

LITERATURE, &c.

The British Magazines.

From Chambers's Edinburgh Journal.

THE SILVER MINE.

A young cavalier was riding down a street in the city of Mexico leading towards the Alameda, when his own name, pronounced in piteous accents, arrested his attention and caused him to rein in his steed.

'Oh, Don Vicente, noble caballero, have pity on me, *por el amor de Dios*; for charity, good señor, save a poor Indian, who is innocent as the child unbaptised.'

The person who uttered this appeal was evidently, from his looks, his garb, and his speech, one of that unfortunate race who, originally lords of all the Mexican soil, have been for centuries in reality, if not in name, the serfs of their Spanish conquerors. The cavalier could even distinguish by his pronunciation that he was an Indian of the Tarascan tribe, who differ in language, as well as in some traits of character, from the Aztecs, or proper Mexicans. His situation sufficiently accounted for the vehemence of his intreaty, since he was then in the clutches of two sturdy constables, who grasped him by the shoulders, and hurried him forward with the least possible regard to his personal comfort. They stopped, however, when Don Vicente turned his horse and rode towards them, saying, 'what is the matter aguziles? Who is this man and what has he done?'

To this question, put by a cavalier, whose rich dress and high bearing bespoke his claims to attention, one of the aguziles replied with gruff civility, that the sanguinary ruffian had just stabbed a white man, a water-carrier, in an adjoining street, and they were conveying him to the *acordada*, or city jail, to await his trial. The 'sanguinary ruffian,' who by the way was a small, simple looking man, the very personification of pacific meekness, earnestly protested his innocence of the crime. He declared that he had merely stepped from curiosity to witness the progress of a game of monte, which was going on in the street; there were many other bystanders, some of whom were betting on the fortunes of the principal gamblers. At length, he said, a quarrel had arisen, though about what he did not exactly know. Their knives were drawn, and presently a man fell dead, stabbed to the heart. Some of the people ran away, and among them a *carbonero*, or coal porter, a large, strong, black-bearded man, who, he believed was the real culprit. As for himself, he waited to see what would be done with the dead man; and when the police came up, to his amazement, two or three of those present, and whom he had seen talking with the *carbonero*, had pointed him out as the guilty person; and that was all he knew about it.

'But, *hombres*,' said the cavalier to the officers, 'this Indian carries no knife. How could he have stabbed the man?'

'Oh sir,' replied the oldest aguzil, 'that is the very proof of his guilt. The murdered man was stabbed with his own knife, drawn out of his belt before he had any warning of the intention. It is a true piece of Indian craft and villainy.'

'Do not believe it, noble Don Vicente,' replied the Indian. 'Why should I murder a man whom I never saw before? I a poor laborer from Zitacuaro, who came to the city yesterday for the first time in my life.'

'Zitacuaro, did you say?' asked the young man, looking earnestly at the Indian. 'It seems to me that I have seen your face before? How does it happen that you know my name?'

'Oh, Don Vicente,' replied the Indian, 'I have seen you many times, when you have ridden by the village where I live to the hacienda of Loyazaga.'

The young cavalier blushed at this reply, and then answered with a smile—'It is very possible; and for the sake of that recollection, I will not quit you until I have made further inquiry into this strange matter. My worthy friends,' he said to the aguziles, as your time is valuable, and the proverb says that justice must have the wherewithal to subsist, you will not refuse me the favor of dividing this doubt between you. And now, oblige me by returning with your prisoner to the spot where the murder took place.'

The officers did not hesitate to obey a command so agreeably enforced, and immediately led the way back to the place in question. A number of men were still collected about it, pursuing their various occupations and amusements of gambling, gossiping, or chaffing, as calmly as though nothing of importance had taken place among them. Some sensation, however, was created by the return of the aguziles with the Indian, followed by Don Vicente, especially when the latter rode into the midst of the crowd, and inquired for the witnesses to the fight and the homicide. It soon appeared that though almost all had been spectators of the quarrel, very few had actually seen the man killed. Of those who had before been loquacious in asserting the guilt of the Indian, the greater number now held their tongues, or disavowed any positive knowledge of the fact. Two only, both of whom were *carboneros*, stood out stoutly for the truth of their former testimony; and although Vicente had little doubt that the accusation was a villainous plot, concocted to screen the real criminal by the sacrifice of a despised and friendless Indian, yet as he had no means of proving the innocence of the latter, he was obliged to allow the aguziles to convey him to the prison. He promised the poor fellow, however, that he should not be forgotten, and with this assurance

Paquo Tormes—for such, it appeared, was his name—suffered himself to be led quietly away without another word of remonstrance.

