

CHRISTMAS NIGHT.

CHAPTER I.



LANDED, my traveling companion and I, just as the Christmas holidays were approaching at the dirty little port of Sinal, and after following a half

asked fellow driving two bullocks attached to a truck cart loaded with raw hides about half a mile at last found ourselves in the "Meson de San Ignacio." It was a dirty hovel, built of the unburnt brick or "adobe" of that country, and used for every purpose pertaining to the occupation of mine host in that civilized land. It had but one room, long, narrow and without light except from the door, and in one corner was built a little fire, where a short fat woman in white chemise and red flannel petticoat was making tortillas, while we were shown to the other end and told to make ourselves at home on a long bench covered with sheepskins.

The major domo tumbled two of the raw hides down on our feet, and with many caracoles tramped the wrinkles out to make them lie flat and then piled the rest of them in the middle of the room. Coffee, tortillas and dried mutton furnished our repast, and soon after we wrapped our "serapes" around us and betook ourselves to the sheepskins, having previously made arrangements for seats in the diligencia for Merida on the following day.

About daybreak we were roused by a tremendous lumbering at the door, and after a volley of quaint Spanish curses addressed to several mules, each of which he addressed by the name of some saint, a little parchment faced fellow with jingling spurs, a broad sombrero, a thick blanket and a heavy whip, made his appearance, calling for his breakfast.

By this time O'Farrell, my companion, was dressed and out to inspect our conveyance.

"Como se llama esta, senior?" he asked of the major domo in Spanish, which, as he said, was reasonable, considering.

"El diligencia, senior," replied the host, touching his sombrero.

"Is that Spanish for cart?" said Jerry, turning to me.

"In this case, certainly," I replied, "though not usually, I believe."

Further comments were prevented by an imposing summons from our host, and in 10 minutes we had disposed of a reasonable quantity of the goat's flesh and tortillas, washed it down with some strong coffee, and returned to the street, where by this time were assembled several senores, with their blankets covering half their faces and their sombreros raised to their eyes, and speaking with Jerry irreverently insinuated should be called a cart.

"Tres reales, senior," said the don to my question for his bill, and he received the money with a lofty bow, which no doubt was meant to impress upon us the light from which he condescended to accommodate us at all.

"Cheap enough," said I, handing him the money.

"And dear enough, too," said Jerry, jumping into the "cart."

"Ista, mulla, Santa Maria! Santa Catharina Santa Ursula!" cried the little courier. The crowd of senores gravely raised their hats, the major domo bowed like a Hidalgo and we were off. I looked back and saw the crowd close eagerly round "mulla" to inquire about the "strangers," and the noble keeper of the "meson" drew himself proudly up to give an account of his "illustrious guests." A turn in the road hid them from view, and we were trotting merrily upon the road to Merida.

Our journey to the capital afforded no incident worthy of narration, unless indeed two "breakdowns" and Antonio's dexterity in patching up the deerskin, and about half an hour after sunset we drove into the deserted streets of "the city." All our friend Antonio's "Ista, mulla," and "Santas" were not sufficient to raise a trot, and in a "most musical, most melancholy" walk we creaked through the wide oak door of the "Meson San Ignacio," or "St. James hotel," where, despite the latitude and longitude differed but little in degree, stood in the paved court, and with many abortive courtesies received the guests, who in this country are always "illustrious."

Jerry took her hand and saluted her fat cheek, telling her he was "devilish glad to see her," and I followed the cordial pair into the best room, where a table was already set with red beans, goat's flesh, tortillas and coffee. Jerry stopped at the door and held a short colloquy with the "madame," while I listened to the music—the "diligencia" and the "carraoches" being stilled at last—I was enabled to hear from an upper room on the other side of the court.

"Why, Jerry, said I as he entered, sending the old abbes off in a quick tread, "you seem to know where you are."

"Know where I am? Certainly I do!" he exclaimed. "I've been here before—spent two months here once. And, by the way, we're just in town. Don't you hear the music?"

"Yes, but I'd know we were in town without that," I answered.

"Not so deep in town, though," he rejoined, "for there is a fandango up there, my boy. See," he continued, slipping me on the back, "see what a thing it is to travel in good company. We have the entire already."

"Good!" I exclaimed, entering into the spirit of the thing, for pleasure was what we were after.

