

CHAPTER XIII.

Another Dance in San Lazaro.—Mexican Improvisadores.—Accident to a couple of Dancers.—Fondness of the Mexicans for Music.—American Visitors.—An agreeable Afternoon passed.—Good Friday, and a better Dinner.—Fasts preferable to Feasts.—A drunken Lazarino.—Touching Incident.—Visits of our Friends prohibited.—Speculations as to the different Modes of escaping from San Lazaro.—Several Plans agitated.—The Foreigners once more permitted to visit us.—News of the Appearance of an American Fleet upon the Mexican Coast.—Advised not to attempt an Escape.—A severe Epidemic in San Lazaro.—Horrible Colds and worse Coughs.—Death of another Leper.—A second midnight Funeral.—Rarity of the Atmosphere of Mexico.—A regular Uproar in San Lazaro.—José Maria and his inhuman and vicious Conduct.—Mexican Gamblers.—Farther Annoyances from José Maria.—An early morning Visit.—Prospects of Release.—Santa Anna's Reasons for not liberating us immediately.—General Thompson at Vera Cruz.—Santa Anna anxious to shuffle out of a Dilemma.—Bright Anticipations of being once more at Liberty.—More American Visitors.—Arrival of General Thompson in Mexico.—The Annoyance of Suspense.—A File of American Papers.—Visit of General Thompson to San Lazaro.—Letters from Friends.—A Visit from Mr. Perrin.—Prospects of Liberation again clouded.—An Opportunity of Escape thrown in my Way.—Determination to improve it.—Anxiously await the arrival of Assistance from without.

ON the Sunday night following the strange events related in my last, the lepers had another dance in the hospital, accompanied, as usual, by singing. The Mexicans are great *improvisadores*, and can rattle off rhymes at a moment's warning. A stranger is frequently struck with surprise, at a fandango, when he hears one of the dancers commence a song the words of which relate exclusively to himself, and which, of course, is "got up" expressly on his account. The copiousness of the Spanish language gives the greatest facility to rhymesters; but the verses of the lower orders are generally made up of senseless jingle, abounding with unmeaning tropes,

absurd metaphors, or the most outrageous inconsistencies.

One little incident occurred during this evening which may be worthy of notice. While a couple were dancing face to face, with a species of shuffling, breakdown step, the plank in the floor upon which they were performing their *pas de deux* suddenly gave way, and amid screams and scrambling both disappeared in the dark and gloomy cellar beneath. After some little exertion on the part of their friends they were extricated, and fortunately neither was so much injured but that they immediately chose a fresh plank and recommenced their dance and song.

Out of San Lazaro I have heard singing among the lower orders of Mexicans which was extremely harmonious and pleasing. Without the slightest knowledge of music, as a science, the common people are still fond of carolling the little airs of the country in chorus, and have ears exquisitely correct in singing the different parts. Frequently, while upon the road, might the closely-tied and strictly-guarded Mexican prisoners, or *volunteers*, be heard giving their native songs and choruses with most pleasing effect. One would think that these unfortunate men, after a long day's march, would be more inclined to sleep than to sing; but such was not the case. On the contrary, some dozen or fifteen of them, seated upon the ground after their scanty supper, would join in a melody which floated sweetly on the evening air. The different voices, from the highest falsetto to the deepest bass, were many of them of purest and softest quality, and blended together with a harmony at once musical and soothing. Madame Calderon de la Barca, in her entertaining work upon Mexico, speaks frequently of the fondness of the lower

classes for music, and of their rare gifts and great taste in singing. The fair author considers music a sixth sense with the Mexicans, and really it would seem that such is the case.