Don Vicente was much annoyed to find that, while he was engaged in this act of benevolence, the time had slipped by during which he should have been upon the Alameda. Any one, indeed, could have seen at a glance that the handsome young cavalier was equipped for an appearance on that rendezvous of the Mexican *beau monde*. His wide-brimmed gold-laced hat, his embroidered jacket, trimmed with costly fur, his Guadalajara boots of stamped leather, his enormous silver spurs, of more than a pound weight each, his superb *manga*, or riding mantle, thrown over the front of his silver-plated saddle, the *anguera*, or housings, of stamped leather, fringed with silver, which nearly covered his horse, were all in the highest style of the native fashion. It was now with some mortification that he beheld several of his acquaintances returning from their accustomed ride, and was greeted by them with inquiries as to the cause of his non-appearance. It is but fair to say, however, that his vexation had nothing to do with disappointed vanity, but originated in a feeling of a gentler nature. A particular carriage was expected to be seen that day on the Alameda, containing at least one pair of the brightest eyes in Mexico; and it was before this vehicle that Don Vicente Aldama had intended to make his handsome *bracador*, or prancing steed, display its most graceful caracoles, in the hope, or, sooth to say, the assurance of attracting an approving glance from the said sparkling orbs. His friends, indeed, did not fail to inform him that the carriage of the Conde de Loyazaga had passed three or four times up and down the Alameda; and that the eyes of Donna Catalina had been seen in it as bright as ever, but roving about very uneasily; whilst the pretty face to which they belonged were a very unusual expression of gravity and displeasure; all of which facts they related for his especial gratification. Don Vicente, however, did not consider the information in the least satisfactory, until it suddenly occurred to him that the incident which had detained him would form an excellent reason for a visit on the following morning, in order to request Donna Catalina's advice on the subject, and to solicit her interest with her father on behalf of the Indian; for the Count de Loyazaga was known to have great influence with the Viceroy, the Marquis de Mendoza who then governed Mexico. Congratulating himself on this bright idea, Don Vicente felt able to retort the raillery of his friends in a corresponding tone, and took his way homeward in joyous spirits.

Vicente Aldama was the descendant of a fortunate companion of Cortes, who had transmitted to his posterity large possessions in various parts of the new land which he had helped to conquer. The father of Vicente had been reckoned among the wealthiest proprietors of the New Spain, at a time when the gentry of that country comprised the richest individuals in the world. But in one fatal night he lost, at the gambling festival of San Augustine, six of his seven great estates; and the next morning he was found dead in his room, with a pistol in his hand and a bullet through his brain—a self-immolated victim to the evil divinity that has tempted so many to their ruin. This dreadful catastrophe had at least one good effect, as it gave to his son, then a youth of fifteen, a salutary horror of the gaming table, which he never afterwards approached. The income of his remaining hacienda was sufficient to enable him to live in handsome style both in the capital and at his country-house, between which, like most Mexican proprietors, he divided his time pretty equally. Now it happened that the estate of Don Vicente was situated at easy visiting distance—as it is there considered—of about six leagues from the seat of the wealthy Conde de Loyazaga, and as the Count had been the friend of his father, the young man was accustomed occasionally to ride over for the purpose of paying his respects to his noble neighbor. As he grew older and better able to appreciate the lessons of wisdom and experience which flowed from the lips of the count, it was very natural in the opinion of the latter, that the visits of the youth should become more and more frequent. The rest of the family, however, including Donna Catalina, the nobleman's bright-eyed daughter, ascribed these continual re-appearances of Don Vicente, to a very different cause of attraction. And even the count himself—conceited old fool as he was—began to have his suspicions.

This state of affairs will account for the anxiety and intrepidity with which Don Vicente, on the day after the occurrence of the incident just related, presented himself at the stately town mansion of the count. The young lady, who was alone, received him with a cloud on her brow; but the shade of displeasure instantly passed away, when her lover related the accident which had detained him from the Alameda on the previous day. Donna Catalina's interest in poor Paquo proved to be greater than he had anticipated. She thought she recollected the name, as belonging to one of the numerous laborers who were occasionally employed on her father's estate in the season of harvest; and with her sex's natural sensibility in the cause of the injured, she offered instantly to employ all her resources in his behalf.

