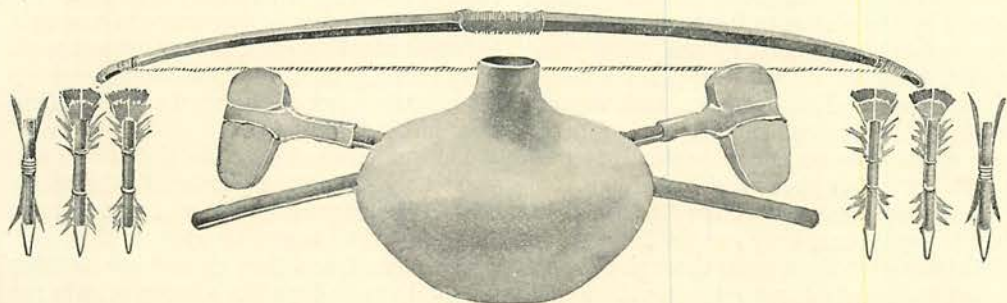


ASCENT *of the* ENCHANTED MESA (La Mesa Encantada)

BY

F. W. HODGE.



ON a rugged rock-table rising from a beautiful level valley in western central New Mexico, the Acoma Indians have had their home since Francisco Vazquez de Coronado, the commander of the most pretentious army of explorers that ever trod our domain, wended his tedious way in 1540 from Mexico to the bison plains of eastern Kansas.

For how long before the middle of the sixteenth century the natives climbed the dizzy trails that still lead to their eyrie citadel cannot be said; but the Acomas have an unwritten book of Genesis, which recounts their origin in the mystic under-world of Shipápu, their emergence into this world of light, their migration from the far North, and their fitful settlements for indefinite periods, in similarly indefinite localities, each probably in the hope that the stable middle of this flat, boundless world had at last been found.

We learn this from Acoma lips; for, like other peoples of prescriptorial culture, these pueblo-dwellers retain mental records of past achievements which are handed down through the ages from father to son, and from shaman to novitiate, even archaic terms and expressions being preserved as they were uttered by the ancients.

The first stopping-place of which the Acomas have an oral record was Kashká-chuti, somewhere in the indefinite North; the next was Washpáshuka, southward of

the latter, they say; and, traveling still to the southward, as if to seek a more genial clime, they reached a place where the village of Kuchtyá was built. The next halt is more definitely located—the Cañada de Cruz, at the gateway of which the walls of Tsíama were reared. But the “middle” was not here, it seems; so southward again they journeyed to the beautiful vale of Acoma, where the pueblo of Tapitsíama was established on a mesa overlooking the valley from the northeast.

Indians do everything with a definite purpose; if they erect a village on a defensive site, it means that they have enemies whose attacks they can thus the better repel. Such a site was Tapitsíama; but it was not impregnable.

A predatory horde may have succeeded in driving out its inhabitants, or it may have been abandoned for other causes. At any rate, the village was deserted, and its Acoma occupants made another move in their great life-game, this time to the summit of the mighty rock of Katzímo.

Among the peculiarly distinctive natural features that mark New Mexico and Arizona, none is so prominent as the great, flat-topped, steep-sided mesas, or rock-tables, that everywhere rise from the sandy plains throughout the length and breadth of these Territories.

And in this land of mesas, none are more

beautiful or more typical than those that hold command over the valley of Acoma. Their sides are pink and cream, while now and then a splendid dash of purple or crimson suggests the magic stroke of some titanic painter. But the loftiest, most beautiful, most majestic of all is the great isolated table of Katzímo, "la Mesa Encantada" (the Enchanted Mesa), which rises more than four hundred feet from the center of the valley, like an isle of rock from a sea of sand. Its massive walls are adorned with pinnacles and minarets and towering spires, carved by the elements from solid rock, and frescoed in many tints by the same great artists, while on its crest appears a crown of evergreen. The northern and western faces of the escarpment are each relieved by a great cove or amphitheater; but elsewhere the cliff is sheer and forbidding.

When the ancestors of the Acomas abandoned Tapitsíama, they sought the summit of Katzímo (tradition says) through the cove in the western face, near the southern end, where the steep wall was surmounted by means of hand- and foot-holes pecked in the rock, as at Acoma to-day. Safe from every intrusion was their new home site. With a solitary trail, so easily defended that a single man might keep an army at bay, what fear had they of enemies?

