

# TEHUANTEPEC TO OAXACA (1896)

Text by John Randolph Spears  
Correspondent of the *New York Sun*

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## Table of Contents

<b>(1) SCENES IN TEHUANTEPEC .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>(2) OF MULES AND MULETEERS.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>(3) OVER A TRAIL TO OAXACA.....</b>	<b>18</b>

## (1) SCENES IN TEHUANTEPEC.<sup>1</sup>

### INTERESTING TRAITS OF PEOPLE IN THE MEXICAN Isthmus.

Odd Homes—Peculiarities of the Dress and Morals of Women—A Cut-Down Freight Car as a First-Class passenger Coach—Market Where Rice and Peas are Sold by the Spoonful, and Bananas by the Quarter and Half—The Guapil—Work of a Tramp Photographer—Children's Games—Dances—Happy in an Out-of-Doors Home with Scant Furniture.

To one who looks at the map of North America, the south shore of the lower part of Mexico seems to be a region about as far out of the way of the ordinary traveler, and from the greater centers of trade, as could well be found in the inhabited parts of the continent. And, so it is found to be, if one go there from New York, the most convenient and trustworthy route being by way of the Isthmus of Panama. But, because the continent is narrow there, and because where it is narrowest the backbone of the continent is broken, and a low pass from sea to sea is found, this out-of-the-way region has been often visited by explorers and engineers who were searching for a route for a railroad or a canal

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that would save the long voyage around the Horn when merchandise was to be transported between the East and the West. So, it has happened that in all collections of what may be called inter-oceanic literature, the number of printed pages devoted to the "Tehuantepec route" seems surprisingly large to one who sees it for the first time, and the region, though geographically out of the way, is, so to speak, rather near at hand in the minds of geographers. The reader is very likely to remember that surveys have been made across the isthmus for several railroad builders, including the famous Capt. Eads, who proposed to construct there a railroad that would carry a fully loaded steamship of large size as an ordinary train load, while at least two surveys have been made with a view of digging a canal that would float the ships from sea to sea.

Because of all this, the traveler in the Spanish Main, though he may have been somewhat surfeited with talk of canals at Panama and in Nicaragua, will usually land at Salina Cruz, the little port where some of these ambitious routes were to terminate, with a renewed interest. And when he gets ashore and goes up into the interior, he finds so much that is strange that he is not unlikely to look back on southern Mexico as being, on the whole, the most interesting region found in the whole journey.

The port of Salina Cruz is fairly well sheltered. A range of red-gray hills, scantily covered with brush, comes down from the interior to terminate in the sea, and there is a shallow bay in behind the barren rocks of what I suppose to be the end of this range of hills. The ship comes to anchor at some little distance from the shore, and the whale-boat launch, common to the ports of Central America, is found in waiting to carry freight and passengers to and fro. In pleasant weather, the landing is a matter of no special interest, but I observed that to help a launch through the breakers, a strong line was carried from a buoy, well out beyond the foam, to an anchor on shore. The crew got this line lengthwise over the launch, and so were able to control its motions easily—to prevent it turning end-over-end in the huge combers that roll in there in bad weather, and to keep it end-on to the seas in all weathers. The passengers who are not expert in jumping from the launch to the sand are carried by the boatmen. A number of native women were among the passengers landing when I did, and when these were taken in arms by the boatmen, they acted much as Yankee girls do under like circumstances—they seemed to enjoy it very much.

Once ashore, it was seen that Salina Cruz was a collection of over thirty houses, all told, standing on a bar of broken-down granite rock, with a salt lagoon behind the bar. One of the passengers, on landing, asked an idle spectator for a drink of water, and was directed to a well four feet deep in the sand. The well water was good, although the salt tide rose and fell but a stone's cast away on both sides of the bar, and the tide was said to raise and lower the well water, as it did that in the bay and the lagoon. It is likely that the well water was an accumulation from rains, and rested layer fashion on the salt water below.

But that was only the beginning of the interesting features of the little hamlet. The houses, except for three adobe and tile structures occupied by officials, were remarkable. About all that could be seen at first glance was an enclosure, perhaps 50x70 feet large on the average, the walls of which were made of posts standing ten feet high and twelve feet apart, with long fish-pole canes woven in basket fashion to fill the spaces between. Above this rose a very high-peaked thatched roof. But, on going to one of these enclosures that was pointed out as a hotel, it was found that the roof rested on adobe walls occupying less than half the space within the basket-work enclosure, the basket work being a mere yard fence. And so it was for the rest of the houses. The floors of these houses were usually made of a layer of adobe clay packed smooth, but tiles were found in some. The hotel yard served also as a dining room. One corner of the fence was roofed over with rude matting to fend off the sun, and the table stood there.

While I was talking to the customs official about my luggage, a fat old woman (nearly all the old women were fat) approached another Yankee passenger, an engineer from Tennessee, named J. G. Hall, and offered to supply him with a young girl "*as a servant*" for a \$20 gold piece. This is worth telling, for the reason that transactions of that kind are so common in this isthmus as to attract very little comment, except among strangers. As many of the readers of THE SUN know, the latest explorations in the Tehuantepec route resulted in the building of a railroad over it. When I was there (1893) a space of thirty-seven and a half miles in the route lacked rails, and a space of a few miles was ungraded. There was no station at Salina Cruz. The track was of standard gauge, and the Yankee engineer just mentioned said that the permanent way was in fair condition. In the afternoon, the one train employed on the road came down from Tehuantepec, and that was the most remarkable train I ever saw. The engine was a very good Baldwin, with a cowcatcher at each end. The car for second-class passengers came next. It was a common flat car, such as is used for carrying gravel when a road is building. The passengers were numerous

enough to cover it, and they used their own luggage and that of the first-class passengers, in lieu of seats. The first-class passenger car was made from a common box freight car. Rude narrow benches were run around the walls of the car for seats, and the upper half of the wall boards on each side had been sawed out, so that ventilation and a chance to see the country were secured.

I paid \$2.50 for a first-class ticket, or, say, ten cents a mile, and 30 cents extra for baggage. Of my fellow passengers who were natives, I can remember but one. I shall be a long time forgetting him. He was a young man, and he manifestly had wealth, some education, a good voice, and a bottle of whiskey. He was singing when I climbed into the car, but he stopped the moment I sat down and came to a seat beside me. Then he said: "*You are a Yankee; I am a Mexican. There was war between us many years ago. Let us drink together and be friends now.*"

The bottle held Kentucky whiskey, and it seemed to me in good taste, as well as good policy, to join him. So, I took a sip to the prosperity of Mexico. In return he took three gurgles to the Yankee nation. Next, he wanted me to drink again to the ladies present, and that was impossible to refuse. Then he got back to the war again, and told of the outrages Yankee soldiers had committed, as he believed, with a detail of untrue facts that became very unpleasant. I began to frame a reply that should lay stress on the fact that war occurred before I was born, when he stopped short and said: "*I ought to kill all the Yankees, but I cannot. I love them all. Drink with me.*"

So, we drank again, and he finished the bottle. I hoped that would end our little spree, but it didn't. He had another bottle and brought it out. Then he began on the war again, and I began to speculate as to whether his love for the Yankees, or his sense of duty commanding him to kill them all, would prevail. And this speculation was becoming exceedingly painful, when the fellow's eyes caught that of a very pretty barefooted native girl in a corner of the car, and the girl's eye twinkled. Thereat, he got on his feet, and after apologizing effusively for leaving one whom he loved so dearly as he did me, he went over to the corner and sat down by the girl.