"Oh," said Jerry, "as they say here, 'Mucho bueno! Speak Spanish, my boy, or you will never get along here, for d—the word do you of these people know of English.'"

"Well, well, don't swear, Jerry! I'll rub up my Spanish."

"Yes, and be a little more Irish and a little less nice," he rejoined. "That's quite necessary as Spanish."

"Jerry was an Irishman himself by his name indicates. So my renders v excuse him. At any rate, I did, for in a man just an hour he energetic, though somewhat equivocal, Spanish had given the entire into the room where was assembled the elite of the city of Merida.

"Here, Tom," said he, dragging me across the room; "come this way, my boy, and let me introduce you to the 'madame.'"

"They were dancing some cross between a cotillon and a reel, as Jerry said, and as we made our way round the figures we passed a group standing in one of the windows, which were all embayed and grated with a profusion of gold ornaments. A young man with a complexion of gold ovals on the outside, and of his cheeks pale as lead, and a very heavy drug on his forehead stepped up and was extremely glad to see Jerry, shaking him by the hand and seeming inclined even to embrace him. Jerry was glad to see him also and introduced me with a good deal of impressiveness. "Don Benito de la Torre," he called him and treated him with far more respect than I thought his slender look warranted.

"Onde esta Carlotta?" Jerry asked. And as that fellow contracted the don's face, but Jerry hurried on, inquiring for his father, Don Francisco, and his mother, Donna Julia, in his rapid Irish way, hardly giving him time to answer.

"Thank you many times," said Benito; "they are not they chose. We took a glass of wine, and Jerry went on inquiring further, but his questions were all answered coldly though politely. It seemed to me that the subject was unpleasant, and I pulled Jerry's arm. We passed on.

"The most distressing churl," Jerry exclaimed, "not to invite us to his father's house; the finest place and the prettiest girl in Merida. I have no patience with him!"

We stopped before a refreshment table, behind which sat an old fat woman, serving behind the grates, wines, liquors, nuts, cakes, cigars or coffee, as suited their various tastes, and receiving the real which each paid for his entertainment. This was the only bill to pay. Each called after drinking, took his partner to the table, if he desired refreshment, drank something himself or took a cigar, and paid his money. "Those who danced paid the bill," including music, too, I suppose, for those who did not dance had nothing to pay.

"I'm not a fool," Jerry said, "I'll take the wine of the country—a white wine, made from a small, yellow grape—and were leaving the table when Jerry turned suddenly to the right, having been tapped by a fan.

"When did you come to Merida again?" she asked in those sweet, liquid tones which only a southern beauty is mistress of.

"Only to night; not an hour ago," said O'Farrell. "But we are going to stay as long as you will let us."

"Well," she exclaimed, looking steadily at me.

"My young friend and traveling companion, Tom Conover," Jerry said, dragging me nearer. "La Senora Carlotta de la Torre, the prettiest girl in Merida," he added, in a whisper, which of course she heard, as he intended. She gave me her hand in the most graceful manner possible. I took it and pressed it warmly.

"I hope his visit to our city will be pleasant," she said.

"If I meet you often, it certainly will," said I modestly; at least I thought it boldly, for then but 15 summers had rolled over my head.

"Oh, that you shall do certainly," she said, and in five minutes more we had joined the waltzers and were whirling around the long room in the graceful gyrations of that giddy dance.

This lasted a long time, until I was dizzy, and then we went to a window. Opening the grating, we found ourselves upon a balcony without, where the moon was shining down calm and still, and the city lay beneath us as quiet as the "City of the Dead."

We walked away from the window till the hum and bustle of the fandango were hardly audible, and the liquid notes of a flageolet came up in the quiet street from an orange grove, through which we could see the little stream, shining in the moonlight among the dark green foliage like a silver thread.

We listened a long time and talked in subdued tones. Like two romantic children as we were, and she showed me her uncle's residence, dimly visible in the moonlight across the tops of the low, flat roofed houses. The gardens around it were full of trees, whose tropical foliage looked like a deep shade upon an exquisite picture. She told me she lived with her uncle, and invited me to come there often, and of course I promised to do so, and then dimly conscious perhaps that she was "kidding" me, she apologized by saying that I was a friend of her father's, and therefore her friend.

