

A CAST FOR FORTUNE.

By CHRISTIAN REID, IN "Lippincott's Magazine."

CHAPTER XI.

A wounded shoulder might not, perhaps, be thought a good preparation for a period of perfect enjoyment, but to the end of his days Derwent will never have any doubt that it proved so to him. Never will he fail to look back on the fortnight at Miraflores that followed his recovery as the one enchanted hour of his life, that one lingering within the magic portals of fairy land which almost all men or women know at some point on the journey of life. Generally it is not for long that any one lingers within those gates, and when once they are closed upon him his issues forth, he may wander far and wide without ever finding his way thither again. But while he is there, everything else that the world holds is forgotten, — sometimes even faith and duty, — and if there are any drawbacks to enjoyment, any pinpricks in the spell of enchantment, he has no recollection of them afterwards.

Derwent in especial would have been quite positive that there was nothing of the kind for him in those magic days, — days of literal as well as metaphorical sunshine and flowers. Whenever he recalled them, he would see the deep sapphire sky looking down, he would hear the musical plash of fountains and inhale the fragrance of opening blossoms; pictures would rise before his eyes, now of cool, shadowy rooms with shining floors and arabesqued walls, now of the courts with their pillared arches and the Oriental looking servants who glided back and forth, of the shadowy vistas of the gardens, of the rich splendor of the chapel, and amid all these varied scenes one central figure always visible, — a graceful, gracious figure, with noble, princelike ways, and a hand ever open to help and to give.

For this may be said for him, that if, despite his valiant resolutions, he was soon hopelessly in love with Dona Zarifa, it was less with the enchantment of her beauty though this grew upon him day by day, as only real beauty does, than with the deeper charm of character which was revealed to him in her life, like the open page of a book full of noble thoughts and poetic words. He had never imagined anything at once so simple and so elevated as this character appeared. The contaminating influence of the world seemed hardly to have breathed upon it, and the lowering standards of the world had no place in a mind which had been trained in the highest school of thought and feeling. Indeed, somewhat to his surprise, he found the whole atmosphere of the house unworldly in the extreme. It was evident that to Don Maurizio his great wealth was chiefly valuable for the power it gave him of doing much good, — how much, it was only through chance references of Padre Francisco that Derwent learned: while Dona Zarifa seemed to give no thought whatever to her brilliant social position, with regard to the opportunities which it offered for pleasure and adulation. The pride, — for *vanity* on *hauteur*, which had struck him as expressed by her face when he first saw her, — was he found, not that ignoble *vanity*, but the high, elevated regions of the soul, — the *glorious* lowering

or certainties of pain that the future might bring, he enjoyed her presence and the sunshine of kindness which every one at Miraflores showered upon him. When he grew stronger, Don Maurizio placed a horse at his disposal, and then his dream of riding with Dona Zarifa found such realization as not many of our dreams do. It was true that they did not ride alone. Don Maurizio always accompanied them, — or, to speak more correctly, they accompanied him, — together with a *mozo*, or groom. But there was nothing in this companionship to detract from Derwent's enjoyment. More and more every day he liked and admired his genial host; and while listening to his graphic accounts of the country and its people, he could look at Dona Zarifa, as she sat erect and square in her saddle, her habit correct enough for Hyde Park, but wearing a broad, sombrero like hat to shield her face from the rays of the tropical sun. Never, he thought, did she look so beautiful as on these rides, when, after a long, stretching gallop across the *mesa*, she would turn and say, with a laugh like a child, "Was not that delightful?" while a pomegranate flush came into her cheek, and her eyes shone like dark diamonds under their silken lashes.

Then there were times when Don Maurizio would leave them, when he would bid them ride on while he paused with a group of laborers in the vast fields, or stopped to discuss the condition of his colts with their tall, dark-browed trainer; although when it was a question of anything so fascinating as the horses neither Dona Zarifa nor Derwent was always willing to be dismissed. Miles of pasture on the green hill-slopes of Miraflores were devoted to the stock which was its owner's chief pride, and nothing interested him more than improving the breed of his horses. Derwent, with the passionate fondness for horses which was part of his life long training soon knew the beautiful, gentle creatures as well as Don Maurizio himself. The races were, therefore, full of interest as well as pleasure; and a part of every day was spent in the saddle.

