

THE UNIVERSAL ROMAN TOWER.

CHAPTER IV.

A MEMENTO OF THE OLD DAYS.

THE village of San Gabriel is only seven or eight miles from a city which the most prejudiced person from some other Californian locality must acknowledge to be a beautiful one, and which possesses a unique charm for every wanderer not to California born. The city blooms and booms with the newness of the very newest American life; the village is drowsy with the feeling of a perpetual afternoon. There are places in this strange country from which this feeling is inseparable, and it seems preposterous that in San Gabriel it should ever be called early in the morning. There are always long shadows and a peculiar yellowness of the atmosphere. There is a faint humming sound as of bees. There is nothing doing. There is one short street crossed by another, and these four corners, lengthened out a little by some white-washed adobes that are of the olden time, is all there is of it. These houses have been furnished with "shake" roofs at some period greatly later than that of their original erection, and their walls are coated with the thickest and deadest white ever seen. But their windows and doors are twins of those found wherever the Spaniard and adobe soil have existed together at any period. The walls are very thick, and these openings are very small. One does not step up to enter in, but invariably down, and with a feeling

that it would be better for him to stoop a little. In lieu of sidewalks, there are only crooked paths through the gray dust from door to door, and there is a straggling and indefinite end to every thoroughfare and every vista in trees and shrubbery and tangles and general crookedness. The voices one hears are almost invariably foreign, and the words are provincial Spanish. There are glimpses of shawls over heads, and of feet that are shod, but deplorably stockingless, and of little boys with brown faces and very black hair and eyes, and with only one suspender and always coatless. There is no wind and no noise, and you are sure there never was any, and that this day is very nearly like all the other days that have ever come to San Gabriel. Yet it has only taken you some twenty minutes to reach the place from a metropolitan depot, and if you go out to the uncertain end of the street you will see a mile away a big and balconied hotel, and beside this there is a street-car track.

The first time I had ever seen the place had been five years before, on a summer afternoon. I remember how the soft breeze from the west came through the little open depot shed, and stirred the tall weeds with swaying yellow heads outside, and that I could smell the eucalyptus trees, and that I heard that dull and universal drone which seems to be a sound made by silence. The sun shone hot and the dust lay thick, and there was the jerky bustle of linnets hither and thither, and a brown lizzard stopped at the door-sill and winked at me, and a chipmunk scuttled across the shining rail of the track beside the door with an impatient squeak. There was nothing in it all to

make the least impression, yet I remembered it, and went back to it.

It is the seat of a mission which in its day was the richest of them all; a presage of later times, since there is, perhaps not in all the world, a bit of soil quite equal to the San Gabriel Valley. It is another one of those cases of not making a mistake in location which has become proverbial. You would know it was one of the old places by certain signs above enumerated, and if you did not see the church at all, for there is an occasional discordant clangor of old bells whose tones are never those of any modern casting. It is one of the two or three remaining mission churches which has a roof on it—a modern one of shingles—and consequently where services are still held. But it is, on week days at least, a service purely perfunctory. There are no worshipers. Morning mass had been omitted on this day within my knowledge, and the priest did not rise until ten o'clock, and when at last he came forth and dawned upon me I felt within me a prescience that when I came again I should not mourn if he came not at all. For he was the most striking incongruity I have ever encountered at a California mission, where incongruities are less to be tolerated, perhaps, than anywhere else in the world. A rasping brogue accent noted his first words, which were addressed to an unhappy man, not a priest and yet in holy orders, who was his and the church's servant, and they were thus: "Hoh! has the felley com weth thot mayl yit?" A heavy shock of reddish hair grew very low on his forehead, and a big jaw and coarse lips made you wonder where

the impulse could have come from which led him into the vow of obedience, poverty and chastity. An old black coat was covered with patches of white mould where the fungus had grown upon innumerable soup-spots. His face was unshorn and his eyes were red, and his manners exceedingly bad. I have an idea that he looked upon his office as a job, and upon his functions as occupation, and that he was not satisfied with his present assignment. There are Protestant clergymen whom one assigns mentally to the office of a quack doctor, and I regretfully discover Catholic priests who seem to have made a narrow escape from a row of bottles, a big mirror and a long white apron.

