

LAND WITHOUT BREAD

Before you see the film which has been announced for this meeting, I should like to tell you very briefly something about this district of Spain which you are going to visit - especially about some aspects of it which do not appear in the film.

When I made this film my intention was to give the bare facts, not to interpret them or to invent new ones. I was drawn to this place because of its drama and awe-inspiring poetry. The little I had read of it had made a deep impression on me. I knew that there, for centuries, human beings had been struggling against a hostile land, where nature gave them no hope of ever overcoming her. Travellers and geographers alike pronounced this place as uninhabitable.

And yet the climate is gentle, the water plentiful, and vegetation there is all around. But climate, water, vegetation, the earth itself seem to be trying to stifle human life instead of encouraging it. There are bees, and they make honey, but the honey is bitter. The water is pure, but its very purity is harmful, for it is completely lacking in those mineral salts essential to health. In fact, this water is a breeding-ground for the terrible Anopheles mosquito; and all the inhabitants of this district suffer from malaria.

You will want to know the name of this region - it is called LAS HURDES, and it is in the West of Spain, very close to the Portuguese frontier.

Until very recently this district was completely cut off from the rest of the world - separated by the huge labyrinth of

hills which none but climbers could penetrate. There was no means of getting into touch with these mountain fastnesses, and even within the region itself communication was almost impossible between the different villages. And this is not surprising; men make roads only when they want to get somewhere, and Las Hurdes does not lead anywhere. It is a lost land, far from all human succour. Not only is it unfriendly to man; it is opposed to all human traffic.

So cut off are these villages from one another that one of the inhabitants once told me that it was 20 years since he had seen his daughter, who was married to a man from the next village. This village was six miles away. But to get there meant a tramp of several hours through thick undergrowth and over sharp craggy paths, and this man simply could not spare the time. He needed all his strength, every moment of his time, for the hard daily toil on this ungrateful land, from which it was difficult to scratch his bread.

The majority of Spaniards knew nothing about Las Hurdes until 1922, when some publicity was given to it by the visit of the former King Alfonso XIII. It was said then that the existence of such a place was a disgrace to Spain. Personally I do not agree. The problem of these people is so deep, so intangible, that action by a government could not get at the root of it. Our great Unamuno has said, perhaps paradoxically, that Las Hurdes is the glory rather than the disgrace of Spain. Is it not worthy of our admiration as well as our pity, that a handful of men are striving, and have striven, to eke out a livelihood toiling hour after hour, century after century, without ever giving up in their

hopeless task? And even supposing that the existence of such a place were a disgrace to Spain, what of it? Let that country which has nothing to be ashamed of cast the first stone.

The first historical document proving the existence of Las Hurdes is a comedy by the prince of Spanish geniuses, Lope de Vega. He did not ever go there, but he had heard of it as a primitive, pastoral region. It is interesting that the discovery of this place by the Spaniards should coincide with the discovery of America - the everlasting paradox of the Spanish mind: it discovers at the same time the Lost Land of Las Hurdes and the Promised Land of America.

It is believed that it was at the beginning of the XVIth century that this region was first inhabited. Jews, fleeing from persecution under Ferdinand and Isabella sought refuge in this deserted country. As time went on there were added to its numbers outlaws fleeing from justice. And in the ensuing years few people ever ventured into this savage place, where it was unbelievable that human life should exist at all.

There is no time in this brief introduction to tell you of the various additions to the inhabitants, which helped to put new blood into their veins, and which prevented their total degeneration. You will see something of this in the film itself.

Both Spaniards and Frenchmen have studied the problem. But we must mention the most valuable of all the documents, which is also the most accurate one - it is the book written in 1929 by the French professor Maurice Legendre. For 20 years he went to this place every year to study it, and his book is remarkable for its objectification and accuracy.

Professor Legendre says that Las Hurdes is unlike any other place in the world-for two reasons: its wretchedness and its tragedy.

We know that there are many groups of people in the world who live under wretched and precarious conditions - in the Atlas Mountains, in Chinese villages, in Hindoo settlements. But usually, if the conditions become impossible - that is, permanently impossible - the population emigrates en masse to subsist in less desperate surroundings. Not so in Las Hurdes. If by chance one of them should leave, he returns almost at once. It is a living death to be there, yet it is a living death too until they can get back again. I have met some who can talk French. They had worked in France as labourers, but as soon as they got together enough money, they hastened home again. I have even met one who had been to America.

