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ADVENTURES IN
MEXICO

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From Vera Cruz to Chihuahua in
the Days of the Mexican War

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CHAPTER XIV

THE UNCHANGING MEXICAN

THE city of Durango * may be considered as the Ultima Thule of the civilised portion of Mexico. Beyond it, to the north and north-west, stretch away the vast uncultivated and unpeopled plains of Chihuahua, the Bolson de Mapimi, and the arid deserts of the Gila. In the oases of these, wild and hostile tribes of Indians have their dwelling-places, from which they continually descend upon the border settlements and haciendas, sweeping off the herds of horses and mules, and barbarously killing the unarmed peasantry. This warfare — if warfare it can be called, where the aggression and bloodshed are on one side only, and passive endurance on the other — has existed from immemorial time; and the wonder is that the country has not long since been abandoned by the persecuted inhabitants, who at all seasons are subject to their attacks.

* The city was founded in 1559, by Velasco el Primero, Viceroy of New Spain, previous to which it was a presidio, or fortified post, to protect the frontier from the incursions of the Indians (Chichimees).

The Apaches, whose country borders upon the department of Durango, are untiring and incessant in their hostility against the whites; and, being near neighbors, are enabled to act with great rapidity against the haciendas and ranchos on the frontier. They are a treacherous and cowardly race of Indians, and seldom attack even the Mexican save by treachery and ambuscade. When they have carried off a number of horses and mules sufficient for their present wants, they send a deputation to the governors of Durango and Chihuahua to express their anxiety for peace. This is invariably granted them, and then *en paz* they resort to the frontier villages, and even the capital of the department, for the purpose of trade and amusement. The animals they have stolen in Durango and Chihuahua they find a ready market for in New Mexico and Sonora; and this traffic is most unblushingly carried on, and countenanced by the authorities of the respective states.

But the most formidable enemy, and most feared and dreaded by the inhabitants of Durango and Chihuahua, are the warlike Comanches, who, from their distant prairie country beyond the Del Norte and Rio Pecos, at certain seasons of the year, and annually, undertake regularly organised expeditions into these states, and frequently far into the

interior (as last year to the vicinity of Sombrete), for the purpose of procuring animals and slaves, carrying off the young boys and girls, and massacring the adults in the most wholesale and barbarous manner.

So regular are these expeditions, that in the Comanche calendar the month of September is known as the *Mexico moon*, as the other months are designated the buffalo moon, the young bear moon, the corn moon, &c. They generally invade the country in three different divisions, of from two to five hundred warriors in each. One, the most southern, passes the Rio Grande between the old presidios of San Juan and the mouth of the Pecos, and harries the fertile plains and wealthy haciendas of El Valle de San Bartolomo, the Rio Florido, San José del Parral, and the Rio Nasas. Every year their incursions extend farther into the interior, as the frontier haciendas become depopulated by their ravages, and the villages deserted and laid waste. For days together, in the Bolson de Mapimi, I traversed a country completely deserted on this account, passing through ruined villages untrodden for years by the foot of man.

The central division enters between the Presidio del Norte and Monclova, where they join the party coming in from the north, and, passing the moun-

tains of Mapimi and traversing a desert country destitute of water, where they suffer the greatest privations, ravage the valleys of Mapimi, Guajoquilla, and Chihuahua, and even the haciendas at the foot of the Sierra Madre. It appears incredible that no steps are taken to protect the country from this invasion, which does not take the inhabitants on a sudden or unawares, but at certain and regular seasons and from known points. Troops are certainly employed *nominally* to check the Indians, but very rarely attack them, although the Comanches give every opportunity; and, thoroughly despising them, meet them on the open field, and with equal numbers almost invariably defeat the regular troops. The people themselves are unable to offer any resistance, however well inclined they may be to do so, as it has always been the policy of the government to keep them unarmed; and, being unacquainted with the use of weapons, when placed in their hands, they have no confidence, and offer but a feeble resistance. So perfectly aware of this fact are the Comanches, that they never hesitate to attack superior numbers. When in small parties the Mexicans never resist, even if armed, but fall upon their knees and cry for mercy. Sometimes, however, goaded by the murder of their families and friends, the rancheros collect together, and, armed with bows

and arrows and slings and stones, go out to meet the Indians (as occurred when I was passing), and are slaughtered like sheep.

