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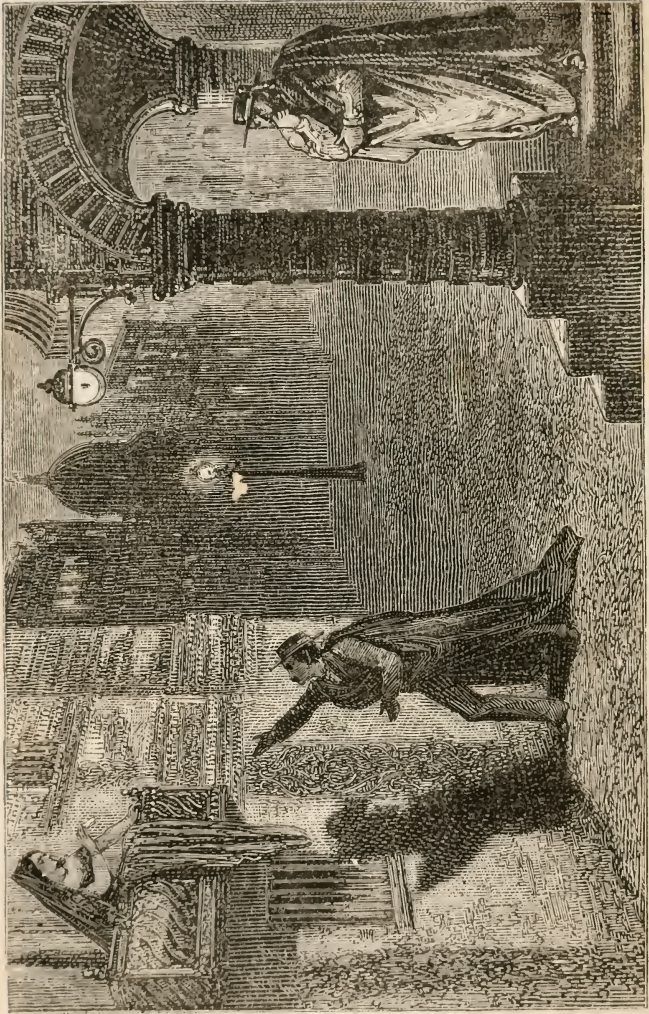
29th

1855

Golden Hill

M. J. Lathrop

THE BANDOLERO.



“Va con Dios!”

THE BANDOLERO;

OR,

A Marriage among the Mountains.

BY

CAPTAIN MAYNE REID,

AUTHOR OF "THE HEADLESS HORSEMAN," ETC. ETC.

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THE BANDOLERO :

OR,

A MARRIAGE AMONG THE MOUNTAINS.

CHAPTER I.

A CITY OF ANGELS.

LA PUEBLA DE LOS ANGELES is peculiar, even among the cities of modern Mexico ; peculiar in the fact, that two-thirds of its population are composed of priests, *pelados*, *poblanas*, pickpockets, and *picarones* of a bolder type.

Perhaps I have been too liberal in allowing a third to the “gente de bueno,” or respectable people. There are travellers who have altogether denied their existence ; but this may be an exaggeration on the other side.

Trusting to my own souvenirs, I think I can remember having met with honest men—and women too—in the City of the Angels. But I shall not

be positive about their proportion to the rest of the population. It may be less than a third—certainly it is not *more* !

Equally certain is it : that every tenth man you meet in the streets of Puebla is either a priest, or in some way connected with the holy fraternity—and that every tenth woman is far from being an angel !

Curas in robes of black silk serge, stockings of the finest texture, and “coal-scuttle” hats, full three feet in length ; friars of all orders and colours—black and white, blue, brown, and grey—with shaven crowns and sandalled feet, are encountered, not only at every corner, but almost at every step you take.

If monks were immaculate, Puebla might deserve the sanctified appellation it has received—the *City of the Angels*. As it is, the *City of the Devils* would be a more appropriate title for it !

“The nearer the church, the farther from God.”

The adage is strikingly illustrated in Puebla, where the Church is not only present—in all its outward symbols—but paramount. It governs the place. It owns it. Almost every house in the city,

as almost every acre of land in the vast plain that surrounds it, is the property of the Church, in fee simple, or by mortgage deed!

As you pass through the streets you see painted over the door-heads—three out of every four of them—the phrases, “Casa de San Augustin,” “Casa de San Francisco,” “Casa de Jesus,” and the like.

If a stranger inquire the object of this black lettering, he is told that the houses so designated are the property of the respective convents whose names appear above the doors. In short, you see the Church above, before, and around you, all-powerful over the bodies as well as the souls of the Poblanos; and you have not ceased to be a stranger, ere you discover its all-pervading villainy and corruptness.

Otherwise, Puebla might be termed a terrestrial paradise. Situated in the centre of an immense plain—whose fertility suggested to Cortez and his *conquistadores* the title “La vega” (the farm)—surrounded by an amphitheatre of magnificent mountains, in grandeur unsurpassed upon earth—with a climate of ever-spring, truly might it be deemed an abiding place for *angels*; as truly as

it is the home of a host of infamous men, and not less infamous women.

Despite its moral character, there is a grand picturesqueness about *La Puebla de los Angeles*—both in its present aspect and its past history. Both are redolent of romance.

Standing upon the site of an ancient Aztec town, within view of Cholula, the Indian Athens—with Tlascala, their Sparta, on the other side of the mountain Malinché—what heart would not be touched by the historic souvenirs of such a spot? And though the sages of Cholula and the warriors of Tlascala are no longer to be recognised in their degenerate descendants, there, still, are the grand objects from which they must have drawn their inspirations. On all sides tower up the Cordilleras of the Andes. Sublime, against the eastern sky, rises the “Star mountain;” matched upon the west by the rival cone of Popocatepec. Still in solemn silence reclines the “White Sister” under her cold coverlet of snow.

Well do I remember the impression produced on my own mind when, after passing through the *mal pais* of Peroté, I first came within view of the domes

and spires of La Puebla. It was an impression, grand, mystical, romantic; in interest exceeding even that I afterwards experienced, when gazing for the first time on the valley of Tenochtitlan. It was a *coup de cœur* never to be forgotten!

As my entry into the "City of the Angels" was not of an ordinary kind,—and, moreover, had much to do with the events about to be related—it will be necessary to give some account of it. I transcribe from the tablets of my memory, where it is recorded with a vividness that makes the transcript easy. I can answer for its being truthful.

I was one of three thousand invaders; all travel stained; many footsore, from long marches over the lava rocks of Las Vigas, and the desert plains of Peroté; some scathed in the skirmish with Santa Anna's lancers along the foot hills of the mountain Malinché; but all weary unto death.

Fatigue was forgotten, dust and scars disregarded, as we came within sight of the sanctified city, and with beating drums and braying bugles marched on to take possession of it.

It needed no warlike ardour on our part. Outside the gates we were met by the *Alcalde Mayor*

and his magistrates ; who, with fair speech on their lips, but foul thought in their hearts, reluctantly bestowed upon us the “freedom of the city !”

Who could wonder at the reluctance? We only wondered at the soft speeches, instead of the hard blows we had been led to expect from them. All along the route, Puebla had been proclaimed as the point where we were to be brought to bay. There we should have to encounter the sons of the *tierra templada* ; and our laurels, cheaply gathered at Vera Cruz and Cerro Gordo, from the enervated children of the *tierra caliente*, would be snatched from our brows by the “*valientes*” of La Puebla. The saints of the “holy city” had been promised a hecatomb ; and we expected, at least something in the shape of a fight.

We were disappointed—I will not say disagreeably : for, after all, fighting is not the most desirable duty to be performed in a campaign—especially on the eve of entering into some grand town of the enemy. In my opinion, it is far pleasanter to find the streets clear of obstructions, the pavement without blood spots—although they may be those of the foe—the shops and restaurants open, especially the

latter—and the windows filled with fair forms and smiling faces.

After this fashion were we received in the *City of the Angels*. There were no barricades—no street fighting—no obstructions of any kind. The fair forms were there, seen in shadow behind the iron *rejas*, or standing in full light in the *balcons* above. Many of the faces, too, were fair; though I shall not go so far as to assert, that any of them were *smiling*. It would be nearer the truth to say that most, if not all of them, looked frowningly upon us.

It was a cold reception: but the wonder was that we were received at all, or not more warmly welcomed—in a different sense. Horse and foot all told, we counted scarce three thousand weary warriors—stirred for the moment into a spasmodic activity by the sound of our drums, the thought of being conquerors, and perhaps a little by the battery of bright eyes before which we were paraded. We were marching through the streets of a city of more than sixty thousand inhabitants, with houses enough to hold twice the number; grand massive dwellings with frescoed fronts, that rose frowningly above us—each capable of being converted into a fortress.

A city lately guarded by choice troops, and whose own fighting men outnumbered us ten to one !

Its women alone might have overwhelmed us, had each but pitched a projectile—her cigarito or slipper—upon our heads. They looked as if they *would* have annihilated us !

And yet we did not run the gauntlet altogether unscathed—not all of us. Some received wounds in the course of that triumphal entry, that rankled long after.

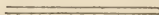
They were wounds of the heart, inflicted by those soft love-speaking eyes, for which the Poblana is peculiar.

I can testify to one heart thus sweetly scathed.

* * * * *

The fatigued Foot grounded arms in the *Plazza Grande*. The detached squadrons of cavalry scoured the deserted streets in search of soldiers' quarters.

Guided by the displaced authorities, the *cuartels* were soon discovered ; and, before night, a new *régime* ruled the City of the Angels. The priest had given place to the soldier !



CHAPTER II.

A CITY OF DEVILS.

Our conquering army thus easily admitted into the City of the Angels, soon discovered it to be deserving of a far different appellation; and before we were a week within its walls there were few of our fellows who would not have preferred taking the chance of "quarters in Timbuctoo." Notwithstanding our antipathy to the place, we were forced to remain in it for a period of several months, as it was not deemed prudent to advance directly upon the capital.

Between the "Vega" of Puebla and the "Valle" of Mexico extends a vast wall—the main "cordillera" of the Mexican Andes. It affords several points capable of easy defence, against a force far superior to that of the defenders. It was reported that one or other of these points would be fortified and sustained.

Moreover, the city of Mexico was not to be considered in the same light as the many others in that Imperial Republic, already surrendered to us with such facile freedom—Puebla among the number.

The latter was but an outlying post ; the former the heart and centre of a nation—up to this time unvisited by foreign foe—for three centuries untainted by the stranger's footstep.

Around it would be gathered the chivalry of the land, ready to lay down its life in the defence of the modern city ; as its Aztec owners freely did, when it was the ancient Tenochtitlan.

Labouring under this romantic delusion, our timid commander-in-chief decreed that we should stay for a time in the City of the Angels.

It was a stay that cost us several thousands of brave men ; for, as it afterwards proved, we might have continued our triumphant march into the capital without hostile obstruction.

Fate, or Scott, ruling it, we remained in La Puebla.

If a city inhabited by *real* angels be not a pleasanter place of abode than that of the sham sort at Puebla, I fancy there are few of my old comrades would care to be quartered in it.

It is true we were in an enemy's town, with no great claim to hospitality. The people from the first stayed strictly within doors—that is, those of them

who could afford to live without exposing their persons upon the street. Of the tradesmen we had enough ; and, at their prices, something more.

But the women—those windows full of dark-eyed *donçellas* we had seen upon our first entry, and but rarely afterwards—appeared to have been suddenly spirited away ; and, with some exceptions, we never set eyes on them again !

We fancied that they had their eyes upon us, from behind the deep shadowy *rejas* : and we had reason to believe they were only restrained from shewing their fair faces by the jealous interference of their men.

As for the latter, we were not long in discovering *their* proclivity. In a town of sixty thousand inhabitants—with houseroom (as already stated) for twice or three times the number—a small *corps d'armée*, such as ours was, could scarce be discovered in the crowd. On days of general drill, or grand parade, we looked formidable enough—at least to overawe the ruffianism around us.

But when the troops were distributed into their respective *cuartels*, widely separated from one another, the thing was quite different ; and a sky-

blue soldier tramping it through the streets might have been likened to a single honest man, moving in the midst of a thousand thieves !

The consequence was that the Poblanos became "muy valiente," and began to believe, that they had too easily surrendered their city.

And the consequence of this belief, or hallucination on their part, was an attitude of hostility towards our soldiers—resulting in rude badinage, broils, and, not unfrequently, in blood.

The mere mob of "leperos" was not alone guilty of this misconception. The "swells" of the place took part in it—directing their hostility against our subaltern officers—among them some good-natured fellows, who, quite unconscious of the intent, had for a time misconstrued it.

It resulted in a rumour—a repute I should rather call it—which became current throughout the country. The people themselves said, and affected to believe it, that the *Americanos*, though brave in battle—or, at all events, hitherto successful—were *individually* afraid of their foes, and shirked the *personal* encounter !

This idea the *jeunesse doré* propagated among

their female acquaintances ; and for a time it obtained credit.

Well do I remember the night when it was first made known to those who were sufferers by the slander.

There were twelve of us busied over a basket of champagne—better I never drank than that we discovered in the cellars of La Puebla.

There is always good wine in the proximity of a convent.

Some one joining our party reported : that he had been jostled while passing through the streets ; not by a mob of *pelados*, but by men who were known as the “ young bloods ” of the place.

Several others had like experiences to relate—if not of that night, as having occurred within the week.

The Monroe doctrine was touched ; and along with it the Yankee “ dander.”

We rose to a man ; and sallied forth into the street.

It was still early. The pavement was crowded with pedestrians.

I can only justify what followed, by stating

that there had been terrible provocation. I had been myself more than once the victim of verbal insult—incredulous that it could have been so meant.

One and all of us were ripe for retaliation.

We proceeded to take it.

Scores of citizens—including the swells, that had hitherto disputed the path—went rapidly to the wall: many of them to the gutter; and next day the *banquette* was left clear to any one wearing the uniform of “Uncle Sam.”

The lesson, followed by good results, had also some evil ones. Our “rank and file,” taking the hint from their officers, began to knock the Poblanos about like “old boots;” while the *leperos* finding them alone, and in solitary places, freely retaliated—on several occasions shortening the count of their messes.

The game continuing, soon became perilous to an extreme degree. In daylight we might go where we pleased; but after nightfall—especially if it chanced to be a dark night—it was dangerous to set foot upon the streets. If a single officer—or even two or three—had to dine at the quarters of any remote

regiment, he must needs stay all night with his hosts, or take the chance of being waylaid on his way home!

In time the *lex talionis* became thoroughly established; and a stringent order had to be issued from head quarters: that neither soldier nor officer should go out upon the streets, without special permission from the commander of the regiment, troop, or detachment.

A revolt of the "angels," whom we had by this time discovered to be very "devils," was anticipated. Hence the motive for the precautionary measure.

From that time we were prohibited all out-door exercise, except such as was connected with our drill duties and parade. We were in reality undergoing a sort of mild siege!

Safe sorties could only be made during the day; then only through streets proximate to the respective *cuartels*. Stragglers to remote suburbs were assaulted *sub Jove*; while after night it was not safe anywhere, beyond hail of our own sentries!

A pretty pass had things come to in the City of the Angels!

CHAPTER III.

THE LADY IN THE BALCON.

Notwithstanding the disagreeables above enumerated, and some others, I was not among those who would have preferred quarters in Timbuctoo.

One's liking for a place often depends upon a trivial circumstance; and just such a circumstance had given me a *penchant* for Puebla.

The human heart is capable of a sentiment that can turn dirt into diamonds, or darkness to light,—at least in imagination. Under its influence the peasant's hut becomes transformed into a princely palace; and the cottage girl assumes the semblance of a queen.

Possessed by this sentiment, I thought Puebla a paradise; for I knew that it contained, if not an angel, one "fair as the first that fell of woman-kind." As yet only on one occasion had I seen her; then only at a distance, and for a time scarce counting threescore seconds.

It was during the ceremonial of our entry into the place, already described. As the van of our

columns debouched into the Piazza Grande a halt had been ordered, necessarily extending to the regiments in the rear. The spot where my own troop had need to pull up was overlooked by a large two-story house, of somewhat imposing appearance, with frescoed front, *balcons*, and *portales*. Of course there were windows; and it was not likely that so situated I should feel shy about looking at, or even *into* them. There are times and circumstances when a man may be permitted to dispense with the strictest observance of etiquette; and, though it may be quite unchivalric, the conqueror claims, on the occasion of making entry into a conquered city, the right to peep into the windows.

No better than the rest of my fellows, I availed myself of the saucy privilege, by glancing toward the windows of the house, before which we had halted.

In those below there was nobody or nothing—only the red iron bars and the black emptiness behind them.

On turning my eyes upwards, I saw something very different—something that rivetted my gaze, in

spite of every effort to avert it. There was a window with balcony in front, and green Venetians inside. Half standing on the sill, and holding the *jalousies* back, was a woman—I had almost said an *angel!*

Certainly was she the fairest thing I had ever seen, or in fancy conceived; and my reflection at the time was—I well remember making it—if there be *two* of her sort in Puebla, the place is appropriately named—*La Puebla de los Angeles!*

She was not of the fair-haired kind, so fashionable in late days; but dark, with deep dreamy eyes; a mass of black hair, surmounted by a large tortoise-shell comb; eyebrows so pretty as to appear painted; with a corresponding tracery upon the upper lip—the *bigotite* that tells of Andalusian stock, and descent from the children of the Cid.

While gazing upon her—no doubt rudely enough—I saw that she returned the glance. At first I thought *kindly*; but then with a serious air, as if resenting my rudeness. I would have given anything I possessed to appease her—the horse I was riding, or aught else. I would have given much for a flower to fling at her feet—knowing the effect of

such little flatteries on the Mexican "muchacha;" but, unfortunately, there was no flower near.

In default of one, I bethought me of a substitute—my sword knot!

The gold tassel was instantly detached from the guard, and fell into the balcony at her feet.

I did not see her take it up. The bugle at that moment sounded the advance; and I was forced to ride forward at the head of my troop.

On glancing back, as we turned out of the street, I saw that she was still outside; and fancied there was something glittering between her fingers in addition to the jewelled rings that encircled them.

I noted the name of the street. It was the Calle del Obispo.

In my heart I registered a vow: that, ere long, I should be back in the Calle del Obispo.

* * * * *

I was not slow in the fulfilment of that vow. The very next day, after being released from morning parade, I repaired to the place in which the fair apparition had made itself manifest.

I had no difficulty in recognising the house. It was one of the largest in the street, easily distin-

guished by its frescoed front, windows with "balcons," and jalousies inside. A grand gate entrance piercing the centre told that carriages were kept. In short, everything betokened the residence of a "rico."

I remembered the very window—so carefully had I made my mental memoranda.

It looked different now. There was but the frame ; the picture was no longer in it.

I glanced to the other windows of the dwelling. They were all alike empty. The blinds were drawn down. No one inside appeared to take any interest in what was passing in the street.

I had my walk for nothing. A score of turns, up and down ; three cigars smoked while making them ; some sober reflections that admonished me I was doing a very ridiculous thing ; and I strolled back to my quarters with a humiliating sense of having made a fool of myself, and a resolve not to repeat the performance.

CHAPTER IV.

A PAIR OF COUNTERPARTS.

It was but a half-heart resolve, and failed me on the following day.

Again did I traverse the Calle del Obispo; again scrutinise the windows of the stuccoed mansion.

As on the day before, the *jalousies* were down, and my surveillance was once more doomed to disappointment. There was no face, no form, not even so much as a finger, to be seen through the screening lattice.

Shall I go again?

This was the question I asked myself on the third day.

I had almost answered it in the negative: for I was by this time getting tired of the profitless *rôle* I had been playing.

It was perilous too. There was a chance of becoming involved in a maze, from which escape might not be so easy. I felt sure I could *love* the woman I had seen in the window. The powerful impression her eyes had made upon me, in twenty

seconds of time, was earnest of what might follow from a prolonged observation of them. I could not calculate on escaping without becoming inspired by a passion.

And what if it should not be reciprocated? It was sheer vanity, to have even the slightest hope that it might be!

Better to give it up—to go no more through the street where the fair vision had shewn itself—to try and forget that I had seen it.

Such were my reflections on the morning of the third day, after my arrival in the Angelic city.

Only in the morning. Before twilight there was a change. The twilight had something to do in producing it. On the two previous occasions I had mistaken the hour when beauty is accustomed to display itself in the balconies of La Puebla. Hence, perhaps, my failing to obtain a view of her who had so interested me.

I determined to try again.

Just as the sun's rays were turning rose-coloured upon the snow-crowned summit of Orizava, I was once more wending my way towards the Calle del Obispo.

A third disappointment ; but this time of a kind entirely different from the other two.

I had hit the hour. The *donçella*—of whom for three days I had been thinking — three nights dreaming—was in the window where I had first seen her.

One glance and I was completely disenchanted !

Not that she could be called plain, or otherwise than pretty. She was more than passably so, but still only *pretty*.

Where was the resplendent beauty that had so strangely, suddenly, impressed me ?

She might have deemed me ill-mannered, as I stood scanning her features to discover it ; for I was no longer in awe—such as I expected her presence would have produced. I could now look upon her, without fear of that possibly perilous future I had been picturing to myself.

After all, the thing was easy of explanation. For six weeks we had been among the hills—in cantonment—so far from Jalapa, that it was only upon rare occasions we had an opportunity of refreshing our eyes with a sight of the fair Jalapeñas. We had been accustomed to see only the peasant girls of

Banderilla and San Miguel Soldado, with here and there along the route the coarse unkempt squaws of Azteca. Compared with these, she of the Calle del Obispo was indeed an angel. It was the contrast that had misled me ?

Well, it would be a lesson of caution not to be too quick at falling in love. I had often listened to the allegement, that circumstances have much to do in producing the tender passion. This seemed to confirm it.

I was not without regret, on discovering that the angel of my imagination was no more than a pretty woman,—a regret strengthened by the remembrance of three distinct promenades made for the express purpose of seeing her—to say nothing of the innumerable vagaries of pleasant conjecture, all exerted in vain.

I felt a little vexed at having thrown away my sword-knot!

I was scarce consoled by the reflection, that my peace of mind was no longer in peril ; for I was now almost indifferent to the opinion which the lady might entertain of me. I no longer cared a straw about the reciprocity of a passion the possibility of

which had been troubling me. There would be none to reciprocate.

Thus chagrined, and a little by the same thought consoled, I had ceased to stare at the señorita; who certainly stared at me in surprise, and as I fancied, with some degree of indignation.

My rudeness had given her reason; and I could not help perceiving it.

I was about to make the best apology in my power, by hastening away from the spot—my eyes turned to the ground in a look of humiliation—when curiosity, more than aught else, prompted me to raise them once more to the window. I was desirous to know whether my repentance had been understood and acknowledged.

I intended it only for a transitory glance. It became fixed.

Fixed and fascinated! The woman that but six seconds before appeared only pretty—that three days before I had supposed supremely beautiful—was again the *angel* I had deemed her,—certainly the most beautiful woman I ever beheld!

What could have caused this change? Was it an illusion—some deception my senses were practising upon me?

If the lady saw reason to think me rude before, she had double cause now. I stood transfixed to the spot, gazing upon her with my eyes, my soul—my every thought concentrated in the glance.

And yet she seemed less frowning than before: for I was sure that she had frowned. I could not explain this, any more than I could account for the other transformation. Enough that I was gratified with the thought of having, not idly, bestowed my sword-knot.

For some time I remained under the spell of a speechless surprise.

It was broken—not by words, but by a new *tableau* suddenly presented to my view. Two women were at the window! One was the pretty prude who had well nigh chased me out of the street; the other, the lovely being who had attracted me into it!

At a glance I saw that they were sisters.

They were remarkably alike, both in form and features. Even the expression upon their countenances was similar—that similarity that may be seen between two individuals in the same family, known as a “family likeness.”

Both were of a clear olive complexion—the tint

of the Morisco-Spaniard—with large imperious eyes, and masses of black hair clustering around their necks. Both were tall, of full form, and shaped as if from the same mould; while in age—so far as appearance went—they might have been twins.

And yet, despite these many points of personal similarity, in the degree of loveliness they were vastly different. She who had been offended by my behaviour was a handsome woman, and only that—a thing of Earth; while her sister had the seeming of some divine creature whose home might be in Heaven!



CHAPTER V.

A NOCTURNAL SORTIE.

From that day, each return of twilight's gentle hour saw me in the Calle del Obispo. The sun was not more certain to set behind the snow-crowned Cordilleras, than I to traverse the street where dwelt Mercedes Villa-Señor.

Her name and condition had been easily ascer-

tained. Any stray passenger encountered in the street could tell, who lived in the grand *casa* with the frescoed front.

“Don Eusebio Villa-Señor—*un rico*—with two daughters, *muchachas muy lindas!*” was the reply of him, to whom I addressed the inquiry.

I was further informed, that Don Eusebio was of Spanish descent, though a Mexican by birth; that in the veins of his daughters flowed only the Andalusian blood—the pure *sangre azul*. His was one of the *familias principales* of Puebla.

There was nothing in this knowledge to check my incipient admiration of Don Eusebio’s daughter. Quite the contrary.

As I had predicted, I was soon in the vortex of an impetuous passion; and without ever having spoken to her who inspired it!

There was no chance to hold converse with her. We were permitted no correspondence with the *familias principales*, beyond the dry formalities which occasionally occurred in official intercourse. But this was confined to the men. The señoritas were closely kept within doors, and as jealously concealed from us as if every house had been a harem.

My admiration was too earnest to be restrained by such trifling obstructions ; and I succeeded in obtaining an occasional, though distant, view of her who had so interested me.

My glances—given with all the fervour of a persistent passion—with all its audacity—could scarce be misconstrued.

I had the vanity to think they were not ; and that they were returned with looks that meant more than kindness.

I was full of hope and joy. My love affair appeared to be progressing towards a favourable issue ; when that change, already recorded, came over the inhabitants of Puebla—causing them to assume towards us the attitude of hostility.

It is scarce necessary to say that the new state of things was not to my individual liking. My twilight saunterings had, of necessity, to be discontinued ; and upon rare occasions, when I found a chance of resuming them, I no longer saw aught of Mercedes Villa-Señor !

She, too, had no doubt been terrified into that hermitical retirement—among the señoritas now universal.

Before this terrible time came about, my passion had proceeded too far to be restrained by any ideas of danger. My hopes had grown in proportion ; and stimulated by these, I lost no opportunity of stealing out of quarters, and seeking the Calle del Obispo.

I was alike indifferent to danger in the streets, and the standing order to keep out of them. For a stray glance at her to whom I had surrendered my sword-knot, I would have given up my commission ; and to obtain the former, almost daily did I risk losing the latter !

It was all to no purpose. Mercedes was no more to be seen.

Uncertainty about her soon became a torture ; I could endure it no longer. I resolved to seek some mode of communication.

How fortunate for lovers that their thoughts can be symbolised upon paper ! I thought so as I indited a letter, and addressed it to the "Doña Mercedes Villa-Señor."

How to get it conveyed to her, was a more difficult problem.

There were men servants who came and went

through the great gateway of the mansion. Which of them was the one least likely to betray me ?

I soon fixed my reflections upon the *cochero*—a tall fellow in velveteens, whom I had seen taking out the sleek carriage horses. There was enough of the “picaro” in his countenance, to inspire me with confidence that he could be *suborned* for my purpose.

I determined on making trial of him. If a doubloon should prove sufficient bribe, my letter would be delivered.

In my twilight strolls, often prolonged to a late hour, I had noticed that this domestic sallied forth : as if, having done his day’s duty, he had permission to spend his evenings at the *pulqueria*. The plan would be to waylay him, on one of his nocturnal sorties ; and this was what I determined on doing.

On the night of that same day on which I indited the epistle, the Officer of the Guard chanced to be my particular friend. It was not chance either : since I had chosen the occasion. I had no difficulty, therefore, in giving the countersign ; and, wrapped in a cloth cloak—intended less as a protection against the cold than to conceal my uniform—I proceeded onward upon my errand of intrigue.

I was favoured by the *complexion* of the night. It was dark as coal tar—the sky shrouded with a thick stratum of thunder clouds.

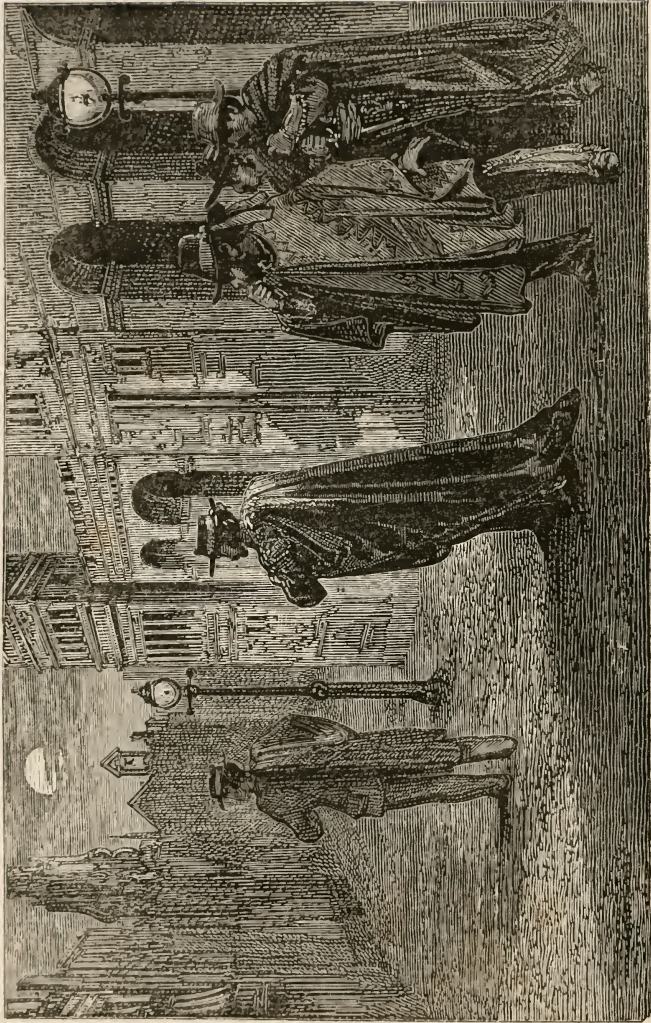
It was not yet late enough for the citizens to have forsaken the streets. There were hundreds of them, strolling to and fro, all natives of the place—most of them men of the lower classes—with a large proportion of “leperos.”

There was not a soldier to be seen—except here and there the solitary sentry, whose presence betokened the entrance to some military cuartel.

The troops were all inside—in obedience to the standing order. There were not even the usual squads of drunken stragglers in uniform. The fear of assault and assassination was stronger than the propensity for “raking”—even among regiments whose rank and file was almost entirely composed of the countrymen of St. Patrick.

A stranger passing through the place could scarce have suspected that the city was under American occupation. There was but slight sign of such control. The Poblanos appeared to have the place to themselves.

They were gay and noisy—some half intoxicated



Followed by Footpads.

with *pulque*, and inclined to be quarrelsome. The leperos, no longer in awe of their own national authorities, were demeaning themselves with a degree of license allowed by the abnormal character of the times.

In my progress along the pavement I was several times accosted in a coarse bantering manner; not on account of my American uniform—for my cloak concealed this—but because *I wore a cloak!* I was taken for a native “aristocrat.”

Better that it was so: since the insults were only verbal, and offered in a spirit of rude badinage. Had my real character been known, they might have been accompanied by personal violence.

I had not gone far before becoming aware of this; and that I had started upon a rash, not to say perilous, enterprise.

It was of that nature, however, that I could not give it up; even had I been threatened with ten times the danger.

I continued on, holding my cloak in such a fashion, that it might not flap open.

By good luck I had taken the precaution to cover my head with a Mexican sombrero, instead of the mili-

tary cap ; and as for the gold stripes on my trowsers, they were but the fashion of the Mexican *majo*.

A walk of twenty minutes brought me into the Calle del Obispo.

Compared with some of the streets, through which I had been passing, it seemed deserted. Only two or three solitary pedestrians could be seen traversing it, under the dim light of half a dozen oil lamps set at long distances apart.

One of these was in front of the Casa Villa-Señor. More than once it had been my beacon before, and it guided me now.

On the opposite side of the street there was another grand house with a portico. Under the shadow of this I took my stand, to await the coming forth of the cocheró.

CHAPTER VI.

“VA CON DIOS !”

Though I had already made myself acquainted with his usual hour of repairing to the pulquería, I had not timed it neatly.

For twenty minutes I stood with the *billetita* in my hand, and the doubloon in my pocket, both ready to be entrusted to him. No cochero came forth.

The house rose three stories from the street—its massive mason work giving it a look of solemn grandeur. The great gaol-like gate—knobbed all over like the hide of an Indian rhinoceros—was shut and secured by strong locks and double bolting. There was no light in the *saguan* behind it; and not a ray shone through the jalousies above.

Not remembering that in Mexican mansions there are many spacious apartments without street windows, I might have imagined that the Casa Villa-Señor was either uninhabited, or that the inmates had retired to rest. The latter was not likely: it wanted twenty minutes to ten.

What had become of my cochero? Half-past nine was the hour I had usually observed him strolling forth; and I had now been upon the spot since a quarter past eight. Something must be keeping him indoors—an extra scouring of his plated harness or grooming of his *frisiones*?

This thought kept me patient, as I paced to and

fro under the portico of Don Eusebio's "opposite neighbour."

Ten o'clock ! The senorous *campaña* of the Cathedral was striking the noted hour—erst celebrated in song. A score of clocks in church-steeple, that tower thickly over the City of the Angels, had taken up the cue ; and the air of the night vibrated melodiously under the music of bell metal.

