BOOK III.

FROM MEXICO TO MATAMORAS.

I.

TO QUERETARO.

The Start.—First and last Church in the City.—The Game-cocks.—First Scare.—Guatitlan again.—Barrenness.—Gambling and Tortilla-making.—Descent to Tula.—A Bit of English Landscape.—Tula.—Hunt for a Statue.—A silver Heavens and Earth.—Juelites.—Mountains and a mounting Sun.—Vista Hermosa.—Napola.—A stone Town.—An Interior.—The Stables.—Sombrero Walls.—Eagle Tavern.—Playing with the Children.—Gamboling *versus* Gambling.—Cazadero, the Bull Prairie.—Hacienda of Palmillas.—Blacksmith Idolatry.—Misterio de la Santissima Trinidad.—'Tother Side up.—Descent into the Valley of San Juan.—Lone yellow Cone.—Longfellow and Homer.—Elysium after much Turmoil.—A Dissertation on Beggars.—A Market Umbrella.—In Perils among Robbers.—The beautiful Valley of San Juan.—Colorado.—A Turner Sunset.—Sight of Queretaro.—The Aqueduct.—The Bed.

Do you want a trip of twenty days and twelve hundred miles in a stage-coach, through charming scenery, the ride made piquant with possible kidnapings, robbings, slaughters, and such like pleasantries? Then come to the office of the Diligence Company, in the Street of Independence, back of the Hotel Iturbide, and get your billet and place. The ticket will cost you ninety-nine dollars. You can deposit another hundred or two if you wish, and receive a bill of credit, on which you can draw every night, where the coach stops, of an administrador, or agent, of the company. This avoids the necessity of carrying much silver about you, and so of tempting overmuch the rapacity of the robbers among whom your journey lies. A few dollars it is desirable to carry with you in order to satisfy them partially for their trouble in stopping and searching you, and to prevent their giving you their pistol because of your refusal to give them your pistoles. If they should rob you of your bill of credit, you can telegraph back the fact, prevent its further use, and get a new one covering the amount then undrawn.

"Y tanto fue de una mujer á adorar."

Armed with the ticket and the bill of credit, and with no other weapons, I take my seat in the coach. It is number one, the best back seat. I am the only through passenger from the city to the northernmost port. Three friends were there to see me off. One, a Mexican, parted with me in true compadre style, hugging and kissing, which were as compadrially returned. Three months had made a cold Yankee into quite a warm Mexican. It is a delicious morning in March; but as all mornings here are delicious, the remark is superfluous. The March wind is a June zephyr, and "December's as pleasant as May." The sun is not quite up, but the sky is gray with his sub-horizon radiance. The streets are silent and empty but for the rattle of the coach, which makes all the more noise seemingly because of the surrounding stillness.

We pass the first church built by Cortez.* It is well in the fields to-day, and only frequented by a few poor neighbors. Close by it is the penitentiary, and here military and other executions frequently occur. Death is the regular punishment. A captain, a day or two before, insulted his superior, was marched out here of a morning, and shot. Three men robbed a carriage on the paseo, and, as soon as captured and condemned, were shot. Four kidnapers of a gentleman in the city were treated with like summary justice. The action of General Burriel is after the fashion of the race: drumhead court-martial and instant execution.

The church is surrounded by heaps of ruined huts, the adobe brick dissolving into its original dust. Mexico looks like Rome, half a ruin, both in its central streets, where convent ruins abound, and in these dust heaps, black and homeless, that fill up its eastern sections. We pass the gate and emerge on a hard pike, which leads to Tolu, about sixty miles away. We traverse broad haciendas belonging to Mexican gentlemen, devoted chiefly to the culture of the maguey.

The first village is like most we pass—a string of whitewashed huts flush with the roadway, no sidewalk coming between the door and the rider. This one, unlike the others, is largely occupied with

* See illustration, page 195.

