

the procession of the Holy Wafer I had seen. It would not have been allowed in the larger cities. Nor could I have witnessed it without kneeling myself a few years ago, except at the cost of my life.

The hot day has grown cool, a fresh breeze blows from the hills, and a good rest will prepare for our second day at sea.

## VIII.

## MID-OCEAN.

The "Rolling Forties."—Ceral Hard-tack.—Not so Hard.—Mexican Birds.—Smoking-girls.—Laguna Seca.—La Punta.—First Breakfast in an Adobe.—Hacienda of Precita.—The Spanish Bayonet.—Mattejuala.—Birnam Wood marching on Dunsinane.—The first and last Mosquito of Mexico.—Yankee Singing.—Worse threatened.

THE point in a journey where you strike the dead neutral centre between the coming and the going is almost always one of intense disagreeableness. Such the ocean wanderer finds the "rolling forties," in "the dead waste and middle of" that tiresome ferriage. I am in the like condition now. I doubt if many would take this trip could they see this room before they start; nor would many cross the ocean if they were treated to a foretaste of that ridge where the waves roll east and west, and the spirits sink like lead in the mighty waters.

The room is in the Casa Diligencias Generales, in the town of Ceral, which contains three thousand human inhabitants. Of course, being the stage-house, it is the best in the place; and it is the best room in the house; since I, being the only passenger, have my pick. Look at it. First look at that muddy water, a tumbler of which that dirty boy has just brought in. A Mississippi boatman could not taste it. It is worse than the Thames after Hood's "Bridge of Sighs" had spanned it.

"Drink of it, lave in it then, if you can."

It stands on a dressing-table that saw paint in spots a century ago, and has hardly seen soap since. Adjoining it is a like white-and-gray wash-stand, its legs inclining inward from the decrepitude of



age. In the centre is a round table, on which this is being written, that is not quite so venerable. The red of its varnish still largely covers it, but it makes up in dust for what it lacks in years. A single chair is present, alike venerable, too venerable to be in service, like a worn-out preacher not well supported with Conference gifts. One fears all the time that it will break down in its present occupancy, as one fears a like breakdown in a like superannuate if he is put to work belonging to his prime. A like dilapidated bedstead stands in each of three of the corners of the room. All together do not seem strong enough to uphold their probable present occupants, let alone two hundred pounds more.

The floor is of cement, like a good cellar bottom, well covered with dust. The paper is torn off half up the walls, and is badly rent in the ceiling, which is of the same unsubstantial stuff, as is not unfrequently the case in this country. A door opening into another apartment has three of its six window-panes knocked out. Truly one might well sigh for some other lodge in this vast wilderness.

Yet every cloud has its silver lining. The "rolling forties" at least roll well. What are the good points about this *cuarti*? First, it is roomy—fifty feet at least long, and twenty wide. It will make a good chapel for us one of these days. Then it has a fine picture of the Virgin—of course it could hardly be of any body else here—a picture that an artist made, her sweet looks raised heavenward, a dove in one hand resting over her heart, an exquisite bouquet in the other lifted to the skies. I should like to carry it off, both for its beauty and for its lack of fitness to these disagreeable surroundings. Then it opens on a sunny court surrounded with flower-pots, but not many flowers, though roses and geraniums give it a home-like look, and feeble agave varieties show that we are in the tropics, but getting out of them. Birds line the walls, singing merrily their vespers. The chico is the favorite in number, if not in melody. This is not so very small as its name signifies. Perhaps cage-life has made it greater in size as well as song. It is gray and white, not unlike our ground chip-bird, though larger

and prettier. The burrion is small, canary-like in size, dark-striped, with yellow streaked slightly in. Here is a blue canary, the first I ever saw—*canarid azul* the hostess calls it. It is as handsome as its yellow kindred, and, for a novelty, prettier. The cardinal bird concludes the circuit, radiant of plumage and crested with scarlet, a haughty representative of his name. So birds and flowers are some consolation, and may even incline us to apologize for the dust, for which the mistress is perhaps no more to blame than is Cincinnati for its coal grime, or Boston for its east winds, or New York for its mosquitoes. For the plains are dry, and the winds high.

Another good point about this place is its situation. Seldom has a better or bigger town an equal location. The mountains come close to it on the west. Superb black sierras they look, after this sunset hour, superb golden purple just before. They are, however, inwardly neither black nor golden, but full of silver. The one nearest, and that rises solitary and splendid out of a vast plain, is the Sierra Catorce, and it is said has yielded a million of dollars in two months. These mountains are offset by the plain which they limit close on this side, but lie low in the eastern horizon, being there thirty miles away.

Last and best, this has the good point that it is nearer home than any previous casa. The mid-ocean is agreeable, if for no other reason, because it is *mid-ocean*. So in this feature of our dismal house we rejoice, and will rejoice. When the lad said we started away at three, I said "Good;" if he said "at twelve," I should have said, "better;" if "now," "best." Let us while away the interregnum with recording the log of the day. It will make the night less tedious.

