CHAPTER II

THE HACIENDA

"What are those?" said Emma presently, pointing to some animals that were half hidden by a clump of wild bananas. I looked and saw that they were two of the mules which the brigands had cut loose from the diligence. There could be no mistake about this, for the harness still hung to them.

"Can you ride?" I asked.

She nodded her head. Then we set to work. Having caught the mules without difficulty, I took off their superfluous harness and put her on the back of one of them, mounting the other myself. There was no time to lose, and we both of us knew it. Just as we were starting I heard a voice behind me calling "senor." Drawing the pistol from my pocket, I swung round to find myself confronted by a Mexican.

"No shoot, senor," he said in broken English, for this man had served upon an American ship, "Me driver, Antonio. My mate go down there," and he pointed to the precipice; "he dead, me not hurt. You run from bad men, me run too, for presently they come look. Where you go?"

"To Mexico," I answered.

"No get Mexico, senor; bad men watch road and kill you with machete so," and he made a sweep with his knife, adding "they not want you live tell soldiers."

"Listen," said Emma. "Do you know the hacienda, Concepcion, by the town of San Jose?"

"Yes, senora, know it well, the hacienda of Senor Gomez; bring you there to-morrow."

"Then show the way," I said, and we started towards the hills.

All that day we travelled over mountains as fast as the mules could carry us, Antonio trotting by our side. At sundown, having seen nothing more of the brigands, who, I suppose, took it for granted that we were dead or were too idle to follow us far, we reached an Indian hut, where we contrived to buy some wretched food consisting of black frijole beans and tortilla cakes. That night we slept in a kind of hovel made of open poles with a roof of faggots through which the water dropped on us, for it rained persistently for several hours. To be more accurate, Emma slept, for my nerves were too shattered by the recollection of our adventure with the brigands to allow me to close my eyes.

I could not rid my mind of the vision of that coach, broken like an eggshell, and of those shattered shapes within it that this very morning had been men full of life and plans, but who to-night were--what? Nor

was it easy to forget that but for the merest chance I might have been one of their company wherever it was gathered now. To a man with a constitutional objection to every form of violence, and, at any rate in those days, no desire to search out the secrets of Death before his time, the thought was horrible.

Leaving the shelter at dawn I found Antonio and the Indian who owned the hut conversing together in the reeking mist with their serapes thrown across their mouths, which few Mexicans leave uncovered until after the sun is up. Inflammation of the lungs is the disease they dread more than any other, and the thin night air engenders it.

"What is it, Antonio?" I asked. "Are the brigands after us?"

"No, senor, hope brigands not come now. This senor say much sick San Jose."

I answered that I was very sorry to hear it, but that I meant to go on; indeed, I think that it was only terror of the brigands coupled with the promise of a considerable reward which persuaded him to do so, though, owing to my ignorance of Spanish and his very slight knowledge of English, precisely what he feared I could not discover. In the end we started, and towards evening Antonio pointed out to us the hacienda of Concepcion, a large white building standing on a hill which overshadowed San Jose, a straggling little place, half-town, half-village, with a population of about 3,000 inhabitants.

Just as, riding along the rough cobble-paved road, we reached the entrance to the town, I heard shouts, and, turning, saw two mounted men with rifles in their hands apparently calling to us to come back. Taking it for granted that these were the brigands following us up, although, as I afterwards discovered, they were in fact rurales or cavalry-police, despite the remonstrances of Antonio I urged the jaded mules forward at a gallop. Thereupon the rurales, who had pulled up at a spot marked by a white stone, turned and rode away.

We were now passing down the central street of the town, which I noticed seemed very deserted. As we drew near to the plaza or market square we met a cart drawn by two mules and led by a man who had a serape wrapped about his nose and mouth as though it were still the hour before the dawn. Over the contents of this cart a black cloth was thrown, beneath which were outlined shapes that suggested--but, no, it could not be. Only why did Antonio cross himself and mutter Muerte! or some such word?

Now we were in the plaza. This plaza, where in happier times the band would play, for all Mexicans are musical, and the population of San Jose was wont to traffic in the day and enjoy itself at night, was bordered by an arched colonnade. In its centre stood a basin of water flowing from a stone fountain of quaint and charming design.

