

In Indian Mexico (1908), by Frederick Starr

(Extract of the book)

1901

The little hotel at the station is a new venture, and deserves complete success. At few places in Mexico have we found meals so good and cheap. In the evening, more from curiosity than expectation, we watched the train come from the east, and to our surprise and satisfaction, found our luggage. We had really made up our minds that we must spend some days in waiting; on the whole, the quiet and comfort of the little tavern would not have been unpleasant; but we hastened at once to Señor Espindola, and urged him to make instant arrangements for our leaving in the morning. To this he replied that no *carretero* would be likely to start on Sunday, and that we would have to wait until the following day. Matters turned out better than anticipated, and before nine, the following morning, our arrangements had been made. Two *carretas* were hired, at twenty-eight pesos each, to make the journey; our driver agreed that, without counting that day, he could get us to Tuxtla in eight days; in order to encourage him, we promised to pay five pesos extra for each *carreta*, in case we reached the city of Tuxtla on Monday the 11th. His name was Eustasio; he was a good-natured little Zapotec, from Juchitan originally, but living now at Guviño, Union Hidalgo. He warned us that, for the first day, we would have to put up with some discomfort, but that, upon reaching his home, he would fit us out magnificently. He promised to start at four that afternoon, and we were ready; of course, he was not, nor was he at five; so we went back to the hotel for a last good supper, and finally at 5:50 started. There were four teams and carts in the company, loaded with freight for Hidalgo. The night was clear, with a fine moon. The road was over heavy sand. Sometimes we walked in the moonlight, passing Ixtaltepec at 8:30, and reaching Espinal at ten, where we lost three-quarters of an hour in loading freight. From there all went well, until a-quarter-of-two in the morning, when we were passing through a country covered with scrub timber. Here we constantly met many carts heavily loaded; the road was narrow, and several times collisions, due to the falling asleep of one or other of the *carreteros*, were narrowly escaped. Finally, one really did take place, between our second cart and a heavily loaded one going in the other direction. The axle of our cart was broken, and the vehicle totally disabled. Two hours and a quarter were consumed in making repairs and in reloading. Here, for the first time, we were impressed with two characteristics in our driver: first, his ability to swear, surpassing anything that we had ever heard; second, his astonishing skill and ingenuity in repairing any accident or break, which happened on the road. Before our journey was over, we learned that both these qualities are common to his profession. It was four o'clock in the morning before we were again upon our way. All hope of reaching Union Hidalgo at the promised hour disappeared. Before sunrise, we had turned into the hot, dusty, broad, straight high-road, which, after my journey of 1896, I had devoutly hoped never to see again. Just as the sun rose, we took quite a walk, killing some parrots, *calandrias*, and *chacalaccas* as we walked. They said that *javali*—peccaries,—were common there. The day was blisteringly hot, long before we reached Union Hidalgo; hot, hungry and sleepy, we reached our carter's home, a little before ten in the morning. The *carreta* in which we were travelling was here far ahead, and after we had rested half-an-hour or more, Manuel, hot and perspiring, appeared, and reported that the disabled cart had broken down again, and that the other two were delayed by a sick animal. All came straggling in later. We had planned to leave here toward evening, travelling all Monday night; but hardly had we rested a little, and eaten dinner, when

