

CHAPTER VIII.

Departure from Salina.—Last Speech of the Kentucky Circus Proprietor.—His Wishes in relation to Roblado.—Arrival at Espiritu Santo.—Pass a pleasant Evening.—A Contrast.—La Parada.—Wild mountain Scenery.—The Organo.—A picturesque View.—First Sight of San Luis Potosi.—A beautiful Valley.—Innumerable Wells.—Large Prickly Pears.—The Peruvian Tree.—Our Approach to San Luis heralded.—Arrival within the City.—Beauty of the Women.—Description of San Luis.—Its Churches, Convents, and public Buildings.—Convent of the Augustine Friars.—Benevolence of the Brotherhood.—Wants of the Sick provided for.—An evening Stroll through the City.—Market Scenes.—Encounter with a Company of Equestrians.—A droll Specimen of the Yankee Genus.—“Old Hundred” in San Luis.—Return to the Convent.—Visited by the Foreigners.—Our Yankee Wag and his Stories.—Subscription for the Prisoners raised.—Allowed our Parole.—An interesting Scotch Lady.—Visit to the Circus.—Appearance of the Audience.—An Invitation to Supper.—Find ourselves in the wrong House.—Apologies unnecessary.—Supper at last.—An Opportunity to write to my Friends improved.—Departure from San Luis.—A new Guard and new Commander.—An interesting Incident.—Las Pilas.—Arrival at El Jaral.—Anecdote of General Mina.—Wealth of the Proprietor.—A singular Funeral Procession.—A “Hog on Horseback.”—Description of the Arrieros of Mexico.

As we were about departing from Salina, the Kentucky circus proprietor rode up to take his leave of us. Just as he was turning his horse's head, in the direction of Zacatecas, Roblado passed by on a gallop, the Kentuckian simply remarking that he would like to have him, and six more just like him, in a close room for about ten minutes, the door to be locked on the outside, and the windows strongly barred. He entertained what he called a private opinion, but which he expressed publicly, that the whole of them would “find themselves most essentially chewed up” in less than that time. After uttering this short but emphatic speech, he too put spurs to his horse and galloped off in an opposite direction. I have little doubt that such odds as even

seven Roblados would have fared badly in his hands, for the Kentuckian was a well-made, stalwart specimen of our Western men, and had that determined expression of countenance which plainly indicated that he meant what he said.

In the afternoon we reached Espiritu Santo, a noble hacienda, having a fine church and a very well-informed and gentlemanly priest. Here, too, we met with a good blacksmith, and as the road beyond was reported to be exceedingly rough and rocky, several of our party embraced the opportunity of having their animals shod. Fortunate it was that we did so, for we found the road even worse than had been represented.

Our night at Espiritu Santo was one of the most pleasant on the whole route. A Mexican gentleman residing there had two or three very pretty daughters, girls who had been educated in Europe and seen much of the world, and there were also several well-informed and intelligent ladies attached to the priest's family. At night a *tertulia*, or party, was given to the Mexican officers by the former, to which a number of the Texans were invited. One of the young ladies, in particular, waltzed gracefully, and played upon the guitar with excellent skill. A generous supper was given during the evening, and thus, amid music and the dance, feasting, and the charms of well-bred society, the night wore away at Espiritu Santo—the next we passed in miserable quarters at the poor and worn-out hacienda of La Parada. Surely, the hours of our captivity were checkered.

The country between La Parada and San Luis Potosi is wild, mountainous, and exceedingly picturesque. Often the traveller finds himself winding along through deep, dark, and dreary barrancas, or mountain passes,

surrounded on all sides by high and rugged precipices. Many of these passes are not more than twenty or thirty yards in width, having pure streams of swift-running water dashing through them, and enlivened here and there by the rude mud dwelling of some family that has chosen the secluded retreat for a home. On either side the mountains rise in abrupt and precipitous masses, shutting out the sun almost entirely except for an hour or two in the middle of the day. Wild flowers of almost every variety and hue, sending forth delicious fragrance upon the pure mountain air, are to be seen on every side; orange and other fruit trees grow luxuriantly, and in one of these passes we for the first time met with the tall and symmetrical *organo* plant, a species of the cactus. It is about six inches in diameter at the base, tapering upward very gradually, from eighteen to twenty-five feet in height, and almost entirely destitute of limbs or leaves. As it is an evergreen, and grows perfectly straight, it is in many parts of Mexico planted closely in rows, and when it attains its full size and height makes a neat and strong fence—as symmetrical in every particular as though the hand of man had fashioned it. This singular production of nature receives its name from the resemblance a row of the trees has to the pipes of an organ. The prickly pear was also seen growing upon the almost perpendicular mountain sides, and here goats and ragged, rough-coated donkeys were picking a scanty subsistence from the thorny herbage. The climate in these mountain passes, for they scarcely deserve the name of valleys, is delightfully mild, and the limited wants of the scattered inhabitants are easily supplied by the vegetables that grow upon a few square rods of land. Ignorant of the wide world from which they are shut out, its cares and its vanities,

the poor Indians here pass their days in peace and quietness, and in apparent unconsciousness of the wild sublimity with which they are surrounded.

