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Tales of Isleta

By MARIE HAMILTON BROWN

Preface:

THESE anecdotes are written in an effort to portray only the exterior of Pueblo life. The Indian ceremonies, marvels of witchcraft, and dance significances, I will not say do not hold for me an intense interest; but I know that the persistency of the white man in trying to obtain material for his books, and the deluging of Pueblos by objectionable tourists, have created in the Indian a desire to conceal the so called mysteries deep within the recesses of his being. Few white men, I am sure, have yet been able to sound successfully those unfathomable depths. So, I give you, in its simplest form, an expression of the people of Isleta without in any way venturing to interpret (if I could) their community life or folk secrets. These narratives are what may be observed from one's doorstep as one may see people in any village anywhere. Beyond my doorstep and beyond my neighbors I do not presume to go. Although the incidents here recounted are real, the names are, of course, fictitious.

Home-building in the Pueblo.

José is my landlord. José is a very good landlord indeed. But I must tell you how he came to acquire that estate.

One day I was roaming around the outskirts of the village in an effort to procure some apple-blossoms for my table. It was here I came upon the home in which I now live. It was then, to the Indians, an evil and dilapidated looking place—and far too close to the cemetery—but to me it was an architect's paradise. I visualized it only in its completed state after a lengthy discussion with José whom I had called from his work in the fields.

"Have you no idea who owns it?" I asked.

"Well, you see," said José, "no one has lived in it for so long I have forgotten. It belonged to my grandmother and now I think it belongs to me."

"You think it belongs to you?" I asked in surprise. "Don't you know?"

"No ma'am," said he, "but I can find out and let you know in a few days."

"That's fine!" I assented. "I would like to rent the house if the owner is willing to fix it so I could live in it."

José shook his head perplexedly. "You really want it?"

"I certainly do."

"Then I go find the owner." And he trotted off still puzzled as to why anyone should want to live way off here in this deserted old place.

I waited impatiently for several days. Then José appeared bearing important news. He now owned the house and would rent it to me. I was delighted—too much so to inquire into the mysteries of his ownership. José was known in the village as a very smart man. He had been four times governor. A number of his friends owed him money. These he gathered together and had them agree to plaster and build in return for the loan. The house consisted of three rooms.

One day, when improvements were under way, José informed me excitedly that the third room did not belong to him and that he had forgotten to look up the owner. These people were, fortunately, soon located and they, too, agreed to renovate and rent to me the room. The friendship of the two landlords I discovered was only a formality; so there began rivalry in the matter of workmanship. José's people went to the hills to procure only the whitest clay. Landlord number two had begun work earlier and had used a clay not so white. Consequently my little house looked, when finished, like a piebald pony. Landlord number two would not be outdone; so he repaired to the hills for clay and proceed-

ed to replaster. Fireplaces were built and walls white-washed, and the house at length proclaimed a finished job, when, to my astonishment, I discovered that a small kitchen and the outside bake-oven had not been touched. I called José to account.

"Oh that," he said, as though dismissing it entirely. "The workers did not think their debt extended all the way to the coop and bake-oven."

"But José," I protested, "I cannot have it left that way."

"Then maybe you can fix it," he replied. "It will only cost three dollars."

I acquiesced, and the work was done.

Then José came for his first rental.

"How," I asked, "did you discover your ownership?"

He told me in confidence that in the beginning he had only been one of a number of six relatives who had inherited the house. This seemed quite complicated. Two rooms. Six owners! "Then you pay them all a portion of the rent?" I asked.

"Oh no ma'am. You see I bought them out."

My curiosity increased. "Did you tell them you were renting the house?"

José evaded my question and went on to explain. "I gave to my sister a horse-trough. To my younger brother I gave a dollar, and to my cousin an olla, and to several of the others a little money or something that they needed."

"And they seemed to think this was enough?" I asked.

"Oh yes, they are satisfied." And José, too, suave and benign, standing there in faded overall trousers and cotton shirt ornamented by the inset embroidery characteristically Isletan, appeared to be satisfied. The grey hair falling in short curls about his forehead and drawn into the chongo at the back did not indicate age without wisdom.

