

## A CAST FOR FORTUNE.

[CHAPTER VIII. Continued.]

"Ah, Mr. Derwent," he said, cordially, "I am delighted to see you here. You look better already. A little society is a good thing; although I must warn you that we can offer you very little variety in line at Miraflores."

Derwent replied very sincerely that it was impossible to desire better society than he found at Miraflores. "But I have heard," he said, "that most Mexican proprietors of large estates do not live on them, because of their loneliness."

"It is, unfortunately, true," answered his host. "The estates are generally so large, and the distances from one to another so great, that wealthy Mexicans do not, as a rule, live on their haciendas, except for a few weeks in the course of the year."

"That is what I was told when I expressed a desire to see something of life on an hacienda," said Derwent. "Nobody lives on the haciendas but the agents," I was assured. "There is no life there of the kind you fancy. Mexicans of the higher class all live in the capital or abroad."

"Allowing for the exceptions," said Don Maurizio, "that was a correct statement. And the consequence is that half the haciendas of Mexico are for sale, destined before long to pass into the hands of aliens. When men leave their estates in the control of agents, the result is mismanagement in all respects. Who knows this better than an Irishman? Absenteeism has been the curse of my country; and it is in a great degree the curse of Mexico. So when I became a Mexican I determined that I would not follow the prevailing fashion. Great estates came into my hands, and I resolved at once to administer them myself. I have done so for twenty years, and I am rather proud of the result."

"And you have not found it very irksome to live on an hacienda?"

"I cannot understand how a man can find anything irksome which is in the clear line of duty and which affords abundant occupation for his hands and head. I have found infinite pleasure as well as infinite employment in my life. An Irishman from Galway naturally loves everything connected with a free, out-door life; and I have taught my daughter to love it as I do myself. She is an enthusiastic horsewoman, and we live in the saddle half our time. By the bye, if you like riding, I can give you a good mount."

Derwent's eyes brightened. "I am a Southerner," he said, as if that were answer enough. "Half of my life, I have spent in Louisiana, and half in the blue grass region of Kentucky—my mother belonging to the first, and my father to the last. Not even in Galway do you think more of riding than we do."

"And in neither are there such plains over which to ride as in Mexico, I am sure," said Dona Zarifa. "Ah, it is like flying through the air to put one's horse at his best speed and ride for miles over our great mesas."

Her delicate nostril dilated as if she inhaled the breezes sweeping over the wide leagues of space of which she spoke; and Derwent, looking at her, felt a quick thrill at the thought that he might be permitted some day to ride by her side.

"And you really, then, spend all of your time here?" he asked, addressing Maurizio.

"Here at Miraflores?" Oh, no," that gentleman replied. "I have another large hacienda in the Bajío—you know that stretch of fertile country between Irapuato and Querétaro? I divide my time between that place and this with a month or two now and then in Mexico. But, rich, productive, and beautiful, too, as the Bajío is, both my daughter and myself prefer this wider country; and if we were called upon to name our home I think we should say Miraflores."

"Without doubt," said Dona Zarifa. "There is no place in the world so dear to me as this."

"That is very good for a girl who is fresh from a season in Paris, is it not?" said Dona Maurizio, as he laid his hand caressingly on her wrist.

She placed her other hand over his, and looked up at him with her dark eyes melting into a more liquid softness than they had known before. "You were not in Paris," she said, with an enchanting smile.

"No, thank heaven," he answered, gayly. "What should a Mexican hacienda do, with his heart among his flocks and herds, do there? But go, *carina mia*, and give us some music. Let Mr. Derwent see what he thinks of our Mexican airs."

She rose instantly and moved across the floor—a perfect picture of grace. Derwent thought, in her soft, shimmering draperies, and with her natural, unstudied charm of step and bearing. Sitting down to the piano, she struck a few chords and began to sing in a contralto so rich and sweet that it was like notes drawn from a violin by a master hand, rather than the sounds of the human voice. What she sang her listener did not know,—the words were Spanish,—but the air was wild, haunting, mournful, and yet passionate in the extreme. As he listened, he seemed to see the rugged mountain-passes, the great Sierras like storm-tossed waves, the vast expanse of mighty plains, the sad, gentle faces and passionate eyes of the people; then the strain sank to a lower key, a tender sweetness stole into it, as though tropical flowers were breathing their fragrance out on the starry night, and with one last burst of sad, strange melody it ended.

"Oh, yes, it is Mexican," said Don Maurizio,—"one of the wild native airs that linger among the people and that are now and then caught and formulated by the composers."

"Children Cry for Pitcher's Castoria."

"What did it say to you, señor?" asked Zarifa, turning around.

He told what it had suggested and she smiled as if pleased. "A girl is relating how her lover had been killed among the wild mountains, and how her own heart is broken," she said. "At the close she wanders back to memories of their love, of how in the summer night he would come and sing beneath her window. Then she remembers that he is dead, and ends with a cry of despair."

"A very mournful *motif*," said Don Maurizio. "Give us something a little more cheerful, and then I will play physician and order Mr. Derwent to bed."

"Sing an *Ave Maria*, my child," said a quiet voice at the door; and as Derwent looked in that direction he saw a tall, slender man, wearing the cassock of a priest, enter the room.