One morning, as they were about to start, and while Derwent loitered under the arcade waiting for his companions, he observed that the *mozo* brought out two large logs, of the kind made throughout the country, of a grass-like fibre, and hung them over the highommel of his saddle. They were evidently well filled, and while Derwent wondered idly what they might contain, he heard a step, and, turning, found Dona Zarifa by his side.

"Have you come," he said, "to gratify my curiosity? I have just been wondering what those bags contain that Juan has placed so carefully over his saddle."

"I hope you will not be sorry to hear that they contain our lunch," she answered. "We are going this morning to a ranch on the lake; and since the distance is considerable, and my father has business there, we cannot return until the middle of the afternoon. Therefore I thought it well to provide against the pangs of hunger: for, though papa and myself could take some *tortillas* and milk at the house of the *ranchero*, you know that you do not like *tortillas*."

"No," he answered with a slight grimace, "I confess that I do not. It is the only Mexican thing I don't like."

"Then you shall not be forced to eat them," she said, smiling. "We will take our lunch in a pretty place on the border of the lake. But papa lingers. You may put me up, Mr. Derwent, and we will ride down forward."

That Derwent had this morning generally liked the saddle as lightly as if it were a feather, it was an unexpected thing, to hold out his hand, — his foot placed with a spring into the stirrup, — and then to find that he was to ride down forward.

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She laughed, as she drew out from a pocket at her waist the smallest and daintiest weapon he thought he had ever seen, — a silver-mounted pistol which lay in his hand like a toy, but which, he saw at once, was capable of doing deadly work.

"It is very beautiful," he said. "But may I ask why you carry it? If there is any danger, surely Don Maurizio and Juan are sufficiently armed to protect you, — not to speak of myself."

"There is no danger," she answered, a little haughtily. "How could there be on our own hacienda? If papa puts on his pistol when he rides out, it is more from habit than anything else; for there have been times in Mexico when it was not safe to be without arms. But when I wear a pistol it is only for amusement. I am very fond of shooting, and I have not tried my hand lately. I thought that there might be an opportunity to do so to-day."

"I will make an opportunity by setting up a target on the lake," he said, as he returned the pistol and mounted his own horse, as Don Maurizio came out, and, with an apology for delay, swung himself on his powerful chestnut.

Their place of destination was, it appeared, sixteen miles distant, — a short ride over the level plain for horses fresh and sprited as theirs. It was a part of the hacienda which Derwent had never visited before, and when they drew near the lake they found themselves in a more broken country, since one side of the beautiful sheet of water was enclosed by forest-clad hills rising abruptly from its edge.

There is nothing more charming than these lakes which are scattered over a wide region of the plateau of Mexico. Blue as Como or Maggiore, only their own great elevation prevents their being surrounded by mountain-scenery as grand. If the heights that enclose them are not relatively as imposing as the Alps, they are none the less noble and majestic in outline, and absolutely enchanting in color. So it was with this lake on the beach of which the party from Miraflores presently drew rein. They were at its head, and so commanded a magnificent view of the shimmering azure water spreading for miles, bordered on one side by abrupt green heights that, with the haze of distance over them, were draped in robes of softest blue and purple, while on the other side of the liquid expanse the great plain stretched to meet the horizon.

"This is the most beautiful picture that I have ever seen in Mexico," said Derwent, as they paused to admire it. "What a paradise of color!"

"You will be glad to hear that we make the rest of our journey by water," said Don Maurizio. "Here is our boat."

A large, well-built row-boat, manned by four Indian carmen, swept around a headland as he spoke, and came toward them.

"Everything at Miraflores reminds one more or less of the Arabian Nights," observed Derwent, "but really this suggests positive *enchanted*. We ride up to the shore of a wild and lonely lake, not a human being is in sight, and you do not even clap your hands as a signal of arrival, yet here comes a boat, ready to convey you where you will."

"It looks mysterious, I admit," said Don Maurizio, with a laugh, "but a message sent yesterday is the cause of the boat being ready, while the approach was not so unobserved as you thought. The house of the man who looks after the boat is near by, and we will leave our horses here."