Like the other Pueblo Indians, the Acomas have always been tillers of the soil. The fertile sands of their valley and its tributaries bore harvests of corn, beans, squashes, and cotton, the seeds of which they planted deep with a shouldered dibble, and fructified with impounded storm-water. Before the advent of the bearers of cross and sword, every man and every woman was a human beast of burden; for horsekind was unknown, and of cattle, sheep, and swine they also knew nothing. Yet, born to work, they performed the task of battling with nature for a livelihood, and performed it well; for their granaries were always full enough to enable them, if need be, to withstand a twelvemonth's siege.

Time rolled on. How long the top of Katzímo had been occupied not even the elders now know; perhaps a few generations had passed; perhaps, indeed, five hundred years had flown since the walls of Tapitsíama were left to crumble. Another springtime came, and, as of yore, the sun-priest heralded from the housetops that the time for planting was soon to come. The seeds from the last year's harvest were gathered from the bins, planting-sticks were sharpened,

and the natives stood in readiness for the final announcement of the seer to repair to the fields.

Meanwhile the clans were busy in selecting representatives to participate in the great foot-races, for the Pueblos are famous runners, and, incredible as it may seem, a spirited contest over a cruel course of twenty-five miles is a feat still accomplished with comparative ease.

All was life on the mesa-top before the first eastern glow kissed with ruddy warmth the crest of Katzímo. Down the rugged trail the natives clambered—every one who was able to force a planting-stick in the compact sand, or sufficiently lithe to drive away a robber crow. Only a few of the aged and the ailing were left behind.

The sun climbed over the tinted cliff and spent its glare on the planters in the valley below. Warmer and warmer it waxed, until flecks of cloud began to appear; then new clouds formed, and they chased one another across the mesa-tops like a troop of children at play; childlike, too, their murmurings soon began, then grew louder and louder still, and the tears began to fall. The busy planters hastened in their work; but faster and faster came the rain, driving them to the shelters made of boughs and sticks from which the crops are watched. The great black dome was rent by a hundred glittering swords; the thunder crackled and roared; and the rain fell in such a torrent that Katzímo was hidden by the sky-born cataract, and the valley became a sheet of flood.

With dire forebodings the elders shook their heads. Never before had the heavens given vent to such fury. Yet as suddenly as the storm arose, so suddenly did the clouds disperse, and in all its majesty the sunlit crest of Katzímo loomed from a sea of mist.

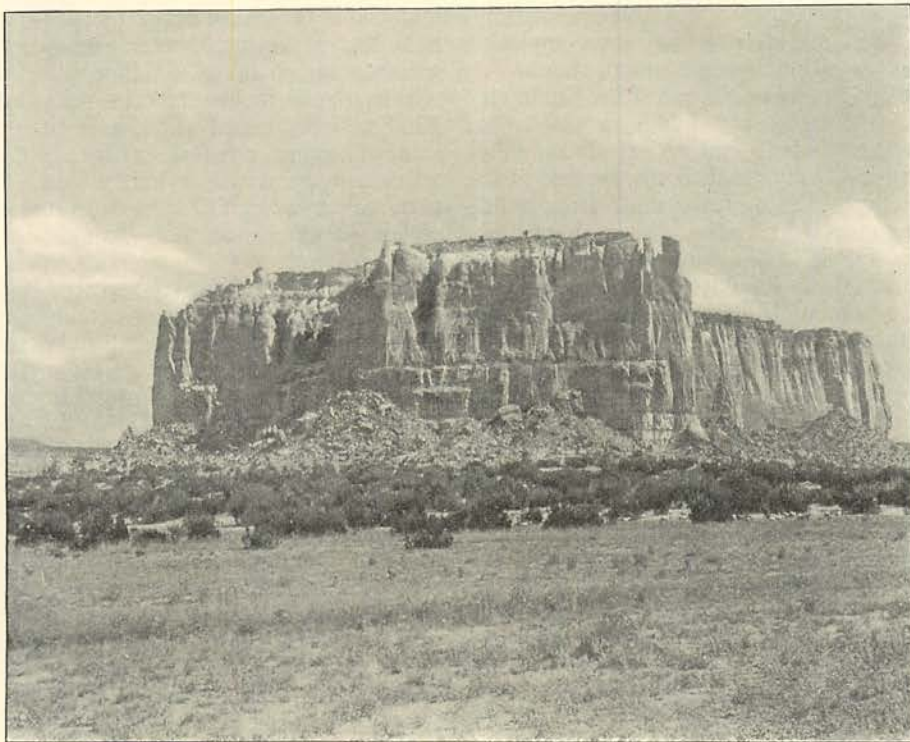
The toilers trudged toward their mountain home. When the base of the trail was reached, huge sharp-edged blocks of stone, such as frequently fall to-day, were encountered at the talus foot, blocking the pathway of the morning, and giving mute testimony of disaster to the ladder-trail above. The Acomas still tell us that a great rock-mass at the foot of the cove, formerly giving access to the cleft by means of the holes therein pecked, became freed from the friable wall in that memorable storm of centuries ago, and thundered downward in a thousand fragments, cutting off communication with the mesa village, and thus preventing the rescue for which the feeble voices above were calling.

