

lost among savage rocks and precipices, bearing evidence to terrible volcanic convulsions at some remote period.

The purity and freshness of the highly rarified atmosphere (for San Agustín stands 8000 feet above the level of the sea) renders it a delicious retirement for invalids, or those who require repose; for the place is full of an intense solitude, peculiarly adapted for peace and meditation.

But once a year, on the feast of Whitsuntide, this quiet village is roused from its lonely calm, and becomes the scene of an orgie—a fever—a wild infatuation, which lasts for three days.

The fair of San Agustín is perhaps unique in the world. Neither the German baths, nor the French fêtes, nor the feasts of Andalusia, nor the English Derby-day offer a parallel to it.

The Peruvians alone have something of the kind at Chorrillos, but not upon the same scale.

To give a perfect picture of this fair, we must look back a few years, for now the influx of French and English, and the gradual influence of European civilisation is beginning to be felt, and Mexican manners and customs are not what they were ten years ago, at least in the capital; a few years more will doubtless round off the corners of Mexican nationality, as the water of a small stream rubs the corners off stones.

Formerly the approach of the Whitsuntide Fair, was the most important event in the whole year for the families of Mexico and the vicinity.

Who stayed away? No one!

The women came to dance and exhibit their most gorgeous toilettes, the men came to gamble, and the working people to erect booths, stables, restaurants, tents and games of all kinds.

The Government employé saved his earnings all the year round in a porcelain savings bank, broke the mysterious jar on Whitsuneve, and changed its contents into gold, with the intention of going to San Agustín to gamble, to win of course, to return, and then—to buy furniture, a grand embroidered coat, a great broad-brimmed hat with a silver serpent (the emblem of Mexico) twisted round it, clothes for the children, and—what not?

The commercial clerk asked leave of absence and part of his salary in advance, hoping to return with his pockets full of gold, to buy that chestnut horse and embroidered saddle, a diamond ring for Juanita, and the ear-rings for his *comadre* (co-godmother—i.e. co-sponsor for the same child, a sacred and beautiful relationship in Mexico).

As for the rich, they were at the same time plaintiff and defendant, so to speak, for they united in forming the capital of the monte banks, also reserving a fund of 15 or 20,000 dollars to play against themselves for their individual amusement.

They secured the best houses, sent the best French and Mexican cooks, collected their friends around them, and ate, and drank, gambled, danced, and made merry for three consecutive days, forgetting business, politics, intrigues, their own existence in fact, if such a thing is possible.

Oh, the pleasure! the mad oblivion of everything disagreeable in life, that was achieved in that little village!

Oh, San Agustín! thou hast been the cause of grievous night-watches, tears of agony shed by innocent families, sighs, and groans and bitter remorse, resolutions never fulfilled, and magnificent plans scattered to the winds!

If we could gather together, and see, feel, or touch, the agonies, the curses, the contrasts, the bitter diabolical pleasures of those who one moment placed their mountains of gold on thy fatal green tables, to see them disappear as by enchantment in the next, we should assuredly die from the touch of such cruel torment, as if struck by lightning from heaven!

But those times are gone, thank God! never to return; and the same magnificences who then poured out their gold like water on the green tables, where two huge candles were burning day and night, making those dismal dens still more lugubrious, and where the mellifluous chink of gold was ever sounding, go now with perhaps three or four miserable doubloons in their pockets, lose them at the first but, look sulky, and fold

their arms, or perhaps borrow a shilling, and take the first omnibus back to the city.

"You may make a note of it" that all Mexico in those three days of Whitsuntide, gambled at San Agustín.

Those who did *not* go, that is to say ladies of very strict opinions, timorous paterfamilias, and such of the clergy as would avoid the sin of scandal, nevertheless made up their little purse, or little cow (*vaquita*), as they facetiously called it, and sent her to market at the fair of San Agustín, in the charge of some confidential friend.

It is worthy of notice, and might make a text for a sermon on the force of custom, that the laws which prohibit gambling, the morality which reproves it, and even Mrs. Grundy herself, who would persecute a hermit in his cave, were utterly ignored and nullified during these three days of "pascua." Generals, merchants, friars, clerks, Brethren of the Holy College, barristers, doctors, boys, and old men, all—no matter whether rich or poor, went in and out of the monte-banks without concealment or disguise.

The first day of the fair, all the carriages in the city, all the diligences, omnibuses, carts, horses, mules, and donkeys, are in motion by six o'clock in the morning, and even at that early hour, men, women, and children (or as the Mexicans politely have it, "women, men, and children") may be seen, eager to secure places in the coaches, which, when filled, leave at a rapid pace, in order to return in time for another fare.

On the second day the excitement is not quite so great, as many of the most eager votaries do not return to the city until the fair is over, and also because a still greater number reserve themselves for the third and great day.

Then, indeed, the road to San Agustín is a perfect miracle.

