

IX.

NEARING SHORE.

Preparations against a Rancho.—A golden Set.—Bonaventura.—A Rancho: what is it?—Companions.—Aztec or Chinese?—Desolation.—Tropic Thorns and Flowers.—An Oasis.—Hacienda of Solado, and its unexpected Hospitalities.—Freaks of the Spanish Bayonet.—Green velvet Mountains.—The true Protector.

ONE day's sail from land is not thought much of by the sea-tossed traveler. The stage-tossed may feel equally comforted. Though the stage is to be my companion more days than the one, still this oceanic stretch in its voyaging will come to a prosperous issue, God willing and working, to-morrow at the heat of the day, which is not noon, but three in the afternoon, in this burning sky.

I was warned last night, at my dismal quarters at Ceral, that this night would be far more miserable. So I fortified myself with big gingerbread swine—their ginger-snaps hereabouts take no other shape—with a French roll, a Bologna sausage that has done duty heretofore as a pistol, its tinfoil covering making it look like a shining silvered barrel, and all the more terrible, as it peeped from my breast-pocket, to the non-appearing robbers. So fearful was I that this would protect me, that it was hidden away in my valise, and is now to be agreeably eaten. That is more than turning swords into pruning-hooks, even pistols into meat. For dulces I had oranges, bananas, and pea-nuts. But the pea-nuts are not baked, and the bananas are hard and horrid, so that I have to fall back on the oranges, and sour they are.

The rancho food thus being provided for, the rest of its accompaniments are easily accepted. On a big log, resting on a white

artificial mould thrown round a little pond of brackish water, I am looking at the setting sun and writing these rambling notes.

The rancho "has a pleasant seat." All around it tower magnificent mountains not far away, from two to five miles. They completely inclose it, except toward the south, where a green opening shows no end. Like the green sea, it lies on the horizon, only it is still, as that sea is not, and is touched at its sides with the hills of blue. The western ridges, where the sun is just descending, are black already with the shadow of night, the eastern glow richly in his rays. In blessings over the sleeping scene, a high and solitary peak just across this pond lifts its white castellated front like a venerable, bearded priest, and therefore not a Romanist, who is beardless as well as crownless. Off in that southern green ocean is a green cone, as perfect as a rounded pyramid—a Teneriffe covered with eternal spring.

To the north the hills, more distant, shine the brightest in the vanishing hues, while the sky above and along the northern side, and far around to the eastward, is still aflame. The valley itself thus superbly inclosed is a sea of green, all its white, bare, barren, disagreeable features being lost in this dying hour of the day, as all the bare, barren, disagreeable features of a life so often fade and disappear in its setting. As we drove up here, weary with the hot and long and dusty ride, and saw this white embankment and the white adobe of the rancho shining in the sun, with a half-dozen tall green willows standing guard over them, I was glad to welcome it as my home for the night, and to bless its name, Bonaventura (good coming), as prophetic of this advent. And now, as this lovely flush overspreads all the heavens, like a bloom and a smile on the cheek of the dying beloved—I have seen such, have not you?—I feel yet more like blessing the good angel that has brought me thus far happily over the burning and the brilliant, yet dangerous land. How that rose deepens, and rims the north with fire! Where did you, where could you ever see a grander setting? How vastly ahead of the tumultuous and fatal sea! Ah! you say, your land is tumultuous and fatal also. Those brown fellows, do

they not weigh you in their balance for so much gold? You are pistolless, and they know it. Perhaps they know too that you are a Methodist parson, and therefore their legitimate, nay, commanded, prey. "When you say peace and safety, then sudden destruction cometh." Well, it may be so, and so may it be on shipboard; but it may not also. They have treated me splendidly so far. I will believe and hope unto the end.

The scarlet is becoming crimson, and its darker edges purple, the sure sign of approaching dissolution.

The hundred horses that have just been up here drinking, and then out in the chaparral for a nip at the new grass, are wandering back to their corral, an inclosure of upstanding logs. We shall have to leave our log and outlook, the big willow standing in water just at my feet, the green landscape fast turning gray, and the solemn, affectionate, parental hills, not so solemn as that they are not happy-looking also, as all properly solemn persons are, and hie us to the inside of our rancho.