Ask the Acomas why their ancestors made no desperate effort to save from the fated town those of their flesh and blood, and they gravely shake their heads. Many a place has become enchanted to the Indian for lesser cause.

So much for the legend of la Mesa Encantada, shorn of its poetry and its pathos. When the story was first related to white people cannot be said. Perhaps it was known

pueblos of New Mexico in the summer and autumn of 1895, I visited Acoma, where the tradition was outlined to me by Tsíki, a chief and medicine-man of renown in his tribe.

Having devoted no little time to the determination of the verity of native tradition by substantial historical and archæological evidence, the thought of discrediting the Katzímo legend did not occur to me. During



PHOTOGRAPHED BY A. C. VROMAN.

ENCHANTED MESA (KATZÍMO), FROM THE NORTH.

to the *conquistadores* who trudged the waterless sands long before Puritan feet pressed the rock of Plymouth; if so, they left no record behind. In our own time, however, the tradition was repeated to Mr. Charles F. Lummis, who resided for several years at the pueblo of Isleta, and was on intimate terms with the gray-haired priests of Acoma.

The publication by Mr. Lummis, some twelve years ago, of the story of Katzímo aroused no little interest in the history of the giant rock among students of Southwestern ethnology—an interest which has grown apace until the very name of the Enchanted Mesa has come to be almost a household word.

While conducting a reconnoissance of the

the same trip I made a visit to the great rock, three miles northeastward, and, clambering over the talus piled half-way up the cliff, entered the amphitheater through which the traditional trail had wound its way. Little difficulty was experienced in passing, unshod, over the rocky slope to within about sixty feet of the summit of the cliff; but at this point a sheer wall of thirty feet prevented further progress.

Retracing my steps, with the aid of a series of depressions that bore indication of having been artificially pecked, I rejoined my companion below, and devoted some time to an examination of the talus slope, observing that it was made up largely of earth washed from the mesa-top, scattered over which were numerous sherds of ancient pottery. The

antique and the modern earthenware of the Pueblo Indians are quite distinct in texture and decoration, but the method of manufacture is identical in each case. The laborious practice of coiling, then smoothing, polishing, and painting, the clay is still in vogue; for the natives have never been initiated into the mysteries of the potter's wheel.

Not having on this occasion the facilities for climbing to the top of the mesa, I reluctantly departed from the Acoma country, with the hope of returning and completing the examination at some future time.

Nothing more was heard of the Enchanted Mesa until last year, when it was announced in the newspapers that an expedition which had successfully reached the summit of the mesa by means of ropes shot from a life-saving mortar had, after a search of three hours, failed to find any evidence that the mesa had been inhabited in former times.

The news of the results achieved by this expedition reached me while *en route* to Arizona for the purpose of conducting some field-work in that territory. While at Moki I was directed by the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution to proceed to Acoma and la Mesa Encantada, with a view of scaling the height, and supplementing the evidence of its former occupancy gained two years previously. The knowledge gleaned from my former trip served me well in procuring a special outfit for performing the task. I was already aware that a ladder of sufficient length to cover the thirty-foot wall, together with sufficient rope to serve as hand-lines, etc., would be all that a climb to the summit by way of the amphitheater would require. Therefore, equipped with a light extension-ladder and a sufficient quantity of half-inch rope to meet every emergency, I proceeded on the Santa Fé Pacific Railroad to the Indian village of Laguna, the most recent, yet the most rapidly decaying, of all the pueblos, where I had rare good fortune in enlisting the services of Major George H. Pradt, a civil engineer of that place; Mr. A. C. Vroman of Pasadena, California, who served as photographer; and Mr. H. C. Hayt of Chicago. To these gentlemen much of the success of the expedition is due.