"Look at all those people sleeping," said Emma, as we passed five or six

forms that, very small and quiet, lay each under a blanket beneath one of the arches. "Why, there are a lot more just lying down over there. What funny folk to go to bed in public in the afternoon," and she pointed to a number of men, women and children who seemed to be getting up, throwing themselves down and turning round and round upon mattresses and beds of leaves in the shadow of the arcade which we approached.

Presently we were within three paces of this arcade, and as we rode up an aged hag drew a blanket from one of the prostrate forms, revealing a young woman, over whom she proceeded to pour water that she had drawn from a fountain. One glance was enough for me. The poor creature's face was shapeless with confluent smallpox, and her body a sight which I will not describe. I, who was a doctor, could not be mistaken, although, as it chanced, I had never seen a case of smallpox before. The truth is that, although I have no fear of any other human ailment, smallpox has always terrified me.

For this I am not to blame. The fear is a part of my nature, instilled into it doubtless by the shock which my mother received before my birth when she learned that her husband had been attacked by this horrible sickness. So great and vivid was my dread that I refused a very good appointment at a smallpox hospital, and, although I had several opportunities of attending these cases, I declined to undertake them, and on this account suffered somewhat in reputation among those who knew the facts. Indeed, my natural abhorrence went even further, as, to this day, it is only with something of an effort that I can bring myself to

inspect the vesicles caused by vaccination. Whether this is because of their similarity to those of smallpox, or owing to the natural association which exists between them, I cannot tell. That it is real enough, however, may be judged by the fact that, terrified as I was at smallpox, and convinced as I have always been of the prophylactic power of vaccination, I could never force myself--until an occasion to be told of--to submit to it. In infancy, no doubt, I was vaccinated, for the operation has left a small and very faint cicatrix on my arm, but infantile vaccination, if unrepeated, is but a feeble protection in later life.

Unconsciously I pulled upon the bridle, and the tired mule stopped. "Malignant smallpox!" I muttered, "and that fool is trying to treat it with cold water!"[*]

[*] Readers of Prescott may remember that when this terrible disease was first introduced by a negro slave of Navaez, and killed out millions of the population of Mexico, the unfortunate Aztecs tried to treat it with cold water. Oddly enough, when, some years ago, the writer was travelling in a part of Mexico where smallpox was prevalent, it came to his notice that this system is still followed among the Indians, as they allege, with good results.

The old woman looked up and saw me. "Si, Senor Inglese," she said with a ghastly smile, "viruela, viruela!" and she went on gabbling something

which I could not understand.

"She say," broke in Antonio, "nearly quarter people dead and plenty sick."

"For Heaven's sake, let us get out of this," I said to Emma, who, seated on the other mule, was staring horror-struck at the sight.

"Oh!" she said, "you are a doctor; can't you help the poor things?"

"What! and leave you to shift for yourself?"

"Never mind me, Dr. Therne. I can go on to the hacienda, or if you like I will stay too; I am not afraid, I was revaccinated last year."

"Don't be foolish," I answered roughly. "I could not dream of exposing you to such risks, also it is impossible for me to do any good here alone and without medicines. Come on at once," and seizing her mule by the bridle I led it along the road that ran through the town towards the hacienda on the height above.

Ten minutes later we were riding in the great courtyard. The place seemed strangely lifeless and silent; indeed, the plaintive mewing of a cat was the only sound to be heard. Presently, however, a dog appeared out of an open doorway. It was a large animal of the mastiff breed, such as might have been expected to bark and become aggressive to strangers.

But this it did not do; indeed, it ran forward and greeted us affectionately. We dismounted and knocked at the double door, but no one answered. Finally we entered, and the truth became clear to us--the hacienda was deserted. A little burial ground attached to the chapel told us why, for in it were several freshly-made graves, evidently of peons or other servants, and in an enclosure, where lay interred some departed members of the Gomez family, another unsodded mound. We discovered afterwards that it was that of the Senor Gomez, Emma's uncle by marriage.

"The footsteps of smallpox," I said, pointing to the graves; "we must go on."

Emma was too overcome to object, for she believed that it was her aunt who slept beneath that mound, so once more we mounted the weary mules. But we did not get far. Within half a mile of the hacienda we were met by two armed rurales, who told us plainly that if we attempted to go further they would shoot.

Then we understood. We had penetrated a smallpox cordon, and must stop in it until forty days after the last traces of the disease had vanished. This, in a wild part of Mexico, where at that time vaccination was but little practised and medical assistance almost entirely lacking, would not be until half or more of the unprotected population was dead and many of the remainder were blinded, deafened or disfigured.

