

### CHAPTER VIII.

#### PALM SUNDAY IN PUEBLA DE LOS ANGELES.

SOME one hundred miles from the city of Mexico, and within twice that distance of Vera Cruz and the sea, and some seven thousand feet up into the clear, crisp air, lies the city of Puebla. The streets are broad and clean, the plazas filled with trees and rich in flowers, the markets exceptionally interesting. Above this charming city tower, like huge sentinels, the two great volcanoes Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl.

The legend of its founding is quaint and somewhat characteristic; moreover, there is no shadow of doubt as to its truth.

The good Fray Julian Garces, the first consecrated bishop of the Catholic Church in Mexico, conceived the most praiseworthy plan of founding, somewhere between the coast and the city of Mexico, a haven of refuge and safe resting-place for weary travellers. Upon one eventful night, when his mind was filled with this noble resolve, he beheld a lovely plain, bounded by the great slope of the volcanoes, watered by two rivers, and dotted by many ever-living springs, making all things fresh and green. As he gazed, his eyes beheld two angels with line and rod, measuring bounds and distances upon the ground. After seeing the vision, the bishop awoke, and that very hour set out to search for the site the angels had shown him; upon finding which he joyously exclaimed, "This is the site the Lord has chosen through his holy angels, and here shall the city be;" and even now the most charming and delightful of all the cities on the southern slope is this Puebla de los Angeles. Nothing has occurred since to shake confidence in the wisdom of the good bishop, nor impair the

value of his undertaking, and to-day the idler, the antiquary, and the artist rise up and call him blessed.

But the pious bishop did not stop here.



As early as 1536 he laid the corner-stone of the present cathedral, completed one hundred and fifty years later. This noble edifice, in its interior adornments, lofty nave, broad aisles divided by massive stone columns, inlaid floor of colored marble, altars, chapels, and choirs, as well as in its grand exterior, raised upon a terrace and surmounted by majestic towers, is by far the most stately and beautiful of all the great buildings of Mexico.

Before I reached the huge swinging doors, carved and heavily ironed, I knew it was Palm Sunday; for the streets were filled with people, each one carrying a long thin leaf of the sago palm, and the balconies with children twisting the sacred leaves over the iron railings, to mark a blessing for the house until the next festival.

I had crossed the plaza, where I had been loitering under the trees, making memoranda in my sketch-book of the groups of Indians lounging on the benches in the shade, and sketching the outlines of bunches of little donkeys dozing in the sun; and, mounting the raised terrace upon which the noble pile is built, found myself in the cool, incense-laden interior. The aisles were a moving mass of people waving palms over their heads, the vista looking like great fields of ferns in the wind. The service was still in progress, and the distant bursts of the organ resounded at intervals through the arches.

I wedged my way between the throngs of worshippers, — some kneeling, some shuffling along, keeping step with the

crowd, — past the inlaid stalls, exquisite carvings, and gilded figures of saints, until I reached the door of the sacristy. I always search out the sacristy. It contains the movable property of the church, and as I have a passion for moving it, — when the sacristan is of the same mind, — I always find it the most attractive corner of any sacred interior.

The room was superb. The walls were covered with paintings set in gilded frames; the chests of drawers were crammed with costly vestments; two exquisite tables covered with slabs of onyx stood on one side, while upon a raised shelf above them were ranged eight superb Japanese Imari jars, — for water, I presumed.

When I entered, a line of students near the door were being robed in white starched garments by the sacristan; groups of priests, in twos and threes, some in vestments, others in street robes, were chatting together on an old settle; and an aged, white-haired bishop was listening intently to a young priest dressed in a dark purple gown, — both outlined against

an open window. The whole effect reminded me of one of Vibert's pictures. I was so absorbed that I remained motionless in the middle of the room, gazing awkwardly about. The next moment the light was shut out, and I half smothered in the folds of a muslin skirt. I had been mistaken for a student chorister, and the sacristan would have slipped the garment over my head but for my breathless protest. Had I known the service, I think I should have risked the consequences.

The sacristy opened into the chapter-room. The wanderer who thinks he must go to Italy to find grand interiors should stand at the threshold of this room and look in; or, still better, rest his weary bones for half an hour within the perfectly proportioned, vaulted, and domed apartment, hung with Flemish tapestry and covered with paintings, and examine it at his leisure. He can select any one of the superb old Spanish chairs presented by Charles V., thirty-two of which line the walls; then, being rested, he can step into the middle of the room, and feast his eyes upon a single slab of Mexican onyx cover-

ing a table large enough for a grand council of bishops. I confess I stood for an instant amazed, wondering whether I was really in Mexico, across its thousand miles of dust, or had wandered into some old palace or church in Verona or Padua.

