

## CHAPTER XX.

Preparations for Departure.—High Words with a Mexican Stage-agent.—A Victory.—A Scotch Traveller.—No Room for another Passenger.—Leave the "City of the Angels."—Approach of an Escort.—Appearance of the Dragoons.—Arrival at El Pinal.—Roadside Graves.—Change of Horses.—A wild Mexican Steed and his Antics.—A rapid Start.—A noted Stand for Robbers.—Another doughty Escort.—The Mal Pais and Cerro de Pizarro.—Arrival at Peroté.—Visit to the Texan Prisoners.—Their Condition.—A vile Supper.—A French Lady.—Another early Start.—Coldness of the Mountain Air.—A false Alarm.—Colder and Colder.—Tierras Frias.—Arrival at Las Vigas.—In want of Refreshments.—"No hai" and "Quien sabe" again.—Wild Mountain Scenery.—Volcanic Formations.—El Cofre de Peroté.—Strange Indian Legend.—Leave the Region of Lava.—Remarkable Change of Scene and Climate.—Sudden Transition.—Halt at the House of a Mexican Lady.—Singularity of her Conduct.—La Guerra Rodriguez.—Examination of our Passports at the Garita.—Arrival at Jalapa.

WE were awaked at two o'clock in the morning by a servant with the old announcement, which has annoyed so many thousands of travellers, "stage is ready, gentlemen." Huddling on our clothes as rapidly as possible, we descended to the patio of the hotel, stumbling over a sleeping Mexican rolled in his blanket in the passage-way, and treading upon one leg of a worthless cur, which went whining off on the other three.

Repairing at once to the stage, we found one of our passengers engaged in high words with the agent, a Mexican, who insisted upon sending a set of harness to Peroté upon the top of the coach. There were fourteen passengers belonging to our party, all good-sized men, and these fourteen were to be stowed in and upon a common, Troy-built coach, intended only to carry nine

inside, with a seat for two on the box with the driver. Of course three of us were compelled to perch ourselves upon the extreme top of the coach, and as a heavy harness, with its strong iron buckles and other appurtenances, afforded anything but a soft or comfortable bed, its transportation by this particular stage, it was at first respectfully contended, was putting all hands to serious annoyance. The agent said this was a matter we must settle among ourselves—the harness he was obliged to forward by this conveyance. A passenger, who had already taken his station upon the top of the stage, now expressed a doubt whether the objectionable baggage would be allowed peaceable and quiet possession of its quarters in case the Mexican insisted upon giving it a berth—the latter, after a little frothy vapour, threw the harness upon the stage. The next moment a shower, very much resembling horse collars, traces, and girths, was falling upon the head of the agent, accompanied by a general laugh at his expense. Finding it impossible to carry his point, the fellow now slunk into the office, muttering a variety of unbecoming Spanish oaths as he went.

By this time our trunks were all safely stowed in the boot, and the inside of the stage was wedged with the substance of as many as could possibly crowd into the contracted quarters. Some of the younger passengers—harum-scarum fellows who were anxious that the lardrones might give us a call upon the road—recommended that we should all conceal our weapons under our sarapes and cloaks. A crowd of Mexicans were standing around the diligence, some of whom were evidently spies; and it was thought that if they should discover no arms about us they might give their companions such information as would draw them into a snare



of guns, pistols, swords, and bowie-knives. But this plan was overruled by one of the older and more prudent travellers, on the ground that the robbers, should they see fit to attack us, would probably fire directly into the stage without previous parley, and thereby gain an advantage at the expense, perhaps, of the lives of some of the passengers.

As we were about leaving, a Scotchman came hastily down the stairs, dragging a trunk by the handle, and shouting that he was a passenger for Vera Cruz, and must have a seat. There are two stages running daily between the city of Mexico and Puebla, in one of which, with a party of Mexicans, he had made the trip on the previous day; but as this stage went no farther, the Scotchman was anxious to go directly on with us. He was a stout, healthy man, dressed in a suit of blue clothes, and as he well knew that we were all armed, no better chance for a safe transit to himself and chattels could possibly offer. We told him there was no room—no possible opening for another passenger: he said he had a sum of money about him, and that if we did not give him a seat he should be robbed of it the next day—he was sure he should. He even announced to some of the by-standing Mexicans, in their own language, the fact of his having money; for in his eagerness to obtain a seat with us he was drawn into a departure from prudence not very common with his countrymen. On finally ascertaining, to his own conviction if not satisfaction, that there was no room for him—not even a chance to hang on to any part of the stage—he reluctantly gave up all hope of prosecuting his journey until the morrow. As we left the place, after having shaken hands for the last time with Mr. Black, we could still see the sorrowful countenance of the poor Scotch-

man, as he stood in the patio with one end of his trunk resting against his knee, while his fingers were securely clasped around the handle.