Eustasio announced that we should spend the night here, and not leave until the following afternoon. He said the animals were hot and tired from travelling in the daytime, and that to push on would defeat our plans. He swore that, unless God decreed otherwise, we should reach Tuxtla Gutierrez by the promised date. There was nothing for it but submission, though we would gladly have chosen a more interesting town than Union Hidalgo for a stay of almost two days. When evening came, I took my bed of poles out into the open air, into the space between two houses; Ramon lay down upon a loaded *carreta*, also out of doors, while Louis and Manuel took possession of hammocks in one of the houses. It was a cloudless night, with brilliant moon. The air soon grew cool. After midnight, I was aroused by the most frightful yelling, and opening my eyes, I saw a barefooted, bareheaded Indian yelling out the most frightful imprecations and oaths. At first I thought that he was insulting some one in the house, but both the houses were fast closed. Ramon, completely wrapped in his blanket, could attract no notice, and I did not believe that I had been observed, nor that I was addressed. For quite ten minutes the crazy drunkard stood there in the moonlight, bawling out a frightful torrent of abuse, invective, and profanity, with an occasional "*Viva Mexico! Muere Guatemala!*" patriotically thrown in. At last he disappeared, but for a long time could be heard howling, as he went from house to house. Believing that it might be well to be prepared for intruders, I arose and pulled a stake from one of the carts, and laid it at my side, upon the bed. But I was soon fast asleep again. Awaking at five, I found myself so cold, and the dew so heavy, that I dressed, and wrapped my blanket around me, and sat up, waiting for daylight. At 5:30 our drunken friend passed again, somewhat less voluble, but still vociferous. He was absolutely crazed with drink, and through the day several times made his appearance, and always with a torrent of abuse and profanity which made one's blood run cold. Before the day was well begun, a second person, almost as drunk, but far more quiet, a nice-looking old man, began making similar visits about the village. The two drunkards, differing in age and build, differed also in dress, but on the occasion of one of their visits, they were taken with the crazy notion of exchanging clothes, and proceeded to undress, making the exchange, and re-clothing themselves in garments ridiculously non-fitting—all with the utmost gravity and unsteadiness. During the day, our *carretas* were being prepared. Apologizing for the inconvenience of the preceding day, Eustasio proposed to fix our cart "as fine as a church." He put a decent cover over it, and laid our sacks of plaster on the floor. Upon this, he spread a layer of corn-stalks, and over them, a new and clean *petate*. To be sure, the space left above was low for comfort, and we were horrified when we saw him loading up the second one, not only with the balance of our luggage, but high with maize, fodder, and great nets of ears of corn, to feed the animals. We had supposed that two persons and part of the luggage would go in each of the carts, and never thought of carrying food enough to last four oxen eight days. Crowding four people into our *carreta* made it impossible to lie down in comfort. Still, such is the custom of the country, and we submitted. During the day we heard a woman crying in a house. Upon investigating, we found that she was the wife of a *carretero* who had been injured on the road, and for whom a *carreta* had been sent. Shortly afterward, they brought the poor fellow into town, amid weeping and lamenting. When they took him from the *carreta* in which he had been brought, he was supported by two men and helped into the house, where he was laid upon a hammock. He groaned with pain, and a crowd of curious villagers pressed into the room.



THE DRUNKARD'S EXCHANGE; UNION HIDALGO



BEFORE REACHING UNION HIDALGO

It was easy to locate four broken ribs behind, and he complained of great internal bleeding. It seemed that he had started to climb up onto his moving cart in the usual way, and the stake which he had seized broke, letting him fall to the ground under the wheel of the heavily-loaded cart, which passed over his body.

Finally, all was ready, and at about five in the evening we started. Packed like sardines in a box, we were most uncomfortable. Personally, I did not try to sleep, neither lying down, nor closing my eyes. Shortly after leaving town, we crossed a running stream, and from the other side went over a piece of corduroy, upon which we jounced and jolted. Soon after, we descended into a little gully, from which our team had difficulty in drawing us. The baggage-cart had a more serious time; the team made several attempts to drag it up the slope, but failed, even though our whole company, by pushing and bracing, encouraging and howling, aided. There was a real element of danger in such help, the slipping animals and the back-sliding cart constantly threatening to fall upon the pushers. Finally, the cart was propped upon the slope, and its own team removed; our team, which was heavier and stronger, was then hitched on, but it was only with a hard tug, and with heavy pushing, that success was gained, and the cart reached the summit of the slope. We crossed a fine marsh of salt water, quite like the lagoon at San Mateo del Mar, and were told that we were not far from the Juave town of San Dionisio. From here, the country, was, for a distance, an open plain. With the moonlight, the night was almost as bright as day; cold winds swept sheets of sand and dust over us. At one o'clock, we happened upon a cluster of six or eight carts, drawn

up for rest, and the company of travellers were warming themselves at little fires, or cooking a late supper. We learned that this gypsy-like group was a *compania comica*, a comic theatre troupe, who had been playing at Tuxtla, and were now on their way to Juchitan. We never before realized that such travelling of ox-carts as we were now experiencing was a regular matter, and that the carter's trade is a real business. At two o'clock, we stopped to repack our loads, but were shortly on the way again. After the sun rose, we were in misery; the road was deep with dust, and we were grimy, hot, and choking. When the cross that marks the beginning of the land belonging to Ixhuatlan was pointed out, we were delighted, but it was still a long ride before we crossed the little stream and rode into the village.