On the afternoon of the 23d of March I was visited by Mr. Mayer, accompanied by Mr. Elliot, who had been chaplain to the United States exploring expedition, and a young American named Weed, who had been travelling some two years in Mexico and the South American republics. They passed the whole afternoon with me, and so far as regards myself, three or four hours have seldom been whiled away more agreeably. We all had many anecdotes of travel to relate, most of them amusing, and night had fairly set in before my friends were admonished that it was time to depart. That quarter of the city in which San Lazaro is situated is notorious as being frequented by robbers of the worst class, fellows who would have little hesitation in taking life for a few dollars; hence there is danger in traversing it after nightfall, unless well armed; and as my visitors had not taken that precaution on setting out, they now hurried their departure. Should any of them chance to peruse this chapter, they will recollect the afternoon they spent with me at San Lazaro, and the merry time we passed—I never once thought that I was a prisoner until I accompanied the gentlemen as far as the door, and was reminded by the guard stationed there that I could go no farther. Until some time afterward I was not aware that Mr. E. was a clerical gentleman, else there might have been more constraint and less hilarity.

Good Friday passed in San Lazaro with no incident to mark it, save that a better dinner was provided for us than usual. We had fish served in different modes,

frijoles and other vegetables, all of them well cooked. The fast-days we always preferred to the feast-days; for in the absence of meats they invariably gave us far better fare in every other respect.

Here I will relate a little incident which occurred one morning in the hospital, and which occasioned me not a little annoyance. Among the unfortunate *lazariños* was one poor fellow, fast verging towards the grave, who, for getting intoxicated and afterward quarrelling, was sentenced to wear a long and heavy chain. The leper had lost a part of his nose and almost all his powers of speech—in fact, was only able to articulate a few words intelligibly, and these in a tone harsh and frightfully discordant. While yet stupified by liquor and lost to all feeling of shame, he appeared to care little for the disgrace which had been inflicted upon him, but, on becoming sober, his countenance plainly denoted that the iron entered his soul, and occasioned him much distress, not only of body but of mind.

The chain was tightly riveted to his right ankle, and whenever he left his cot for the *cocina* or kitchen, where the lepers warmed their food and made their chocolate, he was obliged to drag it after him. While passing my cot, on the occasion I have alluded to, his face wore an expression unusually lugubrious—so grotesque yet piteous, that I had much difficulty in repressing a smile. It would seem no easy task to read a man's countenance when it wants a nose; but in the present instance the eye had a peculiar expression that was a complete key to his thoughts. He appeared to divine what was running in my mind, came to a halt, and turned upon me another look—a look which denoted that he deeply felt the disgrace of wearing the galling chain, and which it was evident he also intended as

an appeal to my sympathy. There was something so ludicrous, however, although mournful, in this look—something in which the comic was so strangely mixed with the serious—that for the life of me I could not resist laughing. This was too much for the leper. He drew back the foot to which the chain was attached, gave me a glance full of reproach for my want of feeling, and then, by a violent kick, sent the instrument of his disgrace clanking across the floor. He then gave me another upbraiding glance, uttered with much effort the worst oath in the Spanish language, and stalked off, dragging his chain after him. Once only he turned his eye towards me, as if to ascertain the effect his singular movements had wrought; and if my own face betokened the workings of my mind, I am confident the leper was satisfied. I felt vexed with myself to think that I had unnecessarily wounded the feelings of one upon whom misfortune had laid her hand so heavily—one whose situation called rather for pity than ridicule—and I resolved never again to give him cause to reprove me for want of sensibility. The leper appeared to see contrition in my countenance; and as he afterward manifested no ill feelings towards me, I had the satisfaction of knowing that I had made him sufficient atonement.

From the 22d of March to the 6th of April not a person was allowed to visit us at San Lazaro, the authorities having taken some whim into their heads which induced them to forbid our friends holding any communication with us. During this long interval—long at least to one confined—I determined upon making an escape if possible. So long as my friends were permitted to have personal interviews with me, and daily held out hopes that I should be speedily liberated, so

long my situation was endurable, although my better judgment taught me to believe many of these hopes delusive; but now that I was *incomunicado*—now that all intercourse with my friends was cut off through some trifling caprice, my situation became irksome in the extreme.

