

MEXICAN PLAZA, FOUNTAIN, AND CATHEDRAL.

FACE TO FACE WITH THE MEXICANS.

CHAPTER I.

A NEW HOME AND NEW FRIENDS.

ALTILLO! Saltillo! Saltillo!"

These piercing cries rang out again and again on the still morning air in the long ago from the lips of a terrified Tlaxcalan boy away up in the Sierra Madre Mountains.

But what do they mean?

As is well known, Mexico is a land of song, romance, and tradition, and these are inseparably intertwined in the lives of the people. Every noted spot has its legend, which descends not only to posterity but also to strangers. As the tradition about the founding of Saltillo lends something of interest to a sojourn of several months in that city, I tell it as it was told to me; in doing so reserving the right to say that, like most traditions, it has a decidedly made-to-order air.

The little Indian boy before mentioned had an aged, infirm, and blind old uncle. Now, it was a strange fancy of this blind man to take a stroll very early every morning, and it was the duty of this little nephew to hold him by the hand as a guide to his steps, as well as to amuse and entertain him on the way.

The spring known in Saltillo as *El ojo de agua* (the eye of water) breaks boldly forth from the craggy rocks, and in its fall transforms itself into a pool of considerable depth. The water is as cold as ice, and shimmers and glistens in the white sunshine as it reflects on

its crystal surface the towering mountains and the deep azure of a faultless sky.

This spring supplies the entire city with water, which is conveyed through antiquated earthen pipes to the fountains, and thence borne by carriers into the houses.

But to the tradition: This inconsiderate old uncle was being led by his nephew, who was endowed with the very same tastes and instincts as all other boys, regardless of caste or complexion, the world over. As they approached the *ojo de agua*, the whirring sound of a thousand birds in flight over their heads caused the boy to drop his uncle's hand and look upward, with head thrown back, straight hair standing at right angles, and great, wild, black eyes, gazing at the myriad of birds that seemed to mottle the whole sky.

The uncle, having no support, began to totter and hold out his arms, calling loudly, but to no purpose, for his forgetful guide. Inch by inch the old man felt his way over the rough stones; a step more, and there was a plunge, a scream, and the unfortunate uncle was floundering in the "eye of water." The young truant was recalled to himself, but, being paralyzed with fright, could only scream and wring his hands wildly, exclaiming:

"Saltillo! Saltillo!" (Get out, uncle!)—an injunction as heartless as it was impossible to obey.

At this critical moment, some passing *arrieros* (mule-drivers) compassionately rescued the drowning man, and so happily ends the tradition.

Posterity, studying out of cold, unsympathetic lexicons all kinds of puzzling derivations, finds, according to some, that the verb *salir* signifies "to go out;" *sal*, the first syllable, means "get out;" and *tio* (uncle) has, as perhaps in this case, been misspelled or corrupted into *tillo*, as Saltillo (pronounced *Sal-tee'-yo*), the liquid *ll* being more euphonious in the Mexican tongue.

Others yet believe that Saltillo comes from the language of the Chichimecas, and signifies "High land of many waters." In almost any direction may be seen innumerable sparkling cascades of limpid

water bursting from the apex of the mountains, descending in a crystal sheet, and reflecting the prismatic glories of the rainbow as they go murmuring along to the valleys below. This may give credence to this version. Saltillo is the capital of the State of Coahuila.

The name *Coahuila*, according to some historians, means "Happy Land," while others claim its signification to be "*Vibora que vuela*" (flying snake). It is possible that this latter is the real derivation, as snake in the Indian is *Coatl*, and *huila* means to fly. This, taken together, may have some reference to the great temple of Huitchilopochtly, the Aztec war god, which was surrounded by a square wall called *coatlpanthli* (snake wall), carved within and without with myriads of these creatures. In the minds of those who had the naming of the States there must have been an idea that the bleak and barren aspect of Coahuila was sufficient to cause the exodus of even these not over-fastidious reptiles.

In view of these forbidding physical features, the term "Happy Land" must have been given in a spirit of satire; or perhaps some consumptive writer of poetic verse, enchanted by the fine dry climate, pure atmosphere, and blue skies, bestowed the title in gratitude for their salubrious effects.