After a short drive we passed the outskirts of the "City of the Angels," and struck into the open country. One of the most noted stands, or rather hiding-places, for the robbers, is within hearing of the town, and just as we were reaching the spot a clattering of horses' hoofs was heard rapidly approaching. Fourteen pairs of eyes were instantly peering into the darkness to ascertain the nature of the party, while at least twice fourteen pairs of pistols were pointing in the same direction to be ready for any emergency. The horsemen turned out to be a detachment of some half dozen dragoons, sent out from the barracks to protect and succour us in case of an attack from the *ladrones*. Muffled in their yellow military cloaks, for the early morning air was raw and biting, the fellows appeared well enough as their horses clattered along on either side of the stage; but we were now seeing them in the most favourable light. Long before the sun had risen above the eastern mountains, dispelling that darkness and chillness which precede daybreak, our doughty guardsmen had uncloaked themselves, and sat before us in all their inefficiency. Very respectable scarecrows I have little doubt they would have made, stuck about judiciously in a corn-field; but I have a better opinion of the Mexican brigands than to suppose, for one moment, that such a set of ill-appointed, badly-armed apologies for soldiers could in the least intimidate them if they had meditated an attack. We openly told them they might canter back to their barracks, and finish their morning nap; for no more dependance could be placed on them than on an equal number of the crosses stuck



by the roadside. With the first appearance of danger they would undoubtedly have left us, and at a speed as great as their horses could conveniently accomplish, if not faster.

At a rapid pace we sped across the valley which encircles Puebla, passing the noted robbing-post without meeting other than the usual number of market people, wending their way to the city and driving their donkeys before them. Our driver allowed his horses to slacken their pace as we ascended the pine-clad hills known as the Pinal. This lonely forest is another noted haunt for the ladrones; but we passed through it seeing nothing more alarming than the numerous crosses which pointed to the spots where murder had done its work, and hearing naught more terrifying than the wind sighing mournfully in the pine tops—a sad requiem, it seemed, for the rest of the departed victims. Many thrilling tales did our driver relate of these roadside graves.

About the middle of the day we changed horses at a meson built near a large spring of warmish water. The circumstance I recollect from the fact that one of the fresh horses was a wild, vicious creature, not only disposed to break our necks, but having no apparent marked regard for the safety of his own. In Mexico they frequently hitch five horses to a stage, two on the pole as is the custom in the United States, while the three leaders are harnessed abreast. In the present instance one of the leaders acted as wildly as would a fresh-caught mustang; leaped entirely over the heads of his fellows, wound himself up in the traces, and reared, pitched, and kicked in such a manner, notwithstanding the efforts of half a dozen Mexican hostlers, that he was

soon free from all encumbrances. After several attempts, the driver was so far successful as once more to place harness upon the vicious animal's back; but no sooner had the stable boys released him from the strong halters with which he had been held, than he jumped and dashed off at a furious pace, imparting his own fright to the rest of the team, and threatening us all with a dangerous upset. For some distance the mad steed pressed forward, the driver in vain attempting to check him; and it was only when much exhausted by his efforts that he slackened his onward course in the least. It was now the driver's turn. "You've run a spell on your *own* account," said the Yankee, addressing the tired animal; and then, after a loud crack from his whip, finished the sentence with "you've got to run a piece farther on *mine*." And run he did, and at a rapid pace too; for determined to subdue his vicious spirit, and break him of his mad pranks, the driver forced him onward until the reeking team could no longer withstand the killing pace. A short time after this occurrence, we approached still another celebrated stand for robbers—a dreary spot upon a wide, sandy plain, with a few scattering clumps of thornbushes and rocky hills in the vicinity, which afford a cover for the gentlemen of the road. As we drew near the spot an escort of badly-mounted dragoons came out to meet us from an adobe-built hovel some little distance from the road. As they formed themselves on either side of the stage they were told that we could dispense with their services; but the valiant fellows, thinking of the money which it is expected the passengers will pay them, and of the drunken frolic which is sure to follow, insisted upon seeing us *safely* through all dangers as far as Peroté.



It was about four o'clock in the afternoon, after we had crossed the *mal pais*, or bad country, as it is called, and taken a survey of the huge volcanic mass known as the Cerro de Pizarro, that we reached the stage tavern at this dreary and desolate place. As we entered the patio of the inn, a crowd of bad-visaged fellows congregated about us, scrutinizing our weapons and the general appearance of the party. If some of them were not robbers and cutthroats, their faces villanously belied them.