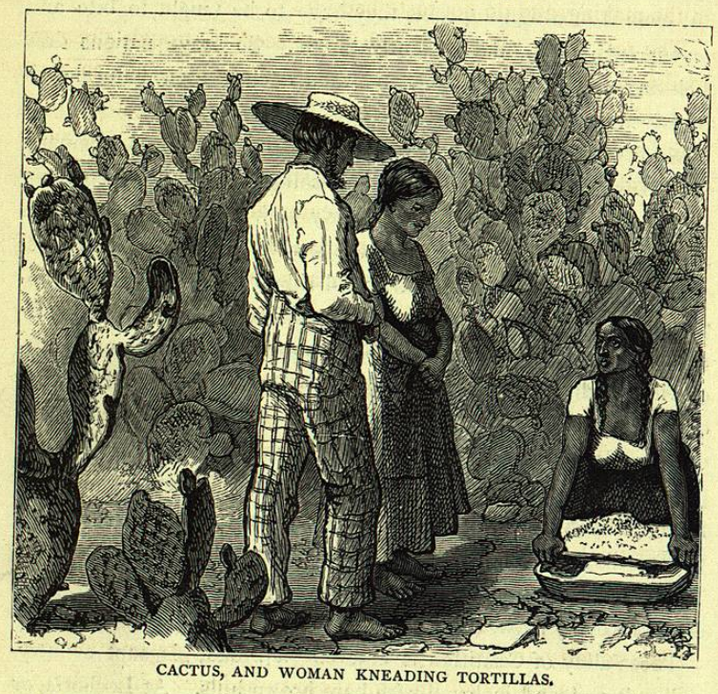
game-cocks. A breeder of them is giving his brood the early morning air. They stand on a raised seat running along the front of his cabin, prevented from general perambulation by a fastening to the foot. The trainer is teaching the young ones how to fight, holding a gray one up to a black beauty, and making each strike the other artistically. They are splendid birds, putting to shame the Shanghais and other gentry of bloodless and fightless fame. But even if of a fighting race, they have to be taught to bite and devour each other, and patiently taught. So brave nations drill their braver soldiers to fight, and then declare their natural animosity causes war.

My first scare occurs just out of this gamy town. A company of horsemen come riding down on us from a rocky hill-slope up which our half-sick mules must slowly pull, for the epizootic is in the land, and I take this thousand-mile ride and risk with that accompaniment. The gay-caparisoned riders, as they appear wrapped in their red and blue zerapes, are sufficiently brigandish to stir the fever in the timid blood. No weapon was mine save my mother-wit, and that was an exceeding dull weapon, and would be very clumsily used in the unknown tongue. So I wait patiently the coming of the foe. On they drive, nearer and nearer to us, on us, past us. "Adios" is the only shot they fire. They are muleteers from Chihuahua and Durango, going to town, a long three weeks' trip, to dispose of a few sorry mules. Time is of no value here. Two months and twenty dollars profit are good equivalents. Thus ends our every fright the whole journey through.

The Valley of Guatitlan is entered—a broad, pleasant country, well cultured, and inclosed with bare brown hills. At Lecheria, or Milk-place, we change one set of eight sick mules for another.

Guatitlan is galloped through, or would have been had the mules been well. The San Pedro hotel looks as familiar and uninviting as ever. I shiver as I think of that den where, like Bunyan's Pilgrim, I laid me down, but, unlike him, did not get a good sleep or dream. The town is large. Protestant service has been held here, and will be again.

Tecepitlan appears on the left, embosomed in trees, at the base of hills—a city of priests, all Church property, till the day of vengeance came: now a city of poverty and fanaticism. Cyotepec, a pretty village, is passed; and ten miles from Guatitlan we stop to breakfast at Huahuatoca, a sleepy little town, but with a good table. I can not promise for the correctness of this spelling. It is phonetic, and that should be the only way to spell.



CACTUS, AND WOMAN KNEADING TORTILLAS.

Now comes barrenness of barrenness. For ten leagues, or nearly thirty miles, all is a wilderness. Rocks lie loose over the earth, which is baked, and hard, and worthless. Half-way, we change horses at a hacienda.

I watch the men gamble for cents, and the women make tortillas. The former bet on two who pitch, putting up eight or ten centavos on the throw. The latter are more sensible in their vocation. They do not grind the maize, but soften it by potash, pulp it, and then prepare it for cooking. A smooth stone, inclined downward, two feet long, is the table. Behind it, on the ground, kneels the lady of the house. She rolls out the soft dough with a stone roller, takes up some of it, pats it and repats it over and over, and lays it on a brazier—a large, slightly-hollowed dish, over a small fire kept up by dried maguey leaves. The cakes look nice in the making, and do not taste bad.

The rest of the ride is through softer scenery—rough along the roadside, but opening into broad fields and hollows of rich earth and culture. Zumpango and its lake lie over to the right or north, a little, nice town, and a handsome water. To the left you see a deep vale, crowded with trees. The stage turns toward it almost by instinct. We wind down, and enter among green fields and trees, all out in their new spring attire. A square in a preliminary village, called Santa Maria, is especially charming. On we drive amidst these tender and brilliant fields and foliage, the barley a foot high, the grass velvety, and ash and oak superb in volume and color. The river Tula is crossed, English in its quiet, shallowness, and munificence of trees; and we put our sick mules to the jump, and run through the plaza of Tula. This is a town not less than a thousand years old. It was settled by the Toltecs in the eighth century. Stone pillars still attest their presence and power. It was too late to visit them; but one called Malinche was pointed out to me in a hill-side overhanging the green hollow. I tried to get a boy to go with me, but failed; so I started alone.