Any one ignorant of its cause would suppose that a general emigration of the whole city was on foot.

Let us also go to San Agustín—for if we remain in the capital, we shall die of *ennui*. Not a soul to be seen, not even the old blind beggarman who, on every other day in the year, haunts the door of the Hotel Iturbide, droning out his "Pity the poor blind;" nor our friend, the drunken old paralytic woman, who drags herself, seated on a bit of hide, along the streets by her hands and heels, shouting for "socoero" (alms) at the pitch of her loud and unmusical voice.

They, too, have gone to San Agustín, and the feeling of being the "last man" becomes insupportable.

To San Agustín then!

On arrival, the first operation is breakfast, and a very pleasant operation it is, for the clear "upland" air creates an appetite, and there is the breakfast waiting us.

Let us eat it, aye, and pay for it. It is good, but costly, very costly!

After breakfast let us go to the *montes*, the principle attraction, the *spécialité* of the feast. We enter a spacious lofty room which may have been the reception-room of some viceroy of other times; a room lighted up by five or six windows, looking on to a pleasant garden, in which dilapidated fountains still play, and where figs and other luscious fruits may be had for the trouble of plucking.

The room is crowded with people.

In the centre is a long table, covered with dark-green cloth, on which certain divisions are symmetrically traced out with yellow tape.

On the right are placed a thousand golden doubloons, neatly piled in tens; on the left another thousand, and in the centre a little mountain of smaller golden coins. At each end of the table stand two enormous candles of beeswax, which burn day and night, although their red flame is scarcely distinguishable in the mid-day sun.

Closely surrounding this table, a vast concourse of people is congregated, their eyes intently fixed on the gold and on the cards.

If we speak to them, they do not answer; if a friend enters, they know him not; if there

is a disturbance in the street, they never hear it; if it rains the immemorial "cats and dogs," they remain in total ignorance.

It is not a Morgue, it is not the Inquisition, nor the Council of Ten; but there is a something in the very atmosphere of a gambling-house inexpressibly oppressive and appalling.

Before proceeding farther, let us explain the game of "Monte," by which so many hearts are broken.

The dealer holds in his hand a pack of cards face downwards. From the top he draws two, placing them on his right and left—king and ace perhaps. The players select their card, and place their money by its side. When all the bets are made, the dealer turns the pack face upwards, and carefully draws off card by card until another king or another ace appears. If it is a king, he takes in all the money bet on the ace in an incredibly short space of time, and then leisurely pays those who bet on the king the amount of cash they had on the table.

There are rules connected with this game which secure a *certainly* in favour of the dealer, but it is unnecessary to enter into these details: we merely wish to describe Whitsuntide in Mexico.

Let us mark the proceeding

It is a moment of solemnity! The dealer, with a dexterity and coolness worthy of a better cause, shuffles the little book of fortune in an almost imperceptible manner, and throws the two first cards on the table. There is a general movement. The gamblers have their favourite cards, their superstitious sayings and even verses.

The turned-up cards are an ace and a knave.

The knave is the popular card in Mexican superstition. Every one places his money on the knave.

Among others, a young man whom we have been watching, and who has been constantly losing. He has been playing the *certain* game as he calls it, of double or quits; he *can't* always lose.

This time his bet is 800 golden ounces on the knave.

The fortune of a small family!

There is scarcely anything bet on the ace, but the favourite is well backed.

Everything is ready! the dealer turns the cards, and prepares to draw them off.

The silence is intense: you might hear the flap of a fly's wing, or the beating of your neighbour's heart. Every card that is drawn off is a hope revived or a fear dispelled, and brings us nearer to the end of this anxiety, which is becoming unendurable. The dealer alone is perfectly cool, and has no further interest in the affair than his day's salary (about eight pounds), and appears to take a pleasure in prolonging the suspense; he draws off the cards half an inch, then stops, showing the top of the king's crown or the knave's hat—who can tell which?

Slowly he passes on—it was the king, not the knave.

At last the suspense is ended, and the ace is the winning card.

The silence is broken! The dealer rakes in the treasures whose ownership was uncertain the moment before.

Do we see anything indecorous when the result is known? No; we cannot but admire the gentlemanly delicacy which is observed on these occasions. There is no cursing, or swearing, or unseemly conduct.

The victims suffer in silence, or with an outward cheerfulness extremely touching.

Is this inherited from the dignity of the old Spaniard, or from the impassibility of the Indian? *Quien sabe?*

On some occasions there have been as many as fifteen or twenty monte-tables, with a capital of 50,000 or 60,000 dollars each, so that it is not difficult to believe that, taking into account montes, hotels, restaurants, cock-fights, balls, dresses, and all the different expenditures consequent on these amusements, there may have circulated, as has been stated, a million of dollars in the three days' feast of Whitsuntide in Mexico.