They dismounted, and Juan led the horses away, while the boat was brought up to a rocky point, from which they could step into it. Clean and well-painted, with crimson-cushioned seats, the little craft lay lightly on the water as Dona Zarifa, with a smiling salutation to the men, took her seat at the rudder. "I like to steer," she said in answer to Derwent's glance, as she rather the cords into her slender hands. There was a moment's pause, Juan came running lightly over the rocks, the lunch-bags were safely shipped, and then they glided on a calm, shimmering water.

Others are handicapped, as hour, of which said a gushing young man, all in, steeping his lawyer, and lie in the golden charm side. "I hear enough old be so fleeting, granted the lady's. Where beautiful picture the girl. In the distance cowhide, let his the wretch, exquisite gleaming

water, it constantly returned to dwell on Zarifa, as she leaned back on the low seat, with the steering-cords in her hands, and her wide hat shading her face, — the "tossy forehead," with its delicate tendrils of dark hair, soft and silky as floss, the dusky splendor of her eyes, with their golden lights, set under perfect brows, the fine straight nose with its arched nostrils, and the curving lips, forming, in Solomon's words, "a thread of scarlet" on the creamy softness of her skin.

They rowed three or four miles down the lake, keeping sometimes near enough shore to be almost within the show of the hills, and at last entered a lovely miniature bay, where an opening in the heights gave a glimpse of cultivated fields and the group of buildings belonging to a ranch. Here they disembarked, and, while Don Maurizio went to transact his business with the *ranchero*, Derwent found a shady nook, arranged the boat-cushions in a seat for Zarifa, and placed himself at her feet, while Juan kindled a fire at a little distance, where he proceeded to make coffee, to warm chicken (by holding it on a pointed stick to the fire), and to toast bread in a very deft manner.

"And what do you think of our lake, Señor Derwent?" asked Zarifa at last; for the spell of silence seemed still to hang over Derwent.

He roused himself with a start at the sound of her voice.

"I think," he replied, "that it is like everything else at Miraflores, — simply perfect. Do not laugh; do not believe that I am speaking in exaggerated compliment. I mean just what I say. Whether the place is enchanted or whether I am, I don't know, but certainly there seems to me no flaw or blemish anywhere. I have never before known anything half so charming, and it makes me almost sad to feel that I must soon go back to the commonplace world, where all this," — he made a comprehensive sweep of the hand, — "will seem as distant and unreal as a vision in sleep."

"I am glad that you think so well of Miraflores," she said, smiling. "As for going — well, I suppose that after a while you will have duties to call you away. But you can surely return again! Our gates are always open to our friends."

"It is good of you to include me in that class," he said, flushing a little. "I feel it deeply; for what do you know of me? I may be the merest adventurer, a man unworthy of your notice or acquaintance, for aught you can tell. Why, your father has not even once asked me who I am, since I have been in his house! Such hospitality is fairly Arabian."

"Oh, no," she said, "it is only Mexican. And why should he ask you such a question? In the first place, you were in need of help, that was reason enough for opening his doors to you. And in the second place, do you think that he does not know a gentleman when he sees him? My father has not always lived at Miraflores, señor."

"Your father is the truest and the finest gentleman I have ever seen," said Derwent, quickly. "I think that with one glance he could judge a man. But such is his courtesy that if the judgment were unfavorable the subject of it would never be made aware that it was so."

"Not without need; but with need no man can be more frank than my father."

"I am sure of that, too. And frankness is a virtue I so much admire that I can do no less than practise it. Don Maurizio has asked me nothing, as I said; but I hope that he will feel interest enough to listen to the account of how and why I chance to be in Mexico."

"I am certain that he will listen with interest to whatever you care to tell him," said Zarifa; "but you must not suppose that there is any need for you to explain. Did you not say, — or imply, — when speaking to Padre Francisco and myself, that there was something in the nature of an affair of honor in what brought you here? In that case, no one would even wish you to talk of it."

"I said that I desired to make money, and make it quickly, in order to pay a debt of honor," he answered. "But I must not leave you under a mistaken impression. It is a debt of honor inasmuch as honor is deeply involved in it, but it is also a debt that will ruin my mother and myself if we must make it good out of our fortune. So that I have to consider the happiness of our parent, and the honor of

He paused abruptly. Had he spoken the two words trembling on his lips? He