

CHAPTER IX.

A DAY IN TOLUCA.

HITHERTO my travels, with the exception of a divergence to Puebla, have been in a straight line south, beginning at the frontier town of El Paso, stopping at Zacatécas, Aguas Calientes, Silao, Guanajuato, and Querétaro, — all important cities on the line of the Mexican Central Railroad, — and ending at the city of Mexico, some twelve hundred miles nearer the equator.

It is true that I have made a flying trip over the Mexican Railway, passing under the shadow of snow-capped Orizaba, have

looked down into the deep gorges of the *Infiernillo* reeking with the hot humid air of the tropics, and have spent one night in the fever-haunted city of Vera Cruz; but my experiences were confined to such as could be enjoyed from the rear platform of a car, to a six by nine room in a stuffy hotel, and to a glimpse at night of the sea, impelled by a norther, rolling in from the Gulf and sousing the quay incumbered with surf boats. Had I been a bird belated in the autumn, I could have seen more.

This bright April morning I have shaken the dust of the great city from my feet, and have bent my steps westward towards the Pacific. In common parlance, I have bought a first-class ticket for as far as the national railroad will take me, and shall come bump up against the present terminus at Pátzcuaro.

On my way west I shall stop at Toluca, an important city some fifty miles down the road, tarry a while at Morelia, the most delightful of all the cities of western Mexico, and come to a halt at Pátzcuaro. In all some three hundred miles from where I sit in the station and look out my car

window. I am particular about these distances.

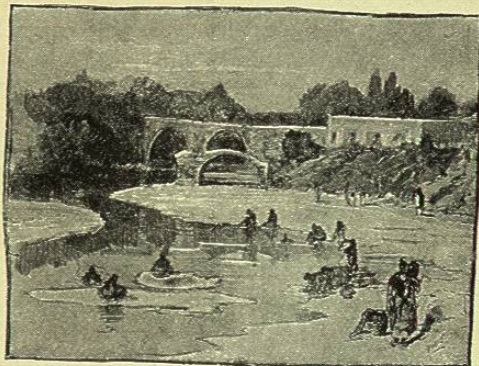
At Pátzcuaro I shall find a lake bearing the same name. Up this lake, nearly to the end, an Indian adobe village, at the end of the village a tumbling-down church and convent, within this convent a cloister, leading out of the cloister a narrow passage ending in a low-ceiled room with its one window protected by an iron grating. Through this fretwork of rusty iron the light streams in, falling, I am told, upon one of the priceless treasures of the world—an Entombment by Titian.

This, if you please, is why my course points due west.

The scenery along the line of the road from the City of Mexico to where the divide is crossed at *la Cima*—some ten thousand feet above the level of the sea, and thence down into the Toluca valley—was so inexpressibly grand that I was half the time in imminent danger of decorating a telegraph pole with my head, in my eagerness to enjoy it.

Great masonry dams hold back lakes

of silver shimmering in the sunlight; deep gorges lie bottomless in purple shadows; wide stretches of table-land end in volcanoes ragged, dead, and creviced with



snow; and sharp craggy peaks, tumbling waterfalls, and dense semi-tropical jungles start up and out and from under me at every curve.

On reaching the valley of Toluca, the road as it nears the red-tiled roofs of the city follows the windings of the river Lerma, its banks fringed with natives bathing. On reaching the city itself the clean,

well-dressed throng at the depot explains at a glance the value of this stream apart from its irrigating properties.

And the city is clean, with a certain well-planned, well-built, and orderly air about it, and quite a modern air too. Remembering a fine gray dust which seems to be a part of the very air one breathes, and the great stretches of gardens filled with trees, and the long drought continuing for months, I should say that the prevailing color of Toluca's vegetation is a light mullein-stalk green. Then the houses are a dusty pink, the roofs a dusty red, and the streets and sidewalks a dusty yellow, and the sky always and ever, from morn till night, a dusty blue. It is the kind of a place Cazin, the great French impressionist, would revel in. So subtle and exquisite are the grays and their harmonies that one false note from your palette sets your teeth on edge.