The start from Laguna was not made until September 1, the day on which I had hoped to reach the mesa summit, in order that the task should be completed before the pilgrimage to Acoma of numerous visitors from the surrounding country to witness the *Fiesta de*

San Estevan on the day following; but the difficulty in obtaining a team from an Indian, who had engaged one of his brown brethren to bring in the animals from the range several days before, necessitated the postponement.

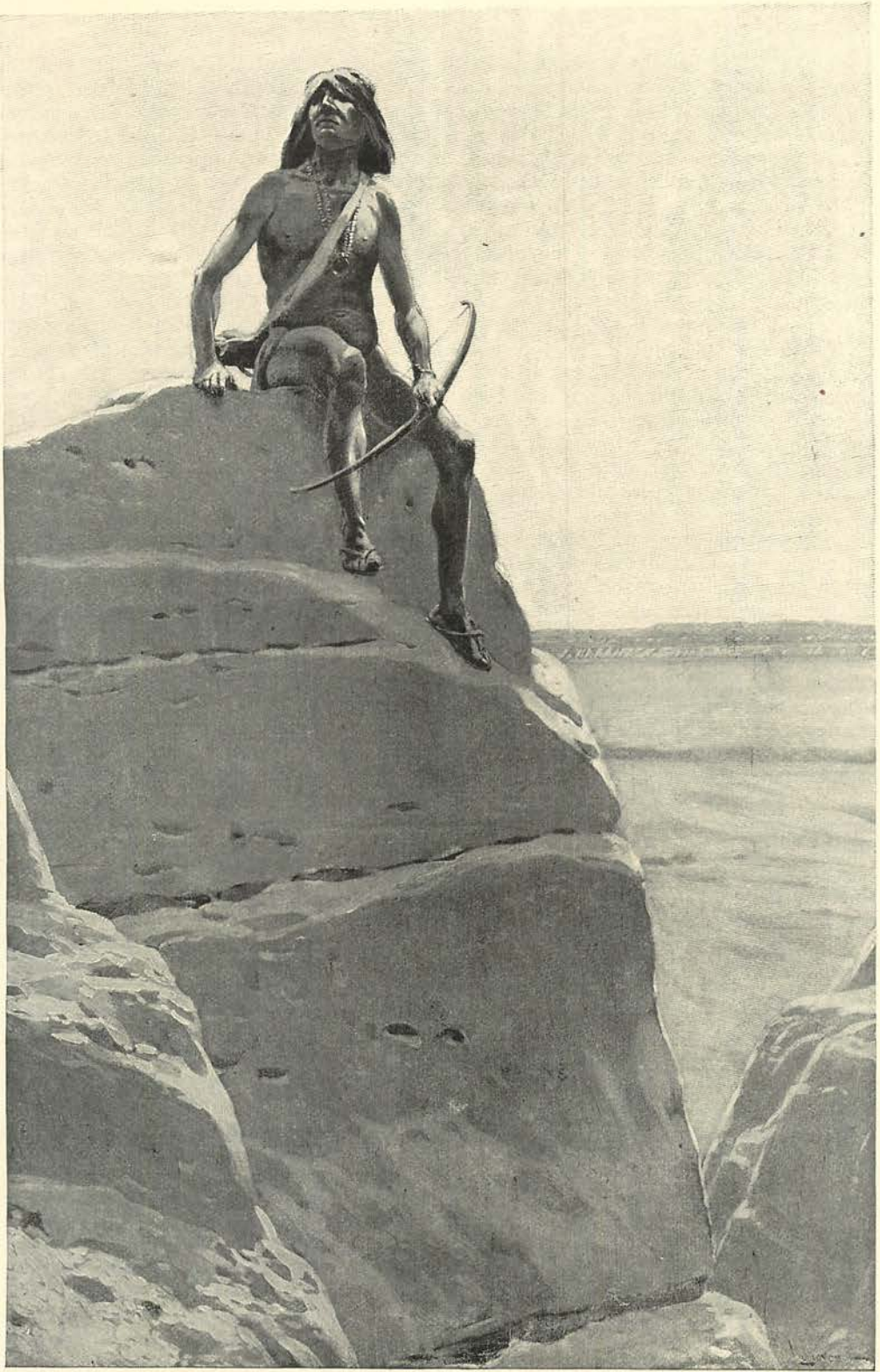
Mounted on a farm-wagon drawn by a large white horse and a mule so small that one had to look twice to be sure it was not a burro, we crept along through the suburbs of the village, where a group of Lagunas were engaged in threshing wheat by the primitive but effectual method of lashing into perpetual gallop a bunch of unshod horses set loose within a rude inclosure. The valley of the Rio San José, named in honor of the patron saint of Laguna, was followed for about eight miles to a point where half a dozen roads turn southward. Of these one takes his choice—they are all bad enough, and all lead to Acoma.