So far as I recalled, this was the only time that I saw a shoe-wearing Spanish-American drunk in public, and he was certainly the only one who made himself offensive to me. And I am not now certain whether he was working himself up to a point where he would be dangerous or not, but I think not. However, I saw abundant evidence that Mexicans regard citizens of the United States with

precisely the feelings that stir the hearts of patriotic Americans when they read of British aggression and insolence. And it is greatly to the credit of the Mexican people that, while trying to work out national improvement by every means possible, including the encouragement of foreign investments, they are not developing, either in business or society, a class of toadies.

The railroad runs back through a low, wood-covered country for the most part, though we passed through a ridge at one place, and hills are constantly in sight to the north. The soil looked like the best sort for sugarcane and corn, and a railroad man who had been a long time in the country said it was so. "*Can you tell why it lies waste, then, when so convenient to a port where steamers call regularly?*" said I.

*"Yes: there is no land tax. All the available land is owned by wealthy citizens, who, having no expense in connection with it, can afford to wait for the rise in prices likely to come when the railroad across the isthmus is completed."*

The traveler's first view of Tehuantepec city is interesting. The train stops at a water tank on the bank of a shoal river, a hundred yards or so wide at low water. Looking up this stream, one sees that it seems to break through a range of low but pretty rugged hills, a half mile or so away. On the west side of the river the hills came to the water's edge, but, on the east, there was a level space some hundreds of yards wide, while the valley could be seen widening out beyond the hills. Right on this neck of level land was built the city of Tehuantepec. The houses were not confined to the level land. They had swashed like a wave, so to speak, up the hillsides, and clung there on benches and terraces where they overlooked the wide valley above and below, and the mountains far beyond. It was a collection of whitewashed adobe walls, with red tile roofs above, but on the hills were seen enough thatches to make the scene thoroughly picturesque.

Very likely, the reader will wonder that the thatches—that is to say, the houses of the poor—should have been found up on the hills, where the choicest building sites were to be had, according to Yankee taste, but so it was. And that is a peculiarity of the urban Spanish American. A traveler rarely sees the picturesque building sites near a town occupied, save by the barefooted peons. The people of wealth are commonly merchants in one way or another, and live adjoining their places of business. Yankee farmers build their houses under the hills for shelter and to save fuel. Possibly the Spanish American lives near the store to save shoe leather. As a town, Tehuantepec was not unlike other

Spanish-American towns. There was the usual plaza, and the usual business houses of tiles and adobes facing it, and the churches were here and there, and the streets were glaring deserts in the sunlight, while the interior courts were invariably cool and refreshing with the shade and moisture of tropical vegetation.

The train stopped in a Tehuantepec street, so narrow that a carriage would not have found room between it and the houses. The houses of this street were all alike—all were apparently dwellings—but some men carried the baggage to the court of one of the houses, and, when in there, I found the house was in a small way the Grand Central depot of the town. The baggage was weighed to see how much to charge for transporting it, and then we were free to seek the hotels, of which there were two patronized by foreigners. "Billie" Tocavén, the proprietor of *El Globo*, had been recommended at various places by travelers, and I found him a right fine little Frenchman—one of the kind who likes to eat well and drink well, and get as many other good things in life as possible. His table, for the region, was excellent, but his bedrooms were arranged like the cells of a prison, and contained absolutely nothing but canvas cots with a couple of spreads on each. However, after a man has traveled a while in the Spanish Main, he does not worry over the absence of furniture in a bedroom.

I found the marketplace of Tehuantepec in some respects the most interesting of any I ever saw. The market consisted of a tile roof, say 40x80 feet, supported by huge round bricks and cement pillars. There was a tile floor, slightly elevated above the level of the barren plaza in which it stood. The traders squatted on the floor for the greater part, but a few had small tables, and one fair young squaw had a table twelve feet long, on which dry goods were piled high. Women commonly have the most of the market trade in their hands all through the Spanish Main, but here they monopolized it. And very remarkable trade it was—Lilliputian trade, it might well be called, for little butter plates were used in measuring out peas and rice for soup; wedges of cabbage, the size of a man's thumb were in constant demand; squashes were cut into chunks 2x3 inches large, and onions and garlic were cut into quarters, and so on. Thus, I frequently saw a woman buy a piece of beef the size of her little fist, then go to another dealer and buy a butter plate full (it measured a teaspoonful only) of peas, and another of rice, a little wedge of cabbage, three or four leaves, by count, of greens, with a quarter of an onion and a half of a green pepper, and then argue with the dealer over the quantity of salt she was to throw in with this purchase. Even bananas were sold in quarters and halves, and I saw a woman argue for

five minutes over the size of a piece of cabbage leaf which she was to get in exchange for a single hard sweet cake, an inch and a half in diameter. Corn for tortillas was sold by the ordinary saucerful. The mango was the only product that was sold in quantities, and the largest sale of those that I saw was a dozen. Yet, in spite of the scant quantities of food purchased, the people were by no means ill-fed or poorly nourished in appearance. There was not a scrawny woman in the market, while the men, though slender, were able to carry from 125 to 150 pounds on their backs comfortably, as I saw them do.

An imported novelty on sale in the market was a double-ended wax match. It sold at three cents a small box.

In one corner of the market was what might be called the restaurant department. Soups were constantly boiling in earthen jars, and tortillas baking on flat round tiles, supported above tiny fires by stones on other tiles. Coffee was not boiling, it was leaching. They filled a jar that had a perforated bottom full of ground coffee, and poured warm water over it to leach away the strength, and that is the best way, but one, to make coffee. The best way of all is to use cold water. In this section of the restaurant one could get a light luncheon—soup and tortillas for three cents, a pretty good meal for five cents, and all he could eat for twelve. At this price he would have meat, beans, rice, and fruit, as well as soup and tortillas.

The women of Tehuantepec are, all things considered, perhaps the most interesting of any in the Spanish Main. Certainly, in form, in dress, and to some extent in their ideas, they are unique. As seen by a traveler, they are a most cheerful lot, and, as they laughed and talked, one noticed that their teeth were very white and regular, and that their skin, though a dark reddish-brown, was very clear. Their hair was black and straight, of course, for they are Indians, and they wore it in braids. They were very graceful in all their motions, and their voices were rarely shrill. In form they were erect and well proportioned, the shoulders being rather wider than the hips, and the waist like that of the fat Venus. Their hands and feet were small and shapely in spite of hard work and lack of shoes, but the most remarkable feature, and one that makes them well-nigh unique among aborigines, was this, that the breasts, even of mothers of considerable families, were not pendant. Their faces were Indian—that is to say, usually not beautiful to a Yankee taste.

