CHAPTER X.

NOOKS AND CORNERS.

EARLY one morning I saw coming along the village street a figure that attracted my attention without being in the least attractive; one of the commonest figures of a place that is full of ancient oddity to the unaccustomed eye, and which is a kind of museum of those relics which pertain to the Californian past.

THE DESCENDANT OF A MISSION SOLDIER.

He was a little and dried-up man of something like 80 years. Mounted like a manikin on the back of a big white horse, he bore before him a bunch of green corn-fodder, and turned in

at the gate to a piece of low ground thick with walnut-trees, between the rows of which the soil was studded closely with that peculiar greenery which delights the peasant soul, and which, when finally realized upon, does not amount to any value whatever; pumpkins and peppers and onions, some spindling stalks of corn for roasting-ears, and all that miscellany which comes under the comprehensive head of "garden-sass," and which, so far as all modern experience goes, it is cheaper to buy than to raise. His weazened face was covered with a short, grizzled beard; his head was crowned with a nondescript hat; his garments were old and clean, and he had the air of being about his business so early in the morning from a mere habit, being raised in that way and having always done so, and I conceived the idea that here, so far from his native hills, I had again encountered a kinsman of Sancho Panza, less that bodily appendage which the word "panza" is taken usually to mean.

A little later I perceived that it was going to be a busy day with Sancho. He had an ancient hoe, through the eye of which the crooked handle went too far on the back side to be convenient for use, and the edge of which was demoralized by innumerable contacts with the casual dornick. He was in the sawgrass beside the *acequia*, busily engaged in making a childish little dam of earth across it, and in expectation of the coming flood he should turn on he was barefooted. There was not any water, the riparian proprietors above having temporarily taken the liberty of cutting it off for their own uses, but he went

on damming just the same, and was greatly interested in coaxing the infantile current that remained through his little notch in the bank, and in making it go as far as possible for the refreshing of three pumpkin vines.

And here I beg indulgence in the tedium of remarking that the ground in question did not need any water, but rather a "cultivator" with a mule attached, and afterwards a hoe that would pass inspection. This man was but illustrating the ancient modes of Catalonia and California alike, and showing how a country whose great interest now is in railway rates under which to find a market for an enormous surplus, was formerly scarce able to raise more than enough for the sustenance of a sparse population who in their day possessed the choice of all situations and localities, with water galore.

Later, when I went over to pay him a visit, he was inclined to receive me distantly, if politely. But when he had finished to the very lips the little brown paper cigarette with a grain and a half of tobacco in it, I gave him one of the American abominations, which are considerably bigger, and his heart warmed to me. But he did not light the one I gave him, not for the reason the reader would have in not doing so, but because he wanted to get the entire good of it. Having tucked it away in the recesses of his apparel, I am quite sure that, taken to pieces and economically administered, that same bit of Virginia long-cut-tinctured-with-paregoric lasted him two or three days.

Sancho Panza, in California and elsewhere, always conveys to a stranger the impression of not knowing anything whatever. He is, once started, garrulous without saying anything, and loquacious after the manner of a parrot or a crow. His mind, like his life, runs round and round in a circle. Remind him of something; assert a fact; and something by way of assent or protest may result. I asked this man how old he was, and he replied that he did not know, adding the usual "*Quien sabe?*"

"Yes, you do," I said; "you are seventy-six."

"No. I am seventy-eight." This without any reference to the fact of his not knowing but a moment previously.

"And you are distinctly Spanish."

"Yes, I am a Spaniard;" with some pride, and evidently gratified at my discrimination in a matter that required no guessing at all.

"You were born here, and so was your father."

"*Si Señor; es muy verdad;*" and the old fellow began to look as though he intended to stop hoeing for a moment.

"And your grandfather was a Mission soldier and came with the Padres."

"It is true, that also; he was a soldier, and he came with the Franciscans. Who told you?"

"Nobody."

And he did stop hoeing, and with his hands on his hips seemed hesitating whether or not he had better look into my antecedents as a sorcerer.

"Come," I said, "tell me what you know about those times."