We left the town of Chalcos at our usual hour of four, four of us this time, for a rarity, being in the coach. At six we concluded our sleep, and looked each other in the face. My fellow-travelers were two young ladies, of seventeen to twenty, and their little Cinderella, a maid of twelve. They were going to Mattejuala, three postas off. The youngest of the two smoked several cigarettes before the day



had fairly begun. She was a bright, laughing girl, who was only following, as they say here, *la costumbre de la país* (the custom of the country). How is it worse for girls than boys? Men and women drink together. They can as properly indulge in this vice. Not far from sunrise we pass the beautiful hacienda of Laguna Seca (Dry Lake). It relieves the uncultured dreariness of the landscape with its finish and fineness of luxuriant green. The gate towers of stone are prettily capped and pointed in colored mortars. Its large plaza is swept clean. A pretty little pond, faced, walled, and encircled with trees, increases its attractiveness, and even the huts of the laborers are made into cottages. A dozen or more stand end to the street, neatly built and thatched. I was surprised at this, for it was the first attempt I had seen on any hacienda to make the home of the work-people attractive. It soon dies away; for only a few rods off is a cluster of as mean huts as any in the worst spots on the roadside. It would cost too much to fix all the homes of the people that way. These are specimens of what might be done and will yet be done; for all these dens are to be yet pleasant and comfortable homes.

Leaving this partly perfect spot, we soon get into the thick of the hills. The open pass which I had thought yesterday would accompany us all the way gives out, or we turn away from it. The spurs of the hills hug us, and we wind around and around them for several leagues. The soil is parched, cleft, barren, save of the perpetual cactus and mesquite. We get at last away from these too-close embraces, pass some plowed fields, and large thickets of the mesquite, and change mules at the poor station of Solis, a mere rancho. The scenery broadens, and in a few leagues we scamper through the quite good-sized village of La Vega de Gaudalupe.

A bit of a rancho of two or three huts, called La Punta, is our next stopping-place. It is our breakfasting-place also. It is a new experience to enter an adobe hut for breakfast, but traveling is intended for new experiences. So hunger drives me to the white table-cloth, the clean earth floor, and the bill of fare. A brisk and pleasant lady serves the table, assisted by a not so brisk

or pleasant, but much older, man. The tortillas are warm, and the roasted chicken is as good as I have tasted in the country, far better than most I have tried to eat. Milk is wanting; they have not any. I protest and persevere until he brings me two tumblers of delicious milk, for which he wants a real extra, but is content with his half-dollar at the last. I asked her if he was her father. "No," she replied, laughing; "my husband. He is *mas grande*" (much older). They had twelve children. He said he went to church every Sunday with his wife and children to Mattejuala, twenty miles off, which I doubt. If any body wants good milk and good roast chicken at a rancho, let them call on Señor and Señora Tebucio, at La Punta.

The hills fall back from this point (probably called La Punta from that circumstance), and we descend gradually into a handsome plain, almost a circle, from six to ten miles wide. We skirt its eastern side, leaving all the plain to the vast fields of the hacienda of Precita. The hills close it in on every side, except a tiny opening on the north-east. This, as we come near, widens into a pass, called El Puerto del Terquaro (the Pass or Gate of Terquaro). This lets us down gradually, as by terraces and slopes, into the handsome plain of Mattejuala. In this plain the palma, or Spanish bayonet, as they call it in Colorado, assumes pre-eminence over all rivals, both for number and size. It had been coming into note more and more the last score of miles. Here it opens into forests, miles square. It assumes almost the majesty of oaks, and extends an ocean of verdure, refreshing to the eye, though not of especial value to any other sense. A score of miles along its quaint hedges and deep green effects brings us to Mattejuala, the largest town between San Luis Potosi and Saltillo. Here our cigaretting girls disembark, and hie round a corner to the broad-leaved gateway of a cool one-story house, where they probably still keep up their chattering and smoking. The town is large and lazy, not having life enough hardly on that lazy day to harness our mules, or even to see it done. They, however, have enough to fly away, and dive into the outer country of palms and mesquite like a



mountain torrent. Idler fancies crept over them as soon as they got well out of the last adobe lane of the gray and glowing town, and they fell into a soberer pace. It was another stretch over the same wide, bayoneted plain, which looked as if myriads of soldiers in Lincoln green were standing firmly at their arms over the wide prairie, or as if Birnam Wood was getting ready to march on Dun-sinane. It was a superb army, and suggested the prettiest of uniforms for a soldier's gala-day, if not for actual service.

The level drive brought us, ere fall of night, to this dingy dwelling-place of Ceral. I stroll in its dull plaza, and buy poor oranges and poorer bananas. The Hot Lands are leaving us. A mosquito buzzes about my ear, the first I had heard or seen in all the country. He seemed so lonely that it appeared a deed of charity to put him into the ghostly company, innumerable of his kindred, that the hand of man has slain.

An imaginative metaphysician said once, in a sermon "On Compensation," "The little insect you crush between your thumb and finger sails away on silvery wings to a loftier Empyrean;" and an irreverent listener commented, "Every time, then, you kill a mosquito you sting an angel." This was not of so high a faith as the little girl, who soliloquized to a fly, held between her thumb and finger, "Itty fy, you want to see Dod? You s'all see Dod;" and a crunching of her finger and thumb, and grinding of the fly between them, puts her promise, as far as she could do so, into effect. So far has this mosquito murder led us, and him, away from this dismal plaza.

Vespers were being held in a little church, and a melodeon, with a boy player and girl singers, gave this usually formal service a home-familiarity that was so far agreeable. May this attainment lead to higher graces of social worship.

The sun sinks behind the silver hills, changing them to amethyst and gold, and the dreary cell of Ceral is reluctantly re-entered. Dinner is as bad as the chambers; bed and board alike disgust. The meats are cooked horribly, and are of horrid materials. I follow Meg Merrilies's advice, "Gape, sinner, and swallow," and

make out to worry a few mouthfuls down. The administrador of the Diligencia Company, to whom I complain of such accommodation and fare, replies, "Wait till you sleep in a rancho to-morrow night." So I anticipate worse horrors on the morrow. Shall I find them?