

CHAPTER XXXII.

A WILD COUNTRY—ASCENT OF A MOUNTAIN—RIDE IN A SILLA—A PRECARIOUS SITUATION—THE DESCENT—RANCHO OF NOPA—ATTACKS OF MOSQUITOES—APPROACH TO PALENQUE—PASTURE GROUNDS—VILLAGE OF PALENQUE—A CRUSTY OFFICIAL—A COURTEOUS RECEPTION—SCARCITY OF PROVISIONS—SUNDAY—CHOLERA—THE CONVERSION, APOSTASY, AND RECOVERY OF THE INDIANS—RIVER CHACAMAL—THE CARIBS—RUINS OF PALENQUE.

EARLY the next morning the sugar party started, and at five minutes before seven we followed, with silla and men, altogether our party swelled to twenty Indians.

The country through which we were now travelling was as wild as before the Spanish conquest, and without a habitation until we reached Palenque. The road was through a forest so overgrown with brush and underwood as to be impenetrable, and the branches were trimmed barely high enough to admit a man's travelling under them on foot, so that on the backs of our mules we were constantly obliged to bend our bodies, and even to dismount. In some places, for a great distance around, the woods seemed killed by the heat, the foliage withered, the leaves dry and crisp, as if burned by the sun; and a tornado had swept the country, of which no mention was made in the San Pedro papers.

We met three Indians carrying clubs in their hands, naked except a small piece of cotton cloth around the loins and passing between the legs, one of them, young, tall, and of admirable symmetry of form, looking the freeborn gentleman of the woods. Shortly afterwards we passed a stream, where naked Indians were setting rude nets for fish, wild and primitive as in the first ages of savage life.

At twenty minutes past ten we commenced ascending the mountain. It was very hot, and I can give no idea of the toil of ascending these mountains. Our mules could barely clamber up with their saddles only. We disencumbered ourselves of swords, spurs, and all useless trappings; in fact, came down to shirt and pantaloons, and as near the condition of the Indians as we could. First went four Indians, each with a rough oxhide box, secured by an iron chain and large padlock, on his back; then Juan, with only a hat and pair of thin cotton drawers, driving two spare mules, and carrying a double-barrelled gun over his naked shoulders; then ourselves, each one driving before him