A week after I moved in, things began to happen. I was attracted one night by the sound of digging. I paid lit-

tle attention to it until I heard shouting and quarrelling over in the corral. It was a very nice corral, and I had visions, later on, of keeping horses there for myself and son. At this moment the east wall was being demolished by no other than the sister of my friend José. She announced to the world at large that he was a thief and a liar. A horse-trough indeed! The east side of the corral was hers, and down it came and was carted triumphantly away. I wondered what would happen next. José told me most affably not to worry, everything would be all right.

On the contrary, I arrived home one evening and discovered two workmen in the throes of razing my one and only beautiful tamarisk that had stood perhaps for centuries, its graceful limbs protecting my front door. I uttered an exclamation of horror, but the men, utterly oblivious to my pain, proceeded to do some more chopping. "Oh please don't take away that tree," I cried.

"But it is my tree," protested one of the men.

"How can it be your tree," said I, "when I am renting the house? Who sent you here?"

"I came because the tree is mine. It belonged to my grandfather. José has not paid me for it—so I chop it down."

"How much do you want for it?" I asked. "I will see José about it."

You may be sure I did so immediately.

"Oh that," said José, "is a little matter I forgot."

Perhaps in the future there will be other little matters that have been forgotten, but up till now things have gone along smoothly enough. José, a charming, picturesque old man, smilingly evades the truth—but is, in his way, a very good landlord indeed!

An Honest Man

The Indians of Isleta are all very good people. I draw my conclusions solely from the fact that the jail is seldom

used. It is a small cement structure isolated on the outskirts of the village, an unwanted stepchild of the people, but remains nevertheless, barred and padlocked, a significant gesture on the part of law. I had lived in the village several months and had seen none enter or leave the building. One morning, however, on my way to the store, I beheld a strange sight. The door of the jail stood wide open and on the threshold reposed a gentleman of the community reading the morning paper. A group of friends stood by, one of whom had contributed a bowl of hot food and some cigarettes. I must say I did not quite comprehend the situation.

I asked a passing Indian who the man might be.

"Oh heem; he's a prisoner—he get fifteen days."

"A prisoner," I exclaimed, "but the jail is not locked."

The man seemed surprised. "Lock heem? Why Pablo he's a very honest man!"

Juanita

Marcellena was my neighbor. She was an old, old woman. The village people called her a witch. She had, I understood, a very bad disposition indeed. For a while Marcellena was noticeably hostile to the Americana. There was a slight thaw, however, when I entered the placita with garbage for her pigs. We became good friends when I showed admiration for her chickens. Indeed Marcellena had some very fine chickens. I had seen them often, for had they not wandered recklessly into my yard in the hope of extricating therefrom bigger and better worms? Waxing more and more friendly Marcellena expounded unto me the virtues of her favorite chicken, Juanita. Juanita was indeed a female worthy of notice. A little redder to be sure than most red hens and a mite scrawnier—but then was she not the beloved one of Marcellena's heart?

The next day Marcellena called for her garbage and there were days and days afterward when she favored us

with friendly visits. We christened her, I'm afraid a bit irreligiously, "Our Lady of the Garbage," she was so faithful to her pigs and her little feathered ones.

One day I heard a great commotion in the roadway.

I rushed to the rescue only to discover that our poor little Juanita had been mowed down by a hit and run driver and left in a very much flattened condition.

The rooster and the other chickens, much alarmed, were circling the spot clucking and to-doing in an effort to awaken some response in the silent Juanita.

In a few moments Marcellena appeared. When she saw what had happened she threw herself on her knees in the dust.

"Ah mi pobrecita Juanita—my poor little one!" she wailed over and over.

"Marcellena," I said, "it is no use. She is dead. You had better take her inside and maybe you can cook her for supper."

"What?" she exclaimed. "Cook my poor little one? Ah mi pobrecita Juanita!"

"But," I insisted, "she is dead."

"Ah, so she is," agreed Marcellena at length, checking her grief.

"Then cook her for dinner," I urged.

"But she is so flat," Marcellena observed in a genuinely puzzled voice.

"You might try frying her," I suggested.

I thought I beheld a twinkle of amusement in the eyes of the bereaved one. In a moment it was gone, however; and, rising from the ground, she lifted Juanita carefully from the dust and left to prepare the last rites for her little one. Juanita had always been useful; and Marcellena, who had always been very, very poor; would eat chicken for the first time in many months. She hurried within and I could hear her muttering as she went, "Gracias, Señorita, Gracias!"