The dress, save for the headgear, was but little above the simplicity of Mother Eve's first garment. Over the shoulders was a tiny calico waist, cut high in the neck, entirely sleeveless, and almost, but not quite, long enough to reach to where Yankee women wear the belt. It was not only scant in length, but it was a very loose fit and of thin texture. They called it as *guapilito*. That no sort of undergarment was worn was obvious to the most careless observer. For a skirt, a piece of cotton goods, perhaps two yards long, was wrapped around where skirts are always worn and the corners tucked in at the waist. Some women wore a long narrow scarf to support this skirt, as a belt would do, but most of them depended on the hold the corners of the cloth got when tucked in. This seemed to an unaccustomed spectator to afford a very uncertain support for the skirt, but I did not see any skirt drop.

It is worth noting that, owing to the shortness of the waist, an inch or more of mobile brown skin was always visible below it. And yet, within recent years, the waist, they said, had been lengthened because of a Government decree. They used to show from three to five inches of mobile brown skin. Curiously enough, this alteration in fashion was decreed because of the sensitiveness of the foreigners who came to Tehuantepec to build the railroad.

Quite as remarkable as the form of the clothing was the arrangement of colors. The waist was commonly of one color, the upper half of the skirt of another, and the lower half of a third. I saw some who had red waists, with blue and white skirts, and since the skirts were clinging, there was an approach to a barber-pole coloring that seemed very funny at first consideration. The lower part of the skirt was almost invariably white, and the women seemed to take a pride in keeping it so, just as a gentleman prefers spotless cuffs and collars. This indicated that the natives were a cleanly race, and every one to whom I talked said that they were so. This curious skirt, in the old days, was woven by the natives themselves and dyed with native colors, blue and white being the common combination, while the aristocrats colored the upper half of the skirt red. Red was the badge of wealth, because the coloring matter was obtained, they said, from a kind of oysters that yielded but one drop of coloring matter per oyster.

But the most remarkable thing about their dress was the headgear. Travelers in Mexico have often noticed that the men there lavish money on the high-peaked felt sombreros common to the country, often paying \$50 or more for one, while the women are content with a scarf ([?]) or a shawl. But in

Tehuantepec, women are not content in that fashion. They make a most striking garment, of which the common use is as a headdress. The name of this garment was pronounced by some as "wee peel" and by others as "wan-peel." One man who wrote it for me spelled it "guapil". He said it was also written "guipil". It is an extremely scanty waist, with a starched ruffle six inches wide around the neck, another of the same kind around the bottom, and others still in place of sleeves. As ordinarily worn, it hangs down the back, with the hem of the bottom caught across the top of the head. All the ruffles (always starched stiff) stand out behind, down the back, in very close resemblance to a Sioux war bonnet. When going to church, they put the waist over the head, so that the neck ruffle surrounds the face and gives it the appearance of a conventional sunburst. At a dance, the guapil is put on waist fashion, when the collar ruffle is suggestive of the days of Queen Elizabeth. By all odds, the most picturesque fashion is that of wearing it down the back like a war bonnet. For women who stand erect and walk with easy grace, as these do, the guapil is a most attractive headdress. With the guapil, the guapilito, and the skirt, the Tehuantepec women are dressed for any emergency. I saw them as travelers in Oaxaca with no other garment than these three.

Another fashion that is well-nigh unique is that of wearing gold-coin necklaces. The rich use silk instead of cotton for the dress, but the pride of both matron and maid is the gold-coin necklace. The American double eagle is held in the highest estimation—they will pay more for it than for two eagles—and next to that is the tiny \$1 piece. To have a string of any sort of gold coins about her neck with a \$20 piece at the end on front is the dream, if not the hope, of every maiden's heart; and what her thoughts would be at the sight of a string of the rare \$1 pieces, with an eight-square slug at the end, is more than I can tell.

Foreigners in Guatemala had told me that I should go down to the sandy beach of the river in the morning when in Tehuantepec, because it was a common thing for both sexes to bathe there naked, regardless of strangers; but, when I arrived, I found that this practice had been well-nigh abandoned, because a contemptible tramp photographer had taken snap shots at some of the bathers, and, taking some prints, had exhibited them about town with the glee that men who carry obscene pictures exhibit when showing them. Among the women who were treated so was the wife of a Judge of the Supreme Court. The practice of bathing naked in public had never been to these women any more immodest than that of going barefooted. But when they found that photographs of the bathing were used as obscene pictures, they were so shocked by the outrage

that the photographer had to fly from the country to escape the vengeance of angry relatives. I am bound to say that the women of Tehuantepec are, in their way, as modest and sensitive to ridicule as any I ever saw, but this is not to say that their notions of sexual morality are like those of ascetics. It should be remembered that they are Indians, with no very great intermixture of white blood, and that the purchase of women in the old days was a common transaction. However, on going to the river one evening, to take a dip myself, I passed a number of men who were bathing in little wells dug in a sandbar, and nearby them was a woman bather, who, judging by the quality of her clothing, belonged to one of the rich families. Her guapil, lying on the sand, was of silk.

But more interesting than any number of women crouching over a hole in a sandbar was a gang of boys running alongshore, stark naked—genuine little savages from 8 to 12 years old. There was a verve in every motion that, backed by the whoop and yell, was inspiring. More than that, half the boys had bean-shooters made of springy forks of brush, that they used with precision, while some played a game precisely like one often seen in the streets of the Yankee metropolis—hopscotch. They marked out a succession of rectangles on the sand, and then, while hopping continuously on one foot, kicked a caju<sup>2</sup> seed from one square to the next. But a spiral hopscotch was a still more interesting game. A geometrical spiral was laid out, say fifteen or eighteen feet in diameter, and the alleyway into its heart about eighteen inches wide. The game required a boy to start at the mouth, and as he hopped along, kick the caju seed home to the heart without crossing the line or putting his foot down.

Dancing is perhaps the chief amusement of all in Tehuantepec. One part of the plaza was covered over with smooth tiles to form a dancing floor large enough to accommodate a hundred couples, I guess. They waltz and schottische and polka and so on, and have a lot of native dances besides. I saw a little private party in one house where six men and six women were dancing. The women wore red waists and red skirts and had tiny red flags stuck in their hair. Each held a red handkerchief stretched by diagonally opposite corners in her hand before her. So arrayed, the women stood in a widespread line facing the men, and all balanced from one foot to the other and waved their bodies and the handkerchiefs gently to and fro to the music of a slow waltz. The men stepped and inclined their bodies much as the women did. It was a dreamy sort of a dance, and an important feature was a stop at frequent intervals to take a drink

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<sup>2</sup> Caju — Cashew (a tropical American tree)

of rum, but I do not think it one likely to attract favor in the United States—at least not in the rural districts, where the joys which follow the call to "swing" are prized above all mere grace of movement.