He removed his head-piece and began to collect his thoughts by fumbling for them in his hair. Finally getting some of the facts together, he said there were four missions—the reader knows there were twenty-one—one at San Diego, one at San Luis Rey, one at San Juan Capistrano, and the last of them at Santa Barbara. The two Fathers at Capistrano, he continued, went to all the others to say mass; they had charge of the whole business. That being about the end of his very accurate historical information, he paused, but went on scratching his head, and saying, "*Si Señor; todas,—todas.*"

The reader will understand that to every Spanish peasant his local priest is a bishop, or if he is not he ought to be, which is sufficient, and the places he has heard mentioned are practically the only ones there are, and as for the rest; well, *El Dios sabe*, and there an end.

"And about the Indians; were they many?"

"Los Indios?—eron muchos,—muchos."

He pronounced it "*moon*chos," thereby betraying, a hundred years after, his family origin among the peasantry of Catalonia. So I told him, at a venture but with an air of positively knowing, that his said grandfather was a Catalonian.

With still greater pride he acknowledged this statement also. Every unlettered Spaniard looks upon his province as being the chiefest one of Spain, very much as some of our forbears regarded Virginia in relation to her sister States and the world at large.

I asked him the old question: what became of all the Indians whom he himself remembered having seen. He replied at first with an expression which simply means that they were, and are not, indefinitely, but finally added that they all died. His remarks on this point were strongly in the line of a universal belief among Californians; that the Americans when they came purposely brought with them a Pandora's box which contained but one disease, but that one of sufficient malevolence to make up for all the others which that unfortunate woman let loose upon mankind. This belief will never be eradicated among the few old ones who are left to retain it. The more educated smile at this notion, but in their turn allege that the Americans "robbed" them. They do not say how, nor specifically when, and merely mean that provincial carelessness was pitted against the far-seeing wits of people who in those times did not usually come to California for their healths. It is quite noticeable that the robbery has

AN INDIAN WHO STAID CONVERTED.

now ceased, and that, with all the intensity of modern speculation, the later Californian is quite proof against the highwaymen who come in palace-cars.

My friend with the hoe went on with his digging, having apparently told me all he knew or had heard in the course of seventy-eight years. I give him briefly to the reader, not as a unique specimen, but as one common in all the corners of rural California. He could discern no motive in my questioning except to pass the time withal. The world was to him a thing vague, indefinite, unreal; a kingdom he never saw, an unread book. But he was not crude. The indefinable Spaniard was in his bones.

Away across the little creek there was a scattered collection of houses, placed here and there on the verge of the valley. The yellow hills lay behind them, the sun beat down upon them, and around them there was no tree or shade in a land where in ten years a fig will grow to shadow half an acre with the broad leaves from which was made the first apron a woman ever wore. But in California poverty is robbed of half its sting by a climate which renders something to eat the only actual necessity, and while the love of flowers is in the Spanish nature, a tree is too much trouble. Nearly all of Spain is a treeless country. The Spaniard has cut away the natural forest wherever he has wandered. There is a saying that the sylvan gods have in the course of ages become so angry with him that now he and a tree do not thrive in the same locality. The olive, the fruit that makes his face to shine with fatness, and the historic vine, are the only ones that cling to his waning fortunes.

I began the day with the Catalonian peasant whose stores of varied knowledge I have imperfectly bestowed upon the reader, and now a further thirst was upon me to know more of the class the California tourist never sees. Taking all risks of being supposed to be making parochial calls, I went my way across piles of melted adobe, through dismantled doorways, among all the debris of last winter's greenness and last generation's decay, toward the little creek whose sweet waters seemed to have sprung somewhere out of dryness, and to hurry swiftly away to suicide in the sea.

