

TO DOT WITH LOVE:

Some Memories of Childhood
in Mexico.

My dear Dot,

You have asked me to tell you something about the Mexico of my childhood, and I send you some of my memories which may amuse you.

It was a very different city from this great, modern, industrialized one which we live in to-day. So many of the old colonial buildings which gave it atmosphere have been torn down, and when I see the big concrete buildings which have gone up in their places, I can't even remember what was there before, until I look at a photograph. It is difficult also to recall those, crystal-clear mornings, the glorious nights when you could see millions of stars in the sky. My father, who taught me the constellations, told me it was one of the three skies of the world. I have never seen it so clear as in those days.

Except for the lighting and signs over the shops, and the crowds of people on the streets, the part of the city least changed is that around the Zocalo, and the old university, which, incidentally, is the oldest on this continent. If you had visited Mexico City at the turn of the Century, in the square opposite the Cathedral and the National Palace you would have seen a park with trees, fountains and flower beds. The story goes that someone had said ^{he was} ~~they~~ ^{Carancho} were going to hang General Varranza from a tree in the Zocalo, so ~~he~~ ^{they} had them all cut down as an answer. This big square was the centre of all traffic in and out of the City. Trams drawn by mules left for the suburbs of Coyoacan and San Angel, Mixcoac, San Pedro ~~and~~ Tacubaya and Chapultepec which are now part of the City but then ^{there} were separate populations. ^h People had their country houses, with large gardens; ~~in then, and~~ a visit to these places took a whole afternoon. Each had its own square where a band played every Sunday morning and on "Fiestas".

The streets leading out of the Zocalo were all cobbled, and were lit by acetylene lamps, ~~from which we~~ ^{children} had a large collection of black sticks which were dropped when ~~they~~ ^{the lamps} were ~~changed~~ ^{re-charged}.

The main street, "Plateros", which is now called Avenida Madero, entered at right angles to the Palacio and there were many lovely old houses here. The blocks were deep, so deep that in the centre of some of them were convents or monasteries. There are one or two still left, such as San Agustin, on Uruguay, with its beauti-

At this very moment it is
ful cloisters, now being torn down and a monstrous ~~city~~ parking-lot going up in its place.

The histories of these monasteries and old palaces which have disappeared would fill several books, and the lovely old buildings are only remembered in pictures. This may be called 'advancement' but Mexico is the poorer for the loss of these grand old colonial ~~general structure~~.

The houses were entered by large, carved doors - "saguanes" - large enough to admit a carriage. They had colonial lanterns over the door-way or one on either side, and a knocker, usually in the shape of a hand or fish. *One* could tell by the knock which of the family had arrived. There was also a cord to pull, which rang a bell in the back patio.

The bigger houses consisted of two large patios. If in the front of the house, there was an office or store, the big "saguan" would be open in the daytime, and a lighter, wrought-iron gate further in would keep the house private. The carriage would drive in through these doors, dropping its passengers at the entrance to the house upstairs, and continue through to the back patio where the stables were. This was a more lively part of the house. Here were servants' quarters, store-rooms, and the laundry. The water was held in large sinks - "piletas" - some of them large enough to sail a small boat; but all held enough water to get thoroughly soaked with. There was the chatter and gossip of the servants, and something always going on.

On the second block of "Plateros", opposite the old Profesa church, was the home of my great grand-parents. The offices occupied the ground floor, the Great Grand-parents lived on the first floor, and their eldest son, with his family, occupied the second floor. This house was always referred to by the family as "Number Six", or "The Profesa", and some of my earliest recollections begin there. My grandmother was left a widow at the age of twenty-seven, with five children. She went home to live with her mother and sister, who was several years older than she was, and who helped her a great deal in bringing up her young family. I don't remember my great grand-parents, but I remember Auntie Rosita very well. She was a sweet, gentle old lady.

We sometimes spent the day with her and Grandmother. She liked to tell us stories. We liked to hear her tell about how she and Granny had been to balls in the Castle of Chapultepec, and had seen the Empress Carlota.

"The Profesa" was furnished in the Victorian style, with large mahogany bookcases and tables, wash-hand stands with marble tops, etc., - all very solid and comfortable. Auntie had a special wash-hand stand for us with a little stool to stand on and a lovely ball of "Pears" soap which we enjoyed. My brother Thurston and I were the first Grandchildren and came in for a lot of love and attention.

We liked to watch the street from the balconies. Even on rainy days there were always people scurrying about with umbrellas and coming in and out of the church opposite. On Sundays there was the church parade with everyone dressed in their best: the men in frock-coats and top-hats, and the elegant ladies in their carriages.

Life at "Number Six" was very quiet and well-ordered. At table we children sat with our hands folded and never spoke unless we were spoken to. ~~I told this to my little grandson one day, hoping he would be sufficiently impressed and inspired to sit still. All I got was, "What a funny little girl. Tell me more about you."~~ This was not a hardship, it was just what one did at Grannie's. Our grown-ups were kindly people, and if they were not being particularly interesting, there was always the clock on the wall with its leisurely tick, and a big mahogany bookcase full of leather-bound books to think about.

The servants had nearly all been in the house when my Grandmother was born, and old Chole, the cook, used to make sweets for us. My brother was her special favourite. I think they ^{probably} were a trial to Grandmother at times, as they called her by her Christian name, and "tu" (thou). But they all stayed with her till they died. There was "Chole Grande" and her daughter, "Chole Chica". Then there was Pancha who had several daughters. There was not room for all of them in Grandmother's house. Some of them married, and one of them became a seamstress.