To kill time—and another bird with the same stone—I took out my repeater, with the intention of regulating it. I knew it was not the most correct of chronometers. The oil lamp on the opposite side enabled me to note the position of the hands upon the dial. Its dimness, however, caused delay ; and I may have been engaged some minutes in the act.

After returning the watch to its fob, I once more glanced towards the entrance of Don Eusebio's dwelling—at a wicket in the great gate, through which I expected the *cochero* to come.

The gate was still close shut ; but, to my surprise, the man was standing outside of it ! Either he, or some one else ?

I had heard no noise—no shooting of bolts, nor

creaking of hinges. Surely it could not be the cochero?

I soon perceived that it was not; nor anything that in the least degree resembled him.

My *vis-à-vis* on the opposite side of the street was, like myself, enveloped in a cloak, and wearing a black sombrero.

Despite the disguise, and the dim light afforded by the *lard*, there was no mistaking him for either domestic, tradesman, or lepero. His air and attitude—his well-knit figure, gracefully outlined underneath the loose folds of the broadcloth—above all, the lineaments of a handsome face—at once proclaimed the “cavallero.”

In appearance he was a man of about my own age: twenty-five, not more. Otherwise he may have had the advantage of me; for, as I gazed on his features—ill lit as they were by the feebly glimmering lamp—I fancied I had never looked on finer.

A pair of black moustaches curled away from the corners of a mouth, that exhibited twin rows of white regular teeth. They were set in a pleasing smile.

Why that pain shooting through my heart, as I beheld it?

I was disappointed that he was not the cochero for whom I had been keeping watch. But it was not this. Far different was the sentiment with which I regarded him. Instead of the "go-between" I had expected to employ, I felt a suspicion, that I was looking upon a *rival*!

A successful one, too, I could not doubt. His splendid appearance gave earnest of that.

He had not paused in front of the Casa Villa-Señor without a purpose—as was evident from the way in which he paced the banquette beneath, while glancing at the balcon above. I could see that his eyes were fixed on that very window—by my own oft passionately explored!

His look and bearing—both full of confidence—told that he had been there before—often before; and that he was now at the spot—not like myself on an errand of doubtful speculation, but by *appointment*!

I could tell, that he had not come to avail himself of the services of the cochero. His eyes did not turn towards the grand entrance-gate, but remained fixed upon the balcony above—where he evidently expected some one to make appearance.

Shadowed by the portal, I was not seen by him ; though I cared not a straw about that. My remaining in concealment was a mere mechanical act—an instinct, if you prefer the phrase. From the first I felt satisfied, that my own “ game was up,” and that I had no longer any business with the domestic of Don Eusebio Villa-Señor. His daughter was already engaged !

Of course I thought only of Mercedes. It would have been absurd to suppose that the man I saw before me could be *after* the other. The idea did not enter my brain—reeling at the sight of my successful rival.

Unlike me, he was not kept long in suspense. Ten o'clock had evidently been the hour of appointment. The cathedral was to give the time ; and, as the tolling commenced, the cloaked cavalier had entered the street, and hastened forward to the place.

As the last strokes were reverberating upon the still night air, I saw the blind silently drawn aside ; while a face—too often outlined in my dreams—now, in dim but dread reality, appeared within the embayment of the window.

The instant after, and a form, robed in dark

habiliments, stepped silently out into the balcony ; a white arm was stretched over the balusters ; something still whiter, appearing at the tips of tapering fingers, fell noiselessly into the street, accompanied by the softly whispered words :

“ *Querido Francisco ; va con Dios !* ” (God be with you, dear Francis !)

Before the *billet-doux* could be picked up from the pavement, the fair whisperer disappeared within the window ; the *jalousie* was once more drawn ; and both house and street relapsed into sombre silence.

No one passing the mansion of Don Eusebio Villa-Señor could have told, that his daughter had been committing an *indiscretion*. That secret was in the keeping of two individuals ; one to whom it had, no doubt, imparted supreme happiness ; the other to whom it had certainly given a moment of misery !

CHAPTER VII.

BRIGANDAGE IN NEW SPAIN.

Accustomed to live under a strong government, with its well-organized system of police, we in England

have a difficulty in comprehending how a regular band of robbers can maintain itself in the midst of a civilized nation.

We know that we have gangs of burglars, and fraternities of thieves, whose sole profession is to plunder. The *footpad* is not quite extinct; and although he occasionally enacts the *rôle* of the highwayman, and demands "your money or your life," neither in dress nor personal appearance is he to be distinguished from the ordinary tradesman, or labourer. More often is he like the latter.

Moreover, he does not bid open defiance to the law. He breaks it in a sneaking, surreptitious fashion; and if by chance he resists its execution, his resistance is inspired by the fear of capture and its consequences—the scaffold, or penitentiary.

This defiance rarely goes further than an attempt to escape from the policeman, with a bull's-eye in one hand and a truncheon in the other.

The idea of a band of brigands showing fight, not only to a posse of sheriffs' officers, but to a detachment, perhaps half a regiment, of soldiers—a band armed with swords, carbines, and pistols; costumed and equipped in a style characteristic of their calling

—is one, to comprehend which we must fancy ourselves transported to the mountains of Italy, or the rugged ravines of the Spanish sierras. We even wonder at the existence of such a state of things there ; and, until very lately, were loth to believe in it. Your London shopkeeper would not credit the stories of travellers being captured, and retained in captivity until ransomed by their friends—or if they had no friends, shot !

Surely the government of the country could rescue them ? This was the query usually put by the incredulous.

There is now a clearer understanding of such things. The experience of an humble English artist has established the fact : that the whole power of Italy—backed by that of England—has been compelled to make terms with a robber-chief, and pay him the sum of *four thousand pounds* for the surrender of his painter-prisoner !

The shopkeeper, as he sits in the theatre pit, or gazes down from the second tier of boxes, will now take a stronger interest in “Fra Diavolo” than he ever did before. He knows that the devil’s brother is a reality, and Mazzaroni something more

than a romantic conceit of the author's imagination.

But there is a robber of still more picturesque style to which the Englishman cannot give his credibility—a bandit not only armed, costumed, and equipped like the Fra Diavolos and Mazzaronis, but who follows his profession *on horseback!*

And not *alone*—like the Turpins and Claude Duvals of our own past times—but trooped along with twenty, fifty, and often a hundred of his fellows!

For this equestrian freebooter—the true type of the highwayman—you must seek, in modern times, among the mountains, and upon the plains, of Mexico. There you will find him in full *fanfar*; plying his craft with as much earnestness, and industry, as if it were the most respectable of professions!

In the city and its suburbs, brigandage exists in the shape of the *picaron-a-pied*—or “robber on foot”—in short, the *footpad*. In the country it assumes a far more exalted standard—being there elevated to the rank of a regular calling; its practitioners not going in little groups, and afoot—after

the fashion of our thieves and garotters—but acting in large organized bands, mounted on magnificent horses, with a discipline almost military !

These are the true “bandoleros,” sometimes styled *salteadores del camino grande*—“robbers of the great road”—in other words, *highwaymen*.

You may meet them on the *camino grande* leading from Vera Cruz to the capital—by either of the routes of Jalapa or Orizava; on that between the capital and the Pacific port of Acapulco; on the northern routes to Queretaro, Guanajuato, and San Luis Potosi; on the western, to Guadalajara and Michoacan; in short, everywhere that offers them the chance of stripping a traveller.

Not only *may* you meet them, but *will*, if you make but three successive excursions over any one of the above named highways. You will see the “salteador” on a horse much finer than that you are yourself riding; in a suit of clothes thrice the value of your own—sparkling with silver studs, and buttons of pearl or gold; his shoulders covered with a *serapé*, or perhaps a splendid *manga* of finest broadcloth—blue, purple, or scarlet.

You will see him, and feel him too—if you don’t

fall upon your face at his stern summons "*A tierra!*" and afterwards deliver up to him every article of value you have been so imprudent as to transport upon your person.

Refuse the demand, and you will get the contents of carbine, *escopeta*, or blunderbuss in your body, or it may be a lance-blade intruded into your chest!

Yield graceful compliance, and he will as gracefully give you permission to continue your journey—with, perhaps, an apology for having interrupted it!

I know it is difficult to believe in such a state of things, in a country called civilized—difficult to you. To me they are but remembrances of many an actual experience.

Their existence is easily explained. You will have a clue to it, if you can imagine a land, where, for a period of over fifty years, peace has scarcely ever been known to continue for as many days; where all this time anarchy has been the chronic condition; a land full of disappointed spirits—unsatisfied aspirants to military fame, also *unpaid*; a land of vast lonely plains and stupendous hills, whose shaggy sides form impenetrable fastnesses—where the feeble pursued may bid defiance to the strong pursuer.

And such is the land of Anahuac. Even within sight of its grandest cities there are places of concealment—harbours of refuge—alike free to the political patriot, and the outlawed *picaro*.

Like other strangers to New Spain, before setting foot upon its shores, I was incredulous about this peculiarity of its social condition. It was too abnormal to be true. I had read and heard tales of its brigandage, and believed them to be tinged with exaggeration. A *diligencia* stopped every other day, often when accompanied by an escort of dragoons—twenty to fifty in number; the passengers maltreated, at times murdered—and these not always common people, but often officers of rank in the army, representatives of the *Congresa*, senators of the State, and even high dignitaries of the Church!

Afterwards I had reason to believe in the wholesale despoliation. I was witness to more than one living illustration of it.

But, in truth, it is not so very different from what is daily, hourly, occurring among ourselves. It is dishonesty under a different garb and guise—a little bolder than that of our burglar—a little more

picturesque than that practised by the fustian-clad garotter of our streets.

And let it be remembered, in favour of Mexican morality—that, for one daring bandolero upon the road, we have a hundred sneaking thieves of the attorney type—stock-jobbers—promoters of swindling speculations—trade and skittle sharpers—to say nothing of our grand Government swindle of over-taxation—all of which are known only exceptionally in the land of Moctezuma.

In point of immorality—on one side stripping it of its picturesqueness, on the other of its abominable plebbishness—I very much doubt, whether the much-abused people of Mexico need fear comparison with the much-bepraised people of England.

For my part, I most decidedly prefer the robber of the *road*, to him of the *robe*; and I have had some experience of both.

This digression has been caused by my recalling an encounter with the former, that occurred to me in La Puebla—on that same night when I found myself forestalled.

CHAPTER VIII.

A RIVAL TRACKED TO HIS ROOF-TREE.

That I *was* forestalled, there could be no mistake.

There was no ambiguity about the meaning of the phrase: "God be with you, dear Francis!" The coldest heart could not fail to interpret it—coupled with the act to which it had been an accompaniment.

My heart was on fire. There was jealousy in it; and, more: there was anger.

I believed, or fancied, that I had cause. If ever woman had given me encouragement—by looks and smiles—that woman was Mercedes Villa-Señor.

All done to delude me—perhaps but to gratify the slightest whim of her woman's vanity? She had shown unmistakable signs of having noted my glances of admiration. They were too earnest to have been misunderstood. Perhaps she may have been a little flattered by them? But, whether or no, I was confident of having received encouragement.

Once, indeed, a flower had been dropped from the *balcon*. It had the air of an accident—with just

enough design to make the act difficult of interpretation. With the wish father to the thought, I accepted it as a challenge; and, hastening along the pavement, I stooped, and picked the flower up.

What I then saw was surely an approving smile—one that seemed to say: “in return for your sword-knot.” I thought so at the time; and fancied I could see the tassel, protruding from a plait in the boddice of the lady’s dress—shown for an instant, and then adroitly concealed.

This sweet chapter of incidents occurred upon the occasion of my tenth stroll through the Calle del Obispo. It was the last time I had the chance of seeing Mercedes by twilight. After that came the irksome interval of seclusiveness,—now to be succeeded by a prolonged period of chagrin: for the dropping of the *billet-doux*, and the endearing speech, had put an end to my hopes—as effectually as if I had seen Mercedes enfolded in Francisco’s arms.

Along with my chagrin I felt spite. I was under the impression that I had been *played with*.

Upon whom should I expend it? On the Señorita?

There was no chance. She had retired from the balcony. I might never see her again—there, or elsewhere? Who then? The man who had been before me in her affections?

Should I cross over the street—confront—pick a quarrel with him, and finish it at my sword's point? An individual whom I had never seen, and who, in all probability, had never set eyes upon me!

Absurd as it may appear—absolutely unjust as it would have been—this was actually my impulse!

It was succeeded by a gentler thought. Francisco's face was favourable to him. I saw it more distinctly, as he leant forward under the lamp to decipher the contents of the note. It was such a countenance as one could not take offence at, without good cause; and a moment's reflection convinced me that mine was not sufficient. He was not only innocent of the grief his rivalry had given me, but in all likelihood ignorant of my existence.

From that time forward he was likely to remain so.

Such was my reflection, as I turned to take my departure from the place. There was no longer any reason for my remaining there. The cochero might now come and go, without danger of being accosted

by me. His tardiness had lost him the chance of obtaining an *onza*; and the letter I had been hitherto holding in my hand went crumpled back into my pocket. Its warm words and soft sentiments—contrived with all the skill of which I was capable—should never be read by her for whom they had been indited!

So far as the offering of any further overtures on my part, I had done with the daughter of Don Eusebio Villa-Señor; though I knew I had not done with her in my heart, and that it would be long—long—before I should get quit of her there.

I turned to go back to my quarters—in secret to resign myself to my humiliation. I did not start instantly. Something whispered me to stay a little longer. Perhaps there might be a second act to the episode I had so unwillingly witnessed?

It could hardly be this that induced me to linger. It was evident she did not intend reappearing. Her visit to the balcon had the air of being made by stealth. I noted that once or twice she cast a quick glance over her shoulder—as if watchful eyes were behind her, and she had chosen a chance moment when they were averted.

The manœuvre had been executed with more than ordinary caution. It was easy to see they were lovers *without leave*. Ah! too well could I comprehend the clandestine act!

Still standing concealed within the shadow of the portal, I watched Francisco deciphering, or rather devouring, the note. How I envied him those moments of bliss! The words traced upon the tiny sheet must be sweet to him, as the sight was bitter to me.

His face was directly under the lamplight. I could see it was one that woman might well love, and man be jealous of. No wonder he had won the heart of Don Eusebio's daughter!

He was not long in making himself acquainted with the contents of the epistle. Of course they caused him joy. I could trace it in the pleased expression that made itself manifest in every line of his countenance. Could I have seen my own, I might have looked upon a sad contrast!

The reading came to a close. He folded the note, and with care—as though intending it to be tenderly kept. It disappeared under his cloak; the cloak was drawn closer around him; a fond parting look cast

up to the place from which he had received the sweet missive; and then, turning along the pavement, he passed smilingly away.

I followed him.

I can scarce tell why I did so. My first steps were altogether mechanical—without thought or motive.

It might have been an instinct—a fascination—such as often attracts the victim to the very danger it should avoid.

Prudence—experience, had I consulted it—would both have said to me :

“Go the other way. Go, and forget her! Him too—all that has happened. ’Tis not yet too late. You are but upon the edge of the Scylla of passion. You may still shun it. Retire, and save yourself from its Charybdis!”

Prudence and experience—what is either—what are both in the balance against beauty? What were they when weighed against the charms of that Mexican maiden?

Even the slight I had experienced could not turn the scale in their favour! It only maddened me to know more; and perhaps it was this that carried me along the pavement, on the footsteps of Francisco.

If not entertained at first, a design soon shaped itself—a sort of morbid motive. I became curious to ascertain the condition of the man who had supplanted me ; or whom I had been myself endeavouring to supplant with such slight success.

He had the air of a gentleman, and the bearing of a true *militario*—a type I had more than once met with in the land of Anahuac—so long a prey to the rule of the sabre.

There was nothing particularly martial about his habiliments.

As he passed lamp after lamp in his progress along the street, I could note their style and character. A pair of dark grey trousers without stripes ; a cloak ; a glazed hat—all after a fashion worn by the ordinary *commerciantes* of the place. I fancied I could perceive a certain shabbiness about them—perhaps not so much that, as a threadbareness—the evidence of long wear : for the materials were of a costly kind. The cloak was of best broadcloth—the fabric of Spain ; while the hat was encircled by a bullion band, that, before getting tarnished by the touch of time, must have shone splendidly enough.

These observations were not made without motive.

I drew from them a series of deductions. One, that could not be avoided: that my rival, instead of being rich, was in the opposite condition of life—perhaps penniless?

I was confirmed in this conjecture, as I saw him stop before the door of an humble one-storied dwelling, in a street of corresponding pretensions; thoroughly convinced of it as he lifted the latch with a readiness that betokened it to be his home, and, without speaking to any one, stepped inside.

The circumstances were conclusive; he was not one of the “ricos” of the place. It explained the clandestine correspondence, and the caution observed by her who flung down the *billetita*.

Instead of being solaced by the thought, it only increased my bitterness of spirit. I should have been better pleased to have seen my rival surrounded by splendour. A love unattracted by this must be indeed disinterested—without the possibility of being displaced. No chance to supplant the lover who is loved for himself. I did not harbour a hope.

A slight incident had given me the clue to a romantic tale. Mercedes Villa-Señor, daughter of one of the richest men in the place—inhabiting one

of its grandest mansions—in secret correspondence with a man wearing a threadbare coat, having his home in one of the lowliest dwellings to be found in the City of the Angels !

I was not much surprised at the discovery. I knew it to be one of the “Cosas de Mexico.” But the knowledge did not lessen my chagrin.

CHAPTER IX.

MUERA EL AMERICANO !

Like a thief skulking after the unsuspecting pedestrian, on whom he intends to practise his professional skill, so did I follow Francisco.

Absorbed in the earnestness of my purpose, I did not observe three genuine thieves, who were skulking after me.

I am scarce exact in my nomenclature. They were not thieves, but *picarones-a-pied*—footpads.

My first acquaintance with these gentry was now to be made.

As already said, I was not aware that any one was

imitating me, in the somewhat disreputable *rôle* I was playing.

After watching my rival disappear within his doorway, I remained for some seconds in the street—undecided which way to go. I had done with “*querido Francisco* ;” and intended to return to my quarters.

But where were they? Engrossed by my espionage I had made no note of the direction, and was now lost in the streets of La Puebla!

What was to be done? I stood considering.

All of a sudden I felt myself grappled from behind!

Both my arms were seized simultaneously, at the same time that a *garota* was extended across my throat!

They were strong men who had taken hold of me; but not strong enough to retain it.

I was then in the very vigour of my manhood; and, though it may seem vanity to say so, it was a vigour not easily overcome.

With a quick wrench, I threw off the two flankers; and turning suddenly—so that the *garota* was diverted from its purpose—I got a blow at the ruffian who

held it that sent him face foremost upon the pavement.

Before any of the three could renew their attempt, I had my revolver in hand—ready to deal death to the first who reassailed me.

The footpads stood aghast. They had not expected such a determined resistance; and, if left to themselves, in all probability, I should have seen no more of them that night.

If left to themselves, I could have dealt with them conveniently enough. In truth, I could have taken the lives of all three, as they stood in their speechless bewilderment.

I held in my hand a Colt's six-shooter, No. 2; another in my belt; twelve shots in all—sure as the best percussion caps and careful loading could make them. A fourth of the shots would have sufficed: for I had no thought of taking uncertain aim.

Despite the cause given me for excitement, I never felt cooler in my life—that is for a combat. For an hour before, my nerves had been undergoing a strain, that served only to strengthen them.

I had been in want of something upon which to pour out my gathering wrath; and here was the

thing itself. God, or the devil, seemed to have sent the three thieves as a safety-valve to my swollen passion—a sort of target on which to expend it!

Jesting apart, I thought so at the time; and so sure was I of being able to immolate the trio at my leisure, that I only hesitated as to which of them I should shoot down first!

You may be incredulous. I can assure you that the scene I am describing is no mere romance, but the transcript of a real occurrence. So also are the thoughts associated with it.

I stood eyeing my assailants, undecided about the selection.

I had my finger on the trigger; but, before pressing it, a quick reflection came into my mind that restrained me from shooting.

It was still early—not quite ten o'clock—and the pavement was alive with passengers. I had passed several on entering the little street; and, from the place where I stood, I could see a dozen dark forms flitting about, or loitering by the doors of the houses.

They were all *leperos* of the low quarter.

The report of my pistol would bring a crowd of them around me; and, although I might disem-

barrass myself of the footpads, I should be in as much, or more, danger from the *patriotas* !

I was quite sensible of the perilous situation in which I had placed myself by my imprudent promenade.

As the robbers appeared to have given up their design upon my purse, and were making their best speed to get out of reach of my pistol, I thought the wisest way would be to let them go off.

With this design I was about to content myself—only staying to pick up my cloak, that in the struggle had fallen from my shoulders.

Having recovered it, I commenced taking my departure from the place.

I had not gone six paces, when I became half convinced that I had made a mistake, and that it would have been better to have killed the three thieves. After doing so, I might have found time to steal off unobserved.

Allowing them to escape, I had given them the opportunity to return in greater strength, and under a different pretence from that of their former profession.

A cry that all three raised as they ran down the

street, was answered by a score of other voices; and, before I had time to make out its meaning, I was surrounded by a circle of faces, scowling upon me with an expression of unmistakeable hostility.

Were they all robbers—associates of the three who had assaulted me?

Had I chanced into one of those streets entirely abandoned to the thieving fraternity—such as may be found in European cities—where the guardians of the night do not dare to shew their faces?

This was my first impression, as I noted the angry looks and hostile attitude of those who came clustering around me.

It became quickly changed, as I listened to the phrase, fiercely vociferated in my ears:

“*Dios y Libertad! Muera el Americano!*”

The discomfited footpads had returned upon a new tack. They had seen my uniform, as it became uncloaked in the struggle; and, under a pretence of patriotism, were now about to take satisfaction for their discomfiture and disappointment.

By good fortune I was standing upon a spot where there was a tolerable light—thrown upon the street by a couple of lamps suspended near.

Had it been darker, I might have been set upon at once, and cut down, before I could distinguish my antagonists. But the light benefitted me in a different way. It exposed to my new assailants a brace of Colt's revolvers—one held in hand and ready to be discharged; the other ready to be drawn.

The knife was their weapon. I could see a dozen blades bared simultaneously around me; but to get to such close quarters would cost some of them their lives.

They had the sharpness to perceive it; and halting at several paces distance—formed a sort of irregular ring around me.

It was not a complete circle, but only the half: for I had taken my stand against the front of a house, close to its doorway.

It was a lucky thought, or instinct: since it prevented my being assailed from the rear.

“What do you want?” I asked, addressing my antagonists in their own tongue—which by good fortune I spoke with sufficient purity.

“Your life!” was the laconic reply, spoken by a man of sinister aspect, “your life, *filibustero!* And

we mean to have it. So you may as well put up your pistol. If not, we'll take it from you. Yield, Yankee, if you don't want to be killed on the spot!"

"You may kill me," I responded, looking the ruffian full in the face, "but not till after I've killed you, worthy sir. You hear me, cavallero! The first that stirs a step towards me, will go down in his tracks. It will be yourself—if you have the courage to come first."

I cannot describe how I felt at that queer crisis. I only remember that I was as cool, as if rehearsing the scene for amusement—instead of being engaged in a real and true tragedy that must speedily terminate in death!

My coolness, perhaps, sprang from despair, or an instinct that nought else could avail me.

My words, with the gestures that accompanied them, were not without effect. The tall man, who appeared to lead the party, saw that I had selected him for my first shot, and cowered back into the thick of the crowd.

But among his associates there were some of more courage, or greater determination; and the cry,

“Muera el Americano!” once more shouted on all sides, gave a fresh stimulus to the passions of the *patriotas*.

Besides, the crowd was constantly growing greater, through fresh arrivals in the street. I could see that the six-shooter would not much longer keep my assailants at a distance.

There appeared not the slightest chance of escape. A death, certain as cruel—sudden, terrible to contemplate—stared me in the face. I saw no way of avoiding it. I had no thought of there being a possibility to do so—no thought of anything, save selling my life as dearly as I could.

Before falling, I should make a hecatomb of my cowardly assassins.

I saw no pistols or other fire-arms in their hands—nothing but knives and *machetés*. They could only reach me from the front; and, before they could close upon me, I felt certain of being able to discharge every chamber of my two revolvers. At least half a dozen of my enemies were doomed to die before me.

I was in a splendid position for defence. The house against which I had been brought to bay was



A rescue from "Red Hats."

built of *adobés*, with walls full three feet thick. The door was indented to a depth of at least two. I stood with my back against it, the jambs on both sides protecting me. My position was that of the badger in the barrel attacked by terriers.

How long I might have been permitted to hold it is a question I will not undertake to answer. No doubt it would have depended upon the courage of my assailants, and the stimulus supplied by that patriotic cry still shouted out, "*Muera el Americano!*"

But none of those who were shouting had reached that climax of recklessness, to rush upon the certain death which I stood ready to deal out.

They obstructed the doorway in front, and in a close threatening phalanx—like a pack of angry hounds holding a stag at bay, the boldest fearing to spring forward.

Despite the knowledge that it was a terrible tragedy, I could not help fancying it a farce: so long and carefully did my assailants keep at arm's length.

Still more like a burlesque might it have appeared to a spectator, as I fell upon the broad of my back—kicking up my heels upon the door-stoup!

It was neither shot, nor stab, that had caused this sudden change in my attitude ; but simply the opening of the door, against which I had been supporting myself.

Some one inside had drawn the bolt, and, by doing so, removed the support from behind me !

CHAPTER X.

THE STREET OF THE SPARROWS.

As I tottered upon my back, I felt my head and shoulders in contact with the legs of a man. They broke the fall, that might otherwise have stunned me : for the floor was of stone flags.

I lost no time in disentangling myself ; but, before I could regain my feet, the man bounded over my body, and stood upon the threshold.

As he passed between me and the light outside, I could see something shining by his side. It was a sword blade. I could see that the hilt was in his hand.

My first impression was that he had sprung into

the doorway to intercept my retreat. Of course I classed him among my enemies. How could I expect to find friend, or protector, in such a place?

It could make but little difference. I believed that retreat by the front door was out of the question. Double barring it would make things no worse.

Just then I bethought me of a chance of escape, not before possible. Was there a back door? Or a stair up to the *azotea*?

My reflections were quick as thought itself; but while making them they lost part of their importance. The man was standing with his back towards me and his face to the crowd upon the street. Their cries had followed me in; and no doubt so would some of themselves, had they been left to their predilections.

But they were not, as I now perceived. He who had opened his door to admit, perhaps, the most unwelcome guest who had ever entered it, seemed not the less determined upon asserting the sacred rights of hospitality.

As he placed himself between the posts, I saw the glint of steel shooting out in front—while he commanded the people to keep back.

The command delivered in a loud authoritative voice, backed by a long toledo, whose blade glittered death-like under the pale glimmer of the lamp, had the effect of awing the outsiders into a momentary silence. There was an interval in which I heard neither shout nor reply.

He himself broke the stillness, that succeeded his first salutation.

“Leperos!” he cried, in the tone of one who feels himself speaking to inferiors; “What is this disturbance? What are you after?”

“An enemy! A Yankee!”

“*Carrambo!* I suppose they are synonymous terms. To all appearance you are right,” continued he, catching sight of my uniform, as he turned half round in the doorway. “But what’s the use?” he continued. “What advantage can our country derive from killing a poor devil like this?”

I felt half indignant at the speech. I recognized in the speaker the handsome youth who had been before me with Mercedes Villa-Señor!

A bitter chance that should have made *him* my protector!

“Let them come on!” I cried, driven to desper-

tion at the thought; "I need no protection from you, sir—thanks all the same! I hold the lives of at least twelve of these gentlemen in my hands. After that, they shall be welcome to mine. Stand aside, and see how I shall scatter the cowardly rabble. Aside, sir!"

If I was not mad, my protector must have thought me so.

"*Carrambo, señor!*" he responded, without showing himself in the least chafed by my ungrateful answer. "You are perhaps not aware of the danger you are in. If I but say the word, you are a dead man."

"You'll say it, *capitano!*" shouted one on the outside. "Why not? The Yankee has insulted you. Let's punish him, if it be only for that!"

"*Muera! Muera el Americano!*"

My assailants, freshly excited by these cries, came surging towards the door.

"*Al atras, leperos!*" shouted my protector. "The first that sets foot over my threshold—humble as it is—I shall spit upon my sword, like a piece of *tasajo*. You are very brave here in the Callecito de los Pajaros! I doubt whether there's one among you

who has met the enemy—either at Vera Cruz, or Cerro Gordo!”

“You’re mistaken there, capitan Moreno!” answered a tall dark man who stood out in front of his fellows, and whom I recognized as the chief of the trio who had first attacked me, “Here’s one who has been in both the battles you are pleased to speak of; and who has come out of them, not like your noble self—a prisoner upon parole!”

“Captain Carrasco, if I mistake not?” sneeringly retorted my protector. “I can believe that of you. Not likely to be a prisoner of any kind. No doubt you took care to get well out of the way before the time when prisoners were being taken?”

“*Carajo!*” screamed the swarthy disputant, his face turning livid with rage. “You say that? You have heard it, *camarados?* Capitan Moreno sets himself up, not only as our judge, but the protector of our accursed invaders! And we must submit to his sublime dictation—we the citizens of Puebla!”

“No—no, we won’t stand it. *Muera el Americano!* The Yankee must be delivered up!”

“You must take him, then,” coolly responded Moreno, “at the point of my sword.”

“And at the muzzle of my pistol,” I added, springing to the side of my generous host—determined to share with him the defence of his doorway.

This unexpected resistance caused a change in the attitude of Carrasco and his cowardly associates. Though they hailed it with a vengeful shout, it was plain that their impetuosity had received a check; and, instead of advancing to the attack, one and all stood cowed-like and silent.

They seemed to know the temper of my protector as well as his sword; and this no doubt for the time restrained them.

But the true secret of their backwardness was to be sought for in the six-shooters, one of which I now held in each hand. The Mexicans had just become acquainted with the character of this splendid weapon—first used in battle in that same campaign—and its destructive powers, by report exaggerated tenfold, inspired them, as it had done the Prairie Indians, with a fear almost supernatural.

Perhaps to this sentiment was I indebted for my salvation. Brave as my protector was, and skilled as he might be with his toledo—quick and sure as I

could have delivered my twelve shots—what would all have availed against a mob of infuriated men, already a hundred strong, and every moment augmenting? One, perhaps both, of us must have fallen before their fury.

It may seem strange to talk of sentiment, in such a crisis as that in which I was placed. You will be incredulous of its existence. And yet, by my honour, it *did* exist. I felt it, as certainly as I ever did in my life.

I need scarcely say what the sentiment was. It could only be that of profound gratitude—first to Francisco Moreno ; and then to God for making such a noble man !

The thought that followed was but a consequence of this reflection. It was to save him who was risking his life to save me.

I was about to appeal to him to stand aside, and leave me to my fate. What good would it do for both to die ? for I verily believed that death was at hand.

My purpose was not carried out ; though its frustration came not from a craven fear. Very different was the cause that stayed my tongue.

As we stood silent—both defenders and those threatening to attack—a sound was borne upon the breeze, which caused the silence to be prolonged.

There could be no doubt as to the signification of this sound. Any one who has ever witnessed the spectacle of a troop of horse passing along a paved street, will recognize the noises that accompany it:—the continuous tramping of hoofs, the tinkling of curbs, and the occasional clank of a scabbard, as it strikes against spur or stirrup.

Such noises I recognized, as did every individual in the “Street of the Sparrows.”

“*La guardia! La patrulla Americana!*” (The guard! The American patrol!) was the muttered exclamations that came from the crowd.

My heart bounded with joy, and I was about to spring forth—thinking my assailants would now make way for me.

But no. They stood firm and close as a wall, maintaining their semicircle around the doorway.

Though evidently resolved on keeping their ground they made no noise—with their knives and *machetes* only demonstrating in silence!

I saw their design. The patrol was passing along

one of the principal streets. They knew that the least disturbance would attract it into the Callecito.

If silent, but for ten seconds, they would be safe to renew the attack ; and I should then be lost—surely sacrificed !

What was to be done ? Fire into their midst, commence the *fracas*, and, by so doing, summon the patrol to my rescue ? Perhaps it would arrive in time to be too late—to take up my mangled corpse, and carry it to the cuartel ?

I hesitated to tempt the attack.

Was there no other way, by which I could give warning to my countrymen ?

O God ! the hoof-trampling seemed gradually growing less distinct ! No sound of bit, or spur, stirrup, or steel scabbard. They had passed the end of the Callecito. Ten seconds more, and they would be beyond hearing !

Ha ! a happy thought ! That night—I now remembered it—my own corps—the Rifle Rangers—constituted the street patrol. My first serjeant would be at its head. Between him and me had long been established a code of signals—independent of those set for the bugler. By the favour of fortune,

I had upon my person the means of making them—a common dog-call, that more than once, during the campaign, had stood me in good stead.

In another instant its shrill echoes resounded through the street, and were heard half way across the City of the Angels.

If the devil himself had directed the signal, it could not have more effectually paralyzed our opponents. They stood speechless—astounded!

Only for a short while did they thus remain. Then, as if some wild panic had suddenly seized upon them, both footpads and citizens ran scattering away!

In the place they had occupied I could see two score of horses, with the same number of men upon their backs—whose dark green uniforms were joyfully recognized.

With a shout I rushed forth to receive them!

After an interlude of confused congratulations I turned to give thanks—far more than thanks—to Francisco Moreno.

My gratitude was doomed to disappointment. He who so well deserved it was no longer to be seen.

The door, through which I had so fortunately fallen, was closed upon my generous protector!

CHAPTER XI.

THE RED HATS.

For more than a month after the incidents related, were we of the invading army compelled to endure a semi-seclusion, within *cuartels* neither very clean nor comfortable.