The country always whips the town when brought into fair competition. As I strolled through these rural lanes, with their fresh fields and pastures, even their trees all in their best attire, I thought "Mexico is cheap to this." I crossed a bridge which had little openings on each side, with iron railings, to let you look down into the stream. What bridge in America is equally excellent? Not one of our costly spans has a place for rest and observation. Will the East River be thus favored? If it is, few spots for rest and observation will be more popular.

I climbed the hill where the white face of the Toltec Malinche had been marked out to me. I could not find it. A ghost of the ages it represents, like all other ghosts, it flies on near approach. The sun went down, the moon came up, each brilliant in its work and way. But Malinche hid her white face before the white face of the moon among the tall cacti of the hills, and I came back disappointed to my hotel. Several huge gray shafts in its patio carved over (specimens of the pinea I found not) solaced me for my loss.

At two o'clock in the morning I was awakened by the mozo, as the house or body servant is called, of the Casa de Diligencias. The moon was up, and the sky, like the earth under it, was full of silver. A cup of excellent coffee and a fresh sweet roll, and I am safely stowed away in the coach. Fortunately, the whole back seat is mine, so that I can take my ease, if any ease can be taken in this peripatetic inn. The mules leap out of the court-yard and whirl away, crazy as the Pegasus of a new-fledged poet.

The cold is sharp, and the road rough, rougher, roughest. But sleep is too much for any road, and, lying on a pillow of coats, with a shawl for a blanket, I am tossed unconsciously for three solid hours; unconscious save for the cold that bites the toes, and which a redistribution of the shawl causes to retreat. The sun is up, and a hill-top station (also up), for changing the mules, gets me up. I get out, stretch legs, and renew coffee. It is called Juelites (pronounced Wheyletes), the name of an herb the Indians eat, which is worse of smell than garlic. These half-dozen "huts of stone" are such as Dr. Holmes would not be content with, I fear, despite his declaration to the contrary. There is existence here, and that only. Yet a school is held here, and some day the newspaper and the true Church will follow, and the hut of barbarism give way to the cottage of civilization, which has not been the case these three hundred and fifty years, in which a spurious Christianity has subdued, not elevated, this people.

The land slopes softly and prettily. The fields are frosty, the first I have seen, with one exception, all this winter; each was a light September frost. They are good for grazing, and their hollows ample for grain. There is no need of poverty and degradation so unspeakable. The hills, black, blue, and purple, and, when the sun lights them, golden-brown, as everywhere in Mexico, "brown in the shadow, golden in the sun," like Willis's beloved's tresses, form a grand background, the rising sun being in this case a grander background to the hills.

Our mules fly as fast as the fearful road and a partial epizootic will let them, to the stone-house village of Napola. Before we reach it, we note the superb roll of the land. It sweeps away in majestic breadth, black with the plow, or awaiting in yellow dryness the near approaching rains that shall set every germ alive. A hacienda in the heart of this grand landscape is rightly called "Vista Hermosa" (view beautiful). I had never seen one prettier. Nor did it lose its beauty because a tiny lake lay at the bottom of the valley, flashing in the morning rays. Some upper Minnesota views were not unlike it, only those lacked the mountains, a lack indeed.

The town disenchants you. Man is far below nature. It was burned twice by the French in their marches to and fro in the land, either because it did not give good enough pulqui or not enough of it, for their thirsty needs, or because it harbored republicans and patriots, and political Protestants, who resisted a triumphing foreign Church and army and tongue. "America for Americans," native or adopted, the motto of these United States, as well as those of the North, brought wrath upon Napola. It seems determined not to be caught that way again; for it rebuilt its town of stone. Not a stick in it that I could see, except the few that formed the doors. The stones are laid neatly, and even ornamentally in some cases, and then plastered over, so as to give a uniform whiteness when finished; for this city, unlike some in the West, and many in this country, can not be said to be finished. It has been finished twice in another way, and that gives it a chance to be a-growing again. Its name signifies cactus, and this hardy and useful tree is growing in orchards among its rocks. So it grows everywhere, and is well called the national tree.