Dad called old Chole "the Port Wine Chole" as he always offered her a glass of port when she came to see mother, and she never refused it.

On one occasion, when she had been to a funeral, Grannie asked her how things had gone. She replied, "Very well indeed. They passed the cognac twice."

In the next block was the Palace of Iturbide. Built by a Mexican architect for the Marquesa de San Mateo de Valparaiso,

it became, later in the eighteenth century, the palace of the Emperor Iturbide. It was a palace worthy of an emperor. He went from there to be crowned. When I knew it it had been a hotel for some time, and during the "Decena Tragica" - the "Ten Tragic Days" - of the Revolution, when Madero held the Palacio and Don Porfirio ^{Diego} Diaz son ~~was~~ fortified in the Ciudadela, the showers of bullets made the City dangerous and a great many people took refuge here. The great "saguan" was closed and only opened to drag someone in, either wounded or seeking refuge. Father and Mother locked up their house and left it in charge of a "portero" and with my youngest brother went to the Hotel Iturbide to wait till they could get a train out of Mexico. An armistice was called, and, getting a carriage, Father packed Mother and the small boy in with suitcases around them, and left for the station. The firing began again before they got there but they arrived safely and got their train to ^{up to} Vera Cruz. They found a great many friends on board, all going to Vera Cruz in hopes of getting a boat to Europe or New York. They stayed in Vera Cruz for months during the occupation by the Americans.

At the end of "Plateros" was the "House of Tiles", now the famous 'Sanborns'. It is probably the most beautiful of the eighteenth century palaces, and was built by the Condes del valle de Orizaba. There is a saying in Spanish: "You could not build a house of tiles," meaning, "You are good for nothing." The story is told that in the earlier generations of the Condes del valle de Orizaba, there was a young man who thought of nothing but enjoying himself. His father, exasperated, said to his son, "Hijo, tu nunca haras casa de azulejos." ("Son, you will never build a house of tiles"). According to history the lovely Palace was his answer.

After the Independence of Mexico, the Counts continued to live there till December, 1828. In an uprising in which the people plundered and committed many crimes, an official named Manuel Palacios entered the House of Tiles just as Count Diego Suarez de Pereda, Conde del Valle de Orizaba, was coming down the ~~Palacio~~ stairs. He stabbed and killed him. It was thought his motive was political, but it seems more likely to have been a personal vengeance because the Count had refused to accept him as a suitor for a young girl of his family. So ended the history of the ancestral home of the Counts. When I knew the Palacio it was the Jockey Club - a very elegant and exclusive men's club with a long gambling room, where large sums of money were lost and won. It had also a lovely ball-room (you could see the beautiful chandeliers from the street) where the annual

Charity Ball was held. I remember seeing Dad and Mother dress and drive off to one of these balls, and thinking proudly how splendid they looked.

On Sundays or "Fiestas" the men would sit in the big "saguan" watching the church parade ^{emerge} from the church of San Francisco opposite. The convent of San Francisco occupied the whole block and at one time had cloisters of great beauty. The church was purchased in 1868 by the Rev. Henry C. Riley who arrived from New York to open an episcopal mission here, and Father and Mother were married there.

There is an amusing legend about the narrow street along one side of the House of Tiles - the "Callejon de la Condesa". Two nobles entered from opposite ends with their retinues and, each refusing to give way to the other, they stayed there for three days and nights. If the Viceroy had not sent orders that both must back out to where they had come from they would probably have died there.

Crossing San Juan de Letran you would come to the Alameda, the oldest park in Mexico. As a girl my Mother, with her sisters and cousins, would be taken for a walk every afternoon here or in the Zocalo. This was no ordinary walk. It required hats, gloves and ^{so on} ~~everything~~, and no young woman was ever allowed out without a chaperone. It was here that my Father as a young man travelling for a large Manchester firm first saw my Mother.

Beyond the Alameda began the residences of the wealthy people. The gardens were large - sometimes occupying a whole block. At the beginning of the Paseo de la Reforma stands the equestrian statue of Charles V of Spain, always known as the "Caballito". ^{The horse derives from} ~~It is the same as the one on the Pont Neuf in Paris; designed by the famous Spanish sculptor and architect, Manuel Tolsa, and is the only statue in the world cast in one piece.~~ ^{It was said to be} At first it stood in the Zocalo but has stood in its present situation as long as I have known it.

From here a small train drawn by a small engine went out to Coyoacan and Tlalpan. It was known as the "Ferrocarril del Valle" and was my brothers' greatest joy. This was the end of Juarez, and now the Paseo de la Reforma began. I think it is one of the lovely avenues of the world and it was built ^{in the nineteenth century} on the plan of the Champs Elysées. It had large trees and gardens on either side, ^{which were flanked by} ~~and still on the outer sides~~ a smaller road and the grand homes

of the wealthy. The houses were built in the French and Italian style, surrounded by large, well-kept gardens.

At the end of the first stretch, where the statue of Columbus stands, was the "Café Colon" where we went for an ice-cream on Sundays. Tables were put outside under an awning and an orchestra played and everything was lively and gay.

The City finished at the statue of Cuauhtemoc, the last Indian Prince. To the right was the Colonia Station where the trains left for the North. The Paseo continued on to the Park and Castle of Chapultepec.

On the left the old country road of Insurgentes went out to the Hacienda of San José. It was a lovely old road studded by willows and eucalyptus trees, with green mossy places, delightful for walks. On either side were fields which in the rainy season were full of sun flowers and cosmos.