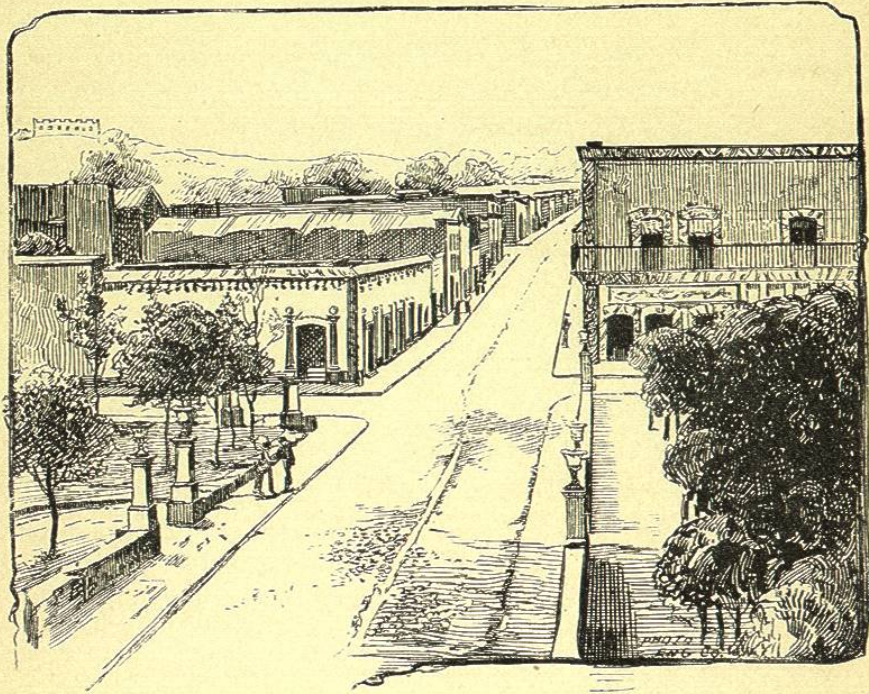
Saltillo was once also the capital of Texas when that great State formed an unwilling member of the Mexican federation. It has a population of about twenty thousand, and is situated on the Buena Vista table-land in the Sierra Madre Mountains, at an elevation of about five thousand five hundred feet above sea-level.

It was founded on the 25th of July, 1575, by one Francisco Urduñola, who brought with him sixty Tlaxcalan families who were bitter foes of the Aztecs and firm allies of the conquerors.

The city is the seat of important manufactures, both woolen and cotton. Here are made *rebozos* (a long narrow shawl worn by women over their heads), and also those gorgeous and durable *serapes* (blankets), of finest wool and most brilliant colors, which have gained so wide a celebrity that the term "Mexican blanket" is a synonym for a genuine and almost everlasting fabric.

It has the usual places for recreation, a bull-ring, plaza, and alameda; a cathedral worthy of inspection, also numerous churches, with a full quota of schools and colleges.

We were a party of Americans on business, health, and pleasure bent. Our company consisted of Mr. and Mrs. R—, the former a retired banker from a large western city; Mr. and Mrs. A—, Mrs.



CALLE REAL, SALTILLO, SHOWING PLAZA ON THE RIGHT, A CORNER OF THE CATHEDRAL GARDEN ON THE LEFT, EXTENDING UP THE MOUNTAIN, WITH VIEW OF AMERICAN FORT IN EXTREME LEFT-HAND CORNER.

S— and daughter, my husband and self. As the hotel accommodations were meager and uncomfortable, and it not being the custom of the country for families to live in hotels, we concluded to go to housekeeping, as our stay was indefinite, and might extend through a few weeks or months.

We found this picturesque old city teeming with interest; many quaint old *adobe* bridges span the *arroyos* (dry streams), and the drives through the orchards in the Indian *pueblos* adjoining are full of exuberant

erant life and color. The noblest view is from the brow of the San Lorenzo, where are situated the fine medicinal springs and baths which tourists as well as natives enjoy. The drives in whatever direction are full of thrilling historic associations, the city having been the coveted ground of the contesting forces in untold battles and desperate encounters.

But no street or highway interested me so much as Calle Real, one of the principal and most delightful thoroughfares of the city. By a circuitous route and steep ascent it led to the American fort, and, circling to the right over the smooth table-lands, on to La Angostura (the Narrows), where lies the famous battle-field of Buena Vista.

Since the founding of the city, Calle Real has figured conspicuously in its history. The patriot Hidalgo and his chosen brave followers must doubtless have passed down this street to meet their fate—betrayed by friends.

The history of this grand captain's career was fresh in my mind, and, as I looked upon this long, narrow, and winding street, I pictured the fearless leader of the great cause of the Mexican people, with head erect and eye as bright as, when a victor, he heard the wild plaudits from the thousand dark brothers of his race who had flocked to his standard.

