THE OLD BASKET-WEAVER OF SAN FERNANDO

By J. TORREY CONNOR

IT MIGHT be a corner of Old Spain, so brightly falls the sunlight on the red-tiled roof, so balmy are the breezes that set the gray-green leaves of the olive trees all a-quiver. Beyond the mission the sleepy little village of San Fernando lies basking in the golden noontide, its one connecting link with the busy, work-a-day world the Southern Pacific train, at the moment speeding cityward, leaving a trail of smoke across the blue sky.

But the quiet of this peaceful spot remains unbroken; the old mission, "the world forgetting," is "of the world forgot." At the upper end of the corridor a dark-robed figure paces meditatively, and as I advance along the uneven flagging, the priest turns and holds out a hand in greeting.

"The basket-weaver? You will find her in a shack at the turn of yonder wall."

Like many another sojourner in California, I had caught the basket-collecting fever in its most virulent form. I had seen the famous Jewett collection, comprising one hundred and thirty perfect specimens of the textile art, their beautiful colors — such tints as no recent weave could imitate — mellowed by age. Then did I determine to own its counterpart, and straightway took a basket-collecting friend into my confidence.

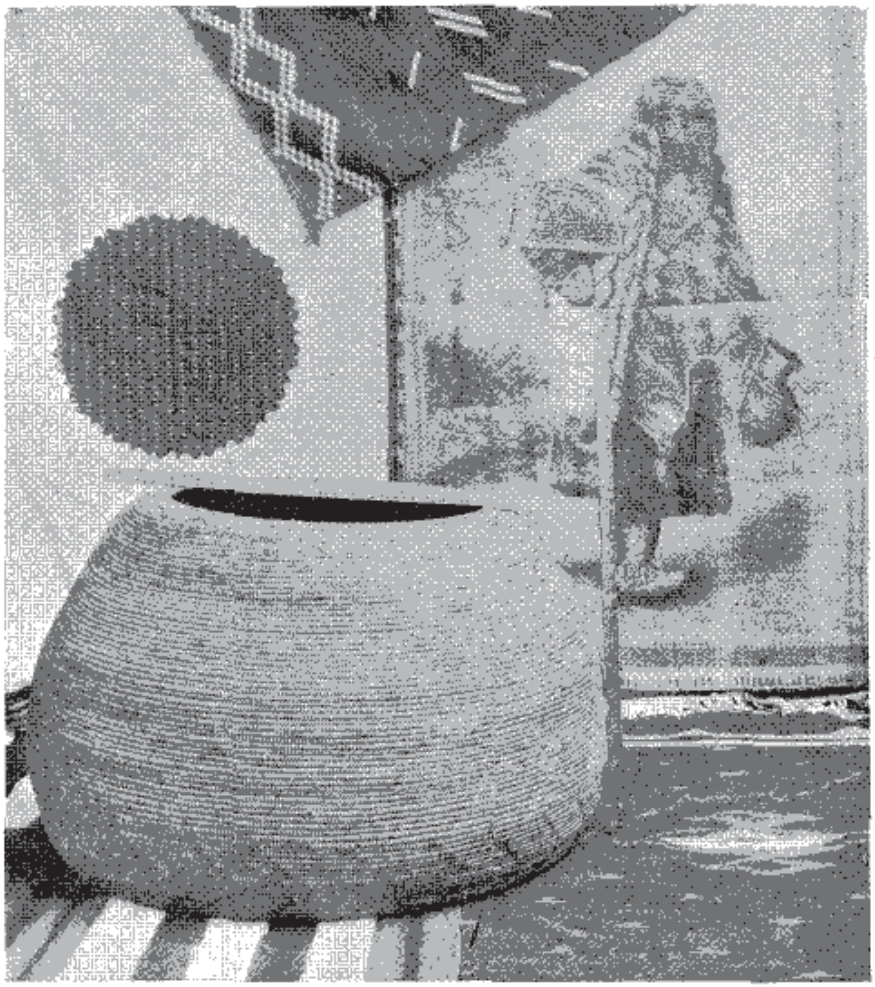
"You can obtain these things at a curio dealer's, by paying six prices for them, but you are never sure of their authenticity. The authentic basket is the basket with a history," my friend continued. "It must have all the ear-marks of actual service, must, in short, have been put to uses for which it was designed. The bowl baskets, made at a period when the entire furnishings of the tepee were the work of the Indian woman's hands, were intended for cooking utensils. So finely woven were they that they held water, which for cooking purposes was brought to a boiling point by casting in stones, heated red-hot in the glowing embers. Water jugs, shaped like the Mexican olla, were coated with pitch to render them water-tight, and were almost the only basket without ornament.

