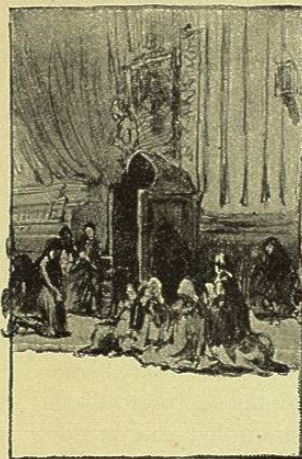


forged many of them, and see only the purple city swimming in the golden light, and the deep shadows of the hills behind it.



CHAPTER II.

AFTER DARK IN
SILAO.

"CABALLERO! *A donde va usted?*"

"To Silao, to see the cathedral lighted."

"Alone?"

"*Cierto!* unless you go."

I was half way across the open space dividing the railroad from the city of Silao when I was brought to a standstill by this inquiry. The questioner was my friend Morgan, an Englishman, who had lived ten years in the country and knew it thoroughly.

He was placed here in charge of the property of the road the day the last spike was driven. A short, thickset, clear blue-eyed, and brown-bearded Briton, whose word was law, and whose brawny arm

enforced it. He had a natural taste for my work and we soon drifted together.

"Better take this," he continued, loosening his belt and handing me its contents — a row of cartridges and a revolver.

"Never carried one in my life."

"Well, you will now."

"Do you mean to say, Morgan, that I cannot cross this flat plain, hardly a quarter of a mile wide, and enter the city in safety without being armed?"

"I mean to say, *mi amigo*, that the mountains around Silao are infested with bandits, outlaws, and thieves; that these fellows prowl at night; that you are a stranger and recognized at sight as an American; that twenty-four hours after your arrival these facts were quietly whispered among the fraternity; that every article of value you have on down to your collar-button is already a subject of discussion and appraisal; that there are nine chances to ten that the blind cripple who sold you dulces this morning at the train was quietly making an inventory of your valuables, and that, had he been recognized by the guard, his legs would

have untwisted themselves in a minute; that after dark in Silao is quite a different thing from under the gaslight in Broadway; and that unless you go armed you cannot go alone."

"But, Morgan, there is not a tree, stone, stump, or building in sight big enough to screen a rat behind. You can see even in the starlight the entrance to the wide street leading to the cathedral."

"Make no mistake, señor, these devils start up out of the ground. Strap this around you or stay here. Can you see my quarters — the small house near the Estacion? Do you notice the portico with the sloping roof? Well, my friend, I have sat on that portico in the cool of the evening and looked across this very plain and heard cries for help, and the next morning at dawn have seen the crowd gathered about a poor devil with a gash in his back the length of your hand."

As we walked through the dust towards the city, Morgan continued: —

"The government are not altogether to blame for this state of things. They have done their best to break it up, and they

have succeeded to a great extent. In Celaya alone the *jefe politico* showed me the records where he had shot one hundred and thirteen bandits in less than two years. He does not waste his time over judge or jury: strings them along in a row within an hour after they are caught plundering, then leaves them two days above ground as a warning to those who get away. Within a year to cross from Silao to Leon without a guard was as much as your life was worth. The diligence was robbed almost daily. This began to be a matter of course and passengers reduced their luggage to the clothes they stood in. Finally the thieves confiscated these. Two years ago, old Don Palacio del Monte, whose hacienda is within five miles of here, started in a diligence one morning at daylight with his wife and two daughters and a young Mexican named Marquando, to attend a wedding feast at a neighboring plantation only a few miles distant. They were the only occupants. An hour after sunrise, while dragging up a steep hill, the coach came to a halt, the driver was pulled

down and bound, old Palacio and Marquando covered with carbines, and every rag of clothing stripped from the entire party. Then they were politely informed by the chief, who was afterwards caught and shot, and who turned out to be the renegade son of the owner of the very hacienda where the wedding festivities were to be celebrated, to go home and inform their friends to bring more baggage in the future or some of them might catch cold!

"Marquando told me of it the week after it occurred. He was still suffering from the mortification. His description of the fat driver crawling up into his seat, and of the courteous old Mexican standing in the sunlight looking like a scourged mediæval saint, and of the dignified wave of his hand as he said to him, 'After you, señor,' before climbing up beside the driver, was delightful. I laughed over it for a week."

"What became of the señora and the girls?" I asked.

"Oh, they slid in through the opposite door of the coach, and remained in seclu-

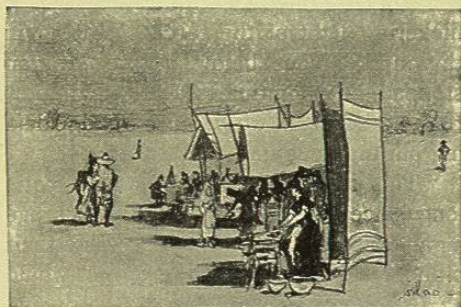
sion until the driver reached an adobe hut and demanded of a peon family enough clothes to get the party into one of the outbuildings of the hacienda. There they were rescued by their friends."