The ecclesiastical servitor I had already encountered, and he was not adverse to the interview I had been having with him. He met me at the door of the ancient sanctuary, and remarked with a German accent that it would be necessary to charge a fee for entering, owing to the need of repairs in the church. I smilingly assented and asked him to convey to me a vague and distant hint as to how much he conscientiously thought I ought to contribute towards the rescuing from premature decay of the venerable building, and he unhesitatingly said "mens fo' bits; vimmen, two bits."

I gave him a dollar in a moment of imprudence, and an elocutionary fervor immediately took possession of him. I do not know if he had been accustomed to spell-bind visitors with it every day, or if it was specially reserved for such extra occasions as the present, but unquestionably it had been written out for him by some one, and had been duly committed to memory by him. It abounded, as far as I

heard it, in graceful delineations of virginal and saintly character, and in passages which reminded me strongly in their style of some of the "lectures" of the lodge-room. But while he had his back to me, and was waving his hand toward the ancient images behind the altar, I went away to one side to examine the worn leather of the worm-eaten old confessional where the Franciscans had leaned their elbows a century ago. To obtain possession of me and of my undivided attention he had to stop and come to me, and in the pause that ensued I asked him what he really had that was old to show me. He replied that the principal treasures of this church were undoubtedly the twenty-one—I think he said twenty-one—actual and legitimate portraits of the apostles and disciples, and he waved his hand around the walls to indicate them where they hung in a long row on each side. With a countenance which probably bore every indication of profound belief I asked him if he was sure they were actual portraits, and he said they were, "vitout ony tout fatefer." He then told me that they had come here, the gift of Ferdinand and Isabella, because San Gabriel was intended to be the Cathedral of California. I neglected at the moment to call attention to a discrepancy in his narrative of a little less than three hundred years lying between the generosity of the celebrated monarchs mentioned and the founding of the California missions, and so he went on to say that every one of them had been painted by Murillo—twenty-one Murillos hanging dilapidated and without frames on the walls of an old building, seven miles from Los Angeles, and yet the

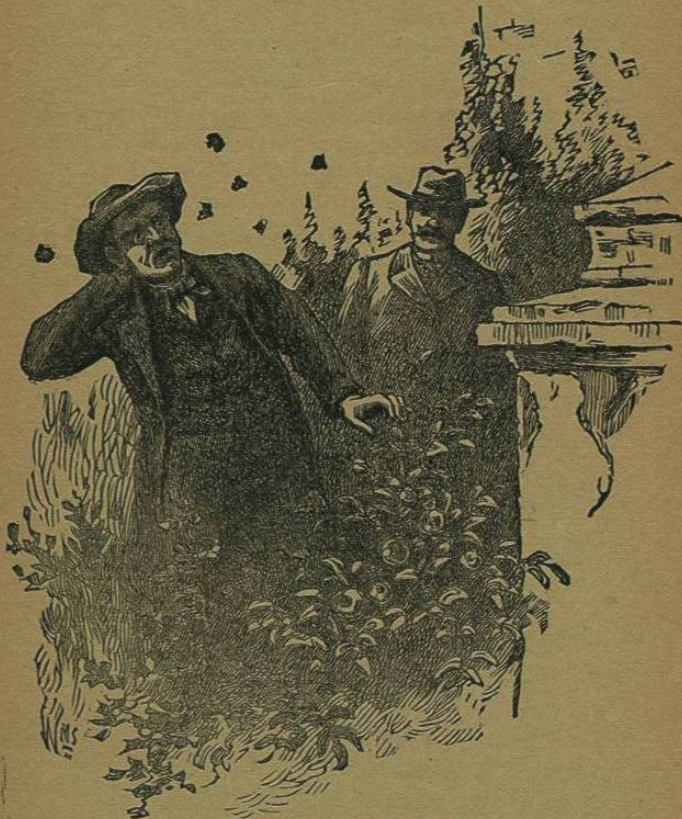
"boom" had been in real-estate, and not a picture mentioned.