Then the scene would change, and the forms of my own martial countrymen, who had so often passed up and down this street, nearly two score years ago, would take the place of the dauntless Hidalgo. I lost sight of the present, and saw American soldiers, with stars and stripes floating proudly, move rapidly in solid columns of infantry, and heard the tread of the bronzed cavalymen, and the rattle of sabers and the clear-ringing words of command in my own language. I saw the angry gleam of dark eyes and heard mutterings in the strange tongue as the Americans marched up the steep hill to take possession of the fort that commanded the city.

Another change: the shade of Hidalgo has vanished; the stars and stripes no longer float under the unclouded sky. In imagination I see the flag of the French Empire and the eagles of Austria streaming

over the city, and the gorgeous uniforms of the soldiery of two mighty empires mingling with the rude, dark forms that look on them with wondering eyes of mute protest and reluctant admiration. Wild carousal is heard on every side, and wine flows like water. The harsh accents of the Austrian and the volatile utterances of the Frenchman fill the air.

The panorama moves on. Gone are the foreigners. Their chief lies dead in the stately burial place of the Habsburgs. Miramon and Mejia rest in San Fernando, and the banner of the Republic, with its emblematic red, green, and white bars and fierce eagle, waves proudly over the people freed from a foreign foe and hated alien rule.

War and revolution have yielded in turn to the softening influences of well-earned peace and tranquillity. The passions of those perilous times are long since dead; our quondam enemy is now our friend, and an American woman is at liberty to peacefully erect her household gods among them.

Both courage and resolution were necessary in transplanting ourselves to this *terra incognita*; but the climate, the hospitality of the people, the beautiful scenery, the novelty of the surroundings, which every day afforded delight, would of themselves reconcile one to exchanging the old, the tried, and the true for the experiences of an unknown world.

The house selected for our Bohemian abode, we were assured, was almost one hundred years old, and had an air of solemn dignity and grandeur about its waning splendor. It was of startling dimensions, capable of quartering a regiment of soldiers with all their equipments. It was one story in height, with a handsome orchard and garden in the rear, extensive corrals for horses, the whole extending from street to street through a large square of ground.

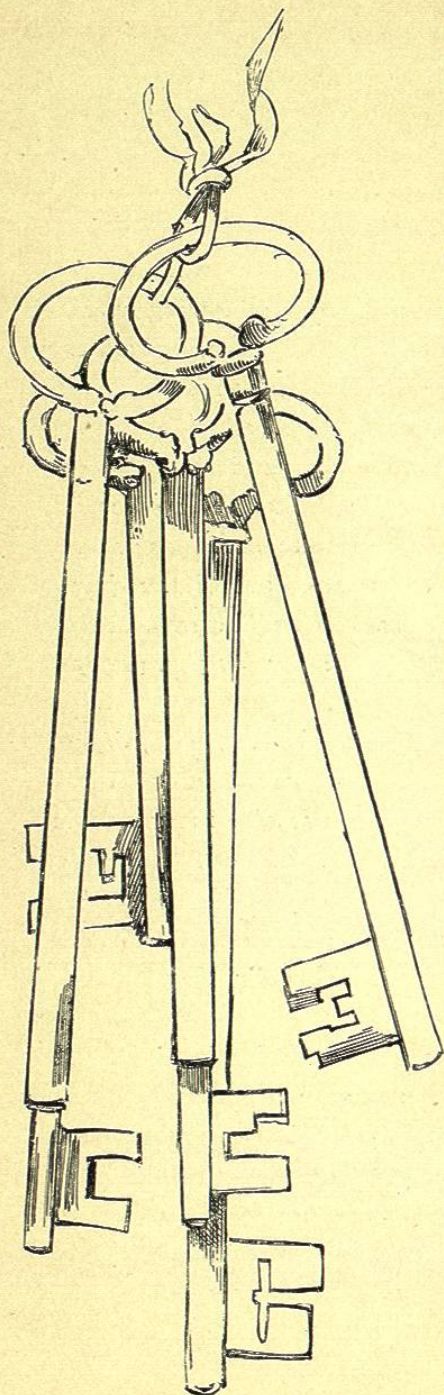
The distinguishing features of Mexican and Spanish architecture were evident throughout the *patio* (court-yard), with fountain in the center, flat roof, barred windows, and parapet walls. These latter rise often to the height of six feet above the main structure, and, in times of war and revolution, have proved admirable defenses to the besieged.

Intrenching themselves behind these walls, passage-ways are made from one house to the other, until the entire block of buildings is one connected fortification. The strife may continue for weeks uninterruptedly, the fusillade not ceasing long enough to remove the dead from the streets.