We should have far preferred the *billet* ; and there were scores of grand “casas” whose owners richly deserved it.

But the thing was out of the question. To have scattered our small force would have been to court the rising we had reason to apprehend.

Our division-general had the good sense to perceive this ; and, against the grumbling of both officers and men, insisted upon his injunction—to stay within doors—being rigorously observed.

To me the situation was irksome in the extreme. It gave too much leisure to brood over my bitterness. An active life might have offered some chance of distraction ; but inside a barrack—where one grows ennuyed with always seeing the same faces, and tired of the everlasting small talk—even the ordinary

routine is sufficiently afflicting. What was it in the heart of a hostile city? What to me, suffering from the humiliation I had experienced?

Only for the sake of excitement did I desire to go out on the streets. The Calle del Obispo had lost its attractions for me; or, rather should I say, they were lost *to* me. As for visiting the Callecito de los Pajaros, I am sorry to record: that my wounded *amour propre* was more powerful than my sense of gratitude. I felt more inclined to shun, than seek it.

A month, and there came a change. The streets of La Puebla were once more free to us—by night as by day.

It was caused by the arrival of three or four fresh brigades of the American army: now concentrating to advance upon the capital.

The tables were turned, and the hostile Poblanos were reduced—if not to a state of friendship, at least to one of fear.

They had cause. Along with our troops came a regiment of “Texas Rangers”—the dread of all modern Mexicans—with scores of nondescript camp followers, by our enemies equally to be dreaded.

Still more to be feared, and shunned, by the citizens of Puebla, was a band of *regular robbers*, whom General Scott—for some sapient purpose of his own—had incorporated with the American army, under the title of the “Spy Company”—the name taken from the service they were intended to perform.

They were the band of captain—usually styled “colonel”—Dominguez; an ex-officer of Santa Anna’s army, who for years had sustained himself in the mountains around Perote, and the *mal pais* of El Piñol—a terror to all travellers not rich enough to command a strong escort of Government “dragones.”

They were true highwaymen—*salteadores del camino grande*—each mounted on his own horse, and armed with carbine, pistol, lance, or long sword!

They were dressed in various fashions; but generally in the picturesque *ranchero* costume of *jaqueta*, *calzoneros*, and broad-brimmed high-crowned hats; booted, spurred, sashed, laced, and tasselled.

On the shoulders of some might be seen the

serapé; while not a few were draped with the magnificent *manga*.

On joining us they were a hundred and twenty strong, with recognized officers—a captain and a couple of “tenientes,” with the usual number of “sarjentes” and “cabos.”

So close was their resemblance to the *guerilleros* of the enemy, that, to prevent our men from shooting them by mistake, they had been compelled to adopt a distinguishing badge.

It consisted of a strip of scarlet stuff, worn, band-like, round their sombreros—with the loose ends dangling down to the shoulder.

The symbol naturally led to a name. They were known to our soldiers as the “Red Hats”—the phrase not unfrequently coupled with a rude adjunctive.

Outlawed in their own land—now associated with its invaders—it is scarce necessary to say that the Red Hats were an object of terror wherever they had a chance of showing their not very cheerful faces.

And in no place more than La Puebla; that had given birth to at least one-half of them, and to all

of them, at one time or another, shelter within its gaols !

Now returned to it under the *ægis* of the American eagle, there was a fine opportunity for the Red Hats to settle old scores with *alcaldes*, *regidores*, and the like ; and they were not backward in availing themselves of it.

The consequence was, that the Poblanos soon laid aside their bullying tone ; and were only too well pleased when allowed to pass tranquilly through their own streets.

I was one among many other officers of the American army who felt disgust at this association with *salteadores*—solely an idea of our superannuated commander-in-chief, since celebrated as the “ hero ” of Bull’s Run.

Endowed with a wonderful conceit in his “ strategic combinations,” the employment of the Spy company was one in which he felt no little pride ; while we regarded it as a positive disgrace.

The act might have been allowable under the pressure of a severe necessity. But none such existed. In the anarchical land invaded by us we could have found spies enough—without appealing to its cut-throats.

It is not to be denied that Dominguez and his robbers did us good service. Faithfulness to our cause was a necessity of their existence. Outlawed before—now doubly estranged by their treason—they were hated by their countrymen with an intensity beyond bounds; and, wherever caught straying beyond our lines, death was their certain doom.

In several skirmishes, into which they were drawn with their own guerilleros, they fought like very tigers—well knowing that, if taken, they had no mercy to expect.

On their side the *lex talionis* was practised with a loose hand; so loose that it soon became necessary to restrain it; and they were no longer allowed to go scouting on their own account. Whenever their services were required, they had to be performed under the eye of an officer of mounted rifles or dragoons, with a troop of these acting in concert.

But the terror originally inspired by them continued till the end of the campaign; and the sight of a Red Hat coming along the street was sufficient to terrify the women, and send the children screaming within doors.

In no place were our red-handed allies held in

greater detestation than in the city of La Puebla—partly from the striking resemblance borne to them by a large number of its population, and an antipathy on this account; partly from old hostilities; and, perhaps, not a little from the fact of our having there, more than elsewhere, permitted them to carry out their proclivities.

There was a sort of tacit consent to their swaggering among the Poblanos; as a punishment to the latter for the trouble, which *their* swaggering had caused to us.

It was only for a time, however; and, when things appeared to be going too far, the good old Anglo-American morality—inculcated by the *township school*—resumed its sway over the minds of our soldiers; and the Red Hats were coerced into better behaviour.

CHAPTER XII.

“UN CLAVO SACA OTRO CLAVO.”

Now that its streets were no longer obstructed by the fear of mob violence, or midnight assassination,

we had an opportunity of exploring the "City of the Angels."

A fine old town we found it—with its grand cathedral, of which, according to monkish legend, *real* angels were the architects; its scores of *capillas* and *parroquias*; its hundreds of massive stone and stuccoed houses; and its thousands of *adobé* dwellings.

Besides those standing, we discovered whole streets that had fallen to decay; *barrios* of uninhabited ruins, covered with a weed-tangle of convolvuli, cowage, and other creepers, growing in green luxuriousness over the chaos of crumbling walls.

No other evidence is needed to prove that La Puebla, still the third city of Anahuac, was once much grander than it is to-day.

I sought distraction in wandering through its streets; though there was one into which I never went—the Calle del Obispo.

I shunned it with as much zeal as if there had been a plague in it; though I knew it contained *una cosa muy linda*—the fairest thing in the city of Puebla.

And it was for this that I shunned it. Since

I had no longer the slightest hope of possessing Mercedes Villa-Señor, I was acting in accordance with the counsel of a friend, sager than myself, to whom I had communicated the story of my illusion. The course advised by him was to forget her,—if I could.

“ Don’t go near again, nor see her on any account,” were the words of my wise counsellor. “ It’s the only plan with a passion like yours—suddenly conceived, and, perhaps, founded on a mistaken fancy. She may not be such perfection, after all. You’ve had but a poor chance of judging. Beauty in the balcony is sometimes wonderfully changed when it descends into the street. No doubt this damsel at close quarters would turn out very different from what you describe her. It’s only imagination.”

“ No imagination could create such a form—such a face—such——”

“ Such fiddlesticks! Come, old fellow! Don’t give way to this confounded romancing. I venture to say, that, if you could see her at six feet distance, and under a good strong light, you’d be completely disenchanted. The same tripe-coloured skin all these Spanish women have—that won’t bear the sun

upon it. I wouldn't give one of our fair-haired Saxon girls for a whole shipload of them."

"Take my advice," continued my mentor, whose leaning was towards light hair; "don't see her again. If she should prove plain, it would only cause you a chagrin to discover it; and, if she really be the angel you think she is, better you should never more meet her—except in heaven! From what you've told me, she's either engaged to this young fellow, or in the fair way of being made a fool of—a thing not so uncommon among the damsels of this good city. In either case there's no chance for you. Give up fretting about her. It will be easy as falling off a log. Don't go into the street where she lives; though I don't suppose there'd be much danger of seeing her if you did—now that those rascally Red Hats are about. In a month more we'll be on the march for the Halls of the Moctezumas; and there you'll either get a bullet in your abdomen, or another shot through the heart, from a pair of eyes perhaps as sparkling as those of the Villa-Señor."

The word "never" was upon my lips, and the thought was in my mind. I did not utter it, knowing that my friend would only laugh at me.

“ *Un clavo saca otro clavo* ” (one nail drives out another), continued my Job’s comforter ; “ A proverb of their own exactly applicable to your case. Ah ! well do they understand the intricacies and tricks of love. These same Spaniards understood them three hundred years ago ; while we simple Saxons only knew them as instincts. No doubt Miss Mercedes has often heard the proverb—perhaps often practised it. So take my advice, old boy, and do you the same. Take for your motto, ‘ *un clavo saca otro clavo !* ’ ”

“ All very well for you, who have no love to be expelled. That is a thing not so easy, as you imagine.”

“ Bah ! Easy enough. Look around you. I’ll warrant you’ll see plenty of beautiful women—according to your style—among these dark-complexioned señoritas. Go out upon the streets—into the Alameda—to church—anywhere, excepting into the ‘ street of the bishop.’ ”

I followed my friend’s advice, and sought for the “ *un clavo* ” that should force out the “ *otro clavo.* ” I did not succeed in finding it. The first nail held its place in my heart, despite every endeavour to draw it.

Still did I persevere in the resolution to see Mercedes no more—stern struggle though it cost me.

It was not necessary I should shut my eyes, while passing through the streets. There was little likelihood of my encountering her by chance. More than ever did the ladies keep to their seclusion. And no wonder, during the reign of the Red Hats.

The few who sallied forth in carriages, for a drive round the Alameda, were either the wives of foreign merchants, or belonging to one of the half dozen families, who, from interested motives, had become, for the time, “Ayankeado.”

With these exceptions, we saw only the little brown-skinned *leperas*, in their hideous slate-coloured rebosos; and now and then, when chance conducted us to a fandango, a few flaunting specimens of the class “poblana,” whose patriotism was not proof against our purses.

Among the *élite* our epaulettes were not specially attractive; and our company was altogether tabooed. The gown appeared to take the shine out of the sword. The soldier might rule in the streets; but within doors the sleek *curas* had it all their own way.

It was these last to whom we were chiefly indebted for the taboo ; and of course we hated them accordingly.

For my part, I cared but little. If the *donçellas* of Puebla had made me ever so welcome, I could not have responded to their smiles. The wound I had received from one of them was sufficient for the time ; and, so long as it remained uncicatrized, I had no zest for a second *amour*.

* * * * *

For weeks I adhered to the programme traced out by my friend ; but without finding the relief he had so confidently prognosticated.

The society of woman was absolutely distasteful to me. I had become almost a *gynothrope*.

I sought distraction in the company of men ; and, I regret to add, men who played *monté*.

Play is but a sorry resource—though one of the commonest resorted to—for soothing the pangs of an unrequited passion. The coquette makes many a recruit for the gaming table. Homburg has seen its scores of frequenters—sent there by her arts—hanging over its tables with broken hearts—even when fortune seems smiling upon them !

I had no difficulty in discovering a place to practise the soul-absorbing passion. Professional gamblers travelled along with us—as if part of the regular staff of the army. Every division had its “dealer” of “faro” or “monté;” and almost the first canvas spread in an encampment was that which covered the *tapis vert* of a card table!

In the country it was a tent; in the city a grand saloon, with chandeliers and a set supper.

Our army gamblers usually superintended such places—having established temporary partnerships with the indigenous vultures who owned them.

The game usually played was that universal in Mexico—*monté*. It was the most convenient—permitting players of all kinds and classes, and equally favourable to the novice as to the skilled gambler. There is no skill required—not much knowledge of any sort. A “banquier,” a “croupier,” a piece of green baize, and a pack of Spanish cards—*voilà tout!*

There were two or three of these gambling saloons, or “monté banks,” in La Puebla. More likely there were twenty; but two or three were grand establishments—frequented by the Poblanos

of the better class; where gold *doblones* might be seen upon the green cloth as common as silver dollars. They were attachments to the grand Cafés, or Exchanges, that in Mexican cities take the place of our clubs—serving as places of rendezvous for the *hacendados*, and higher class of *commerciantes*.

One was much frequented by the officers of our army; though not exclusively by them. The Mexican gentlemen did not deny us their company over the monté table; and around it might be seen representatives of the Teutonic and Latinic races, in nearly equal proportions—with many a type between.

Though the natives were all in civilian costume, we knew that there were among them men who had once worn uniforms. In fact, some of them were our prisoners *on parole*; whom we had encountered, and captured, at the siege of Vera Cruz, or on the ensanguined summit of Cerro Gordo.

The poverty of these men was too conspicuous to escape observation. Their pay—scant at all times and often in arrears—was now stopped altogether; and how they contrived to live *on parole*, they and God alone can tell.

It was painful to note their contrivances for keep-

ing up the appearance of gentility. A close inspection of their coats would show where the shoulderstraps and facings had been stripped off—to convert them into civilian garments; and the unfaded stripe, down the seams of their pantaloons, told where the gold lace had once gaily glittered.

They were usually provided with an ample cloth cloak; which in the streets effectually concealed the transformation. But in the hot saloons this could not well be worn; and a man standing behind, as they sat around the *monté* table, might look upon a pair of shoulders—now plain—that had been lately decorated with the epaulettes of a colonel, or even general!

Their ventures were usually of the most modest kind: beginning with a *peseta*, and graduating upwards, in proportion to the propitiousness of Fortune. When their luck was good, they gambled with *doblones*.

Otherwise, the *peseta* ended their play for the night; but, instead of retiring in despair, they would continue at the table; as though they took a pleasure in contemplating the gains of the more fortunate players, and the losses of the banker!

CHAPTER XIII.

A PLEASANT MISCONCEPTION.

There was one of these frequenters of the saloon in whom I felt a peculiar interest. Our acquaintance did not commence at the *monté* table. I first saw him in the Calle del Obispo, and, on the same night, in the Callecito de los Pajoros. His name was Francisco Moreno: the man who had crossed me in love and saved my life!

I had ample opportunity of studying his character, without referring to either incident of that night. I had the advantage of him: for, although I remembered *him* well, and with strange emotions, he had no recollection of *me*!

I had reasons for keeping my incognito.

Though we had become otherwise acquainted—and were upon such terms of comity, as two strangers who meet over a gaming table—I could learn very little about him—beyond the fact that he was, or had been, an officer in the Mexican army. My own observation told me as much as this. His bearing, with an occasional speech that escaped him, pro-

claimed the military man : for in this, as in other callings, there is a freemasonry : and the *rajpoot* of one land will easily recognize his *caste* in another.

He was one of the Mexican officers *on parole* ; but we had reason to believe that there were many others among us—during our long interval of inaction—who had no business to be there. We were not very particular about *spies* ; and, in truth, they might have come and gone—and they did come and go—with as much freedom as if no guard had been kept. Successes unexpected—almost astounding—a series of them—had taught us to despise even the secret machinations of our enemy. His scouts might have entered our camp, partaken of hospitality in our tents—even in the *marquée* of the commander-in-chief—and departed again with as much facility as a man might obtain an interview with his hatter or tailor !

No one thought of suspecting Francisco Moreno. No one gave heed to him, any more than to remark what a fine, noble-looking young fellow he was.

I alone made a particular study of him. I knew that he was more than noble-looking—that he was noble.

It maddened me to think he was the first ; though I could scarce be grieved at his being the last. Had it not been so, I should not have lived to take note of it. I had strange fancies—sometimes not very creditable ones—about captain Moreno.

It was plain that he was poor ; though not one of those who had converted the military tunic into a civilian's coat. His dress, if threadbare, would pass muster as a correct costume. Nor did he put down *pesetas* upon the *tapis vert*. His stake was usually a *peso*—sometimes two—but never rising to the *onza*. The dollar lost, he would retire from the table. Winning, he would remain.

One night I observed a reversion of the rule. His stakes were being doubled at each draw of the cards ; and yet he rose from his seat, and hastily took his departure from the place !

Many wondered at this. A man must be mad to leave such luck ? It was like flinging the favours of Fortune back into her face.

I had a clearer comprehension of what had caused his defection from the gaming circle. I divined, that he was going to worship the goddess elsewhere, and under another title.

I had heard the cathedral clock strike ten—the hour when I had first seen him in the Calle del Obispo. It suggested the conjecture that he was going thither.

Had my own luck at the game been ten times greater than it was—and I was winning—I could not have stayed to take advantage of it.

I clutched at my stake, as soon as it was covered by the coin of the croupier; and, starting up from the table, followed Francisco Moreno from the saloon.

Whether my abrupt departure created as much surprise, as that of the Mexican, I never knew.

It may have done; but at that moment I was absolutely indifferent, either to the thing itself, or the conjectures that might arise respecting it.

I had but one thought in my mind; and that was to witness a second of those interviews—the first of which had lacerated my heart to its core!

I felt as the bird may feel, fluttering into the jaws of the envenomed reptile; as the moth that goes voluntarily to have its wings scorched by the candle!

There was a fascination in the thought of thus

rushing upon ruin ! Perhaps it was the knowledge, that my heart could not be reduced to a greater desolation than it already knew.

For the first time in four weeks I entered the Calle del Obispo.

Francisco was before me. I had correctly divined his intent. He had forsaken the smiles of Fortune to bask in those of Mercedes !

We took different sides of the street ; he going silently along the *façade* of the Casa Villa-Señor ; I skulking, thief-like, under the portal of the opposite house.

We were not kept waiting for as much as an instant. Scarce had we taken our respective stands, when the blind was drawn back, and a woman appeared in the window. Of course it was Mercedes.

“ You are late, Francisco ! ” said she, in an undertone, and with the slightest accent of reproach. “ The cathedral has tolled ten minutes ago ! It is very cruel. You know how I am watched, and that every moment is so precious ! ”

Francisco stammered out some excuse, which appeared to satisfy her. I could see she was not



“ En la Alameda—a seis horas !”

exacting—by the easy grace with which she forgave him. Even this increased my anguish.

“Do you know, dearest, papa is more suspicious than ever! Even now I am afraid he will be coming this way. He has not yet retired to his bed; and never does till both sister and I have gone to ours.”

“Why don’t you give him a sleeping draught? Put poppy-seed in his chocolate. Do that, *niña*, and we might have a better chance of a little conversation at this hour. I never see you now, or only for a moment. It’s very tiresome to be kept apart in this fashion. I hope it is the same to you?”

“Do you doubt it? You do not? But what help for it? He is so much against you. I think some one has been telling him something bad about you. When we go to *matins* he always sends *Tia Josefa* along with us, and I’m sure she has instructions to watch us. I know it’s only *me*. He’s not half so careful about sister. He allows her to drive out alone—to the Alameda—anywhere. If I go, I must be accompanied by *Tia Josefa*.”

“The deuce take *Tia Josefa*!”

“And do you know, Francisco, there’s something worse yet? I’ve only heard it this very day. Josefa told it me. I believe papa put it in her head to tell me. If I don’t consent to marry *him*—you know whom I mean—I’m to be shut up in a convent! Only think of it! Imprisoned for life in a dark cloister, or marry a man I can’t love—old enough to be my uncle! *Ay Dios!* What am I to do about it?”

“Neither one nor the other of those two things—if I can hinder it. Don’t be uneasy, love! I’ll find some way to save you from such a fate—which would be equally ruinous to myself. Your father can have nothing against me, except that I’m poor. Who knows but that I may become rich during this war. I have hopes of promotion, and—listen dearest!”

Here the voice of Francisco sank into a whisper, as if the communication he was making required peculiar secrecy.

The words were not audible across the street; neither were those murmured in response. I only heard some phrases that fell from the lady’s lips as she turned to go inside.

“ *Adios querido ! Hasta la mañana !* ”

Far sweeter to *my* ear were some words spoken by Francisco himself.

“ Stay ! A moment, *dear Dolores !* one moment — ”

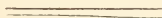
I did not hear the conclusion of his passionate appeal, nor the reply—if there was one.

Dolores might have stayed in the *balcon*, and chatted with her dear Francis for an hour by the cathedral clock, without giving me the slightest chagrin. I was too happy to listen to another word of their conversation.

Mercedes—*my* Mercedes—was not she who had dropped that little note, and said to him who received it, “ *Va con Dios !* ”

There was still a hope that her heart was free ; that no “ *querido Francisco* ” had yet taken possession of it !

“ God grant but that,” was my mental prayer, as I turned to take my departure, “ and Mercedes may yet be mine ! ”



CHAPTER XIV.

QUE COSA ?

Giving way to sweet imaginings, I stood for some seconds under the shadow of the portal.

Meanwhile the Mexican had passed out of the street.

As I believed that he had gone back to the saloon we had both lately forsaken, I started in the same direction.

I now longed to have a conversation with him ; determined in my own mind that it should be more cordial than any that had yet taken place between us. I could at that moment have embraced him : for my gratitude, hitherto restrained by the thought of his being my rival, was suddenly exalted to a feeling of fervour.

I should seek an interview with the noble youth ; make known who it was he had befriended ; and ask if there was any way in which I could reciprocate his generosity ?

My heart was overflowing towards Francisco Moreno ! As he had been the cause of my late

misery, I now looked upon him as the instrument of my regeneration.

“Oh! I shall make an ample return to him! But what is it to be?”

Just as I gave thought to the interrogatory, a harsh sound struck upon my ears—as if some one, suddenly stopped in the street, had uttered a cry of mixed anger and surprise. It was followed by the words:

“*Que cosa caballeros? Que cosa conmigo?*” (What is it, gentlemen? What do you want with me?)

“*Vuestra bolsa, señor; nada mas.*” (Your purse, sir; nothing more.)

“*Carrambo!* A modest demand! For all that, I’m not inclined to comply with it. You may have my purse; but not till after you’ve taken my life. Out of the way, scoundrels! Let me pass!”

“Upon him, *camarados!* He is loaded with doblones. *Al tierra!* Down with him!”

These words—not very loudly spoken—were succeeded by the sounds of a struggle, in which several men appeared to take part; five or six, as I could tell by the shuffling of their shoes upon the flagged pavement.

I no longer heard words ; or only a few, that seemed spoken under restraint, and scarce louder than whispers !

Even he who had first called out appeared to have become suddenly silent !

For all that the struggle was continuing !

The street in which it was taking place was a sort of narrow passage—leading from one of the main thoroughfares towards the Piazza Grande—and not far from the entrance to the Calle del Obispo.

It was dimly illumined by a solitary lard lamp, whose feeble flickering only served to make the path more uncertain.

I had myself entered the lane—which chanced to be a near cut between the café to which I was returning, and the “calle” I had left behind. It was just as I had got into it that the cry fell upon my ears, followed by the challenge “*Que cosa caballeros ?*”

The rest of the dialogue did not occupy ten seconds of time, before the conflict commenced ; and, as the scene of strife was not more than ten paces from where I had paused, another half score of seconds carried me up to the spot.

I had been thus prompt in rushing to the rescue, because I fancied that I knew the voice of the man who was being assaulted.

I was right. It was Francisco Moreno!

I found him in the midst of five men, forming a sort of quincunx around him; against all five of whom he was industriously defending himself; while they were as busy in the endeavour to get him down.

They were all armed with *machetés*; while he wielded a sword, which he had drawn from under his cloak.

I could see that the attacking party carried pistols, but did not attempt to use them—perhaps from fear of causing an alarm, and thus defeating their purpose: to all appearance plunder!

I was not so chary about the discharging of mine. The moment I caught sight of the *Red Hats*—for the assailants were so distinguished—I had a clear comprehension of the sort of gentry with whom the Mexican had to deal, as well as the character of the attack.

The blood ran scalding within my veins. But that very day I had been sickened at hearing the

details of an atrocity, committed by these precious pets of our commander-in-chief; and I had mentally vowed, if I should ever chance to catch one of them at their tricks, to make short work with him.

The chance had come sooner than I expected; and I remembered my vow.

The shout with which I interrupted their pastime was almost loud enough to hinder them from hearing the report of my pistol; but one of them caught the bullet that came out of it, and went groaning into the gutter.

I might have shot down a second, or even a third, before they could get out of the way; though they were anything but slow in making disappearance.

I was satisfied with having put an end to one: for this had I done, as was evident from the silent lump of humanity that lay doubled up along the stones.

CHAPTER XV.

LIFE FOR LIFE.

“*Gracias!*” cried the young Mexican, “*mil gracias, caballero!* That’s all I can say till I get back my breath.”

He stopped. I could hear his respiration, quick and heavy, as that of a horse halted after a rapid run.

“I hope you have not received any serious injury?” I said, on becoming assured that the only Red Hat remaining in the street was the one lying along the kerb-stone. “Are you wounded?”

“Nothing to signify, I think. A cut or two, perhaps. They’re only scratches.”

“You’re sure?”

“Not quite, caballero; though I fancy I’m all right. I don’t feel disabled—only a little fatigued. It was rather quick play, keeping guard against all five at once. I had no chance to get a thrust at them, else I might have reduced the number. You’ve done that, I perceive. Once more let me thank you for my life.”

“There is no need. It is simply a debt paid in kind; and we are now quits.”

“Señor, your speech mystifies me. I cannot tell whether I have the honour of knowing the brave man who has done me such signal service. Your voice sounds like one I’ve heard before. You’ll excuse me. It’s so dark here—”

“ You and I are so much in the habit of having encounters in dark places, I begin to think there’s a fatality in it.”

“ *Carrambo !*” exclaimed the Mexican, still further mystified by my remark. “ Where have we had these encounters ? Pray tell me, señor ?”

“ You don’t remember capitan Moreno ?”

“ It is my name ! You know me ?”

“ I have good reason.”

“ You astonish me. If I mistake not, you are in uniform—an American officer ?”

“ I am.”

“ May I ask where we have met ? At the *monté* table ?”

“ We have met at *monté* more than once. It was not there, however, that I had my first introduction to you, but—”

“ Where ?”

“ In your house.”

“ *Una burla, señor !* No matter ; you are welcome.”

“ No jest, I assure you. Our first exchange of speech was under your own roof.”

“ *Caspita !* You confound me.”

“ ’Tis true, I did not go inside—only just over the doorstep. There we met and parted—both a little unmannerly. For the first I was to blame. The last, I think, you ought to share with me. By your abrupt closing of the door, you gave me no chance of showing politeness; else I should have stayed to thank you for doing, what you say I have just done for you. I intended to seek an opportunity some day. It seems I have found it without seeking.”

“ *Santissima Virgen!* you, then, are the gentleman—”

“ Who on a certain night so unceremoniously made entrance into the house of Don Francisco Moreno, in the Callecito de los Pajaros; who went in head-foremost, and no doubt would have been carried out feet foremost, but for the fortune that gave him such a generous host. Ah! captain Moreno,” I continued, in the ardour of my gratitude grasping the young soldier’s hand, “ I said we were quits. Far, far from it; you owe me perhaps your life. To you I am indebted for mine; and—and much more.”

“ *Por Dios, caballero!* you continue to mystify me. What more?”

Under the dominion of a sweet excitement, I was on the point of confessing my *amourette* with Mercedes, and telling him how he had interrupted it—in short, telling him all. No longer rivals, but fellow-suitors for two fair sisters, we were journeying along the same road. A common motive—each having a different object—instead of estranging, ought rather to unite us?

And yet there was a doubt. Something counselled me to reticence. My secret remained unspoken; not even mention being made of the Calle del Obispo.

“Oh!” I answered, taming down my tone of enthusiasm, “Much more depended on my life. Had I lost it—”

“Had you lost it,” interrupted the young Mexican, relieving me from the necessity of further explanation, “it would have been a sad misfortune for me: since this night I should have lost mine. Five minutes more, and these footpads would have overpowered me. As for my having saved *your* life, that is scarcely correct. Your own comrades did it. But for their timely arrival, we might not have been able to withstand the assault of the angry *patriotas*; who were led by a man of no common kind.”

“ So much the greater reason for my gratitude to you.”

“ Well, you have amply acquitted the debt. But for your interference here—the more generous that you did not know for whom it was exerted—I might now be lying in the place of that red-hatted, red-handed wretch; who has been alike a traitor to his country and his God !”

The last words were pronounced with a scornful emphasis, as if the speaker’s patriotism had become fired at the sight of the renegade robber.

“ But, caballero !” he continued, changing to a more tranquil tone, “ you say we have also met at the *monté* table. Lately ?”

“ Our latest meeting has been to-night.”

“ To-night !”

“ About an hour ago. Perhaps a little less.”

“ *Carrambo !* You must have been there at the time I left the saloon. You saw me go out ?”

“ Every one saw you. More than one remarked it as strange.”

“ Why strange, señor ?”

“ It is not usual for a player to run away from such luck as you had—without a very powerful

motive. Something of the kind carried you off, I presume?"

" *Por Dios!* Not much of that. Only a little errand that required punctuality. I executed it; and was on my way back, when these *picarones* attacked me. Thanks to you, sir, it may still be in my power to gain another *onza* or two; which I intend doing, if the luck has not been drawn out of me along with these drops of blood. But come, caballero! are you going back yourself?" 'Tis not too late to have another *albur*."

"I shall go with you, to see whether you've received any wounds that require looking after."

"Thanks, thanks! They're nothing; else I should have thought of them before now. No doubt they're scarce worth dressing. A little soap and water will set them all right. Are we to leave *him* here?"

"If dead, yes. He don't deserve even the scant honour of being carried upon a stretcher."

"You are not partial to your red-hatted associates?"

"I detest them; and so does every officer in our army who cares for its escutcheon. They were regular professional robbers, these renegades—were they not?"

“Were, are, and will be. *Salteadores del camino grande!*”

“Many of us consider it a scandal. So the world will esteem it. A band of brigands taken into the service of a civilized nation, and treated as its own soldiers! Who ever heard of such a thing?”

“Ah, señor! I see you are a true soldier of civilization. I am sorry to say that in my poor country such travesties are but too common. In our army—that is, the army of his most Illustrious Excellency, General Don Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna—you may discover captains, colonels—nay, even generals, who——. But no. It is not for me to pour these sad revelations into the ears of an enemy. Perhaps in time you may find out for yourself some strange things; which we of the country are accustomed to call—*Cosas de Mexico!*”

CHAPTER XIV.

EARLY BIRDS.

I supped with Francisco. The goddess Fortuna did not show any grudge against him, for his short

flirtation with the sister divinity ; but, on his return to the monté table, again smiled upon him—as she did upon myself.

By way of a change we paid our addresses to Cœna and Bacchus—to the latter more especially—keeping up our devotions to a late hour of the night.

It did not hinder me from being early abroad on the morning after. I saw the rose-tints upon the “White Sister,” as Phœbus imprinted his first kiss upon her snowy brow. I saw this as I entered the Calle del Obispo—the magnificent mountain appearing like a white wall stretched across at the termination of the street !

You will scarce ask why I was there? Only, why at such an early hour?

I could but gaze at the house—trace the frescoes on its *façade*—feast my eyes upon inanimate objects ; or, if animate, only nest-building birds, or domestics of the mansion.

You are thinking of Park-lane—not Puebla, where the angels rise early. In Park-lane they sleep till a late hour, having “retired” at a late hour. In Puebla they are up with the sun, having gone to bed with the same.

The explanation is easy. Puebla is Catholic—a city of *orisons*. Park-lane is Protestant, and more given to midnight revels!

Had I not known the peculiarity of Mexican customs in this respect, I should not have been traversing the “Street of the Bishop” before seven o’clock in the morning.

But I did know them; and that the lady who, at that hour, or before it, is not on her way to church—*capilla, parroquia*, or cathedral—is either too old to take an interest in the *confessional*, or too humble to care for the Church at all!

Few there are of this sort in the City of the Angels. It was not likely that Mercedes Villa-Señor would be among the number. Her sister, Dolores, had let me into a secret—without knowing, or intending it.

In Mexico there are two twilights—equally interesting to those who make love by stealth. One precedes the rising, the other follows the setting, of the sun.

It seems like reversing the order of nature to say that the former is more favourable to the *culte* of the god Cupid—but in Mexico it is even so. While the Belgravian beauty lies asleep on her soft couch,

dreaming of fresh conquests, the fair Poblana is abroad upon the streets, or kneeling before the shrine of the Virgin—in the act of *making them!*

Early as I had sallied out, I was a little behind time. *Oracion* bells had commenced tolling all over the town. As I entered the Calle del Obispo, I saw three female forms passing out at its opposite end. Two walked side by side; the third a little behind them.

I might have permitted them to pass on without further remark, had it not been that the great gate of the Casa Villa-Señor stood open.

The *portero* was closing it, as if a party had just passed out; and it could only be they who were going along the street.

The two in advance? Who should they be but the daughters of Don Eusebio Villa-Señor?

The third I scarce spent a thought upon; or only to conjecture, that she was *Tia Josefa*.

The Calle del Obispo had no further attractions for me. Folding my cloak around me, I followed the trio of señoras.

A spurt of quick walking brought me close upon the heels of Tia Josefa, and within good viewing

distance of the two damsels—over whom she was playing *dueña*.

I had no longer any doubt of their being the daughters of Don Eusebio, though both were veiled to the eyes. Over the eyes in fact: since their shawls were carried *tapado*. Instead of hanging from the shoulder, they were drawn across the crown of the head, and held under the chin—so as completely to conceal the countenance!

The black Spanish eye sparkling in shadow was all that could have been seen; though I saw it not: as I was at some distance behind them.

I saw that of Tia Josefa—as she turned, on perceiving my shadow projected before her on the pavement.

There was a sudden glance, accompanied by the bristling of a fan, as the maternal hen ruffles her feathers when the shadow of the hawk is seen sailing towards her chicks.

Only for an instant was I the object of *aunt* Josefa's suspicion. My meek look, directed towards the "White Sister," at once reassured her. I was not the bird of prey she had been cautioned to keep guard against: and, after a cursory glance at me, she went on after her pair of protegés.

