



The Purple Fabrics of Oaxaca

By Dr. Atl

Translation by A. Plenn

THE very vivid color of some of the sashes used by the Indian women of the coast of Oaxaca, and the resistance of their purple to the action of light and of water, had always interested me.

One morning while bathing among the steep rocks of a small bay in the environs of Acapulco, I saw a man as completely naked as I. He was constantly bending over the rocks, picking up some object which he seemed to be squeezing between his hands. As the waves are very powerful in those places, it is necessary to be extremely careful to keep from being dragged away, and it appeared to me that if I was exposing myself to that danger for pure sport, this man must have been doing so through sheer necessity.

Approaching my bathing companion, I saw that his hands were entirely purple, and along his arms were running streams of that strange purple dye. Observing him very closely, I noticed that the man was catching some small snails, and with the liquid he was extracting from them, saturating a skein of thread held in his hand. Next he put the snail on the lowest part of the rock near the water, and looking for others, he continued the operation of dyeing the skein.

Upon my expressed desire to know what he was doing, he answered, "I am dyeing thread." "What is the thread for?" I again questioned him. "To embroider shirts and belts. They buy it in Oaxaca because it never fades."

The dyer informed me that many years ago this industry of marine dyeing was done on a large scale on the rocky coasts of Guerrero. Here were dyed large quantities of the skeins in the same manner he was employing, and these would be sold, especially in Oaxaca. Sometimes they dyed small pieces of cloth, but never, according to his knowledge and so far as I could afterwards ascertain, did they come to establish dyeing shops suitable for the dyeing of cloth in large quantities.

The skein in the man's hand was going to be dyed in diverse colors: first a lemon yellow, then a sunflower green, and afterwards a very dark purple. The last color seemed to appear more quickly when the skein was submerged in the waters of the sea.

He gave me one of the snails he was using in obtaining the dye, and later I caught various specimens in the numerous breakers around Acapulco. In the region of Guerrero and also of Oaxaca this snail is called "the dye snail," and "Guamelule snail," and it is the "Emastoma Purple." It is not over abundant on these shores, and is to be found only on the bases of the rocks bathed by the strong Pacific surf.

Nowadays the skeins dyed with the liquid of the snails ("Emastoma