"Little stream," she questioned her about her acquaintance with him she only said she had known him the year before and proposed to return to the dancing room. Return we did and danced another figure, la tarantula.

"How long will you be in Merida?" she asked.

"As long as I can enjoy myself," I replied, "that promises a long visit."

"She turned those large eyes upon me searchingly and asked:

"Is there anything in Merida to interest you?"

"Oh, much!" I exclaimed, "more, much more than I had imagined."

"Until when?" she inquired quickly, still gazing at me.

"Until last night," I replied, returning the look which she cast on me as she first asked.

"At the fandango?" she pursued.

"Yes; and on the balcony, in the moonlight," I answered.

She turned the conversation most abruptly, but in such a manner as to let me see that it cost her to do so, and that for an hour of indifferent things, she always turned away from personal topics as soon as we had approached them nearly enough to feel that we were upon uncertain ground.

I was too near her. Her glances and tones were too ardent for me to resist. I felt young, impulsive, giddy headed and full hearted. I threw my arm around her waist and poured out, I fear, a very incoherent medley of English, French and Spanish. She hid her face, blushing and trembling, but as I proceeded she finally raised her eyes and listened quietly, making no effort to escape my arm.

Indeed I could see plainly enough that she was pleased. I knew that in a minute I should press my lips to hers unresisted. I was just about to do so, when a quick tread behind her the jumping of a heavy man from the top of the wall made me start and spring to the ground. Before I could reach the door, however, the vines were jerked aside, and O'Farrell strode hastily in.

"Tom, my boy," he exclaimed, with a quick tread, "you must come away from here, quick. I haven't even time to tell you why till we get into the street. Come," he continued, dragging me almost off my feet, "this way over the wall, quick!"

Scarcely knowing what he said, I leaped down into the street. Jerry followed, and seizing my arm he hurried me away down a small narrow street and by a circuitous route to the meson.

"You are young and impudent!" he exclaimed, almost breathless, as he at last slackened our pace. "I wouldn't have you killed for all old De la Torre's wealth."

"Mean! Why, I mean if you had staid there 15 minutes longer you would have been a dead man!" I said, the bulking rasal Benito talking to the same effect had hired last year to shoot at me. I managed to listen, and you can guess what I heard from what I did. You must be more careful. You are young and green."

He was right. I was green.

CHAPTER III. Time rolled on very pleasantly. The scenes were all new, and I was at precisely the age when our enjoyment is keenest. Jerry was pursuing his own schemes of pleasure in his wild way, and I was left almost alone to my own amusement. I had now determined that no power should force her to it. She did not and could not love me. I pressed her timidly to say whether she loved another, but either she was unwilling to speak or we were always interrupted and I forced to make a precipitate retreat.

Things were in this state on the evening before Christmas. I still lingered on without more plainly declaring what I felt upon

each side to the center, and sidewalks were never dreamed of by that simple people. Here and there a little path ran along the uneven ground under the walls to avoid the pools of water in the rainy season. These I followed from habit more than necessity, for the streets were dry and clean. But walking in the middle of a street never did look right—to me. I was not certain of the place Carlotta had pointed out (a place looks so differently by day to what it does at night), but I pursued and walked more slowly when I supposed I had come to it.

A high wall ran along the street for a long distance, and over it were visible the tops of orange and fig trees. A narrow door which I longed to stop and look through the crevice, pierced about the middle, and near the corner was a smaller door, which had no crevices. I passed on and looked down the cross street, upon which stood a large stone house. This I was sure was the house, and I walked toward it with a beating heart. The little door opened and a boy ran out, beckoning me to follow him in. I did so without a moment's hesitation, and he locked the door stealthily and took out the key.

"This way, senior," said he, and started at a quick pace down one of the shell walls which traversed the garden in every direction. He hurried me so fast and I was so agitated that I had hardly time to notice the beauties of one of the most charming retreats I ever beheld. The grounds were not extensive, containing perhaps not more than three acres, but within that small space were crowded charms which would have beautified ten times the extent.

Over all this scene of enchantment hung a veil of rose-colored moonlight, and as we sat on a summer day in the country. The silence was broken only by the humming of bees and the murmuring of the streamlets as they laved the vines which hung in the ripples, swinging lazily up and down. When I placed my foot upon a flat stone, which led across one of these, I heard the echo come back from the wall, and the boy held up his finger to enjoin caution.