In the fall of last year, 1845, and at the present moment, 1846, the Indians have been more audacious than ever was known in previous years. It may be, that in the present instance they are rendered more daring by the knowledge of the war between the United States and Mexico, and the supposition that the troops would consequently be withdrawn from the scene of their operations. They are now (September) overrunning the whole department of Durango and Chihuahua, have cut off all communication, and defeated in two pitched battles the regular troops sent against them. Upwards of ten thousand head of horses and mules have already been carried off, and scarcely has a hacienda or rancho on the frontier been unvisited, and everywhere the people have been killed or captured. The roads are impassable, all traffic is stopped, the ranchos barricaded, and the inhabitants afraid to venture out of their doors. The posts and expresses travel at night, avoiding the roads, and intelligence is brought in daily of massacres and harrings.

My servants refused to proceed farther; nor would money induce a Duranguero to risk his scalp. Every one predicted certain destruction if

I ventured to cross the plains to Chihuahua, as the road lay in the very midst of the scenes of the Indian ravages. My hostess, with tears in her eyes, implored me not to attempt the journey; but my mind was made up to proceed, and alone, if I could not induce a mozo to accompany me. I had resolved to reach New Mexico by a certain time, and in travelling through a dangerous country laid it down as a principle not to be deterred by risks, but to "go ahead," and trust to fortune and a sharp look-out.

I had made preparations for my departure, and had given up any hope of procuring a mozo, when, at the eleventh hour, one presented himself, in the person of one of the most rascally-looking natives that ever stuck knife into his master. Asking him what induced him to run the risk of accompanying me, he answered that, being "*muy pobre*" [very poor] and unable to procure a living (the road was shut to him), and hearing that "*su merced*"—my worship—had offered high wages, he had determined to volunteer; being, moreover, as he assured me, "*muy valiente y aficionado a manejar las armas*—very valiant and accustomed to the use of arms." The end of it was that I engaged him, although the man bore a notoriously bad character, and was more than suspected of being a ladron of the worst description. But it was Hobson's

choice at the time, and I did not hesitate to take him, trusting to myself to take care that he did not play me false. I was, however, a little shaken when the same evening a man accosted me as I was walking in the streets with an English gentleman, a resident in Durango, and informed me that my new mozo was at that moment in a pulque-shop, where, after imbibing more than was good for him, he had confided to a friend, and in the hearing of the man who now gave the information, his intention to ease me of my goods and chattels and animals, premising that, as he had heard from my late servants that I intrusted my mozo with arms and generally rode in advance, it would be an easy matter some fine morning to administer *un pistol-etazo en la espalda* — a pistol-ball in my back — and make off with the property to Chihuahua or Sonora, where he would have no difficulty in disposing of the plunder. However, I paid no attention to this story, thinking that, if true, it was merely a drunken boast.

As Durango may be called the limit of Mexico proper and its *soi-disant* civilization, it may not be out of place to take a hasty glance at the general features of the country, the social and moral condition of the people, and the impressions conveyed to my mind in my journey through it.

There are many causes, physical and moral,

which prevent Mexico from progressing in prosperity and civilization. Although possessing a vast territory, which embraces all the varieties of climate of the temperate and torrid zones, with a rich and prolific soil capable of yielding every natural production of the known world, yet these natural advantages are counter-balanced by obstacles, which prevent their being as profitable to the inhabitants as might naturally be expected, and in a great measure render them negative and of no avail.

A glance at the physical geography of Mexico will show that the extensive and fertile table-lands of the central region are isolated, and, as it were, cut off from communication with the coast, by their position on the ridge of the Cordilleras, and the insurmountable obstacles to a practicable traffic presented by the escarpments of the *terraces*, the steps, as it were, from the elevated table-lands to the maritime districts, and the tropical regions of the interior. The country is also destitute of navigable rivers, and possesses but two of even moderate size — the Rio Grande del Norte, which runs into the Gulf of Mexico, and the Rio Grande, or Colorado of the West, which falls into the Pacific Ocean. Its eastern coast is swept at certain seasons by fearful tempests, and presents not one sheltering harbor or secure roadstead. The trop-

ical region, subject to fatal malaria, is almost excluded to the settlement of the white population, and consequently its natural riches are almost entirely neglected and unappropriated. Moreover, when we look at the component parts of the population of this vast country, we are at no loss to account for the existing evils — the total absence of government, and the universal demoralization and want of energy, moral and physical, which is everywhere apparent.

