

LITERARY CALIFORNIA

How The West was won and where we're heading

Exploration and Missionaries

Born in the south of France, Comte de La Perouse began his naval training fifteen. As a young lieutenant he fought against the British during the American Revolution. In 1785 he was put in command of two frigates for a voyage around the world. It would become the basis for his classic explorer's narrative, *Voyage autour du Monde*. The stated purpose of this expedition was to increase geographic knowledge and look for the elusive Northwest Passage. The less public motive was to explore the Pacific area with an eye to advancing French trade and possible colonization. In September 1786 the expedition dropped anchor off Monterey, then the provincial capital, where they were welcomed by Governor Pedro Fages and stayed for ten days. While his geologists and botanists gathered data, La Perouse gave the world its first close look at daily life in the newly established mission system. His expedition was never completed. A year and a half later he was killed when his ship hit a reef and sank near the Santa Cruz Islands, northeast of Australia.

"A Visit to Carmel"

The fathers of the mission of San Carlos, at the distance of two leagues from Monterey, soon arrived at the presidio. No less obliging than the officers of the two vessels and the fort, they invited us to dine with them and promised to inform us minutely concerning the government of their missions, the manner of living of the Indians, their arts, their newly acquired habits, and in general everything that could rouse the curiosity of travelers. We eagerly accepted this invitation, which we should not have failed to solicit if we had not thus been anticipated. It was agreed that we should set out in two days. Mr. Fages wanted to accompany us and undertook to procure horses.

After crossing a small plain covered with herds of cattle and in which there were only a few trees, which were necessary to shelter these animals against the rain and the sun, we ascended the hills. From there we heard the sound of bells announcing our arrival of which the missionaries had been previously informed by a horseman from the governor.

We were received like the lords of manors when they first take possession of their estates. The president of the missions, in his ceremonial vestments and with his holy water sprinkle in his hand, awaited us at the gate of the church, which was illuminated in the same manner as on the greatest feast days. He conducted us to the foot of the high altar, where he chanted the *Te Deum* in thanksgiving for the happy outcome of our voyage.

Before we entered the church, we had passed through a square in which the Indians of both sexes were ranged in a line. They exhibited no marks of surprise in their countenance, and left us in doubt whether we should be the subject of their conversation for the rest of the day.

The church is neat though thatched with straw. It is dedicated to Saint Charles, and adorned with some tolerable pictures, copied from originals in Italy. Among them is a picture of hell, in which the painter appears to have borrowed from the imagination of Callot; but as it is absolutely necessary to strike the imagination of these new converts with the most lively impressions, I am persuaded that such a representation was never more useful in any country. It would be

impossible for the Protestant worship, which proscribes images and almost all the ceremonies of our church, to make any progress with this people. I doubt whether the picture of paradise, which sits opposite that of hell, produces so good an effect upon them. The state of tranquillity which it represents, and that mild satisfaction of the elect who surround the throne of the Supreme Being, are ideas too sublime for the minds of uncultivated savages. But it was necessary to place rewards by the side of punishment, and it was a point of duty that no change should be permitted in the kind of enjoyments which the Catholic religion promises to man.

On coming out of the church we passed through the same row of Indians, whom the *Te Deum* had not induced to abandon their post. Only the children had removed to a small distance and formed groups near the house of missionaries, which, along with the different storehouses, is opposite the church. The Indian village stands on the right, consisting of about fifty huts which serve for seven hundred and forty persons of both sexes, including their children

The Indians as well as the missionaries rise with the sun, and immediately go to prayers and mass, which last for an hour. During this time three large boilers are set on the fire for cooking a kind of soup, made of barley meal, the grain of which has been roasted previous to its being ground. This sort of food, of which the Indians are extremely fond, is called *atole*. They eat it without either butter or salt, and it would certainly to us be a most insipid mess.

Each hut sends for the allowance of all its inhabitants in a vessel made of the bark of a tree. There is neither confusion nor disorder in the distribution, and when the boilers are nearly emptied, the thicker portion at the bottom is distributed to those children who have said their catechism the best.

The time of repast is three quarters of an hour, after which they all go to work, some to till the ground with oxen, some to dig in the garden, while others are employed in domestic occupations, all under the eye of one or two missionaries.

The women have no other employment than their household affairs, the care of their children, and the roasting and grinding of corn. This last operation is both tedious and laborious, because they have no other method of breaking the grain than with a roller upon a stone. Mr. de Langle, who saw this operation, made a present of his mill to the missionaries. It was difficult to have rendered them a greater service, since four women will now do the work of a hundred, thus leaving

them time to spin the wool of their sheep and manufacture some coarse cloths.