I followed him in silence almost to the end of the garden, when, crossing a stream and turning suddenly to the right, he pointed me to a rustic summer house and turned back. Two vines were so bent as to form an opening, and a mass of matted vines hung swinging over it for a shutter.

I drew this aside and found myself in the presence of Carlotta.

She sat half reclining in a hammock of silk cord, swung across from tree to tree, and was dressed in the usual flowing costume of the country, a loose flannel robe of red and white, and a small, white hat, but left her shoulders to hide and disclose the sweeping contour of her form. Her hair was arranged in heavy madonna plaits, only confined at the end and falling loosely over her spotless neck. She wore a small red hat, and her eyes were turned toward one of them had fallen off and was lying on the ground, and the foot from which it had fallen was hanging coquetically over the cord of the hammock, and alight covered by no stocking. She had large, swimming black eyes, a small, pointed mouth, red lips and a clear though somewhat brunette complexion.

"Buenos tardes, senior," she said, at the same time throwing a fold of her robe over her blue veined foot, not, however, until it was placed in the hammock. "I was just thinking of you, and I was glad to see you. I have been waiting for you for some time."

"My mother, father and Benito will be in the procession tomorrow at 3 p. m. I shall have a headache, so that I cannot go, but will be at home. Santiago will bring you the key."

I went back, caught her eye resting inquiringly on me, and slightly nodding as a token that I would be there retired from the place.

When I got back to my lodgings, I searched for the note for the purpose of destroying it or reading it again perhaps, but it was nowhere to be found. I hastened back to the church, supposing I might have dropped it there, but I could see nothing of it.

Benito was standing near where I had sat, but he did not move, only glancing at me and withdrawing his gaze. He seldom noticed me now; indeed never, except by one of those sinister looks which promise no good, and which I have kept for months before the day fixed for his marriage with Carlotta, and he watched his prize with a jealousy truly Spanish.

The note was not to be found.

On the following day, Christmas, the procession was formed at the Church of the Incarnation and moved for the cathedral at 3 o'clock. About the same time the peon boy entered the "meson" and handed me a small key, to which was attached a strip of paper with these words, "Enter by the door near the garden street."

I went down immediately on the marching of the procession. The streets were entirely deserted, so that I had no trouble in entering unobserved. The little postern on St. Martin street opened directly on the rear of the summer house, into which I was not long in going.

In precisely the costume I have before described, she sat swinging in the hammock, beautiful, grace and vivacity combined.

"Ah, amigo mio!" she cried playfully as I entered. "I have kept you waiting too long!" I stepped forward, and seating myself at her feet took her extended hand and kissed it.

"The hour you named is not yet past," she said.

"Well, well," she replied, running her hand through my hair. "You are here now at all events. I will not complain since you have come."

"Did you wish to see me very much indeed?" said I.

"Oh, yes," she said, and she gave me a look which said more plainly than any words could that she wanted to see me alone of all the world. What could I do? I took her hand in one of mine, and placing the other round her waist drew her gently to me.

"Do you love me, then?" I whispered.

She gazed in my face a moment, and then throwing her arm over my shoulder abandoned herself to my caresses.

The crack of a rifle resounded through the trees, and with a wild scream she leaped from my arms and fell to the ground. I jumped from the hammock, and drawing a pistol rushed out upon the walk. Another crack resounded among the trees, and a ball whistled by close to my head. Immediately afterward I heard footsteps hurrying away. I pursued, but as I came in sight of the gate on the Calle Real it was closed and locked from the outside. I climbed to the top of the wall, but no one was visible on the street. The procession, and a high mass had assembled almost all the inhabitants of the city. As far as the eye could reach not a human being was visible.

I returned to the arbor and found Santiago and a peon woman living Carlotta upon a bench. The hall intended for me had entered her temple, and she was dead. Her face was turned upward, and the blood was slowly dripping from the wound to the ground. Young, innocent, passionate and beautiful, her warm affections had led her to a premature and violent end.

"My master will be home soon, and you must not let him find you here. Juanna and I will tell him."