But Toluca is not by any means a modern city, despite its apparent newness, its air of prosperity, and its generally brushed-up appearance. It is one of the oldest of the Spanish settlements. No less a per-

sonage than the great Cortez himself received its site, and a comfortable slice of the surrounding country thrown in, as a present, from his king. In fact it is but a few years, not twenty, since the government pulled down the very house once occupied by the conqueror's son, Don Martin Cortez, and built upon its site the present imposing state buildings fronting the plaza *major*.

This pulling down and rebuilding process is quite fashionable in Toluca, and has extended even to its churches. The primitive church of San Francisco was replaced by a larger structure of stone in 1585, and this in turn by an important building erected in the seventeenth century; and yet these restless people, as if cramped for room, levelled this edifice to the ground in 1874 and started upon its ruins what purposes to be a magnificent temple, judging from the acres it covers. In fourteen years it has grown twelve feet high. Some time during the latter part of the next century they will be slating the roof.

Then there are delightful markets, and a fine bull-ring, and in the suburbs a pretty

alameda full of matted vines and overgrown walks, besides two gorgeous theatres. Altogether Toluca is quite worth dusting off to see, even if it does not look as old as the Pyramids or as dilapidated as an Arab town.

In all this newness there is one spot which refreshes you like a breeze from afar. It is the little chapel of Nuestra Señora del Carmen, laden with the quaintness, the charm, and the dust of the sixteenth century. It has apparently never yet occurred to any Tolucian to retouch it, and my only fear in calling attention to it now is, that during the next annual spring-cleaning the man with the bucket will smother its charm in whitewash.

It was high noon when I sallied out from my lodgings to look for this forgotten relic of the past. I had spent the morning with that ubiquitous scapegrace Moon, whom I had met in Zacatécas some weeks before and who had run up to Toluca on some business connected with the road. He nearly shook my arm off when he ran against me in the market, inquired after the chair, vowed I should not wet a

brush until I broke bread with him, and would have carried me off bodily to breakfast had I not convinced him that no man could eat two meals half an hour apart. He was delighted that I could find nothing, as he expressed it, "rickety" enough to paint in Toluca, and then relenting led me up to a crack in a crooked street, pointed ahead to the chapel, and deserted me with the remark:—

"Try that. It is as musty as a cheese, and about a million years old."

I passed through a gate, entered the sacred building, and wandered out into a patio or sort of cloister. Instantly the world and its hum was gone. It was a small cloister, square, paved with marble flags, and open to the blue sky above. Beneath the arches, against the wall, hung a few paintings, old and weather-stained. Opposite from where I stood was an open door. I crossed the quadrangle and entered a cozily furnished apartment. The ceiling was low and heavily beamed, the floor laid in brick tiles, and the walls faced with shelves loaded with books bound in vellum with titles labelled in ink.

Over the door was an unframed picture, evidently a Murillo, and against the opposite wall hung several large copies of Ribera. In one corner under a grated window rested an iron bedstead,—but recently occupied,—and near it an armchair with faded velvet cushions. A low table covered with books and manuscripts, together with a skull, candle, and rosary, a copper basin and pitcher, and a few chairs completed the interior comforts. Over the bed, within arm's reach, hung a low shelf upon which stood a small glass cup holding a withered rose. The cup was dry and the flower faded and dust covered.

A second and smaller room opened out to the left. I pushed aside the curtains and looked in. It was unoccupied like the first. As I turned hurriedly to leave the apartments my eye fell upon a copy of Medina's works bound in vellum, yellow and crinkled, the backs tied by a leathern string. I leaned forward to note the date. Suddenly the light was shut out, and from the obstructed doorway came a voice quick and sharp.

"What does the stranger want with the

padre's books?" I looked up and saw a man holding a bunch of keys. The situation was unpleasant. Without changing my position, I lifted the book from the shelf and carefully read the title-page.

"Will he be gone long?" I answered, slowly replacing the volume.