I did likewise.

Though they were dressed exactly in the same style—wearing black lace shawls, with high combs holding them above their heads—though their figures were scarce to be distinguished in height, shape, or *tournure*—though the backs of both were toward me—I could tell my chosen at a glance.

There is something in the physical form—less in its muscular development than its motion—in the play of the arms and limbs—that proclaims the spirit within. It is that unmistakable, and yet undefinable essence we term *grace*; which Nature alone can give, and Art cannot acquire. It is a quality of the soul; and not belonging to the body—to the adornment of which it but lends itself.

It proclaimed itself in every movement of Mercedes Villa-Señor—in her step, her carriage, the raising of her hand, the serpentine undulation perceptible throughout her whole frame. Every gesture made was a living illustration of Hogarth's line.

Grace was not denied to Dolores; though to her given in a lesser degree. There was a sprightliness about her movements that many might have admired; but which in my mind but poorly compared with the

grand, queen-like, air that characterized the step of her sister.

I soon became aware that they were on their way to the Cathedral—whose matin bells were filling the streets with their clangour. Other intended devotees—most of them women, in shawls and *rebosos*—were hastening across the Piazza Mayor, in the same direction.

Dolores alone looked round. Several times she did so—turning again towards the Cathedral with an air of evident dissatisfaction.

Her seeing me made not the slightest difference—a stranger accidentally walking the same way.

I felt no chagrin at her indifference. I divined the cause of it. I was not “Querido Francisco.”

Mercedes appeared to be uninterested in aught that was passing around. Her air was that of one a little “out of sorts”—as was shown by the cold salutations she exchanged with the “caballeros” encountered upon the way, and who one and all seemed to court a more cordial “buenas dias.”

Only once did she show sign of being interested:—when an American officer in the uniform of the Mounted Rifles came galloping along the street. Then

only during the six seconds spent in scrutinizing him, as he swept past ; after which her eyes once more turned towards the Cathedral.

Its massive door stood open to admit the early devotees, who were by this time swarming up the steps.

The sisters became part of the throng, and passed on inside—Tia Josefa closely following, and keeping up her espionage with as much strictness, as while passing along the streets !

I did the same—with a different intent.

CHAPTER XVII.

AT MATINS.

It was the first time I had made my devotions in a Roman Catholic Cathedral ; and I shall not say that I then worshipped as I should have done.

Santa Gaudalupe—beautiful as the sensuous Mexican priesthood have had the cunning to conceive her—glorious as she appeared in her golden shrine—was scarce regarded by me.

More attractive were the black lace shawl and high comb of Mercedes Villa-Señor—not for them-

selves, but for the lovely countenance I knew to be underneath them.

I watched them with eyes that wandered not. In my heart I anathematized them as the most detestable screens ever interposed between a lover's eye and its idol.

While engaged in her devotions a Mexican *señorita* assumes three distinct attitudes. She stands, she kneels, she *squats*. I regret my inability to express in more elegant phrase, that peculiar species of genuflexion, which may be described as the dropping down from the kneeling attitude to one a degree lower. It is a feat of feminine gymnastics that has long mystified me; and I am not anatomist enough either to comprehend or explain it.

Mercedes Villa-Señor appeared perfect in every *posé*. Even her *squatting* was graceful!

I watched her changing attitudes as the ceremony proceeded—the chant, the prayer, the lesson. During all these she never once looked round. I thought she must be a *saint*—a thought scarce in keeping with the conjectures I had hitherto shaped concerning her.

It gave me but slight pleasure to think she was so

holy. I should have preferred finding her human—that angel of angels !

Dolores appeared less devout. At all events, she was less attentive to her prayers. Twenty times I perceived her eyes averted from the altar—turned toward the doorway—peering into shadowy aisles—looking everywhere but upon the officiating priest.

His shaven crown had no attraction for her. She searched for the shining curls of “querido Francisco !”

He was not in the Cathedral—at least, I could not see him. I had my own thoughts about the cause of his absence.

Less accustomed to “sparkling wine,” he had not borne its effects like the boon companion who shared the revel along with him ; or had not so readily recovered from it.

Certainly he was not there. So much the less trouble for Tia Josefa !

I could have told Dolores a tale that would have given her gratification. I wanted to do as much for Mercedes.

The time passed—chant and psalm, lesson and prayer, rapidly succeeding one another. Bells were

tinkled, incense burnt, and wax candles carried about.

Still kept Mercedes her eyes upon the altar; still seemed she absorbed by a ceremonial, which to me appeared more than absurd—idolatrous.

In my heart I hated it worse than ever in my life. I could scarce restrain myself from scowling upon the priest. I envied him the position that could make his paltry performance so attractive—to eyes like those then looking upon him.

Thank heaven they are mine at last—at last!

Yes: at last they were mine. I was seen, and recognized.

I had entered the Cathedral without thought of worshipping at its altar. The love I carried in my heart was different from that inculcated within those sacred walls—far different from that inscribed upon the tablet: “God is love.” My love was human; and, perhaps, impure! I shall not say that it was what it should have been—a love, such as we read of among troubadours and knights-errant of the olden time. I can lay claim to belong to no other class than that of the simple *adventurer*; who, with tongue, pen, or sword—as the chances turned

up—has been able, in some sort, to make his way through the world !

In my designs there may have been selfishness ; but not one iota in the passion I felt for Mercedes Villa-Señor. It was too romantic to be mean.

In her first glance I read recognition. Only that and nothing more,—at least nothing to gratify me.

But it was soon followed by another, on which I was pleased to place a different interpretation. It was the warm look that had won, and once more seemed to *welcome* me !

There was a third, and a fourth, timidly stolen through the fringe of the *chalé*. The very stealth flattered my vanity, and gave a new impulse to my hopes. There was more than one reason for it : the sacredness of the place ; the reticence of maiden modesty ; and perhaps more than either : the presence of Tia Josefa.

Again our glances met—mine given with all the ardour of a love long restrained.

Once more they met in sweet exchanging—once more, and once more. I had won Mercedes from her worship !

No doubt it was wicked of me to feel joy at the

thought; and, no doubt, I deserved the punishment that was in store for me.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CHALLENGE IN A CHURCH.

While carrying on my eye-courtship with the kneeling devotee, I stood somewhat in shadow. A column, with the statue of some canonized churchman, afforded me a niche where I was concealed from the other worshippers.

But there was a darker shadow behind me—occupied by a darker substance.

Tia Josefa was not the only spy present in the Cathedral.

I was made aware of it, by hearing a voice—of course spoken in a whisper, but so close to my ear, that I had no difficulty in distinguishing every word.

The voice said :—

“*Por Dios, caballero!* You appear greatly interested in the *oracion!* You cannot be a *heretico*, like the rest of your countrymen?”

The sting of a wasp could not have caused me a

more unpleasant sensation. The double meaning of the speech was not to be mistaken. The speaker had observed the eye signals passing between Mercedes and myself!

I glanced into the gloom behind me.

It was some seconds before I could see any one. My eyes dazzled with the splendour of the church adornments, refused to do their office.

Before I could trace out either his shape, or countenance, the whispering stranger again addressed me :—

“I hope, señor, you will not be offended by my free speech? It gratifies us *Catolicos* to perceive that our Holy Church is making converts among the *Americanos*. I’ve been told there is a good deal of this sort of thing. Our *padres* will be delighted to know that *their* conquest by the Word is likely to compensate for *our* defeat by the sword.”

Despite the impertinence, there was something so ingenious in the *argument* thus introduced, that I was prevented from making immediate reply. Stark surprise had also to do with my silence.

I waited upon my eyes, in order that I might first see what sort of personage was speaking to me.

Gradually my sight overcame the obscurity, and disclosed what the corner contained: a man several degrees darker than the shadow itself, up to his ears in a *serapé*, with a black sombrero above them, and between hat and "blanket" a countenance that could only belong to a scoundrel!

I could see a bearded chin and lip, and a face lit up by a pair of eyes sparkling with sinister light. I could see, moreover, that despite the *badinage* of the speeches addressed to me there was *real anger* in them!

The sarcasm was all pretence. He, who had given utterance to it, was too much in earnest to deal long in irony; and I did not for a moment doubt that I was standing in the presence of one who, like myself, was a candidate for the smiles of Mercedes Villa-Señor.

The thought was not one to make me more tolerant of the slight that had been put upon me. On the contrary, it but increased my indignation—already at a white heat.

"Señor!" I said, in a voice with great difficulty toned down to a whisper, "you may thank your stars you are inside a church. If you'd spoken those

words upon the street, they'd have been the last of your life."

"The street's not far off. Come out; and I shall there repeat them."

"Agreed!"

My challenger was nearest to the door, and started first. I followed three steps after.

In the vestibule I paused—only for a second—to see whether my exit was being noted by the kneeling Mercedes.

It was. She was gazing after me—no longer by stealth; but in surprise; I fancied in chagrin!

Had she divined the cause of my abrupt departure?

That was scarcely probable.

In the position lately occupied by my unknown challenger, she could not have seen him. The statue interposed; and the column covered him, as he stepped towards the door.

I returned her glance by one intended to reassure her. With my eyes I said:—

"A moment, sweet saint, and you shall see me again!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A QUIET STREET.

I was not so confident of being able to keep my promise, as I stepped out into the sunlight, and saw a little before me the man who was to be my antagonist.

He stood six feet in his russet boots, with a frame that seemed as sinewy, as herculean. He had all the look of a *vieux sabreur*; and I knew he would insist upon the sword for his weapon.

A Mexican makes but a poor fight with firearms. They are too noisy for taking life—in the way he oft wishes to take it. I was certain my challenger would choose the sword.

By the etiquette of the *duello*, I might have insisted upon having the choice; but I was too angry to stand upon punctilios.

The Cathedral of Puebla stands upon a raised *dâis*—with a stone stairway along its *façade*, and around three sides. Down this the stranger preceded me—having already descended several of the steps before I came out.

At the bottom he paused to await me ; and there, for the first time, I had a fair chance of scrutinizing him.

Forty, but with that tough, terse figure that betokens a man who has passed his life in energetic action, and whose nerves have never been a day out of training.

The face was not a whit improved by the light of the sun. It looked as foul as I had fancied it, when seen under the shadow of the Saint. It told of an ill-spent past, and prognosticated an evil future.

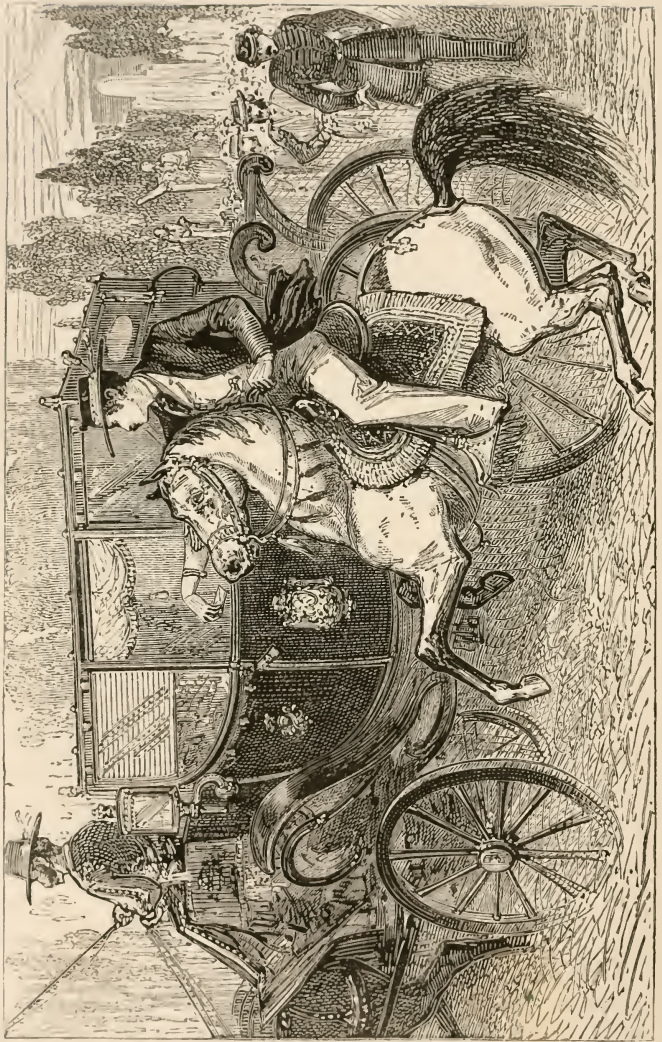
What could the man want with me ?

Under other circumstances I might have asked the question ; but I did not then. I had a tolerably clear comprehension, of what had stimulated him to seek the *desafio*.

Like myself, he was in love with Mercedes Villa-Señor ; like myself, ready to defy to the death whoever might present himself as a rival !

He had recognized me as such ; a successful one— if his interpretation of her glances corresponded with my own.

I had no doubt about this being the reason for his having so deliberately provoked me.



La Billetita.

“It’s rather public just here,” said he, on receiving me at the bottom of the stair. “The Piazza is not the best place for a purpose like ours.”

“Why not?” I asked, impatient to put an end to an episode that was causing me annoyance.

“Oh! only that we are likely to be interrupted by policemen, or patrols. Perhaps *you* would prefer it that way?”

“Lepero!” I cried, losing all temper. “Take me where you will—only be quick about it! Once on the ground, there won’t be much chance for either policeman or patrol, to save you from the sword you are tempting from its scabbard. Lead on!”

“There’s a quiet street close by,” said he, with a coolness that surprised, and, but for my rage, might have disconcerted me; “There we can have our game out, without risk of interruption. You consent to our going there?”

“Certainly. The place is all one to me. As to the time, it won’t take long to teach you a lesson, that will last you for your life.”

“*Nos veremos, señor! Nos vamos!*” was the singular response of my challenger, as he started to conduct me to the “quiet street.”

Mechanically I walked after him, though not without misgivings. Had I been in a proper state of mind, I might have reflected more seriously on the step I was called upon to take.

It could scarce have appeared other than it really was—imprudent.

After passing through several streets, we came to the entrance of that we were in search of.

On turning into it, some vague remembrance flitted across my brain. I fancied I had been there before.

I glanced up to the coign of the corner house. In black lettering I read the inscription :—

“ Callecito de los Pajaros !”

I next looked at my man. I had also some vague memory about *him*—associated with the “ Little Street of the Sparrows.”

The locality quickened my recollection ; and before proceeding farther, I stopped short, and demanded his name.

“ *Carrambo!* Why do you ask that ?” he inquired, in a taunting tone. “ Do you intend to report me in the other world, for despatching you prematurely out of this ? Ha ! ha ! ha !”

“Well,” he continued, “I won’t disappoint you. Tell the devil, when you see him, that he is indebted to Captain Torreano Carrasco for sending him a subject. Now, señor! are you ready to die?”

There needed no further proof to tell me I was entrapped. If there had, it was furnished by sight of a half-score savage-looking *peludos*, who, issuing from the adjacent doors, came running towards us—evidently intending to take part in the combat.

No longer to be a duel. I saw that my challenger had no thought of such a thing. He had changed his chivalric tone, and his voice was once more heard leading the contemptible cry—

“*Muera el Americano!*”

CHAPTER XX.

RESCUED BY RED HATS.

The Street of the Sparrows appeared to be my doomed spot. For the second time there seemed no chance of my getting out of it alive; and for the second time I made up my mind to die hard in it.

Despite the suddenness with which Carrasco had

surprised me, I was upon my guard—before he or any of his comrades could come to close quarters.

But this time, alas! I was without revolver, or pistol of any kind. Not dreaming of danger at that early hour of the day, I had sallied forth, wearing only my parade sword. With this fickle weapon I could not possibly defend myself against half a score of men armed with thin long-bladed *machetés*.

Grasping its hilt was like leaning upon a reed.

I thought of Francisco of again throwing myself upon his protection.

But which of the fifty dwellings was his?

Even could I have told the right one, would I have time to reach it, or would he be at home?

There was a chance that he might be—that he might hear my cries, and come out. It was so slight as to seem hopeless; and yet I clutched at it, as a drowning man at a straw!

Shouting, I retreated along the street—in what I believed to be the direction of his dwelling.

I am not ashamed to acknowledge, that I called loudly for help—coupling my calls with the name of Francisco Moreno. A man, with death staring him in the teeth, may be excused for dropping a

trifle of his dignity. I shouted like a respectable shopkeeper attacked by a gang of garotters.

The Street of the Sparrows was fatal to me only in promise; and for the second time fortune favoured my escape from it.

Help came; though not from the quarter so loudly solicited. Francisco's door remained shut; at least it was not opened by him. It was thrown open by a score of Red Hats, who at that moment appeared entering the street.

At any other time the sight of these sanguinary allies would have caused me a thrill of antagonism. Now they seemed saints—as they proved saviours!

They had shown themselves in the nick of time. Carrasco and his compeers were close behind me—so close that the points of their *machetés* were within six inches of my spine.

On espying the Red Hats they retreated in the opposite direction—going off even faster than they had been following me!

Seeing myself disembarrassed of the danger, I advanced to meet my preservers. I had no idea of what they could be doing there; until I saw them stop in front of a house—where they demanded admittance.

The demand was made in a rude manner, and in terms of an unmistakable determination to enter.

As no one opened the door, they commenced hammering upon it with the butts of their *escopetas* ; for several of them were armed with this weapon.

The door finally gave way—having yielded at the hinges—and, swinging round, stood partially ajar.

Not till then had I the slightest suspicion of what the Red Hats were after. Some “bit of burglary,” I supposed, done in open day ; for there was no reason to think the contrary. I could see they were a straggling lot—out on their own account, and without authority.

I was not enlightened about their object, till I saw the face of Francisco Moreno behind the half-opened door, scowlingly confronting them !

It was his house ; though I had not before recognized it.

The conclusion came quick as electricity. They were there to arrest him, for killing one of their comrades on the night before, or being an accomplice in the act !

I heard them make the declaration to the young soldier himself.

They had sufficient respect for the law to treat with him for a quiet surrender. More probably they feared his resistance—as he stood sword in hand in the doorway—looking like anything but a man who was going to give himself up!

Had he yielded, they would scarce have kept faith with him. I had no doubt of their intention to slay him upon the spot, instead of taking him to their quarters.

It was a crisis that called for my interference; and I interfered.

It only needed the throwing open my cloak, and pointing out the “spread eagle” on my button.

The slightest disobedience to me would have cost them a score of lashes each—“on the bare back, well laid on.” Such was the phrasing of our military courts.

Nothing of the kind was attempted. I had full control of my rescuers—who were altogether unconscious of the service they had done me—ignorant also of the fact that it was I, not the Mexican, who had sent their *camarado* to his long account!

For myself I had no fear of them. I only feared for my friend: who, if left to their tender mercies,

would never have paid another visit to the Street of the Bishop.

I did not leave him to be judged by the Red Tribunal. I made a compromise with their self-esteem—by taking a lead in his arrest !

To this the accused man, with some show of reluctance, submitted ; and, in ten minutes after, he was transported to the *Cuartel*, occupied by the Rifle Rangers—though not to suffer the degradation of being shut up in its guard-house.

CHAPTER XXI.

SIX O'CLOCK—IN THE ALAMEDA !

I had little difficulty in clearing the paroled officer from the charge of assassinating “ a member of the Spy Company.”

As soon as his accusers discovered what I knew of that affair, they not only withdrew their accusation, but their own precious persons, beyond the reach of court-martial inquiry.

When “ wanted,” to give testimony in the investigation that ensued, not one, but five, of Dominguez's

followers were reported "missing!" The four coadjutors of him who had been killed thought it more prudent not to press the charge; and when sent for, could not be found either in the "Spy" quarters, or elsewhere in the City of the Angels!

They had taken their departure *a los Montes*; and I was left alone to tell the story of that nocturnal encounter.

For their testimony I cared not a straw; though the episode was not without some beneficial effects. It taught our renegade allies a little lesson; which was no doubt afterwards profitable—if not to themselves—to those who were so unfortunate as to have dealings with them.

I was not so indifferent to the escape of the scoundrels who had attacked me in the "Street of the Sparrows;" and who appeared to have their head-quarters there.

In half an hour after leaving it with my escort of Red Hats, I was back again—accompanied by a score of Rifle Rangers, who assisted me in making an exploration of that interesting locality.

But the birds we went in search of had flown; and during the remainder of my stay in La Puebla

de los Angeles, I never more set eyes upon my quaint challenger.

I learnt something more of him from Francisco—some chapters of his history that did not fail to astonish me. He had been a captain in the Mexican army; and would be so again, should the tyrant Santa Anna get restored to his dictatorial power. Whenever the star of the latter was in the ascendant, the former was sure of a commission.

But as the light of Santa Anna's star had been of late only intermittent, so also was the holding of his commission by Captain Torreano Carrasco.

During the intervals which Francisco jocosely styled "his leaves of absence," the gallant captain was in the habit of spending a portion of his time among the mountains.

"What does he do there?" I innocently inquired of my informant.

"*Carrambo, señor!* It is strange you should ask that. I thought everybody knew," was the answer.

"Knew what?"

"That El Capitan Carrasco is *un pocito de saltador.*"

I was less astonished at the declaration, than the manner in which it was made.

The young Mexican appeared to treat the thing as of no great consequence, but rather a matter of course. He seemed to look upon it in the light of a levity—scarcely a crime—one of the *Cosas de Mexico!*

He was more serious when replying to my next question: “Has this Captain Carrasco any acquaintance with the daughters of Don Eusebio Villa-Señor?”

“Why do you ask, caballero?” he said, turning pale at the mention of the name; “You know them?”

“I have not the honour of knowing them, except by sight. I saw them this morning at matins. I saw Carrasco there too. He appeared to take an interest in their devotions.”

“If I thought so I’d——. Bah! it is not possible. He dare not——. Tell me, caballero; *what* did you observe?”

“Oh, nothing more than I’ve said. What do you know about it yourself?”

“*En verdad*, nothing either! It was only a

thought I had—from something I once saw. I may have been mistaken. 'Tis of no consequence."

We spoke no more upon the subject. It was evidently painful to Francisco Moreno—as it was to myself.

At a later period—when our acquaintance became better established—further confidence was exchanged between us ; and I was told the story of Francisco's courtship—to a portion of which, without his knowing it, I had listened before.

It was as I had supposed. There was an objection to his being united to his *dear Dolores*—her father being chief objector. The young soldier was but a "poor gentleman" —with no other prospect, save that at the point of his sword—not much in Mexico, to a man with an *honest* heart. There was a rival who was rich ; and to this "party" Don Eusebio had promised his daughter—with the threat of a convent in the case of her refusal.

Notwithstanding this menace, Francisco was full of hope—based upon the promises of Dolores. She had expressed her determination to share penury with him rather than wed the *rico*, who was not of her choice—to die, or do anything rather than go into a convent !

I was not so communicative as my new acquaintance—at least as regarded my relationship with the family of Villa-Señor. To have spoken of Mercedes to another would have spoiled the romance of my passion. Not a word said I to Francisco of that hopeful affair.

* * * * *

From that day I became noted, as one of the earliest risers on the muster-roll of the American army. Not a morning did I outsleep the *reveillé*; nor once missed matins in the Cathedral.

Several times I again saw Mercedes. Each time there was an exchange of glances—each day becoming better understood between us.

And still not a word had we exchanged! I feared to risk speech—the humiliation that would follow, if perchance I was mistaken.

I was again on the eve of resorting to the epistolary mode of communication—and had actually written the letter, intending to deliver it—not second-hand through the *cochero*, but, in *propria persona*, to the lady herself.

At each succeeding *oración* I watched for an opportunity; when the fair worshipper, passing out

along with the crowd, might come within delivering distance.

Twice had I been disappointed. On the third time I had the chance, without taking advantage of it!

It was not needed. The wish I had expressed in my epistle was better worded by Mercedes herself. As she descended the steps on her way to the street, her lips came so close to my ear, that I was enabled to catch every syllable of that sweet whisper :

“ *En la Alameda. A seis horas!* ” (At six o'clock, in the Alameda !)

CHAPTER XXII.

APPOINTMENT AND DISAPPOINTMENT.

In most Mexican cities of the first and second class, there is both a “ Pasco ” and an “ Alameda : ” the former a public drive—riding included ; the latter more especially set apart for pedestrians, though there is also a carriage way around it.

In the capital itself there are two Paseos—*Bucareli* and *La Vega*. The latter extending along the famed

chinampas, or "floating gardens," is only fashionable at a certain season of the year—during the week of Carnival. At all other times it is neglected for the more magnificent drive of Bucareli.

The Paseo of Puebla is poor by comparison; but its Alameda is not without merits. It is a large quadrangle lying on the western edge of the city; with trees, walks, statues, flowers, fountains, and all the usual adornments of a public garden. Around it is a road for carriages and equestrians, as well as a path for promenaders—with benches at intervals on which they may rest themselves.

Its view includes the *teocalli* of Cholula, with the church of the virgin "Remedios" on its top; beyond, the snow-cone of Popocatepec, and the twin *nevada* of the "White Sister."

It was not to look upon these that I was "in the Alameda at six o'clock;" or, perhaps, a half-hour earlier.

With such an appointment as mine, no living man could have restrained himself from anticipating the time.

As the place is devoted to the three several kinds of recreation—walking, riding, driving—it was a

question in which way Mercedes would present herself.

The last was the most likely ; though the first would have been the more convenient—keeping in view the supposed purpose.

It was the mode I had myself adopted : having entered the enclosure as a simple pedestrian, and in civilian dress—to avoid observation.

I sauntered along the walks—apparently admiring the flowers, and criticizing the statues. It was sheer pretence—to deceive the promenaders, who were moving before and behind me. At that moment I had no thought, either of the elegancies of Art, or the beauties of Nature ; not even for its sublimities, displayed within sight on the snow-clad slopes of the great “Cordillera.”

I was thinking only of the beauty of woman—impatient to behold it in its most perfect type.

Was it to appear on foot, on horseback, or between wheels ?

Considering the character of the times—and that Red Hats were in the Alameda—the last was the most likely.

Notwithstanding this conjecture, I scrutinized

every female pedestrian who came inside the enclosure—even those coifed by the cheapest *rebosa*.

Though her sister had said otherwise, Mercedes might not always be free to go forth? She might have to take her recreation by stealth, and disguised?

My surmises soon came to an end; and, to my joy, proved erroneous. Dolores had been right. The *cochero* in black glaze hat and *jaqueta* of blue camlet cloth, driving a pair of *frisiones*, could be no other than he who had once lost a doubloon by staying too late over his stable duties?

I took no further note of him. Thenceforth my eyes were occupied with a countenance seen through the windows of the carriage. It was a *carretela* of elegant construction—all glass in front—best plate, and clear as crystal.

The face inside was but improved by its interposition—toned to the softness of tinted wax.

It needed no scrutiny to identify it. There was no mistaking the countenance of Mercedes.

I had done this before; but that was under the uncertain glimmer of a street lamp.

I now saw it in the full light of day; and well did

it bear the exposure. If possible it was more perfect than ever ; and the jetty eyes, the carmine tinted cheeks, the lips—but I had no time to observe them in detail before the carriage came close up.

I saw that she was its sole occupant—unaccompanied either by sister, or *chaperone*. Even Tia Josefa was not with her !

It was true, then, what Dolores had said. Poor Dolores ! I could not help feeling sympathy for her ; the more so that I was now the friend of her Francisco.

The carriage was coming on at a slow pace. The *frisones* scarce trotted. I had time to take some steps, which simple prudence suggested. Even love has its instincts of caution ; especially when full of confidence.

Mine was to seek some solitary nook of the Alameda, where I might observe without being observed—except by the occupant of the *carretela*.

Fortune favoured me. A clump of Peruvian pepper-trees stood close by—their pendant fronds drooping over the drive. Under their shadow was a recess—quiet, cornered, apparently unoccupied. It was the very spot I was in search of.

In ten seconds I had placed myself under the *pimentos*.

In ten more the carriage came abreast of me—still slowly moving on.

My eyes met those of Mercedes!

Half blinded by the blaze of her beauty, I stood gazing upon it. My glance must have betrayed my admiration; but not less the faltering fear that had hold of me. It was in my heart, and must have been symbolled in my countenance. It was the humility of a man who feels that he is not worthy of the woman he would worship; for I could have worshipped Mercedes!

In five minutes afterwards I was *cursing* her! She passed, with her eyes full upon me, but without showing any sign of recognition, either by speech or gesture!

It was only after they were averted that I thought of interpreting their glance; and then I was prevented by a surprise that stupified me—a rage that almost rendered me frantic.

Instead of the smile—the something more which I had been fondly expecting—the look vouchsafed to me was such as might have been given to a complete stranger!

And yet it was not like this. There was salutation in it, distant, disguised under some strange reserve—to me unreadable.

Was it caution? Was it coquetry?

It stung me to think it was the latter.

I gazed after the *carretela* for an explanation. I was not likely to get it—now that the blind back of the vehicle was towards me, and its occupant no longer to be seen.

But I had it the instant after.

A little farther along the drive I saw a man pass out from among the pepper trees; who, like myself, appeared to have been there “in waiting.”

Unlike me, he was on horseback—bestriding a well caparisoned steed. The man was no stranger to me. At a glance I saw who it was.

Yielding to a touch of the spur, his horse launched himself out into the road; and was pulled up close to the *carretela*—through the opened window of which a white arm was at the same time protruded.

I saw the flashing of a jewelled wrist, with a *billetta* held at the tips of tapering fingers!

Stodare could not have taken that note more adroitly, or concealed it with quicker sleight, than

did my friend Francisco Moreno—*never more to be friend of mine!*

CHAPTER XXIII.

HER NAME IS DOLORES.

There is one subject upon which there can be no question—nothing to admit of discussion. It is, that jealousy is the most painful thought that can torture the soul of man.

In painfulness it has its degrees—greater or less, according to its kind: for of this dread passion, conceit, or whatever you may call it, there is more than one *species*.

There is the jealousy that springs after possession; and that which arises from anticipation. Mine, of course, belonged to the latter.

I shall not stay to inquire which is the more disagreeable of the two—as a general rule. I can only say, that, standing there under the Peruvian pepper trees, I felt as if the shades of death and the furies of hell were above and around me.

I was angry at the man who had made me feel so;—but mad—absolutely mad—with the woman!

What could she have meant in leading me such a measure? What profit did she expect by practising upon me such a damnable delusion?

“ *En la Alameda—a seis horas !*”

I was there, true to the time,—and she, too. Six o'clock could be heard striking from a score of church towers—every stroke as if the hammer were driving a nail into my heart!

For some seconds I listened to the tolling—tolling—tolling. Were they funeral bells?

Oh! what a woman—in beauty an angel—in behaviour a devil!

I had no longer a doubt that such was a true description of Mercedes Villa-Señor.

To excuse my thus quickly coming to conclusions, you should know something of Mexican society—its highest and best.

But it is not for me to expose it. My *souvenirs* are too sweet to permit of my turning traitor.

That was one of the most bitter—although it was also one of the most transient.

Perhaps I should not say transient; since, after a very short interval of relief, it came back bitter as before—with a bitterness long, long, to continue.

The illusion was due to a process of reasoning that passed through my mind as I stood looking after the *carretela*, after the incident described.

I had conceived a half hope.

Mercedes might be only a messenger? The note might have been from Dolores—the guarded Dolores, who dared not go out alone?

The sisters might be *confidantes*—a thing not uncommon in Mexico, or even in England? Dolores, threatened with a cloister, might have no other means of corresponding with her “querido Francisco?”

This view of the case was more pleasing than probable.

It might have been both, but for my knowledge of “society” as it exists in the City of the Angels. From the insight I had obtained, I could too readily believe, that the handsome Captain Moreno was *playing false with a pair of sisters!*

Only for an instant was I permitted to indulge in the unworthy suspicion.

But the certainty that succeeded it, was equally painful to reflect upon: for I left the Alameda with the knowledge that Francisco Moreno had one love;

and she the lady who had driven past in her *carretela* !

I obtained the information through a dialogue heard accidentally behind me.

Two men, whom I had not noticed before, had been sharing with me the shade of the pepper-tree. One was plainly a Poblano ; the other, by his dress, might have passed for a hacendado of the *tierra caliente*—perhaps a “ Yucateco ” on his way to the capital. Small as was the note surreptitiously delivered, and rapid its transition from hand to hand—both these men had observed the little episode.

The Poblano seemed to treat it as a thing of course. It caused surprise to the stranger ; whose habiliments, though not without some richness, scarce concealed an air of rusticity.

“ Who is she ? ” inquired the astonished provincial.

“ The daughter of one of our *ricos*, ” replied the Poblano. “ His name is Don Eusebio Villa-Señor. No doubt you have heard of him ? ”

“ Oh, yes. We know him in Yucatan. He’s got a sugar estate near Sisal ; though he don’t come much among us. But who’s the fortunate individual so likely to become proprietor of that pretty planta-

tion? Such an intelligent fellow would make it pay; which, *por Dios!* is more than I can do with mine."

"Doubtful enough whether captain Moreno could do so either—if he had the chance of becoming its owner. By all accounts he's not much given to accumulating cash—unless over the *monté* table. Independently of that, he's not likely to come in for any property belonging to Don Eusebio Villa-Señor."

"Well, without knowing much of your city habits," remarked the Yucateco, "I'd say he has a fair chance of becoming the owner of Don Eusebio's daughter. A Campeachy girl who'd do, what she has just done, would be considered as marked for matrimony."

"Ah!" rejoined the denizen of the angelic city, "you Yucatecos are a simple people: you leave your *muchachas* free to do as they choose. In Puebla, if they don't obey the paternal mandate, they are inclosed within convents—of which we have no less than a dozen in our sainted city. I've heard say, that such is to be the fate of Dolores Villa-Señor—if she insist on marrying the man to whom you have just seen her handing that pretty epistle."