The size and unwieldiness of the front doors were amazing—noble defenses in time of revolution, it is true, but when with my whole strength I could not move one on its antiquated, squeaking hinges, almost a half yard in length, the question of how to pass from house to street became a serious one. The happy discovery was made at last that, instead of two, there were four doors all in one, the two smaller ones within the greater serving for our usual ingress and egress. The huge double doors, spacious enough to admit a locomotive with its train of cars, were never opened except on state occasions or for the admittance of a carriage, buggy, or something out of the ordinary, such as a dozen or so wood-laden donkeys. Not only funerals and bridal parties, but every imaginable household necessity for pleasure or convenience, must pass through the front doors.

In the *zaguan* (front hall), high up in the cedar beams, darkened by age to the color of mahogany, was this inscription or dedication in large, clear letters: "*Ave Maria Santissima.*" In other houses these dedications varied according to taste. One read "*Siempre viva en esta casa Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*" (May the Virgin Guadalupe always watch over this house). Still another inscription in the house of a friend read: "*Aquí viva con V. Jose y Maria,*" "May Joseph and Mary dwell with you here."

We were astounded at the size and length of the keys, and the number of them; they were about ten inches long, and a blow from one would have sufficed to fell a man. As there were, perhaps, thirty of them, my key-basket, so far from being the dainty trifle an American woman dangles from one finger in her daily rounds, would have been a load for a *burro*, as they call their little donkeys. The enormous double doors connecting the rooms were as massive as if each room were intended for a separate fortification. The opening and



A FEW OF THE KEYS.

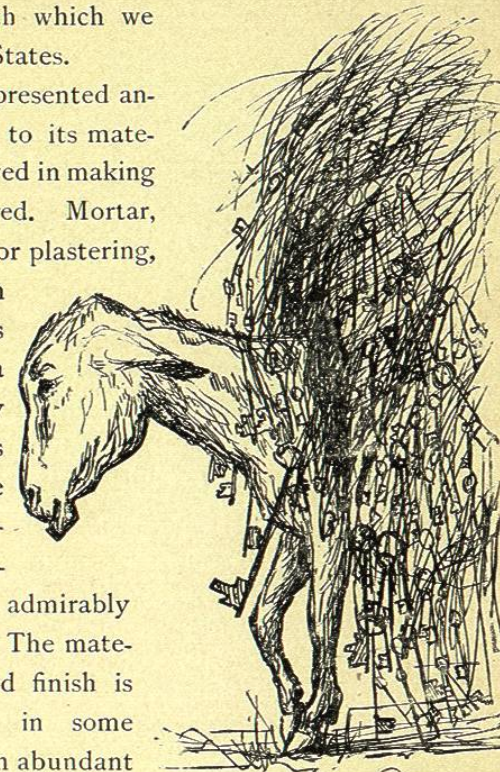
closing of these heavy doors as they scraped across the floors gave forth a dull, grating sound which added to the loneliness of our castle.

Our venerable mansion was constructed of *adobe*, the sun-dried brick peculiar to the country, and of which almost the entire city is built. The walls were from two to four feet in thickness, and the ceilings thirty feet in height. Surrounding the beautiful court-yard were many large and handsome rooms, frescoed in brilliant style, each different from the other. Besides these there were many smaller apartments, lofts, nooks, and crannies, more than I at first thought I should ever have the courage to explore.

The drawing-room was the first thing to attract my attention, as it was about a hundred feet long and fifty wide. Its dado was highly embellished by a skillful blending of roses and buds in delicate shades, while the frieze was the chaste production of a native artist. The ceiling, as before mentioned, was thirty feet in height, and another source of surprise to me was the discovery that the foundation of all this elaborate workmanship was

of the frailest material. These wonderful artisans, in making ceilings that are apparently faultless, use only cheese-cloth. After stretching it as tightly as possible, and adding a coat of heavy sizing, the beautiful and gorgeous frescoes are laid on, and the eye of an expert cannot detect the difference between a cloth ceiling and the more substantial plaster with which we are familiar in the United States.