The houses that faced the plaza, as a rule, had verandas raised a step or more above the street level, and covered with a tile roof. These verandas served every night for sleeping places for scores of men and women. They were, for the greater part, people who had come there while the work on the railroad was in progress. They had been accustomed to sleeping on the bare ground or on tiles all their lives, and it was no hardship to sleep on the verandas. They got their food at the market, and it was said that eventually they would drift away home. But the most primitive housekeeping I ever saw in any town was across the river from Tehuantepec, in the village of Santa Maria. Santa Maria is practically a part of Tehuantepec, as Brooklyn is of the American metropolis, but politically it is separate. I went over to Santa Maria after having remained in Tehuantepec a few days. I arrived at night in the midst of a pouring rain. The house was one of the largest of the town, and of a curious model. It was one-half house and one-half veranda, so to speak. It was as if an ordinary adobe-walled house with a ridge roof had been erected, except that the front wall was set back so as to rise right beneath and up to the ridge pole, leaving the front half open to the weather, save for two thick pillars that supported the front edge of the roof. Engineer Hall, who was going to make the trip through the mountains with me to Oaxaca, came with me to this house. We were welcomed on the veranda in the dark by the landlady, and a cot was provided for Hall, while I slung my hammock across a corner, just clear of the drifting rain, at one end of the veranda. We were wet through and tired, and very quickly got into our beds, being by no means disposed to quarrel because we were asked to make ourselves at home out of doors. But, the moment we stopped talking, we heard voices mingled with giggles in the opposite end of the veranda. A moment later, the moon came partly through a rift in the clouds, and looking to see who my happy neighbors might be, I found there a young man and a young woman in a hammock, and a baby asleep on a mat on the tile floor handy by—man and wife with their first baby, as I learned next day. The couple wholly ignored the presence of strangers, and lay there alternately teasing and talking and chuckling and laughing aloud betimes—the most exasperatingly happy pair I ever saw anywhere, exasperating at least to a lone spectator. The Spanish-American woman must be courted in the most devout fashion while she remains cold, or at best coy, until she is satisfied of the lover's sincerity; but, after she is won, she finds it her chiefest delight to do at least as much courting

as he does. And that is very likely the secret of the happiness of Spanish-American homes, which was everywhere manifest. These two young folks were unrestrainedly happy, and yet they were keeping house on one end of a veranda, with no other furniture than an old hammock and an old mat. They had no clothes save what they wore, and their only kitchen furniture, as I saw next day, consisted of three pieces of red earthenware—a water jar, a pot for boiling, and a round flat tile on which to bake tortillas. The woman ground the corn for the tortillas on a pair of stones [...] which she borrowed. The man was employed on the railroad at 75 cents a day. The woman, having no dishes to wash worth mention, no floors to sweep or mop, no windows to scrub, few clothes to wash or mend, or any other kind of housework, had leisure galore, and she enjoyed it immensely, I guess, swinging in her hammock, though very sober-faced during the absence of her husband.

THE SUN has told of the tramps of the Colorado and Mojave Desert, and, stranger still, of the tramps of the bleaker deserts of Patagonia. It will not, therefore, be surprising when it is said that Tehuantepec has its tramps—not natives, but the vicious brute of a white man who can be made to work only with a whip or a bayonet. I had seen white loafers all through Central America; but, after all, I was not a little startled when walking up the streets of Tehuantepec on the way to the hotel to find that the only signs in town that were in English were there, one above the other:

BRITISH CONSULATE

NO ASSISTANCE FOR TRAMPS

It was said that the construction of the railroads from the United States, down through Mexico, had brought the traveling loafer on the freight trains and the car trucks as far as Oaxaca, and he had walked thence through the mountains to Tehuantepec and on towards Guatemala. I did not see any tramps in Tehuantepec, but I have no doubt they go there in numbers sufficient to worry the industrious.

While speaking of foreigners there, it may be worth telling that two Chinamen found employment as porters about the market, and that there was no sort of a Dennis Kearney<sup>3</sup> among the native porters.

On the whole, the most interesting inquiry about the people of Tehuantepec that occurred to me was as to their manner of making a living. A stranger would have hard work to answer that question regarding the people in any Spanish-American town, for there is rarely a visible industry, and beyond the town limits, but scant signs of agricultural work. I do not remember seeing a market garden anywhere in the Spanish Main, save in the Isthmus of Panama, where the Chinamen had gone to work. However, there were market gardens of some sort everywhere, of course, even at Tehuantepec, where I saw less indications of productive industry than at any point on the route. And, as said at other times in THE SUN, no great production is needed to support people in the torrid zone. And that fact would enable the torrid zone to control the earth, if only the people knew how to employ their leisure.

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<sup>3</sup> Dennis Kearney (1847-1907) — Irish-born labor leader in California, known for his nativism and racial views about Chinese immigrants.

## (2) OF MULES AND MULETEERS.<sup>4</sup>

### TROUBLES OF A TRAVELER IN THE TEHUANTEPEC Isthmus.

There is a Peculiarity About the Mules—A Start at Night in a Tropical Storm—Soldiers Called in With Some Success When the Guide Failed—Guide Prices.

One who makes the journey from Tehuantepec to Oaxaca, in the southern part of Mexico, is not unlikely to have experiences that will be interesting, perhaps inspiring, and certainly exasperating. Among others, there are the experiences with the mules and the muleteers. Of the mules, perhaps it will suffice to say that they are usually from the State of Chiapas, and that in Chiapas the first question asked of the mule seller is this: "*Is he broken to the tail hold?*" They told me that the trails were found so steep all through the cordilleras that travelers were in the habit of grasping the mule's tail as he started down grade, in order to prevent sliding from the saddle over the mule's head. This was what they called the tail hold. If the mule was accustomed to it, the tail hold was found admirably adapted to the situation. But if the beast had not been trained so, he was sure to buck at the most inopportune moment, and then both mule and rider became integral parts of an avalanche. And then they told me that mule sellers in Mexico were just like bronco dealers in Texas: they always "*had it in for the tenderfoot,*" which is to say that they sold unbroken mules as well-trained animals to the inexperienced traveler. So, I hired a sway-backed horse for personal use, with a saddle built like the fork of a tree.

After the mule, in interest comes the muleteer. My experiences in securing a guide are especially worth relating, because therein was developed one of the most remarkable, and, for the foreign promoter of business enterprises, one of the most exasperating traits of the Latin American people.

Very soon after I told Landlord Tocavén when I wished to leave Tehuantepec for the city of Oaxaca, a young native named Florentino Gutierrez came to the hotel to offer his services as guide and muleteer. The landlord guaranteed the young man's honesty, and after some talk—about two hours—the price and the date and the hour of starting were agreed upon. This done, the guide asked for the price in advance, saying he must have money with which to engage extra

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<sup>4</sup> Published by the New York *Sun*, Sunday, January 26, 1896, page 6; Edited by Duncan S. Campbell, February 2019

mules and to leave for the support of his family during the twelve days he would be away from home. The landlord and a number of American railroad men assured me that this was the custom of the country, and that no one would take me on any other terms. So, the money was given to him—\$22.50 in silver—for my share; Mr. Hall, an American engineer, who was going forward with me, paying the same sum. The contract was for transportation from Tehuantepec to Oaxaca, four mules to be provided, and the hour of starting was the peep of dawn of the second day.

On the day before the start a heavy rain began, the first of the rainy season, and a heavy rain at sea level in the tropics is heavy indeed. It looked rather bad for the next morning, and when, just after nightfall, the guide came to the hotel, I was prepared to hear him say it would be impossible to go on next day. To my surprise, he was quite enthusiastic over the prospect of making the journey very quickly, but when he had expressed his enthusiasm several times over, in very thick language, I saw that his good spirits were due to the fact that he was well-nigh staggering drunk.