Emerging from one of these passes, the traveller finds himself climbing the rocky sides of precipices that at first sight seem impassable. By slow degrees the mountain summit is reached, and then he is amply repaid for his toil by the scenes below him—scenes full of calm repose and quiet beauty, for distance has softened the harshness of the rugged barranca and subdued the asperities of the wild precipices by which it is hemmed in. Our wagons with the sick had been sent by a different road, it being utterly impossible for aught save man or beast to make the passage through these mountain gorges.

After toiling some six hours in gaining as many miles, we finally reached the summit of the mountains which overhang the beautiful valley of San Luis on its northern side. In our rear was a rude and broken country—a country formed by nature in one of her wildest freaks—before us was spread out a boundless and peaceful valley. In the distance the numerous domes and steeples of San Luis Potosi were seen rising, while all around were rich and fertile fields teeming with vegetation, and this, too, in the month of January. Innumerable well-sweeps were seen rising and falling in every part of the valley, for here there are no irrigating canals, and the inhabitants are compelled to depend on wells for water to moisten the earth.

Descending the mountains by a rough, zigzag path, in many places so steep that we were obliged to dismount and lead or drive our animals, we at length gained the valley in safety. Here we found a wide, straight road, skirted, on both sides, by huge prickly pear-trees, and

leading directly into the city, now distant some six or seven miles. Those who have never seen the prickly pear as it grows in Mexico can hardly believe accounts of the immense size which it attains. I have seen the trunks of some at least two feet in diameter, growing eight or ten feet in height without a limb, and then branching off in every direction. As we drew nearer the city, the roadsides were planted with rows of Peruvian trees, a species of pepper or spice, their wide-spreading limbs and rich green foliage forming a shady arbour over our pathway, while pendent clusters of red berries, of aromatic fragrance, were hanging gracefully from every little twig and bough. Here and there a dwelling-house would be seen, the front yard fenced in by the towering *organo*, which completely cut off all view of the habitation save through the vacant space left in front for an entrance.

The self-important Roblado had sent on his trumpeters, as usual, to herald our approach, and the principal streets through which we passed were thronged with dense masses of the inhabitants. San Luis is one of the best-built cities of Mexico, regularly laid out, and with an air of cleanliness not common in a Mexican town. The women, too, are somewhat famous for their general beauty—they certainly have small and perfectly formed feet and hands, large and lustrous eyes, and hair more black and glossy than any other females I saw while travelling almost three thousand miles through the country. The windows and balconies of the better houses were filled with the fashionables, while the girls of the poorer classes, who seemed as though they had run from their houses half dressed in their great haste to see *los Tejanos*, were gathered on either side the streets in countless numbers.

The city of San Luis Potosi, with its immediate suburbs, must contain some fifty thousand inhabitants. Like Mexico, it is built in a wide valley, much of which is fertile in the growth of Indian corn and wheat, besides affording excellent pasturage for immense herds of sheep. The city was a place of great wealth while the adjacent gold mines were productive; but since the working of them has ceased it has lost much of its former consequence. The inhabitants, however, appear to be engaged to no inconsiderable extent in the manufacture of clothing, shoes, hats, and different articles of iron, and a quantity of grain is raised in the valley far exceeding the wants of the population. The churches, convents, and public institutions are magnificent, and will vie with those of any city in Mexico—a country abounding with the grandest specimens of religious architecture.

Passing through the principal plaza of the city, which is surrounded by stately churches, palaces, and residences of the higher orders, we at length reached the convent of the Augustine friars. This is a rich establishment, and the holy and benevolent brotherhood kindly appropriated two or three large rooms in their convent to our use. Here our sick were attended to, visited by Mexican physicians, and several of those who were in the most hopeless condition were taken to the hospital to be better attended. How different this from the unkind treatment we had experienced but a few days previous at Zacatecas!

No sooner had dark set in than Van Ness, who had no little influence with the Mexican officers, from the fact of his speaking their language, obtained permission to leave the convent without a guard, accompanied by one of the Texan officers and myself. First ascertain-

ing the name of the street in which our quarters were situated, we strolled off at random into the heart of the city. A walk of but a few squares brought us to the market, which was now filled with the venders of every species of eatable, drinkable, and wearable article. Seated upon the ground, a female might be seen with a few chiles colorados, or red peppers, for sale, her merchandise dimly lighted by a small fire beside her. But a few steps distant another woman, with a scanty supply of frijoles, would be quietly awaiting a customer, and her next neighbour was probably sitting by the side of an earthen pot of chile guisado, kept hot by a small charcoal fire beneath. In her lap would be a small pile of tortillas, and ever and anon, as some hungry customer gave her a call, she would throw two or three of the tortillas upon the fire to warm, dip a saucer of the guisado from the pot before her, and after receiving her *quartillo* in advance, hand over the eatables to the purchaser. The *quartillo* is a copper coin about the size of one of our pennies, but passes for three. There is a small portion of silver in the Mexican copper coins—just enough to make it an object to counterfeit them—and it is said that large quantities of spurious *quartillos* have been manufactured in the United States and in England expressly for the Mexican market.