"This is a member of our family whom you would have met earlier if he had not been absent until to-day," said Don Maurizio,—"our good friend and chaplain, Padre Francisco."

There was something very charming in the dark, gentle face, with finely-outlined features and soft brown eyes that looked at Derwent with a smile as they shook hands.

"I am grieved to hear of your accident, señor," he said, in very good English. "As Don Maurizio has remarked, I have been away for two weeks, else I should have expressed my regret sooner. But you are getting well?"

Derwent replied suitably, and then, turning to Dona Zarifa, said, "I hope that, since I am under orders to retire, señorita, you will sing at least one more song before I go."

"I will sing the *Ave Maria* for which *el padre* has asked," she replied. "I think you will like that."

Derwent was very sure of it, when he heard the strains of Cherubini's *Ave Maria*. Often as he heard this beautiful song before, it was always in a soprano arrangement, and he thought that he had never appreciated its exquisite harmonies until he heard them rendered by Dona Zarifa's rich contralto tones. She sang it like a prayer; and the noble strains lingered in his ear long after he had said good night and retired to his chamber.

They haunted him after he had laid his head on his pillow. Still in his memory vibrated the full, mellow notes of the enchanting voice, and before his eyes floated a picture of the silken-draped form, with its silver ornaments, and the beautiful face out of which shone the star-like splendor of the dark eyes.

It was not strange, that his last thought before falling asleep was to say to himself, severely, "I must take care that I am not such a fool as to fall in love with Dona Zarifa."

CHAPTER IX.

When Derwent opened his eyes the next morning, bars of golden sunshine were lying on the red tiles of the floor, and Ramon stood by his bedside, bearing the coffee to which he always looked forward as a distinct pleasure. His shoulder was less painful, and the recollection that he was to spend an indefinite time amid these charming surroundings was invigorating as a tonic. To the "Buenos días, señor. Cometa usted!" of Ramon he answered "Muy bueno, gracias," with so much emphasis that the face of the attendant lighted up with a bright smile, and he said, "Bueno! bueno!" with an air of commendation, as he set the tray down.

A little later, after the doctor had paid his visit, and had also said "Bueno!" approvingly over the progress of the shoulder, Ramon came in and announced that *el padre* desired to see the señor.

"Beg him to enter," said Derwent, who had been very much pleased by the gentle, refined face of the priest. He anticipated an agreeable visit, in which he could ask much concerning the country of one intimately acquainted with its inner life; but he was by no means prepared for the errand on which it soon transpired that Padre Francisco had come.

"Dona Zarifa," said the priest, after all due inquiries had been made, "thinks that perhaps you are strong enough now for a little outdoor exercise, and that you may like to see something of the hacienda,—at least of the portion which lies immediately around the *casa grande*. If you care to go, she and I will be happy for you to accompany us on our usual morning round."

"I shall be delighted," answered Derwent. A man of another stamp might have been disappointed that he was not to have a *tele-tele* with his fair hostess, but Derwent was not only too much a man of the world to have expected such a thing in a country with the customs of Continental Europe, but he really did not desire it. He had nothing to say to Dona Zarifa that the whole world might not hear; and he was very sure that the society of the padre would in no degree detract from his enjoyment of her companionship.

They found her in the court when they came out, standing under the shade of one of the Moorish arches, dressed as Derwent had seen her first, in black, and draped with lace, which she wore in the graceful Spanish fashion over her head. She gave him her hand, asked how he was feeling, and if he was sure that a walk would not fatigue him. "You must promise," she said, "that you will let us know as soon as you feel the least weary. Now, *padre mio*, I think we are ready."

They passed through the wide, vaulted passage, paved as a *portico*, which led to the front of the house, and out into the arcade which ran the length of the long building, and the great arches of which framed in a succession of pictures the magnificent expanse of the plain.

[To be continued.]

Pitcher's Castoria.

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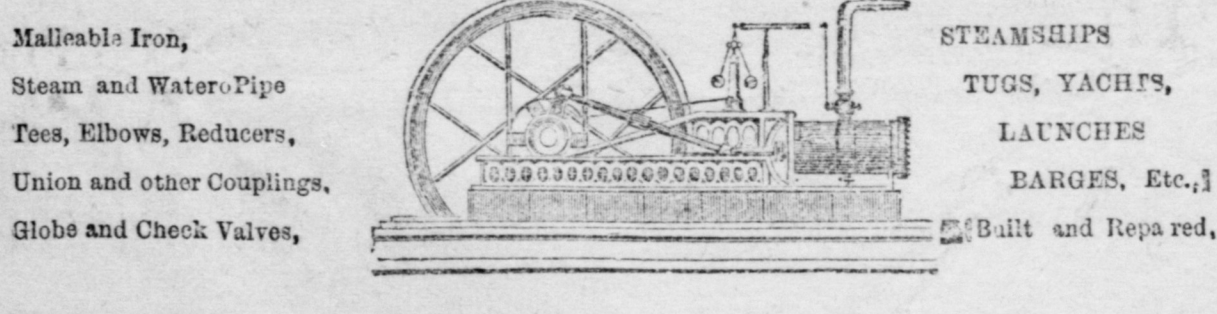
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