“Dolores Villa-Señor?” I asked, springing forward, and rudely taking part in a conversation that so fearfully interested me.

“*Dolores* Villa-Señor? Do I understand you to say that *Dolores* is the name of the lady just gone past in the carretela?”

“*Si señor—ciertamente!*” responded the Poblano, who must have supposed me insane, “Dolores Villa-Señor; or Lola, if you prefer it short: that is the lady’s name. *Carrambo!* what is there strange about it? Every *chiquitito* in the streets of Puebla knows *her.*”

My tongue was stopped. I made no further inquiry. I had heard enough to tell me I had been chicaned.

She who had passed was the woman I loved—the same who had invited me to the Alameda. There could be no mistake about that, nor aught else—only that her name was *Dolores*, and *not Mercedes!*

I had been made the catspaw of a heartless coquette!

CHAPTER XXIV.

A PARTING GLANCE AT PUEBLA.

From that hour I felt that Puebla was no place for me. Any *métier* but that of the singed moth. I determined thenceforth to shun the candle that had cruelly scorched, and might only scorch me more.

Attractive as was the light that had lured me, I resolved never more to let my eyes look upon it. It had proved too resplendent. It would not be with my own will, if I should ever again see *Dolores Villa-Señor*.

How easy thus to talk—thus to resolve—during the first throes of a wounded vanity—when the spirit is strengthened by its discomfiture. But ah! how difficult to maintain the determination! Hercules had no such task.

I endeavoured to fortify myself with reflection: by conjuring up every thought that might restore my indifference, or enable me to forget her.

It was all to no purpose. Such memories could only be chastened by time.

They were not universally painful. It was some-

thing to think that I had interested, even in the slightest degree, one so grand, so famed, so incomparable ; and there were moments when the remembrance soothed me. It was but a poor recompence for the sacrifice I had made, and the suffering I endured.

In vain I invoked my pride—my vanity, if you prefer so to call it. It no longer availed me. Crushed in the encounter, it made one last spasmodic attempt, and then sank under a sense of humiliation.

Untrue what I had been told by other tongues. They must have been sheer flatterers, those friends who had called me *handsome*. Compared with Francisco Moreno, I was as Satyr to Hyperion. So must Dolores have thought? At times, reflecting thus, I could not help feeling vengeful, and dwelling on schemes of retaliation,—of which both were the object. By good fortune none appeared feasible, or even possible. I was helpless as Chatelar, when the sated queen no longer looked lovingly upon him.

There was no hope except in absence—that grand balsam of the broken heart. I knew it by a past experience. Fortune favoured me with the chance

of trying it the second time ; and soon. Three days after that sweet encounter in the Cathedral—and the bitter one in the Alameda—our bugles summoned us to get ready ; and, on the fourth, we commenced moving towards the capital of Mexico.

The counsel I had received from my sage comrade, along with the excitement of opening a new chapter in our campaign, gave temporary relief to my wounded spirit. An untrodden track was before us—new fields of fame—to end in that long anticipated, much talked-of, pleasure : a revel in the “ Halls of the Moctezumas !”

To me the prospect had but little attraction : and even this was gone, before we had passed the *Piedmont* of the Cordillera that overlooks the classic town of Cholula.

On entering the “Black Forest,” whose trees were to screen it from my sight, I turned to take a parting look at the City of the Angels.

The chances were nearly equal I might never see it again. We were about to enter a valley close as that of Cabool ; and from which retreat would be even more difficult. Our troops, all told, mustered scarce ten thousand ; while the *trained* regiments of

our enemy were of themselves three times the number. Besides, we were about to penetrate a capital city—the very heart's core of an ancient nation. Would it not rouse our adversaries to a gigantic effort—a throe sufficient to overwhelm us ?

So supposed many of my comrades.

For myself I had no reflections about the future—either of its conquests or defeats.

My thoughts were with my eyes—wandering over the vast *vega*—resting on the spires of a city, where I had experienced one of the sweetest sensations of my life.

Alas ! it had proved a deception, and I had no pleasure in recalling it. On the contrary, I looked back upon the place with a cold pain at my heart, and a consciousness, that I had there sacrificed some of its warmest affections without an iota of return !

I remained for some minutes on the edge of the *Bosqué Negra*—the *ancillæ* of the long-leaved pines sweeping the crown of my forage cap. Under my eyes, as on a chart, was spread the fertile plain of Puebla, with the city projected in clear outline. Besides the Cathedral, many a spire could I distinguish, and that “public walk” where I had suffered such

humiliation. My eyes traced the lines of the streets—running parallel, as in all Spanish-American cities—and sought that of the Calle del Obispo.

I fancied that I could distinguish it; and along with the fancy a score of souvenirs came sweeping over my soul.

They were not pleasant—not one of them. Though all bright below—turrets rising gaily against the turquoise sky—domes that sparkled silver-like in the sun—Orizava snow-white in the distance—around me upon the mountain side all seemed dark as death!

It was not the *lava* that laced the slope, nor the sombre foliage of the pine-trees, under whose shade I was standing.

The shadow came from within—from the cloud covering my soul.

It was not dread of the Black Forest behind me—the terror of stage-coach travellers—nor apprehension of the fate that might be awaiting me in the capital of the Moctezumas, yet to be conquered.

It could not be worse than that which had befallen me in the City of the Angels!



CHAPTER XXV.

AN ANTIPATHY TO ROBBERS.

After the storming of Chapultepec—the “summer palace of the Moctezumas;” in which I had the honour of leading the forlorn hope—do not mistake a plain statement of fact for a baseless boast—after a seclusion of three months within the walls of a sick chamber, caused by wounds in that action received; I stepped forth upon the streets of the Mexican capital fully restored to health.

Three months more were spent in partaking of those joys—the reward of the victorious soldier, who has completed a campaign.

As in the “City of the Angels,” so was it in that of the Moctezumas. The officers of the invading army were excluded from the “interiors”—such of them as were worth entering.

But as it was no longer an army of invaders, but *conquerors*, the exclusion was neither so strict nor general. There were exceptions on both sides—extending to a limited number of courageous hosts and welcome guests.



“Eusebio Villa-Señor.”

It was my fortune to be among the favoured few. One or two incidents had occurred along the route—one more especially during the march upon Mexico—in which I had the opportunity of bestowing favour and protection. They were reciprocated tenfold by *protégés*—who chanced to be of the *familias principales* of Mexico.

During the three months that I lay upon the couch of convalescence, I was surrounded by luxuries brought me by grateful brothers. In the three months that followed I was overwhelmed by the caresses of their sweet sisters; all, of course, in an honest way.

It was a pleasant time; and, if anything could have made me forget Dolores Villa-Señor, this should have done it.

It did not. The sweetest smile I received in the Valley of Tenochtitlan did not, and could not, stifle within my breast the bitter souvenir I had brought with me from the other side of the Cordillera.

Six months after the capture of the Summer Palace, my life in the city of the Moctezumas became dull indeed.

The theatres, slimly attended by the feminine

élite of the place ; the balls not attended at all, or only by questionable *poblanas*, and the plain wives and daughters of the foreign residents (why are they always plain in such places?) soon became unbearable.

Even dissipation could not redeem the dulness of the times.

For me the *monté* table had no longer an attraction. The green cloth was spread out in vain ; and I could stand by and hear, without the slightest emotion, “ *Cavallo mozo !* ” “ *Soto en la puerta !* ”

In truth my interest in all things appeared gone—all upon earth, with the exception of Dolores Villa-Señor ; and she I could scarce think a thing of earth.

Just at this crisis there came a chance of distraction. I hailed it with a feeling of gladness.

The stray troops of the enemy had forsaken the roads that surrounded the capital—as had also their *guerilleros*. But still the ways were not safe. Partisans had disappeared, to be succeeded by *salteadores !*

From all sides came rumours of robbers—from Puebla on the east, Toluca on the west, Cuernavaca on the south, and the Llanos de Apam, that extend

northward from the Valley of Tenochtitlan. Scarce passed a day without "novedades" of the bandits, and their devilish audacity: stage-coaches stopped; travellers commanded to lie flat along the earth, while their pockets were being turned inside out; and some stretched upon the ground never more to stand in an erect attitude!

An escort of our dragoons could have prevented this—that is, upon any particular occasion. But to have sent an escort with every traveller, who had need to go forth out of the capital, would have required a score of squadrons of well-appointed cavalry. At the time we chanced to be short in this arm; and the distribution of our troops to Cuernavaca and Toluca, the strong force necessary to garrison Puebla—and the numerous detachments required to accompany the commissariat trains, left no cavalry disposable for eccentric service.

Till we should receive from Uncle Sam a reinforcement of dragoons, the robbers must be allowed to stop travellers and capture stage-coaches at discretion.

This was the condition of things, six months after the *second conquest* of Mexico.

I, for one, did not like it. It was but a Christian instinct to hate robbers, wherever found; but in the town of Puebla I had imbibed for this class of mankind a peculiar antipathy.

Experience and suspicion both formed its basis. I remembered Captain Carrasco, and I could not help remembering *Captain Moreno!*

A young artist who had accompanied our army throughout the campaign—and whose life-like pictures were the admiration of all who looked upon them—had been imprudent enough to risk traveling by *diligencia* from Mexico to La Puebla. It was not his destiny to arrive at the City of the Angels—on earth; though it is to be hoped he has reached the abode of truer angels in heaven! He was murdered among the mountains of the *mal pais*—between the “venta” of Rio Frio and that of Cordova.

I had formed a strong attachment to this unfortunate youth. He had oft partaken of the hospitality of my tent; and, in return I suppose for such slight acts of kindness, in his great picture of the storming of Chapultepec, he had fixed my face upon the canvas, foremost—far foremost—

of those who on that day dared to look over the well-defended walls.

The consciousness of having performed the feat did not render me less sensible of the kindness of its being recorded. I, a homeless, nameless, adventurer, with no one to sing my praise—save those who had witnessed my deeds—could not feel otherwise than grateful.

He saw, and sang them; in that verse in which he was a master—the poetry of the pencil.

I was half mad, when I heard that he had been murdered.

In twenty minutes after, I stood in the presence of the commander-in-chief.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE GREAT STRATEGIST.

“What is it, captain? One of my aides-de-camp tells me you have asked for an interview. Be brief with your business; I’m full of affairs just now.”

I was not a favourite at head-quarters. I had no

flattery for the conceited septuagenarian who at this crisis commanded the American army.

Still his consent was necessary for my purpose. Without it I could do nought to avenge the death of my friend. That granted, I had conceived a scheme.

“What is it?” asked the general, with an air of impatience that augured ill for my success. “What is it you want?”

“Leave of absence, general.”

“Why, you’ve been off duty for six months. How much more do you require?”

“Only six days.”

“Six days! And for what purpose?”

“To punish these brigands who infest the road between here and Puebla. I presume, general, you’ve been informed of their atrocities?”

“Of course I have. But what can I do? If I send a troop, they see the soldiers miles off, and won’t stand to be attacked. It’s like chasing a wild goose.”

“I think I have a plan by which they can be brought to close quarters, and some of them chastised. With your permission, I should like to make trial of it.”

“But I have no cavalry just now to spare—not a single sabre. The Government is so stingy, they won’t give me men enough to fill up the regular regiments. They think I can hold a great country like Mexico without horses—where the enemy are nearly all mounted too! No, Sir, I can’t spare a single dragoon—much less your own company; and I suppose you would want to take that with you.”

“On the contrary, general, I don’t desire a single soldier from the ranks; at least only three or four of my own, whom I know to be men of courage. There are some dare-devils among our camp-followers—just the sort for such a purpose as mine. With a dozen of them, I fancy we can hold our own with the biggest band of brigands to be found among the mountains of Mexico.”

“You are a brave man, captain——; but I fear not much of a strategist.”

Strategy was the god of this poor military simpleton, as it was of his favourite pupil, M’Clellan. It was the same sort of strategy that caused the rout at Bull’s Run, and the consequent prolongation of the American civil war. But for it the army of the North might have stacked arms in the streets of

Richmond in three weeks after leaving Washington, and the long sanguinary strife have been shunned.

Well do I remember both preceptor and pupil. There was bad management in Virginia; exactly what I should have expected from my experience of their tactics in Mexico. In our campaign through the country of the Aztecs the latter was scarcely known, or only as a smart drill master. Nor would he ever after have been heard of, but for the patronage of his superannuated Chief—the “Grand Strategist,” as he was desirous of being deemed.

The last remark of the general gave me the cue to flatter him.

In hopes of obtaining my end, I availed myself of the opportunity.

“General!” I said, with a look of real reverence, “I am aware there will not appear much strategy in what I propose—at least to you, who are capable of grand combinations. My idea is of the simplest.”

“Well, let us hear it, captain. Perhaps it may show better in detail. A great deal depends upon that. An army brought into the field *en masse*—as Napoleon would say—with its infantry here and its artillery there, and the cavalry scattered over the

ground, is like a machine without screws. It must soon fall to pieces. I never move my battalions in that way. If I had—”

“If you had, general,” I meekly interposed, seeing that he had made a pause, “you wouldn’t have been here now, as you are—conqueror of the capital of Mexico.”

“You are right, captain; quite right!” rejoined he, evidently beginning to like me, “Quite right, sir. And don’t you think that Cortez’s campaign was inferior to that which *I—I*—have had the honour of planning; and of conducting, Sir—conducting?”

“A mere skirmish to it.”

“A skirmish, sir—a skirmish! His enemies a crowd of naked savages—that’s what they were—nothing but slings and bows with which to defend themselves. Not a gun among them; while *I—I*, sir, have defeated a grand disciplined army, under the greatest general these Mexicans have ever produced; for, say what you like of Santa Anna, the rascal is a thorough soldier—a regular, sir, a regular—not a volunteer. I detest volunteers; and it’s a great shame for the Government to have sent me so

many of them. They've fought well, I admit ; but they couldn't help it. They were properly handled, sir ; and they had my old regulars alongside of them. How could they hang back, when they saw who was at their head ? My presence inspired them ; and the consequence is, that they fought and conquered this great country in less than half the time it took Cortez to do it. Therefore I say, sir, that the conquest of Winfield Scott will shine upon the page of history far brighter than that of Fernando Cortez."

"No doubt of it," was my insincere response, scarce able to conceal my contempt for the huge military *bavard*.

"Well, sir," said he, after he had paced once or twice across the floor in swelling grandeur, "you haven't stated your plans ? Let's hear the detail. My giving you permission may depend upon that."

"What I had intended, general, was to charter the *diligencia* ; and use it, as if it were going on its regular trip between here and Puebla. The robbers are also troublesome upon the Toluca route ; so I don't care which we try first. I should dress my twelve men in Mexican costumes ; have a monk or

two along with them, and at least a couple of ladies. The *reboso* would disguise them sufficiently for our purpose. A Mexican uniform or two might aid the decoy: since just before our coming into the country no less than thirteen officers of their army, travelling in the stage-coach, were stopped by a band of only six robbers, and stripped even of their uniforms! I should have liked two or three Mexican *militarios* among my men; but just now it would scarce look natural, and the bandits might suspect a *ruse*."

"Well, sir," said the general, evidently amused by my ideas, "What would you do with these twelve masqueraders?"

"Arm each of them with a small battery of revolvers; give him a good bowie knife to fall back upon; and, when the robbers make halt around the stage-coach, let all spring out at once, and go at them with a will. I know of twelve men I can muster, who are just the sort for such an enterprise. All of them, one time or another, have done a little bit of street fighting; and I'm much mistaken if there's one of their number who would shy from an encounter with Mexican brigands anything under

ten to one. Our only fear would be that too many of the bandits should be able to get off before we had time to give them a good thrashing. They're wonderfully quick on their little horses."

"By the word of Winfield Scott, sir, there's something in what you propose. For my part, I shouldn't care to trouble about these robber gentry—who are perhaps only a little less honest than the rest of their countrymen—but it don't look just the thing that we haven't put a stop to their depredations—especially as they've committed some outrages on our own people. Well, sir!" he added, after a pause, "I'll consider your proposal, and give you an answer by to-morrow morning. Meanwhile you may hold yourself in readiness—in case I should think proper to approve of it."

"Shall I retain the *diligencia*, general?"

"No, no; not this trip—not for to-morrow. There will be time enough. I must think the matter over. It won't do to be charged with silly things; and, as you ought to know, sir, I have enemies at Washington—foes in the rear, sir, as well as in the front. Besides, you wouldn't have time to get your fellows ready before to-morrow morning?"

“In an hour, general; if your permission be given. I have sounded them already. They would all be *en masque* before midnight.”

“I’ll think of it; I’ll think of it, as soon as I’m disengaged. But there’s somebody waiting outside. A Mexican gentleman, my *aide-de-camp* tells me. I wonder what *he* wants. Safeguard, I suppose, or some other favour. These people pester the life out of me. They think I’ve nothing to do but to look after every little affair that troubles them. If one of our scamps only steals a chicken, they must see *me* about it. God knows I’ve given them protection enough—more than they’ve been accustomed to at the hands of their own officers!”

And God did know it: for the statement was strictly true. However contemptible I might esteem General Scott’s military talents, I can bear testimony to the fact, that his enemies had no cause to complain of his inhumanity. Never was conquered foe treated with such leniency as were the Mexicans during that memorable campaign; which I do not hesitate to pronounce the most *civilized* that has found place upon the page of history.

* * * * *

I had made my salute, and was about stepping out of the "presence," when I heard the command, "Stay, sir!"

In obedience to it, I once more faced towards the commander-in-chief.

"By the way," he said, "I may want you for a minute. I'm told you speak Spanish perfectly?"

"Not perfectly, general. I speak it, as the Spaniards say, *un pocito*."

"Never mind how—so long as you can hold a conversation in it. Now that I think of it, my interpreter is out of the way; and there's none of my *aides* knows anything of their lingo. The Mexican who's coming in is not likely to understand a syllable I might say to him. So stay, and translate for us."

"At your command, general, I'll do the best I can."

"You may prepare yourself, I suppose, to hear of a hen roost having been robbed; and a claim for compensation. Ah! the claimant is there."

The door at that moment was opened from the outside; and one of the *aides* entered, ushering a stranger, who stepped briskly in after him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A BEREAVED PARENT.

The individual thus introduced had all the air of one who had sustained a loss—but of a much graver kind than the stealing of his chicks.

At a glance I could see that he was a Spanish-American of the pure Iberian blood—the boasted *sangre azul* of Andalusia—without any trace of the Aztecan. Perhaps a Spaniard resident in Mexico—in other words, a *Gachupino*? He had, at all events, the distinguished bearing of the hidalgo; which was further confirmed by the fineness of his habiliments, that differed very little from what might be seen on a well-dressed English gentleman of the old school: for the stranger was a man of advanced age.

He was clean shaven, without moustache or whisker; the hair upon his head short-cut and snow-white; while that upon his arched eyebrows was as black as it might have been at the age of twenty!

A piercing eye still showed the capability of flashing fire, when occasion required it. Just then it was

filled with a sombre light ; and his whole demeanour betokened a man who suffered from some overwhelming sorrow.

Under its influence his habitual serenity had forsaken him ; and, without pausing inside the door, he walked hurriedly up to the general, and commenced to unburden himself.

Between the two of us there was no possibility of mistaking which was the commander-in-chief—so that the stranger had addressed himself to the proper personage.

As his talk was Cherokee to the general—perhaps not so well understood—he was motioned to make his communication to me.

I had already gathered from his introductory remarks, that he had been travelling in a stage-coach, *en route* for the capital on a special errand to the general himself ; and that a great misfortune had befallen him on the road. I had by this time noticed a slight *délabrement* in his dress—to say nothing of some scratches on his hands and face—that went towards confirming his hurried statement.

“A misfortune?” I asked, in my capacity of interpreter. “Of what nature, señor?”

“ *O caballero ; una cosa horrible ; un robo ! Por los bandoleros !* ”

“ A horrible business—a robbery by brigands ! ” I said, translating literally to the general.

“ How very singular ! ” remarked the commander-in-chief. “ Quite a coincidence ! I think, captain, I shall have to grant your request. ”

“ Of what have they robbed you, señor ? ” I inquired, in the continuation of my new *rôle*. “ Not your watch—else they would scarce have left you those splendid appendages ? ”

I spoke of a massive chain and bunch of gold seals, with turquoise, topaz, and other sparkling stones, that hung conspicuously from his waist-coat.

“ *Por Dios*, no ! They did not take that ! ”

“ Your purse, perhaps ? ”

“ No, señor ; they did not touch it either. They would have been welcome to it, and the watch as well. Ah ! they might have had everything else but what they did take. ”

“ What was it ? ”

“ *Mias niñas ! mias niñas !* ”

“ Ninyas ! ” interrupted the general, without wait-

ing for the translation, "that means young girls, don't it, captain?"

"In its general signification it does. As he has used it, it means his own daughters."

"What! Have the brigands robbed him of them?"

"That's what he has just stated."

"Poor old gentleman—for he's evidently a gentleman! It's a hard case, no doubt, to have his daughters carried off by brigands—worse than if Indians had got them. Go on, and question him. Let him give the whole story; and then ask him what he wants me to do. I'll wait till you've finished. You can translate it all in a lump."

As the general said this he turned away, and speaking to his aide-de-camp, dispatched the latter on some errand that carried him out of the room.

He himself became engaged upon some charts—no doubt covered with "grand strategic plans:" for although we were in the enemy's capital, it was not certain that our campaign had come to a close, and more fighting might be before us.

Left free to take my own course, I motioned the Mexican to a seat.

He declined it on the score of haste; and standing, I went on with his confession.

“How did it happen? When? Where?” was the series of questions I addressed to him in continuation.

“On the road, señor—as we came from La Puebla.”

“From Puebla!” The words startled me into a strange interest.

“Si, señor; but much nearer to this city. It occurred within sight of it, I may say—this side Rio Frio, and not far from the *venta* of Cordova.”

“You were travelling?”

“We were travelling—myself, my two daughters, and our family confessor, the good Padre Cornaga.”

“In your carriage?”

“No, señor; in the *diligencia*. We were stopped by a band of *ladrones*, all wearing crape over their faces.”

“Well?”

“They ordered us out of the coach. Then to lie flat along the ground—with a threat, that if we looked up till they gave the word, we should be shot without ceremony.”

“You obeyed, I presume?”

“ *Carrai, señor!* Why need you ask the question? Not to do so would have been certain death; and, of course, I did as the *ladrones* commanded. My daughters, I am happy to think, were spared the indignity. But what matters it, since they were carried off?”

“ Whither?”

“ *A los montes!*” “ *Aye de mi!* Holy Virgin, protect them!”

“It is to be hoped she will. But why, may I ask, did you risk travelling in the *diligencia* between this place and Puebla? You had no escort, I take it; and must have known that the road is unsafe?”

“True, cavallero, we had no escort. It was very imprudent on my part, but I trusted to the counsels of our confessor—*un hombre muy sabio*—who believed there was no danger. The good *padre* assured us the roads were safe—made so by you valiant *Americanos*—that there was not a robber to be encountered between Puebla and the capital. Even then I might not have listened to him, but that I had a good reason for coming hither with my daughters; and as they—neither of them—were at all afraid, but rather inclined to it, I ventured to travel by *diligencia*.

Alas! too easily did I yield consent to their wishes—as I have now reason to know. *Dios de mi alma!* Despoiled of my children! Robbed! Ruined!”

“I presume you had money upon your person, as well as these other valuables?”

I pointed to the chain and seals hanging from the watchpocket of the petitioner. “They left you these! How do you account for it?”

“*Aye Dios, caballero!* That is the strangest thing of all. I had both money—gold money—and this watch. It is one of considerable value, as you may judge for yourself.”

The old gentleman drew out a grand chronometer-like timepiece, with jewelled holes and strong gold cases—evidently worth a couple of hundred dollars.

“They left me this,” he continued, “and my money too! But what signifies that, since they have taken away the *muchachas?* *Pobres niñas!*”

“And they took *only* them?” I asked, becoming interested in the story of a robber episode so little in keeping with the ordinary experience.

“*Nada mas.*”

“Nothing more! And your fellow-passengers in the *diligencia?* were they alike sparing of their purses?”

“ Fellow-passengers ! We had none, señor capitan. There were but the four of us, as I’ve said—all members of my own family : for of course we count the good *padre* as one of ourselves. True, there were two or three other gentlemen who wished to get in with us at Puebla. They were strangers to me ; and, not liking their looks, I chartered the *diligencia* for myself. I believe they came in another coach after us. I am sorry, now, we did not have them along with us. It might have been better. It could not have been worse !

“ But the *padre* of whom you speak—this *hombre muy sabio*—what has become of him ?”

“ *Carrambo, señor !* That is the strangest thing of all : they kept him too ! After a time the robbers permitted my unworthy self to proceed on the journey. But the monk they compelled to remain. What a scandal to our Holy Church ! I hope it will cause the excommunication of every *ladron* in Mexico, and have them devoted to the perdition they so richly deserve. This comes of having changed our government into a republic. It was not so in the old times, when Spain sent us a viceroy. Then there were no robbers, such as these audacious *salteadores*,

that have this day deprived me of my dear daughters !
Aye de mi ! Aye de mi !”

“What do you wish the general to do?” I inquired, as the old gentleman became a little tranquillized, after a spasmodic outburst of grief.

“Señor,” he replied, “we have all heard of the humanity of the American ‘Gefe.’ Though he is our country’s enemy, we respect him for the compassion he has shown to a conquered people. Entreat him to take my unhappiness to heart. I know you will do so. Ask him to send out a troop of his valiant dragoons, and recover my lost children. At sight of your brave soldiers the robbers would take to flight, and leave the poor *muchachas* to be restored to their sorrowing father. O kind capitan ; do not deny me ! My only hope is in you !”

Although the story of a father thus brutally bereft of his children was of itself calculated to excite commiseration, I should, perhaps, not have felt it very keenly, but for a souvenir it had stirred up within me.

There was nothing at all strange in what he had told me. It was only one of the “Cosas de Mexico,” though, perhaps, not among the commonest. Still

it would have given me little more concern than one might feel on reading the account of a lady in London streets—Bloomsbury-square, for instance—having been stopped by a fustian-coated garotter, and relieved of her pocket handkerchief, her card case, and vinaigrette.

Any chagrin the story caused me was but a resuscitation of that already in my mind—the remembrance of my murdered friend, and my antipathy to the whole fraternity of *salteadores*.

Both might have been freshly excited by his narrative, and nothing more; but for the aroused remembrance, of which I have spoken; and which secured him a sympathy I could scarcely explain. Besides, there was something touching in the appeal of the old Don—not the less that it was made with all the elegance and in the diction of an educated gentleman.

I had no desire to resist it. On the contrary, I at once determined to lay his case before the general, and strengthen it with my own influence—so far as that went.

There was not much generosity in my motive. Without knowing it, the Mexican had done me a

service. I felt certain I should now have the chance of chastising—if not the same brigands who had assassinated my artist acquaintance—some who would have behaved quite as badly, had the opportunity occurred to them.

Before turning to translate what had been communicated to me, I thought it might be as well to make myself acquainted with the patronymic of the petitioner.

“Your name?” I inquired, looking him full in the face, and with a vague impression that I had somewhere seen him before, “You have not told me that? The general may wish to know it.”

“*Eusebio Villa-Señor. Al servicio de V.*”

I started as if a shot had struck me. Oh! the memories that rolled up at the mention of that name!

I was carried back to the City of the Angels—to the Calle del Obispo—to the sorrow from which I had vainly imagined myself to have escaped!

Again was it upon me, full and fell as ever.

* * * * *

With an effort I succeeded in controlling my emotions, or at least the exhibition of them.

Absorbed in his own grief, Don Eusebio did not suspect the existence of mine ; and the general was still engrossed with his strategical combinations.

I was now too deeply interested in the suit of the petitioner, to lose a moment's time in placing it before him petitioned.

I endorsed it with all the eloquence I could command : since it was almost identical with my own—already preferred.

Our joint prayer was heard, and granted upon the spot.

I obtained a commission to chastise any band of brigands, I might choose to go out against.

Need I say, that I had not much difficulty in making the selection ?

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DISOBEDIENT DAUGHTER.

I shall not attempt to describe the blackness in my breast as I sallied forth from the President's palace—Don Eusebio by my side.

Directed by the general, he had placed his affair in my hands, and himself at my disposal.

The announcement of his name had caused me an acute pain—the agony of a reopened wound.

And the pain came not from the story I had heard. It was not the thought that Dolores—for it was no more Mercedes—that Dolores Villa-Señor was in the keeping of brutal brigands! It had pained me as much—perhaps more—to think of her in the keeping of Francisco Moreno!

Truth compels me to the sad, disgraceful confession: that I listened to the tale with a sort of satisfaction! Jealousy was still alive—anger not dead—within my heart!

Though remembered with reluctance, too keenly did I feel the slight that had been put upon me.

The ungentle thought did not for long control me. Soon was it succeeded by one purer and holier—sprung from such chivalry as I possessed. A weak woman in the power of wild, wanton men—two of them, for that matter; though I thought but of one—borne off by brigands to some hideous haunt—some scene of lascivious revel!

They were horrid fancies that came crowding

upon me. They drove jealousy out of my heart, and along with it my senseless anger.

These gone, I became inspired by a slight, scarcely definable, pleasure—like the distant redawning of a hope that has been for a time extinguished.

What if I should be the means of rescuing Dolores Villa-Señor from the hands of her worse than savage captors—of saving her from a life-long shame?

Might not the gratitude, called forth by such a deed, become changed to that other feeling, I had once fondly fancied to have been entertained in my favour?

I could have risked everything—life itself—to bring about such a revolution!

After all, had I not been too precipitate in my conclusions? Was it certain she had surrendered her heart—her *whole* heart—to Francisco Moreno?

The episode in the Alameda—of which I had been a spectator—might it not have been but a bit of flirtation, deftly practised by Spanish dames, and oft without serious intent, or termination?

Or might it have been only a chapter of coquetry—myself the object aimed at?

Consoling thoughts—well calculated to stir me to energetic action! Don Eusebio might have been surprised at my ardent espousal of his cause!

He was at least affected by it. Entirely unsuspecting of my motive for questioning him, he not only gave me an unreserved account of the robbery upon the road, but made me the confidant of more than one family secret.

One gave me something more than a surprise. It caused the renewal of my chagrin.

“In your interview with the general,” I said, “you spoke of some important matter that was bringing you to the capital. May I be told it? Excuse me for asking: but in the performance of my duty it may be necessary for me to know what was the object of your journey.”

“Say no more, señor capitán,” he rejoined, interrupting me; “you have taken such a friendly interest in my misfortunes—far beyond what your duty requires—that I have no hesitation in telling you all. Indeed, it is essential I should do so. Hear me, then.”

Without repeating Don Eusebio’s words—with all the circumlocution rendered appropriate by paternal

affection, and the sorrow from which he suffered—I learnt from him what might have caused me greater surprise, but for the chance conversation to which I had listened in the Alameda.

The Poblano had spoken the truth to his friend from Yucatan.

Not only had Don Eusebio threatened to immure his daughter in a nunnery ; but was actually on his way to carry the threat into execution, when stopped by the *salteadores* !

Although accompanied by both his daughters, but one of them was to be consigned to her living tomb—the aristocratic convent of *La Concepcion*, in the city of Mexico—the abode of some of Mexico’s fairest *muchachas*.

“ Which of your daughters ? ” I asked with such eager *empressement* as to startle Don Eusebio, and call forth an interrogative exclamation.

“ Oh ! ” I answered, with an effort to gloss over my confusion, “ I understood you to say you had *two* daughters. Of course one is older than the other—that is, if they be not twins ? ”

“ No señor ; they are not twins. One is two years the elder. It was she who intended to devote

herself to the service of God. *Por dios!*" he continued, his brow shadowing as he spoke, "Both must do so now. There is no other future for them—*pobres niñas!*"

I understood the significance of the sad speech, and remained silent.

After a pause, he proceeded, "It was *Dolores*, my eldest girl, who intended to take the veil."

"Was it of her own free will?" I asked.

I could see that the question caused embarrassment. My emotions at the moment were not less powerful—not less painful—than his.

"Pardon me," I continued, "for making so free with your family affairs; which, of course, cannot in any way concern me. It was a mere inadvertence—quite unintentional—I assure you."

"O, sir! have I not promised to tell you all—you who have so nobly espoused our cause; you who are about to imperil your precious life for the safety of my children! Why should I conceal from you aught that appertains to their welfare?"

"It is true," he continued, after a short interval of silence, "true, that my daughter was not altogether reconciled to the step. I myself was inciting her to

take it. I had my reasons, señor; and I am sure, that on hearing them, you will approve of what I intended doing. It was for her happiness; for the honour of our family name and the glory of God—which last should be the chief end and act of every true Christian.”

The solemn speech awed me into silence. I made no reply, but stood awaiting the revelation.

“Only of late,” continued Don Eusebio, “in fact within the last few days, was I made acquainted with a circumstance, that caused me both anger and alarm. I learnt that some intimate relations had become established between my elder daughter, Dolores, and a young man in no way worthy of forming an alliance with our family. Know, sir, that the name *Villa-Señor* is one—— But why dwell upon that? I could not look upon my child, and think of her disgrace. For that reason I determined that she should pass the rest of her days in expiating the crime she had committed.”

“Crime! What crime?”

It would be difficult to describe the sensation I felt while putting this question, or the agony with which I awaited the answer.



Una cosa de Mexico.

“That of consenting to unite herself—for it had come to giving her consent—to one of low birth; of listening to vows of love from the lips of a peasant—a *lepero!*”

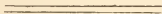
“Was he this?”

