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H. J. Taylor

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Return of the Last Survivor

by H.J. Taylor



Eight miles east of Mariposa, in the Mother Lode country of California, a trail leads over the hill from Dawson's Service Station to a little old log cabin. It is the home of Maria Lebrado, granddaughter of Tenaya, chief of the Yosemite Indians. The gold rush brought conflict between miners and Indians, and in 1851 the Yosemite Indians were driven by the Mariposa Battalion from their secluded valley home, their *Ahwahnee*.^{*} At the point of the bayonet, about two hundred Indians, almost without clothing or food for the winter, made their way out by Inspiration Point and the Wawona road, or climbed the steep trail of Indian Canyon; among the latter was Maria, a girl of about ten years. Henceforth the Yosemite Indians were a scattered people, never again to know the tie of band or tribe.

Seventy-eight years had passed when in July, 1929, Maria, then in her middle eighties, returned for the first time to the home of her childhood, her beloved *Ahwahnee*. The Kellogg and Golden Cup oaks produced abundantly that year, and Maria had gathered several bushels of their acorns. They lay in a large pile

beside her tent in Indian Village, now inhabited mostly by Piutes and Monos. The horny outer shell of the acorns which had been cracked with stones, she removed with her hands. The soft brown inner covering was blown away when winnowed in her *chincoo* (basket-shake). She pounded the acorns in a metate with a stone pestle, leached out the tannin, and cooked the flour into palatable mush. It was here in the Indian Village of Yosemite that I met Maria, last survivor of the exiled band, talked with her daily for a week as she prepared her acorn food, and heard from her lips an unwritten story.

Expulsion had left its impress on the child, and recollections of the event, though few, were vivid. There was the long climb through the snow, out of the Valley, over the mountains, in sorrow and humiliation. Then there was the figure of the soldier—"Man with the red shirt,"...man with the red

shirt, she always replied to my questioning. And in these images is the essence of it all—the tragedy of a people filing out from their tribal home, forced by the redshirted Forty-niner!

This article previously appeared in THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA CHRONICLE in 1930.

* The Yosemite Indians called the Valley "Awani." Interestingly, the name Yosemite was first applied to the Valley itself by Dr. Bunnel, a member of the battalion then in the very act of expelling the very people for whom he named it.

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But of the Valley itself and the life of her people her memories were more numerous and varied. We went together to the cemetery. At the grave of Lucy, her cousin, she stood a moment in silence, then began to moan and wail loudly. Aside, her daughter explained, "Indian do like that 'cause they Indian. We not tell Mamma now when relation die, 'cause she not strong to cry three days and no sit, no eat." Moaning, Maria cried, "All gone, long, long time 'go. I 'lone; no more Yosemite; long time 'go." She stooped to pick some ferns near by and placed them on the grave. With hands extended, she chanted in strong, clear tones words that I did not understand, then turned to me and said in sympathetic voice, "I Catholic—just little Catholic." And she was comforted.

In the Indian room of the museum she looked about in wonderment. The "long time 'go" became the present, and youth and joy and laughter returned to her. Her Indian words needed no interpreter, for the human face speaks a universal language. In basketry, she quickly detected whether made by Mono or Yosemite. A poorly made basket she pronounced "too dirty," pointing out where it lacked smoothness and form. She took a *hiki* (cradle), strapped the band across her forehead, and with delicious laughter walked about saying, "Papoose, long time 'go." The Indian arrowheads recalled the annual visit of the Monos into the Valley to trade their obsidian for acorns. Food was essential, likewise weapons. In awakened memories Maria lived over the distant past. Extending her arms to all that was about her she murmured, "Long, long time 'go; I so big," as she pointed to a little girl of about ten years.

Two young men drove us over the Valley she had not seen since her childhood. The wide open meadow, the Indian *pantanko** of her day was covered with trees and shrubs. She shook her head, saying, "Too dirty; too much bushy." Everywhere, to her, the floor of the Valley seemed changed. She clasped her hands and exclaimed, "All fixed up! Ahwahnee too dirty bushy. No big pantanko; long time 'go big, like all kick 'em." We failed to understand. Loud and emphatically she repeated, "Long 'go, pantanko big place like all kick'em." Still we did not grasp the meaning. She leaned forward, placed an imaginary ball and kicked it. "Football field!" we exclaimed. Her laughter was delightful and unbounded. Later we came upon Leidig's Meadow, now the largest open space in the Valley. Her face beamed with joy as she cried, "Pantanko! Ahwahnee!" The voice, the lights and shadows of the human face give expression beyond the power of words.