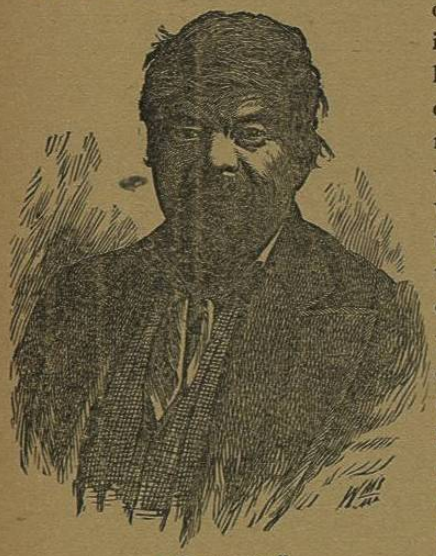
On my way I passed a little adobe where unquestionably there was an assortment of dogs. A huge and hideous tawny monster with but one eye lay basking in the sun, too old and too decrepit to pay attention. But a pert little one, a "cute" dog without a hair upon his back, came out and raised an outcry. Then an old woman appeared in the doorway and observed the situation. A single glance would convince the most skeptical that she was not an amiable old woman, but she took that little dog to task with some of the most voluptuous phrases of the Spanish tongue. "Come hither thou little thief," she said. "Hast thou no shame, to use thy tongue against a gentleman who but passes by?" Doing the best I could, I thanked her, and the little dog retreated past her within doors, receiving as he went by an adroit flip of his owner's apron which must at least have hurt his feelings.

A little further on I met in a shady lane near the stream a man who rode a horse and was leading

a second. There was a muddy place, and we met on opposite sides of it. He stopped his cavalcade with a sudden pull, and bade me pass first. In a narrow place on the other side two mounted *vaqueros* had roped a cow. In almost any other locality where men catch cattle about the horns with a flying noose, and, indeed, where they never do, a footman may go round as best he can. But these two untutored gentlemen proceeded to pull the cow out of the way bodily, and wait until I was past the difficulty. In an instant they were gone the way I came, the cow protesting. One of them pulled her along without much difficulty, and I regret to add that the other seemed to have her by the tail, and that he offered her an inducement by twisting it gently, and with an artistic appreciation of the effect of caudal torsion upon the average cow's feelings.

As I came nearer one of the little houses the effect was that of a picture seen somewhere long ago and almost forgotten. Four people sat in a row on the edge of a little porch; a man, a woman, a boy and a girl. The man leaned his arms upon his knees as people do who are accustomed to seats without backs, and the woman's chin was in her palms. The two children had the attitudes of youth the world over, and the girl was a comely child. But they were not Californians, but Mexicans. No one who has often seen the Aztec countenance will easily forget the indescribable something which marks its lineaments. There is the same similarity in all Mexican faces that there is in the faces of Egyptian sculptures, and there is, besides, a real or imagined kinship between the

lineaments of the Egyptian and the Mexican. The last is a face that causes people to come away and say that the curse of God rests upon the Republic of Mexico. It is an impression they have, drawn from an unknown source. The native Mexican is not a laughing man. A sadness dwells in the universal countenance; an inheritance, perhaps, from the old days of communal slavery when the Inca was lord of all; the times when the huge cylinder of carved granite which lies in an open court in the City of Mexico had a side of it made smoother than the rest by the dragging over it of bodies for human sacrifice. The native Mexican is also a man of greatly more ability than he has ever been given credit for. It must be rememembered that he was subjected to the demoralizing rule of Spain from the Conquest of Cortez to the year 1821, and yet recovered his country; that there are nine million Mexicans and less than two millions of Spaniards in Mexico now; that the greatest man Mexico ever produced,



A "MESTIZO."

Benito Juarez, a name venerated in the remotest mountain hamlet, was an "unmixed" Indian, and the cast of his face, resting beneath glass in the National museum, shows all the sadness which marks the universal countenance of his ancient race.

And this man and his wife were Mexicans, and I wondered how and why he came here. He told me in his first remark, and seemed unwilling to be mistaken for one of Spanish lineage. He came, as a soldier, to assist in marking out that boundary between the two countries whose homely last monument stands at the point where probably Junipero Serra first saw the harbor of San Diego. The theme started him upon his country and its ups and downs, and the subject of his profoundest hatred I found to be old General Santa Ana. He had it mostly wrong, and his accusations were not based upon the facts of the case. That man was undoubtedly bad, but he did not intentionally lose the battle of Buena Vista, or sell Texas at so much per square league, or line his private purse with California. In his vehemence this man named over to me all the territory Mexico had lost, and counted the prices on his fingers, and told me why until I felt ashamed of myself, and his woman sat and listened, and kept tally by nodding her head. He knew more than my Catalonian friend had ever heard of, and wherever he was wrong he stuck to it. But when I told him I had seen the place where Maximilian was shot the woman came closer and listened, and ejaculated "*y la pobre Carlotta*," with a sigh. The "touch of nature" which "makes the whole kin" exists in California, and

in the heart of the wife of an ex-private of the Mexican army, as it does everywhere else.