“Si, señor; was, and is. Through the state of anarchy and revolution from which this unfortunate country has long suffered, like many others of his class, he has risen to the paltry distinction of being an officer in our army—a captain, I believe. Among you, I am aware, the title is one of distinction—not so easily earned, and substantial when obtained. In the army of our so-called Republic, a swineherd to-day may be a captain to-morrow; and the captain of to-morrow a *salteador* the day following!”

“Of course you know the name of this captain—whom you deem so unworthy of your daughter?”

The question was put mechanically, and without care for the answer. I knew that the name would be “Francisco Moreno.”

It was.



CHAPTER XXIX.

DON SAMUEL BRUNO.

Before separating from Don Eusebio I received from him a detailed account of the coach robbery, with all the allied incidents. It was necessary I should know everything; and everything was made known to me.

In addition to what he had already communicated, there was one fact of a curious, if not comical, character. Before permitting him to depart in the *diligencia*, the brigands had taken his bond for ten thousand dollars—as collateral security against the ransom of his daughters!

They had even gone so far as to require it in the shape of a written *acceptance*—to be cancelled and sent back along with the señoritas, whenever the cash should be forthcoming!

Such were the quaint stipulations of the *salteadores*!

Though sounding strange to English ears, no Mexican would be at all surprised at them. Oft

and again have similar bargains been made—and kept—among the mountains of Mexico!

There was something that still perplexed me. How was this queer contract to be carried out?

I had been told that the usual mode is by a messenger; some one acquainted with the neutral ground—if there be such—lying between robber-land and the precincts of the police. This messenger meets an envoy—deputed by the brigands; the acceptance is honoured; the captives given up, and permitted to depart without further molestation!

In some cases even a *cheque* has been taken in exchange; afterwards presented at the bank by one of the robbers themselves—and *paid!*

Who was to be Don Eusebio's deputy? This was a question that interested me.

The answer gave me great satisfaction. It was the driver of the *diligencia* that had been stopped—known to his passengers by the name of “Don Samuel Bruno.”

When it is said, that the stage-coaches of Mexico are a modern importation from the United States, I need scarcely add that their drivers have been imported along with them. They are all, or nearly all,

States' men; and "Don Samuel," despite his *sobriquet*, was not an exception. He was simply Sam Brown.

Though the intended envoy of Don Eusebio, he had been nominated by the bandits themselves; no doubt for the reason that he knew where to carry the cash, and that it could be safely entrusted in his keeping. Any treachery on his part would put an end to his stage driving—at least, upon the roads of Mexico—and ten chances to one whether he should survive to handle the "ribbons" elsewhere.

Sam knew all this, on consenting to become a "go-between;" though it was scarcely by his own consent: since the office had been assigned to him, not by request, but command.

It was a fortunate circumstance for me—the very thing I would have wished for. My chief difficulty—I had seen it from the first—would be to obtain an *interview* with the knights of the road. With the stage-driver as a guide, the difficulty seemed more than half removed.

As good luck would have it, I knew something of Don Samuel. I knew him to be intelligent—and notwithstanding the ambiguous *rôle* he was oft compelled to play—honest.

I was not long in placing myself *en rapport* with him. As I had expected, I found him ready and right willing to “co-operate.”

There was at this time much talk of our permanently occupying the country. In that case he would have nothing to fear for his future; but in any case he was too gallant to regard consequences where a *señorita* was concerned.

There was yet another difficulty. Sam’s appointment with the robbers had been made for an early hour of the next morning—the place of rendezvous a treeless plain lying under the shadow of forest-clad hills—not far from the noted inn of Cordova.

Alone he might easily meet the *parlamentarios* of the other party; but it would be quite a different thing if he should go accompanied by a score of mounted men.

How was the difficulty to be got over?

I put the question to himself.

The intelligent Yankee soon bethought him of a scheme; and one that appeared feasible.

My party should make approach in the night; go into covert under the pine-forest that shrouded the slopes above the place of rendezvous; and leave Sam

himself to come on in the morning—carrying the ransom-money along with him. That night he could go with us to a certain distance—as a guide all the way—returning, to return again, at the hour of day-break.

The plan seemed excellent. There was but one drawback. Our ambuscade could only affect the envoy of the robbers, not the robbers themselves—whose den might be at a distance, among the passes of the mountains.

“Don Samuel” did not see it in this light. With the bandit emissary in our power, and the dollars of Don Eusebio at our disposal, he did not apprehend any difficulty. If there were a *salteador* in all Mexico proof against gold, Sam Brown did not believe it.

I was satisfied with his reasoning ; and consented to act under his guidance.

But little time was required for preparation. The commander-in-chief—not so ungenerous after all, and always liberal in the cause of humanity—had given me *carte blanche*. I only drew a score of my own men—Mounted Rifles—with a small supplementary force of the dare-devils already alluded to.

Don Eusebio was equally quick with the ransom-money; which I hoped to be able to return to him.

With such credit as the old "rico" possessed, he could have opened a Mexican bank in the middle of the night; and one was opened to him, as the shades of evening closed over the Calle de Plateros.

It was a load for a pack-mule—that ten thousand in gold; and on a pack-mule was it placed—partly for the convenience of transport, and partly to keep up the intended decoy.

All things arranged, we prepared to set forth; and just as the bells of the Cathedral were tolling twelve, we filed through the *Garita de San Lazaro*—leaving such *leperos*, as were lounging about the gate, to mistake us for the ordinary patrol bent upon a short excursion along the country road.

CHAPTER XXX.

A YANKEE JEHU.

Along the lone causeway, three hundred years ago traversed by Cortez—and now, instead of open

water, with a *zanca* on each side of it—we journeyed in solemn silence.

I had waited for that hour of the night when wayfarers, who might turn informers, were not likely to be encountered on the road.

We passed the isolated hill of El Peñon without meeting any one; and commenced skirting the saline shores of Tezcoco.

The ride, though long, was far from appearing tedious. How could it be in the company of a stage-coach driver—especially one from the “States?”

Who does not know him? Who that has journeyed upon the “corduroy roads” of Kentucky, Mississippi, or Tennessee—who thus dreadfully jolted—does not remember the compensation he has had, in the cheerful conversation of the man who conducted him over these accursed causeways?

In Mexico he is met, just as in the States; mounted on the box of a “Troy” coach; dressed in jacket, or tailed-coat with short skirts; the universal white hat upon his head; and perchance a cigar sticking slantwise between his teeth. Thus he may be seen—and never seen without being liked—

almost beloved—by those whose luck it is to have a seat upon the box beside him.

Light, tight, intelligent, and cheery—civil to the humblest outsider—daring to a degree of recklessness—he is as different from the unwieldy six-caped carcase of English stage-coach celebrity, as a butterfly to a buffalo. Who ever sate on the box beside him, without longing to sit there again?

Where is the guide-book that can tell you half so much of the road—every turn and winding—every incident that has occurred upon it for the last ten years—murders, suicides, runaway matches, struggles with black bears, and chases of red deer—in short, everything worthy of being recorded?

And all this with a thorough disinterestedness—his sole design being to entertain you. No thought of the “tip” which your Old World Jehu expects to receive at parting company. Offer it to *him*, and in all likelihood he will fling it back at your feet! He has not yet been corrupted by the customs of king-loving communities.

Meet him in Mexico: for he is there. He had to go with the coaches imported from “Troy”—not the Troy of the Dardanelles, that “Ammon’s sons

ran proudly round"—but its modern, and more peaceful, namesake in the state of New York.

Although under a different name, the *diligencia* of Mexico is the stage-coach of the States—its driver the same light-hearted happy fellow, with a good word for everybody, and a kindly smile for all the *muchachos*, plain or pretty, he may pass upon his route.

Interesting as this man is—and has been for a century in the United States—he is still more interesting upon the stage roads of Mexico. Scarcely a day of his life passes without his being in peril. I do not allude to the reckless pace at which he urges his half-tamed mustangs—three abreast—down the declivities of the Mexican mountains. These are occurrences of every hour. I speak of the perils that threaten him from the behaviour of the *bandoleros*—by whom he is repeatedly surrounded.

Sam Brown's dealings with these gentry were of almost daily occurrence. At all events, there was scarcely a week without his being witness to a scene—not unfrequently having a tragical termination. More than once had he been present at the spilling of blood !

The *diligencia* is usually accompanied by an

escolta—a troop of *dragones*, or *lanzeros*, ill-armed and equipped; whose tattered uniforms, and feet set shoeless in their stirrups, render them more grotesque than terrible.

At times the escort is itself attacked; and a sharp skirmish comes off between troops and bandits—the former not unfrequently fleeing the field, and leaving their *protégés*, the passengers, to be plundered at the discretion of the triumphant *salteadores*.

At other times the *escolta* declines “coming to the scratch”—having taken the precaution just at the critical moment to be riding far in the rear; then galloping up with swaggering demonstration, after the robbers have completed their pillage, and gone away from the ground!

Either a strong escort, or none at all, was Sam Brown’s sentiment; but his preference was, decidedly, for none at all!

In the latter case the *diligencia* is often permitted to continue its route uninterrupted: the bandits believing, that it carries no passengers worth protecting, and therefore not worth pillaging!

It is no rare thing for the “*escolta*” itself to be suspected; or at least the officer commanding it.

More than once has the connivance been established, by evidence, in a court of law !

Still rarer does punishment follow in any proportion to the diabolical crime—the criminal usually getting clear by turning *salteador* himself !

On the other hand, there are times when an honest officer—one of action and courage—makes his appearance upon the scene ; and by the energetic performance of his duty becomes a terror to the bandits—rendering the roads comparatively safe.

Unluckily this improved state of things continues but for a short period. Some new *grito*—followed by the usual spasmodic revolution—brings about a change, both in rulers and robbers ; who sometimes also *exchange* situations ! The energetic officer is snatched away from the scene—either by death, or promotion to a better post ; and the passage of the roads becomes perilous as ever.

Such were a few of the revelations I had from the lips of Don Samuel Bruno, as we journeyed along the lone causeway leading by the lake Tezcoco.

There were two things still unexplained, and which no little puzzled me : how my guide had contrived to come safe out of so many hair-breadth perils ? And

how he managed to keep his peace with the *salteadores*?

The explanation was asked for, and freely given.

The secret lay in a nutshell.

No matter what happened, Sam always remained neutral!

“Ye see, cap’n,” said he—by way of explanation rather than apology, “as I’m only the driver, they hain’t no ill-will agin me. They know I’m but doin’ my duty. Besides, if thar was no driver, there ked be no *diligencia*; an’ if *it* war off the road, all the wuss for them, I reck’n. They look upon me as bein’ nootral; otherwise I needn’t go that way agin. I keep on my box, an’ leave ’em do as they’ve a mind—knowin’ that I ked be of no sarvice to the poor passengers that’s bein’ plundered. I kin do *them* more good, arter it’s all over—by drivin’ them on to thar destinashun.”

For a time my companion was silent, and I too. I became absorbed in thoughts, cheerless, if not absolutely sad.

The sight of Tezcoco, along whose shores we were now proceeding, was not calculated to cheer me. The lake looked still, and dark as Acheron itself—its

sombre silence relieved only at intervals by sounds yet more lugubrious—the scream of the great curlew, or the screech-like call of the American ibis !

Giving way to a string of unpleasant fancies, I rode on without speaking to any of my comrades.

I was roused from my reverie by the voice of Sam Brown ; who appeared desirous of once more entering into conversation.

“Cap’n !” said he, spurring alongside of me, and dragging the pack-mule after him. “’Seuse me for intrudin’ upon you ; but I’ve got somethin’ more to say about this business we’re on. What air ye goin’ to do ?”

“No excuse, Mr. Brown. On the contrary, I was about to put the same interrogatory to you. I confess that I feel a little perplexed. Now that we’ve started on this expedition, I begin to see the difficulty—if not the absolute idleness of it. It seems absurd to suppose that the robbers would send one of their number to meet any messenger, who may be deputed to them,—without taking precautions against a surprise ?”

“They never do, cap’n. They ain’t sech con-sarned fools.”

“Well, I thought as much; or do now—now that I’ve had time to reflect upon it. It isn’t the scheme I had intended to have carried out. After all, there’s no alternative, but to go through with it. What’s your advice?”

“Well, cap’n; my advice might be no better than anybody else’s; only that I’ve took notice to a thing or two.”

“Where? When?”

“I kin answer both yer questions at the same time: whar and when the coach was stopped.”

“You noticed something strange?”

“More’n one thing; several o’em.”

“What were they?”

“First, then, the skunks were *craped*.”

“I’ve heard the same from Don Eusebio. But what signification is there in that?”

“Not much, I admit; only that it ain’t common for reg’lar robbers to wear crape. They don’t care who sees *their* faces: bein’ as they make thar home among the mountings; and never put themselves in the power of the sojers, or *alguazils*. These bein’ craped, shows they’re a lot from the town.”

“What town?”

“Puebla, in coorse. It’s the biggest nest in all the Mexikin domeenyuns. They wore that kiver to keep from bein’ recognized—shed they be met afterwards in the streets. It don’t follow that they were any the less brigands on that account. Them of the town air jest as bad as them that keep out in the country. They all belong to the same school; only the outsiders don’t care whether they’re known by them as they plunder; while the town chaps sometimes do—for sartin reasons.”

“There were some other circumstances that appeared odd to you?” I asked of my intelligent guide.

“One other as looked darnationed odd. It puzzled me at the time, an do still. I had my eyes on them two saynoritas as travelled with the old Don, thar father. There’s one o’ them especially I’d like to know who ked keep his eyes off o’. Well, what surprised me was, that instead o’ seemin scared like, and squealin out—as I’ve heerd other Mexikin sheemales do when tuk by the robbers—they both flirted off among the trees, with two or three o’ the brigands attending on ’em, jest as if they were startin’ out a huckleberryin’!

“All the while the old Don war down upon his belly—flat as a pancake—from which seetuation he warn’t allowed to stir, till the gurls had gone clean out o’ sight.

“Then one o’ the band bargained wi’ him about the ransom-money—tellin him it was to be trusted to me, an whar it was to be brought. They then bundled him back into the coach, an ordered me to drive on—the which, I reck’n, I war riddy enough to do.”

“But there was a priest along with them. What became of him?”

“Oh! the monk. That ’ere is also kewrious. The robbers usooaly let *them* go—after makin’ ’em give each o’ the band a blessin’! *Him* they kep along wi’ ’em; for what purpose the Lord only knows. Maybe to make sport o’ him, by way o’ divarshin. Seein’ that I war no longer wanted, I gave the whup to the hosses; and fetched the old gentleman away, all by himself.”

“Do you think his daughters in danger of being ill-treated?”

“Well, that depends on whose hands they’ve fallen into. Some are worse than others. Some-

times they're only a set o' idle fellows from the towns, who put on robber for the time—just to raise the wind in that way. When they've got up a stake, they go back to their gamblin' at *monté*; the which pays them better, and ain't so much risk o' their gettin' shot, or shet up. There are officers of the army who've been known to take a turn at the business—after they've spent their pay, or don't get it to spend—which last happens beout half the time."

"Then there's the reg'lar *bandoleros*—or *salteadores*, as they sometimes call 'em—who live by it for constant. Of them there's several seprit bands along this road. One in partickler, called *Carrasco's*, who used to be a officer in Santa Anna's army. There's *Dominguez*, too, who was a colonel; but he's now along wi' you at the head o' the Spies. I don't think it was *Carrasco's* fellows that stopped us this time."

"Why not?"

"*They* wouldn't acared to wear crape. I hope it wan't them."

I had a painful suspicion why this hope was expressed; and anxiously enquired the reason.

"Because," answered the guide, "if it hez been

Carrasco, I shed say a pity o' them two young critters. Kewrious thar showin' so little skeeart!

"Maybe they didn't more'n half know thar danger. As the robbers don't allers ill-treat the weemen—'ceptin' to strip 'em of thar gimcracks and the like—the Mexican sheemales ain't so much 'fraid o' 'em as ye might suppose they'd be."

"Arter all," continued he, "it may be that I war mistaken. They were so quick bore off into the bushes, I hadn't much time to take notice o' 'em—the more so as I had enough to do in keepin' my hosses from goin' over the edge o' a precipice—by the side o' which we were brought to the stand."

"In any case," pursued Sam Brown, riding a little closer to me, and speaking so as not to be overheard by my followers, "It air time ye made up your mind what to do, cap'n. We're now come to the place, whar we must take leave o' the main road. The rendezvoos gin me by the robbers lies up one o' these side gullies, whar there's nothin' but a bridle path. Another half-hour's ridin' 'll fetch us to the place o' appointment."

"Have you thought of any other plan than that already spoken of?"

I put the question, fancying from his manner that something else had suggested itself to him.

“I hev, cap’n. There’s jest a chance that I know whar them craped gentlemen air at this very minute—jest a chance of thar bein’ thar.”

The last words were spoken slowly, and in a sort of meditative soliloquy.

“Where? Of what place are you speaking?”

“A queery place; and ye wouldn’t know whar it is if I war to tell ye. To understan the lie o’ that shanty, ye’d hev to see it for yourself; which not many ever do, ceptin’ them as have got bizness thar—an’ they ain’t sech as air honest.”

“A shanty—there’s a house? Some solitary dwelling, I suppose?”

“Ye may well call it that, cap’n. It sartinly are the most solitariest dwellin I ever seed; an’ what any man ked iver a built it for, beats my recknin’—as I b’lieve it do that o’ most others as hev specklated upon it. Lies up thar.”

I looked in the direction indicated by his gesture. Several dark lists scamed the side of the mountain—at the foot of which we had come to a halt. One of them looked deeper and more cavernous than the

rest; though all seemed to trend towards the summit of the slope.

The mountain itself went up with a gradual acclivity; its sides forest-covered—except here and there, where the naked porphyry peeped out through the dark green drapery of the pines.

Though the sky was moonless, there were stars. By their light I could distinguish something white above and beyond the pine-covered track. It looked like a patch of fleecy cloud.

“That ere’s the buzzum o’ the White Woman,” remarked the guide, seeing what my eyes were fixed upon. “She lies jest beyont the big black mountain. There’s only a sort o’ a ridge atween ’em.”

“*Ixticihuahatl!*” I said, now recognizing the snowy summit. “You don’t mean that the robbers are gone up there?”

“Not so fur as that. If they war, we *shed* have a climb for it. The place I’m speakin’ o’ is in that dark gulley ye see straight afore you. It’s this side the lower end o’ it whar I’m to meet thar messenger, and deliver up the dollars. That’s jest why I think we might find them at the shanty I’ve told ye about.”

“There can be no harm in our going there?”

“I reckon not,” answered the guide, reflectingly. “If we don’t find ’em thar, we kin get back to the bottom afore daylight, an then carry out the other plan. Thar’s one thing we’ve got to do, afore we reach that ere shanty. We’ve got to hev a climb for it; and the last quarter o’ a mile ’ll hev to be made upon Shanks’s mare.”

“No matter for that,” I said, impatient to proceed. “You lead the way. I’ll answer for myself and men being able to follow you.”

“I ain’t afeerd beout that,” rejoined Don Samuel Bruno. “But mind, cap’n!” added he, in the exercise of his Yankee caution, “I haint said we’ll find them thar—only thet it air likely. All events it air worth while tryin’—considerin’ sech a sweet gurl as she air in the hands o’ sech ruffins. She oughter be tuk from ’em anyhow—an’ at any price!”

I needed not to ask him which was meant by the “sweet gurl.” Too well did I divine that it was Dolores.

“Lead on!” I exclaimed, giving the spur to my horse, and the “Forward” to my followers.

CHAPTER XXXI.

DEMONTÉ.

It had not yet reached the hour of midnight, as we left the Great National Road, and commenced moving up the mountain,—in a lateral though somewhat parallel course to that we had been following.

For a mile we marched along a path, where wheels might have passed at a pinch.

We could see by the starlight that there were some small settlements on each side, and one more conspicuous above, which we knew to be the hacienda of Buena Vista—famed as the spot where the best view can be had of the valley of Mexico. From this circumstance does the dwelling derive its name; and he who from its *azotea* can look downward, without having his soul stirred within him, must be incapable of romantic emotion.

On approaching from the coast—I mean Vera Cruz—it is here the traveller first obtains a good view (*buena vista*) of the world-renowned “Vallé of Tenochtitlan;” here that he first comes within sight of the City of the Moctezumas.

Story-telling tourists can see it from the summit of the Sierra—looking through the long-leaved pines! Almost every one who has written a book about Mexico has made this plausible assertion.

But it must be remembered that these books have been mostly compiled after the travellers had returned home; and, in some instances to my knowledge, before they started out—not having started at all!

One and all have followed the first teller of the fictitious tale; who must have been sharper sighted than I. With tolerably good eyes—strengthened by a capital field glass—I could see no city of Mexico from the summit of the Sierra, nor from any part of its sloping declivity, through the clearest break the pine forest afforded.

Considering the distance, it is not likely that I should. What I saw was the “Vallé” itself—not a valley in our sense, but a wide plain; inclosing within its limits several isolated hills, that might almost be termed mountains; mottled with broad expanses of swamp, and sheets of clear water—the largest of these being Lakes Tezcoco and Chalco; here and there a white dot, showing the limewashed

walls of a hacienda, the keener sparkle of a church spire, or the glistening of an enamelled dome amidst the scattered huts of a *pueblita*.

All this you may see from the summit of the Cordillera; but not the towers of Tenochtitlan. Before you can distinguish these, you must descend—nearer and lower. You must look from the terrace where stands Buena Vista; or the plateau occupied by the “Venta” of Cordova.

* * * * *

When nearly abreast of the latter place, the road we were pursuing ran out, or rather into a bridle path; and my little troop had to stretch out into “twos.”

A mile farther on, and even this slender formation had to be changed to one still more extended. The path was only possible for “single file;” and into this we fell.

Another mile of marching, and it was not possible for cavalry, or horsemen of any kind. Only a pedestrian could pursue it, and he, too, one accustomed to climbing.

I muttered the command to halt, which had become indispensable. It was carried in *sotto voce*

to the rear ; and the horses, strung out for a hundred yards, came to a stand—one behind the other.

“There is no road beyond?” I said, interrogating the guide, who had squeezed up alongside of me.

“For horses, no. Only a footpath ; an’ scace that eyther. Thar air a horse track further up ; but it comes in from t’other side o’ the ridge—on the left. It strikes off o’ the National Road, close to the place whar the coach got stopped. Thet’s why I hev the suspicion the fellurs may be found at the house as lies up hyar.”

“But why have we not gone along the main road, and then taken that you speak of? We could have ridden on to the house?”

“No—not to the house. Thar’s a bit o’ it too—the last hundred yards or so—impossible for hosses.”

“Still it would have been better than to leave them here? I don’t like separating the men from their saddles—especially as we know nothing of the ground.”

“Thar’s another reezun for our not goin’ the other way,” pursued the guide, without replying to my remarks. “If I’d taken you by the road we might a made a mess o’ it.”

“How?”

“If they’re up at the big house there’ll be one o’ ’em on the watch down below—near the joinin’ o’ the roads. They allers keep a sentry there. He’d be sartin to a seen us—whereas, by comin’ this way, we may have a chance o’ stealin’ close to the shanty afore any o’ ’em sets eyes on us.”

“You propose that we dismount, then, and go forward afoot?”

“Thar’s no other way, cap’n.”

“How far is it to the house?”

“As to distance, nothin’; not over six hundred yards, I shed say. I’ve only been there once. It’s the steepness o’ the track that takes up the time.”

I did not much like the idea of dismounting my men, and leading them away from their horses. Not but that the individuals I had selected were equal to good fighting afoot; but it occurred to me that it was possible for us to have been seen, as we marched along the lower road—seen, too, by those who might have a fancy to follow us.

There were guerilleros along the mountain foot, as well as robbers in its ravines. In short, every peasant and small proprietor was at this time a *partizan*.

What if a band should get together, and come on after us? The capture of twenty American horses—without a blow struck to retain them—would have been a blow to me I should not easily have got over. It would have been the ruin of a military reputation, I had but just commenced making.

I dared not risk such a discomfiture ; and I determined upon the men remaining by their horses.

I had no idea of abandoning the enterprise. That would have been a still greater disgrace. I but stayed to consider some plan of approach, involving less risk of a failure.

A few minutes spent in reflection, and a few more words exchanged with the stage driver, helped me to what I conceived a better : the men to remain where they were ; myself and the guide to go up the ravine alone, reconnoitre the house, and then take such measures as circumstances might suggest.

If we should find that the brigands were “ abroad,” my troopers would be spared a toilsome ascent, and the chagrin of a disappointment. If “ at home,” it might then be worth while to pay them a visit in full force.

The guide thought there would be no danger in our going alone—so long as we made our reconnois-

sance with proper caution. There was no scarcity of cover, both underwood and tall timber. In the event of our being perceived while making approach, we could fall back upon our friends, before much harm could be done to us. Should we be close pressed, the men could meet us half way. I had the means of making them hear me at three times the distance.

I had no lieutenant with me—only my first sergeant, who had seen service in three out of the four quarters of the globe. Above all, he had “fit Injun, both in forest and prairie;” and could be trusted on an enterprise like that we had in hand.

Having arranged the signal in a whisper, and communicated to him such other instructions as occurred to me, I dismounted from my horse; and followed “Don Samuel Bruno” in the direction of the “shanty.”

* * * * *

The night was far from being a dark one. These are rare under the skies of Southern Mexico. There was no moon, but myriads of stars; and at a later hour the moon might be expected.

The atmosphere was tranquil—scarce a breath of

air stirring the suspended leaves of the pines. The slightest sound could have been heard at a remarkable distance. We could distinguish the bleating of sheep on the plain below, and the screaming of wild-fowl on the sedgy shores of Lake Chalco !

Less light, and more noise, would have answered our purpose better.

We ourselves made but little of the last. Though the path was steep, it was not so difficult of ascent—only here and there, as it extended from terrace to terrace by a more precipitous escarpment—and up these we were assisted by the shrubbery.

We had agreed to proceed by signs ; or, when near enough, by whispers. We knew that the slightest sound might betray us.

At short intervals we stopped to obtain breath—less from actual exhaustion, than to keep down the noise of our heightened respiration.

At one place we made a more lengthened pause. It was upon a shelf-like terrace of some extent—where there were hoof-prints of horses, and other indications of a trodden path. My guide pointed them out—whispering to me, that it was the road of which he had spoken.

I bent down over the tracks. They were of recent date—made that very day. My prairie experience enabled me to tell this, despite the obscurity through which I scrutinized them. The “sign” promised well for the success of our enterprize.

Beyond, the road became opener and easier. For two or three hundred yards it trended along a horizontal level, and we could walk without strain.

The stage driver silently preceded me—still going slowly, and without any abatement of caution.

I had time to reflect, as I followed him.

My thoughts were anything but cheerful. The gloomy canopy of the pines appeared to give a tinge to my spirit, and it became attuned to the sad sighing heard high up among their *ancillæ*. The moaning of the great Mexican owl, as it glided past on soft silent wing, seemed meant only to mock me!

I had been under a half belief that I had forgotten Dolores Villa-Señor, or become indifferent to her existence. Vain hallucination! Idle, and I knew it now.

Long weary marches; sieges protracted; battles, and wounds therein received; even the coquetry of other eyes—wicked as hers—had not chased her

image from my heart, or my memory. It was there still.

I could see her countenance before me—under the sombre shadow of the trees—plain as I saw the white-winged owls—soft as the weird wafting of their wings!

I had not forgotten her. In that hour I knew that I never should.

And while hastening to effect her rescue, I felt as if I could have gloated over her ruin—so steeped was my soul in chagrin—so brimful of black vengeance!

It was no chivalrous thought that was carrying me up the slopes of Ixticihuatl—only the hope of humiliating her, who had humiliated me!

I was aroused from my unworthy imaginings by the voice of Sam Brown, whispering close to my ear. His words were :—

“ Don't ye hear it, cap'n ? ”

“ Hear what ? ”

“ The music. ”

“ If you call the hooting of that horrid owl ”—

I stopped at a gesture from my guide. In the obscurity I could see his hand uplifted, his finger pointing upwards.



"A Monk it is!"

“Don’t ye hear somethin’ up that way?” he continued, “Thar’s the twang o’ a guitar, or one o’ them thar Mexikin bandoleens—as they call ’em. Hear that? Somebody laughin’! Hear that, too? If my ears haven’t lost thar hearin’, that ere’s the voice o’ a sheemale!”

The last remark secured my attention. I listened—as if expecting to hear a summons of life or death!

There *was* the twang of a stringed instrument—harp or guitar, bandolon or *jarana*. There *was* a voice—a man’s voice—and the instant after a series soft tones, with that metallic ring that can only proceed from the feminine throat.

“Yes,” I assented, mechanically, “there’s music there!”

“Moren’ that, cap’n! Thar’s dancin’.”

Again I listened.

Certainly there was the pattering of feet over a floor—with motion timed to the music—now and then a pause—a laugh or an exclamation—all betokening a scene of enjoyment!

“It’s the exact direckshin o’ the shanty,” whispered Sam. “They must be *in* it. Thar’s somethin’

goin' on, hear that? There's a bust! Darn me, if they hain't got a *fandango* !”

It was an increased swelling in the sound that had called forth this exclamatory language. A violin had joined its continuous strain to the throbbing of the *jarana* ; and several voices appeared to take part in the conversation, which was carried on during the intervals of the music.

There appeared to be nothing boisterous—no riot or roystering—only such sounds as might be made by a party of pleasure-seekers engaged in a picnic, or *dia de campo*—the chief difference being that it was *in the night* !

Certainly the sounds were not such, as I should have expected to proceed from a band of brigands engaged in an interlude of festivity.

“It's *them* !” whispered the driver of the diligencia—a better judge of brigand music than myself. “The very chaps we're in search o'. They're doin' a little bit o' divartin ; an, cuss me, cap'n, ef I don't b'lieve that them two gurls is jeinin' willinly in the spree !”

I answered his speech only in thought. And a fell, fearful thought it was.

“Dolores Villa-Señor not forced by cruel circumstances, but voluntarily assisting at a carnival of *salteadores!*”

All thoughts of strategy were chased out of my mind. Even prudence for the time forsook me. The remembrance of the past—the morbid imaginings of the present—alike maddened me.

She upon whom I had fixed my affections—high and holy—the toy of a robber chief! Worse still; herself wanton and willing!

“Go on!” I said, grasping my guide by the arm; “on to the house! Let us see what it means. On, on! There’s no danger. In ten minutes I can call my men around me; and if need be, we can run back to them. On! on! I must see with my own eyes, if she can be so degraded!”

Without altogether comprehending why, Sam Brown saw that I was determined on advancing; and, yielding to my impulsive command, once more led the way.

CHAPTER XXXII.

PARADISE FROM THE PILLORY.

Another terrace was ascended ; and before us stood the house—a massive structure of quadrangular shape only one story in height, but surmounted by an *azotea* with a parapet running around it.

It was placed upon a platform of limited extent ; backed by a precipitous slope, of which the platform was the base ; and flanked by two cliffs that scarped off in the opposite direction—downward.

What might be called the gables of the dwelling were flush with the flanking cliffs ; but between its rear and the ascending slope was an inclosed space—forming a *corral*, or courtyard.

Its *façade* lay towards the smooth space in front ; that declined gently from the walls, like the glacis of a fortification.

A better site for defence could scarcely have been chosen. No foe could advance by either flank ; and an attacking party from the front would be exposed while crossing the open ground. The place might

be more successfully assailed from the rear—by an enemy coming over the top of the sierra.

The idea of defence could not have been entertained. On the Indian frontier, yes; but in the valley of Mexico—tranquil since the time of Moctezuma—there had been no fighting. The structure could have nothing to do with the revolutionary era. It was too ancient for that.

It was difficult to understand why such a dwelling had been erected in such a place. It could not be an agricultural establishment: there was no arable land within reach. Nor yet a *hacienda de ganados*: since there was no pasture upon the pine-covered slopes that surrounded it.

Had it been built by the monks? Perhaps by some eccentric recluse, who had chosen the site, for the purpose of contemplating civilization, without being disturbed by it?

These thoughts were things of an after-time; when, upon an excursion of curiosity, I made myself better acquainted with the topography of the place.

All that I saw then—as we were making our stealthy approach—was a block of dark mason work, with a still darker disc in the centre indicating the

entrance door; and on each side of this a large window, from which a stream of light was escaping.

The ground in front had the look of a ruined garden—overgrown with rank grass, and here and there some clumps of shrubbery run wild.

Among these we made our approach—taking care to keep clear of the two bands of yellow light diverging from the windows. Both were mere apertures without glass; defended, as in all Mexican houses, by strong iron bars rising vertically from the sill.

There was neither blind nor curtain, to obstruct the passage of the light outward, or the view inward.

After a few seconds spent in skulking across the lawn, we succeeded in placing ourselves within good viewing distance of one of the windows.

Inside we could see a table set with the paraphernalia of a feast. It appeared a rude piece of furniture; as did also the chairs that stood around it. So, also, were the plates, dishes, and drinking vessels that covered it: though in these we could perceive a grotesque commingling of the cheap and costly.

Common earthenware *ollas*, and carved bowls of

calabash, stood side by side with goblets of silver, and bottles, whose tapering necks told of claret and champagne!

Tall wax candles, that looked as if they had been moulded for the service of the Church, were suspended in chandeliers of the *pitahaya* cactus, or held in cleft sticks—themselves stuck into the interstices of the slab table!

Only the drink had been as yet brought upon the board; though the meats could be scented from the *cocina*; while several brown-skinned, leathern-clad, “muchachos” were moving to and fro, with a hurried *empressement* that showed they were setting the supper.

It was evident that the two windows were in different apartments; the one opposite us being the *sala de comida*, or dining-room.

It was the *sala grande*, or drawing-room, I most desired to look into.

