

CHAPTER III.

It is strange that so small a stream as the Rio Grande should separate two races, two civilizations, two cycles. From the Anglo-Saxon civilization of to-day we pass, upon crossing the river, to the Spanish-American civilization of one hundred and fifty years ago. As we file out of the train to the custom house we see only dark faces, and sombrero-hatted serape-draped figures, and, most foreign of all, we are treated by the custom-house officials with a gentle courtesy alien to our experience. The examination is soon over—for wine and spirits are the principal dutiable articles—and we dash off into another world—a world whose inhabitants and customs are alike strange to us.

The route by Eagle Pass carries us along the high plateau, in the same path by which the Aztecs entered the country. The plateau, which is from 6,000 to 7,000 feet high, is bordered on both sides by mountain ranges, beyond which the land slips away to the sea. The country is covered with

shifting sand, whose only vegetable life is an occasional clump of greasewood or cactus. The distant mountains on both sides of the plateau shut off the clouds that rise from the sea on either hand, and in some of these districts no rain has fallen for seven years, a condition of affairs which by no means adds to the comfort of the traveler.

A ride of fifteen hours brought us to Torreon, where we saw for the first time that curious picture of Mexican life which was afterward to become so familiar to us. The sunny plaza before the station was crowded with peaked-hatted, gay-blanketed Mexicans who, in spite of the heat, wore their serapes twisted closely around them. Their nether man was clothed in the tightest trousers on the thinnest legs I ever dreamed of. With their bulky shoulders and stilt-like legs, these dark-faced dandies, in gay trappings, curiously resembled high-colored birds of the heron family. The women wore bright-hued rebosas, or shawls over the head, and I was interested to see that hoopskirts were still in fashion in Mexico; there were even some old-time tilters in evidence. Both sexes wore great flapping sandals of leather, bound to the foot with thongs of rawhide. No one, however, was naked, as in Cuba.

As the day wore on our surroundings grew more and more picturesque. Mexico is, in fact, more foreign than anything in Europe outside of Turkey.

The quaint figures of the men plowing with oxen and crooked sticks in the fields, the troops of cattle, sheep, and goats, whose red-blanketed herder gives a bright bit of color to the landscape, the little villages where hordes of beggars besiege the traveler with jargon prayers for centavos, all are alike curious and interesting to the tourist who sees the picture for the first time. Nor must we forget that most familiar of all Mexican figures—the woman preparing tortillas for the humble meal. One whom we saw by the wayside was surrounded by a flock of peeping chickens, who took advantage of her interest in the passing train to peck the dough from her hands.

We reached Zacatecas one evening about ten o'clock. For some incomprehensible reason most of the railway stations in Mexico are at a distance from the towns. Zacatecas is no exception to the rule, so we climbed into a dirty old mule-car, and, to the music of a tooting horn, joggled up the hill two miles to the city. As we had more confidence in our command of French than of Spanish, we chose to go to the French hotel. Our landlord, who proved to be a Basque from Bayonne, on the Spanish frontier of France, spoke a thick-tongued dialect, almost incomprehensible, but fortunately he had little difficulty in understanding our peculiar needs. We were ushered into a big, brick-floored

room, opening on a balcony overhanging the street. The room, with its two hard pallets, its two dressing tables, two comfortless chairs, and two candles, was a reproduction of a continental bedroom in a village inn. Upon the wall hung two gaudy lithographs—one a picture of the young Mozart playing before the queen and the other a marriage scene interrupted by the appearance of the bridegroom's mistress and child—a decidedly Frenchy work of art.

In the morning, when we looked from our balcony, we saw a long, narrow, cobble-stone paved street winding up a hill; a hill which pilgrims ascend on their knees to the Chapel of Los Remedios. All around Zacatecas the mountains rise like the rim of a bowl. In the bottom and on the sides of the basin lies the town, which like many of the Mexican cities greatly resembles the crowded hill-towns of Palestine. La Bufa, or the Buffalo Mountain, where Juarez fought one of the battles of the numerous revolutions, overlooks the city. There are gold and silver in all the hills, but neither silver nor gold falls into the hands of the jostling crowds that fill the streets, for—in spite of the fact that they are continually toiling—bitter, crushing, hopeless poverty is their lot. An old man passing one morning under our windows dropped a bag of wheat which broke and scattered the contents in the street. He worked many hours gathering up the precious

cerea, grain by grain. Could there be a more touching evidence of patient want than this?

Zacatecas is more than 8,000 feet above the sea, and the rare air of the high altitude renders less apparent the sickening smells that one naturally expects to find in a Mexican city with a swarming population. This is fortunate, for even with the best will for cleanliness, the poorer people of Zacatecas would be obliged to dispense with water, which is scarce and dear in the city. One of the most curious sights in all Mexico is the fountain in the little plaza, where the women gather every morning with their water jars to scoop up the scanty and treasured fluid. With infinite patience these oily tressed Rebeccas scrape up each precious drop, while the "mute, inglorious" Isaacs stand sympathizingly by, and, let us hope, give to their inamoratas, as they stagger off under the weight of the heavy red jars, the aid of their prayers.