Usually, people who are permanently in want emigrate all together or slowly disperse, leaving the village empty and deserted. It is the opposite in Las Hurdes. The population does not disperse, in fact it has greatly increased, and at present the district is over-peopled. How far is it possible to explain so unexpected a phenomenon?

And so, it is not wretchedness which makes Las Hurdes unique in human society, but the fact that this wretchedness is permanent. It is not the tragedy, but the fact that there, tragedy has no end.

There are a number of strange ideas about Las Hurdes. The most persistent is the belief that the people are savages. Nothing could be further from the truth. If these people are unlike anyone, they are unlike savage tribes. Among savages, life is not nearly so hard. Man has only to reach out his hand to gather the fruits of nature. There is no spiritual conflict between the savage and his circumstances. A primitive civilization has a primitive culture. But in Las Hurdes a primitive civilization goes with a modern culture. These people have the same moral and religious principles as we have. They speak our language. They have the same needs as we have. But in their case the means for satisfying those needs are hardly any better than those of the cave man.

I do not know whether there is any human society which has fewer utensils than these people. Though they live in an age of such frightfully complicated mechanisation, their tools are scanty^{and} primitive. In the upper region there are no ploughs, no beasts of burden: there are no firearms, no steel weapons at all. There are hardly any domestic animals - for example, there are no dogs or cats. You will see in the film what sort of animals do exist there. There is nothing on wheels. There are no jars, no bottles, no forks. I could go on with the list indefinitely.

So you can imagine my surprise when one day I discovered that in one of the villages - it is true it was the most advanced of them all - there was a sewing machine - an out-of-date model, very

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rusty - but a real Singer.

The few utensils which are seen have been brought in from Castile or Extremadura by some who went off begging in those regions. In the district of Las Hurdes nothing is made. There is no skilled labour. I once met a man who said he was a baker, but he had had to give up long ago because he had no dough to make into bread. This is the secret of their great poverty - the soil produces only briars and brambles - hence they have no means of procuring raw materials, and in consequence there is no craftsmanship.

What do they wear? Much the same things as we do. The men wear jacket and trousers, the women bodice and skirt. But so patched and darned that you can hardly see the original cloth. I once counted 72 different places where one garment had been mended.

Another point hard to believe is that here there is no folklore. The whole time we were there we never heard one song. The men are silent at their work, and have no songs to make their task a little lighter. But even their silence is different. It is not the silence of death but the silence of life. This is not so poetic, perhaps, but it is much more awe-inspiring.

Nor did we see drawings on rock or wall. Yet, just where this district begins, in Las Batuecas, there is one of the finest examples of cave-drawing in existence. In other words, thousands of years ago, this place was the heart of human culture; and now the men who live there know nothing of artistic expression.

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regions. In the district of Iam there is nothing in nature. There
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but he had to give up long ago because he had no dough to
live on. This is the worst of their great poverty -
the soil produces only wheat and rye - hence they have to
import all their necessities from the outside world. There is no
means of producing raw materials, and in consequence there is no
industrial development.
What do they want? Much the same things as we do. The man
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ship impossible unless it serves some useful purpose. There is no gaiety, no joyful recreation. Because of the smallness of their dwellings a whole family is obliged to live in a single room. There is no doubt that this leads to incest, of which some cases do exist. This is perhaps the only moral defect of which they can be accused; and we might say with St. Thomas: "To be virtuous it is necessary to have a minimum of material well-being". And in Las Hurdes even this minimum is lacking.

Many suggestions have been made for the solving of this crying social problem. We cannot go into these now. All that we can say is that although some have been tried, none has proved effective. Perhaps the only solution is the one which an old woman suggested one day when we met her on an indescribable path. When she saw us she put down her bundle of wood and came to us. "You are engineers," she said "and you are coming to improve our poor lot. Well, I tell you there is no cure. If you want to rescue us from this hell, take us out of here by force. We cannot leave here now of our own free will."