You have heard much about ranchos. Let me describe this one. It is a very small pueblo, or a tiny corner town, like the larger towns, except there is in it no Casa Grande, no brick or mortar dwellings, only adobe. But our rancho, like a new Western town, aspires to a future, and is laid out with more care than most of such villages. It has a square, or plaza, on this small prairie, three sides already surrounded with the huts that may give way sometime to houses of grander make and material. But here the law of the larger houses prevails. As a log-cabin is a Fifth Avenue house in its germ, so a true rancho is a Spanish castle or Mexican casa grande in its beginning. First logs, then wood, then marble; first mud, then mortar, then marble. This rancho is exactly after the type of Barron's and Escandron's great houses in Mexico; a common gate-way for horses, carriages, men, and dogs; in this case, pigs are added, a luxury not allowed in the city. A door opens to rooms on either side of the gate-way, porter's there, owner's here; then comes a large square court, with rooms opening into it. The rear side of this court is a stable, and another court behind the

first admits you to the rest of the stables. The room where I write opens into the court on the left. After passing the porter's room into the court, turn to the left, first door; enter. There I sit at a table, with a tallow-dip upon it. Three single cots are in the room, and all occupied to-night; floor of hard earth, every thing comfortable. It is no worse, though less pretentious, than the hotel at Ceral. It is not so disagreeable. My fellow room-mates are a Mexican gentleman, and a German youth of nineteen, who left home to escape the draft, and is to make his residence in Durango. He took the precaution to arrange at Brownsville to become an American citizen at twenty-one. So Bismarck and Moltke have lost him for their battle of Dorking. The Germans do not like to "train" any more than the Americans or English; "'tis not their trade." They will have to abandon that purpose, and trust, as do their kin, to patriotism to defend what patriotism, more than military training, won.

This bright boy is afflicted, as most boys and men are here, with a tendency toward Cognac, and yet complains of the very ailments Cognac pre-eminently induces. When will the good cause of total abstinence preserve youth and men from this dire curse?

Let us run over the log of the day. Out and off at four, in a magnificent starlight, as clear and lustrous as a Northern coldest winter's night, and as warm as a Northern summer's. It chills a little in the riding, and a bonfire of corn-stalks at the first posta is not disagreeable. A peon has kindled the fire, and stands over it in his white cotton trowsers and shirt, with his zerape round his shoulders, his feet bare save of sandals and thongs. He is on a walk from Mattejuala, to work on a road for three reals (thirty-seven and a half cents) a day. Think of that, ye who are giving Irishmen three dollars, and sending to China for substitutes. Here are millions of industrious and ingenious gentlemen—I use that word in both senses—whom you can get for a dollar, and they will think themselves wealthy. Let our Samsons find China at their doors.

The apple and quince trees hang full of blossoms, in a garden

attached to this rancho, and other flowers and growing grains give proof that the air here, if chill, is never cold.

A long, long posta of fourteen leagues (thirty-six miles) follows, over a wide plain, with scarce the sign of habitation. Five leagues out we meet a private coach and gentleman, the coach covered with cloth, a common usage here, to preserve it handsome for the city paseo; for this coach contains a Congressman, who is on his way to the city, and the session. Not another sign of life, save in bush and tree, and not much in them, till the twelfth league is reached. Some horses grazing in the bushes look wistfully at us, envying, doubtless, their brothers in the coach, as boys, with all their liberty, envy the burdened man, harnessed and dragging his weary load up hill and down hill till he drops it, or drops under it, dead. A rag on two high bushes marks a house for an Indian family, and relieves the monotony of desolation. The sun has risen with a burning heat. Yesterday we shivered in a shawl till near noon; to-day we swelter in the shade, and solicit and enjoy the breeze that blows through the coach, albeit much dust gets mixed up with it.

The vast prairies are thinly covered with shrubs of mesquite, and even the Spanish bayonet gives out, and dwindles to meagre proportions. A red-headed cactus, big-headed too, glows by the roadside, sharp, but not unlovely. This is the beginning of the chaparral region, whereof we heard so much in the days of General Taylor, and which Lowell so humorously sets forth in his "Bird of Freedom Sawin'." It is hard-looking stuff to march through, being short, and as sharp as a virago's temper.

