VIII.

THE CONQUEST OF MEXICO.

SEÑOR CARMINE'S hospitality, being put to a practical test by the arrival at his *hacienda* of the entire American party, proved to be as boundless in fact as it had been boundless in promise. His only regret was that the party had not been organized on a larger scale. Jaune and Van, indeed, found his pressing questions as to why the surviving parents of their respective wives had not come with them a trifle embarrassing.

The Señora Carmine—or Mrs. Carmine, as, with lingering memories of her early life at Fort Leavenworth, she preferred to be styled—was equally instant, and far more voluble, in her expressions of welcome and general good-will. She was a stout, jolly woman of eight-and-forty, or thereabouts, with just a

suggestion of brogue in her English and Spanish, and with a heart that seemed to be as big as she herself was broad. Rowney Mauve found her at once shocking and delightful, and had the wisdom to congratulate himself upon the fact that his feelings toward his mother-in-law could be of this mixed sort. From Violet's report of her he had expected that things would be a good deal worse.

In point of fact, all of the Americans had dreaded this visit a little. It is one thing to associate somewhat formally with foreigners in a city, and it is quite another thing to be projected into close and intimate association with a foreign family in its own home. Mrs. Gamboge, in whose character adaptability was not an especially prominent trait, frankly admitted that she wished that the visit were well over; and in this wish Mr. Gamboge, who took a warm interest in his own personal comfort and was impressed by a prophetic conviction that this was one of the occasions when his personal comfort would have to be sacrificed, heartily sympathized. Mr. Man-

gan Brown had his own private doubts as to how things would work out; but he went at the matter cheerfully, and comforted himself with the conviction that, after all, a fortnight is not a very important part of a lifetime. The younger members of the party were disposed to regard the visit in the light of a very original frolic, and to get as much fun out of it as possible.

Violet, of course, was in a condition of enthusiastic delight that she manifested in her own vigorous fashion, completely exhausting Rowney Mauve during the first two or three days by trotting him about, on foot and on horseback, to see the various places and people and things on the *hacienda* especially beloved by her. And when Rowney, who was a capital horseman, got the better of the bucking pony, Violet's pride in him was unbounded. This equine victory of Rowney's had the further good result of settling him firmly in the Carmine family heart.

"Ah! he can ride," said Señor Carmine, with the same complacent air that an Ameri-

can father would say of his daughter's husband: "He is worth a solid half-million; he is a consistent church-member, and he belongs to one of the best families in the State!"

But none of the doubts which disturbed the minds of the American visitors disturbed the minds of their Mexican hosts. Self-consciousness is not a characteristic of the kindly Spanish-American race. With a frank cordiality Señor Carmine welcomed these strangers within his gates; and as he was very glad to see them his guests, he did not for a moment imagine that they could be anything else than glad too. In a general way he knew that their customs must be unlike his, and he expected some manifestations of this difference which would seem to him strange. Americans were curious creatures. Had he not married one, and did he not know? It was a cardinal belief with Señor Carmine that his wife, the Señora Brígida O'Jara de Carmine—the descendant, as she herself had assured him, of a line of Irish kings, and the

daughter of a prominent citizen of Fort Leavenworth — was a shining example of the grace, the elegance, and the refinement of the Americans of the North. It surprised him a good deal to find how, in certain ways, the American ladies now his guests differed from this his standard of American ladyhood.

As for the Señora, this access of American society caused her to renew her youth like the eagles. It was her desire to make the house and the household, for the time being, as American as possible. She arranged her guest-chambers in the fashion, as nearly as she could remember it, of the aristocratic hotel in Kansas City that her father had taken her to for a week, five and twenty years before. She introduced substantial breakfasts at eight o'clock; and Señor Carmine, eating for politeness' sake, nearly ruined his digestion by his enforced abandonment of his morning bread and chocolate.