I found the "new woman" greatly in evidence in Zacatecas. She didn't know she was a new woman—bless her—but she certainly was one. She fought her own battles, and went into business on her own account, and no man said her nay. I watched with interest the methods of a courageous soul who appeared one morning bearing upon her handsome head a heavy table. She established herself in a sunny spot opposite my balcony, opened an um-

brella and a folding chair, took from her bag a small stock of dulces and bananas, and after a spirited contest with the proprietor of the store before which she located, opened shop according to approved methods. A baby slung to her back proclaimed the fact that she had not sacrificed private to public duties, but that her "sphere" included all.

During her business life I saw her sell one banana, and a small boy stole two of her dulces, so fearing that, even in the land of free silver, she would never become a bloated bondholder, I felt myself obliged to give her the support of my humble patronage.

Around the old plaza of the fountain are the markets of the poor people. The ground is thick with vendors who sit upon the pavements with their scanty stocks—little piles of potatoes, of peanuts, of oranges, or of onions—spread around them. Here too are sold sausages, chickens, liver, beans or frijoles, chops, garlic, pins, needles, nails, cotton cloth, and the thousand and one necessities of daily life. The new market, near the grand plaza of the Cathedral, is more pretentious, and is filled with great piles of tropical fruit heaped in tempting mounds.

The streets of Zacatecas are kept clean by the prisoners in the city jail, who are compelled, in chains and under the surveillance of squads of mounted policemen with leveled guns, to work out

their fines. From our balcony we watched with sympathy these unwilling workers, but I believe that the system is not, on the whole, a bad one. Indeed, the penal system of Mexico has some advantages over that of our own country. The term of a prisoner in the penitentiary is divided into three periods. The first is given entirely to penal labor; the second allows a little time for amusement, and the third is preparatory for freedom, and the prisoners receive pay for their work and are entitled to various privileges.

The best-dressed and most impressive persons in Zacatecas are the policemen. They wear white caps and neat belted suits of dark blue trimmed across the breast with festoons of white cord. In the day time they carry a baton and swing a revolver from their belts; in the evening they add to their equipment a lighted lantern, and the long rows of these lighted lanterns extending up and down the street at night give the comforting assurance that the guardians of the peace are on duty. These policemen, on the kindergarten principle of keeping mischievous people busy, are often chosen from the most dangerous criminals. I can testify that they are efficient officers, for during one afternoon seven men were arrested under my window. The principal cause of arrest is drunkenness. When the offender cannot pay his fine—and he never can

—he is sent with the chain-gang to work it out.

There is at Zacatecas a very good Cathedral with a wonderfully, but not beautifully, carved front, although for Indian work it is fairly creditable. Inside there is a famous painting, not in the least bad, which is said to have been done by a boy seven years old. While we were in the Cathedral vespers began, and the same boy—or some other one—opened service with the most awful voice I ever heard. Indeed, the music in its entirety was so horrible that it quite thrilled us.

The center of social life in Zacatecas seems to be the plaza near the Cathedral, where the band plays in the evening and the young people promenade. The youths form in line and march in one direction while the maidens march in the opposite one. This is really another market on the plaza, where most of the Mexican marriages are made, for as the two lines pass each other, by some sign known only to lovers an understanding is established, and the maiden is wooed and won. In some of the Mexican cities there is a double ring—one for the upper classes, the other for the lower classes. Our personal advent into the plaza circles of Mexico could hardly be called a social triumph. First Ahasuerus marched with me in the women's procession, and was covered with contumely as with a garment; then I made matters worse by joining his party,

and in the end we were only too glad to sit down on a cold stone bench and play the modest part of humble and chilly spectators.

It is an amusing experience to take the street cars in the plaza of the fountain, and slide down by gravity six miles to the town of Guadalupe, where there is a fine old church with a curiously carved front. The church contains a modern chapel overloaded with gilt, said to be the most costly in Mexico. The convent, which was formerly a part of the church, has been confiscated by the government and is used for an industrial school, where boys are seriously and practically taught the different trades. We went into some of the departments and saw the carpenter shop, the serape factory, the hat-braiding and the shoemaking establishments, and the bakery. In this well-ordered institution more than one hundred boys are each year prepared for a life of honest toil.

As I waited in Guadalupe for the coming of the half-dozen panting mules who were to drag us up the steep hills, I seated myself in a drug store and observed Mexican methods of dispensing medicines. The counters of this particular shop were like the rails of a grand altar, and the drugs were stored in carved choir-stalls with glass doors. On the high altar were piled bottles of patent medicines, prominent among them the familiar "bitters" and "tonics"

of our own land. The druggist seemed to be a sort of high priest, who prescribed penitential doses and then sold them. Everything was thick with dirt, even to the face and hands of the high priest.