

THE "PENITENTIES."

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At the conquest of New Mexico by the Spaniards, the Pueblo Indians were converted to Christianity. From the first they were very attentive to the teachings of the Catholic priest, but they could not grasp the new creed in its entirety. They were handicapped by the fact that they were not able to read or write. The Bible could not be used as an instrument for their instruction. They had to depend upon the words of the priest only. As a result Christianity, as practiced by the Pueblo Indians today, is greatly "distorted."

The "padres" taught penitence. The Pueblos began in easy stages, but soon corrupted the religion; and now many of the Indians undergo excruciating torture annually to atone for the sins of their respective village. In June of each year there are invariably a number of young Indian men who volunteer their flesh for the elevation of their people. In each village several are selected who lead a procession, composed of nearly every inhabitant of the village. One of these "penitents," as the Mexicans call them, as late as even the eighties, carried a massive cross in representation of Christ's carrying the cross to the crucifixion. This one seldom returned alive. In this performance of the "penitents," the Indians who are not acting as "penitents" arm themselves with cactus; and each in turn, pricks the "penitents." The more cruel the nature of the torture, the more nearly have the people of the village been forgiven by the Supreme Being for their sins during the year. The flesh bruising part of the ceremony being finished, the suffering subjects, bleeding from head to foot, are carried back to the church, where prolonged and weird ceremonies are conducted. This human offering is followed by the "Matachina Dance," described in a previous paper—a curious ceremony performed in celebration of the birth of Christ.