About the time this became apparent, he proposed that we go to a place across the river in the suburb of Santa Maria, and when we objected, he said we must, because the river would be too high for the mules to ford in the morning. We agreed to go then, of course, and asked him if he had mules ready for the baggage. That made him laugh aloud. Why should he bring mules? He could carry the trunk of "*Meester Hall*," and I could carry my own baggage, could I not? It was not according to the contract, and the rain was flooding down, but it was an interesting experience.

We helped him get the trunk on his back, and, although it weighed 125 pounds—quite as much as he did—he walked away with it for a time with apparent ease. I followed with my bundles in hand and Hall beside me. We were drenched before we had crossed the plaza, but that was only the beginning of the adventure. Before another block was passed, the guide slipped and pitched the trunk half-way across the street, shattering one of the trunk's corners badly. Hall was exasperated, but we helped the fellow to get the trunk up again. We had scarcely done so when he slipped and fell with the trunk on top of him. He howled over that cheerfully—it was cheerful at least to us to hear him howl, for a variety of reasons, but chiefly because we knew from the noise he made that he was not badly hurt. So, we helped him up again, and thereafter he went on carefully until we reached the ferry to Santa Maria. The river was already rising,

after the fashion of such mountain streams, but when I asked the ferryman if we were not sure to go to the sea instead of Santa Maria, he said "*Let us go and see,*" which we did, and arrived in the usual place, because he could handle his lumbering bongo as an Algonquin used to handle a bark canoe.

Once ashore, we found our troubles increasing. Florentino had become chilled as he sat in the boat, and was shivering from head to foot. He staggered under the trunk as he walked, and soon fell. We helped him up, and he staggered on to the top of the sloping bank, and then fell again, and then gave it up. He said he would go and get a man to carry the trunk, but we stopped him. We thought likely he would not return, and so we helped with the trunk while he showed the way to the house where we were to remain.

We had agreed that we should leave at daylight next day, but I was in no way surprised when Florentino failed to appear until 10 o'clock. The rain was falling as hard as ever and the river was booming. The next day after that, the rain ceased, but the river was still higher, and as our trail lay across on important tributary, we could not go on if we wanted to. Florentino was sure the conditions would favor a very early start the next day still, and he warned us impressively to be ready. We were ready when the time came, but we did not see Florentino until 11 o'clock. When we asked why he had not come as agreed, he said he lacked one mule, and then, by a little cross-questioning, we learned that he had not up to that moment made any effort whatever to secure the mules needed. Then I said: "*It is very bad. We are in a hurry to go. Make us the favor to secure the mules for tomorrow.*"

He said he would do so, and that it would please him to arrive early. But we did not see him next day until sundown, when he appeared as a prisoner between two soldiers.

Finding when the morning came that he was not on hand, we went to his house, where his wife said she did not know where he was. We searched at a couple of his loafing places, but he had not been there. So, we went over to Tehuantepec, and asked Landlord Tocavén what we should do.

"*Do nothing,*" he said. "*Leave it to me.*" Then he wrote a letter to the Alcalde of the town, telling the story. The Alcalde sent two soldiers to bring in the procrastinator, and they did it. Florentino looked as happy as a lark, and when I suggested that he had been on one, he laughed cheerfully but made no reply.

Instead, he took a bag from his bosom and poured forty-five silver dollars on the table. "*There is your money,*" he said. "*You thought I was a thief. See the money. I am honest.*"

"*But we have lost all this time,*" said I, and at that he looked in wonder at those about him, and said, by way of explanation of my protest: "*He is an American.*"

Florentino had at first been really enthusiastic over the prospect of a profitable journey to Oaxaca. Could we have started at once, he would have enjoyed the journey greatly, and I have no doubt he would have been an interesting guide. But the delay due to the rain brought on a reaction. He came to look upon the journey with unreasoning dread, and yet his love of money prevented his bringing the silver back to us. When in Guatemala City, I saw a machine shop that was fitted up with as good a set of tools as anyone could ask for. It was well located, too, and the coffee plantations and mills of the region were numerous enough to furnish all the work the proprietor need ask for. But his courage gave out just as the workmen were putting the finishing touches on the shop. A few thousands of dollars more were needed to open the place and keep it running during the few months needed to give it a reputation for good work. But the owner preferred to allow this shop to stand idle—to let at least \$100,000 worth of plant go to ruin through idleness—rather than risk the \$5,000 needed to make the plant pay enormous dividends. In Rio Janeiro, a street railroad company imported an electrical plant for their road. Some mistake was made, which necessitated the expenditure of a comparatively modest sum in addition to what they had expected, and at once they abandoned the whole enterprise, and when I was there the whole plant was said to be ruined. The Latin-Americans are in some respects the most patient people in the world, but of patient persistence for the prosecution of an enterprise under unexpected bad auspices they do not seem to have a little bit.

Florentino having given up his contract, we had to search for a new guide. We got a good one, but the fellow, knowing that we were now anxious to get on to escape the rainy season, held us up for \$20 in gold instead of \$22.50 silver.

### (3) OVER A TRAIL TO OAXACA.<sup>5</sup>

#### ON HORSEBACK FROM TEHUANTEPEC TO A MEXICAN EDEN.

Wonders of the Scenery and Peculiarities of Human Life in the Cordilleras—Hidden Perils of the Mexican Breakfast—A Patient Half-breed Wife and her Management of a Drunken Husband—Native Caravans—A Song that was not Composed for American Ears—Happy Farm Life, from Which the Yankee Might Learn.

If any reader of THE SUN is looking for an outing in some place that is at once wild and picturesque and yet easy of access, let him buy a railroad ticket for Oaxaca, Mexico, and, when there, engage a guide and mules for a journey over one of the trails to Tehuantepec and back by another. Or he need not return to Oaxaca. He can cross the Isthmus and get a steamer to New Orleans. The railroads from New York lead to many wild and picturesque regions, but to none, I guess, that can offer more attractions than the extreme south part of Mexico. For, not only may one find there magnificent mountain scenery, curious forms of civilization and half civilization, ruins of extinct races, and a most desirable climate, but he can reach the land in comfortable railway cars, and he can travel all over it, if at all accustomed to camp life, without any hardship worth mentioning. Indeed, if the traveler will secure a mule-sedan chair for a conveyance, he can make his out-of-the-way mountain journey in comparative luxury.

My own journey through the region was made with a Yankee engineer named Hall, from Tehuantepec, or, strictly speaking, from Tehuantepec's Brooklyn, Santa Maria, to Oaxaca. We had engaged a middle-aged guide, who looked like a man of intelligence, and our first-formed opinion of him was confirmed when he arrived at the boarding house an hour before sunrise and had the pack mule loaded and ourselves in the saddle a half hour later, having in the meantime built a fire and boiled coffee for all hands, including his son, a lad of sixteen, who was going along just for the pleasure of making his first trip away from home. We were therefore remarkably comfortable as we left the irregular streets of the town and struck off across the country nearly due north.

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It is worth mentioning that we were comfortable at the start, because the day, for want of proper precaution, brought the hardest strain physically that I ever endured. We started thus early with the usual Spanish-American breakfast—a cup of coffee and a bit of corn bread (*tortilla*). Although it was fourteen leagues<sup>6</sup> to the first village, there was no hope of getting any food on the route, and the chances were that we would find little if any water. The light breakfast was all right for the natives, who had been raised on such fare, but no Yankee traveler should start on so little, even though he may have been four or five months in the country.