He mentioned a few moments later the fact that the Fathers yet remaining at San Carlos had lately been obliged to sell the mission plates and utensils to buy bread, and I then said to him that a single authenticated Murillo, sold at half price, would probably tide over any emergency the brethren might come to in a hard year. He said, yes, it might, but they didn't want to sell them; as soon as they got money enough they were going to have them *painted over!* I asked by whom, and he said a gentleman was coming to see about it tomorrow—a very good painter indeed.

In the afternoon I passed that way again, and he had four young men, probably from the hotel a mile away, in front of the altar-rail, and was going uninterruptedly through his lecture. I caught the words "te most loofly of vimmen; te most anchelic of anchels," and sneaked out again. I do not know if he told them about the Murillos. That was not a part of the lecture, of course, and oozed out in a personal conversation I had with him. Perhaps it was not intended for publication, but I cannot refrain from divulging the fact of their existence to my art-loving countrymen who may find themselves in the neighborhood. At most an inspiring view of them, in a fair light, only costs "four bits."

This same accomplished man showed me the redwood ceiling lately made to hide the rafters of the roof—a very decidedly modern innovation—and told me it had cost five thousand dollars. When it comes

to the inherent pecuniary value of abstract sacredness, aside from antiquity and associations, I do not pretend to judge. It may be worth while to repair. But



THE SAN GABRIEL BEES.

I am of opinion that the church of the mission of San Gabriel could now be entirely rebuilt as it stands, with some modern improvements and conveniences,

for little more than twice the sum he mentioned as the cost of the ceiling. He also told me that the government of the United States had left this mission only four acres of land, including the cemetery. Others say that the ground assigned it, and now valuable and rented by it, is more than forty times the amount mentioned. Should I ever revisit San Gabriel, I should feel strongly inclined to have this man report to me all his store of knowledge, for I did not really question him to any extent. We passed a huge stucco tomb beside the church. It lacked, as usual, any inscription whatever, and I asked him if he knew whose it was. He said, yes, it was a sea-captain's, for all sea-captains were buried with their heads to the pole-star, but he did not remember the name. There was one black and time-worn crack in the side of it, out of which the bees were issuing, and the place smelled of honey. Stopping to ponder for a moment upon the uses, industrial and otherwise, to which we may come at last, this man said he had no doubt there was a great deal of honey there, for those bees had been there a very long time, and the place had never been opened, all of which was evidently true. But by and by some of the more pugnacious of them began to object to our presence, and I was forced to hurriedly depart. Then my chaperone said they never stung *him*; he had once taken three dollars' worth of honey out of that place and escaped free. At that moment his attention seemed to be violently attracted to a spot on the back of his neck, beneath a dilapidated blue neck-tie he wore without any collar, and he hurriedly went away through the tall mustard-plants

which overgrew the place, and I had no further reliable information from him.

Looking very old, but partially repaired into shabbiness, San Gabriel shows the least signs of its former importance and great wealth of any of the California missions. The walls and arches of the quadrangle are entirely gone. There is not a sign of the rows of cloisters. The remains of gardens and fountains have been obliterated. The church has no transept, and is but an oblong building of an aspect not particularly imposing. If it had towers they were small, for the wall shows neither angles nor greater thickness where they would have been. Perhaps architectural beauty was not intended, for the Roman arches are all wanting, and as a peculiarity not noticed in most others, the outer walls are buttressed to the eaves. I looked longer at a little outside balcony near one end of the building than at any other single feature, for it seemed quite without any religious purpose. It was a narrow structure, railed neatly with iron, shadowed by an immemorial pepper-tree, and the steps close beside the wall by which it was reached were deeply worn. Perhaps it was the entrance to the organ-loft, or only an architectural caprice; perhaps a place whence the Spanish recreations of those days could be conveniently overlooked. For San Gabriel had an extensive and famous bull-ring in its time, and while bull-fights may not have been directly favored by the Franciscans, we must not forget that they were Spaniards, and there was never one of that blood whose soul was proof against the national pastime.