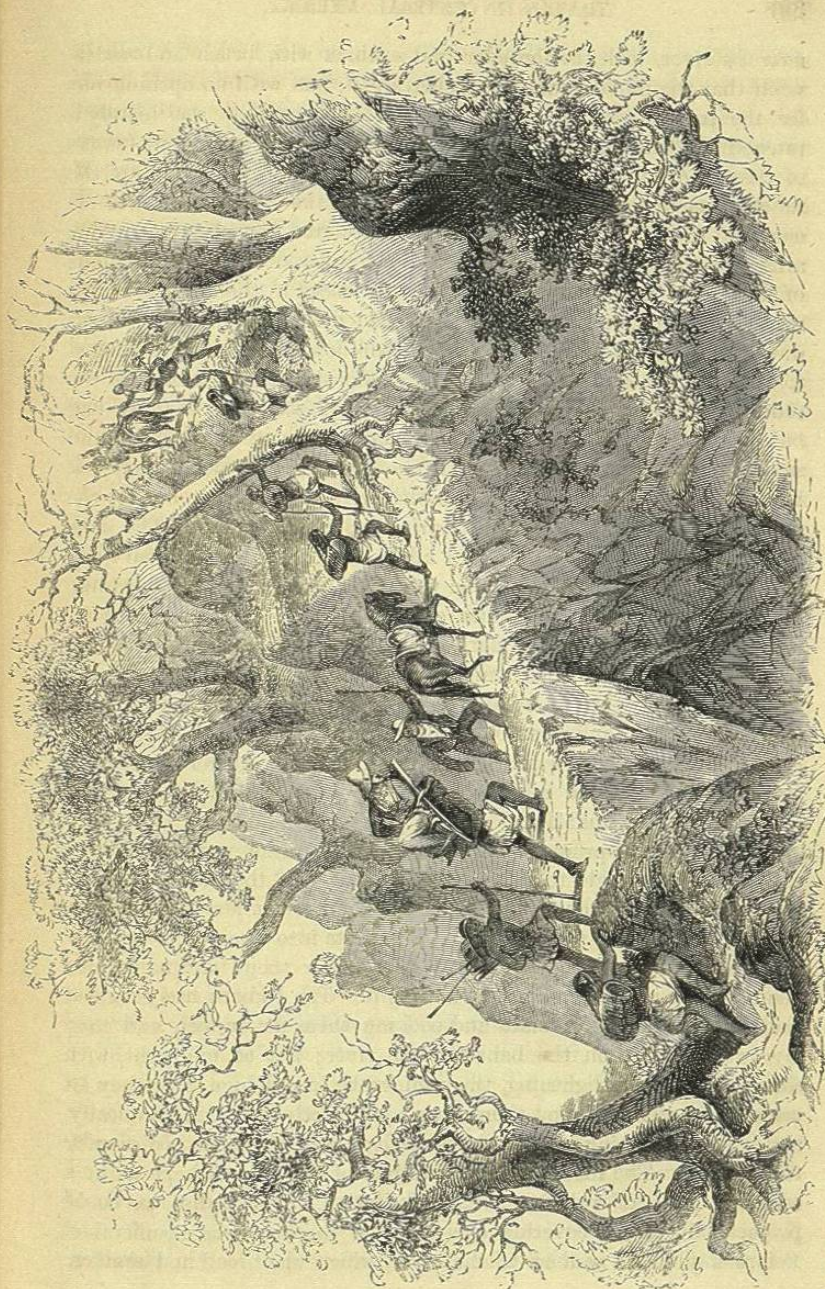
or leading his own mule; then an Indian carrying the silla, with relief carriers, and several boys bearing small bags of provisions, the Indians of the silla being much surprised at our not using them according to contract and the price paid. Though toiling excessively, we felt a sense of degradation at being carried on a man's shoulders. At that time I was in the worst condition of the three, and the night before had gone to bed at San Pedro without supper, which for any of us was sure evidence of being in a bad way.

We had brought the silla with us merely as a measure of precaution, without much expectation of being obliged to use it: but at a steep pitch, which made my head almost burst to think of climbing, I resorted to it for the first time. It was a large, clumsy arm-chair, put together with wooden pins and bark strings. The Indian who was to carry me, like all the others, was small, not more than five feet six, very thin, but symmetrically formed. A bark strap was tied to the arms of the chair, and, sitting down, he placed his back against the back of the chair, adjusted the length of the strings, and smoothed the bark across his forehead with a little cushion to relieve the pressure. An Indian on each side lifted it up, and the carrier rose on his feet, stood still a moment, threw me up once or twice to adjust me on his shoulders, and set off with one man on each side. It was a great relief, but I could feel every movement, even to the heaving of his chest. The ascent was one of the steepest on the whole road. In a few minutes he stopped and sent forth a sound, usual with Indian carriers, between a whistle and a blast, always painful to my ears, but which I never felt so disagreeably before. My face was turned backward; I could not see where he was going, but observed that the Indian on the left fell back. Not to increase the labour of carrying me, I sat as still as possible; but in a few minutes, looking over my shoulder, saw that we were approaching the edge of a precipice more than a 1,000 feet deep. Here I became very anxious to dismount; but I could not speak intelligibly, and the Indians could or would not understand my signs. My carrier moved along carefully, with his left foot first, feeling that the stone on which he put it down was steady and secure before he brought up the other, and by degrees, after a particularly careful movement, brought both feet up within half a step of the edge of the precipice, stopped, and gave a fearful whistle and blast. I rose and fell with every breath, felt his body trembling under me, and his knees seemed giving way. The precipice was awful, and the slightest irregular movement on my part might bring us both down together. I would have given him a release in full for the rest of the journey to be off his back; but he started again, and with the same care ascended

