

Suppressing the Sisters.

SCENE IN THE MEXICAN CONGRESS ON THE OCCASION OF THE PASSAGE OF THE LAW BANISHING THE SISTERS OF CHARITY.

The day of our visit was one chosen for the final debate and ballot on the bill for suppressing the Sisters of Charity. Arriving at the entrance, we found the galleries filled with the crowd drawn up before the building, and guards with fixed bayonets at all the entrances. Our conductor spoke a few words to the officer in charge, and the crowd gave way for the "Americano" to pass. The interior was densely packed with the best people of Mexico, for it was a day of great excitement, as the "Sisters" were the last remaining Catholic order in Mexico, and the abolition of all the orders of the Roman Catholic Church in Mexico, excepting pastors of churches. This fight is not between two religious orders, like that which is now going on in England and Germany, but between the Mexican government and Rome. The causes of the latter feeling against the Sisters are their continual attempts to excite the ignorant and lower orders of the population to revolution and their intrigues against the government. The priests and monks of Mexico have borne the cross of St. Peter in superstition and ignorance for over two centuries, and the French, in their corruption and tyranny, attempted to sell their country to the French invaders. This produced a revolution, which first broke out during the French occupancy of the country. This has been growing stronger and gaining strength every day until now, and has finally resulted in the destruction of every order of the Roman Catholic Church in Mexico.

A few years ago this city and country swarmed with tens of thousands of profligate nuns and monks, who once owned one-third of all the real property of the country. They lived in the hundreds of convents and monasteries which occupy the most beautiful sites in the land, and waxed and waned with Italy and old Spain, and the delicious fruits from the Terra Caliente. The clergy were the omnipotent governors of the State, politically and ecclesiastically. Nine millions of people worshipped God through them, and were taxed accordingly for their support. The priest exercised a most jealous guardianship over this ignorant population, lest the "daughters of luxury" should ever take root among them. Religious freedom was unknown, although the Constitution, which is very similar to that of the United States, acknowledged the rights of man to worship according to the dictates of his conscience. Protestants had no rights that a Catholic was bound to respect.

When a religious procession, with the image of the virgin at its head, was passing, all were obliged to kneel, and women and children, in particular, were obliged to bend their knees, for he would be immediately attacked and knocked down by some zealous devotee of the church. Formerly the few Protestants who resided here were not allowed to bury their dead in the light of the sun, and were compelled to deposit the remains of their loved ones in the caves which abound in the mountains.

To-day everything is changed. In traveling through the country one is impressed with the look of rain and desolation that surrounds the now abandoned convents that everywhere dot the landscape, their crumbling walls half concealed by the trees that have outlived their planters and are now green and vigorous after the holy brothers who nourished them have passed. These old monasteries, with their Moorish towers and crumbled bells, are melancholy reminders of the number, wealth and influence of their former owners. Around them are clustered the only trees that survive the ravages of the elements, and the few houses of the people who bought the walks of the gardens may still be traced, though overgrown with briars and cactuses. Like the ruins of the convents, however, the rare plants and shrubs that were once trim and blooming now have a mournful air of neglect and decay, all being a commentary on the clergy's extravagance of the "padres" who owned them.

To-day, thanks to the benevolent labor of the progressive Juarez, and in spite of the opposition of the army of bishops and priests of the church, religious toleration is established and defended by law. The jolly, roistering friars and monks are disarmed and overthrown. I am informed by Mexicans, in answer to my inquiry as to what has become of these suppressed friars and nuns, the most of the friars have become brigands and gamblers, while some of the nuns were married, and the city is following a life of shame. The overthrow of the different orders in the church has been complete, and the immense property of the church was confiscated to the State. The priests having charge of these churches remain undisturbed, but are simply tolerated on probation.

This is the work the government has been engaged in during the last three years, and the expulsion of the "Sisters" is the final finale in this contest between liberalism and patriotism on the one side, and intolerance, bigotry, and reaction on the other. For several days the expulsion of the "Sisters of Charity" was the cause of a most animated debate in the Mexican Congress, and created much excitement among the people. It was the subject of conversation to the exclusion of all other topics. The opposition to the bill, headed by the clergy, was fierce and protracted, but it was carried by a vote of 112 to 54.

While I was in the House I witnessed an incident which illustrated the condition of law and order in this country. During the debate on the bill for suppressing the "Sisters of Charity," a priest of the Juarez apostasy, in favor of the bill, an Indian policeman, a sympathizer with the "Sisters," drew his sword and struck several blows, cutting him on the head, shoulders and arms, nearly killing him. Juarez drew his revolver and fired at his assailant, but missed him, and killed another Indian standing by. The crowd was frightened and fled, and the police rushed in and arrested the murderer policeman and took him off to prison. He will be tried and probably shot.

This assault on Juarez created much intense excitement among the liberals, who charged that the adherents of the church were at the bottom of the attempt to take Juarez's life.

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