The mission was also an extensive manufactory. In the very yard, quite close to the church-walls, are still to be seen the remains of the huge furnaces and cauldrons where they tried tallow and made soap. Something is there also, now filled with earth and almost enigmatic, which looks like the pit of an ancient water-mill. Outside, across the road, and by me found by chance, are the remains of a huge cement water-main. It is laid above ground entirely, and being some four feet wide and deep, conveyed a torrent. Perhaps nothing could recall so vividly the old and prosperous Saturnian days as to imagine this aqueduct brim-full through the midst of the shining valley. It seems indicative of the utter passing away of all these early blessings to see that the railroad, when it was built, cut it square across. There is water yet, but it comes in iron pipes. There is a hydrant at the corner of the old church, and cocks and troughs in the village street. They do not change its sleepiness in the least; it is only incongruous. It was better when it splashed and foamed, and ran in rills down the village street, and was played in by the urchins, and when the Indian girls went to the fountain with tall pitchers on their shoulders, and it followed the hoes of the Indian laborers over the low fields. In those days water was as precious as in Biblical days it was in Palestine, and, as in Palestine, wherever it ran, the land flowed with milk and honey, and there was happiness unalloyed by investment; peace undisturbed by the price of land; security that knew no margins; sunny years that heard no booms.

There is a cemetery. Its principal feature is dilapidation. This is about all that in these times any mission graveyard ever indicates. No graves are visible there which extol in stately Latin the virtues of either convert or friar. Those are sunken, gone, ploughed over, utterly lost. The oldest part of this has been utilized for the practical purpose of raising oranges. That which is not so old, is a couple of acres of wooden crosses, all modern, but all dilapidated, with here and there a memorial of white marble. One of these says of the sleepers, "*Requiescant in Pace*," and adds another unintended item to a long line of tombstone pleasantries. A brick mausoleum near a corner of the church, seemingly old, has been broken and rifled, and nobody knows why or when. Nobody cares. *Camp Santo*, sprinkled with holy water, and the dedicated resting place of believers only, seems in all Catholic countries to be inconsistently neglected.

There are only four bells at San Gabriel, though there are hanging-places for five. Thereby, of course, hangs a romance. There was a señorita in old Mexico, name and date given more or less, but unimportant, who had a lover. He came north and died. In the course of masses for his soul's repose, the young lady sent to this mission a beautiful and costly bell. For a long time it hung in its niche and rang the faithful to prayers, and was one of the institutions of the place. Finally it disappeared, and there are those who say that it was taken down when sequestration came, and was returned to its donor. But a grizzled American says, in his practical way, "It aint best to

believe that yarn. There was thought to be considerable silver in that bell, and some priest or other, don't know who, sold it. That's all." You will always find some member of this prosaic race on hand to destroy romances, little and big, and some of them are able to bring forward the most disagreeable and inconsistent conclusions.

One of these came within my ken as I sat in the shade at the street corner. He was a young man with an old face and a gray head, friendly and hilarious, talking Spanish to all comers, and evidently a man of the country. He addressed me in English, with a strong Southern inflection, and we entered into conversation. He told me he came to San Gabriel in '49, when a boy, and had known the last days of the remaining Franciscans. I hinted that I should like to hear about the old times. He said "there is nothing to tell; I can put it all into two sentences." I asked him to do so, and his reply was that they came, had any number of Indians to work for them, it was a good country, they grew rich, and when the Mexican government took their lands from them, they went away angry.

This succinct summary of the situation seemed to him a very full one, but I remained unsatisfied. Insisting upon further particulars, he told me there were some 2,000 Indians here in 1849, all of them having been connected in some way with the industrial operations of the missions—ranches, herds, fields, factories, etc. "In plain English," I said, "kindly answer for me one question. Were, or were not these Indians slaves?"