On the evening that the Americans arrived, this hospitable lady announced that "it 'u'd be after makin' them feel more home-like,

sure, to play some American games," and added, after a moment's reflection, "How 'u'd yees like 'Copenhagen,' now?" And in spite of Violet's protests, Mrs. Carmine organized the game instantly, and "chose" Mr. Mangan Brown and kissed him with a hearty smack that was the very embodiment of cheery hospitality. And both Señor Carmine and Mrs. Gamboge were rather shocked, and very nervous over it, when Señor Carmine, acting under his wife's orders, in accordance with the rules of elegant society in Fort Leavenworth, "chose" and kissed the eldest lady among his guests.

Señor Carmine felt called upon to explain through Violet that this cordial freedom was not in accordance with Mexican customs, which very emphatically was the truth. "But while our house is honored by the presence of Americans," he added, "we desire to make our ways like theirs." Even Mr. Gamboge, after this friendly speech, was not so lacking in tact as to suggest that their host be informed that "Copenhagen" was not an

ordinary form of evening amusement in all classes of society in New York.

However, in private, Violet took upon herself the task of enlightening her mother in the premises. The Señora was a good deal cut up about it.

"To think how times has changed since I was a gurrl, Violet dear! We all uv us, from the Mejor down, was great hands for kissin'-games in the old days at the Foort; an' moighty good fun 'twas, too. Your mother's after feelin' that she's an old woman, sure," ruefully said the descendant of the royal house of O'Jara. But she accepted her daughter's advice in good part, and among the various modes of entertainment which she thereafter devised for the benefit of her guests "kissing-games" did not reappear.

To Rose the most distinctive feature of the visit was the arrangement of her bedchamber. The Señora's memory of the hotel in Kansas City had not been very clear. In fact, it consisted principally of rocking-chairs. As it is a matter of pride with Mexican

housewives to have as many chairs as possible in a room, the Señora had sent a liberal order for rocking-chairs to the City of Mexico as soon as the coming of the Americans had been arranged.

"It's a little horrifying, somehow, Van, don't you think," Rose said, "to see all those six rocking-chairs in a row that way? It's like ghosts and skeletons, you know." Brown failed to see where the ghostliness and skeleton-likeness came in; but he was accustomed to having Rose discover unexpected resemblances, and took the matter easily.

"Of course the two little beds are all right," she went on, "for that's the regular Mexican custom; but I wish they hadn't put them at opposite ends of the room—it's such a very big room, you see."

"Big enough for a town-hall, up in our part of the world," Van assented.

"But suppose I'm taken sick, or something frightens me in the night; what am I to do?"

"You might have your shoes handy, and

shy them at me. You wouldn't be likely to throw straight enough to hit me; but I'd hear things banging about, and wake up in time to rescue you."

"Don't be foolish, Van; I'm really in earnest. It is dreadful to be so far away in the dark. And—why, Van, there isn't any slop-bucket, and there's only one towel! And it can't be because they're poor, or anything like that, for they're not; and the basin and the pitcher are perfectly beautiful French china, good enough for bric-à-brac. Don't you think it very strange? Oh! who's that?"

Van himself was a little startled, for a door at the end of the room opened and a nice-looking old woman placidly walked through the apartment—smiling in a friendly way at them—and passed out by one of the doors opening on the corridor, bidding them as she departed, an affable good-night. Neither Rose nor Van was exactly in costume for receiving even transient visitors.

Brown went to close the door through

which the old woman had entered. "Why, it's a chapel!" he said. "She must have been in there saying her prayers. And I don't see what we are going to do about ventilation," he continued, as he examined the doors opening on the corridor. "These things are solid wood, three inches thick. If we shut them, we won't have any fresh air at all; and if we leave them open, anybody can see in. The Mexicans seem to have very extraordinary notions of privacy, anyway."

"I don't like it at all," said Rose. "And with all these old women marching about—but she seemed a nice sort of old woman, I must say—and these open doors, and all, I'm quite nervous. You'd better shut them all tight, Van. It is such a big room that the air won't be very bad."