It was not long before the crest of Katzímó loomed above the intervening heights; and as the valley of Acoma was entered we looked with awe at the tremendous isolated pile, and silently wondered at the intrepidity of the Acomas of old. After yielding to a desire to measure with our eyes the distance up the great cove near the southwestern corner, and speculating on the adequacy of our scaling equipment, we proceeded to the pueblo. A score of Navajos dashed across the sands, and made straightway, almost without slackening speed, up the horse-trail, the treacherous pitches of which have been rudely walled.

The Navajo is a veritable centaur. A tale is current in the Southwest that once an American rode a horse until apparently he could go no further; then a Mexican mounted him, and forthwith rode twenty miles more, until the poor beast fell exhausted; but a Navajo jerked him to his feet, leaped into the saddle, and won a ten-mile race!

Night came on, and belated burro-trains labored slowly in, laden with melons, peaches, and wild plums; and, between the constant proddings of their patient little beasts, the drivers bade us welcome. We made a moonlight ascent of the famous Camino del Padre, and found other preparations for the fiesta on the morrow. A flash of light across the night from a housetop-oven gave phantom outlines to the oldest dwellings in our domain, and the dying words of a herald lent a weirdness to the scene long to be remembered.

The start for the mesa was made early on the morning of September 3, the day after the fiesta. The sun burst through the east-



AN ANCIENT OF KATZÍMO.
("A single man might keep an army at bay.")