The reader is aware that this question has been much discussed, and that no one seems to quite understand the peculiar and unique situation that is perhaps quite without a parallel in the long story of the contact of the European with the Aborigine on this continent. These California Indians lived toilsome and patient lives, and did an immense work. They had never worked before, and were reputed the most extraordinarily shiftless of all Indians. Why did they? Enthusiasm; readiness to believe only the good and reject the unpleasant; admiration for the heroism of those fathers who came first;—these do not answer the question.

My new friend had told me that he came from a slave State. That he need not have done, for he spoke English with that accent no ear can fail to recognize. Knowing him but ten minutes, I still knew he would speak truth if he answered at all, for it was in his demeanor and the general look of him. Many times and in various forms, I had asked, or hinted, the same question. Elderly "Californians"—as the California Spaniard is always called—have described to me at length the life of the missions as they had partly seen it and partly heard of it, and in effect have almost invariably led me to the conclusion of serfdom; of at least that form of feudalism which makes its toilers slaves under a politer name. Then when I would finally say "well, they were slaves then, were they not?" they would protest with an endless procession of vehement "no's."

He looked at me a moment doubtfully, seeming to enquire my motive in the question, and then, perhaps

remembering that the question of slavery everywhere is a thing of the past, slowly answered, "Well, yes, that's just about what they were. They got no wages and they made 'em work like the d—l. What else would you call it?"

"How can you make an Indian work?" I said.

"Well, I think they scared 'em into it;—told 'em they'd go straight to hell if they didn't, and made 'em believe it. Oh, they do that with others than Indians." This last significant remark seemed to be in the nature of supplementary proof, and I pursued the subject no further. But I bethought me of Father Serra's own story of the marvelous efficiency of one of his sacerdotal banners, that had upon one side a picture of the Virgin and upon the other a realistic representation of the old-fashioned Hades. I knew also that a coercion unto godliness by a means not very dissimilar to that of the Padres had been practised by the church of my forefathers, and mine, for many generations. But the shrewd notion of these missionaries in turning the powers of which they had control into a means of coercion to field-labor, was a view of the case quite new to me.

I asked my friend what became of the Indians, and he answered in the same old comprehensive way; he said they "died off." I always asked this question when I could find opportunity. I wished to know whether there would ever be any variation in the answer. If there had been, I should have concluded that my fate had changed, and that very likely something startling would soon occur to vary the monotony of my placid days. There was a cause for this

Indian fatality, and a study of it leads to some conclusions not usually much dwelt upon by the average philanthropist and enthusiast. Least of anywhere is it cared about in California. They are gone. The past is accepted with unanimity and composure. But it is a part of the great Indian question of this continent, which for a century has been an illustration of the ancient story of the two knights who saw the shield from opposite sides.

My friend declared that he had no business, never had had any, and was not looking for any, and intimated that this was not unusual in San Gabriel in his day, or even now. Whereupon I ventured to enquire whether the Californians, i.e., Spanish, population were increasing or the contrary. He gave it as his opinion that they were not. Upon my asking why, he gave me another comprehensive answer comprised in the words, "Well, they don't amount to much." By this he meant that they were not fitted for competitive life with the Americans, and were being pushed to one side. He told me presently, with some feeling, that his wife had been a Californian, that he had always been with them and knew them well, and that the present conditions in California were not understood by them. Every one of them could have been wealthy; few of them are. Beyond certain limits and restrictions no Spaniard will ever go. "I am not so very old," he said, "not so old as I look, but I should not be surprised to see almost the last of them myself."