But Brown left the door in the corner open, and the first thing that he knew in the morning he was waking up and finding a serving-man gravely entering with an earthen jar of fresh water. The man said

good-morning, in a matter-of-fact way, and asked—as far as Brown could make out—if the Señor and Señora had rested well, and if there was anything else that he could bring them.

Violet seemed rather surprised when Rose, in a delicate way, lodged a remonstrance against these intrusions.

"Oh, you needn't mind them," she said. "Old Margarita always goes into the oratory at night to say her prayers—she is a dear old thing. And if Juan doesn't bring you fresh water in the morning, and see if you want anything, what are you going to do?"

Rose did not feel at liberty to speak about the one towel. She drew on her private stock. At the end of a week the one towel was removed, and a clean towel was put in its place. They were very elegant, in their way, these solitary towels; of beautiful linen, and ornamented with a good deal of handsome embroidery. Rose never quite succeeded in making up her mind as to whether they really were intended for use, or simply

were fitting accessories to the bric-à-brac basin and pitcher.

In regard to the slop-bucket, Violet settled the matter promptly. "Just empty your basin out over the edge of the corridor," she said. "That's the way we always do, you know." And that was the way they did.

Another peculiarity of the household that struck the Americans forcibly was that at meals the women were given their food after the men. The first portion went to Mr. Mangan Brown, the next to Mr. Gamboge, and then the younger men, in turn, received their portions. After this the women, beginning with Mrs. Gamboge, were served. It made one feel like living in the Middle Ages, Rose said.

But with all the oddities and peculiarities of domestic life which they encountered, the underlying kindliness and hearty hospitality of their entertainers made the Americans feel thoroughly sorry when the fortnight came to an end. It was a matter of some doubt, indeed, as to whether they would be permitted

to leave at the end of this very short visit. Señor Carmine had counted upon having them with him for several months, he assured them; why could they not stay on? The summer was such a lovely season on the plateau—never hot, never cold; and all manner of delicious fruit to be gathered freshly every day. Why should they not remain?

But Señor Carmine yielded to the inevitable, and aided his wife in devising and arranging stores of all manner of good things to eat and to drink for his departing guests to take with them for sustenance by the way. From the quantities of food provided for this purpose, anybody but a Mexican would have inferred that the party was about setting forth to cross an exceedingly wide desert; instead of upon a comfortable journey of eight hours by rail, with very fair opportunities for sustaining life by stops at two reasonably good eating-stations.

The one member of the party who really was glad to leave the *hacienda* was Mr. Pemberton Logan Smith. Pem never had known

two weeks so long as these two weeks had been. He had done his best to be as cheerful as possible, for he was a well-bred young man, with strong convictions in regard to the impropriety of exhibiting publicly his private griefs; but in spite of his best efforts he had not been wholly successful, so very much depended upon that answer which he was to receive when the two weeks were at an end. He had played a masterful part that day at Chapultepec, but would he be able to keep on playing it? Cármen loved him—she admitted it; but could he force her to give him her love? These were the questions which constantly were in his mind, constantly tormenting him with their varying answers and consequent shiftings from hopeful elation to desolating doubts and fears. Even to have desolation set in for a permanency was better, he thought, than that this racking uncertainty should endure. And so he was very glad when at last his face was set once more toward certainty and the City of Mexico.

Although the train did not arrive at the Colonia Station until after eight o'clock at night, Don Antonio was on hand to meet them, and had a little procession of carriages in readiness for their conveyance to their hotel. No one would have been surprised had he brought along a brass band. Had he happened to think of it, very likely he would.

He had planned one more expedition for them, he said; and hastened to add, fearing that the question of lack of time would be raised, that it was a very little one. It was only to go once more to the shrine of Guadalupe. They had been there once, but he feared that they had not drunk of the water of the Holy Well. Did they know that whoever drank of this water needs must return—no matter how far away they might stray into the world—to drink again? Therefore they must come with him and drink: so would he have assurance that they all would return.