Like all his class, this man was also poor. He told me sadly that he owned nothing and was a day-laborer. I tried to argue the case with him, and pointed out how he might thrive by renting the very soil he lived on. He had the usual story: "I need ploughs, and horses and seed, and where is the money to buy them?" Would that some profound philosopher would explain to me why everywhere outside the lines of Saxon blood there exists this peculiar fatalism as an attachment to poverty.

There is one exception in the grotesque personality of the remarkable man from China. California, where these others toil and starve, is his bonanza. He can not explain, for he never learns to speak the English tongue, or the Spanish either, and he is besides not a man of explanations. Alone, or in pairs, he comes creeping unheralded down the valley, and his earliest care is to see some land-proprietor. So early in the morning that the fog almost hides him, one may see him on hands and knees, creeping about between his rows, never stopping, never looking up, working always. Just opposite this Mexican, on a little piece of ground deserving only the designation of a "patch," two Chinamen have earned eighteen hundred dollars in a single year. He is not a man of conventions; he never resolves this or that; he knows nothing about the labor question; he is hated for these very negative qualities, and imposed upon and oppressed in every conceivable way, yet by steady persistence he is the uppermost man in that savage contest that nature

and circumstance and organized society are waging against the toil by which the world lives. One is astonished at the results of his barbarian intellect in a land where he has no friends, and looking upon him one is half converted to the theory that the whole labor agitation is a mere Utopian search for a recipe that shall enable a man to be a producer and yet not labor.

Everywhere is John, friendless yet happy. Long ago he washed over all the tailings of the Argonaut, and tied his gains so securely in a corner of his raiment that no one knows whether he or the original miner got the most. Long ago he knew every nook and corner of California, and was a feature not alone of the by-streets and alleys of the town, but of all the rural nooks. The triangular acre left to the wild mustard at the mouth of a canyon is his world, and the neglected corner cut off by the highway or the railroad, his empire. He is almost of the old times, for he came among the first and was the perpetual victim of the Argonaut. Tens of thousands have come and gone since then; a host so lacking in individuality that they seem an endless procession of automatons. He is in no sense one of the proprietors of the country, for his opinion of it is that he does not wish to own it. He is a pilgrim and a stranger, with an affection for his native land which is as unusual and unique as all his other qualities are. Everybody knows him, not as an individual, but as a Chinaman. He takes the back seats, and the sides and corners, and the alleys and the tumble-downs. The native Californian, the Mexican immigrant, the Mestizo, all look down upon him and laugh at him,

while he makes more money every year than they will ever see, and it is very largely his toil, and certainly not theirs, that has made the present California at which they are surprised, and which they will never understand. Presently, whenever he wants it, he

A COUNTRY FAMILY.

will have this Mexican soldier's house, and till the ground the other is afraid of, and pay a cash rent, and go back to China wealthy.

Originally intended as the land of Nothing-to-do, rural California shows everywhere to-day the remains of that dissipated idea. Under a spreading sycamore