"I have seen shell beads, inwoven with grasses dyed black, brown, or red, on a common hopper,— which is a bottomless basket, made to fit over the hollow stone on which corn is ground. The shallow baskets in which meal was mixed, the 'carrying' baskets, the clothes hamper,— all were more or less elaborately ornamented with designs which required as careful a counting of 'stitches' as does the most intricate embroidery pattern. But it was on the 'trinket' baskets that the dusky dame expended her skill. Tiny beads, bright feathers from the head of the woodpecker, from the breast of the wild canary and the teal duck, and strands of gay worsted, were lavishly employed in decorating these pretty trifles. Without being useful, they served their purpose in being ornamental, and were treasured as our grandmothers treasure their family plate. The baskets fashioned nowadays may, to the uninitiated, appear much the same in shape and coloring; but

examine the weave, note the use of cheap 'store' dyes in the color designs, where vegetable dyes were formerly used."

"Truly it is like comparing stone-ware with Haviland," I replied, recalling several particularly unhandsome specimens offered for sale at the little way-stations along the overland route.

"Just so. These, my enthusiastic friend, of the reward which a good deed merits. There are a few old Indian women yet living who hold in their possession baskets handed down from generation to generation,— baskets made at a time when cheap crockery was a thing unknown this side of the Rockies. Scour the country,— and when you find such a basket buy, beg, or steal it, but secure it at all hazards, and you have



FROM THE JEWETT COLLECTION

are made to sell, not to figure as heirlooms. Do you understand what is meant by the authenticity of a basket?"

"But where may these baskets, the perfect specimens, be found? One may no longer 'discover' them, as did the pioneer collectors, for where there are baskets, there, also, is the curio dealer."

"Scour the country, and take the chances something for which a connoisseur would barter his soul."

"Why is this scarcity of 'high art' basketry?"

"It is no longer expected that a squaw will bring a dowry of baskets to her husband, and the art of weaving, as weaving was done in those days when the skilled worker brought a price in the matrimonial

THE JEWETT COLLECTION

market, will soon be a lost one. It has been said, and truly, that the Indians learn more of the white people's vices than virtues. Thus it happens that the younger generation of shack dwellers has put aside the teachings of their foremothers, the 'advanced' squaw preferring to use any makeshift in which to prepare her messes, rather than spend long hours in the shaping of a basket, that, after all, serves her pupose no better than the odds and ends of broken crockery or rusted tin, picked up from a rubbish heap. Only the old-timers — few they are, and rapidly dying off — can tell you the secret of the 'stitch'; how the tiny feathers of wild birds that embellish the small baskets are 'caught in'; the difference in the two great methods of weaving 'upright' and 'horizontal,' and many other things which you would like to know."

With a serene confidence born of youth and inexperience I set out on my quest, journeying far to find the old basket weaver of San Fernando, of whom I had been told. It is barely possible, I argued, that the tourists have passed her by; and then hope took wings as I thought of the lynx-eyed curio dealer, who had doubtless long before despoiled her of everything on which he could lay his hands.

Crossing the orchard, set with century-old olive trees, I followed the wall; and presently I came upon the abode of Juana, the basket weaver. A curiously constructed hut, half brush, half gunny sack, and wholly inadequate as a shelter, had been erected on the brink of the zanja. A silver thread of water purled between green banks; on a flat stone beside the rivulet was a heap of tattered garments that were to be pounded and turned and pounded again by a woman

THE CLOISTER OF SAN FERNANDO

who deals but feeble blows, and who gropes half blindly in the bright sunlight. A fire blinked in a hole before the shack, and another crone squatted near, grinding laboriously upon a metate the corn presently to be baked into tortillas.