several steps, so close to the edge that even on the back of a mule it would have been very uncomfortable. My fear lest he should break down or stumble was excessive. To my extreme relief, the path turned away; but I had hardly congratulated myself upon my escape before he descended a few steps. This was much worse than ascending; if he fell, nothing could keep me from going over his head; but I remained till he put me down of his own accord. The poor fellow was running down with perspiration, and trembled in every limb. Another stood ready to take me up, but I had had enough. Pawling tried it, but only for a short time. It was bad enough to see an Indian toiling with a dead weight on his back; but to feel him trembling under one's own body, hear his hard breathing, see the sweat rolling down him, and feel the insecurity of the position, made this a mode of travelling which nothing but constitutional laziness and insensibility could endure. Walking, or rather climbing, stopping very often to rest, and riding when it was at all practicable, we reached a thatched shed, where we wished to stop for the night, but there was no water.

We could not understand how far it was to Nopa, our intended stopping-place, which we supposed to be on the top of the mountain. To every question the Indians answered *una legua*, one league. Thinking it could not be much higher, we continued. For an hour more we had a very steep ascent, and then commenced a terrible descent. At this time the sun had disappeared; dark clouds overhung the woods, and thunder rolled heavily on the top of the mountain. As we descended a heavy wind swept through the forest; the air was filled with dry leaves; branches were snapped and broken, trees bent, and there was every appearance of a violent tornado. To hurry down on foot was out of the question. We were so tired that it was impossible; and, afraid of being caught on the mountain by a hurricane and deluge of rain, we spurred down as fast as we could go. It was a continued descent, without any relief, stony, and very steep. Very often the mules stopped, afraid to go on; and in one place the two spare mules bolted into the thick woods rather than proceed. Fortunately for the reader, this is our last mountain, and I can end honestly with a climax: it was the worst mountain I ever encountered in that or any other country, and, under our apprehension of the storm, I will venture to say that no travellers ever descended it in less time. At a quarter before five we reached the plain. The mountain was hidden by clouds, and the storm was now raging above us. We crossed a river, and continuing along it through a thick forest, reached the rancho of Nopa.

It was situated in a circular clearing, about 100 feet in diameter,



44.—RIDING IN A SILLA.

F. Catherwood.

near the river, with the forest around so thick with brush and under-wood that the mules could not penetrate it, and with no opening but for the passage of the road through it. The rancho was merely a pitched roof covered with palm-leaves, and supported by four trunks of trees. All around were heaps of snail-shells, and the ground of the rancho was several inches deep with ashes, the remains of fires for cooking them. We had hardly congratulated ourselves upon our arrival at such a beautiful spot, before we suffered such an onslaught of mosquitos as we had not before experienced in the country. We made a fire, and, with appetites sharpened by a hard day's work, sat down on the grass to dispose of a San Pedro fowl; but we were obliged to get up, and, while one hand was occupied with eatables, use the other to brush off the venomous insects. We soon saw that we had had prospects for the night, lighted fires all around the rancho, and smoked inordinately. We were in no hurry to lie down, and sat till a late hour, consoling ourselves with the reflection that, but for the mosquitos, our satisfaction would be beyond all bounds. The dark border of the clearing was lighted up by fireflies of extraordinary size and brilliancy, darting among the trees, not flashing and disappearing, but carrying a steady light; and, except that their course was serpentine, seeming like shooting stars. In different places there were two that remained stationary, emitting a pale but beautiful light, and seemed like rival belles holding levees. The fiery orbs darted from one to the other; and when one, more daring than the rest, approached too near, the coquette withdrew her light, and the flutterer went off. One, however, carried all before her, and at one time we counted seven hovering around her.

