

Truth's Contributors.

LIFE IN MEXICO.

(Truth Special Correspondence.)

All Mexican haciendas are much alike as to general features, whether the owner reckons his possessions by hundreds of square miles or *por sitio ganado mayor*. The main building is always an immense structure of stone or equally durable plastered adobe—neither farm nor country-house, according to our ideas, but with a character peculiar to itself. It resembles a fort more than anything else to be found at the north, with bastions and ramparts like the domain of a baron of old, its corner towers and loop-holes for guns having been built with an eye to revolutionary sieges and the frequent raids of *ladrones*.

The wealthy proprietor seldom lives upon his estate, but gives it over to the care of an administrator, who in turn lets it to sub-administrators, who each have their clerks and secretaries to superintend the overseers—and so on down through the social gamut to the peons who "superintend" the pigs. As may be imagined, there is

NOT MUCH THRIFT

in this complex system, for when every ear of corn and gallon of pulque must pass through so many hands, it naturally follows that most of the profits are absorbed before those of the owner are reached.

Most of these fort-like houses have the appearance of barracks, being curtainless and carpetless, with brick floors, barred windows, whitewashed walls, numberless empty rooms scantily furnished with wooden benches, pine tables, and iron bedsteads, put up only when wanted, while the adjacent kitchens, servants' quarters, bakery, outhouses, enormous granaries and stables, and the outlying huts of the peasantry form a city within the ramparts.

Every hacienda, whether rich or poor, has its own church, of more or less magnificence—which to the curiosity-hunter is a perfect treasure-trove of charming ugliness. Each private sanctuary possesses as many yellow-legged and blue-haired saints as the grand cathedral in the city of Mexico, candles are constantly burning upon its altar, and native offerings of fruits and grains are piled around the Holy Family to insure a blessing upon the crops—for the peons are devoutly pious and superstitious to a degree.

In those exceptional instances where the millionaire owners live upon their estates, their immediate families sometimes number enough to populate a village. This is partially due to the prevalence of

AN OLD SPANISH CUSTOM

which obliges gentlemen to provide for all their destitute female kinsfolk, and to shield them from contact with the world. When a Mexican lady is widowed, a family council is held, her male relatives and those of her late husband charging themselves with the education of her sons and the care of herself and daughters. Though the widow and her grown-up girls may be accomplished as well as poor, nobody dreams of the possibility of their doing anything toward up-oring themselves, and the proffered aid is accepted quite as a matter of course and an hereditary right. Even if the widowed mother is wealthy, she cannot be independent. Custom, which rules with iron hand, prescribes that the entire charge of her property and the education of her children be delegated to male relatives, and—unless she is really an aged woman—she must reside with her kindred. So thoroughly are Mexican gentlemen imbued

with the idea of womanly helplessness that they do not regard the care of any number of bereaved families as an unjust burden; but on the contrary, when a man marries he virtually contracts to befriend all the female kith and kin of his lady-love and to provide for them if need be. This knightly courtesy makes matrimony a serious matter, and perhaps accounts for the multitude of eligible bachelors with which Mexico abounds; but, badinage apart, it is a beautiful custom, and a strong proof of the innate chivalry of Mexican gentlemen is found in the fact that the estates of widows and orphans are invariably administered with honesty.

Another cause for filling these hacienda communities with as many people as can be gathered together, is the

UNUTTERABLE LONELINESS

of their situation, the family being isolated from the world as much as was Robinson Crusoe on his island. No events occur from without to disturb the dull monotony of life—unless it be an occasional raid by robbers or revolutionists; absolutely nothing to break the eternal stillness of the surrounding solitude, except the occasional footstep of some wandering Indian—the de-based descendant of that proud Aztec race, who are now "hewers of wood and drawers of water," where once they reigned as monarchs. Most of the lonesome *haciendados* have few books, never any daily mails or frequent newspapers, and no manner of amusement except such as they can create for themselves.

Thus life is similar to that of people on board a ship at sea, there being no escape from one another's companionship till the harbor is reached—the principal difference being that the voyage of the hacienda community ends only at the "undiscovered country." Happily they are an exceedingly affectionate and even-tempered race, for a family quarrel under these circumstances would be unbearable—without even the advantage possessed by those ancient citizens of Tenochtitlan, who built their homes upon the floating gardens of the great salt lake, Texcoco, and when the neighborhood became distasteful, could paddle away with their entire estate.

It is easy to understand how, in such a situation, visitors at the hacienda are welcomed as a boon direct from heaven. In former times there were no inns in Mexico, and to-day they are few outside the great cities; hence persons travelling from place to place, with the retinue of armed attendants which personal safety requires, are obliged to depend upon the hospitality of the *haciendados* for nightly stopping-places. So generally is this expected that the proprietors always set apart a generous sum in the provision for annual expenditures, to be used by their administrators in the

ENTERTAINMENT OF CHANCE GUESTS,

be they rich or poor, friends or strangers. Many are the delightful acquaintanceships formed by these accidental meetings, and sometimes the halt, intended only for a night, lengthens into weeks, and paves the way for future returns for the sole purpose of visiting. Numerous are the romances begun in this manner, between wandering knights and imprisoned maidens, of which the end is matrimony, with the usual sequel, "They lived happily forever after."