"You are waiting, then, for Fray Geronimo? Many pardons, señor, I am the sacristan. I will find the padre and bring him to you."

I sank into the armchair. Retreat now was impossible. This will do for the sacristan I thought, but how about the priest?

In a moment more I caught the sound of quickening footsteps crossing the patio. By the side of the sacristan stood a bare-headed young priest, dressed in a white robe which reached to his feet. He had deep-set eyes, which were intensely dark, and a skin of ivory whiteness. With a kindly smile upon his handsome intellectual face, he came forward and said:—

"Do you want me?"

I laid my course in an instant.

"Yes, holy father," I replied, rising, "to crave your forgiveness. I am an Ameri-

can and a painter; see, here is my sketch-book. I entered your open door, believing it would lead me to the street. The Murillo, the Riberas, the wonderful collection of old books, more precious than any I have ever seen in all Mexico, overcame me. I love these things, and could not resist the temptation of tarrying long enough to feast my eyes."

"*Mi amigo*, do not be disturbed. It is all right. You can go, Pedro," — this to the sacristan. "I love them too. Let us look them over together."

For more than an hour we examined the contents of the curious library. Almost without an exception each book was a rare volume. There were rows of ecclesiastical works in Latin with red lettered title-pages printed in Antwerp. Two editions of Don Quixote with copper plates, published in Madrid in 1760, besides a varied collection of the early Mexican writers including Alarcon, the dramatist, and Gongora, the poet-philosopher.

Then in the same gracious manner he mounted a chair and took from the wall the unframed Murillo, "A Flight into

Egypt," and placed it in the light, saying that it had formerly belonged to an ancestor and not to the church, and that believing it to be the genuine work of the great master, he had brought it with him when he came to Toluca, the face of the Madonna being especially dear to him. Next he unlocked a closet and brought me an ivory crucifix of exquisite workmanship, the modelling of the feet and hands recalling the best work of the Italian school. He did not return this to the closet, but placed it upon the little shelf over his bed close to the dry cup which held the withered rose. In the act the flower slipped from the glass. Noticing how carefully he moved the cup aside, and how tenderly he replaced the shrivelled bud, I said laughingly:—

"You not only love old books, but old flowers as well."

He looked at me thoughtfully, and replied gravely:—

"Some flowers are never old."

In the glare of the sunlight of the street I met Moon. He had been searching for me for an hour.

"Did you find that hole in the wall?" he called out. "Come over here where the wind can blow through you. You must feel like a grave-digger. Where is your sketch?"

I had no sketch and told him so. The interior was in truth delightfully picturesque, but the young priest was so charming that I had not even opened my trap.

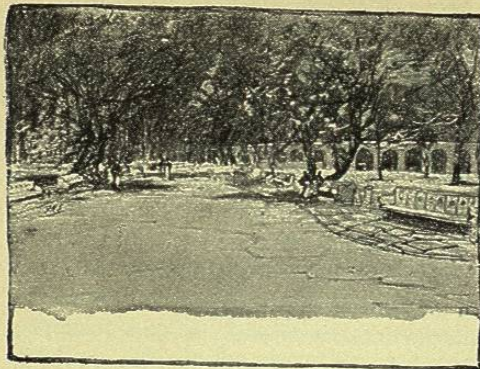
"What sort of a looking priest?"

I described him as closely as I could.

"It sounds like Geronimo. Yes — same priest."

"Well — ?"

"Oh! the old story and a sad one. Gray dawn — muffled figures — obliging duenna — diligence — governor on horseback — girl locked up in a hacienda — student forced into the church. Queer things happen in Mexico, my boy, and *cruel* ones too."



CHAPTER X.

TO MORELIA WITH MOON.

MOON insists on going to Morelia with me. He has a number of reasons for this sudden resolve: that the señoritas are especially charming and it is dangerous for me to go alone; that he knows the sacristan *major* of the cathedral and can buy for me for a song the entire movable property of the church; that there is a lovely alameda overgrown with wild roses, and that it is so tangled up and crooked I will lose the best part of it if he does