"And Marquando!" I asked, "did he appear at the wedding?"

"No. That was the hardest part of it. After the ladies were smuggled into the house, Don Palacio, by that time decorated with a straw mat and a sombrero, called Marquando aside. 'Señor,' he said with extreme gravity and deep pathos, 'after the events of the morning it will be impossible for us to recognize each other again. I entertain for you personally the most profound respect. Will you do me the great kindness of never speaking to me or any member of my family after to-day?' Marquando bowed and withdrew. A few months later he was in Leon. The governor gave a ball. As he entered the room he caught sight of Don Palacio surrounded by his wife and daughters. The old Mexican held up his hand, the palm towards Marquando like a barrier. My friend stopped,

bowed to the floor, mounted his horse, and left the city. It cut him deeply too, for he is a fine young fellow and one of the girls liked him."

We had crossed the open space and



were entering the city. Low buildings connected by long white adobe walls, against which grew prickly pears, straggled out into the dusty plateau. Crooning over earthen pots balanced on smouldering embers sat old hags, surrounded by swarthy children watching the preparation of their evening meal. Turning the sharp angle of the street, we stumbled over

a group of peons squatting on the sidewalk, their backs to the wall, muffled to their eyes in their zarapes, some asleep, others motionless, following us with their eyes. Soon the spire of *la parroquia* loomed up in the starlight, its outlines brought out into uncertain relief by the flickering light of the torches blazing in the market-place below. Here Morgan stopped, and pointing to a slit of an alley running between two buildings and widening out into a square court, said:—

“This is the entrance to an old patio long since abandoned. Some years ago a gang of cutthroats used it to hide their plunder. You can see how easy it would be for one of these devils to step behind you, put a stiletto between your shoulder-blades, and bundle you in out of sight.”

I crossed over and took the middle of the street. Morgan laughed.

“You are perfectly safe with me,” he continued, “for I am known everywhere and would be missed. You might not. Then I adopt the custom of the country and carry an extra cartridge, and they know it. But you would be safe here any

way. It is only the outskirts of these Mexican towns that are dangerous to stroll around in after dark.”

There is a law in Mexico called the *ley de fuego*—the law of fire. It is very easily understood. If a convict breaks away from the chain gang he takes his life in his hands. Instantly every carbine in the mounted guard is levelled, and a rattling fire is kept up until he either drops, riddled by balls, or escapes unhurt in the crevices of the foot-hills. Once away he is safe and cannot be rearrested for the same crime. Silao has a number of these birds of freedom, and to their credit be it said, they are eminently respectable citizens. If he is overhauled by a ball the pursuing squad detail a brace of convicts to dig a hole in the softest ground within reach, and a rude wooden cross the next day tells the whole story.

If a brigand has a misunderstanding with a citizen regarding the ownership of certain personal effects, the exclusive property of the citizen, and the brigand in the heat of the debate becomes care-

less in the use of his firearms, the same wooden cross announces the fact with an emphasis that is startling. Occurrences like these have been so frequent in the past that the country around Silao reminds one of an abandoned telegraph system, with nothing standing but the poles and cross-pieces.

Morgan imparted this last information from one of the stone seats in the alameda adjoining the church of Santiago, which we had reached and where we sat quietly smoking, surrounded by throngs of people pushing their way towards the open door of the sacred edifice. We threw away our cigarettes and followed the crowd.

It was the night of Good Friday, and the interior was ablaze with the light of thousands of wax candles suspended from the vaulted roof by fine wires, which swayed with the air from the great doors, while scattered through this sprinkling of stars glistened sheets of gold leaf strung on threads of silk. Ranged along the sides of the church upon a ledge just above the heads of the people sparkled a curious collection of cut-glass bottles, de-

canter, dishes, toilet boxes, and goblets — in fact, every conceivable variety of domestic glass. Behind these in small oil cups floated burned ends of candles and tapers. In the sacristy, upon a rude bier covered by an embroidered sheet, lay the wooden image of the dead Christ, surrounded by crowds of peons and Mexicans passing up to kiss the painted wounds and drop a few centavos for their sins and shortcomings.

As we passed out into the fresh night air, the glare of a torch fell upon an old man seated by a table selling rosaries. Morgan leaned against one of the pillars of the railing surrounding the court, watched the traffic go on for a few minutes, and then pointing to the entrance of the church through which streamed the great flood of light, said: —

“Into that open door goes all the loose money of Mexico.”