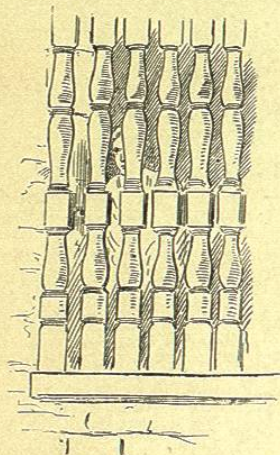
The floor of this room presented another subject of inquiry as to its materials and the method employed in making it so hard, smooth, and red. Mortar, much the same as is used for plastering, but of a consistency which hardens rapidly, is the basis of operations. On this a coating of fine gravel, very little coarser than sand, is applied. Then comes the final red polish which completes a floor of unusual coolness and comfort, and admirably adapted to the country. The material used to give the red finish is *tipichul*, an Indian word, in some places known as *almagra*, an abundant earthy deposit to be found principally in the *arroyos*. For ages this substance has been an important article for ornamentation, even the wild tribes of Indians using it to paint their faces and bodies. When the floor is hardened, a force of men is employed, who, by rubbing it with stones, produce a beautiful glazed polish. If time were of any value, these floors would cost fabulous sums, as it takes weeks to complete one of them. It required months almost for me to comprehend the manner of cleaning them.



"WOULD HAVE BEEN A LOAD FOR A BURRO."

The floors of the other rooms were of imported brick and tiles, the former not less than a foot square and perhaps half as thick, while the latter were octagonal and of fine finish, though, like the mansion itself, they bore the evidences of age and decay.

We enjoyed the unusual luxury of glass windows, and it was enough to puff us up with inordinate pride to look out and see our neighbors' houses provided with only plain, heavy wooden shutters. When it rained or was cold, however, our ill-fitting windows proved an inadequate protection, and it became necessary to close the ponderous wooden shutters, thus leaving the rooms in total darkness.



"JEALOUS HUSBANDS' WINDOWS."

Our windows were also furnished on the outside with iron rods, similar to those used for jails in the United States, and quite as effective, while those of many of our neighbors had only heavy wooden bars, so close together as scarcely to permit the hand to pass between them. These, I was told by a Mexican lady, were called "jealous husbands' windows."

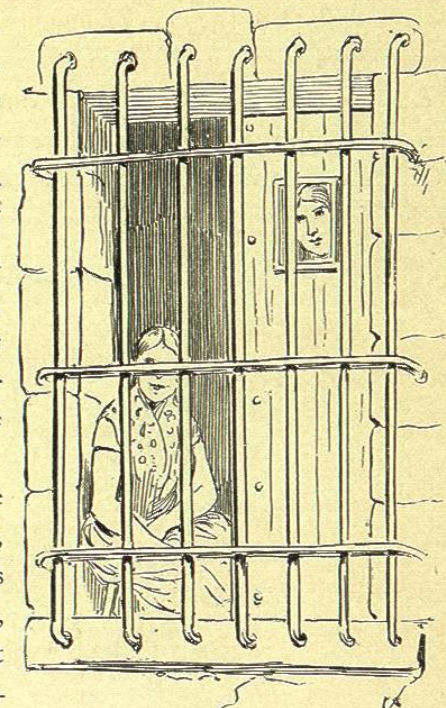
In the middle of many of the shutters of some of these houses were tiny doors, whose presence, when closed, would never be suspected. They were just large enough for a face to peer through, and when passing along the street on cold or windy days, hundreds of soft, languishing, dreamy eyes might be seen gazing out of these little windows.

In Mexican architecture the window is second in importance only to the roof itself. For, the next thing to being protected from the rain, is the necessity for the family to be able to see into the street. The walls are of such thickness that one window will easily accommodate two of their quaint little home manufactured chairs, and as there is no front stoop, each afternoon finds the señoritas seated in these chairs, taking in the full enjoyment of the usual street scenes. The illustration on page 43 shows a señorita in the window, while on the

other side a view is had of the little window that is opened on a cold or rainy day.

The roof being flat, was constructed in a unique manner, having first heavy wooden beams laid across the top of each room, and then planks coated with pitch placed on these, after which twelve inches of mother earth were added; then a coating of gravel, and lastly one of cement, the whole making a roof impervious to rain or heat, and proving the admirable adaptability of Mexican architecture to the climate and the people.

The houses in general are provided with roofs of *adobe*, and some of the plainer ones in which I became a visitor, when the rainy season was at its height, gave me an amusing insight into the freaks and tricks of the "doby," as they are familiarly termed. When there were no frescoes on the cheese-cloth canvas, it would be taken down periodically, washed and then replaced as smoothly as a plaster ceiling. But woe betide the "doby" roof, when the rainy season makes its advent. The treacherous mud covering succumbs to the pressure of the driving water, and often the entire room or house is submerged in the twinkling of an eye. Besides the main leaks, numerous little bubble-like projections, like pockets, each filled with water, sagged down the canvas in various places. To my great amusement I found that my ingenious native friends had always on hand the essentials for stopping the leak, such as an old broom handle or strip of wood,



TWO VIEWS FROM ONE WINDOW.