When a troop of friends invades some lonely hacienda,—then great indeed is the rejoicing! Not only is the fatted calf slaughtered for the occasion, but frequently the finest bull the estate affords is also sacrificed upon the altar of hospitality, in the

A PRIVATE BULL FIGHT,

for the delectation of any who may wish to be thus diverted. The court-yard in the centre of the square of buildings is transformed into a temporary *plaza de toros*; professional *metadors* and *picadors* are sent for, and word goes to all the adjacent hamlets that a free show is about to transpire—such as is dearest to the *Mestizo* heart. At the appointed hour a crowd is collected, whose surprising numbers—considering the apparently empty country lying all around—induce one to believe that the mythological sowing of the dragon's teeth, from which came an army, has been repeated. With that graceful hospitality which is the direct heritage of this gentle race from their Moorish progenitors, all are welcome to come in and make merry with the lords of the land.

A bull-fight costs no more than a fashionable ball, although the best *torro* on the place is slain. The pay of professional fighters is about the same that skilled musicians would require for rendering dance-music, the slaughtered animal serves as the loaves and fishes to feed the multitude, and the national sport stirs the blood and affords that excitement for which their stagnant lives are longing. After the *metadors*, in spangled doublets and satin knee-breeches, have distinguished themselves and delighted the rabble, by tormenting the beast to rampant fury and then dexterously killing him with one thrust with a slender rapin straight through the lungs, the carcass is given to the mob—who proceed to roast it whole, having previously built a big fire in a hole dug in the ground. Then, while their betters in the social scale are feasting on more dainty viands in the main hall of the mansion, all the retainers and stragglers enjoy

A GRAND BARBECUE

under the open sky, decked out with tortillas, *frejoles* and pulque from the generous supply of the hacienda.

On the evening following a bull-fight, an impromptu ball is always expected to come off in the same "ancestral hall" where the dinner was served—which the servants have made haste to decorate with green branches and garlands of flowers, till it looks like an immense arbor. The whole motley multitude of the bull-fight graces the festive scene, those who cannot gain entrance being fain to content themselves by crowding around the doors and windows. The peons, wrapped in their blankets and squatted upon the floor—their distended stomachs having been astonished by the rare luxury of a "square meal"—are too placidly happy for speech, beyond an occasional *viva*! The administrators and agents of the hacienda, with all their numerous assistants, the bespangled heroes of the *plaza de toros*, servants, peasantry from all the surrounding country, even the priest of the establishment is present, and each lends a willing hand—or foot—for the general good. The *haciendado*, with his family and guests, occupy one end of the vast apartment, in the role of audience to their numerous entertainers. While at the bottom of the hall the peasantry are whirling themselves dizzy in the top-like evolutions of the Mexican "mazy," the peons and house-servants execute dances peculiar to their class interspersed with quaint folk-songs; after each performance they make the most respectful salaams to the patrician circle, and entreat them to accept grateful thanks for the honor of their attention. Anon half a dozen dusky troubadours, with fife, guitars and curious instruments of reed, come to the front, and after due obeisance to the aristocrats, beg the privilege of singing,

Among the hundreds of folk-songs, all equally meaningless, one of the best begins as follows:

"Aforrada de mi vida!
Como estas? Como te va?
Como has pasado la noche?
No has tenido novidad?"

"Aforrada means *living*, a rather singular *nom de tendresse*, doubtless signifying something soft and well-wadded. The literal translation is:

"Living of my life!
How are you? How do you do?
How have you passed the night?
Hast you met with nothing new?"

The next verse of the ingenuous ballad goes on to state:

"From Guadalupe fighting,
With the soldiers I came on;
My well-lined sweet syrup,
I came to see you alone."

About ninety-seven more stanzas, all equally brilliant, belong to this effusion, but none more touching than the "Sweet Syrup" passage above quoted.

A favorite song which the lower classes are constantly singing—on the streets, in the pulque-shops, everywhere—is of "Las bonitas señoritas de Guadalupe," (the Pretty Girls of Guadalupe) who are considered the handsomest women in the Republic. Apropos of this partiality, I read the other day in a Guadalupe paper that it has been found impracticable to establish telephones in that city because society is so scandalously lewd there that business questions cannot be asked without obscene words being wired in reply!

A COMMON DANCE

is called *Los Manos*, in which the dancer claps his hands and sings an accompaniment to his feet, meanwhile making himself little—a la John McCullough as Richard III.—and thereby eliciting great applause. The chorus runs:

"Oh, how pretty are the dwarfs, the little ones, the Mexicans!
Out comes the handsome one, out comes the ugly one, out comes the Dwarf in his jacket of skin!"

Toward midnight the hilarity is at its height—*fandangos*, *zapateros* and other plebeian dances for the parvenues, and the swift waltz or slow, dreamy *Habanera* for the patricians. All join in the exercise—the bull-fighters perhaps *fandangoing* to my lady's maid, the professional priest tripping a light fantastic too with the prettiest *señorita* in the room, and the lord of the manor whirling like a top with a young *rauchera*. But never for a moment is there any forgetfulness of caste in this apparent mingling of social elements, or the least bridging of that bottomless gulf forever fixed between servant and master. The scene reminds one of Christmas festivities in our own South during days of slavery, or of older times when serfs sat at the table with their superiors, but "below the salt."

After the evening gaities are ended, our personal troubles nightly began in the solitude of our chamber.

AS EDEN HAD ITS SERPENT,

so all these Mexican paradises are infested with a thousand creeping and crawling creatures, many of which are dangerous. How often have Betsy and I sighed for suits of battle armor, as we ensconced ourselves between the blankets—having first shaken scorpions, etc., out of them and chased centipedes or tarantulas from under our pillows; afterwards trying vainly to woo "tired nature's sweet restorer," with visions of enormous things crawling up the bed-posts or spinning downward from the walls—dancing before our weary eyes! The most common of these pests are the *acarans*—scorpions. They are in the wall, between the bricks of the floor, hiding within your garments. Turn up a corner of the rug or table-cloth, and you disturb an interesting family of them; they flop out of your shoes