

XIV.

THE FINISH.

Coach, not Couch.—A new Tread-mill.—Rascality of a Sub-treasurer.—The same Country, but another Driver.—Live-oak *versus* Mesquite.—A sandy Desert as large as Massachusetts.—Not a complete Desert.—A dirty, but hospitable Rancho.—Thousands of Cattle on no Hill.—A forty-mile Fence.—A Patch of four hundred square Miles.—Mr. King's Rancho and Pluck.—Perils.—Mr. Murdock's Murder.—Corpus Christi.—Indianola.—Good-bye.

It was a coach, and not a couch, that awaited me. Neither beef-steak nor bed, on each of which I was so much doting, did I see or feel or taste in Brownsville. Reaching the hotel, I find a few servants just opening and sweeping its hall; for the time of breakfast is not yet. Inquiring as to the best means of reaching Galveston, I learn that no steamer is due for a day or two, and it will be several days before she leaves. A stage is to leave for Corpus Christi in a few moments. It will reach there to-morrow night. Thence I can catch a mail-boat for Indianola, perhaps a steamer, and so swing round to Galveston.

It seems strange that one on a stage-coach for three weeks should crave it again so soon. But Holmes describes a tread-mill prisoner who was so pleased with his punishment that he determined, at his release, to "have a round or two for fun," and, after he had got home, to set up "a tread-mill of his own." I have no expectation of going into the stage business myself; but I did feel so glad at escaping from that three weeks' imprisonment in a tossing, racking, galloping prison, that I felt willing to add nearly two hundred miles more to it, and not hesitatingly mounted the coach of rest.

Two things helped forward this feeling—a dislike of the sea, and

the fact that I was moving homeward; so, like every other motive or act, it was mixed.

"Joy and moan
Melt into one."

This is a new route, hardly yet opened. The first change noticeable was not in the country, but in the drivers and driving. The country remained the same. The Rio Grande is no more a natural boundary than the St. Lawrence. The same woods of mesquite; the same cactus (called here prickly-pear), with its varied and rich blossoming of crimson, yellow, and many-tinted hues; the same humbler but not less beautiful flowers—these testified to a common country. The fields grew a little more open, but not vastly different from those the other side of the tiny stream which I had traveled beside for a day and a half, and only seen a corner of once, and the narrow, muddy brook which I crossed at Matamoras. But the driving told me that I was in a new country. The four large horses, the calm driver, the unused whip, the unheard screech and yell, the square, steady trot, no spurts of a run and long blanks of walking, hardly even walking, the absence of mozos and stones, were all new features in horsemanship. The intelligent driver talked mildly, and showed also the calming influence of character and success. These elements grow with success, and America is fast becoming as phlegmatic as England or any other well-to-do people.

I had been a little excited at Matamoras. The administrador, or agent, of the Diligence Company had put upon me, despite my protest, a lot of smooth and cheapened silver, what was left of my deposit in Mexico. Fortunately, it was only ten dollars. It was a rascally robbery, and I urge all who cross the country to take up their deposit, what remains of it, at Comargo. It is a good way of traveling, as you can put your money in the office at Mexico, and draw it out at every place where you stop for the night, what you wish of it. But do not leave any of it for the man at Matamoras. Señor Don Rumaldo, I think they call him; *mal do*, a giver of evil, he surely is. He attempted to shove forty quarters on me, not six

of which could show both faces, and most could show none, and some never were worth more than pistareens, or twenty cents. When these were refused, he denied he had any more money, but afterward offered a chipped gold-piece. This could not be changed. He then offered ten dollars, only two of which were of full weight. This, of course, would have prevented the sale of the silver at its full value. He was robbing the depositors, and should be instantly removed. The other agents acted excellently.

I had to run to catch the coach after this vexing debate, had been up all night, and had no chance even for a cup of coffee or a cup of milk; so I was not in the best of conditions. But a glass of cold water, buttered rolls (butter had been a thing unknown for weeks), and a good nap put me to rights.

The country became more open, and cattle began to becloud the broad prairies. The woods changed from the light, thin-leaved mesquite to the dark, thick, short, John-Bull leaf of the live-oak, an evergreen of beauty in this spring-time; how much more in the yellowness of winter! It stands in groups and bunches on the open sea of grass, at times stepping out by itself to show us how perfectly it can round itself into shape when it takes the notion. Then it is almost as lovely as a New England elm or a New York maple. I have not yet seen the Southern rival of these twain, nor the Western, unless this live-oak be he. It comes near it—so round, so compact, so green. It is handsome enough, anyway.