Ixhuatlan is like all the Zapotec towns of this district, but less clean, on account of its lying in the midst of dust, instead of sand. Our carts drew up in a little grove, a regular resting-place for carting companies, where more than fifteen were already taking their daytime rest. Having ordered breakfast, we hastened to the stream, where all enjoyed a bath and cleansing. Coffee, bread, *tortillas*, eggs, and brandied peaches, made a good impression, and we ordered our buxom young Zapotec cook, who was a hustler, to have an equally good dinner ready at 2:30. We set this hour, believing that she would be late, but she was more than prompt, and called us at two to a chicken dinner. It was interesting to watch the *carreteros* in the grove. The scenes of starting and arriving, packing and unpacking, chaffing and quarreling, were all interesting. In the lagoons of Vera Cruz, our boatmen applied the term *jornada* to a straight stretch across a lagoon made at one poling; here among the *carreteros*, the word *jornada* means the run made from resting-place to resting-place. In neither case is strict attention paid to the original meaning of the word, a day's journey. Ixhuatlan is a made town; a paternal government, disturbed over the no progress of the pure Juaves in their seaside towns, set aside the ground on which this town now rests, and moved a village of Juaves to the spot. High hopes were expressed for the success of the experiment; now, however, the town is not a Juave town. It is true, that a few families of that people still remain, but for the most part, the Juaves have drifted back to the shore, and resumed their fishing, shrimp-catching and salt-making, while the expansive Zapotecs have crowded in, and practically make up the population of the place. Between dinner and our starting, we wandered about the village, dropping into the various houses in search of relics. As elsewhere, we were impressed with the independent bearing and freeness of the Zapotec woman. She talks with everyone, on any subject, shrewdly. She loves to chaff, and is willing to take sarcasm, as freely as she gives it. In one house we had a specially interesting time, being shown a lot of things. The woman had some broken pottery figures of ancient times, but also produced some interesting crude affairs of modern make from Juchitan. These were figures of men and women—the latter generally carrying babies in indian fashion—of horses and other animals. As works of art, they make no pretension, but they are stained with native colors, and are used as gifts at New Year's by the common people. Here we saw the making of baked *tortillas*, and sampled some hot from the oven. Such *tortillas* are called *tortillas del horno*—oven *tortillas*. Flat *tortillas*, about the size of a fruit-plate, are fashioned in the usual way; a great *olla* is sunk in the ground until its mouth is level with the surface. This is kept covered by a *comal*, or a smaller *olla*, and a good hot fire of coals is kept burning within. When the *tortillas* have been shaped, they are stuck on the hot *olla*, being pressed against the sides, to which they adhere, and are left to bake. In baking, the edges curl up so that the cake, instead of being flat, is saucer-shaped. They are crisp and good. Leaving at four, we continued on the hot, deep, dusty road, but saw interesting plants and animals along the way. There were fine displays of the parasitic fig, from examples where the parasite

was just beginning to embrace its victim, through cases where it had surrounded the tree with a fine network of its own material, to those where the original tree-trunk was entirely imbedded in the great continuous gray investing trunk of the parasite, now larger than its host. Some trees bore bunches of pale-purple flowers of tubular form, which fell easily from the calyx, and dotted the ground along the roadside. Other trees appeared as if covered with veils of little purplish-red flowers hung over them. Others were a mass of golden bloom, the flowers being about the size of cherry blossoms. A few trees, yet leafless, showed large, brilliant white flowers at the tips of rather slender branches. At Ixhuatlan, we saw the first monkey's comb of the trip. This orange-yellow flower, growing in clusters so curiously shaped as to suggest the name, is among the most characteristic, from this point on through Chiapas into Guatemala. There were but few birds, but among them were macaws and toucans. Eustasio said that in the season, when certain berry-bearing trees are in full fruit, the latter may be seen by hundreds.