The entire population is about eight millions, of which three-fifths are Indians, or of Indian origin, and Indios Bravos, or barbarous tribes; the remainder of Spanish descent. This population is scattered over an area of 1,312,850 square miles, in departments widely separated, and having various and distinct interests, the intercommunication insecure, and a large proportion in remote regions, beyond the care or thought of an impotent government.

The vast table-land which stretches along the ridge of the Cordillera of Anahuac, although possessing tracts of great fertility, is not, in itself, the rich and productive region it is generally represented to be. The want of fuel and water must always prevent its being otherwise than thinly inhabited, and these great drawbacks to the population and cultivation of these districts would ap-

pear to be insurmountable. I believe the capabilities of the whole country to be much overrated, although its mineral wealth alone must always render it of great importance; but it is a question whether the possession of mineral wealth conduces to the wellbeing of a country. The working of mines of the precious metal in Mexico, however, has certainly caused many spots to be cultivated and inhabited, which would otherwise have been left sterile and unproductive, and has been the means of giving employment to the Indians, and in some degree has partially civilized them, where otherwise they would have remained in their original state of barbarism and ignorance.

The Mexicans, as a people, rank decidedly low in the scale of humanity. They are deficient in moral as well as physical organization: by the latter I do not mean to assert that they are wanting in corporeal qualities, although certainly inferior to most races in bodily strength; but there is a deficiency in that respect which is invariably found attendant upon a low state of moral or intellectual organization. They are treacherous, cunning, indolent, and without energy, and cowardly by nature. Inherent, instinctive cowardice is rarely met with in any race of men, yet I affirm that in this instance it certainly exists, and is most conspicuous; they possess at the same time that amount of

brutish indifference to death which can be turned to good account in soldiers, and I believe, if properly led, that the Mexicans would on this account behave tolerably well in the field, but not more than tolerably.

It is a matter of little astonishment to me that the country is in the state it is. It can never progress or become civilized until its present population is supplanted by a more energetic one. The present would-be republican form of government is not adapted to such a population as exists in Mexico, as is plainly evident in the effects of the constantly recurring revolutions. Until a people can appreciate the great principles of civil and religious liberty, the advantages of free institutions are thrown away upon them. A long minority has to be passed through before this can be effected; and in this instance, before the requisite fitness can be attained, the country will probably have passed from the hands of its present owners to a more able and energetic race.

On the subject of government I will not touch: I maintain that the Mexicans are incapable of *self-government*, and will always be so until regenerated. The separation from Spain has been the ruin of the country, which, by the by, is quite ready to revert to its former owners; and the prevailing feeling over the whole country inclines to

the re-establishment of a monarchical system. The miserable anarchy which has existed since its separation, has sufficiently and bitterly proved to the people the inadequacy of the present one; and the wonder is, that, with the large aristocratic party which so greatly preponderates in Mexico (the army and the church), this much-to-be-desired event has not been brought about.

The cause of the *two hundred and thirty-seven* revolutions which, since the declaration of its independence, have that number of times turned the country upside down, has been individual ambition and lust of power. The intellectual power is in the hands of a few, and by this minority all the revolutions are effected. The army once gained over (which, by the aid of bribes and the priesthood, is an easy matter), the wished-for consummation is at once brought about. It thus happens that, instead of a free republican form of government, the country is ruled by a most perfect military despotism.

The population is divided into but two classes — the high and the low: there is no intermediate rank to connect the two extremes, and consequently the hiatus between them is deep and strongly marked. The relation subsisting between the peasantry and the wealthy hacendados, or landowners, is a species of serfdom, little better

than slavery itself. Money, in advance of wages, is generally lent to the peon or laborer, who is by law bound to serve the lender, if required, until such time as the debt is repaid; and as care is taken that this shall never happen, the debtor remains a bondsman to the day of his death.

Law or justice hardly exists in name even, and the ignorant peasantry, under the priestly thralldom which holds them in physical as well as moral bondage, have neither the energy nor courage to stand up for the amelioration of their condition, or the enjoyment of that liberty, which it is the theoretical boast of republican governments their system so largely deals in, but which, in reality, is a practical falsehood and delusion.