At length we prepared for sleep. Hammocks would leave us exposed on every side to the merciless attacks of the mosquitos, and we spread our mats on the ground. We did not undress. Pawling, with a great deal of trouble, rigged his sheets into a mosquito-net, but it was so hot that he could not breathe under them, and he roamed about or was in the river nearly all night. The Indians had occupied themselves in catching snails and cooking them for supper, and then lay down to sleep on the banks of the river; but at midnight, with sharp thunder and lightning, the rain broke in a deluge, and they all came under the shed, and there they lay perfectly naked, mechanically, and without seeming to disturb themselves, slapping their bodies with their hands. The incessant hum and bite of the insects kept us in a constant state of wakefulness and irritation. Our bodies we could protect, but with a covering over the face the heat was insufferable. Before daylight I walked to the river, which was broad and shallow,

and stretched myself out on the gravelly bottom, where the water was barely deep enough to run over my body. It was the first comfortable moment I had had. My heated body became cooled, and I lay till daylight. When I rose to dress they came upon me with appetites whetted by a spirit of vengeance. Our day's work had been tremendously hard, but the night's was worse. The morning air, however, was refreshing, and as day dawned our tormentors disappeared. Mr. Catherwood had suffered least, but in his restlessness he had lost from his finger a precious emerald ring, which he had worn for many years, and prized for associations. We remained some time looking for it, and at length mounted and made our last start for Palenque. The road was level, but the woods were still as thick as on the mountain. At a quarter before eleven we reached a path which led to the ruins, or somewhere else. We had abandoned the intention of going directly to the ruins, for, besides that we were in a shattered condition, we could not communicate at all with our Indians, and probably they did not know where the ruins were. At length we came out upon an open plain, and looked back at the range we had crossed, running off to Peten and the country of unbaptized Indians.

As we advanced we came into a region of fine pasture grounds, and saw herds of cattle. The grass showed the effect of early rains, and the picturesque appearance of the country reminded me of many a scene at home; but there was a tree of singular beauty that was a stranger, having a high, naked trunk and spreading top, with leaves of vivid green, covered with yellow flowers. Continuing carelessly, and stopping from time to time to enjoy the smiling view around, and realize our escape from the dark mountains behind, we rose upon a slight table-land and saw the village before us, consisting of one grass-grown street, unbroken even by a mule-path, with a few straggling white houses on each side, on a slight elevation at the further end a thatched church, with a rude cross and belfry before it. A boy could roll on the grass from the church door out of the village. In fact, it was the most dead-and-alive place I ever saw; but, coming from villages thronged with wild Indians, its air of repose was most grateful to us. In the suburbs were scattered Indian huts; and as we rode into the street, eight or ten white people, men and women, came out, more than we had seen since we left Comitán, and the houses had a comfortable and respectable appearance. In one of them lived the alcalde, a white man, about sixty, dressed in white cotton drawers, and shirt outside, respectable in his appearance, with a stoop in his shoulders, but the expression of his face was very doubtful. With what I intended as a most captivating manner, I offered him my passport; but we had dis-

turbed him at his siesta; he had risen wrong side first; and, looking me steadily in the face, he asked me what he had to do with my passport. This I could not answer; and he went on to say that he had nothing to do with it, and did not want to have; we must go to the Prefeto. Then he turned round two or three times in a circle, to show he did not care what we thought of him; and, as if conscious of what was passing in our minds, volunteered to add that complaints had been made against him before, but it was of no use; they couldn't remove him, and if they did he didn't care.