But the missionaries have hitherto been more attentive to their heavenly than their earthly concerns, and have greatly neglected the introduction of the most common arts. They are so austere as to their own comforts that they have no fireplace in their chambers, though the winter is sometimes severe. The greatest anchorites have never lived a more edifying life. Father Fermin de Lasuén, president of the missions of New California, is one of the most worthy and respectable men I have ever met. His mildness, charity, and affection for the Indians are beyond expression.

At noon the bells give notice of the time of dinner. The Indians then quit their work, and send for their allowance in the same vessel as at breakfast. But this second soup is thicker than the former, and contains a mixture of wheat, maize, peas, and beans; the Indians call it *pozole*.

They return to work from two to four or five o'clock, when they repair to evening prayer, which lasts nearly an hour and is followed by a distribution of *atole*, the same as at breakfast. These three distributions are sufficient for the subsistence of the greater number of these Indians, and we might perhaps adopt this economical food in years of scarcity, with the addition of some seasoning.

The whole art of this cookery consists in roasting the grain before it is reduced to meal. As the Indian women have no clay or metallic vessels for this operation, they perform it in baskets of bark by using small burning wood coals. They turn these vessels with such dexterity and rapidity that they succeed in causing the grain to swell and burst without burning the basket, though made of combustible material. (We can affirm that our best coffee is far from being roasted with equal skill.) It is distributed to them every morning, and the slightest embezzlement is punished by the whip, though it seldom happens that they expose themselves to the danger.

These punishments are adjudged by Indian magistrates, called *caciques*. There are three in each mission, chosen by the people from among those whom the missionaries have not excluded. However, to give a proper notion of this magistracy, we must observe that these caciques are like the overseers of a plantation: passive beings, blind performers of the will of their superiors. Their principal functions

consist in serving as beadles in the church, to maintain order and the appearance of attention.

Women are never whipped in public, but in an enclosed and somewhat distant place that their cries may not excite a too lively compassion, which might cause the men to revolt. The latter, on the contrary, are exposed to the view of all their fellow citizens, that their punishment may serve as an example. They usually ask pardon for their fault, in which case the executioner diminishes the force of his lashes but the number is always irrevocable.

The rewards are small distributions of grain, of which they make little thin cakes, and bake them on hot wood ashes. On high festivals an allowance of beef is distributed which many eat raw, particularly the fat, considered by them as delicious as the finest butter or the most excellent cheese. They skin all animals with the greatest dexterity, and when an animal is fat they make, like the ravens, a croaking of pleasure, devouring with their eyes those parts for which they have the greatest desire.

The Indian men are often permitted to hunt and fish for their own benefit, and upon their return they generally make a present to the missionaries of a part of their fish or game. But they proportion the quantity to what is strictly necessary for their consumption, taking care to increase it when they know that their superiors have any visitors or guests.

The women raise some poultry about their huts, the eggs of which they give to their children. These fowls are the property of the Indians, as are their clothes, small articles of furniture, and implements of hunting.

There is no example of theft among them, though the door of their hut consists merely of a bundle of straw which they place across the entrance when the inhabitants are absent. These manners may appear patriarchal to some of our readers, who may not reflect that in these huts there is no article which can excite the avarice of a neighboring hut. The food of the Indians is secured to them, and they have therefore no other want than that of giving life to beings who are sure to be as simple as themselves.

The men in these missions have made greater sacrifices to Christianity than the women, because, before its introduction, they were accustomed to polygamy, and were even in the habit of espousing all the sisters of the same family. The

women, on the contrary, have acquired the right of receiving exclusively the caresses of a single man.

I must confess, however, notwithstanding the unanimous report of the missionaries concerning this pretended polygamy, that I am at a loss to conceive how it could have been established in a nation of savages; with the number of men being nearly equal to that of the women, the consequence must have been a forced continence in many individuals, unless conjugal fidelity were less rigorously observed than in the missions, where the holy fathers have constituted themselves guardians of the virtue of the women. An hour after supper, they take care to secure all the women whose husbands are absent, as well as the young girls above the age of nine years, by locking them up, and during the day they entrust them to the care of elderly women. All these precautions are still inadequate, and we have seen men in the stocks and women in irons for having eluded the vigilance of these female Arguses, whose eyes are not sufficient for the complete performance of their office.

The converted Indians have preserved all the ancient customs which their new religion does not prohibit. They have the same huts, the same games, and the same clothes. The clothing of the richest consists of a garment of otter skin, which descends from the waist somewhat lower than the groin. The most indolent have simply a piece of cloth, which the mission supplies, to conceal nudity, and a small cloak of rabbit skin, tied under the chin, which covers their shoulders, and descends to their waist. The rest of their body is absolutely naked, as is their head. Some of them, however, have straw hats which are neatly made.