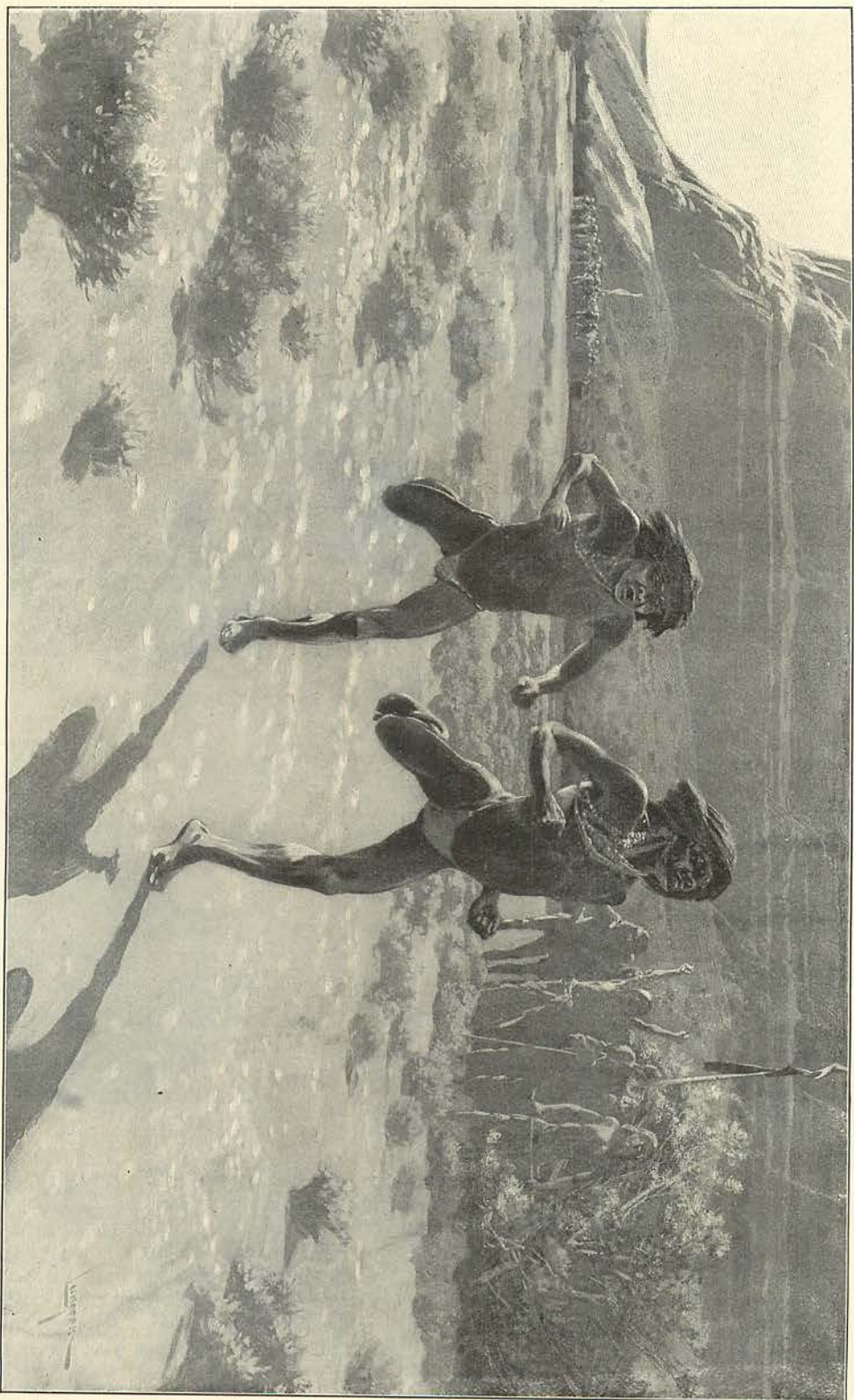
ern heights, and set the valley aglow with wondrous beauty. Every shrub seemed magnified, and the placid little pools, born of the storm of yesterday, glistened like diamonds in an emerald field. But the western face of Encantada looked sullen in the cool shadow of the morn, and the great cleft became a mere black gash. We pitched our camp in a clump of cedars at the base of the talus, below the amphitheater. Major Pradt immediately began the determination of the height of the cliff, which at this point proved to be 431 feet above the plain. The top of the talus was found to be 224 feet above the same point. At noon we were ready, with the aid of our two Laguna boys, to make the ascent. We shouldered the ladders, ropes, and instruments, and in a few minutes reached the top of the talus slope, very much out of breath; for the altitude of the valley is over six thousand feet, and the air is light. The real labor was yet before us; but in our anxiety to reach the top we did not tarry long before beginning to scale the steep, rocky slopes above. One of the party passed ahead, and fastened a rope to a gnarled piñon growing from the rocks through nourishment fed by the summit drainage. By this means, repeated at each convenient landing-place, the other members of the party—except the two Indians, who remained below—found a safe and less arduous method of passing the treacherous pitches.

Thus was reached the narrow platform at the base of the thirty-foot wall, the highest point attained during the 1895 visit. While on this bench an interesting observation was made. In a corner of the ledge a large boulder rests, back of which a crack occurs from the top to the bottom of the thirty feet of wall. On each side of this fissure a regular series of holes had been artificially pecked for the reception of ladder-rungs; but they have been so worn away by the wash from above that they are now traceable only on close examination. Behind the boulder were found several freshly pointed oak sticks, placed there evidently by some one who had attempted to gain the summit through their agency, but had failed. Immediately afterward, almost beneath the boulder, several sherds of a modern Acoma vessel, together with an unfeathered prayer-stick, were discovered—a melancholy reminder of a votive offering made at the highest point of accessibility.

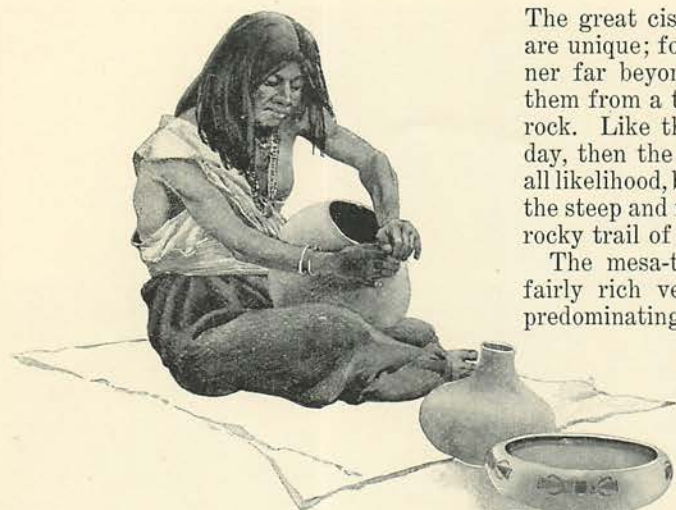
We now adjusted four of the six-foot sections of the ladder, believing that they would