The market-place of San Luis occupies a large square, and every part of it was in some way put to use by the females. Twenty-five cents would have purchased the whole stock in trade of a large portion of them; yet they seemed perfectly happy, and would chat away, while smoking their cigarritos, with the greatest vivacity and cheerfulness. There may not have been as many languages spoken as in the New-Orleans market, but there was as much talking, and even more bustle and

confusion. The square was filled with soldiers off duty, loafers, market-women, girls, monks, gamblers, léperos, venders of oranges and other fruits, robbers, friars, fellows with fighting chickens under their blankets—in short, one of those miscellaneous collections always to be found about a Mexican market square. The adjoining buildings were occupied as drinking and cigar shops, retail fancy stores, and dwelling houses of the poorer orders. Around the liquor shops were seen a few drunken Indians, the husbands or brothers, probably, of some of the market-women, who had spent one half of their hard earnings in the purchase of mescal or aguar-diente.

Entering an *estanquillo*, or shop licensed to sell cigars, we met two or three faces so decidedly Anglo-Saxon in complexion and feature that we at once accosted them in English, and were answered by one of the party with a drawl and twang so peculiarly “Down East,” that Marble, Hackett, or Yankee Hill might have taken lessons from him. We soon ascertained that they belonged to the American circus company then performing at San Luis, and on telling them who we were they at once invited us to their *meson* to supper. The first speaker, who proved to be a regular Vermonter, was not a little surprised to see us out without a guard, and asked if we had received permission to that effect. His astonishment was removed when we told him that we were allowed to leave our quarters on parole.

In five minutes after our arrival at the hotel of the equestrians, I found that our Vermont acquaintance was one of the quaintest specimens of the Yankee race I had ever seen, and not a few examples had I met previous to my encounter with him. He had a droll impediment in his speech which gave to his actions and gestures a

turn irresistibly comic, and then he told an excellent story, played the trombone, triangle, and bass viol, spoke Spanish well, drove one of the circus wagons, translated the bills, turned an occasional somerset in the ring, cracked jokes in Spanish with the Mexican clown, took the tickets at the entrance with one hand, while with the other he beat an accompaniment to the orchestra inside on the bass-drum, and, in short, made himself "generally useful." After partaking of an excellent supper, we spent an agreeable hour in his room, listening to story after story of his adventures. He "come out" to Mexico, to use his own words, by way of Chihuahua, accompanying the traders from Jonesborough, on Red River, in the first and only expedition across the immense prairies. They were some six or eight months on the road, and suffered incredible hardships for want of water and provisions. Our Yankee was a stout man when we saw him, but he told us that he was a perfect transparency when he first arrived at the Mexican settlements—so poor, in fact, that according to his own account "a person might have read the New-England Primer through him without specs."

When ten o'clock came we rose to depart; but the droll genius insisted that we should first partake of a glass of egg-nog with him, and then help him to sing "Old Hundred" in remembrance of old times. There are few persons in the New-England States who cannot go through this ancient and well-known psalm-tune after some fashion, and although neither time nor place was exactly befitting, we all happened to be from that quarter, and could not resist complying with his comico-serious request. He really had a good voice, and, for aught I know, may have led the singing in his native village church. After humming a little, apparently to

get the right pitch, he started off with a full, rich tone; but suddenly checking himself in the middle of the first line, said that the thing was not yet complete. Taking a double-bass from its resting-place in one corner of the room, he soon had the instrument tuned, and then recommenced with this accompaniment. Never have I heard a performance so strangely mingling the grave and the comic. It was odd enough to see one of his vocation in a strange land thus engaged—and then the solemnity and zeal with which he sawed and sang away were perfectly irresistible. I did not laugh; but thoughts arose in my mind very little accordant with the earnest and devotional spirit with which our strange companion went through his share of the performance. This curious scene over, a scene which is probably without a parallel in the history of San Luis Potosi, we took leave of our singular acquaintance, who promised to call at the convent early the next morning, and do everything in his power to assist those among the Texans who were the most destitute.

During the forenoon of the day which followed this strange night adventure, we were visited at the convent by a large number of foreigners—Scotch, Irish, English, German, French, and American. Our Yankee acquaintance also made his appearance, with several of his companions, and for an hour or two the old cloisters fairly rang with laughter at his merry jokes. The mad wag had an inexhaustible fund of humorous anecdote, and one great charm about his jokes was, that while his hearers' sides were shaking at their recital, his own face was as solemn as that of any of the Yucatan idols which grace the volumes of Stephens or Norman. A faint twinkle of humour, enough to show that he felt the full comic force of his story, might be seen lurking