'I do not think that we should apply to my father at once,' she said, 'until we have tried other means. He has an aversion to asking favors of the viceroy; they cost too much you know,' she added with a smile. 'But an idea has just struck me respecting the evidence which, you say, is wanting. You men, Don Vicente, always imagine that you have a mon-

opoly of sense and ingenuity in such matters, but we will try for once what woman's wit can do. Go, my friend, to your lawyer, and ask his advice, while I make some inquiry in my own way. Do not be mortified if I succeed where you are both at fault.'

Although Vicente was somewhat puzzled by this speech, he felt that he could do no better than trust to Donna Catalina's quick intelligence, of which he had had many previous proofs, and he took his leave very well contented with the position of his own affairs, as well as those of poor Paquo. Donna Catalina immediately ordered her carriage, and drove at once to the spot where the murder had taken place. Her 'woman's wit' had suggested to her, that in the case of a disturbance in the streets, the female inhabitants of the neighboring houses would be very likely drawn to the upper windows or balconies, from whence they would have a good view of whatever took place. A very few inquiries sufficed to prove the correctness of her supposition. In the third house which she entered she found that the mistress—the wife of a respectable tradesman—with her two grown up daughters and their maid servant, had all witnessed the quarrel from its commencement to the end. They were certain that the murderer was not an Indian, but a tall, strong man, with a thick black beard, and dressed like a *carbonero*. A messenger, despatched without delay to Don Vicente, informed him of this satisfactory discovery; and the strength of his affection may be judged from the fact, that he was more pleased than mortified by this proof of his mistress's superior acuteness. With the aid of his lawyer, he at once took the necessary steps for procuring the liberation of the prisoner. The regular forms of Spanish law required a few days' delay before this could be effected; but at length the Indian was released, and, as Vicente soon learned, immediately left the city, without stopping to thank either of the benefactors to whose exertions he owed his escape. Vicente, however, was too well accustomed to the peculiar character and manners of the Indians to be much surprised at this omission. He felt assured that Paquo would almost as soon have faced a loaded cannon as have entered the mansion of a wealthy proprietor, or a great noble, for the purpose of making a formal speech to the master or mistress of it.

Of a very similar kind were the sensations of Vicente himself, a few days afterwards, when he approached the residence of the Count de Loyazaga, with the intention of making a solemn proposal—not to Donna Catalina, of whose sentiments he had before pretty well assured himself, but to her father, who, he had reason to fear, might not be found so propitious. The result proved that his presentiments were only too well founded. The old noble drew himself up with a degree of hauteur and pomposity unusual even in him, and expressed his wonder that a young man, whom he had always treated as a friend, should have imposed upon him so unpleasant a duty as that of declining his alliance. He had a great regard for Don Vicente, both for his father's sake and his own merits, but really—not to speak of the difference of rank, which ought to be considered—the disparity of fortune put such an alliance quite out of the question. Besides, he added with great stateliness, he had already nearly concluded a treaty for the marriage of his daughter with the son of the Marquis of San Gregorio, which connexion he considered most eligible in every point of view. It would always give him pleasure to see Don Vicente Aldama, either in town or at his country seat, on the footing of a valued acquaintance; but really his young friend must himself see that his present proposals were very ill-considered and altogether inadmissible.

What reply could Vicente make to such a speech? Could he deny his own comparative poverty, or the immense wealth of the marquis of San Gregorio, whose son, by the way, he knew to be a pleasant compound of sot, gambler and fool? Could he remind the count that his own nobility was not of very ancient date, his grandfather having been a poor woodcutter, who had had the good luck to discover a silver mine, with the produce of which he bought his title and estates? Neither of these courses seemed to be exactly feasible; and poor Vicente could only make his bow (which he did with excessive stiffness) to the proud and selfish old noble, and take his way home in a state of mind approaching to distraction.

On reaching his house, he was surprised to find Paquo waiting in the entrance-hall, accompanied by another Indian, whose white hair and wrinkled face gave evidence of extreme age. Even in his present dejection, Vicente experienced a momentary pleasure at the sight of one whom he had befriended, and in whom Catalina had taken an interest. This feeling of pleasure was all the reward which he had either expected or desired for his charitable exertions.

'Well Paquo,' he said, 'I am glad to see you here once more, and your father with you, to testify your gratitude. But you must not forget that the Lady Catalina, is the person to whom you are most indebted.'

'This is not my father,' said the Indian, scratching his head, as though in some perplexity. 'He is—he is—my *itzchingamaramaxtegni*.'

'What is all that?' asked Vicente, laughing. 'You forget, Paquo, that I do not understand Tarascan.'

