

A CAST FOR FORTUNE.

(Continued from 1st Page.)

between Fernandez and himself. Can you tell it to me?" "In a few words" was the reply. "Fernandez, as you may imagine from the character of the man, is the plant of the corrupt officials with whom Mexico is cursed. There is no transaction so infamous that he is not ready to serve as an instrument in it, and he has therefore an influence all together out of proportion to his real importance. For men fear him as he is in human nature to fear those who have an almost unlimited power to injure. He has grown rich from the bribes he has received, both from those who have something to dread, and those who have much to gain from the government. But Barrera is one man who has neither feared nor bribed him; and since he is well known as an uncompromising opponent of the present government, he has suffered in consequence. He has been imprisoned on false charges, mulcted by heavy fines until his fortune is greatly diminished, and harassed and persecuted in innumerable ways. He is the chief owner of the Buena Esperanza, and on this Fernandez has long been known to have a covetous eye. But, aware of the value of the mine, Barrera has never been willing to sell; and he was in negotiation with me to obtain the money to work the mine when his son—who is as impetuous and uncompromising as himself—fell into trouble with the government. Fernandez was sent to the father, and, while demanding, I heard him brag for those who sent him, he demanded also the Buena Esperanza for himself. Barrera thought that he had no alternative; he gave the bond on the mine, and it was not until later that he learned that this had been no part of the official bargain. He then demanded from Fernandez the return of the bond which had been obtained by fraud and falsehood. The reply was a contemptuous refusal. Do you wonder at the anger of the man when he met the spoiler on his own property?" "I only wonder," said Derwent, "that he held back his hand from shooting him then and there. This I can say for myself, that I had not the faintest doubt as to which was the honest man and which the scoundrel, when I saw them face to face. I told Fernandez that nothing would induce me to buy the mine until I was assured that all was straight and clear regarding the title."

"And made a deadly enemy, as the result abundantly proves," said Don Maurizio. "I am more than ever sure that Fernandez alone is responsible for what might have been your murder. But it will be difficult to prove it." "Let me regain my strength," cried Derwent, "and I will make it my business to prove it." "Your business, more likely to be shot again, and perhaps with a better aim," said the other. "No, you must be quiet, and leave Barrera and myself to work out our matter if possible. I will only ask you to remain here for a time, in order to give your testimony in case we should be successful. In any event, it is necessary that you allow your wound time to heal thoroughly. If you have never been on a Mexican hacienda, I wish us for a few weeks will at least have the attraction of novelty for you." "It is the best fortune I could have imagined to have an opportunity to see how life goes on a great Mexican estate," said Derwent, eagerly. "It is something I have desired from my boyhood, and I really cannot feel much enmity toward the man who shot me, when I think of the result."

"I am delighted to be able to gratify you," said Don Maurizio, smiling, "and very glad to offer some counterbalancing good to atone for the manner in which you have fallen among thieves. It is settled, then, that you will be my guest for some time to come. And now that you are getting better, you must be rather lonely in solitary confinement. Do you not think you might make an effort to join us this evening? My daughter will be glad to see you." "You are very kind. I shall be happy to be allowed to do so; that is, if I can manage to put on a coat" for he was at present clad in a silken dressing-gown that Ramon had brought from his master's wardrobe.

"You must not think of putting on a coat," said Don Maurizio, "not at least, of putting it on your injured arm. Simply button it around you. And if you have nothing large and loose enough, send Ramon for something of mine. We shall see you, then, after dinner, or before?" "After, I think. My strength is not yet that of a giant."

CHAPTER VIII.

After dinner, therefore, following Ramon's noiseless tread, Derwent passed to where wide glass doors showed a large and lofty apartment which charmed his eye at once by its picturesque grace and comfort. "Enter, señor, enter," said Ramon, pushing wider yet the open doors. He glanced around. "Ah! the señorita," he said, as a lady rose and advanced from the farther end of the long room. As she came toward him, it seemed to Derwent as if he had not before had the least idea of her surpassing beauty. Not even in the Alameda of Mexico, when she walked past him like a princess, draped in rich black lace and he fully recognized the perfection of her loveliness. But it fairly dazzled him. The foreign, semi-Oriental room, with its shadowy corners and the circles of shining light from its hanging lamps, made the harmonious background for the graceful figure that, clad in soft white Indian silk clasped by a silver girdle at the waist and fitting high to the throat, under a silver collar wrought with the fairy-like

delicacy of Mexican work, moved over the polished floor with the ease of a grande dame and held out a slender hand to him.