At my approach a half dozen mangy curs set up a chorus of yelps. Attracted by the unusual noise, the woman at the washing-stone left her task, and both advanced, staring at me with frank, childish curiosity. To the younger, Juana, I addressed my remarks, in the best Spanish I could muster; and she replied in the mongrel half-Spanish, half-Mexican lingo which the California Indian speaks.

Unsavory as these poor creatures were, they seemed far from uninteresting to me. The quaint mission, the fast crumbling walls of which were reared a century ago, does not mark the difference between the past and the present more forcibly than do these Indian women, who were here "before the Gringo came." They were here when the thriving cities of the coast were pueblos; when monks in robes and sandals, and Indians bearing burdens, journeyed up and down the land, the sole wayfarers along the paths that led from mission to mission. The older of the two women may be one hundred years old, though she looked two hundred.

Disappointment met me at the outset. Juana told me that she had no *coritas* (baskets) for sale. She acknowledged that she still made them, however, and after much persuasion went into the shack, returning with an unfinished basket in her hand. Further solicitation and a small coin induced her to bring out her stock in trade, — a bundle of reeds and a broken awl, — and I was duly initiated into the mysteries of basket weaving.

The grasses used in the "pattern" had just been dyed a reddish-brown by long submersion in water in which were bits of rusty iron. Beginning with the fine reeds, they were bunched and carried around the basket, the upright reeds and the "coil," or separate strand, wound over and under, binding the whole firmly together.

It is slow work, she said, for she is not as young as she once was, and her eyesight has almost failed her.

Young! Can it be that she was ever young? The dried skin was like parchment,

the dim eyes shunned the light and the bent form leaned heavily upon the stout stick.

Once, she told me, she made in three months' time a grain basket that would hold a half ton of grain, gathering the pliant twigs of the poison oak herself and weaving it strong, so strong! Now it would take her a year, perhaps two, to perform such a task. She brought a goodly store of coritas to her hut when she began housekeeping. There were "carrying baskets" shaped "so" — making a cone in her hands. These were borne upon the back and supported in place by a rope of twisted bark, passed around the forehead. There were also water jugs, buck plates, a cradle-shaped basket in which grain was winnowed, trinket baskets, caps for the head, and many more. "All gone now, none left," she mumbled, and her companion nodded her head violently.

"I will give you four bits for the unfinished basket."

She took the basket from my hand, and made off toward the shack.

"Six bits," I called after her, and the basket was mine.

Although basket making is practised by nearly all of the tribes of American Indians, the work of the California Indians far excels that of any other people in fineness of weaving and beauty of decoration. The oldest baskets, those found in Indian graves, are of so fine a weave that they are said to rival the world-famed weaving of the Japanese, accounted the best basket makers in the world.

A variety of materials were employed,— rushes and silk grass, tule, the stems of the yucca, the flexible roots of the willow, cedar, and oak, kelp thread, — none of which the splint weavers beyond the Rockies could adapt to these uses.

With some guesswork on my part, I made out the story of a basket — O, a very wonderful basket — as the Indian woman told me. It was a "bottle-neck" basket, that is, a basket with a globular body and narrow neck, — one of the most difficult shapes to weave. It was the work of a mission Indian, and the padre had showed her how to put in the figures. In place of the customary patterns,— the pine cone, the diamond-back rattlesnake pattern, the lightning's zig-zag line, the "little men," the sword fish design, and others innumerable, all taken from the book of Nature,— there were a cross, a figure representing Christ, and grouped about the cross, the twelve Disciples.

I received this story "with a grain of salt," as the saying is; but I learned later that such a basket is in existence, and that it is the "feature" of a private collection in San Francisco.

The booming note of a ranch bell, somewhere near, warned me that day was almost done; so with my trophy in my hand I took the road that leads to the little village.

At the turn of the path I looked back. The smoke curled lazily upward from the tiny fire, and near by squatted a dark figure,— Juana had gone back to her metate.