There were three ways by which an escape could be effected from San Lazaro. The most feasible plan, or rather the one that would require no Mexican accomplices, would be the most perilous; but liberty was then worth all the hazards I should be compelled to run. The plan was this: attached to the hospital was a small yard which we were allowed to visit at all times during the day, and in fact until dark. At this time our guard was changed, the new sergeant locking the door which led to the yard for the night. The yard was surrounded by a wall about twenty feet high, and there was one place where the top could be attained, with little difficulty, by means of an out-building which had partly fallen to decay. Once upon the top, a person with sound limbs would run little risk in jumping to the ground; but as my ankle was still tender, from the effects of the severe injury I had received in Texas, I was fearful about hazarding the jump. Outside the walls was the immense plain stretching towards Guadalupe, San Lazaro being at the extreme edge of the city; yet a walk of a few steps would take me to the head of a street leading directly into the heart of Mexico. All I wanted was some friend to smuggle a rope into my hands, which I could in some way fasten to the wall, and thus let myself down in safety. At dusk, and just as the new guard were about locking us in, I could slip stealthily into the yard, effect my escape over the wall, and then, by having a friend

at the head of the first street next the hospital to conduct me, reach some safe quarters in the city. This plan gave every promise of success. Should I be missed immediately, all would be over with me; but with five minutes' start, I could reach an asylum secure from the guards.

Another plan I agitated in my own mind was to bribe the guard to let me pass out during the night, and still another was to induce the old major-domo of the establishment to leave a door, which led from the upper part of our room into the street, open at night. This door had an alphabetical lock, the secret of which was known only to him; had it been secured by an ordinary lock, I could find means to procure false keys, in which case it would afford an easy and safe means of escape. In the mean time, I had had a map of the Mexican country in my possession for several weeks, which I had studied so thoroughly that I was well acquainted with the geography of every section. My intentions were, instead of endeavouring to escape by way of the Atlantic, to make at once for Acapulco or some port on the Pacific, thence by some of the coasting vessels to Callao, where I should be able to find a vessel up for the United States; but in the midst of all these calculations circumstances occurred which for a time drove all thoughts of effecting an escape from my mind.

On the 6th of April several foreigners obtained permission to visit us, bringing with them a number of papers from the United States, and also news that a large American naval force was concentrating in the Gulf, and that several men-of-war were already lying off Sacrificios, near Vera Cruz. From the tone of the journals brought me I could plainly see that my friends throughout the United States were moving with great

spirit in my behalf, and pressing upon the government the necessity and justice of making an immediate and imperative demand for my release. This was all I wanted. I was anxious that some definite action in my case should be at once resorted to, that I might know what to expect, and that the annoying uncertainty which now pressed me down might be removed.*

I mentioned the fact of my contemplating an immediate escape from San Lazaro to my friends. They advised me to give up all thoughts of the attempt, at least for the present. Should circumstances render it necessary to escape, they promised me every assistance; but as now there certainly was a probability of prompt action being taken in my case, they recommended me to give up the idea until the result should be known. With this advice, they left me to pore over the files of papers they had brought for my amusement.

About this time a severe epidemic broke out in the hospital, and I believe was general throughout Mexico, in the form of a cold, accompanied by a distressing cough. Every leper was more or less affected, and the Texans, too, came in for a full share of the malady. There is nothing interesting about a cough, even when a person has a good set of lungs and other appointments to give it full effect; but among the unfortunate lepers, many of whom were destitute of noses, and whose throats were severely affected by the disease which

* While all my editorial brethren throughout the United States spoke as with one voice in my behalf, during the unjust imprisonment I was subjected to, it may appear invidious to single out one as more deserving of my gratitude; yet I cannot, while returning my warmest thanks to all, resist mentioning the name of Mr. Bullitt, the able and warm-hearted editor of the New-Orleans Bee. He, perhaps, knew more of my intentions on first starting for Texas and Mexico, was better enabled to judge of the injustice of imprisoning and detaining me, than any of his compeers, and as a consequence he was more strenuous and untiring in his endeavours to procure my release.

was fast hurrying them to the grave, the strangling noises uttered were of a nature the most horrible. Night after night I was kept awake by sounds the most distressing, the poor fellows apparently in strong convulsions during the paroxysms, and some one of them appearing at all times ready to commence the moment another would obtain a short relief. In this way a continual din and harassing clamour were kept up, and the nights we now spent in San Lazaro were among the most annoying of all our imprisonment.