Not to listen to the music, or become a spectator to the dancing. Both had ceased some time before; and in their place we could now hear only a single voice—that of a man, who seemed to be speaking in a tone measured and solemn!

It required some strategy to get into position for looking through the second window. But it was worth the effort.

From the grand preparations in the dining-room, there should be corresponding company in the drawing-room? Was its quality alike heterogeneous?

As yet we could not tell. A ruined pile, that had once been a sort of portico, extended between the two windows—overshadowing the doorway. It hindered us from obtaining a view of the second.

We had been kneeling among rhododendrons—a clump of which grew near the dining-room window. There were none in front of the drawing-room; but instead, an enormous aloe—the *maguey* of Mexico. Once to rearward of it, and screened by its broad blades, we should be in an excellent place for observation.

The question was how to get there, without being ourselves observed. The ground between the rhododendrons and the “pulque plant” was a smooth piece of turf, without shrub or tree. On this the two bands of light—widening as they went out from the windows—became commingled.

To have crossed from one side to the other would

have been to expose ourselves under a light, clear almost as day.

We did not so much fear being seen by those within the *sala grande*. Their preoccupation—sport, or whatever was going on—would hinder them from looking forth.

But while crouching among the “rose trees” we had noticed that the great gate was open; and in the faint light that fell straggling across the *saguan*—a little brighter in the *patio* behind—we could see the dark-skinned domestics flitting to and fro with the supper dishes—like spectres engaged in the preparation of some infernal feast!

Some of these standing in the *saguan*, or loitering by the outside entrance, might observe us while crossing?

We dared not risk it. The exposure would be too great. Should we attempt to cross there would be scarce a chance to escape detection.

There was only one other course: to steal back down the lawn, cross over through the fainter light, and return along the edge of the other cliff. What a pity we had not taken this route at first!

I was loth to lose the time, but there was no help

for it. To have saved it, by going direct, might have resulted in the loss of our lives; or, at all events, in disaster to our expedition.

Ten minutes more, and we stood behind the *maguey*.

Parting its spinous leaves, and passing in between them, we obtained the desired standpoint.

As I have said, the music had ceased, as also the conversation and laughter. All three had been hushed for some time—having come to a stop while we were skulking among the rhododendrons.

We supposed at first, that supper had been announced to the company in the *sala grande*, and we might soon see them in the *sala de comida*.

Although the preparations did not appear complete, we should have stayed to await the going in of the guests—but for what we heard from the other apartment.

The sounds of merriment, abruptly brought to an end, had been succeeded by the solitary voice. It was that of a man, who appeared to speak in slow measured tones—as if addressing himself to an audience.

We could hear him all the time we were changing

place ; and his harangue was still going on, as we came into cover among the fronds of the pulque plant.

The first glance through these explained everything—why the music had ceased, and the laughter been restrained.

Inside the sala a ceremony was progressing, that, under the circumstances, might well be termed solemn. It was the ceremonial of a marriage !

A monk, whose robe of bluish gray proclaimed him of the order of San Francisco, was standing near the middle of the floor. I mention him first, as he was the first to come under my eye.

He held a book in his hand ; and was reading from it the ritual of marriage—according to the Romish Church.

My eyes did not dwell upon him for a single second. They went in search of the bride, and bridegroom.

A little shifting among the leaves brought me face to face with the latter. Imagine my astonishment on beholding Francisco Moreno !

It was scarcely increased when I obtained a view of the bride. A presentiment—sad, almost stifling—

had prepared me for seeing Dolores Villa-Señor. It was she !

I could not see her face. She was standing with her back towards the window. Besides, a white scarf, thrown loosely over her crown, and draping down to her waist, hindered even a side view of it.

There could be no doubt about its being Dolores. There was no mistaking that magnificent form—even when seen *en detras*. She it was, standing at the altar !

A wide space separated the bridegroom from the bride. I could not tell who, or what, was between. It appeared a little odd ; but I supposed it might be the fashion of the country.

Behind *him* were other figures—all men—all in costumes that proclaimed a peculiar calling. They were *brigands*. Francisco only differed from the rest in being more splendidly attired. But then he was their chief !

I had been puzzled—a little pained—by some speeches he had let fall during our intercourse in the City of the Angels. How gentle had been his reproaches, and tolerant his condemnation, of Carasco ! As a rival, not as a robber, he had shown

indignation against the *ci-devant* captain of Santa Anna!

What I now saw explained all. Don Eusebio had spoken only of probabilities, when he said that Moreno might be a bandit. Had he known the real truth regarding this aspirant to his daughter's hand, he might have been excused for his design to shut her up in a convent.

The bride was willing; there could be no doubt of it. I remembered what the stage-driver had told me, of her tripping off so lightly among the trees. Her present behaviour confirmed it. Even in that solemn hour, I fancied that she was gay. I could not see the face; but there was a free, *nonchalant* carriage of the head, and a coy vibration of the scarf that covered it, very different from the staid, drooping attitude that denotes compulsion. On the contrary, she appeared contented—trembling only with joy!

It would be vain to attempt a description of my own feelings. For the time, a statue set among the shrubbery could not have been more motionless than I. I stood rigid as the fronds of the aloe around me,—my gaze steadfastly fixed upon the

spectacle passing inside. I began to fancy it a dream !

But, no ! There was the bride and the bridegroom ; and the monk, in dull monotone still reciting from his book !

And now I could hear the promise to “love, honour, and cherish,” and the responsive vow to “love, honour, and obey”—all after the formula of the Catholic faith.

Oh ! it was no dream, but a hellish, heart-rending reality !

The woman who had won my heart—whom for six months I had been vainly endeavouring to forget—was before my eyes, surrounded by a band of brigands—not their captive, but the bride of their chief—freely consenting to the sacrifice !

“ *Otra cosa de Mexico !*”

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A RUDE INTERRUPTION.

“ *Otra cosa de Mexico !*”

Another strange occurrence of Mexico ; if not the most incomprehensible, certainly the most painful,

that had yet come under my cognizance: for it related to myself—the black, bitter part of it.

Words will not convey the state of my mind, as I stood regarding the group inside. I could not move—either to advance, or go back. I could scarce get breath. My heart felt as if compressed under a heavy weight, never more to be removed. It was undergoing its maximum of misery.

My feelings can only be understood by one, who has had the misfortune to pass through a like ordeal. He who has bestowed his affections upon some high-born beauty may feel chagrin, on discovering that they are not returned. It will be deepened by the knowledge, that another has won the wished-for prize. Still is there solace, however slight, in the reflection: that the preference has been given to one worthy, whose fortune has been more favourable.

When otherwise—when the preferred rival is worthless, socially or morally, then is the humiliation complete—overwhelming. It is self-love stung to the quick.

Such a humiliation was I called upon to suffer.

With all my pretensions of pride—a conceit in the possession of certain superiorities, mental as well as

physical; courage, talent, strength, activity; a position not humble; a reputation each day increasing; with, and in spite of all these, I saw that my suit had been slighted, and the favour I coveted more than aught upon earth, bestowed upon another.

And who that other? A *bandolero*! A robber!

It was the very wantonness of woe that swept over my heart, whelming it with terrible desolation!

I stood like a stranded ship with the huge seas breaking over her. Waves of passion rushed impetuously through my breast, black as the billows of the storm-contorted ocean.

The spectacle, while stirring me to anger, at the same time kept me fixed to the spot. I made no movement—either forward or backward. I felt paralyzed with a passion, such as I hope I may never feel again. The world seemed full of woe!

For a time I was unable to reflect. My thoughts were but instincts, now woeful, now wicked—now despairing, now tending to resolves.

One a little nobler at length took possession of me. My own fate was sealed; but not that of Dolores Villa-Señor—which to me seemed equally dark, and drear. Was it possible to save her?

I had not heard those mystic words that rivet the golden chain of wedlock, "With this ring I thee wed." The shining symbol had not yet appeared upon her finger.

There was still time to interrupt the ceremony. A single breath into the silver tube, that hung suspended over my breast, would stay it; and, before it could be resumed, the green jackets would be around me.

It was no thought of danger that withheld me from sounding that signal. I was too unhappy to have a feeling of fear; too reckless to care a straw for any consequences to myself. At that moment I could have rushed into the presence of the bridal group, and defied one and all to the death!

It was neither caution, nor a craven spirit, that restrained me; but an instinct more ignoble than either—an instinct of revenge.

Dolores had adopted her destiny. However dark it might prove, it was not for me to attempt turning it aside. She would not thank me for saving her. Sweeter would be my triumph to show her the man she had chosen for husband, in my power—a scorned captive at my feet.

So ran my ungenerous reflections.

“Let the marriage go on!” I muttered to him by my side. “She shall be wed, and—widowed!”

In all my life I never felt so spitefully cruel—so desirous of retaliation. Every spark of chivalric thought had departed from my soul.

The imperturbable Yankee made no reply. The scene inside seemed to be absorbing all his attention—as it was my own. Far different his interpretation of it. With him it was simple conjecture. He little suspected the knowledge I possessed, or the dread interest stirring within me.

We remained in the maguey, to await the conclusion of the ceremony.

We saw the ring glancing between the fingers of the bridegroom. But it came not in contact with those of the bride. Before that critical moment arrived, a change—quick as the transformation in a pantomime—terrible as the passage from calm to tropic storm—from life to death—went sweeping over the scene!

A phalanx of dark forms rushed past the spot where we were crouching. They were human—but so silent in their movements—so weird-like under the wan light—as to appear spectral!

They could not be phantoms. One or two of them touched the tips of the plant in passing, causing its elastic blades to rebound backwards. They were forms of flesh, blood, and humanity; animated by the spirit of fiends—as in another instant they proved themselves.

We saw them by a rapid rush precipitate themselves into the open doorway—a few scattering along the façade, and taking stand by the windows.

We saw the glittering of armour. We saw spears and *machètes* thrust through the iron bars. We heard the cocking of carbines, and the rude summons to surrender—followed by menaces of murder!

There was a short scuffle in the *saguan*, and the courtyard behind it; and then there were death groans, proceeding from the domestics, who fell stabbed upon the stones!

The two apartments appeared to be simultaneously entered. Dark shadowy forms flitted through the dining-room; but in the other the shadows were darker.

There was a rushing to and fro—a changing of places—not as in a kaleidoscope, but in crowded confusion. There was screaming of women—shout-

ing of men—threats and curses—followed by pistol reports; and, what made the *fracas* still more infernal, an occasional peal of diabolical laughter!

Only for a short while did this continue; so short, that I scarce believed in its reality till it was all over!

Almost at its commencement the lights in both rooms had been extinguished; but whether by chance, or design, it was impossible for us to tell.

What occurred afterwards we knew only by hearing, or from glimpses afforded by the occasional flashing of firearms.

Though there was loud talking all the while that the strife continued—with exclamations, every other one an oath—we heard nothing to give a clue to it.

Nor did we find any explanation in what followed. We could only tell, that the conflict had come to an end; that it was succeeded by the shuffling of footsteps across the paved *patio*, gradually retiring to the rear, and at length heard ascending the precipitous pine-covered slope that soared darkly above the dwelling!

As they rose higher, they grew fainter; until the only sounds distinguishable were the moanings of

the Mexican owl, the hissing of the cascade below, and the sighing of the mountain breeze among the tops of the tall pine trees.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

PADRE CORNAGA.

Astonishment still held me speechless, as it did my companion—motionless, too, as the maguey leaves, radiating around us.

Had I known the real signification of what had just transpired, I might have acted with more promptitude, and ten times the energy.

As it was, I felt like one slowly recovering from a state of torpidity—from an ill-digested dream!

“What does it all mean?” I inquired of the stage driver, without stirring from my place.

“Darn’d if I know, cap’n; ’cept it air one band o’ robbers that’s attackted the t’other, and stripped ’em of their spoils. The conq’rors ’pear to be clean gone away, an’ hev took the weemen too! They’ve sloped off on t’other side o’ the shanty. I kin hear

'em yet, making their way up the mountain! Thar's a path there; tho' it ain't so easy to climb. I reckon they've gone up it, toatin up the gurls along wi' 'em. The rcezun *they* ain't still screechin' is, they've got 'em eyther gagged, or *tapado*."

"*Tapado*?"

"Yes; muffled up—thar faces covered wi' something—to hinder them from seeing their way, or singin' out. They only do it, when the weemen show refractory."

What mattered it to me? What mattered, whether Dolóres Villa-Señor was the wife of one robber, or the mistress of another? Why should I care now? She could never be mine!

I stepped out from among the leaves—leisurely, as one who has no motive for making haste. There was a cold pain at my heart; a callous indifference to the fate of her who had caused it. She was welcome to go higher—to the summit of the mountain she had selected as the scene of her nuptials.

It was Ixticihuatl on whose slope we stood. The "White Sister" could be seen through the clear starlight above, reposing in spotless vestments. How different from the robe of Dolores!

“Let her go!” was my unchivalric reflection.
“She has made her own bed: let her lie upon it!”

* * * * *

It was not for the purpose of pursuing—at all events not with any thought of rescuing her—that I placed the call to my lips, and sounded the signal for my men.

In less than five minutes the “Rifles” were around me—their green jackets distinguishable under the brilliant beams of the moon—that on the instant sailed suddenly into sight.

On hearing the shots, and other sounds of strife, they had commenced moving up the mountain-path. Hence the promptness of their appearance.

Selecting half a dozen of them, I stepped straight into the doorway of the house. We entered without opposition—groping our way through the saguan.

Inside all was darkness; though we could tell that the place was still tenanted,—by the groans that proceeded from the adjacent chamber.

A light was struck; and we commenced exploring the apartments. In the dining room there was no one—a banquet spread—but without guest to partake of it!

We turned into the *sala grande*—from whence proceeded the lugubrious sounds.

The scene—so late one of merriment—was now a spectacle of death !

Two men were lying along the floor. One might have been supposed asleep : as he lay quite silent. But a red rivulet, trickling from its source underneath him, and terminating on the tiles in a pool of blood—told that it was the silence of death.

The other, also surrounded by seams of smoking gore, still lived and moved. It was he who was making moan.

On stooping over him, I recognized the features of Francisco Moreno. They were still handsome, though terribly distorted by his struggle, as I supposed, with death.

It was no use asking an explanation from him. I saw that he did not know me !

There was a thought in my mind at the moment—an unsanctified thought. A rival had been removed from my path. Francisco Moreno was no longer in my way !

But it could not matter now. The relief had come too late !

“Hilloa, what’s this?” exclaimed one of the men, poking his rifle under the *banquette*, and pressing it against what appeared a large bundle done up in Kentucky jeans. “By the Almighty, it’s a monk!”

“You’re right, caballero,” answered a voice, from under the envelope of grey-blue serge, which, on closer inspection, proved to be the gown of a Franciscan friar.

“A monk I am — at your service, caballeros. *Sangre de Cristo!* It’s the merest accident that I’m a living one. O, señores; I perceive that you are *hombres buenos*; and that the *ladrones* have retreated at your approach. Say that they are gone; and that I need have no further fear?”

“Two on ’em haint gone fur,” replied the stage-driver; “thar they lie—right afore yur eyes, Padre Cornaga.”

“Ah! you know me, good sir? *Santissima*, it’s the driver of the *diligencia*—the worthy Don Samuel Bruno! What! *these* robbers? *Por Dios*, no! They are gentlemen!”

“A queery kind o’ gentlemen, I reckon’.”

“’Tis true as I say it, Señor Don Samuel. *Caballeros* — *hombres honestos* — both these unfortunate

young men. *Aye de mi!*” added the monk, stooping down over one of the prostrate forms. “This is the son of our *Juez de Letras* (judge of the Criminal court). Many a robber have I shrived after sentence passed by his honoured father. And this,” he continued, turning to Francisco, “Ah! señores, this is the bridegroom himself—*asesinado*—in the presence of his bride, and under the sacred shadow of the altar, that should have protected him from anything! *Pobre Dolores! Pobre Dolores!*”

“It is the name of a lady. How came *she* to be here? You say these men are not robbers—what are they?”

“Oh, señor capitan!—for I perceive you are the chief—it is a strange story. Shall I tell it to you?”

“As you please about that. I came here to capture a gang of *ladrones*; or kill them, if need be. I only want to know which are the thieves, and which the honest men. There does not appear to be any great difference between them?”

“O caballero! why should you say that? Surely you do not mistake the honourable capitan Moreno for a *salteador*? A worthy young gentleman who but ten minutes ago was standing up to be wedded

to one of the fairest and most Christian ladies in our good city of Puebla—the daughter of Don Eusebio _____”

“Villa-Señor. I know all that. But how came it to pass? Why was the ceremony here? Why not in her father’s house?”

“You astonish me, señor! What can you know _____?”

“Never mind what. Tell me, I entreat—I command you—how it is that this marriage—interrupted as I perceive it has been—was taking place here—among the mountains?”

“Señor capitan; you are welcome to know all. Alas! there is now no reason for keeping the scheme concealed.

“A scheme! There was a scheme?”

“Si, señor! It was contrived between the young people themselves. Don Eusebio was against their being united—so much, that to prevent it he was taking his daughter to a convent—that of La Concepcion, in the capital; which I may be permitted to say to you, a stranger, is the most fashionable of our nunneries. Pobre Dolores! Can you blame her for using means to escape from such a fate? Even I,

a *religio*, do not scruple to say it was wrong. To think of immuring such a fair creature within the dull walls of a cloister !”

“ I acknowledge to having been in the confidence of the *amantes* ; and even assisted them to contrive their little scheme ; which, alas ! has proved so unsuccessful. Ah, worse than that : since it has brought ruin to all engaged in it !”

“ What was it ?” I asked, impatiently, having but slight sympathy with the regrets of the priest.

“ Well, señor, it was this. The gallant youth whom you see there—alas, I fear the victim of his gallantry—with half a dozen of his friends, disguised as *salteadores*, were to capture the *diligencia*, and gain possession of the Señorita Dolores,—as also of her sister who accompanied her ; another lady as fair—some say fairer—than she ; and, with all respect to the gentle Dolores, I am myself of this opinion.

“ Need I say that the plan so far was eminently successful ?

“ *Pues, señor !* It had been arranged that I was to be one of the travelling party ; which, from my office of *sacristan* to the family of the Señor Don

Eusebio, was easily brought about. I too was to be taken prisoner by the sham bandits!

“*Pues señor!* There was to be a marriage—without Don Eusebio’s consent. It was in the act of being solemnized. *Jesu Cristo!* what a termination! There lies the bridegroom. Where is the bride? Where her sister Mercedes? Ah, señor! you should see Mercedes—*una cosa muy linda*—the fairest thing in all the city of Puebla!”

“Excepting Dolores.”

The words went forth with a purely mechanical effort. I was in no mood for playing champion to charms never to be enjoyed by me.

“The robbery of the *diligencia* was a ruse, then?”

“*Si, señor. Una engaña.* A little stratagem of Don Francisco and his friends.”

“I thort thar was somethin’ queery beout it,” remarked the stage-driver.

“But what meant the ransom—the ten thousand dollars?” I asked.

“Aye Dios, señor capitan, that was part of the plot. Don Eusebio is *muy rico*—very rich indeed. For all that he is perhaps a little parsimonious. The young people knew that they would need money to com-

mence housekeeping ; and as it might be a long time, before the worthy parent would relent and grant them forgiveness, they thought it might be as well to *borrow* it from him in that way. *Santissima!* it has been a mistake—all, all! Oh, señores! *you* will not betray me? If it becomes known that I was a willing actor in this sad affair, I would not only lose the lucrative situation I hold in Don Eusebio's family, but perhaps also my gown. *Dios de mi alma!*"

"My good padre," I answered somewhat unman-nerly, "we have no time to trouble ourselves about your future. We wish you to give some further explanation of the present. The marriage ceremony you speak of was interrupted. We know that. But why, and by whom?"

"Robbers, señor—real robbers! *Salteadores del camino grande!*"

This was an answer to both my questions. The monk on perceiving it, offered no further explanation.

"Their sole motive was plunder, I suppose?"

"Ah, señor, I wish I could think so!"

"You believe they had some other object?"

"Alas! yes. Look there, caballero!"

The priest pointed to the dead body of the young man, whom he had represented as the son of the *Juez de Letras*. He was lying with face upwards. I could see upon his breast the sparkle of gold—the guard-chain of a watch—and inside the vest a shape showing that the watch was itself there!

“This is strange,” I said. “Are you sure they were regular robbers who did this?”

“Sure—sure!” replied the padre, with a melancholy shake of the head. “Too sure, caballero. ’Tis true they wore masks, and I could not see their faces. But I heard a name that told me all. I heard it as they passed out, carrying the *muchachas* along with them.”

“What name?” I asked, with a painful presentiment.

“Ah, señor capitán; one too well known upon these roads.”

“*Carrasco*?” I half shouted, without waiting for the padre to pronounce it.

“Aye Dios, señor! You know everything! That is the name. I heard it from one of his followers, who spoke to him as they hurried off in the darkness. The robber chief who has done this foul deed is the noted captain *Carrasco*! *Pobres niñas!*”

CHAPTER XXXV.

SAD BUT SWEET.

I waited for no further explanation on the part of the Franciscan.

I fancied I now understood the *situation*, as well as he—perhaps better.

With the thought of Dolores in the keeping of common brigands, I should have been, if not content, certainly less tortured. It was a different thing to think of her in the keeping of *Torreano Carrasco!*

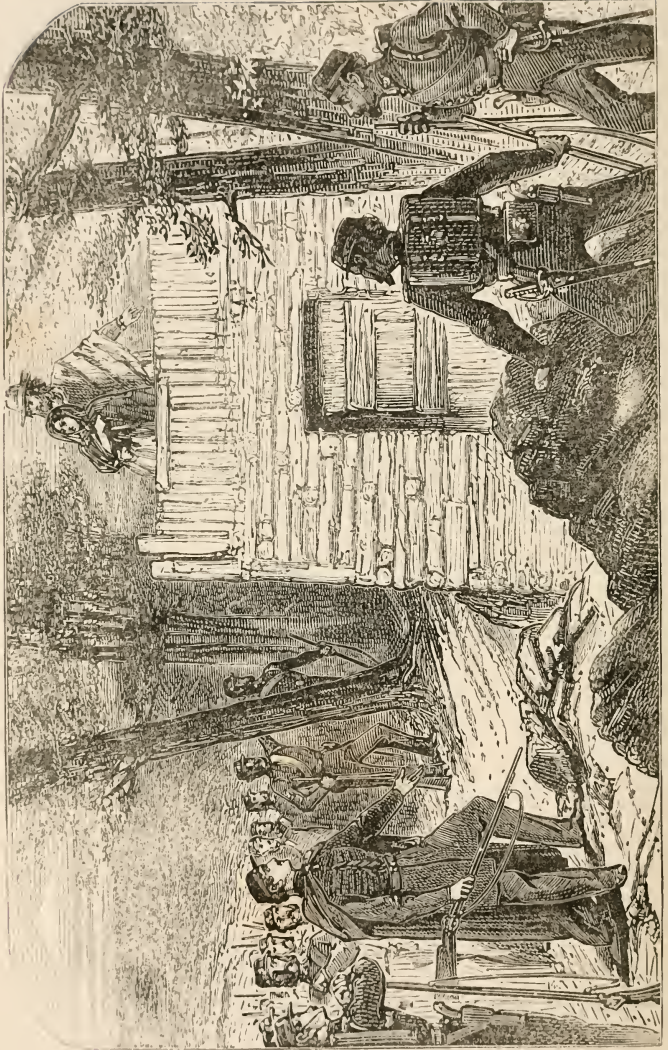
Vividly flashed before me the taunting in the Cathedral—the scenes in the “Street of the Sparrows.”

“Make ready, men! Look to your rifles and revolvers! Sergeant! form in single file, for a march up the mountain-path!”

As he of the triple chevron hastened to execute the order, I turned towards Francisco Moreno.

With an indescribable emotion, I bent down over the wounded man.

At a glance I could see that he had been badly abused.



“Shame!”

In addition to several stabs from sword or poignard, the bullet of an *escopette* had traversed his left thigh—the purple spot appearing right over the femoral artery!

I had myself received just such a shot at the storming of Chapultepec—creasing, but, fortunately, without cutting the vein; and I knew, that if this had been opened in the thigh of Francisco Moreno it was his life blood I saw upon the floor.

Its quantity, and the death-like paleness of his face, were points for a sad prognoscis.

In a double sense the spectacle gave me pain. In the finely-chiselled features—more perfect in their pallor—I saw that which had deprived me of Dolores Villa-Señor. No wonder she loved him!

But he was going from this world, and my jealousy should go with him.

It went at once, hastened by thoughts of Carrasco; and my first friendship for Francisco Moreno was restored in all its strength.

I looked around the room. There was no furniture, except such as appeared to have been transported thither for the occasion. I stepped into a small chamber adjoining. In this I discovered a

catre, or camp-bedstead of leather, stretched upon trestles. Some shawls, scarfs, and other articles of female apparel thrown over it, told of its intended occupancy. It was to have been the *bridal bed* !

I had the bridegroom placed upon it ; to receive the embrace, not of Dolores, but Death !

After a cursory examination of his wounds, I conceived a more hopeful opinion of them. The hemorrhage had been profuse. Still the main artery did not appear to be touched.

He was feeble as a child ; and stood in need of some restorative.

I could think only of that which, under circumstances strangely analogous, had given support to myself—a draught of *Catalan*. My flask was full of *refino*—the best that could be obtained in the Capital.

I placed it between his lips ; and poured down a portion of its contents.

The effect was such as I anticipated—drawing from my own remembrance. The spirit passed immediately through his frame—filling his veins as with fresh blood.

He soon became conscious : he recognized me.

“Ah, señor!” said he, looking gratefully in my face, “It is you—you who are doing me this kindness! Oh! tell me, where is she—Dolores—my own Dolores—my bride—my wife? Ah—no—she was not yet that? But where—where——”

“Do not disquiet yourself about her,” I said, with a bitterness that even his sufferings could not hinder me from showing. “No doubt she can take care of herself.”

“But where is she? O señor! tell me where!”

“Compose yourself, Don Francisco. The lady cannot yet be far off. I fancy I shall be able to overtake the scoundrels who have carried her away.”

“They have carried her away? O God! carried away, by him—by him!”

“By whom?”

It was an idle interrogatory. I knew without asking. There was a voice still ringing in my ears—a voice I had distinguished through the din of the strife, and which even then I fancied having heard before. I now knew it was no fancy. The friar had convinced me of that.

“That wretch, Carrasco!” replied the wounded man; “I am sure it was he. I recognized him

despite the crape mask. Lola, Lola ! you are lost ! And still more *Mercedes ! pobre Mercedes !*”

I did not press for an explanation of this speech, that sounded so ambiguously strange. I only said in reply :

“ Señor Moreno, do not excite yourself. Leave the matter in my hands. My duty compels me to use every effort in recovering these ladies, and punishing the vile caitiffs who have carried them off. Have no fear about my doing what I can. If fate wills it, *your Dolores* shall be restored to you.”

“ Thanks, thanks, señor ! I feel assured you will do what can be done. If not for *Dolores*, *you should for the sake of her sister.*”

“ Her sister ! What mean you by that speech, captain Moreno ?”

“ Ah, caballero ! if you but knew how she loves you !”

“ Loves *me !*”

“ Aye. It was in the hope of seeing you, that she consented to assist in a stratagem, of which I need not tell you now. It was to end by our going on to the Capital ; where, since the storming of Chapultepec, she knew you have been residing. She

heard of your gallant behaviour in that sanguinary action, and of the dangerous wounds you received. You cannot guess how she grieved for you—despite her chagrin. *Pobre Mercedes!*”

“Mercedes — grieved — chagrin! You mystify me.”

“Ah, señor—your conduct mystified her. Aye more: it half broke her heart.”

“Francisco Moreno! for heaven’s sake explain yourself! What does all this mean—about *Mercedes*? Pray tell me!”

“I can tell you little, but what should be known to yourself. *Pobre niña!* She had made me her *confidant*,—having long been mine in my correspondence with Lola. O, señor! you have been kind to me. You are doubly so now. But why have you behaved so to Mercedes? Though I may never rise from this couch, I cannot help telling you it was dishonourable,—aye *cruel!*”

“On what occasion, may I ask, has this cruelty occurred?”

“You are mocking me, *amigo*? You must remember it. She gave you an appointment in the Alameda; and though you came, and she saw you,

you went away without waiting to speak to her. After that slight she never saw you again ! To win a woman's heart, and thus trifle with it ! Was it not cruel ? I ask, was it not cruel ?”

An overpowering surprise hindered me from making reply. There was something more to account for my remaining silent. Through the darkness long shrouding my soul, I discerned the dawning of day.

“You cannot have forgotten the occasion ?” continued the wounded man, still speaking reproachfully, “I myself have reason to remember it : since it brought me a message from Lola—the sweetest ever received from my *querida*. It was a written promise to be mine ; a vow registered *en papel* : that sooner than enter the convent she would consent—*huyar—huyar*. You know what that means ?”

Though I well understood the significance of the phrase, I was not in a state of mind to answer the interrogatory. I had one of my own to put—to me of far more importance.

“You received your letter through the window of a carriage ? Was it not the writer herself who delivered it ?”

“*Por Dios*, no! The *billetita* you speak of was from *Dolores*. She who gave it me was *Mercedes!*”

I felt like folding Francisco Moreno in my friendliest embrace. I could have stayed by his bedside to nurse him, or, what was then more likely, to close his eyelids in death!

I could have canonized him for the words he had spoken. To me they had imparted new life—along with a determination, that soon absorbed every impulse of my soul.

I need not tell what it was. In less time than it would take to declare it, I was scaling the steps of Ixticihuatl in search of my lost love—once more, *Mercedes!*

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE BANDITS AT BAY.

I went not without a guide, else I might have climbed Ixticihuatl in vain.

The stage-driver still acted in this capacity. By good fortune he had made the ascent before—on some speculative expedition during a recess, when

the ribbons were out of his hands ; and he knew of a second " robbers' nest " still higher up than that chosen as the scene of the nuptials.

It was a lone log hut, the residence of a reputed charcoal burner ; but the situation was too high to be convenient for charcoal burning ; and, in Sam Brown's opinion, the " carbonero " was in reality a *bandolero*.

There was just a chance we might find Carrasco at this hut ; if not, somewhere else among the mountains.

How different were the feelings with which I now prosecuted the search. No longer indifferent about the escape of the robbers, I was determined on tracking them up, if I should have to traverse every defile in the Cordillera, or climb to the summit of Popocatepec !

Like a second Ordaz, I could have plunged into its fiery crater to rescue the captive, who but a short hour before might have leaped into it, without my stretching forth a hand to restrain her !

It was all changed now. The wound, that had been bleeding for six long months, had become suddenly cicatrized. A load seemed lifted from my heart.

I felt light and lithe as I sprang up the acclivity. No Alpine climber could have equalled me in energy : for never went one with such a purpose to stimulate his strength. It were a trite triumph to scale the summit of the Matterhorn, compared with that of rescuing Mercedes Villa-Señor !

The path was not only difficult, but perilous. It would have been so in the day. At night both the danger and difficulty were doubled. It was all up hill—steep as the side of a cairn, and with footing not much surer. The surface was corrugated with lava runs, that had been liquid some centuries before—now congealed into scoriæ that resembled the slag cast forth from a furnace.

It was not treeless ; but sparsely covered with cactus, grass-like tufts of *zamia*, and stunted fir-trees. Here and there were patches bare and coal-black—as if the lava had but recently cooled, after being vomited forth from the *volcan* above.

Two things greatly delayed us : the darkness, and the necessity of making a noiseless advance. The slightest sound—a word spoken aloud—might frustrate the purpose of our pursuit.

I had given strict orders for no one to speak—

even in whispers. In these alone the guide conversed, as he gave his directions. We knew that our voices would be carried upward to the ears of the brigands, while there was not much likelihood of our hearing theirs.

That they were above us we had little doubt; though we neither heard nor saw them. We were assured by the nature of the ground. The path carried us along the combing of a ridge—on either side flanked by a stupendous precipice. It was but the continuation of the twin cliffs that hemmed in the hacienda below. We saw no side track, that the robbers could have taken. We were certain we had them before us.

Our search promised fair for success. The robbers could have no suspicion that they were being followed—least of all by a score of American riflemen. The only enemy they might deem near had been left helpless below.

Silently we toiled on, stepping as lightly as possible over the loose lava.

At intervals we stopped to listen. We fancied we could hear footsteps and the murmuring of men. We were not sure about either. The torrent tearing

along the bottom of the "barranca" sent its "sough" into our ears—filling them to the exclusion of almost every other sound.

Still the ravishers could not be far ahead of us. Not suspecting pursuit, they would have no motive for moving in a hurry; though Carrasco might have one—Mercedes!

The horrid thought chilled the blood within my veins, causing me to stride on with nervous impatience.

Though the place we were making for was scarce a mile from that we had left, nearly two hours elapsed before we came in sight of it.

We did so at length.

What we saw was a rude parallelopipedon projected in dark silhouette against the moonlit sky. It was a cabin constructed of hewn tree trunks; very similar to that of the "States," only with a flat terraced roof instead of the slanting cover of "clap-boards."

It stood upon the very edge of the abyss, its back being flush with the escarpment of the cliff! Only one aperture appeared on the side towards us—a narrow doorway, with a door upon it; which, as we came within sight, appeared to be shut.

Presently it was opened from the inside—letting out a stream of light that scattered over the cleared track in front. On this we could distinguish the figures of several men, hitherto unseen under the shadow of the walls. The logs were in juxta-position, as if carefully “chinked” to keep out the cold: for the dwelling was situated on the extreme limits of the *tierra fria*.

While the door remained open we could see a number of men moving inside, and in their midst the loosely dressed form of a woman. A white scarf floated among the darker drapery of cloaks and *jaquetas*.