The road, for five miles, lay across what seemed to be a dead, flat, alluvial country covered with a dense, although not a particularly lofty, forest. The road was dry enough, in spite of a heavy rainfall during three days before our start, but it looked for all the world like the roads that could be seen in summer in the region about the headwaters of the Maumee River in Ohio and Indiana, thirty years ago. The soil was black, the foliage was green and vigorous, and the air, for an hour or two, cool and refreshing. A few birds with explosively loud voices were heard in the forest, but, on the whole, there seemed to be a notable lack of animal life along the trail. When five leagues out, we crossed a creek that had a current a few inches deep and a rod or so wide, which, but two days before, had been a raging torrent, as marks along the shore revealed. The guide said that during the dry season—for several months preceding May—no water was found there, and that travelers who did not carry water were sure to suffer.

We now had reached the foothills of the Cordilleras, and the trail became somewhat undulating, and therefore more pleasant. But the most interesting feature of the scenery was a large mountain, rising off to the right—not that it was novel or unique as a mountain, but because of what was told about it. The guide pointed out a place where a small tableland seemed to be scooped out of the side of the mountain. A narrow foot trail led up there from the Tehuantepec side, he said, a trail so steep that only an active mountaineer could climb it, but, from the tableland or bench, a good road, wide enough for carts, had been made along the face of the mountain around to the further side, where it led down into a valley through which a river used to run—the Tehuantepec River, if one could believe the story. The guide said that "*some foreigners*" had been over there examining it, and they concluded that the river had been turned into its present channel by "*the ancients*".

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<sup>6</sup> League — An archaic, variable expression of distance, approximately 3 miles (5 km)

However this might be, one thing was certain: that bench on the mountainside once had been the site of a populous city. There were remains of houses whose walls were made of broken rock that showed no sign of a tool mark—just as "*in Arcadia, when I was there, I did not see any hammering stone.*"<sup>7</sup> But there were two pyramids of the same kind of stone, each of which, very likely, was "*a tomb for some ambitious booby.*" There were several mounds ten feet long, six wide, and six high, but the use of them can only be guessed. More interesting still, there were several tanks 100 feet in diameter and three feet deep, besides many smaller ones. There were vaults where human bones were to be found, and everywhere no end of broken crockery. Occasionally, copper axes and knives might be found.

From a central point among the ruins, a tunnel ran down into the mountain, and some have guessed this was a passage to the river, for use when an enemy besieged the city, while others think it was the shaft of a gold mine. Over all was a tropical growth of trees and brush. It would have been interesting merely to look on these relics of a former civilization, and very much more interesting to explore them thoroughly, but my business was with the living only.

By the time we had passed this mountain, the sun was high enough to make an umbrella desirable, but there was no such device in the party. Both Hall and myself felt the heat considerably, and as noon came on, both of us found our stomachs in bad order. We stopped where a small spring of hard water came out of the rocks, and bathed our heads and drank sparingly, although intolerably thirsty, because copious drinking when one is overheated is about the worst thing that can be done. We had only a scant supply of native corn cakes to eat, but appetite was gone, and the amount on hand at that time was of small moment. The afternoon's ride proved, of course, more trying still, but I have only a faint memory of it, and made no notes. All I can recollect is sitting in the saddle as the horse ambled along a wide, glaring, yellow trail, with hundreds of small brownish lizards constantly in sight, scampering about in all directions, but chiefly running ahead of the horse I was riding.

I was about done for when, at 4 o'clock, we came to a brook that tumbled down out of a canyon with a most cheerful suggestion of coolness, and after fifteen minutes of bathing in this, I was in fair condition once more. While stopping by

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<sup>7</sup> Quotations from *Walden*, by Henry David Thoreau

this brook, I found in a depression of the rock a bit of black sand, which I poured in a gourd drinking cup, after the fashion in which Nevada desert prospectors test their finds in a horn spoon. I found several very distinct colors of gold at the bottom, but when I showed these to the guide, he said: "*It is impossible. There is no gold here, because many people travel this trail every day, and they would have found it years ago.*" But I do not think I made a mistake.

Just at dark we reached a village that had an unrememberable name, and here we got a very good meal, that included boiled chicken and beef. Then I swung my hammock, while Hall got a bed which had fishpole canes in lieu of springs and mattress. This kind of bed is common throughout the region, although very often the traveler can find no bed at all and must sleep on the floor or the ground. To the traveler, therefore, no more valuable advice can be given than to take with him a good canvas (man o' war) hammock. And if a traveler's stomach gets out of order anywhere in Mexico because of the hardships of the route, there is always a sovereign remedy at hand in the native drink called mescal.

I should be sorry to have anyone take to the drinking habit in the torrid zone. It is excessive drink, and not the climate, that carries off so many northerners there, but mescal in small quantity, night and morning, cured me of my trouble, as it has cured many others in like circumstances. Moreover, I cannot imagine that anyone born outside of Mexico could ever come to like mescal as a beverage.

We started next morning at 3 o'clock, having only the usual light breakfast of the country, but we had in our ride of the previous day got up into the mountains and found a climate very much better adapted to Yankee constitutions, and we did not mind the heat of the sun at all. Besides, when noon came, we reached a tiny hamlet where, in a house that had walls of fishpoles only (save for corner posts), we got four eggs each, a lot of dried beef, beans galore, and coffee, besides as much native cornbread as we wanted. It was all exceedingly good, except the coffee. The Mexicans of all that region brown the coffee too much—burn it, really—and then grind the berries to a fine dust, between two stones. Then they boil the dust in water. No further description is needed for one who knows the art of coffee making.

From the second day until the fourth, we did not see enough level land for a ten-acre farm, although there was a little land standing on edge, so to speak, that

was cultivated here and there. But there were enough things to interest the traveler. For instance, on the evening of the second day we arrived, after a ride of twelve leagues, at a most wretched-looking little rancho by the wayside. Not only were the walls made of unchinked fishpoles and the roof of thatched palm leaves, but one side of the home had no wall at all, and the place looked neglected even for that country. Moreover, the members of the family—a man and three women, besides children—were all almost uncivil. That was a most astonishing reception, but we couldn't go on very well because the next house was six leagues beyond. A considerable drove of chickens rambled around the house, and my appetite was sharp set. The usual price of a chicken to a foreigner there is 25 cents. I offered that sum for one to the señora, but she shook her head. She had none to spare, and we could have bread and beans only. Then I offered 50 cents, but she said "No" vey emphatically. So, I took the guide to one side and told him I wanted a chicken, and I would give \$1 for a good one. He said: "*I will try. You go to the creek.*"

Hall and I at once went down to the creek and had a good bath. When we got back the señora was putting a cut-up chicken into a pot, along with some native peppers and an herb I did not recognize. A little later, the chicken, with an abundant quantity of broth, hot and savory, was put before us, while dried beef roasted on the coals, beans equal to the Boston article, and corn cakes equal to hoe-cake were supplied in most liberal fashion. Last of all, a tea made of a native herb, good in spite of a sage taste, was brought to us. When we had eaten heartily I asked for the bill. The señora smilingly said, "*Twenty-five cents each,*" the price she had proposed to charge for corn cakes and beans only. "*How did you do it?*" said I to the guide when I got him alone.