Of course, an invitation of this gracious

sort could not be refused; and so it was decided to defer the start northward for yet another day, and to go to Guadalupe on the following afternoon. Pem was well pleased with this arrangement, and especially with the fact, mentioned by Don Antonio incidentally, that it was to his niece that he owed the suggestion of assuring in this way the return of their American friends. Pem could not but believe that herein was ground for hope.

But from Cármen's face, when they all met the next afternoon in the Plaza, he could make nothing: her eyes were downcast, and her lips were firm. But it comforted him to see that the wearied, pained look, that had shocked him so when they last met at Chapultepec, had disappeared. During the short ride on the tramway she sat nearly opposite to him in the car, her eyes still cast down. But through the veil of her dark lashes he felt that she was looking at him earnestly.

As the church already had been visited,

there was nothing to detain them from the immediate object of their pilgrimage. Therefore Don Antonio, gallantly escorting Mrs. Gamboge, led the way directly across the pretty *plazuela*, past the old parish church and so to the beautiful little chapel—the masterpiece of the architect Guerrero y Torres—that covers the Holy Well.

With something of the serious air of one who administers a religious rite, Don Antonio dipped up the water through the iron grating and served it to his American friends. As Pem drank, Cármen for an instant looked full upon him. It was a strange look: but again Pem believed that he had a right to hope.

When the ceremony was ended they mounted the stone stairway that winds up the hill-side, to take a last look at the sunset light upon the snow mountains.

"Not a last look," Don Antonio correctingly interposed. "You have drunk of the water of the Holy Well."

In the Mexican fashion the gentlemen

offered their hands to the ladies to assist them in the ascent. Pem gave his hand to Cármen; hers was very cold, and it trembled as it touched his.

Where the stairways from the opposite sides of the hill unite, on the little plateau before the stone screen, they paused to rest; and when the party moved on, passing beyond the screen, Pem took Cármen's hand, as though to follow, but gently detained her. He felt her hand tremble again. She withdrew it from his, and in obedience to his gesture seated herself beside him upon the stone bench. And so once more they were alone at sunset.

But now that the moment for which Pem had longed so earnestly had come, his fears entirely overmastered his hopes, and he did not dare to speak. He knew that this hour would decide his life for him. He remembered all that Cármen had urged to make clear to him that while she loved him she could not give him her love; he remembered how little substantial ground she had given

him that day for believing that the conclusion which she had arrived at deliberately, and deliberately had stated a fortnight before, was to be reversed. And as these dreary thoughts possessed him, hope slipped farther and farther away from his heart.

Cármen sat silently beside him. Her open hand rested upon the stone bench, not far from his, but he had not the courage to take it. Her eyes were turned eastward toward the snow mountains. High above the snow-capped peaks was a glory of red and golden cloud, but the mountains below were cold and colorless. To Pem's mind the White Woman seemed more than ever a dead, cold woman, half hidden beneath her shroud of snow. And as this dreary thought came into his mind, linking itself with the sorrowful thoughts already there, and by an allegory making the sorrow of them still more keen, there came from his lips a sob. Doubtless there is no sound more pathetic than the sob of a strong man.

And then Pem felt a soft hand, not cold,

but warm, in his; and at that instant a shifting of the clouds changed the current of the sunlight, and the White Woman was lit up by a ruddy, life-giving glow.

Pem's heart bounded. He raised his head, and his eyes met Cármen's — looking full at him now, bright through tears and full of love.

"Señor, Señor mio," said Cármen, as they rose at last from the stone bench, yet still looked eastward on the splendor of gold and crimson clouds and crimsoned snow, "it was here in Guadalupe Hidalgo that the treaty of peace between the conquered Mexicans and the conquering Americans was signed."

THE END.