At the far end of this chapter-room sat a grave-looking priest, absorbed in his breviary. I approached him, hat in hand.

"Holy father, I am a stranger and a painter. I know the service is in progress, and that I should not now intrude; but this room is so beautiful, and my stay in Puebla so short, that I must crave your permission to enter."

He laid down his book. "*Mi amigo*, you are welcome. Wander about where you will, here and by the altar. You will disturb no one. You painters always revere the church, for within its walls your greatest works are held sacred."

I thought that very neat for a priest just awakened from a reverie, and, thanking him, examined greedily the superb old carved chair he had just vacated. I did revere the church, and told him so, but all the same I coveted the chair, and but

for his compliment and devout air would have dared to open negotiations for its possession. I reasoned, iconoclast that I am, that it would hardly be missed among its fellows, and that perhaps one of those frightful renovations, constantly taking place in Mexican churches, might overtake this beautiful room, when new mahogany horrors might replace these exquisite relics of the sixteenth century, and the whole set be claimed by the second-hand man or the wood pile.

Then I strolled out into the church with that vacant air which always marks one in a building new to him, — especially when it overwhelms him, — gazing up at the nave, reading the inscriptions under the pictures, and idling about the aisles. Soon I came to a confessional box. There I sat down behind a protecting column.

There is a fascination about the confessional which I can never escape. Here sits the old news-gatherer and safe-deposit vault of everybody's valuable secrets, peaceful and calm within the seclusion of his grated cabinet; and here come a troop of people, telling him all the good

and bad things of their lives, and leaving with him for safe-keeping their most precious property, — their misdeeds. What a collection of broken bonds, dishonored names, and debts of ingratitude must he be custodian of!

The good father before me was a kindly faced, plethoric old man; a little deaf, I should judge, from the fanning motion of his left hand, forming a sounding-board for his ear. About him were a group of penitents, patiently awaiting their turns. When I halted and sought the shelter of the pillar, the closely veiled and muffled figure of a richly dressed señora was bowed before him. She remained a few moments, and then slipped away, and another figure took her place at the grating.

I raised my eyes wistfully, wondering whether I could read the old fellow's face, which was in strong light, sufficiently well to get some sort of an inkling of her confidences; but no cloud of sorrow, or ruffle of anger, or gleam of curiosity passed over it. It was as expressionless as a harvest moon, and placid as a mountain lake. At times I even fancied he was

asleep; then his little eyes would open slowly and peep out keenly, and I knew he had only been assorting and digesting his several informations.

One after another they dropped away silently, — the Indian in his zarape, the old man in sandals, and the sad-faced woman with a black rebozo twisted about her throat. Each had prostrated himself, and poured through that six inches of space the woes that weighed heavy on his soul. The good father listened to them all. His patience and equanimity seemed marvellous.

I became so engrossed that I forgot I was an eavesdropper, and could make no sort of excuse for my vulgar curiosity which would satisfy any one upon whose privacy I intruded; and, coming to this conclusion, was about to shoulder my trap and move off, when I caught sight of a short, thick-set young Mexican, muffled to his chin in a zarape. He was leaning against the opposite column, watching earnestly the same confessional box, his black, bead-like eyes riveted upon the priest. In his hand he held a small red

cap, with which he partially concealed his face. It was not prepossessing, the forehead being low and receding, and the mouth firm and cruel.

As each penitent turned away, the man edged nearer to the priest, with a movement that attracted me. It was like that of an animal slowly yielding to the power of a snake. He was now so close that I could see great drops of sweat running down his temples; his breath came thick and short; his whole form, sturdy fellow as he was, trembled and shook. The cap was now clenched in his fist and pressed to his breast, — the eyes still fastened on the priest, and the feet moving a few inches at a time. When the last penitent had laid her face against the grating, he fell upon his knees behind her, and buried his face in his hands. When she was gone, he threw himself forward in her place, and clutched the grating with a moan that startled me.

I arose from my seat, edged around the pillar, and got the light more clearly on the priest's face. It was as calm and serene as a wooden saint's.

For a few moments the Mexican lay in a heap at the grating; then he raised his head, and looked cautiously about him. I shrank into the shadow. The face was ghastly pale, the lips trembled, the eyes started from his head. The priest leaned forward wearily, his ear to the iron lattice. The man's lips began to move; the confession had begun. Both figures remained motionless, the man whispering eagerly, and the priest listening patiently. Suddenly the good father started forward, bent down, and scanned the man's face searchingly through the grating. In another instant he uttered a half-smothered cry of horror, covered his face with the sleeve of his robe, and fell back on his seat.