How is it that these tropic plants are so apt to be prickly? Almost every bush and tree you meet from here to Mexico is of this repellent type. Is it that heat in the blood of nature is like heat in the blood of human nature, and produces the *noli-me-tangere* state of the Scotch thistle and Scotch terrier? These palms, this mesquite, the cactus, all are thorny, cross, and "let me alone."

"He talked about delishis froots, but then it was a wopper all,

The holl ont's mud and prickly-pear, with here an' there a chapperal."

Every reader of these pages has undoubtedly heard of oases in

the desert. You did not hear of much else in the way of figures, if your juvenile composition life was passed where mine was. It was a cheap and favorite illustration of sentimental youth, who called every "goody" their mothers sent them, every holiday their teachers gave them, every love-sick emotion a fair face bred in them, oases in the desert of their lives.

Well, what they fancied I experienced in reality. I had tried every way to get over the long, lazy stretch of thirty-six hot and pulverized miles of dismal monotony. We drove past a line of wagons, four yoke of oxen to each, and the wagon itself, about two feet wide and six feet high, with palm-leaf matting sides and a peaked roof like a house, covered also with matting, the most curious wagon in the country so far. The wheels were bigger than the house upon them, and the eight oxen seemed intended to drag the wheels.

The wind blew the way we were going, and so we added their dust to our own, a proof that we do not always get out of other folks' dust by getting ahead of them. In fact, we not unfrequently get into it the more; for they blow after you that which they can not leave after for you.

After this weary eating of our own dust for so hot and long a spell, and even of that of those whom we had passed in the slow race, we came in sight of a stately hacienda. Its white walls glistened like a fortress. Its silver reduction chimneys towered, cannon-like, above its gates. Its broad, clean plaza, very broad and very clean, received us. The driver stopped in its centre, regardless of the hotel door, where he usually pulled up. I ask where breakfast is to be got. "Anywhere," he says, tossing his head quite indifferently. I push round to a gate-way, and ask a servant the same question. He points to a closed room. In it I see through the window a man writing. Not much sign of a breakfast there. I push my inquiries farther with like cold courtesy. At last, bewildered, I express my indignation at their neglect. A young man in a wide gray sombrero, pistol at side, white-appareled, says in good English, "You wish for a breakfast, sir?" "Yes, sir," is the reply;

"I am glad to find one man who can speak a Christian language."
 "Go in there, sir, and I will meet you soon." The servants are immediately and uncommonly attentive. I enter the court set forth with flowers and birds, peacock, clarine, and others of gay apparel, enter the cool dining-room, vacant, and take a seat at the first place, which happened to be the head of the table. Soon the courtly youth entered and sat down to eat. Three others did, and I found, instead of being at a hotel table, I was a guest of a gentleman, and occupying his seat. "So foolish was I and ignorant, I was as a beast before" him. I bethought myself of him who with shame had to take a lower seat.

But the young gentleman did not object, and so the seat was kept. I found he was educated near Alexandria, could talk English well, was full of interest in the railroad question, as every body seems to be here. This hacienda was his uncle's, whom I had met seven leagues back, on his way to Congress. It was a cattle-raising farm, had on it now about five thousand cattle and forty thousand sheep and goats. It contained thirty square leagues, over seventy square miles, had on it silver and gold mines, but little worked, though the English ex-consul of Mexico had lately organized a company for their development. The thick silver spoons of the table were from the mine; an eighth of an inch the spoon was across its edge. Had I not had the fear of the unjust fame of my once military commander before my eyes, I would have begged or bought one of those specimens of the product of this farm.

He said the grazing here was excellent most of the year; dry now on the plains, but sweet in the mountains. The cattle were worth ten dollars a head at the hacienda. They kept three hundred men employed, and supported fifteen hundred to two thousand people.

He gave me an excellent dinner, for which he refused any pay. He was pleased, he said, to see Americans, and to revive his English. It revived very easily. I commend to all passers on this road the hospitalities of Señor Gabriel Bustamante, of the hacienda of Solado.