And she is right. To solve their problem we should have to drag them away by force, send them out into other parts of Spain, and destroy completely their wretched homes.

Professor Legendre supports the opinion of the old woman when he says "Las Hurdes is what it is because of its isolation. It may be that by drawing the people back into the world by making roads for them, it will gradually cease to be." Yet a road has been made, and these people have not flocked out along it. They are still there to confound the philosophers and ^{the} sociologists.

If Las Hurdes is unique in human society, because of its

extent and the number of its inhabitants, there are nevertheless other parts of Europe where similar conditions of life exist - in France, in Italy, in Czechoslovakia. But these are isolated cases which up to the present have not roused the interest of men of science. Besides, they are gradually disappearing. In the French Alps, for example, in Savoy, about 20 years ago there were two villages of this type. Today there is only one of them left, and it will probably disappear very soon. And this one, like Las Hurdes, is cut off from human contact, and for six months in the year it is entirely inaccessible owing to the heavy snows. The inhabitants make bread only once a year, and this, with a few vegetables and some starchy foods, is their principal diet.

Almost all the inhabitants of the French village are dwarfs or cretins and if by chance one of them should develop normally in body and mind, he soon leaves the village. In this respect it is already different from Las Hurdes.

As we have seen, one of the things which is unknown in Las Hurdes is idleness. In the village of French Savoy, however, there is a terrible period during the winter when the whole population is idle for six months, unable to leave their wretched hovels. Under such circumstances, relationships within the same family are common.

In Czechoslovakia and Italy, it appears, there are also examples of similar conditions. But my information about them is very scanty because there is hardly anything scientific written on the subject. I have never seen these places. I had hoped to accompany the psychiatrist Dr. Lacan, of the hospital of St. Anne in Paris, on an expedition to these scenes of retarded civilization

extent and the number of the inhabitants, there are nevertheless other parts of Europe where similar conditions of life exist. In France, in Italy, in Czechoslovakia, in Poland and in the Soviet Union, which up to the present have not known the influence of war or violence, they are gradually disappearing. In the French Alps, for example, in 1900, about 40 years ago, there were 100 villages of this type. Today there is only one of them left, and it will probably disappear very soon. And this one, like the others, is cut off from human contact, and for this reason it is an extremely isolated village. It is the only village in the area which is not only a year and a half, but a year and a half, with a few exceptions and some special foods, is still primitive. Almost all the inhabitants of the French Alps are of the type of people and it is by chance that they should develop normally in body and mind, no more than the village. In this respect it is already different from the others. As we have seen, one of the things which is unique in the French Alps is the village of French Alps, however, there is a terrible period during the winter when the village is isolated for six months, and it is very difficult to reach. Under such circumstances, relationships within the village are very close. In Czechoslovakia and Italy, it is said, there are also villages of similar conditions. But an investigation about them is very difficult because it is very difficult to get into them. I am not a psychiatrist. I have never been there myself. I had hoped to accompany the psychiatrist Dr. Lacombe, of the Hospital of St. Anne in Paris, on an expedition to these regions of retarded civilization

still existing in Europe, but my professional duties and the political situation completely ruined our plans. But I still hope it may be possible to go some day.

I should like to end this introduction by recalling those friends who worked so unselfishly to produce this film with me. Our work was the fruit of love for this unhappy country. I had been able to find public and private support for my other films, but for this one I could not find anything like enough. In Europe, there are hardly any of those cultural groups or patrons of art which in America are willing to finance educational films. It was a humble Spanish worker, Ramon Acin, who made it possible for me to make this film: he gave me all his savings - a thousand dollars, which was all the film cost.

By one of those strange tricks which the Censorship plays, a few incidents were suppressed by the French authorities, particularly in the first reel; so you are going to see it in a slightly reduced form. In this first reel there are two details I wish to correct. They were actually corrected in a second version, which was shown in several European countries, but by mistake they sent me a copy of the earlier one. These mistakes are, first, in one of the captions it says that the film was made under the First Spanish Republic - it should be, of course, under the Second Spanish Republic. Apart from a few sound errors there is only one more correction to make - in Europe the film was not known by the title given here - Unpromised Land - it was called "Land Without Bread".

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