This greeting at the end of our severe journey was rather discouraging, but it was important for us not to have any difficulty with this crusty official; and, endeavouring to hit a vulnerable point, told him that we wished to stop a few days to rest, and should be obliged to purchase many things. We asked him if there was any bread in the village; he answered, "no hay;" "there is none;" corn? "no hay;" coffee? "no hay;" chocolate? "no hay." His satisfaction seemed to increase as he was still able to answer "no hay;" but our unfortunate inquiries for bread roused his ire. Innocently, and without intending any offence, we betrayed our disappointment; and Juan, looking out for himself, said that we could not eat tortillas. This he recurred to, repeated several times to himself, and to every new comer said, with peculiar emphasis, they can't eat tortillas. Following it up, he said there was an oven in the place, but no flour, and the baker went away seven years before; the people there could do without bread. To change the subject, and determined not to complain, I threw out the conciliatory remark, that, at all events, we were glad to escape from the rain on the mountains, which he answered by asking if we expected anything better in Palenque, and he repeated with great satisfaction an expression common in the mouths of Palenquians: "tres meses de agua, tres meses de aguaceros y seis meses de nortes," "three months rains, three months heavy showers, and six months north wind," which in that country brings cold and rain.

Finding it impossible to hit a weak point, while the men were piling up the luggage I rode to the prefect, whose reception at that critical moment was most cheering and reviving. With habitual courtesy he offered me a chair and a cigar, and as soon as he saw my passport said he had been expecting me for some time. This surprised me; and he added that Don Patricio had told him I was coming, which surprised me still more, as I did not remember any friend of that name, but soon learned that this imposing cognomen meant my friend Mr. Patrick Walker, of Balize. This was the first notice of Mr. Walker and Captain Caddy I had received since Lieutenant Nicols brought to

Guatemala the report that they had been speared by the Indians. They had reached Palenque by the Balize River and lake of Peten, without any other difficulties than from the badness of the roads, had remained two weeks at the ruins, and left for the Laguna and Yucatan. This was most gratifying intelligence, first, as it assured me of their safety, and second, as I gathered from it that there would be no impediment to our visiting the ruins. The apprehension of being met, at the end of our toilsome journey with a peremptory exclusion had constantly disturbed us more or less, and sometimes weighed upon us like lead.

I returned to make my report, and in regard to the old alcalde, in the language of a ward-meeting manifesto, determined to ask for nothing but what was right, and to submit to nothing that was wrong. In this spirit we made a bold stand for some corn. The alcalde's "no hay" was but too true; the corn-crop had failed, and there was an actual famine in the place. The Indians, with accustomed improvidence, had planted barely enough for the season, and this turning out bad, they were reduced to fruits, plantains, and roots instead of tortillas. Each white family had about enough for its own use, but none to spare. The shortness of the corn-crop made everything else scarce, as they were obliged to kill their fowls and pigs from want of anything to feed them with. The alcalde, who to his other offences added that of being rich, was the only man in the place who had any to spare, and he was holding on for a greater pressure. At Tumbala we had bought good corn at thirty ears for sixpence; here, with great difficulty, we prevailed upon the alcalde to spare us a little at eight ears for sixpence, and these were so musty and worm-eaten that the mules would hardly touch them. At first it surprised us that some enterprising capitalist did not import several dollars' worth from Tumbala; but on going deeper into the matter we found that the cost of transportation would not leave much profit, and, besides, the course of exchange was against Palenque. A few back-loads would overstock the market; for as each white family was provided till the next crop came in, the Indians were the only persons who wished to purchase, and they had no money to buy with. The brunt of the famine fell upon us, and particularly upon our poor mules. Fortunately, however, there was good pasture, and not far off. We slipped the bridles at the door and turned them loose in the streets; but, after making the circuit of the village, they came back in a body, and poked their heads in at the door with an imploring look for corn.

The next day was Sunday, and we hailed it as a day of rest. Heretofore, in all my travels, I had endeavoured to keep it as such, but in this country we had found it impossible. The place was so

tranquil, and seemed in such a state of repose, that as the old alcalde passed the door we ventured to wish him a good morning; but again he had got up wrong; and, without answering our greeting, stopped to tell us that our mules were missing, and, as this did not disturb us sufficiently, he added that they were probably stolen; but when he had got us fairly roused and on the point of setting off to look for them, he said there was no danger; they had only gone for water, and would return of themselves.