From the 6th to the 14th of April our time passed heavily and drearily. One poor leper died in our room during this interval, a dreadful cough cutting short days to which his deplorable malady would inevitably have soon put an end. Whether he had more money or influence than some of the unfortunates, who had here ended the journey of life before him, I know not; but the night ceremonies on the occasion were upon a scale more grand and imposing than were those which took place at the death of any other leper who died during my imprisonment in the hospital. The procession of priests and attendants was larger, there were more candles burning, and they appeared to shed even a more lurid glare upon the wan and gloomy countenances of the lepers in the farther parts of the room. At every interval when the paroxysms of coughing left them, the lepers muttered prayers for the repose of their departed comrade, and smote their breasts violently, as if in penance for their own unconfessed transgressions. Amid low, murmured prayers, the burning of incense, and the monotonous ringing of a bell, the procession left our room, and again all was gloom; a dismal quiet reigned, broken only by the frightful coughs which were heard on every side—the sufferers apparently half

strangled with the paroxysms. There is a rarity in the atmosphere of Mexico, at certain seasons, which makes respiration difficult; and in addition to a slight cough which I had at the time, I suffered from a difficulty of breathing closely allied to the asthma, which gave me much annoyance.

During the afternoon and evening of the 14th of April there was a grand uproar in our room, in which one of our guard received a severe flogging from the corporal. The duty of the soldier on guard was to walk, with his musket at a shoulder, directly in front of our cots, both day and night. On the afternoon I refer to, a gambling leper, on the opposite side of the room, had opened a game of *monte* upon his cot, and as the guard had that day been paid off, he found ready customers and patrons in every one of them. A knot of soldiers and lepers were congregated around him during the afternoon, and among them the corporal of our guard had taken a hand and finally lost, not only his own pay, but that of such of his men as were willing to lend him.

A more ill-natured, morose, and vicious fellow than this corporal I had not met during all the intercourse I was forced to hold with the soldiery of Mexico. His features and expression proclaimed him a petty tyrant of the worst description; for there was a lurking malice in his eye, a sinister expression in his mahogany-coloured countenance, that as plainly denoted his character as a sign over a grocer's door tells the passers-by that sugar or coffee may be purchased within. The fellow took every occasion to annoy us—would prevent our friends from entering our room when they called—deprived us of every liberty in his power, and, in short, made himself odious to all. His name was José Maria;

and here I would remark that José Maria is the John Smith of Mexico. Call the name in almost any crowd you may meet, you will find José Marias ready to respond.

When the wretch had lost his own money, and could borrow no more, he appeared to lose all command of his bad passions. One of our party, against whom he had some ill will, he drove to his bed, and soon after ordered his own men to leave the gambling cot of the leper, and by this means "blocked the game;" but no sooner had he left the room for a few moments than the cards were again produced, and the game resumed. On returning, and finding his men once more engaged, he drew the stick which all the corporals in Mexico carry, and belaboured them most unmercifully—and all to gratify his own malicious passions. This closed the game a second time, but no sooner was his back turned than it was again recommenced. One of his men had won, by three or four successful bets, some ten or fifteen dollars, all of which he had staked on the turn of a single card. The game of *monte* closely resembles *faro*, and the leper had hardly commenced dealing before José Maria again made his appearance. Walking stealthily to the cot, the wretch raised his stick, and uttered a horrible oath. The poor soldier who had staked his all saw the impending blow, but, Mexican-like, his love of the game overcame all fears of the pain and disgrace of a beating, and he continued to watch the cards as the leper slowly turned them over, one by one. José Maria now struck him a violent blow upon the back. He shrugged his shoulders, but still watched the game with as much intentness as ever. Another and another blow followed in quick succession, and still the soldier made no other motion than a slight flinching

as the stick fell heavily upon his head or back. The ungovernable passion of the corporal appeared to gain fresh strength from the stoical indifference of the soldier, and he now belaboured the poor fellow with blows that cut to the very quick; but still he did not move. His all depended upon the turn of a card, and neither blows nor threats could drive him from his watch of the game. An unlucky turn at length decided the bet against him, and now for the first time he turned his head. It was only to give a look of stern defiance at his cruel oppressor, for he did not dare strike back, and then coolly to walk off. Exhausted with his efforts, and pale from exertion and passion, José Maria also left the spot, and quiet was once more restored.