Half-way of the trip we cross a sandy desert, forty miles wide; and, with the passion for push that possesses the modern traveler, the slow dragging of the horses over it seems like a forty years' journey in the wilderness. It takes all the night, and more. From five at evening to nine in the morning we pull through this heavy sand. But this soil is not barren after the Israelitish pattern. Rains keep it moist, and certain black specks in it keep it rich. Is black always the base of richness? Greenness, therefore, does not desert it, nor cattle, nor live-oaks, nor flowers. Some of the finest groups of trees are on this space, which is as wide and long as the State of Massachusetts, and yet hardly noticed in this

State, forty times her size. Many beautiful flowers cover it. I gathered over a dozen different varieties round one rancho, and comforted and strengthened the wavering heart with that apostolic promise, "If God so clothe the grass of the field, which to-day is and to-morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?" These lovely grasses of purple, and scarlet, and blue, and pink, and lustrous white, and golden yellow, and variegated, how brief their life! That beautiful soul far surpasses these creatures in original excellence, infinitely more surpasses it in that its day is eternal.

It is hard sometimes to realize this, as you step into one of these dirty ranchos and see these unwashed, uncombed, almost undressed women and children, and imagine the change that Christ would make if fairly seated in their hearts. He will come, and the flower that fades be excelled, even at its beginning, by the flower that grows in beauty forever and forever. They are kind and hospitable now. How generously a mother and three girl-children, who seemed to have never known a comb or a towel, feasted me on thick milk and delicious coffee, and Spanish chats and smiles! Won't they take to Sunday-schools and all their cleanly accompaniments, when they get out of their Spanish and their Romanism into the light of English and Protestantism?

The fields show great herds of many cattle feeding. Wordsworth thought, when he said, "There are forty feeding like one," that he was describing a good-sized herd. What would he have said had he seen these hundreds and thousands? The prairies, rolling slightly, and dipping down into the sky on every side, are sprinkled with kine. There are thousands feeding like one. Well, it is only multiplication. He first said, if he did not first see, the fact of the silent feeding of great flocks and herds. The prairies would have amazed him more than the cattle. That forty, to his petty and pretty Rydal meadows, were vastly more than these hundreds to these prairies, actually boundless to the eye. They are lost on the ocean. The cattle on a thousand hills are here transformed into thousands of cattle on level plains.

Near noon we drive near a fence, the first I had seen, save of the corral sort for the coach horses. "That fence is forty miles long," says an employé of the road on the coach. Our Mexican driver (we have changed drivers) knows only to lash and scold his horses, run them and walk them by frequent turns. "Forty miles now; that is its beginning. It will include twenty miles square when finished." The owner is Mr. King. We enter the gate, itself nearly a mile from the house, which looks close by, and drive to the barn. Mr. King generously provides a cold cut of beef and cold cup of milk—rarities indeed. He has about sixty thousand cattle, and ten thousand horses and mules. He will get them all in his "patch" when the fence is completed, which will be, he says, seventy miles in length. He intends to improve his stock, and will slaughter twenty thousand this fall, to make way for the better quality. He keeps a hundred men racing down these herds, which are now wandering all the way from the Rio Grande to Austin. That is a specimen of the stock-breeding of the country. He is one of many such—only two or three quite as big, and only one bigger—Mr. Conner, who has not less than one hundred thousand cattle. A passenger had smiled an "Ah Sin" smile when I spoke of a hacienda in Mexico with its five thousand cattle and forty thousand sheep. I saw it now.

They say Mr. King's life is threatened by the Mexicans; but he is brave and daring. Once they shot at his ambulance, and killed a German on the box with the driver. His house is an open one, broad veranda, one story, wood—excellent for a fire, if the Mexican is so disposed. But he would sell his life dearly, and they do not want to buy at such rates; so he will probably live a while yet.

Not far this side, a small fenced inclosure, with trees and gardens, was the abode of Mr. Murdoch, who in the autumn of '72 was caught in bed by these savages, chained down, covered with tar and kerosene, and the house set on fire. He was an easy prey to the flames. So these prairies are not Paradise, except as it was after the devil entered it.

Corpus Christi receives us at night-fall. It is a live, pretty

town, lifted up slightly from a livelier and prettier bay. It is only a night we stop there. The mail-boat thence to Indianola drops down the bay at six in the morning. The wind is splendid, and the run also. The boat sits on the wave without a wave. The breeze is as soft and warm as it is strong; so the more of it the better. I hoped it would get us to Rockport before the steamer left, but I was out of luck. The stars began to fight the other way. I had made every connection up to this time; now I was to make none. The steamer left just before we arrived. She passed us, majestically scornful. Another left Indianola just before we came in sight. So we were left stranded at that port for a day, when the steamer transported us to Galveston, and so to New Orleans, our point of departure. The path to our door is reached. Let us shake hands, and Good-bye.