*"It was very easy. I offered her the \$1 for the chicken, as you told me, but she refused it. Then, I said to her, 'The gentleman is sick. Because his stomach is very bad he needs the good food. But he cannot talk our language well, so he sent me to ask the good lady to make him the favor.' Caramba! Is she not the good lady? She killed the chicken and charges nothing extra."*

At various places i saw the native idea of a cradle—a net made sometimes of twine and sometimes of slender, flexible vines, stretched into a flat, rectangular hammock by means of stiff, slender sticks on the four sides. From the corners, stout lines led to a common center about three feet above the net, and from that point a rope extended to the limb of a tree or a rafter of a veranda. It was at once a hammock and a swing, and the babies slept or turned their big brown eyes

gravely toward the stranger, according to circumstances, but neither either cried or laughed while I was around. I observed that when I told a mother that her baby was very pretty, she took the compliment in a matter-of-fact way, which seemed to betoken a lack of appreciation of a foreigner's opinion, but when I said to my guide, as if I did not think the mother would hear it, that there was an extremely beautiful baby, the mother showed the usual signs of a mother's pride and pleasure. One day a curious lot of natives, travelling afoot, were overtaken on the road. There were five of them, all barefooted, and in the garb of laborers. On talking with them we found that one was an invalid, or at least thought he was, and that he was *en route* to Oaxaca to consult a doctor. As he had, just before that, told me he had walked from eight to ten leagues a day since leaving his home in Chiapas, the statement that he was dangerously sick seemed somewhat astonishing, but when he tried to explain what ailed him, my knowledge of the language failed me.

At the little pueblo where I found the beautiful church<sup>8</sup> recently described in THE SUN, I found three native men drunk, one of them being so drunk that he could not walk three rods without falling down. This man's wife was trying to get him to go home, contrary to his desire. I have seen many such incidents in the United States, and right sorry affairs they all were, but here in this little mountain hamlet, drunkenness was not exactly the same evil that it is north of the Rio Grande. Not even the children playing around the street paid any special attention to the drunkard's doings. Plainly, he was not disgraced in the eyes of his neighbors by his condition. The wife did not, so far as I could see, feel degraded either. But what struck me most was the conduct of the wife as she strove to keep him headed down the trail and walking along. Never was a wife kinder or gentler or sweeter in temper. It was best for him to go home, and she did not for a moment cease in her efforts to get him there, but not a cross word or a look or a sigh was to be noted. On the contrary, she coaxed and petted and caressed him continually, and when he broke away and tried to go back, she only became the more affectionate. When he fell headlong, she caught him so that he did not fall heavily, and when she helped him to his feet, she carefully dusted his clothes and cleaned his face. I never saw a public portrayal of good wifely qualities so beautiful as that, or so pathetic, either, for that matter.

And this incident seems all the more worth telling because the woman displayed only the common characteristics of her race, as I came to believe

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<sup>8</sup> San Bartolo Yautepéc — Described in the *Sun* article *Priestly Peculiarities*, 5 January 1896

them to exist. I certainly do not mean to advise Yankee men to get half-breed Indians for wives, for, to a man of sense, a woman is in all respects a desirable companion in proportion to her wisdom, culture, and ambition; but, even a man of culture might do worse than marry a native of the State of Oaxaca.

At the village of San Carlos, where I remained overnight, I found a remarkable little plaza. It was a shady, grassy square. In the center stood a structure that looked like a two-story round pagoda with a cone-shaped roof, sixty feet in diameter. There were twelve square tile pillars, twelve feet high, supporting the rim of the roof. Within these pillars was a smoothed tile floor that was fifteen feet wide, laid around a great central fountain of water. Around this fountain stood a number of tree trunks to support the roof frame. About eight feet above the tile floor was the wooden floor of an upper story—a somewhat contracted story where the stand-up space was chiefly beneath the peak of the roof. A ladder of poles led to this, and, on examination, I found there seats and music holders for a brass and string band.

Then I came back and saw that a narrow bench ran from pillar to pillar around the outer rim of the smoothed tile floor, save at the entrance, and it was plain to see that people had sat often on every part of that long bench. Moreover, on each of the central pillars was a good kerosene lamp, while brackets extending between the outer pillars had places for holding seventy-two candles. Cool, sweet water welled up in the center of the fountain and flowed away through an unseen conduit. The shade was everywhere solid and comforting. The tiles had been smoothed by the bare feet of the villagers, while the musicians, stowed out of the way in the little loft above, played waltzes and polkas and other strains that delight young hearts on the nights of feast days.

On one side of the plaza, facing this pagoda, could be seen the crumbling walls of an unfinished church. Two cracked bells were hanging under a low, rude roof supported on four rough poles before the old ruin. I guess that a building of dwelling-house form nearby was used as a church sometimes. I should say that people who do not approve of the form of worship prevailing in Latin-American countries would say that the San Carlosites showed in their public structures more horse sense than superstition. As I saw the people there, they seemed healthy, hearty, and clear-eyed. I do not believe they were any worse off for having completed their open-air dancing hall.

The hotel of San Carlos, although small, was in every way as attractive a public house as I ever saw anywhere between Panama and Paso del Norte. Among the pleasant features was a large court full of trees and flowers, on which the bedrooms opened, and here were three deer, kept as pets.

At intervals along the route we met the muleteers of the country, carrying freight from Oaxaca to all the lower parts of the country. I should have been glad to make a journey with some of these parties, for they had something about them that reminded me of the stage drivers of the United States frontier, and also of the boatmen on the Erie Canal. They were citizens of the trail, carrying their families with them sometimes. Among the rest were several small trains, where one man and one woman only were in charge. These muleteers were all young. The women were good-looking, and were in all cases dressed in jaunty fashion. A peculiarity of their dress was the high-peaked hat, which all Mexican men wear, and I noticed that their hats were ornamented a bit more than were the hats of their young men, and that they wore them tipped just a bit to one side. All the young men wore knives.

Travelers in the Cordilleras would be very much disappointed if they did not find occasionally the trail leading along "*the brow of a frowning precipice,*" and "*where the least misstep would have precipitated one 1,000 feet into the frightful chasm below,*" to quote the words of a traveler of whose adventures I read many years ago. Throughout the journey in the Spanish Main, I was on the lookout for the frowning brow and the frightful chasm, but luck seemed to be against me. In Costa Rica I found the trail overlooking a vertical precipice perhaps fifty feet high, but then the trail was cart-road wide, and lined with trees on both sides. In Honduras, I found one that was perhaps 100 feet high, but any active lad from New York could scramble down its rough face with no great danger. So, when we got into the Cordilleras of the State of Oaxaca, and for three days climbed about the sides of the really lofty mountains without ever seeing a vertical jump-off beside the trail that would compare with the bluffs on the Hudson River, I gave it up. And then I got the thrill I had been looking for, although it was furnished by a native. We had just crossed a divide, and were going down a comfortable trail at least six feet wide, with high banks on each side—we were really in a gulch—when, on rounding a turn, one bank came to an end, and a sheer precipice absolutely bare and smooth was revealed.