reach the top of the sheer wall. But the height was deceptive, and another section was added. Yet it fell short of the mark; so the last length was fitted and locked, and when the structure was raised to an almost perpendicular position the ladder reached just above the cap of the wall. To keep the ladder from slipping outward and crashing down the chasm, a hole was pecked in the soft sandstone for each leg. Again a member of the party went ahead, the remaining three holding the bottom of the ladder with all their strength. The frail structure swayed and cracked and bent like a reed, but the top of the wall was gained in safety. A rope was secured to an upper rung, and attached to a giant boulder that had found lodgment in a corner of the platform. Then the baggage, wrapped in blankets, was hauled aloft, and the remainder of the party followed, a rope being placed around the chest of each as a measure of precaution. We turned and looked out through the lofty walls of the narrow cleft across the sunny valley to the rugged *peñol* of Acoma beyond, and the vista was one of peculiar beauty. Another perpendicular stretch of thirty feet, and the top was reached.

The passage from the deep shadow of the amphitheater, where two hours had been spent, to the sunlight of the summit, was like entering into a new world—a world like that the Acomas entered when, as half-formed beings, they emerged from the mystic Shipápu, and began to battle anew. And what a view our eyes beheld when they had grown accustomed to the glare of this new light! A thread of blue smoke curled lazily from distant Acoma, as if to remind us that the ancient town was weary from its yesterday's festivities. A moving speck of white across the valley green told of the departure of the last group of visitors. Away in the west, the great frowning Mesa Prieta, fringed with immense pines and skirted by the awful river of glistening black lava, overlooked the beautiful vale of Cebollita. Mount San Mateo (called Mount Taylor for the last fifty years by Americans, unaware that it had been christened a century before) loomed up in all its grandeur, the loftiest peak in New Mexico. The broken pink cliffs on every other side, at the feet of which miniature forests of piñon and cedar have served the Acomas for fuel during generations past, walled in the beautiful grama-carpeted valley, while the whole was ceiled by a dome of turquoise festooned with clouds of burnished silver.



A TRIAL OF SPEED—AT THE BASE OF KATZIMO.



The rocky floor of the mesa-top had been swept and carved and swept again by the storm-demons of centuries since the "ancients" of the fleeting forms we saw on the roofs in the moonlight of the night before had descended the ladder-trail in the early morn of that fateful day.

Although the afternoon was still young, I at once saw that the remaining hours of daylight would not suffice for a thorough examination of the summit. Directing the two Lagunas below to gather together our blankets, and a sufficient supply of provisions for a couple of meals, a reconnoissance was begun, and in a few moments a fragment of greatly weather-worn ancient pottery was picked up.

The storm of the previous day, which drove the Indians from their religious ceremonies, and gave birth to the glittering little pools in the verdant valley below, afforded facilities for observation on the summit that otherwise would not have been possible. Here and there in the rocky floor "pot-holes" had been eroded by wind and rain, and were now filled with water; but nowhere else on the entire summit had the rain found resting-place. Over the brink it had poured in scores of cataracts, carrying with it stones and such earth as it managed to gather from the scanty store yet remaining. Like the mesa-dwelling Mokis of to-day, the inhabitants of Katzímo doubtless derived their water-supply from springs below—a source since hidden, either by the talus or by the Acomas, just as springs have been covered from sight by natives at El Morro, at Tabirá, and at many other abandoned dwelling-sites of old.

The great cisterns of rain-water at Acoma are unique; for nature built them in a manner far beyond native skill, and sheltered them from a thirsty sun by mighty walls of rock. Like the toiling women of Moki to-day, then the water-carriers of Katzímo, in all likelihood, bore their brimming *tinajas*¹ up the steep and rugged cleft, wearing deep the rocky trail of long ago.