No sooner had we safely secured and locked up our baggage, than we inquired and took the way towards the castle in which General McLeod, and a party of the officers and men attached to the Santa Fé Expedition, were confined. A short parley with an officer at the ponderous gate of the fortress, and we were permitted to enter. Our former comrades had just returned from their work at a neighbouring stone quarry. They crowded around us, and knowing that our visit must necessarily be short, with eager inquiries asked intelligence in relation to their friends at Puebla and the city of Mexico—pressing question upon question in such rapid succession that to answer one half of them was impossible. Their situation, in many respects, was preferable to that of the prisoners at Puebla, for their quarters were cleaner and more comfortable, and the Mexican criminals were confined in separate apartments; yet the castle is but a cold and dreary place at best, being situated at an elevation far above the level of the sea, bleak and exposed, and where the biting winds from the surrounding snow-clad mountains have full and powerful sway. After receiving messages and letters innumerable from the poor fellows, and

promising to make known their situation, we bade them farewell, and retraced our steps to the tavern.\*

Here we found that the stage from Jalapa had arrived, and that our supper was ready—a vile, greasy repast, to which nothing lent sauce or aid save the remembrance of worse, and the hearty appetites we had contracted by our long ride. Among the passengers from Vera Cruz was a French lady with a little child, the mother on her way, without a protector, to join her husband at Zacatecas. We could not but admire the boldness of the lone female, who had undertaken a journey so long and so perilous.

After smoking our cigars, and watching the ice-encrusted sides of the towering mountain peaks in the vicinity, as the setting sun clothed them with silvery lustre, we retired to rest. At two o'clock in the morning we were aroused from sleep by a servant, and in half an hour, after swallowing a cup of chocolate in the dirty cocina attached to the tavern, we muffled ourselves in cloaks, greatcoats, and sarapes, and, shivering with the early morning cold of this bleak region, took our seats in the diligence and were again on the road towards Jalapa.

If the air was raw and chilly at starting, it was doubly so as we ascended the gradual slope which brings the traveller near the base of the celebrated Cofre de Peroté. We had entered the gorge of a gloomy barranca, such of us as were within the coach nestling close to each other for warmth and with the vain hope of finishing

\* Notwithstanding the isolated situation and great strength of the castle of Peroté, several successful escapes have been effected within the past year by Texans confined within its walls. They suffered much from want of food, water, and sufficient clothing in the mountains, but eventually arrived safely, either in the United States or Texas.



the sleep from which we had been disturbed, when the report of a heavy pistol from the top, and the cry of "*Ladrones!*" "*Ladrones!*" startled us as with an electric shock. The loud laugh from the region of the driver instantly convinced us that it was a false alarm—an eccentricity, merely, of some wag on the top of the coach, who only wished to get up a little excitement. The place chosen was certainly well adapted for a joke of the kind; for a more dark, dismal, piratical haunt to all outward seeming was never chosen by freebooters.

As the morning advanced towards daybreak, and a higher region was attained, the cold appeared to increase. The air was damp and disagreeable to a degree—a chill fog rested lazily in the lower atmosphere—it seemed as though we were cutting our way through frozen clouds. On reaching the high mountain hamlet of Las Vigas\* we were directly in the *tierra fria*, or cold country, at an elevation of nearly eight thousand feet above the level of the sea. The driver halted for some ten or fifteen minutes, but whether to change or water his horses I am unable to say: I only know that we dragged our benumbed limbs from the stage, and by dint of much shouting, pounding, kicking, and knocking were enabled to arouse a Mexican family from their slumbers and effect an entrance within doors. No other refreshment could we obtain than rank Catalan brandy, as it is called, strong as alcohol itself, and with the flavour of ley or a tea made of potash. With teeth chattering we called for coffee, chocolate—for some-

\* The literal translation of Las Vigas is *the beams or timbers*. The houses of the village are constructed of logs—the first and almost the only dwellings of the kind I saw in Mexico—a circumstance from which the place probably received its name.

thing warm. "*No hai,*" was the chilling answer. We asked the stupid, half-asleep master of the dwelling if he could tell us where we could obtain the desired refreshments. The eternal "*Quien sabe?*" was the only rejoinder. How the inhabitants of Las Vigas obtain a livelihood is a mystery. Of course we could see nothing of the face of the country in the vicinity of the village; but judging from the feeling of the cold mountain air, it would seem impossible for even Greenland moss to withstand it—so keen, so cutting, so penetrating.