From the meadow she looked up at the rock walls of the Valley. The great monoliths stood unchanged. The waterfalls drawing their substance from the eternal source of rain and snow spoke to her as they had spoken in her childhood. Looking at Yosemite Falls she cried, "Chorlock! Chorlock no gone!" She saluted *Tu-tock-ah-nu-lah*, now known as El Capitan. Her own Indian village had stood in full view of *Loya*, now

* Probably from the Spanish *fandango*, meaning "dance", but applied by Maria to the meadow where Indian festivals were held.

Sentinel Rock. It seemed very dear to her. A momentary silence, then in quiet supplication she said, "Loya, Loya; long time 'go." For us the wonders of Yosemite took on new and deeper meaning as the names so full of Indian lore fell from her lips. What loss to posterity and to history that these names have not been preserved. Bridal Veil, Vernal Falls, Mirror Lake, Sentinel Rock, Half Dome—these names are found throughout the world. Yosemite alone has a *Pohono*, a *Py-wz-ack*, an *Ah-wi-yah*, a *Loya*, a *Tis-sa-ack*. In these names there is tradition and meaning that express the life of the people who originally possessed this Valley.

Maria's speech is laconic. Her words are Indian, Spanish, and English. It was expression rather than words that told her graphic story. Pointing to Eagle Peak she told of gathering Indian potatoes along the slope and up the trail. I gave her the flower and bulb of the common *brodiaea*. Her face lit up with a smile. The flower she knew. She bit into the bulb and laughed, saying, "Walli, walli," (i. e., from the earth).

Yosemite Valley is seven miles long and from a half-mile to a mile in width. Through its entire length flows the Merced River, on either side of which were located the Indian villages of her time. As we approached Bridal Veil Falls, *Pohono* in her day, Maria called sharply to the men, "Boys, *Pohono*! Look out, boy! *Pohono* kill boy much!" We stopped. This, she told us was the western limit of the Indian wigwams, beyond which no Indian dared to build his *utcu* (house), for the evil wind swayed the falls. Bridal Veil stretches a rainbow across the Valley, and beyond it an Indian feared to go lest the evil spirit of *Pohono* claim him.

Though bent, Maria is physically strong. The gnarled hands, purple with age, speak clearly of a life of toil. Her shock of steel-gray hair is cut short. Her face is wrinkled with lines deep and innumerable, such as only time can trace through almost ninety summers of changing skies. Her mind is clear and alert; her senses are well preserved. Often as we shelled acorns together, we sat long without a spoken word; yet it was not an empty silence. The lights and shadows of the face may be read; they can never be translated into words.

I asked about the four sons. She looked afar off. The unshelled acorn fell from her fingers as she stretched forth her hand. Her body swayed. Her breath was a deep-drawn sigh. Slowly she whispered the names, "Leandro, Cruz, Pietro, Angelo." In the sacred silence I felt the agony and sorrow of the mother heart, the longing that time could not still. Almost breathlessly she repeated the names, and I, too, seemed to see them pass before me. In whispered tones I heard, "Gone, all gone, long 'go." Looking at me as if she had suddenly become aware of my presence, her face took on the look of revenge. In harsh and powerful tones she cried aloud, "Gone! all gone, long 'go!" Each of the four sons had met a tragic death. We continued shelling acorns in silence. I asked about her daughters. She raised four fingers. "Mary, full-blood!" she said with pride. Maria's first husband was a Yosemite. Her second husband was Mexican. With three fingers upraised she said, "Andrea,

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Francisca, Grace," there was merriment in her eyes as she whispered in my ear "half-breed." Then followed roguish laughter.

The days were full for Maria, lone survivor of the Yosemite Indians who were driven from the Valley. Memory became a reality to her. Emotionally she lived over the tragic events of her life, events that have long since passed into cold, historical data; and to those who spent these days with Maria Lebrado, the facts of Yosemite's early history took on the life and atmosphere of human beings who suffered hopelessly.

We bade her good-bye. To the young men she curtsied as she said, "Good-bye, boys; gracias, gracias." Laying her hand on my shoulder, she said, "Thank, thank; you white daughter." Then she gave the high-pitched, piercing call that Tenaya gave when he summoned his people. The clear, strong, musical tones she trilled with long sustained breath that excited amazement. Maria stood beside her pile of acorns gazing at *Tis-sa-ack*, the cleft rock. Slowly the picture faded as we followed the winding road in *Aiwahnee*.