Hairbreadth escapes play but a small part in the lives of pueblo chickens. And the untimely end of little Juanita becomes, in memory, only another blot on the scutcheon of the reckless driver.

Funeral.

It was nearing the day of the Fiesta of Saint Augustinito. I noticed that my pretty little maid, Marie, had eaten scarcely anything all week. I remarked about this to her.

"But we are all so anxious for the Fiesta," she replied. "We shall dance our toes off. All day and night we shall dance."

It is not often that fiesta comes to the pueblo; and when it comes, there is nothing to rival it as a joy-giver to the community. Such enthusiasm for a holiday may seem child-like to strangers, but the white man need only remember his Fourth of July, and his Hallowe'en and his Christmas for parallels. Yet these somewhat faded and considerably commercialized festivals of Americans, lack in general the genuine qualities inherent in the Pueblo fiestas.

This day of Saint Augustinito will always remain, for me, a most fascinating and beautiful memory. Indians had arrived from all the important pueblos in New Mexico. Navajos, Santo Domingans, San Felipans, Lagunans—all were there. The plaza was a blaze of color. Spanish music stirred hundreds of feet to action and hundreds of hearts to song. I was being carried by their rhythms to greater and greater excitement when I felt a sudden stillness in the direction of the church. I picked my way through the throng of merrymakers—no less gay than before, for few had felt the hush—a note scarcely audible in the program of the day. As I neared the edge of the crowd, I was just in time to witness the most impressive procession. A youth in white embroidered shirt and blue trousers walked in front carrying a massive cross. Four stalwart men followed, bearing on their shoulders a canvas stretcher on

which lay a still form covered with a gay blanket. Rain had suddenly begun to fall. In the drizzle, ten to twelve mourners, men, women, and children, walked behind the dead body in its blanket coffin. All the women were wrapped in the beautiful red shawls of the pueblo. I followed behind the quiet little group, not from any sense of morbid curiosity. Something had called me to rest a moment from the gayety of the plaza.

As we walked up the hill toward the cemetery, the storm grew worse. The wind began to eddy and beat against us and the rain dropped steadily upon the blanket-ed form. Proceeding up a little hill, the stretcher and its bearers were outlined against the draining sky. The mourners were so calm they seemed to feel neither rain nor wind.

When the procession reached the grave, two of the men carrying the body lifted it from the stretcher as one might a tired child and placed it reverently in its earthy bed. The relatives threw in a few clods of earth as a last farewell. As they did so, there sounded a distant roll of thunder. I felt the spirit had been released from its captivity to be at once enfolded in the heart of the universe. There was a moment of peace in which it seemed as though I rested my head against the shoulder of God.

The Lovers

The fields in front of my house are very bare save for a few shaggy neglected old fruit trees. These are clustered grumpily together in an effort to lessen the onslaught of the capricious desert winds. On the edge of the fields, like lonely orphans, stand two very young peach trees. Oh, they are very young indeed. Their limbs are smooth and glisten in the sun and the winds have been kind to them. When they were even younger they wished to touch, but the winds said, "Not yet, not yet!" But now they have grown, and their limbs entwine. The old trees that are gnarled and bitter and huddled close together laugh and nudge one an-

other and croak in rusty voices, "Wait, wait, it will not always be so." The wind is kind and the young trees do not hear. The Indian sees and does not prune. They stand there alone, smiling in the sun, whispering to one another in low voices. The very young peach trees stand close, their arms entwining one another. They whisper, "It will always be so."

A Toast

By FRANCES HALL

Life's deep-drawn drink is brewed of simple things
When one blows off the froth from passing years.
How little bitterness there is of tears
And unsought taste of sad rememberings;
It is the pleasant, joy-spiced fragrance clings
About the flagon when the moment nears
To drink the last rich dregs, when there appears
The great bartender for his reckonings.

Come, lift your goblets gallant-gestured up
And in good fellowship clink brim with brim;
Drink to the hour that finds the chalice drained
And bares the secret that the glass contained—
A draught eternal welling to the rim
Or but the bottom of a wine-stained cup.