Muffling again in our blankets and cloaks, we entered the stage and resumed the journey. As the sun began to disperse the mists and fogs of morning we were awakened to a full realization of the wild mountain grandeur which surrounded us. We were already at an elevation several thousand feet higher than the loftiest summits of the United States; yet it seemed to us, as we gazed upward to the cloud-capped peaks, that we were at the base of huge, towering mountains, thrusting their lofty heads even into the very vault of heaven. As we commenced descending the rough and rocky road which leads down the lower mountain sides, the prospect below us was concealed by an immense sea of misty, cloudy vapour, reaching far as human vision could penetrate—looking back, the fog was still above us—it appeared as though we were travelling directly between two stratas of cloud. Such of the country as we could see immediately around us, bore evident marks of its volcanic formation. In one spot a huge mass of rock, evidently the upheaving of some strong throe of nature, was plainly visible; in another, a bed of hard, black lava, with the appearance of having been poured down in a liquid stream and of having cooled as it fell, gave farther evidence of the mighty convulsions nature has



undergone in this wild region in bygone times, and of the violent and tremendous efforts by which she has relieved herself of some burning, inward fever. The gnarled and stunted firs and oaks, which have found root among the different volcanic masses, show that they have wrestled powerfully for nourishment and growth.

With astonishment the traveller looks at the beds of lava, and masses of broken rock he sees on every side—so fresh and with such a seeming newness that he cannot imagine more than a few months, or years at farthest, to have rolled away since they were first deposited; yet even the oldest legends of the aborigines, their most remote traditions, carry him not back to the awful disruption which placed them there. The Indians point to the now extinct volcano upon the Cofre de Peroté as the point from which came the shower of burning lava and rocks that has rendered this section desolate, but offer no surmise as to the time when the crater belched forth its storm of destruction; and the mind, in attempting to trace the interval which has since elapsed, is soon lost in the wide and mazy fields of conjecture.

El Cofre de Peroté, or *The Chest of Peroté*—so called from the fact that its sides bear strong resemblance to a trunk or chest—was, ages since, a volcano, and the different volcanic formations over which we were now journeying were doubtless belched from its yawning but long-smothered crater. Awful must have been the throes, the mighty workings and convulsions, of the huge mass of mountain while in labour. Imagination shudders and turns pale, the mind is awe-stricken, as the immense rocks are reviewed by the eye—rocks which are of themselves hills, and which must have been quarried, torn, riven, and hurled upward from the bow-

els of the earth by the elemental fever within, and, after roaring high in air, descended, amid streams of burning lava, a red-hot deluge of mighty fragments.

I have said that the Indians have no tradition of the time when this terrible convulsion occurred, but they relate a story of its causes and effects—a story which I will here insert for its singularity and simplicity. Previous to the first eruption, the mountain was fertile, peaceful, and well behaved as its brother mountains, and was the joint property of a deer, a tiger, a leopard, and a bear. For a long time these animals, so discordant in temperament, lived in the greatest amity together, each roaming over a particular section which was set apart for him, and never trespassing upon the land of his neighbour; but by-and-by the bear, either from lack of forage within his own specified limits, or from a natural proneness to interfere with the just rights of his neighbours, crossed, after the manner of certain governments of more recent times, the prescribed boundary lines, and made inroads upon the domain adjoining his own territory. The deer, the tiger, and the leopard, upon learning this trespass, held public consultation, and warned their neighbour of his encroachments and of their determination not to submit to outrages of the kind. The bear threw defiance in their teeth, and insisted upon roaming the mountain-sides at will; whereupon the deer, the tiger, and the leopard made common cause against a common enemy, joined their forces, and declared war at once. What part the deer took in this struggle is not related, but among them they drove, worried, and chased the bear from point to point, giving no rest to the soles of his feet until he reached the summit of the mountain, where they encompassed and beleaguered him about with the full intention of starv-



ing him into terms. But the bear was not to be thus hemmed in by his adversaries; so, bethinking him that there was no other means of escape, he commenced digging through the mountain with his paws, firmly determined upon working a passage to the lower side. Deeper and deeper did he force his way, toiling diligently, until at length he came upon the evil spirit Tlacatecolotl, who was lying asleep in an immense fire cave. Not aware of this new danger, the bear still pawed and dug away, and not until he had scratched the slumbering fiend upon the nose did he cease from his labour. Tlacatecolotl awoke from his sleep, and instantly all was rumbling and commotion. The bear retreated upward; but the enraged fiend pursued him with a shower of fire, and drove him for succour to his former enemies. He hugged, with all love and familiarity, the deer, the tiger, and the leopard wherever he met them, and was successful in quieting their just displeasure; but the fury of the fire-fiend was not to be appeased. He pursued the bear with red-hot stones, with streams of burning lava, with an avalanche of fire—his rage waxed fiercer and more fierce—the fair mountain-sides were lurid and made desolate with the implements of his strange revenge—and never did the torrent of destruction slacken until a good Indian shot the bear and ate him: then was the mighty wrath of Tlacatecolotl assuaged, and he retired once more to his bed of fire. Such is the marvellous tradition of the simple natives in relation to this long extinct volcano.