The man edged around on his knees from the side grating to the front of the confessional, and bowed his head to the lower step of the box. For several minutes neither moved. I flattened myself against the column, and became a part of the architecture. Then the priest, with blanched face, leaned forward over the half door, and laid his hand on the peni-

tent. The man raised his head, clutched the top of the half door, bent forward, and glued his lips to the priest's ear. I reached down noiselessly for my sketch-trap, peeled myself from the column as one would a wet handbill, and, keeping the pillar between me and the confessional, made a straight line for the sacristy.

Before I reached the door the priest overtook me, crossed the room, and disappeared through a smaller door in the opposite wall. I turned to avoid him, and caught sight of the red cap of the Mexican pressing his way hurriedly to the street. Waiting until he was lost in the throng, I drew a long breath, and dropped upon a bench.

The faces of both man and priest haunted me. I had evidently been the unsuspected witness of one of those strange confidences existing in Catholic countries between the criminal and the Church. I had also been in extreme personal danger. A crime so terrible that the bare recital of it shocked to demoralization so unimpressionable a priest as the good father

was safe in his ear alone. Had there been a faint suspicion in the man's mind that I had overheard any part of his story, my position would have been dangerous.

But what could have been the crime? I reflected that even an inquiry looking towards its solution would be equally hazardous, and so tried to banish the incident from my mind.

A jar upon the other end of the bench awoke me from my reverie. A pale, neatly dressed, sad-looking young fellow had just sat down. He apologized for disturbing me, and the courtesy led to his moving up to my end.

"English?"

"No, from New York."

"What do you sell?"

"Nothing. I paint. This trap contains my canvas and colors. What do you do?" I asked.

"I am a clerk in the Department of Justice. The office is closed to-day, and I have come into the church out of the heat, because it is cool."

I sounded him carefully, was convinced

of his honesty, and related the incident of the confessional. He was not surprised. On the contrary, he recounted to me many similar instances in his own experience, explaining that it is quite natural for a man haunted by a crime to seek the quiet of a church, and that often the relief afforded by the confessional wrings from him his secret. No doubt my case was one of these.

"And is the murderer safe?"

"From the priest, yes. The police agents, however, always watch the churches."

While we were speaking an officer passed, bowed to my companion, retraced his steps, and said, "There has been an important arrest. You may perhaps be wanted."

I touched the speaker's arm. "Pardon me. Was it made near the cathedral?"

"Yes; outside the great door."

"What was the color of his cap?"

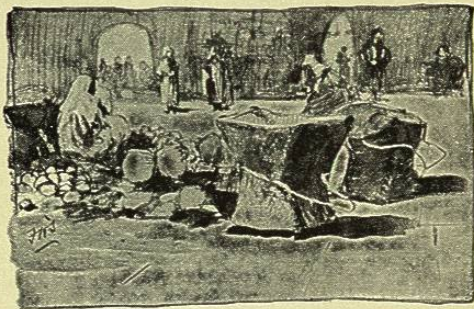
He turned sharply, looked at me searchingly, and said, lowering his voice, —

"Red."

A few days later I wandered into the market-place, in search of a subject. My difficulty was simply one of selection. I could have opened my easel at random and made half a dozen sketches without leaving my stool; but where there is so much wealth of material one is apt to be over-critical, and, being anxious to pick out the best, often loses the *esprit* of the first impression, and so goes away without a line. It was not the fault of the day or the market. The sun was brilliant beyond belief, the sky superb; the open square of the older section was filled with tumble-down bungalow-like sheds, hung with screens of patched matting; the sidewalks were fringed with giant thatched umbrellas, picturesque in the extreme; the costumes were rich and varied: all this and more, and yet I was not satisfied. Outside the slanting roofs, heaped up on the pavement, lay piles of green vegetables, pottery, and fruit, glistening in the dazzling light. Inside the booths hung festoons of bright stuffs, rebozos and *pañuelos*, gray and cool by contrast. Thronging crowds of natives streamed in



and out the sheds, blocked up narrow passageways, grouped in the open, and disappeared into the black shadows of an inviting archway, beyond which an even crisper sunlight glowed in dabs, spots, and splashes of luxuriant color.



There was everything, in fact, to intoxicate a man in search of the picturesque, and yet I idled along without opening my sketch-book, and for more than an hour lugged my trap about: deciding on a group under the edge of the archway, with a glimpse of blue in the sky and the towers of the church beyond; abandoning that instantly for a long stretch of street lead-

ing out of a square dotted with donkeys waiting to be unloaded; and concluding, finally, to paint some high-wheeled carts, only to relinquish them all for something else.