When night had really fallen, I unwisely sat in front with the driver, to prevent his sleeping, and to keep the animals moving. Both drivers had a way of dozing off, utterly regardless of the movements of the animals or the dangers of the road. Carts going in opposite directions must often depend absolutely upon the oxen for their chance of escaping collisions or being thrown over precipices. Frequently the animals themselves stop, and the whole company is at a standstill until the driver wakes up. In this *jornada*, we had planned to reach La Frontera, the border of the state of Chiapas, at which place we had been promised we should arrive at 8:30 in the morning. Everything had gone well, and we were just about to reach the place, where it was planned to repack for the last time; it was just daylight, and Eustasio was congratulating us upon our prompt arrival; we drove to the brink of a dry stream, on the other side of which was our resting-place; just at that instant, we heard the other driver cry out; we stopped, and found that the baggage-cart was overturned. This dashed all hopes. There was unhitching, unloading, the making of a new axle, and reloading. It was plain that we could not reach La Frontera. While the men were putting things to rights, we strolled up the dry stream-bed to a shanty, where Eustasio told us we could breakfast. There was a well there, with fresh water, and the shanty, for the refreshment of travellers, consisted of nothing but a little shelter of poles. Here, however, we found baked *tortillas*, *atole*, and hard meat; the breakfast for four persons, cost twenty-five centavos, equal to ten cents American money. Through the day, birds were hunted and skinned, reading and writing carried on, until at half-past-three in the afternoon we were again ready for movement. The road was now sandy, and not dusty, the sand being produced by the decomposition of crystalline rocks. Mounting to a high *llano*, we shot a pair of curious birds, which looked like water-birds, but were living in a dry place and were able to run with great speed. They were of the size of a hen, and had a long beak, long legs and four flat though not webbed toes. At the end of this high *llano*, we passed the Hacienda of Agua Blanca, a property belonging to the *jefe* of Juchitan. From here, we descended rapidly over a poor road, coming out at nine onto the straight road from Tapanatepec, at this point four leagues behind us. From here on, the whole road was familiar to me. La Frontera was just ahead, and, arriving there at 10 o'clock, we spent an hour. Before us rose a massive mountain, the ascent of which seemed appalling. We could see a white line of road zigzagging up its side, and well remembered Governor Leon's pride in having constructed a cart-road against great natural difficulties. Thirty or forty ox-teams had gathered here, either ready to make the ascent, or resting, after having come down the mountain. Having gotten breath and courage, we started at about eleven. The road had suffered during the five years since I last passed over it, but was still an excellent work of engineering. As we mounted, zigzagging constantly, the magnificent view over

the valley widened; each new turn increased its beauty. My companions were asleep, and had had so little rest recently, that I hated to disturb them for the view. When, however, we were two-thirds up the slope, they awakened, and were as delighted as myself. We all got out, and walked for a considerable distance. An astonishing number of little streams and pools of fresh water burst forth from the rocks, and cut across the road or flowed along its sides. Finally, we reached the summit, and began the descent. This had made no impression on me when I went over it on horseback, but travelling in an ox-cart was a different matter, and I shall never again forget it. It was less abrupt than the ascent—less of vertical zigzag, and more of long steady windings. It also was excavated in the solid rock. It was badly neglected, and the cart jolted, and threatened every instant to upset us, or leap into the gulf. Coming out into a more level district, we passed Paraje and Dolores, reaching Carizal at five, where we stopped for the day. This is a regular resting place for *carreteros*, and there were plenty of carts there for the day.

As soon as the oxen were unyoked, I turned out my companions and lay down in the cart, trying to get an hour's sleep before the sun should rise, as I had not closed my eyes since leaving Union Hidalgo two days before. I was asleep at once, but in less than an hour was awakened by the assaults of swarms of minute black-flies, whose stings were dreadful. The rest of the company suffered in the same way, so we all got up and went to work. A group of *carreteros* breakfasting, invited me to eat with them—hard *tortillas*, *atole* and salted meat, formed a much better breakfast than we got, a little later, at the house upon the hill where travellers eat their meals. At this house they had a little parrot which was very tame, and also a *chacalacca*, which had been hatched by a domestic hen from a captured egg. This bird is more slender and graceful than a hen, but our landlord informed us that its eggs are much larger than those of the common fowl, and much used for food. Both this bird and the little parrot regularly fly off with flocks of their wild fellows, but always come back afterward to the house. This was a most interesting example of an intermediate stage between true wildness and domestication. There was little doing throughout the day. Heat, black-flies, and sunlight all made it impossible to sleep; but we took a bath in the running brook, and skinned some birds, and tasted *posole* for the first time. *Posole* is a mixture of pounded or ground corn and sugar, of a yellow or brownish color, much like grape-nuts. It may be eaten dry, but is much more commonly mixed with water. The indian dips up a *jícara* full of clear spring water, and then, taking a handful of *posole* from his pouch, kneads it up until a rather thick, light-yellow liquid results, which is drunk, and is refreshing and satisfying.