He was right. I could do no good by staying and minding to harm. Telling the boy to say to his master that I would call upon him on the following day and explain my connection with her death, I looked for the last time upon the lifeless form and slowly left the place.

The remaining part of my story is soon told. Her uncle never knew by whose hand she had died, but the disappearance of his son led him to suspect Benito. The latter felt the city immediately after the procession. It was observed to talk to imitate Christ in Mexico, and their disappearing down a street near by he was seen no more.

Yet his own hand had not done the deed, for he was in the procession at the time and throughout the mass. The explanation I suppose to be that he had got information in some way of the appointment, probably by finding the note which I had dropped, and having hired two assassins purposely showed himself in the procession in order to escape the suspicion of having murdered me, for whom the show was intended. All efforts to arrest him were unsuccessful, probably because they were discouraged by his friends.

We staid in the city long enough to witness the magnificent general service of the

see by this time that I was deeply in love, and she was unwilling to forestall my declaration. On that night I went to the Church of the Incarnation to hear mass at midnight.

With a light Spanish mantle thrown over my shoulders, I stood among the kneeling throng, I confess not over devout. A crowd of women came rustling in. As they passed me I felt my mantle slightly pulled, and on turning saw the bright eyes of Carlotta, bent on me for a moment and then withdrawn.

"Aguá, madre," she whispered to her aunt, whom she called mother, and they both knelt very near me. I stepped lightly around them and seated myself on a kind of dais which ran along the side of the church very near to Carlotta. I had not been there more than five minutes when she looked up with one of those long, furtive looks which are so charming from a dark, liquid eye. It was dusky where we were, and I was unable to see her face, but a small note pinned to the corner of her mantilla, and to that she directed me by a glance. Changing her posture, she threw the mantilla close to me. Covering

my eyes with my hands, I took up the note, and I was surprised to find it was a letter from Carlotta, written in her own hand, and containing the following words: "I have been waiting for you for some time."

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Catholic church, with what feelings I will not stop to say. I called to see her uncle, but I am now not surprised that he refused to see me. On the following day we went to Sinal. Here I took shipping for La Habana and have not been in Merida since.

OSCAR C. HAMLIN.

CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS.

How to Arrange Flowers and Greens on the Dinner Table.

Much careful thought and attention should be given to the home table on Christmas day, as a happy arrangement of greens or plateaux of flowers will be found to give the perfect touch that makes the Christmas dinner the bright and cheery meal it should be. When greens also are desired for decoration, a large branch of mistletoe is effectively placed over the chandelier, and a basket of holly, with the berries, in the center of the table. English holly is preferable to the American, both on account of its richer coloring and the larger size of the berries.

Place several sprays of either holly or mistletoe over the table, tying the larger ones with scarlet ribbons. If other greens are used, try to carry out the same suggestion, adding to them above the chandelier branches of the brilliant hued sumac, placing a mass of bitterweed in the center of the table and sprays carefully here and there on the cloth. The result will prove to you that even without the holly and the mistletoe your table may be daintily and effectively decorated. Sometimes ferns alone are used; sometimes ferns with lilies of the valley.

When both greens and flowers are desired the former is more effective on or above the chandelier, the flowers placed in the center of the table. A pretty addition would be the placing of a small spray of holly, with its berries, tied with a tiny scarlet ribbon, in each person's place. One could add little appropriate Christmas mottoes to these if desired.

The flowers used may be either orchids, roses, Roman hyacinths, violets or lilies of the valley. Tiny bunches of violets or a few detached roses, if such are used as centerpieces, from which all traces of childhood seemed to have vanished. He had been sole protector of his two little brothers for the space of a year and a half—ever since his father found a home in the cemetery. His mother drank, and when drunk she was sometimes violent. He had seen a good deal of life, although he was only 8, for he lived in a lodging house. Fights, murders, suicides and deaths made epochs in his existence, and he talked of "when I was young," though the time lay far back in his memory.

Presently the baby began to cry, and Tim went to fetch it from the bed. He brought it to the fire and fed it with some of the tea which old Sally had given him for his birthday. "Why he was busy with the baby," Bill cried, "and I was there a good deal of life, although he was only 8, for he lived in a lodging house. Fights, murders, suicides and deaths made epochs in his existence, and he talked of "when I was young," though the time lay far back in his memory.

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