"I am very glad to see you, señor," she said, with gentle graciousness, "and more than glad that you have recovered sufficiently to be able to join us. Pray take this chair."

With her own hands she moved forward a large wicker chair, fitted with soft cushions of eri-son silk, and Derwent was glad to sink into it, with a murmured apology, while she sat down on a divan opposite and looked at him with her dark, beautiful eyes full of solicitude.

"You are very pale," she said. "Shall I not send Ramon—who still lingered at the door—for a glass of wine?"

"Oh, no,—thanks," he answered. "You are very kind, but I am only a little weak. I felt more weakness from my wound than from the heat of the day, and I have not lost so much blood," he added, apologetically.

"And then the fever," she said. "Considering both those things, I think you made great strides toward recovery. It was only a week yesterday since you were brought into the house insensible—we almost thought you dying man."

"I owe you many excuses for making such a sensational entrance," he said smiling. "It must be very unpleasant to have an apparently dying man brought within our walls, and to know that you were getting better."

"What should I have been made of if I did not get better?" she said. "It is the only way in which I can show my appreciation of your great kindness."

"Let us not talk of that," she said, with a slight wave of the hand. "Our kindness is nothing. In Mexico it is not considered remarkable to show hospitality to any one,—especially to a wounded stranger. The remarkable thing would be if one failed in it. But probably you do not know Mexico well, señor?"

He perceived that she wished to change the subject, and followed her lead at once. "No," he answered, "I cannot say that I know Mexico well; but I have at least the desire to know it better. The mere idea of the country always excited a great fascination over me."

Then you did not think of us as barbarians,—as I have been told that the most of your countrymen do?" she said smiling.

"The most of my countrymen are very ignorant of Mexico, señorita," he replied, "but I really do not think that their ignorance leads them so far as that."

"Does it not?" she said, rather incredulously. "I have heard that in the States Mexico is considered a barbarous country. It is a little singular, is it not, that in Europe no such idea exists with regard to us?"

"Europe knows you better," he answered. "Up to the present time, all Mexico's social and commercial intercourse has been with Europe, rather than with her immediate neighbor. There was very good reason for this, as you know, I have no excuses to make for my countrymen, señorita. The grasping propensities of the Anglo-Saxons are, unfortunately, well known. And the narrow-minded vanity which induces him to fancy himself the exemplar of the human race is not less remarkable."

"You are not very complimentary to your countrymen," she said, showing her pearly teeth in another smile.

"Why should I be complimentary?" he asked. "Why should not one try to clear one's mind even of national prejudice, and get as near the truth as possible in this very imperfect world? Every race has its defects to be seen qualities. But it is a great mistake to confound the defects with the virtues."

"Yes," she said, meditatively, "that is very true. Mexicans have undoubtedly some defects, although I really think—and it is not only because I too am a Mexican—that they have also great virtues."

"Even from the little that I have seen of them, I am very sure of it," said Derwent, heartily. "But you, señorita, can hardly consider yourself altogether a Mexican."

"I do, however," she said, lifting her head a little higher, with a pride that became it well. "I am Mexican in heart and soul, as well as in blood and birth. It is true that my dear father comes of another race; but he will tell you that he is altogether Mexican now."

"I am glad that he has at least not laid aside his knowledge of English, at that you consented to speak it also," said Derwent, smiling.

"But here comes one who does not," said the young lady, rising. Derwent rose, too, as an elderly lady entered the room. He knew her at once as Dona Zarifa's companion when he saw the latter in the Alameda,—a handsome, middle-aged woman, very brunette and inclined to embonpoint, as all Spanish women are after a certain age. With a few words of greeting, she held out a soft, kindly hand to Derwent, who bowed over it.

"This is my cousin, Senora Peralta," said Dona Zarifa. "She hopes you are recovering. If you speak French you can answer her in that language."

Derwent did speak French with fluency, so he answered Senora Peralta's inquiry, and then, in reply to other questions, gave a circumstantial history of his wound and all relating to it. Both ladies listened to him attentively, and the subject was hardly exhausted when Don Maurizio came in.

[To be continued.]

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