The drop was well-nigh 200 feet. Of course, a tumble of 200 feet would be as serious as one of 1,000, but there wasn't any chance for a tumble. The trail

remained at least five feet wide at the narrowest, and, moreover, it was rough enough to give a good foothold to the animal. But, while I looked, a native of the shoe-wearing class was seen coming up the trail about 200 yards away. I stopped my horse at a wider spot in the trail, made apparently for a turnout, and waited for him. He saw me do this, but instead of keeping on the safe side of the trail, he guided his mule to the very edge—the frowning brow of travelers' tales. A moment later the mule reached a crumbling place, and for three steps I saw the rock give way under its feet, and only by a remarkable exertion did it escape the plunge. This native traveler, it seemed to me, had guided his mule to the edge of the trail out of a desire to show that he was wholly indifferent to the dangers of mountain travel. I think he was a vain fool. I do not mean to say that all travelers who tell of narrow escapes from precipices are guilty of like bravado, but I should say that where the trail is wide enough for a mule with a man astride of him, it is wide enough for a man afoot, and if the ride on the back of a mule made the traveler giddy, he could very easily avoid the feeling by walking over the seemingly dangerous place, and so save the necessity of harrowing the reader's feelings afterward.

I tried walking on the first day we were in the Cordilleras, but for a different reason. I climbed some of the steepest trails to save the horse, but along in the afternoon the horse objected to my mounting again. It was a narrow trail, and there was no way of heading him off, so for three miles I alternately sneaked and ran, in vain efforts to get a hand-hold on some part of the wily beast, while the guide and the engineer made unfeeling remarks and enjoyed themselves as much as the horse seemed to do.

The trail, for a good part of the way, is the route of the Government telegraph line. Telegraph lines in the United States are everywhere odious to the eye, but in Oaxaca it is not so. There was but a single wire, and that was stretched from mountaintop to mountaintop in magnificent curves, often a half mile or more in length. At intervals we met natives carrying long poles that were split at the smaller end into four prongs, which were sharpened. These prongs all seemed to have been bathed in blood, at first glance, and so were not a little gruesome. But I quickly noticed that the mouths of those carrying these four-pronged spears were all smeared with the same color, and then I learned that the spears were used to gather a red, juicy fruit of the towering cactus of the region. The great cactus forests on the sides of those huge mountains form not the least interesting feature of the landscape.

At Totolapa, I swung my hammock under the veranda in the rear of a country store that, in the variety and disposition of its goods, suggested a country store in the States, although the shelves back of the counter were made entirely of fishpole canes. There were a dozen men and women [lounging] about—a regular, cracker-barrel clique, it seemed to be—but instead of discussing politics after the manner of Yankee loungers, they got a couple of guitars. Two of the men played these, sitting the while on the counter, while two young women and four young men danced a sort of jig, stopping at intervals to sing a song about the troublous love adventures of two wild animals of different breeds and sexes. To make sure that I understood the drift of the song, I asked the guide about it, repeating the chorus. "*It is well. You can sing it perfectly. They will be glad to have you join them.*"

*"No, I do not wish to do that. It is a jolly song and dance,"* I said, *"but in my country, if they should sing it in public, they would be arrested. The song would be called indecent there."*

*"Por Dios! Is that true?"* said he. *"And is there no liberty in the United States?"*

This seems to be worth relating, because nobody in that country regards a song minutely descriptive of the doings of animals in the mating season as in any way improper. It was as innocent and as entertaining to them as the *Merry Wives of Windsor* to a cultured American reader.

We left Tehuantepec on a Sunday morning. After the first day, our trail was wholly within the Cordilleras for three days. It climbed through gulches and canyons; it zigzagged hither and yon, up mountains that rose far above the clouds; it rose over crests and divides, and plunged down by devious ways (and once over a mass of slide-rock<sup>9</sup>) to follow the beds of mountain streams. It was often difficult, and sometimes it was barren, but it was continually picturesque beyond description. I do not believe that any trail of that length anywhere in the world can be more attractive to a hardy traveler. On Thursday afternoon we rode out on a wide plateau that, although surrounded by yellowish, barren-looking peaks, was one great garden bed—the plains of Oaxaca. No finer combination of soil and climate lies under the sun than this great valley. It was like a magnified river bottom of the Indian Territory, without the Indian Territory fever and ague, or it was like an amplified Mohawk Valley under a

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<sup>9</sup> Slide-rock — Slope formed of loose stones or rock debris; scree

perpetual June sky. For there is neither wet nor dry season here, as the term is understood elsewhere in the tropics. As we rode along, we saw men turning up the soil with plows that were made of tree roots lashed to long saplings. In other fields they were planting corn. In others the corn had sprouted. In short, within a ride of one league, we saw men planting, cultivating, harvesting, and carrying home crops of corn. We saw wheat fields in like diverse states of maturity.

The threshing of the grain was done by driving a string of burros over the straw that was spread inside of a very excellent imitation of a Yankee circus ring; and this was on the first day of June. Of vegetables we saw a great variety in the marketplaces, and peaches and pears as well; but, curiously enough, we saw none of these things growing anywhere, although we rode fourteen leagues through the heart of the region. There were great flocks of sheep and goats, everywhere in charge of shepherds, for no fences were to be seen. We saw coffee plantations with the trees set much too near together, and right alongside them we saw mesquite trees and sage bushes, and jackrabbits dodging about as they do in the Texas Panhandle. But probably the most interesting feature of the valley is the manner of life of the simple natives. There was not a farmhouse in all this rich agricultural region, but, scattered over the valley at intervals of two or three leagues were to be found the homes of the people, collected in cozy villages. Most of the houses were thatched huts, with walls of fishpole canes, but a few were made of adobes and tile roofs. The furniture in the houses consisted chiefly of home-made crockery, with hammocks, cots, and, occasionally, chairs, and in every house was the picture of a saint. The houses were all so low as to be wholly concealed from a spectator a mile or so away, but almost every village could be located from any point about the valley's brim by the lofty towers of the churches. The amount of labor that has been expended in building great stone churches in the Oaxaca Valley is only less astonishing than that which was necessary to build the great structures which a former race erected in this region, of which many striking ruins remain now.

To the traveler with leisure and the right tastes, these ruins would furnish matters of interest sufficient to last through many vacations; but, for an ordinary traveler, the revelations of the simple habits, the quiet but sufficient industry, the good nature and the contentment of the living, would be an ample return for the trouble of the journey. We Yankees are a great people, of course, but the Oaxaca Indians, with their village life, have, for time out of mind, been setting an example to our farmers which we have only begun to follow in a few

cases, like the fruit-growing villages of California. Of course, the Oaxaca farmer loses an hour or so at each end of his day, going to and from his work, but he takes his family along with him, and very often his friends and visitors also, makes a picnic of his day's labor, raises an ample crop for all needs, and gets the good of life as he goes along. The people are priest-ridden beyond doubt, but I did not observe that the saddle galled<sup>10</sup> the jade.<sup>11</sup> They are certainly ignorant and superstitious, but they were not sweating under mortgages or worrying about the free coinage of silver. I should be the last one to urge the Yankee farmers to adopt the exact life of these Indians; but, on the other hand, to substitute the civilization of either the Mohawk Valley or the Kansas plains for that of the Oaxaca plateau would be an outrage.

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<sup>10</sup> Gall — Make sore by wear or rubbing

<sup>11</sup> Jade — Broken-down or worthless horse