Back we crept to the deserted hacienda, and there in this hideous nest of smallpox we took up our quarters, choosing out of the many in the great pile sleeping rooms that had evidently not been used for months or years. Food we did not lack, for sheep and goats were straying about untended, while in the garden we found fruit and vegetables in plenty, and in the pantries flour and other stores.

At first Emma was dazed and crushed by fatigue and emotion, but she recovered her spirits after a night's sleep and on learning from Antonio, who was told it by some peon, that it was not her aunt that the smallpox had killed, but her uncle by marriage, whom she had never seen. Having no fear of the disease, indeed, she became quite resigned and calm, for the strangeness and novelty of the position absorbed and interested her. Also, to my alarm, it excited her philanthropic instincts, her great idea being to turn the hacienda into a convalescent smallpox hospital, of which she was to be the nurse and I the doctor. Indeed she refused to abandon this mad scheme until I pointed out that in the event of any of our patients dying, most probably we should both be murdered for wizards with the evil eye. As a matter of fact, without medicine or assistance we could have done little or nothing.

Oh, what a pestilence was that of which for three weeks or so we were the daily witnesses, for from the flat roof of the hacienda we could see straight on to the plaza of the little town. And when at night we could not see, still we could hear the wails of the dying and bereaved,

the eternal clang of the church bells, rung to scare away the demon of disease, and the midnight masses chanted by the priests, that grew faint and fainter as their brotherhood dwindled, until at last they ceased. And so it went on in the tainted, stricken place until the living were not enough to bury the dead, or to do more than carry food and water to the sick.

It would seem that about twelve years before a philanthropic American enthusiast, armed with a letter of recommendation from whoever at that date was President of Mexico, and escorted by a small guard, descended upon San Jose to vaccinate it. For a few days all went well, for the enthusiast was a good doctor, who understood how to treat ophthalmia and to operate for squint, both of which complaints were prevalent in San Jose. Then his first vaccination patients developed vesicles, and the trouble began. The end of the matter was that the local priests, a very ignorant class of men, interfered, declaring that smallpox was a trial sent from Heaven which it was impious to combat, and that in any case vaccination was the worse disease of the two.

As the viruela had scarcely visited San Jose within the memory of man and the vesicles looked alarming, the population, true children of the Church, agreed with their pastors, and, from purely religious motives, hooted and stoned the philanthropic "Americano" and his guard out of the district. Now they and their innocent children were reaping the fruits of the piety of these conscientious objectors.

After the first fortnight this existence in an atmosphere of disease became absolutely terrible to me. Not an hour of the day passed that I did not imagine some symptom of smallpox, and every morning when we met at breakfast I glanced at Emma with anxiety. The shadow of the thing lay deep upon my nerves, and I knew well that if I stopped there much longer I should fall a victim to it in the body. In this emergency, by means of Antonio, I opened negotiations with the officer of the rurales, and finally, after much secret bargaining, it was arranged that in consideration of a sum of two hundred dollars--for by good luck I had escaped from the brigands with my money--our flight through the cordon of guards should not be observed in the darkness.

We were to start at nine o'clock on a certain night. At a quarter to that hour I went to the stable to see that everything was ready, and in the courtyard outside of it found Antonio seated against the water tank groaning and writhing with pains in the back. One looked showed me that he had developed the usual symptoms, so, feeling that no time was to be lost, I saddled the mules myself and took them round.

"Where is Antonio?" asked Emma as she mounted.

"He has gone on ahead," I answered, "to be sure that the road is clear; he will meet us beyond the mountains."

Poor Antonio! I wonder what became of him; he was a good fellow, and I hope that he recovered. It grieved me much to leave him, but after all

I had my own safety to think of, and still more that of Emma, who had grown very dear to me. Perhaps one day I shall find him "beyond the mountains," but, if so, that is a meeting from which I expect no joy.

The rest of our journey was strange enough, but it has nothing to do with this history. Indeed, I have only touched upon these long past adventures in a far land because they illustrate the curious fatality by the workings of which every important event of my life has taken place under the dreadful shadow of smallpox. I was born under that shadow, I wedded under it, I--but the rest shall be told in its proper order.

In the end we reached Mexico City in safety, and there Emma and I were married. Ten days later we were on board ship steaming for England.