind blow softly across her face.

“Y si la mar se agita,
“No temas, Lola——” she sang in soft, full tones.
José, waiting at the steps, came toward her eagerly.
“I thought you had gone,” he cried, in relief, “and I want you to go for a walk with me.”
“A walk?” Perciliano laughed; “Come, then.”

She gave him one merry glance over her shoulder, and was off, fleet as a deer. Just for a moment José stared after her in dumb amazement, then he gave a shout of joy and fell into swift pursuit. For a time the issue was doubtful. Perciliano increased the distance between them, hair flying, lips parted, eyes dancing. Away from the settlements, across the mesa she flew. But after a little the distance between them grew less and less. Perciliano ran more slowly, more slowly, stumbled, and finally half dropped, half fell behind a tall mezquite bush. José was beside her in a moment.

“Hurt?” he asked anxiously.
Perciliano was shaking with mirth.
“No, oh, no,” she gasped.
José threw himself down beside her.

Perciliano stopped laughing. They sat silent. She stole a little glance at José; he was breaking a twig of the mezquite bush into bits and throwing them one by one on the ground before him. The rose tint of Perciliano’s cheeks deepened, her eyelids fell, and she drew a deep breath. José looked up and saw her so.

“Querida mia,” his voice broke strangely, he had to stop and clear his throat.

“Querida mia,” he began once more; “I am old enough to—to—have me a wife, and you—you are old enough to——”

Perciliano’s face was rosy red, she gave a little uncertain laugh as José paused, and threw him a glance from under lowered lids. José leaned forward and caught her in his arms. A little later, Perciliano, her two hands against José’s shoulders, pushed herself away from him.

“You weel be my ’usban’,” she murmured softly, and laughed.

Joyously José pulled her back into his arms.

“And you weel be my leetle wife,” he laughed, and kissed her again.

One morning, three weeks later, Perciliano came up to the schoolhouse very early. She stopped for a moment outside Miss Miller’s
A MEXICAN LOVE STORY

door, uncertain, her color coming and going. Then she took two hesitating steps into the room and stood still, looking at the “maestra,” who was busy at her desk.

“Mees Miller,” Perciliano’s voice was very small, but Miss Miller heard and glanced up.

“Why, good morning, Perciliano, what brings you so early?”
Perciliano brought out her answer with great difficulty.

“I can’t come to school today, Mees Miller.”

Now Perciliano had not missed a day since the return of the García family from Mexico. Miss Miller was inclined to be lenient, but she must know why this absence was desired, if it were justifiable.

“Why not, dear?” she asked pleasantly.
Perciliano blushed. Her eyes were upon her fingers, twisting nervously.

“Why not, Perciliano?” Miss Miller asked again; “if your reason is a good one, of course, I will let you go.”
Perciliano tried to speak.

“I—I—” then suddenly she turned and fled from the room.

Miss Miller looked wonderingly after her, smiled, in humorous despair, at her inability to comprehend this strange people, and turned back to her work.

Ten minutes later there was a scraping of feet outside her door. She got up to see who wanted her. In the doorway stood Perciliano and a tall young man.

“Why, it’s José!” cried Miss Miller in surprise, and held out her hand.

“How you’ve grown, José! Are you working?”
José nodded in embarrassment.

“Yes, Maestra, I work at the smelter,” he answered.

“Fine, and you don’t forget the English that you learned here with us, I see.”
José beamed.

Then Miss Miller bethought herself, she turned to Perciliano.

“But Perciliano, tell me, dear, why you don’t want to come to school today?”

To her amazement, both Perciliano and José turned a deep red and looked down at the floor. Then José lifted his eyes bravely.

“Plees, Mees Miller,” he stammered; “we goin’ git married to- day.”

Miss Miller dropped her pencil down upon her desk. She stared first at the blushing Perciliano, then at José, who stood up very straight and tall, trying manfully to look her in the eye.

“What—you babes—going to get married!” she gasped at last.
A MEXICAN LOVE STORY

Perciliano’s head dropped lower, but José faced her bravely, though with a quaver in his heart, for wasn’t she the maestra?
“Me, I’m old enough to git married, Perciliano, she old enough,” he said stoutly.

Miss Miller looked at José scrutinizingly. He was straight, healthy, handsome, unafraid. She looked at Perciliano, what loveliness! And Perciliano was waiting for her permission to stay out of school to be married! Miss Miller suddenly threw her head back and laughed, laughed long and merrily, but when she stopped there were tears in her eyes.

“Oh, you darlings, you poor darlings,” she murmured.

José grinned cheerfully, and Perciliano gathered courage enough from the laughter and kind tones to glance up and smile uncertainly.

“Mees Miller,” she said happily; “when José and me git married. I wash all over myself!”

It was Miss Miller’s turn to blush rosy red. She jumped up and kissed Perciliano lightly on her forehead.

“Now run, dears,” she cried, a little break in her voice, “or you’ll be late for the wedding!”

She stood watching them until they were out of sight, the smile still on her lips.

“Oh, I must help Perciliano, I must keep in touch with her and encourage her to—to——” the smile became tender, “—wash all over herself!”