

A CAST FOR FORTUNE.

BY CHARLES BIRD. [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 confess you that we can offer you very little variety in that line at Miraflores."

Derwent replied very sincerely that it was impossible to desire better society than he found at Miraflores. "But," 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 a better man than an Irishman? Absenteeism has been the curse of my country; and it is in a great degree the cause 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 lives everything connected with a free, out-door life; and I have taught my daughter to love it. 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 over 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 do 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 Queretaro? 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 wilder 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.

"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 remarking 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 she 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."

"Singing 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 unless 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, low 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."

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