As we left the region of lava, the morning air became more mild, vegetation of more luxuriant growth took the place of the stunted pines and firs, and the ocean of vapour far below us began to dissipate under the influence of the sun. Turning our eyes back, we could see

scudding masses of fog and cloud creeping up the mountain-sides, and fast hiding and dispersing themselves apparently among the clefts and fissures. The stage rattled more rapidly down the winding road, and at every step new beauties presented themselves. Every revolution of the wheels seemed to bring us into a new climate—each succeeding minute brought with it an air more bland and balmy. Birds of bright plumage were seen crossing the road, and fluttering from copse to copse of deep-green foliage, while here and there a rude dwelling, surrounded by a small patch of ground richly cultivated, relieved the rugged asperities of the mountain cliffs. So sudden is the transition, that a short hour conducts the traveller from bleak and dreary winter to bright and sunny spring—a winter which it seems to him is unchangeable, a spring which is eternal. At one moment, as it were, he is shrugging, shivering, and rubbing his hands in the *tierras frias*—the next he is basking in the soft sunshine of the *tierras templadas*, or temperate lands, amid orange groves and flowers innumerable. A single day's travel in Mexico carries the traveller from the heat and verdure of unchanging summer, to the cold and sterile face of undying winter.

When within a few short miles of Jalapa, the morning fog had entirely dispersed, the sun was out in all his splendour, and the ocean of cloud had given way to a vast expanse of green—we were looking down upon the *tierra caliente*, the land of summer's heat and summer's verdure. The driver halted for a few moments at the house of a Mexican lady, and allowed us to alight. We entered the dwelling, the front of which was almost concealed from view by creeping vines and different species of rose and other flowering bushes. The mistress of this sylvan retreat, a stout, handsome-faced



woman, some thirty years of age, instantly beset us with inquiries in relation to some American she had known formerly—a colonel she called him, but the name I do not remember. His hair, features, size, and all were described with a minuteness which convinced us that his image still lingered in the memory of the fair questioner, but not one of us could give her information which seemed satisfactory. She kindly asked us to partake of refreshments; but mingled with her pressing invitations were farther inquiries about the colonel—thoughts of one, who evidently occupied a strong hold in her affections, never left her while there was a ray of hope that some one of us might possibly know him.

When we were again on the road, the driver informed us that for many years this woman had been earnest in her inquiries respecting the colonel. In her artless simplicity she had asked all foreigners alike for information—one whom she knew so well must surely be known by others—but had never been able to gather a gleam of intelligence of the long-lost one. Love, as a matter of course, was at the bottom—was the mainspring which actuated her in her inquiries. Some roving, blue-eyed, light-haired American had won her affections in early life, and those affections continue as warm as ever for the *guerro*, as she called him. In Mexico all light-haired men are termed *guerros*—yellow locks, blue eyes, and a fair complexion, are so uncommon in that country, that the possession of them is a passport directly to the affections of the opposite sex. Among the celebrated beauties of Mexico, and one who held sway as a reigning belle for many years, was La Guerra Rodriguez, or *The Light-haired Rodriguez*. In Humboldt's time her empire over the hearts of men was su-

preme in Mexico; and although a beautiful and fascinating woman in every respect, much of her celebrity and ascendancy she owed to the circumstance of her having light hair. She is still alive, I believe, and her society is still courted by all, although her light locks have long since faded.

From the residence of the Mexican lady at which we had called—a place where the driver stops to water his horses and allow her to press her questions—the road runs through a cultivated country until it reaches Jalapa, distant some three or four miles. It was Sunday, and the road was filled, chiefly with pedestrians, on their way to the city to mass, to market, or some merry-making. The air was richly perfumed with the fragrance of innumerable flowers—the roadside was bordered with that luxuriant vegetation which appears to belong to this climate. We were compelled to halt a few minutes at the *garita* to show our passports—this examination over, we were again on the road, and in a short time were descending the steep declivity which has been chosen as the site for Jalapa. The stage wound slowly down the precipitous streets, passed through the crowded market-place, turned into the Calle Principal, and safely deposited us in the patio of the Casa de Diligencias in season for breakfast. We were now revelling in a soft and wooing climate, of spring-like temperature—two hours before we were shivering in an atmosphere which would freeze an Iceland.