He arose and went whistling away, followed by some half-dozen little brown-faced boys, who pulled

him by the skirts of his coat, and clung to him by every available portion of his person. They were saying something about going fishing, and he made several solemn promises to them on that subject while still in my hearing. A man whom the boys love is never a fool, is almost invariably a gentleman in his nature, and may be counted upon to say truth if anything. But he may be such an one as Irving has immortalized. In a corner as quiet and almost as quaint, surrounded by every inducement to idleness with few of its penalties, brooded over by tradition and sunshine, surrounded by mountains rugged and bluer than the Catskills, I think I have encountered the Rip Van Winkle of San Gabriel. But this man owned a horse and buggy, into which he managed to climb with as many boys besides as would have made a coach-full. Perhaps he owned a rancho, and I believe he did. He was Rip, but of the California variety. Onions and cabbages were the products of the country of the first. Here, a hundred feet away, the water was foaming out of the throat of an iron pipe, and running away in black and shining furrows beneath long rows of orange trees, and vindictively nibbling at the bare feet of the laborers who coaxed it hither and thither with shining hoes.

After he was gone, and I had nothing with me on the sunny corner to console myself withal, I began to think of what had come to the sons of the virile *conquistadores* who had once laid half a world under tribute to *España Madre*, that they should come next after the miserable "Digger" in their chance of early extinction. They are not heathens, and have not

been since the names "Goth" and "Vandal" became familiar in all the ancient stories of valor in war and strength in peace, or Alaric closed his palm upon the beauty and strength of classic Rome, and something of a solution of the question came to me at the moment. Of the four village corners I have mentioned, three bore on the fronts that strange and odious tergiversation to which our American eyes are so accustomed that it has ceased of itself to disgust us—the word "Saloon." Perhaps even the fourth one was of similar character, and lacked only the name;—four small-sized gin-mills facing each other in a village, which but for them might seem a corner of Arcadia, the home of simplicity and peace. I could hear the tipsy Spanish voices within trying to sing "La Golondrina," but so maudlinly that it might have been a Comanche chant. Spoiled by the toilless traditions of their ancestors, lured by the modern price of ranch-lands and deceived by the blandishments of a climate that robs poverty of half its terror, the native Californian is drinking himself into that imbecility which presages extermination. It is not alone at San Gabriel that the gruesome process goes on. Every isolated village, every shearer's camp, has its continuous orgies. It is not with wine. The Spaniards have crushed and drunk the red blood of the grape for ages, and if it has poisoned them they have been very slow in dying. It is the rampant fluid known as American whisky whose seductions he has learned and whose death he tastes.

The contrast to this, in the same sunny region, is the slant-eyed Mongolian. A dim suspicion must

sometimes find lodgment in the mind of every visitor that this shrewd and toiling economist, this Asiatic sphinx, may sometime come forward not as a claimant, but as an actual holder of the lion's share. He may do everything else, and he can and still survive, but he does not drink. A moment after the saloon idea had dawned upon me, I found this same Chinaman having it quite his own way, fearless of any municipal discouragement. From an adobe a little way down the shady street I heard a sound that was dimly like the cackling of hens, mingled occasionally with a little human screech of triumph and exultation. John was at it; a dozen of him. They sat on either side of a long laundry-board, and the game they played I could not understand, and rather than disturb a national amusement, which had also the effect of lighting for the first time for me the stolid face of a Chinaman, I did not linger long in the doorway.

For a unique mingling of some of the most diverse sensations of life, commend me to the village of San Gabriel, Archangel. Call it *Gab-rail*, as was intended by its founders, or what you will, you will not find its equal for many a league. It stands in the midst of the most fertile plain of a land whose barrenness and whose fertility, lying side by side, have given rise to two distinct opinions, alternately in the majority for fifty years. Looking out of its embowerment, mountains fence it on every hand, and shimmering in changeless summer itself, a huge patch of white snow looks down on it in June. For a hundred and twenty years its drowsy ears have listened to the

clangor of its mission bells, and until times that must seem to it exceeding new, it has been accustomed to scenes foreign and transplanted; pictures out of the common life of Spain. It is still older than these, for here stood that group of booths and huts the invaders called a *rancheria*, and here have lived and died the dusky generations of whose history or times or thoughts there has been left us not a word or an indication. Surrounded now by all that is new, by the improvements of the world's most restless denizens, by a skill that accomplishes in a single year the results of a Spanish century and an Italian eternity, it is still San Gabriel, abiding in a peace that is held about it by a spell.