I have related this anecdote to show how deep-seated is the passion for gaming in Mexico. From the *lépero** to the highest dignitary—men and women—all, or nearly all, are alike afflicted with the passion. They manifest, too, the greatest indifference to loss, and instances are daily occurring where a man will lose his hat, shoes, blanket, and even the very shirt from his back, with a coolness and nonchalance which in any other situation would be highly commendable. He fears no pain or disgrace—starvation he looks upon with perfect indifference—in short, so strong and deep-seated is his passion for any game of chance, that the Mexican will stake a month's food in advance upon the single turn of a card, even were he to know that starvation would be the inevitable result of an unlucky deal. That there are many gentlemen in Mexico who do not gamble I have little doubt; but as a general rule, all classes are more or less addicted to games of chance.

* The *lépero* is the loafer of Mexico, not one afflicted with leprosy, as many of my readers may imagine. The latter are called *lazarinos*.

For hours after the strange scene at the cot of the gambling leper sleep did not visit my eyelids. A continued succession of horrid sounds from the lepers around me—sounds intended for coughs, but which resembled more the last rattling struggles of dying men—would have prevented sleep; but to these were added an extreme difficulty of respiration on my own part, and the unceasing annoyances of José Maria. The wretch had seen that we took part in the general dissatisfaction manifested at his inhuman conduct, and sought his revenge by counting us every half hour until after midnight. Not content with simply examining each cot closely, he held a lantern directly in our faces, so that the light could not but awaken us even had we been ever so much disposed to sleep. It was not until he himself became completely weary with too much watching that he ceased his annoying attentions, after which I was enabled to fall into a doze.

At an early hour the next morning, even before the sun had risen, I was awakened by a hearty shake of my shoulders. On opening my eyes, I was not a little astonished on seeing Mr. Mayer sitting by the side of me on my narrow cot. The unusual hour, and the fact that his face wore an expression of much satisfaction, convinced me that he was the bearer of glad tidings, and with not a little curiosity I inquired of him the news.

Mr. M. informed me that there was now every prospect of my speedy liberation, together with five or six of the other prisoners who had claimed American protection. He farther stated that Mr. Ellis had had an interview with Santa Anna, at which the latter manifested a disposition to give an order for our release so soon as certain movements on the part of the American

government, and some of its citizens, could be satisfactorily explained. Among these, Santa Anna referred to the fact that a number of United States men-of-war had either anchored or been seen off Sacrificios, and to a rumour that young Frank Combs had entered Texas from the United States with a body of men, whose intention was to invade the Mexican territory. He farther mentioned the case of young Spencer, whose movements in New-Orleans and Texas at that time were of a suspicious nature, and that there might be some design against Mexico at the bottom of them.

That all these circumstances could be so satisfactorily explained as in no way to compromise the dignity of either Mexico or the United States, Mr. Mayer expressed himself confident, and at the same time congratulated me upon the prospect of once more regaining that liberty of which I had now been deprived for seven months. After informing me, in addition, that General Waddy Thompson, the new minister to Mexico, had arrived at Vera Cruz, and was then on the road to the capital, and promising to call upon me the next day, Mr. M. left San Lazaro.

That I was not a little elated by this favourable turn in my affairs may be readily imagined. I had all along believed that Santa Anna would keep me in confinement so long as he could find any pretext for such a course; but that the moment he found he could no longer detain me, he would find some excuse for granting my release. He now saw that the subject of our imprisonment had excited a lively interest in the United States; that meetings were held at different points, having for their object a call upon the government to demand the immediate and unconditional release of such Americans as were entitled to its protection; and that