When we reached the plaza the people still thronged the streets. Venders sold dulces, fruits, candles, and the thousand and one knickknacks bought in holiday times; torches stuck in the ground on

high poles flared over the alameda; groups of natives smoking cigarettes chatted gayly near the fountain; while lovers in pairs disported themselves after the manner of their kind under the trees. One young Indian girl and her dusky caballero greatly interested me. Nothing seemed to disturb them. They cooed away in the full glare of a street lantern as unconscious and unconcerned as if a roof sheltered them. He had spread his blanket so as to protect her from the cold stone bench. It was not a very wide zarape, and yet there was room enough for two.

The poverty of the pair was unmistakable. A straw sombrero, cotton shirt, trousers, and sandals completed his outfit, a chemise, blue skirt, scarlet sash, and rebozo twisted about her throat her own. This humble raiment was clean and fresh, and the red rose tucked coquettishly among the braids of her purple-black hair was just what was wanted to make it picturesque.

Both were smoking the same cigarette and laughing between each puff, he pro-

testing that she should have two whiffs to his one, at which there would be a little kittenish spitting, ending in his having his own way and kissing her two cheeks for punishment.

With us, some love affairs end in smoke; here they seem to thrive upon it.

Morgan, however, did not seem to appreciate the love-making. He was impatient to return to the station, for it was nearly midnight.

"If you are going to supervise all the love affairs in Silao you might as well make a night of it," he laughed. So we turned from the plaza, entered a broad street, and followed along a high wall surrounding a large house, in reality the palace of Manuel Gonzalez, formerly President of the Republic. Here the crowds in the street began to thin out. By the time we reached another turn the city was deserted. Morgan struck a wax taper and consulted his watch.

"In ten minutes, *mi amigo*, the train is due from Chihuahua. I must be on hand to unlock the freight-house. We will make a short cut through here."

The moon had set, leaving to the flickering lanterns at the street corners the task of lighting us home. I stumbled along, keeping close to my friend, winding in and out of lonely crooked streets, under black archways, and around the sharp projecting angles of low adobe walls. The only sound beside our hurrying footsteps was the loud crowing of a cock miscalculating the dawn.

Suddenly Morgan pushed aside a swinging wooden door framed in an adobe wall, and I followed him through what appeared to be an abandoned convent garden. He halted on the opposite side of the quadrangle, felt along the whitewashed wall, shot back a bolt, and held open a second door. As I closed it behind me a man wrapped in a cloak stepped from a niche in the wall and leveled his carbine. Morgan sprang back and called out to me in a sharp firm voice:—

“Stand still.”

I glued myself to the spot. In fact, the only part of me that was at all alive was my imagination.

I was instantly perforated, stripped, and

lugged off to the mountains on a burro's back, where select portions of my ears were sliced off and forwarded to my friends as sight drafts on my entire worldly estate. While I was calculating the chances of my plunging through the door and escaping by the garden, this came from the muffled figure:—

“*Quien vive?*”

“*La libertad,*” replied Morgan quietly.

“*Que nacion?*”

“*Un compatriota,*” answered my companion.

The carbine was lowered slowly. Morgan advanced, mumbled a few words, called to me to follow, and struck out boldly across the plain to the station.

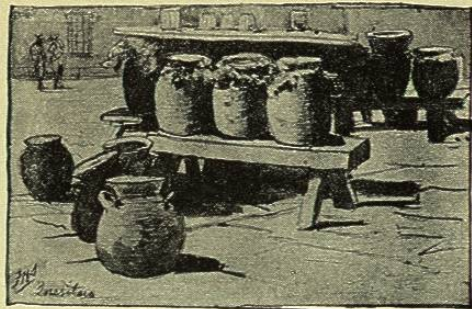
“Who was your murderous friend? a brigand?” I asked when I had recovered my breath.

“No. One of the Rurales, or civil guards. They are the salvation of the country. They challenge every man crossing their beat after ten o'clock.”

“And if you do not halt? Then what?”

“Then say a short prayer. There will not be time for a long one.”

As we reached the tracks I heard the whistle of the night express. Morgan seized a lantern and swung it above his head. The train stopped. I counted all my bones and turned in for the night.



CHAPTER III.

THE OPALS OF QUERÉTARO.

I ARRIVED with a cyclone. To be exact, the cyclone was ahead. All I saw as I stepped from the train was a whirling cloud of dust through which the roof of the station was dimly outlined, a long plank walk, and a string of cabs.

A boy emerged from the cloud and grabbed my bag.

"Will it rain?" I asked anxiously.

"No, señor. No rain, but much dust."

It was a dry storm, common in this season and section. Compared with it the simoon on the Sahara is a gentle zephyr.