I continued, I say, to waste thus foolishly my precious time, until, dazed and worn out, I turned on my heel, hailed a cab, and drove to the old Paseo. There I entered the little *plazuela*, embowered in trees, sat down opposite the delightful old church of San Francisco, and was at work in five minutes. When one is dazzled by a sunset, let him shut his eyes. After the blaze of a Mexican market, try the quiet grays of a seventeenth-century church, seen through soft foliage and across cool, shady walks.

This church of San Francisco is another of the delightful old churches of Puebla. I regret that the fiend with the bucket and the flat brush has practically destroyed almost the whole interior except the choir, which is still exquisite with its finely carved wooden stalls and rich organ,—but I rejoice that the outside, with its quaint altar fronting on the *plazuela* fa-

gade of dark brick ornamented with panels of Spanish tiles, stone carvings, statues, and lofty towers, is still untouched, and hence beautiful.

Adjoining the church is a military hospital and barracks, formerly an old convent. I was so wholly wrapped up in my work that my water-cup needed refilling before I looked up and about me. To my surprise, I was nearly surrounded by a squad of soldiers and half a dozen officers. One fine-looking old fellow, with gray moustache and pointed beard, stood so close that my elbow struck his knee when I arose.

The first thought that ran through my head was my experience of Sunday, and my unpardonable imprudence in imparting my discoveries of the confessional to the sad-faced young man on the bench. Tracked, of course, I concluded, — arrested in the streets, and held as a witness on bread and pulque for a week. No passport, and an alibi out of the question! A second glance reassured me. The possessor of the pointed beard only smiled cordially, apologized, and seated

himself on the bench at my right. His intentions were the most peaceful. It was the growing picture that absorbed him and his fellow-officers and men. They had merely deployed noiselessly in my rear, to find out what the deuce the stranger was doing under that white umbrella. Only this, and nothing more.

I was not even permitted to fill my water-bottle. A sign from my friend, and a soldier, with his arm in a sling, ran to the fountain, returned in a flash, and passed the bottle back to me with so reverential an air that but for the deep earnestness of his manner I should have laughed aloud. He seemed to regard the water-bottle as the home of the witch that worked the spell.

After that the circle was narrowed, and my open cigarette-case added a touch of good fellowship, everybody becoming quite cozy and sociable. The officer was in command of the barracks. His brother officers — one after another was introduced with much form and manner — were on duty at the hospital except one, who was in command of the department of

police of the city. A slight chill ran down my spine, but I returned the commandant's bow with a smile that established at once the absolute purity of my life.

For two hours, in the cool of the morning, under the trees of the little *plazuela*, this charming episode continued; I painting, the others around me deeply interested; all smoking, and chatting in the friendliest possible way. At the sound of a bugle the men dropped away, and soon after all the officers bowed and disappeared, except my friend with the pointed beard and the commandant of the police. These two moved their bench nearer, and sat down, determined to watch the sketch to the end.

The conversation drifted into different channels. The system of policing the streets at night was explained to me, the manner of arrest, the absolute authority given to the *jefe politico* in the rural districts, — an execution first, and an investigation afterwards, — the necessity for such prompt action in a country abounding in bandits, the success of the government in suppressing the evil, etc.

“And are the crimes confined wholly to the country districts?” I asked. “Are your cities safe?”

“Generally, yes. Occasionally there is a murder among the lower classes of the people. It is not always for booty; revenge for some real or fancied injury often prompts it.”

“Has there been any particularly brutal crime committed here lately?” I asked carelessly, skirting the edge of my precipice.

“Not exactly here. There was one at Atlixco, a small town a few miles west of here, but the man escaped.”

“Have you captured him?”

“Not yet. There was a man arrested here a few days ago, who is now awaiting examination. It may be that we have the right one. We shall know to-morrow.”

I kept at work, dabbing away at the mass of foliage, and putting in pats of shadow tones.

“Was it the man arrested near the cathedral on Palm Sunday?”

“There was a man arrested on Palm

Sunday," he replied slowly, "How did you know?"

I looked up, and found his eyes riveted on me in a peculiar, penetrating way.

"I heard it spoken of in the church," I replied, catching my breath. My foot went over the precipice. I could see into the pit below.

"If the American heard of it," said he in a low voice, turning to my friend, "it was badly done."

I filled a fresh brush with color, leaned over my canvas, and before I looked up a second time had regained my feet and crawled back to a safe spot. — I could hear the stones go rumbling down into the abyss beneath me. Then I concentrated myself upon the details of the façade, and the officer began explaining the early history of the founding of the church, and the many vicissitudes it had experienced in the great battles which had raged around its towers. By the time he had finished the cold look went out of his eyes.

The sketch was completed, the trap bundled up, three hats were raised, and we separated.

I thought of the horror-stricken face of the priest and the crouching figure of the Mexican; then I thought of that penetrating, steel-like glance of the commandant.

So far as I know the priest alone shares the secret.