somebody is always slowly washing clothes. Upon the stony highways somebody is always walking slowly along. Wherever there is a bench a row of persons is always sitting. There are two words indispensable to life, and one of them is *todavia*—"not yet," and the other is *mañana*—"to-morrow." It is not that there is any intention of not doing at all; the idea is merely to wait a little, to see about it, to hasten slowly. For the same man who says "*mañana*" is capable of prolonged hardship without complaint, or of daily doing the same task over and over for fifty years. His head is idler than his hands. His few inventions are all in the domain of common life, and none of them seem traceable to a single individual. All he knows his father knew before him; all he believes is the property of the ages; all he suffers is the common lot. There was never before such a unity of purposes, opinions and ways in an entire community as exists in one of the places forgotten by the "boom." There are no "cranks." Every man goes without suspenders, and every woman has a shawl over her head. The scene is pleasant and the idea attractive. Except a mountain village in New Mexico, or mayhap a coast hamlet in New England, there is no other corner of America where this peace in daily life may be found. It is impossible to convey a sense of it in words. It is accompanied by a picturesqueness not only of scene, but of language and thought. There are no books here, yet the old provincial Spanish remains unchanged through the years. There are no newspapers, yet there is always something to talk about. There are no anniversaries

of their own, yet all the Fourths of July come and go unnoted, the one ridiculous gala-day of a people who have no church "fiestas," and who can do no better.

From the times of Miss Hannah More and "The Shepherd of Salisbury Plain," there have been many references to "decent poverty" as a virtue. But to carry the idea to the extent of everybody being decent and everybody poor in a whole community, has not been thought of. The idea is nevertheless carried out fully among that small remainder of the old times whose destiny it probably is to see the last of their kind who shall ever live north of the Mexican boundary on this continent. It is one of the puzzles, and the Americans can no more understand such a situation than the Californian can, in his turn, understand the ways and ideas of the Saxon. There is neither luxury nor squalor, neither plenty nor want. Where so much can be obtained, so can more likewise, and the process is almost endless. It is an axiom; self-evident and indisputable. Yet you must come away from the by-ways of California knowing that it is not an axiom, and not necessarily true. One has seen no squalor, heard no complaints, been asked for no alms, and has been treated as an equal. The things he has about him have excited no envy, not even remark. Ignorance and dignity, courtesy and independence, poverty and self-respect, have been found together. You have found no woman who did not know all the rules of ladyship, and no man who wore his hat indoors. Every man or woman you have met has saluted you without either solemnity or effusion,

and every little boy or girl has behaved as though carefully trained in good society. Yet they have lived, in all their generations, and time immemorial, in Spain and in California, beyond the extremest verge of luxury and outside of the remotest traditions of wealth. Decency, to some others an unattainable thing even after penury has gone, is to these an inheritance, and that elderly shepherd of Miss More becomes a bit of pious tawdriness by comparison.

The time must come, and soon, when there will be no more of this. The nooks and corners where it yet abides are passing away. Names, the melliflu-ous names they deliberately composed when there was plenty of time to stop and say them in will remain, even though San Bernardino has become "San Berdoon," and Los Angeles "Loss Ang," and San Francisco submits to a hideous abbreviation which dates back to a period when the commodity of time first began to be scarce in California. Since 1821 Spain has been slowly reclaiming her own again, not from across the sea, but through the cemetery and by Plato's doctrine. In a brief twenty-five years the very nook I have in my mind as I write has lost eight-tenths of its people, never returning and never replaced; dropping out of the unequal contest and away from the changed conditions; dead from Saxon contact; lost; gone.

This is but a little interior picture of Spanish fate and Indian fatality that may be reproduced a thou-sand times from the histories that cover only a hun-dred and ten years. The strange thing is that the

alleged reasons for the disappearance of the Indian are not those which entirely account for that of the Spanish-American. As for him, the few that may be included under the head of the "rising generation" are going by the shortest roads. The "saloon" com-pounds are his very evident passports. But all Span-iards, by immemorial custom, drink, and something in addition is also to be looked for. His race has fallen into a sleep. Repose in his surroundings, changeless custom, immemorial tradition, life in death, rest, peace, are his requirements. When I come again the old Catalonian will have ceased to irrigate his little patch, and the Mexican soldier will have joined his regiment. The singers of love-songs in the wayside saloon will have ceased, and the dogs will have lost a mistress. The whole locality will be changed and nothing but the hills, the winding valleys and eternal sunshine will seem familiar. Tradition and a Spanish name will remind the passing stranger, perhaps, that here for more than a century flourished all the quaintness of monk, soldier and peasant, and that from here departed the last days of Old California.