The robbers appeared to have just arrived. We knew they could not have been there long. Those inside the hut were hurrying to and fro—some carrying torches that appeared recently ignited.

The party without had commenced kindling a fire, that soon blazed up, throwing its red glare athwart the grey pine trees; a grove of which growing near the edge of the cliff flung its sable shadow over the dwelling.

The bivouackers were the inferior men of the band; for whom there was no accommodation inside.

We could hear voices, both inside and out; but the harsh hissing of the cascade, both above and below, hindered us from making anything of what was said

We needed no words to give us an explanation of what we saw. It was intelligible without this. We had tracked the bandits to their den. They were in it—their victims along with them!

* * * * *

For the first time since starting on the uphill pursuit, we felt puzzled as to how we should act. My own impulses prompted me to spring forward, and bring the affair to an instant termination.

As far as regarded victory or defeat, I had no fear about the issue. Although Carrasco's party and ours were nearly equal in numbers, I knew that in real strength—as in courage and equipment—we were as two to their one.

But even reversing the order, my men would not have shied from the contest; not if the enemy had been ten to our one.

For myself—with the motive I had, to move, and madden me,—odds never entered my thoughts.

As it was, we simply considered ourselves in the

presence of *vermin*, that we could crush beneath the heels of our boots.

With such feeling of contempt for our antagonists, the impulse was to set upon them at once. My men only waited for the word.

I was prevented from giving it by a reflection. In destroying the vermin the game might be injured along with it? Mercedes and her sister—I thought only of Mercedes—might be wounded, perhaps killed in the conflict?

This fear was sufficient to restrain us. My comrades intuitively shared it with me; and I had no difficulty in keeping them in check.

For some time we stayed, crouching behind the trees, where we had first come within sight of the cabin.

Who could say what was best to be done? This was the inquiry that passed mechanically among us.

The sergeant had conceived an idea. He was an old veteran of the Texan wars—had served in the campaigns of Houston—and obtained a thorough knowledge of the Mexican character.

“Best way, capten,” said he, whispering close to

my ear, "would be to besiege 'em, and make 'em come to tarms."

"How?"

"Surround the place. It's half surrounded already. We've only got to 'filade' the other half, and they'll be complete caged."

There was sense in the sergeant's suggestion. I should at once have acceded to it, but for the thought—I need not say what. Time was the enemy I most dreaded. Just then an hour seemed eternity!

"No," I rejoined, "we must attack them at once. If we leave them undisturbed till the morning, then our pursuit would be to no purpose. These ladies—"

"I kin understan you, capten. I didn't mean to leave it till the mornin'. Let's pounce upon 'em now—them that's outside yonder! Lick that lot up first, and then summon the others to surrender. Seein' their comrades taken, and theirselves surrounded—with ne'er a chance of escapin'—they'll be only too glad to give up the weemen—aye, without rufflin' a hair o' their heads. Besides," continued he, pointing to the summit of Ixticihuatl, seen distinctly from the spot, "talkin' o' mornin', look yonder, capten!"

I directed my glance upwards. A roseate tint appeared upon the snow. It was the first kiss of the Aurora. Though still night where we lay, there were signs of morn upon the summit of the mountain. In less than twenty minutes there would be daylight around us !

The thought decided me to act according to the suggestion of the sergeant.

My commands, imparted in a low tone to the comrades that crouched behind me, were followed by a quick rush across the open ground, and the almost instantaneous capture of the fellows around the fire.

It might have been done without alarming their comrades inside, but for one of them discharging his carbine as we came up.

For him it proved an imprudent act. It was the last shot he ever fired. It hurt no one ; but he himself dropped dead the instant after, riddled by the bullets of our revolvers.

The rest surrendered without further show of fight ; and in a minute more were our prisoners.

The shots, of course, carried the surprise inside ; but instead of the door being thrown open, we saw that it was quickly barricaded !

We discovered this on attempting to force it open, and also that it had been contrived with an eye to such contingency!

While occupied in front of it we were saluted with a volley from above; while the besieged brigands were seen over the parapet of the azotea.

Before we could answer the fire, their heads were "ducked;" and we were compelled to stand with guns undischarged, or send our shots idly into the air.

I felt that we were foiled. My comrades shared the thought. A rifleman lay, wounded, among our feet. A second had dropped upon his knees; while three or four others had been scathed by scattering shots.

We stood in a position completely exposed. To hack down the door would take time. Before it could be done, we might look for a second discharge from the housetop, with an uneven chance of returning it: for we now saw that the parapet was *crenelled*; rudely, it is true, but sufficient for the protection of its defenders.

We felt loth to retreat. There seemed a chance to shelter ourselves close to the wall; and some,

yielding to instinct, had done so. But several heavy blocks of stone were hurled down from above—proving the position untenable.

There was no help for it but retreat to the cover of the trees; and this we did, taking our crippled comrades along with us.

We had lost but little time. The interval of indecision occupied only a few seconds; and, before the bandits had got their carbines ready for a fresh fusilade, we were safely sheltered against such “sharpshooters” as they.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A SCOUNDREL SAFELY SCREENED.

Though for the time disconcerted, we had no thought of retreating. The unsuccessful assault but rendered my men more determined—besides still further embittering them against the despised foe.

Fortunately the wounds received by their comrades were not mortal, though it needed not this to provoke their vengeance. The situation of the two captives—now thoroughly comprehended by every one—was

sufficient to check all thoughts of retiring from the strife—even had the enemy far outnumbered us.

As it was, we still believed that we had them in the trap, and it was only a question of time and strategy to bring the affair to a termination.

By withdrawing to the trees we had obtained a more advantageous position. It gave us a better chance of aiming at any object on the azotea; and as the sky was each instant becoming clearer, we could distinguish the loopholes along the parapet.

They were but rude holes—the ragged interstices between the logs—but good enough for the purpose for which they had evidently been left in the fabrication of the dwelling.

We expected to see faces behind them, or something we might fire at. We saw nothing—not so much as a hand!

The brigands had by this time discovered who were their assailants, and no doubt knew something of the skill of the American rifleman. Mistrusting it, they were keeping close—not even daring to look through the loopholes.

They were not far astray in their tactics—if such they were. Not a clear spot on the parapet that was

not watched with eager eyes, and fingers ready to press upon the trigger.

For full five minutes did the inaction continue— five minutes that seemed fifty !

To me the delay was intolerable as some slow subtle torture. I was scheming how to put an end to it, when, to my astonishment, I saw a form rising above the parapet. It was that of a tall man, whose dark *silhouette* became outlined against the lighter background of the sky.

At a glance I recognized *Carrasco* !

I can scarcely tell what restrained me from sending a bullet through his body. Perhaps surprise at the unexpected apparition ?

And my followers seemed to be influenced by a like feeling ; since, along their whole line, not a trigger was touched !

The robber-chief must have calculated upon something of the kind, else he would not have so audaciously exposed himself.

He had also made a nice reckoning of the limits to which our surprise could be trusted. The time was short enough ; but before we had recovered from it, we saw a white curtain drawn hastily before him,

that concealed from our sight more than half of his person!

“A flag of truce!” thought we, as we lowered the muzzles of our guns.

In another instant we were undeceived—so far as to its being a flag. It was the white drapery of a woman’s dress—with a woman inside it! Despite the ambiguous light of the struggling dawn, I could see who the woman was.

Her appearance—quick and instantaneous—was evidently an act of compulsion—as if Carrasco had forced her into the position. I fancied I had seen his arm outstretched, as he hastily drew her in front of him.

Our rifles were instantly dropped to the “trail,” and my comrades uttered a simultaneous cry of “Shame!”

It was enough to challenge their indignation. A young and beautiful woman thus basely used for the shielding of a bandit’s body!

Many of them shivered at the thought of the murder they had been so near committing.

I experienced an emotion peculiar to myself—unknown to them—more painful than that they had

been called upon to feel! since I knew the white shield to be Mercedes!

There was now enough of light to enable me to distinguish her features. It needed not this. The undulating outlines of her head, neck, and shoulders, like a cameo cut against the sky—were easily identified.

It was an image too firmly fixed in my memory, and too deeply engraven upon my heart, to be ever more mistaken.

I had just time to see that her dress was torn, her hair tossed, and hanging like a cloud about her shoulders—just time to note that she looked wan and woe-stricken—when the voice of Carrasco, rising above the sibillation of the torrent, summoned us to a parley.

“Caballeros!” he cried out, “in the darkness I have no chance to know who you are; but, from your mode of making approach, I take it you are our enemies. Furthermore, from the fact of your being armed with rifles, you should be *Americanos!* Am I right?”

I had not sufficiently recovered coolness to make reply. My eyes, my thoughts, were still fixed upon Mercedes.

“What else should we be?” answered the stage-

driver by my side, "That same we air, an' no mistake about it."

"Why have you come here?"

"To capter the cussdest cut-throat in all Mexiko: for that same ye air, Mister Capting Carrasco."

"*Hola, amigo!* You've made a mistake this time? You appear to take me for the noted Carrasco; and my people, no doubt, for a cuadrilla of salteadores? We're nothing of the sort, I assure you. Only a band of honest *patriotas*; who, loving our country, have continued to fight for it—as you know, after our grand army has seen fit to forsake the field. *Por Dios; señores Americanos!* You're not the men to blame us for that? Just now we acknowledge ourselves vanquished; though still only besieged. But as we have no supplies in our castle here—you will give me credit for some candour in confessing it?—moreover, as we believe it hopeless to hold out against you, we have made up our minds to capitulate. All we ask for ourselves is an honourable *cartel* of surrender."

Surrender! The word fell sweet upon my ears—and for a particular reason. It promised safety for Mercedes.

“Come then, caballeros!” pursued the robber-chief; “state your terms; and let me entreat you not to be too exacting!”

For some seconds I refrained from making reply—partly astounded by the audacity of the robber—partly considering the answer that should be returned to him.

Had it been any other man I might have talked about terms. But it was the wretch Carrasco; and just then I remembered the deception practised upon me in Puebla. I thought of Francisco Moreno lying on his death-bed below, and of my artist friend, who, in all probability, had fallen by the same hand.

With the remembrance there sprang up in my mind, not only suspicion, but a fresh feeling of revenge; and by these, not prudence, was my answer inspired.

“Terms!” I shouted back, in a tone of undisguised scornfulness; “We make no terms with such as you. Surrender; and then trust to such mercy as may be shown you!”

“*Mil demonios!*” screamed the bandit, now for the first time recognizing me. “*Carajo!* you, it is! You, my saintly friend, whose devotions I had the

pleasure of witnessing, and the pain of disturbing, in the Cathedral of La Puebla! May I ask why I am honoured by this early call—in a mansion so remote from the ordinary walks of life?”

“Come, Captain Carrasco,” I replied, “if such be your title. I don’t intend to lose time in talking to you. I call upon you to surrender, and at once!”

“And suppose I don’t choose to take it in that way, what then?”

“You need expect no mercy.”

“From you, caballero, I have no idea of asking it?”

“You have need, then, unless you desire to die. You have no chance of escape—not the slightest. I tell it you in all seriousness, and without thought of triumph. My men are stationed, so as to command every path that leads from the place. They are all armed with rifles and revolvers.”

“Listen to reason!” I went on almost entreatingly, having now become convinced of the mistake I had made, in doing what might drive the brigand to desperation. “Give up your captives, and I promise to spare the lives both of yourself and your comrades.”

“*Aye, Dios!* how generous you are! Ha! Ha! Ha! Is that all you can promise, noble captain?”

“No—not all,” I answered, stung by the taunting speech. “Something more. If you reject the terms offered, I promise that in ten minutes from this time your soul will be in eternity, and your body hanging from the branch of yonder tree!”

I pointed to one of the pines that stood conspicuous on the cliff.

“What, so soon?” was the cool rejoinder. “It will take you more than ten minutes to force an entrance into this citadel of ours. Don’t mistake it for a *jacalé*. Though our fortress be of wood, it is stronger than you suppose, señor captain.”

“We can set fire to it!”

“Ah! you won’t do that. I’ve no fear of being burnt up, or smoked out, so long as I am in such goodly company.”

The sneer with which the speech was accompanied goaded me to frantic rage—at the same time that it made me feel my impotence to carry out the threat I had so boastingly pronounced.

“We shall not need to set the house on fire,” was my reply; “we shall get at you without that.”

My men are provided with axes. They are back-woodsmen, and know how to use them. It won't take us ten minutes to break open your door."

"Open it!" interrupted the robber, "and one half of you will never live to stride across the threshold. Those who do, will be witnesses to a scene which I know, noble captain, *you* won't love to look upon."

"What scene?" I involuntarily asked, as a horrid fancy flashed across my brain.

"A woman—a beautiful woman—with a poignard in her breast! By the Holy Virgin, you shall see *that!*"

I felt as if a dagger had been plunged into my own. I knew it was no idle vaunt. There was a terrible firmness in the tone of the brigand's voice that told of his being in earnest.

"Let me take a shot at him," whispered the sergeant by my side. "I think I can fetch him 'ithout touchin' the gurl."

"No—no!" I hastily answered, "Leave it to me. For your life, don't fire—not yet!"

I stood trembling—uncertain what course to pursue. I had my own rifle in hand, and was con-

sidering whether I should not risk taking a shot at the ruffian. Under other circumstances I should have been confident enough of making a sure one ; but just then I felt my nerves shaking through the throes of my excited heart. It was a terrible crisis. The sinews of Tell could not have been more severely tried, as he adjusted his arrow to the string.

The bandit seemed thoroughly to comprehend my hesitation.

There was something fiendishly exultant in the laugh with which he followed up his last speech.

“Now, señor Yankee!” he went on, without waiting for a reply. “I hope you are ready to accede to my request. If so, state your terms for our release ; and remember ! make them easy, or it will be impossible for us to accept them. I don’t wish to hurry you. As it’s a matter of some importance to both of us, and to *her* as well”—I could see him nod towards Mercedes—“I beg you will take time to consider. Meanwhile, we shall retire, and patiently await your answer.”

Saying this, he receded from the parapet—as I supposed, still staying on the azotea.

The white shield was drawn back along with him ; and once more Mercedes was out of sight—leaving me to fell fancies, more torturing than the sting of the *tarantula*.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE SWING BRIDGE.

I stood for some time chafing, irresolute.

There seemed no help for it, but complying with the brigand's request. The log cabin could not be successfully stormed without a fearful sacrifice of the lives of my men—which I was unwilling to make.

Not but that *they* were willing—one and all of them. Stung by the insulting tone of the robber-chief, they were ready to rush forward, defiant of death, and die in the act of obtaining vengeance.

The vile threat still ringing in their ears alone restrained them—as it did myself. No one doubted that the monster meant what he had said ; and we knew that, if driven to desperation, he would carry out his atrocious design.

There was no alternative but to make terms with him—the best we could obtain.

Stepping back behind the trees, and summoning around me half a dozen of my most experienced men, we proceeded to discuss the points of capitulation.

No words were wasted. Tortured by the thought of that loved form still trembling in the loathsome embrace of the brigand, I lost no time in taking the opinions of my comrades.

As my voice ruled the council, they coincided with my own; which was: that the robbers should be permitted to leave the place without further molestation—their captives to remain with us.

To let these scoundrels escape, after having them so completely in our power, was a source of the bitterest chagrin to every one of our party. It was like abandoning the object of our expedition. But, from the high tone taken by Carrasco, I could tell that less liberal terms would be rejected; and I was far from being confident of his compliance with these. I had a thought—shared by my comrades—that there was still something behind, and that another trick was intended to be played upon us. In the speeches addressed to us, there was an

ambiguity we could ill understand. Despite his professed fearlessness, the robber-chief could not but be sensible of the danger he was in; and the *sang froid* displayed by him was scarcely reconcilable with the situation.

Perhaps at this moment he was in the act of perpetrating some piece of strategy—some villanous *ruse*?

We could not think what it might be, nor even that any was possible; and therefore no one gave speech to the vague suspicion, though all felt it. It was only as a presentiment—and for this reason remained unspoken.

It had the effect, however, of urging us to hasten our deliberations, and bring them to a more speedy conclusion.

The terms settled, I stepped once more to the front—with the intention of making them known to the enemy.

There was no one in sight; but I supposed that the bandit was still upon the housetop—crouching below the level of the parapet.

I shouted to attract his attention.

There was no response, save the echoes of my own

voice, that reverberated in duplicate along the twin cliffs of the chasm.

I shouted a second time, louder than before.

Still only echoes—mingling with the cries of a *caracara* eagle, that soared scared-like into the air.

Again I put forth my voice—calling the robber by his name, and summoning him to listen to our proposal.

But there was no answer—not even a responding exclamation!

Outside the hut there was heard the hoarse roaring of the torrent, that rose continuously from below—above, the *caracara* still repeating its shrill screech; but inside there was only silence—ominous, death-like, appalling!

I could bear the suspense no longer.

Directing one half of the men to keep their places—and cover our approach with their rifles—with the other half I started towards the dwelling.

With a rapid rush we reached it—coming to a stop in front of the doorway.

There was no need for such haste. We were permitted to make approach unmolested. No shout heard—not a shot fired—not a missile hurled from above!



“As she lay panting upon my breast.”

We stayed not to give expression to our surprise. The door was instantly assailed; and, before the strokes of the Collin's axe, soon gave way—going inside with a crash.

We entered in a confused crowd—unopposed, not caring for opposition. We did not expect it. Despite its improbability, we were more than half prepared to find the fortress forsaken.

And so did we find it. The bandits had gone off; and, O God, they had again carried *their captives along with them!*

There was no mystery about their disappearance. The mode by which they had made escape—as well as the way taken—was before our eyes the instant we entered the hut.

There was another doorway at the back—with a door upon it, standing slightly ajar.

Hastening across the floor, and drawing it wide open, I looked out.

At a glance everything was accounted for.

A swing bridge (*punte-hamaca*), constructed of *llianas*, with sticks laid across, extended over the chasm. One end was attached to the door post; the other to a tree standing out from the opposite cliff.

At its farther extremity were two men, engaged as if hammering upon an anvil. But instead of hammers their tools were *machetes*; and I saw they were hacking at the suspenders of the bridge.

They succeeded in completing their task—in spite of the shots fired to prevent them.

It was the last act of their lives. Both went headlong into the abyss below; but along with their bodies, went the bridge they had been so eager in destroying!

Mingling with their last cries came a peal of laughter from the opposite side of the chasm. It would have sounded fiendish enough without this. It was from the throat of Torreano Carrasco!

I saw him standing upon the cliff—near the point of a projecting rock. He was not using it as a screen. He was sheltered as before. Mercedes was still in front of him. His arm was around her waist. He was holding her in a hug!

Near at hand was her sister Dolores—shielding a second of the ruffians in a similar manner!

“*Hola!*” cried the robber-chief, intentionally restraining his laughter, and speaking in a tone of loud exultation. “*Hola! mio amigo!* Very clever of

you to have made your way into my mountain mansion? And so quick you've been about opening the door? For all that, you see you are too late. Never mind. You can make your morning call upon some other occasion; when perhaps you may find me at home. Meanwhile I have some business with this lady—the Doña Mercedes Villa-Señor—that will carry us a little further up the mountain. Should you want to see her again, you may come after—if *you can!*”

Another peal of coarse laughter—in which his comrades, hidden behind the rocks, were heard to join—interrupted his taunting speech.

“*Hasta luego!*” he again cried out. “Good morning, noble captain! I leave you to your matins; while I go to enjoy a little stroll in company with the sweet Mercedes. *Va con Dios—o' si gusta V. al Demonio!*” (Go with God, or to the Devil, if you like it better!)

At the close of this profane speech, he commenced making approach to the rock, taking Mercedes along with him.

Rifle in hand I watched his movements, with an earnestness I cannot describe. The feverish anxiety,

with which the stalker regards the shifting of the stag, can give but a faint idea of that stirring within me.

I had hopes that the coward might become separated from the fair form he was using as a shield. Six inches would have satisfied me: for his last brutal inuendo proclaimed a terrible emergency; and with six inches of his carcass clear I should have risked the shot.

But, no! He did not allow me even this trifling chance. He seemed to divine my intent; and inch by inch, keeping her body straight between us—O God, to see her in that swarth embrace!—he sidled behind the stone!

The other followed his example, taking Dolores; and before another word could be spoken, both robbers and captives had passed out of sight!

The instant after, half a score of hats started suddenly out of the bushes, that skirted the edge of the cliff; and we were saluted by a volley from a like number of *escopetas*.

A rifleman, standing in the door by my side, threw up his arms with a shriek, and fell forward upon the stoup.

As I caught hold, to hinder him from going over the cliff, something hot came spurting against my cheek.

It was the life-blood of my comrade, who had been killed by the bullet of an escopeta.

I saw that I was dealing with a dead body; and desisted from the struggle to sustain it.

It glided from my grasp, and fell with a heavy plash upon the swift water below!

My men were by this time more than half mad. It needed not the death of their comrade to excite them to frantic action. The sight of the captive ladies; the disappointment caused by our being unable to rescue them—after supposing ourselves sure of it—and perhaps, as much as anything else, the trick that had been played upon them—rendered one and all thirsty for vengeance.

I need not say that I shared this thirst—so much that I no longer cared for consequences, and had lost even the perception of danger.

I stood upon the projecting door-step; not looking after the body which had gone below, but across the chasm, in hopes of getting sight of a brigand. Any one now: since I knew there was not much chance of again seeing their chief.

I heeded not the stray shots that came hurtling around my head ; and, in all likelihood, one would have consigned me to a fate, similar to what had befallen my comrade, had I been left to a much longer indulgence in my reckless mood.

But I was not. A strong arm seizing me from behind—it was that of my sergeant—drew me back within the cabin ; whose thick wooden walls were proof against the bullets of either carbine, or *escopeta*.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

GUIDED BY A RENEGADE.

For some seconds there was silence in our midst. It was the silence of men who have nothing to say to one another.

There was no need for any one to explain what had passed. All saw, and too clearly, that we had been chicaned ; and that the wretched curs who had “ sold ” us, were as completely beyond our reach, as if twenty miles lay between us and them !

To be convinced of this, we had only to look down

to the bottom of the *barranca*—sheer fifty feet, before the eye rested on the white froth flakes gliding below!

It was superfluous in Sam Brown to tell us, there was no crossing for a mile above or below. A glance at the twin cliffs, as they faced frowningly towards each other, seemed to say: that they had parted in anger, not soon to come together again!

A mile in either direction meant as much as ten—aye, twenty, upon an ordinary road. It meant the ruin of Mercedes!

“O God!” I exclaimed in my anguish, “is there no chance of our getting across?”

I was answered by the groaning of the torrent beneath my feet, and the maniac laugh of the eagle that soared majestically over my head—both seeming to mock the impuissance of man.

“A thousand dollars!” I shouted out, loud enough to be heard by the remotest of my followers, “a thousand dollars to the man who can show a way by which this chasm may be crossed!”

“*Por dios, caballero!*” replied a voice, coming from a quarter where it was not expected. “For the tenth part of that pretty sum I’d be willing to

pledge my soul: more especially, if by so doing I can redeem my body."

The words were in Spanish. I turned in the direction whence came the voice. I could see that it had proceeded from one of the prisoners, we had taken in the first attack.

The speaker declared himself by endeavouring to struggle to his feet, and making other gestures to attract our attention.

I hastened towards him, and gave an order for his limbs to be set free of their fastenings.

This was done.

"You know ——?" I was about to ask.

"A way to get across the *quebrada*," said the brigand, interrupting me, "if you'll let me show it to you. I only stipulate——"

"Hang your stipulations!" interposed one of my men. "We'll shoot you, if you don't show it! Like a dog we'll shoot you!"

The rude rebuke, with which I punished the interference of my over zealous follower, had its effect upon the bandolero. It secured me his confidence—while strengthening his treasonous intention.

"Señor capitán," he said, "I perceive that you are

a true caballero, and can be trusted with a secret. How much, then, for taking you across? I know you're not in earnest about the thousand *pesos*. Say a hundred, and the thing's done. I don't bargain for my life. That, of course, will be part of the price I should claim for my services."

"Your life, and a thousand dollars, if within ten minutes you take us to the other side!"

"Ten minutes!" answered the robber, reflectingly. "Ten! It's but short time to do it in. Say twenty, señor capitán?"

"Twenty, then—if it must be."

"Agreed! And don't suppose that I'm going to earn the reward without some risk. *Carrambo!* I'm staking my life against it! *Silencio, señores!*" he continued in a commanding tone, "*Hay Moros en la costa!* I must listen a bit before it will be safe to proceed."

We had released the brigand from his ropes, and conducted him inside the hut.

As soon as he had entered it, he stole cautiously to the back door; and, placing himself behind one of the jambs, remained for some seconds listening.

I had given orders that no one should make a

noise. There was none heard except the hoarse cataract and the shrill *caracara*.

“*Esta bueno!*” he at length ejaculated. “The Moors are gone—the coast is clear.”

“It is?” I mechanically asked.

“*Sin duda, señor*. My *camarados* have taken their departure. If you wish to cross to the other side there will be no danger now.”

“We wish it! Quick! Show us the way!”

“*Nos vamos!*”

The bandit, stepping out upon the ledge—that served as a sort of sill to the back door of the cabin—knelt down upon it.

Misled by a former experience, I fancied he was going to offer up a prayer for the success of his treasonable enterprise!

I was undeceived, on seeing him glide gently over the edge.

I craned my head outward, and looked below.

He was already half-way down the cliff, suspended on the lianas that had formed the swing-bridge.

He was still rapidly descending.

In another score of seconds he had reached the

base of the barranca ; where a narrow shelf of rock afforded him footing by the stream.

On touching it, he stopped, looked upwards, and called out :—

“*Hola ! señor capitán !* I’ve forgotten to tell you, that I require assistance. I shall not be able to raise the *punte-hamaca* myself. You must give me one of your men ; or else one of my old *camarados !*”

“I know what he means,” said the stage-driver, stepping forth as a volunteer, and stooping to take hold of the llianas. “Thar may be treezun in the skunk. I don’t think thar is. But if there shed be, cap’n, jest keep a look out acrosst the gulley, an’ give ’em plenty o’ lead. I know enough o’ your fellows, to feel sure they won’t make a meal-sieve o’ my carcass. Here goes for a bit o’ gymnastics !”

Before I could make reply to this extraordinary speech, Sam Brown had disappeared below the level of the doorstep. When I next saw him, he was standing on the ledge below, with the froth of the cataract clouting up around his ankles !

CHAPTER XL.

THE CONSUMMATION.

Though by this time the sun was in the sky, it was still sombre darkness at the bottom of the barranca. I could barely distinguish the forms of Sam Brown and the brigand.

I was now convinced that the latter had no thought of treachery,—at least as regarded us ; and with his treason to his old comrades we had nothing to do. That was an affair between him, and such conscience as he possessed.

For a second or two, both stage-driver and salteador were out of sight.

When I next set eyes upon them, they were upon the opposite side of the stream—climbing up the escarpment of the cliff, by a zigzag path that appeared to conduct to its summit.

A few minutes sufficed them for making the ascent ; and then they appeared at the place where the two men had stood, while cutting down the bridge.

Shortly after I could see them hauling hand over hand—as if upon a rope ; and looking below, I ob-

served the *punte-hamaca* slowly ascending above the surface of the water.

Gently and gradually was it drawn up, till it hung like a hammock across the chasm—just as we had seen it on first looking out of the hut.

A short interval elapsed; and then the voice of the bandit was heard calling to us to come over.

“*Vengan ustedes!*” he cried, encouragingly. “You need have no fear. The *punte* is perfectly safe. If you cross quickly you may yet overtake ——”

I waited to hear no more. Whether the man meant treason or not, I was determined to be on the other side; and, seizing hold of the *sipo*, which served as a sort of hand-rail, I scrambled across the chasm.

My comrades, agile as I, swarmed after me—two or three staying to keep guard over the captives already secured.

“Now, sir!” I said to the brigand, as soon as we had secured footing upon the opposite side, “You’ve earned your thousand dollars by showing us the way to get across. On the word of an American officer I promise it shall be paid you; and another like sum if you guide us to the spot where I can find Torreano Carrasco.”

I spoke with a serious air, and in a confidential tone—my confidence designed to tempt the cupidity of the brigand.

It was not misplaced. It produced the effect intended.

“*Bueno!*” replied he, with an assenting movement of the head; “It’s only a step from here,” he continued in a stage whisper. “Our captain thinks himself safe, because nobody—except one of ourselves—could have brought you over the quebrada. *Nos vamos!* In twenty minutes time you will see your Mercedes.”

My impatience to be off hindered me from questioning the guide about his last speech; though it struck me as singular, he should know aught of my relations with the captive of Carrasco. I had forgotten that the robber-chief had shouted across the chasm, loud enough to be heard by our prisoner.

“Forward!” was my hurried response, “Guide me to *her*, and you may make your own terms about money!”

What cared I for the vile dross, of which I had ten thousand dollars in my keeping? True, it was not my own. It belonged to Don Eusebio Villa-

Señor. But had I not been intrusted with it for the ransom of his daughters? And was this not the way in which I was employing it?

The Mexican seemed to comprehend me, and with a clearness that left nothing misunderstood. Willingly he led the way; and with equal willingness was he followed by myself and comrades.

Our journey proved but a short one. After climbing a rocky ridge, we came within sight of a forest-covered tract—lying just under the line of the snow.

The guide pointed to it—saying that there we should find the man we were in search of. There was a *rancho* among the pines. On reaching it, we might make sure of seeing Carrasco!

This *rancho* was the “head-quarters” of the *cuadrilla*—the cabin on the cliff serving as a sort of outlying post, to be used only in cases of close pursuit. The *salteadores* had but halted there, to wait for the morning light—the more safely to make the passage of the swing bridge.

Their real rendezvous was the *rancho*—a large house in the heart of the pine forest, where the renegade assured us we would find his chief, his comrades, and their captives.

“Lead on!” I cried, roused to renewed energy at thought of the last. “A hundred *pesos* for every minute spared. On! on!”

Without another word the Mexican struck off among the trees, the sergeant treading close upon his tracks.

It was now broad daylight; but in five minutes after we were again in twilight darkness.

We had entered the pine forest, and were traveling among trees whose stems stood thickly around us, and whose leafy boughs, interlocking overhead, formed an umbrageous canopy scarcely penetrable by the sun.

The path led labyrinthine through the close-standing trunks, and still more deviously among those that had fallen.

Properly speaking there was no path; for our guide was conducting us by a route different from that usually taken by the *salteadores*. This was to secure us against the chance of an ambushade.

Unless the robbers had taken the precaution to throw out sentinels, there was not much danger of our approach being perceived; and this their *ci-devant* comrade assured us was never done. He was

confident that no picket would be placed : the *salteadores* considering themselves safe, after having crossed the *quebrada*.

Notwithstanding his assurance, we advanced with caution. It was not due to me—too excited to care—but to the sergeant.

The latter kept close to the traitor, holding a cocked pistol to his ear—with the determination to shoot him down, should he show the slightest sign of a second treason !

The stage-driver betrayed no such concern. Better acquainted with Mexican morals, he had full confidence in the fidelity of our guide ; who had but one motive for being false, and two thousand for proving true.

“ Let him alone ! ” he muttered to the suspicious sergeant. “ Leave him to take his own way. I’ll go his bail for bringin’ us out in the right place. If thar be any fluke, it won’t be his fault. So long as he meets nobody to promise *more* than two thousand he’ll be true ; an’ that bid ain’t like to be riz ’mong these here mountings. Leave the skunk to himself. He’ll take us whar we kin trap Carrasco.”

* * * * *

The conjecture of Sam Brown proved but partially true ; though the renegade was not responsible for any part of its failure.

He did all in his power to earn the reward promised him, and in the end was paid it. He had only stipulated to take me into the presence of the robber-chief ; and to the letter was this stipulation carried out.

Through his agency I was brought face to face with Torreano Carrasco, and my comrades hand to hand with his *cuadrilla* of *salteadores*.

Reader ! I forbear to harrow your heart with a description of the conflict that followed. It was too sanguinary to be told to your gentle ear, as it is too sad a *souvenir*, even for my remembrance.

Suffice it to say, that one-third of the faithful followers who accompanied me in that expedition, slept their last sleep on the cold sides of Ixticihuatl—the dark pines singing over them their eternal requiem—that more than two-thirds of our outlawed antagonists were slain at the same time ; and that the rest—including their chief,—contrived to make their escape across the mountain.

I cared not so much for that, so long as Mercedes

remained safe—and to me. She did so, and I was satisfied.

The *bandoleros*, taken by surprise, had no time either to conceal their captives, or hurry them out of the way. Each had enough to do in providing for his own safety; and at the very first rush into the *rancho* Mercedes became mine!

As she lay panting upon my breast, I felt like one who has long been in chase of some beautiful bird—fearing by a too close contact to ruffle its rich plumage—at length, enfolding it in his embrace, in the full faith of having a treasure from which he will never more be called upon to part!

It was the first time I had holden her in my arms—the first of our exchanging speech—and yet it seemed to both of us like the renewal of an old love, by some sinister chance long interrupted!

We talked, as if years had sanctified our affection; though a love like ours needs scarce an hour to carry it to the spring-tide of passion.

On the spot I called her Mercedes—*my* Mercedes; while she in return gave me the endearing title of “querido!”

It was no longer “Querido Francisco!”

It cast no shadow over my joy, that Francisco survived that terrible night ; and, along with his Dolores, lived to complete the *marriage commenced among the mountains*, and so ruthlessly interrupted.

I had the pleasure of being present at the crowning scene of the ceremony. It came off in the Capital—in the quiet little church of the Capuchins—where Don Eusebio, instead of insisting upon his daughter becoming *una novia del Cristo*, gave his consent to her being the bride of Francisco Moreno.

THE END.