'It means,' replied the Indian rubbing his brow, in deep meditation; 'oh yes: it means

* The reader does not vouch for the literal correctness of this word; it is possible that a few syllables may have been omitted.

that he is the brother-in-law of my wife's grandfather. He lives at Trinanda, near Esparza, in the mountains of the Sierra Madre.'

'Vaya, Paquo,' said Vicente, gaily; 'you must be very worthy man, if your relatives come from so great a distance to show their interest in you.'

'Yes,' replied Paquo, with great simplicity; 'and my uncle is a very good man too, but he does not speak Castilian. He has brought something to show you, señor.'

'Poquo then addressed a few words in Tarascan to the old Indian, who advanced and laid at Vicente's feet a bundle carefully tied up in a blue cotton cloth. When opened it was found to be filled with lumps of a grey mineral substance. Vicente took up one of them, and after closely examining it, exclaimed in some surprise—'Why, hombre, this is silver ore of the very richest quality! From whence do you bring it? Is your uncle a miner?'

'No, señor,' replied the Indian, 'but this is the case: many years before I was born, when my uncle here was a young man, he was travelling over the Sierra Madre. The night came on very cold, so he made a great fire, and lay down to sleep beside it; and in the morning, when he awoke, he saw in the ashes something shining. He looked and found that it was silver; and he knew that he had discovered a very rich mine. So he covered it up with earth and stones, and he came away and told his own family, and no one else; and since then we have kept it secret until this day. Now we have brought the ore to you, señor, to show that the story is true; and if you will go with my uncle and me, we will point out the spot.' And here Paquo stopped short.

'You wish me to work the mine, I suppose,' said Vicente, 'and share the proceeds with you?'

Paquo did not at first precisely understand this question; but when he was made to comprehend it, he shook his head, and said gravely, 'What could we poor Indians do with a silver mine? But perhaps you will give us something to buy tobacco with, and some new clothes?'

'What will I net do for you, my good Paquo,' said Vicente, with emotion, 'if your story proves true?'

The young man's voice trembled with excitement, for the visions which now unfolded themselves before his mental sight, almost dazzled and confused him by their brightness. He wrote a hasty note to Catalina, imploring her to defer her consent to any marriage which her father might propose for only a single month, by which time he had strong hopes of a favorable change in his position. Then talking with him two or three armed attendants (for the roads of Mexico were no safer in those days than at present), and an experienced miner, he set out on horseback for the Sierra Madre, distant about forty leagues from the capital.

A Mexican Indian can rarely be induced to mount a horse; and in this instance Paquo and his venerable relative proceeded the party on foot, at the usual regular trot in which the natives make their journeys. Notwithstanding the great age of the elder Indian, he kept ahead of the horses all the way, without appearing in the least fatigued on their arrival at the mountains. The silver vein was found exactly as he had represented it, 'cropping out' at the surface of the ground; and the miner declared that there could hardly be a doubt of the abundance of the mineral wealth which it contained. Vicente took instant measures for claiming, or, as it is called in Mexico, 'denouncing' the newly discovered mine, by laying an information before the proper tribunal, and commencing the necessary works for the extraction of the metal: this being all that is requisite in that country to give a complete property in any mine, without reference to the previous ownership of the land in which it is found.

In less than a month the miner's predictions were amply verified. By that time it was known all over Mexico that Vicente Aldama was working a 'clavo,' or deposit of ore, which had already produced him fifty thousand dollars. The Conde de Loyazaga, therefore, with a promptitude which did honor to his paternal sensibility, complied with his daughter's request, first to defer, and to break off entirely, the treaty with the Marquis San Gregorio. He still declared however, that he could not think of giving his daughter's hand to any one under his own rank; and possibly this declaration was the remote cause of an announcement which, before the close of the year, created some interest, though not much surprise in the city—namely, that Vicente Aldama had just been created Count of Esparza: a title for which, it was said, he had given half a million of dollars; but probably to him, with a seemingly inexhaustible mine at his command, both the money and the title appeared of equally trifling value, compared with the greater treasure which they were the means of procuring him.

The traditional account from which the foregoing narrative has been derived, does not enlighten us with respect to the subsequent history of the personages to whom it relates. All that is certainly known is, that the fortune of the Aldama family, or at least a large portion of it, has survived the revolution which has swept away their costly title, along with much other rubbish equally expensive and worthless.

TIGHT LACING.—A learned doctor, referring to tight lacing, avers that it is a public benefit, inasmuch as it kills all the foolish girls, and leaves the wise ones to grow to be women.