The mesa-top was once covered with a fairly rich vegetation, piñons and cedars predominating; but most of these now stand gaunt and bare, or lie prone and decaying on the bleak surface, their means of subsistence having been long washed away. A few dozen more storms, and the others must inevitably perish. But

the examination of the surface of Katzímo was not essential to a determination of the fact that it was for-



A PRIMITIVE PUEBLO POTTER.

merly mantled with a thick stratum of earth; the talus had already told the story that on the very site of their village the inhabitants of Katzímo had an abundance of material with which to make the balls of adobe mud described by one of the Spanish chroniclers of the sixteenth century. The last remnants of their houses, together with the fragments of their household utensils, save such as we

¹ Spanish for a large earthen jar. Anglicized in the Southwest.

found, passed over the brink generations ago; but one may still find an abundance of the latter scattered through the detritus which in places is piled half-way up the mesa sides.

From Katzimo the pine-fringed Mesa Prieta is a fitting foreground to each dying sun. Black from every point of view, it is gloomier still in the light of the ruddy mesas over which it stands guard. The sun had

the unusual feeling that crept over us when we realized that our camp in the moonlight was pitched on the site of a honeycombed village fraught with life in the days before Columbus set sail, inspired sensations during our waking moments of the night that cannot be described. Before the red sun broke through the distant haze we were out of our blankets, and, after a hasty breakfast, each



THE HORSE TRAIL UP THE ACOMA MESA.

set, and already the moon was spreading its silvery sheen over the placid valley beneath. The smoke still curled from the drowsy village, and rose in phantom outline against the cool gray sky, the only thing of life within our range. The faint strains of a plaintive chant from the two Indians in the cedars at the foot of the great cliff increased the weirdness of our lofty camp, and almost made one wonder if it all were real. A flash of lightning made me aware of a bank of black clouds in the southwest, which sent a chilling breeze across the mesa-top. We built a huge fire around one of the gaunt specters that stood about us with outstretched arms; soon there was a mighty blaze, and a shout of approval reached us from the two Lagunas below.

The exertion of the previous afternoon,

was engaged in his chosen work. While aiding Major Pradt in making a survey of the mesa-top, I was not a little surprised to find three Acoma Indians among us. They were by no means friendly at first; for, having seen our fire the night before, they had come to the top by means of our ladders to learn the cause of this unusual burst of flame from their ancestral home site, and to oust the intruders from the height. The leader, who was the war chief of the tribe, and a medicine-man, asked us our business. We told him. The natives became interested, and said that their people had feared we were after their land. Being assured we had no desire to make our future home on their dry sand-dunes or drier mesas, but that we were merely looking for pottery fragments, the chief expressed serious doubt that any relics

could be found, inasmuch as many ages had passed since his people lived on the great table, and he believed all evidences of former occupancy had been swept or washed away. The interest of the three Indians was quite apparent when I showed them the fragment of pottery picked up by Major Pradt the evening before, and they manifested no unwillingness to search for other potsherds when I made the suggestion. They were engaged in this quest only a short while when they returned with several fragments of extremely ancient, greatly worn earthenware, a large projectile-point, a portion of a shell bracelet, and parts of two grooved stone axes, all lichen-flecked with age, and still moist from contact with the ground. Thoroughly satisfied with the outcome, I decided to bring the work to a close as soon as the survey, the photographic work, and the examination of the general features of the mesa's summit were concluded.

When I considered that the summit of Katzímo is, and long has been, absolutely inaccessible to the Indians; that it has been washed by rains and swept by winds for centuries, until scarcely any soil is left on its

crest, as the bare trees plainly attest; that numberless blocks of soft sandstone, weighing hundreds of tons, have so recently fallen from the cliff that their edges have not had time to become rounded by erosion; that the topography of the summit is such that not a cupful of water now remains on the surface, save in a few eroded pot-holes in the sandstone, but that it rushes over the precipice on every side in a hundred cataracts; that well-defined traces of an ancient ladder-trail may still be seen, pecked in the rocky wall of the very cleft through which the traditional pathway wound its course; and, above all, the large numbers of very ancient potsherds in the earthy talus about the base of the mesa, which must have been washed from above—the conclusion was inevitable that the summit of la Mesa Encantada was inhabited prior to 1540, when the present Acoma was discovered by Coronado, and that the last vestige of the village itself has long been washed or blown over the cliff.

As we wended our way across the arroyo-scarred plain, I still looked in awe at the royal height, and wondered again at the Acomas of old.



AFTER A PHOTOGRAPH BY F. H. MAUDE & CO.

DANCE OF SAN ESTEVAN AT ACOMA.



PHOTOGRAPHED BY A. C. VROMAN.

THE CLIMB UP THE GREAT CLEFT OF KATZÍMO.

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