The Spanish bayonet here comes to the front again, and puts on some of its queerest forms; and nothing can look queerer. Here is one with two legs coming together in its spiked head, like a boy's picture of a scared man, with his hair erect. Another has a single trunk and two arms stuck out, and a bushy head between, another infantile drawing. Two are ogling each other, their crooked backs crowned by projecting barrels of spikes that look like grinning faces; and here are two others, evidently back to back, frowning fiercely out of the same wrathful hair. A row of them, of every size, shape, and position of crookedness, looks like Falstaff's army, with tremendous fierceness in their weak though plumed heads. One was so perfect a statue, that I could not believe it to be any thing but a man till after passing it, and hardly then. Their grotesqueness is inimitable. Hood's queer pictures, and Thackeray's and Nast's and Cruikshank's, are all surpassed by the common doings of this palma. It is the harlequin of Nature, the clown and the court fool of her royal palace here.

The hills seemed to grow greener, and the fields also, perhaps because of the refreshment body and spirit had received, perhaps because I had learned that it was their intention to do so soon. Still they did increase in verdure. The hills especially began to put on velvet. It became them well, but no better than their previous nakedness. They were sculptured so admirably, that one feels as if they were statues, and needed no wardrobe.

"The sinful painter drapes his goddess warm,
 Because she still is naked, being dressed;
 The god-like sculptor will not so deform
 Beauty, which limbs and flesh enough invest."

But that western side, so daintily robed in soft, short green, does not look any the worse for the apparel. Indeed it is an improvement, for it fills up the rough clefts and rounds out the contour to a perfect symmetry. You never saw and never will see out of Mexico such foldings of rock, draperies tight-fitting yet flowing, cavities that are dimples, and swellings that are the rounding out of youth-

ful cheeks and forms. It did not seem possible that rocks could be so lady-like ; soft, yet firm ;

"So moving delicate, so full of life."

I gazed, and envied the coming circuit-riding brethren over this hacienda. We pass one of its ranchos, clean and comfortable compared with many below, the men gentlemanly and the women lady-like. They came and shook hands with the driver ; a chatty mother offering him cold water, and all showing the American training of the young hacendado, and preparing the way for the chapel and the stationed preacher.

This posta of twelve long leagues is pulled across through heavy, dusty, level roads, but also through this munificent landscape of green and silver, and we come where we began, and where, at near the midnight hour, this writing is being finished, in the peaceful rancho of Bonaventura.

One more day and we see the city that concludes this ocean section, and we get to the end, practically, of Mexico. May the robbers keep still aloof, though my German lad sleeping over there says they are plenty and bad above, and tells a story of what they lately did, to put me in bodily fear, shooting a woman, and tying two men to a tree. He is armed, and thinks that is his protection. Shall I get out my tin-foil sausage, or beg a revolver? Nay. I sing my talisman:

"Jesus protects, my fears begone!
What can the Rock of Ages move?
Safe in His arms I lay me down,
His everlasting arms of love!"

X.

INTO PORT.

Sunrise.—Villa de Gomez Firias.—A lost American found.—Flowering Palms.—An unpleasant Reminder.—A charming Park.—Agua Nueva.—La Encantada.—La Angostura.—Battlemented Mountains.—Buena Vista.—The Battle-field.—The Result.—Why.—Saltillo.—Alameda.—Friends.

THE four days' trip across the wilderness ocean is completed. The pleasant harbor is made ; the perils by land are at an end. True, four days' staging yet remain, or ere the country is left, and the robbers, if such there be. And as a vessel has been wrecked in sight of its port, and coaches have been robbed within two miles of Mexico, there are plenty of chances yet to experience all that is threatened and feared. But the chief perils are past, and the chief weariness ; and it is to be hoped none that follow will exceed those that have gone before. Our night in a rancho was without excitement. "I laid me down in peace and slept. I awaked, for Thou sustained me."

It was not much after midnight when the men sleeping on the ground at the door of our biggin began to bestir themselves ; at a little after one we were all up, and at two off, one party of two for the South, one of one for the North. The coach had several rent windows, and let in the cold air full freely. But as the air was not very cold, the shawl sufficed for a protector, and I tossed and slept till morning broke. The same level was before me, shut in by the same hills. The light grew rosy in midheavens, then on the western ridge, and then the blaze boiled and steamed up the east, and all was done.

It was a long pull through the unchanging fields of stunted mesquite and palm, varied by equally stunted castor-oil bean, whose