



When San Jose Was Young

A Series of Interesting Articles of An Historical Nature Prepared Especially for The News by a Well Known Author and Journalist.

NO. 45 THE MADONNA OF ALMADEN

The Madonna of the Mountain is the wife of Clemente Chaboya, the last man in the Mexican town of Almaden. All I recall of her garments is a black shawl draped about her head and shoulders. The grace of old Spain was in the folds of that shawl. It framed her ivory pale face, her black hair, streaked with white, her sorrowing dark eyes.

All her life had been passed on the hill in Mexican Almaden. Her father came there in 1840. She saw the town in its wild, reckless dissolute prosperity, while life was only a bubble and death an adventure. In Almaden's poverty she likes it best.

She sat in her little unpainted, neat house. "It is beautiful here," she said. "You can't see the valley for the fog. It is most beautiful in the spring."

"You're the only woman here?"

"Yes"

"You're not lonely?"

"I like to be alone near the church. It's over there." She nodded in the direction of the turricated hill.

"Will you show us the church?"

Quickly she took a key, and led us up the steps of her hillside garden, around the base of the hill, over a rocky road which once had been a smoothly paved street of Almaden. We passed wrecks of houses, wrecks of gardens. Here had been a dancing hall, there a house, and beyond near the church was one of the two spots where the stars of the circus had amused Almaden.

We approached the little church, the bell was gone. "Yes, she said, "When service was discontinued the bell was taken away."

We passed through the church garden, a tangle of Scotch broom and oleanders. Reverently she opened the door of the little sacristy with its worn red carpet. Then she took us into a darkened room where the last padre had slept. Here still remained parts of his bed. Here was the Madonna to whom in the morning his eyes opened.

Then we went out into the abandoned house of worship. Some of the windows were missing and the openings had been boarded over. Several of the prints of the stations of the Way of the Cross had been torn from their frames, but the room was clean and well ordered. A covering of lace and linen lay on the altar.

Facing the altar was an empty little gallery where had stood two organs. In the right hand corner of the church were two small, uncurtained boxes large enough to conceal a man. Here for years had sat the confessor and the confessed. During all the stormy life of the mine, Almaden was the refuge for the sinners of San Jose, and this little corner seemed seared with sins sobbed forth in whispers.

I turned away from the confessional. Before the black crucifix which stood out on a purple background, with Our Lady of Refuge and Our Lady of Guadalupe looking down on either side,

kneelt the Madonna of Almaden.

When she rose I asked her if the church had appointed her caretaker of the place.

Gradually her story came. All her life she had worshipped in this church. She had been here baptized and confirmed. Always she had come here to mass and to confession. When services were discontinued the other people attended the little church at the hacienda. But this church on the hill seemed dearer to her than the one below. She continued to come here where was Our Lady of Guadalupe, to whom she prayed to preserve her loved ones daily risking their lives in the great dark cavern of death, nearly a third of a mile under the earth. Perhaps the church remembered those years and pleaded with her not to go away, even when the bells were silenced, even when there were only ghosts of prayers to be heard.

She refused to see irreverent beings and irreverent winds break wide open the church, wrench out the windows, wreck the stations of the Way of the Cross. Wild storms beat through the windows and drenched the robes of even the Madonna who for seventy-five years had guarded old Almaden. Mrs Chaboya could not endure the agony of the suffering Madonna.

So Faith taught the Madonna of the Mountain the way. She was poor, but one of her sons also loved the little church. He nailed tight the windows. He boarded up the empty spaces. No longer was the Virgin lashed by the winds from Loma Prieta. No longer was she drenched by the water. The Mother of God was safe.

Then for days the Madonna of the Mountain worked cleaning the church. Unknown, unrewarded, she put it in its pleasing order. She locked the front door and took the key to the sacristy.

Worshippers never come to the deserted building. Almaden is no pilgrimage for travelers. Alone on the heights this humble woman there kneels. She hears only echoes of music, of prayer, of vespers. She sees only shadows of priests, but the echoes, the shadows are her reality. Our Lady of Refuge, Our Lady of Guadalupe, the black crucifix, the echoes and the shadows all belong to the Madonna of the Mountain.