The village of Palenque, as we learned from the Prefect, was once a place of considerable importance, all the goods imported for Guatimala passing through it; but Balize had diverted that trade and destroyed its commerce, and but a few years before more than half the population had been swept off by the cholera. Whole families had perished, and their houses were desolate and falling to ruins. The church stood at the head of the street, in the centre of a grassy square. On each side of the square were houses with the forest directly upon them; and, being a little elevated in the plaza, we were on a line with the tops of the trees. The largest house on the square was deserted and in ruins. There were a dozen other houses occupied by white families, with whom, in the course of an hour's stroll, I became acquainted. It was but to stop before the door, and I received an invitation. "Pasen adelante, capitan," "Walk in, captain," for which title I was indebted to the eagle on my hat. Each family had its hacienda in the neighbourhood, and in the course of an hour I knew all that was going on in Palenque; *i.e.* I knew that nothing was going on.

The Prefeto was well versed in the history of Palenque. It is in the province of Tzendales, and for a century after the conquest of Chiapas it remained in possession of the Indians. Two centuries ago, Lorenzo Mugil, an emissary direct from Rome, set up among them the standard of the cross. The Indians still preserve his dress as a sacred relic, but they are jealous of showing it to strangers, and I could not obtain a sight of it. The bell of the church, too, was sent from the holy city. The Indians submitted to the dominion of the Spaniards until the year 1700, when the whole province revolted, and in Chillon, Tumbala, and Palenque they apostatized from Christianity, murdered the priests, profaned the churches, paid impious adoration to an Indian female, massacred the white men, and took the women for their wives. But, as soon as the intelligence reached Guatimala, a strong force was sent against them, the revolted towns were reduced and recovered to the Catholic faith, and tranquillity was restored.

A short distance from Palenque the river Chacamal separates it

from the country of the unbaptized Indians, who are here called Caribs. Fifty years ago the Padre Calderon, an uncle of the Prefect's wife, attended by his sacristan, an Indian, was bathing in the river, when the latter cried out in alarm that some Caribs were looking at them, and attempted to fly; but the padre took his cane and went toward them. The Caribs fell down before him, conducted him to their huts, and gave him an invitation to return, and make them a visit on a certain day. On the day appointed the padre went with his sacristan, and found a gathering of Caribs and a great feast prepared for him. He remained with them some time, and invited them in return to the village of Palenque on the day of the fête of St. Domingo. A large party of these wild Indians attended, bringing with them tiger's meat, monkey's meat, and cocoa as presents. They listened to mass, and beheld all the ceremonies of the Church; whereupon they invited the padre to come among them and teach them, and they erected a hut at the place where they had first met him, which he consecrated as a church; and he taught his sacristan to say mass to them every Sunday. As the Prefect said, if he had lived, many of them would probably have been Christianised; but, unfortunately, he died; the Caribs retired into the wilderness, and not one had appeared in the village since.

The ruins lie about eight miles from the village, perfectly desolate. The road was so bad, that, in order to accomplish anything, it was necessary to remain there, and we had to make provision for that purpose. There were three small shops in the village, the stock of all together not worth fifteen pounds; but in one of them we found a pound and a half of coffee, which we immediately secured. Juan communicated the gratifying intelligence that a hog was to be killed the next morning, and that he had engaged a portion of the lard; also, that there was a cow with a calf running loose, and an arrangement might be made for keeping her up and milking her. This was promptly attended to, and all necessary arrangements were made for visiting the ruins the next day. The Indians generally knew the road, but there was only one man in the place who was able to serve as a guide on the ground, and he had on hand the business of killing and distributing the hog, by reason whereof he could not set out with us, but promised to follow.

Towards evening the quiet of the village was disturbed by a crash, and on going out we found that a house had fallen down. A cloud of dust rose from it, and the ruins probably lie as they fell. The cholera had stripped it of tenants, and for several years it had been deserted.