LETTER THE TENTH


SAN FERNANDO, 25th February.

We have been engaged for some time past in the disagreeable occupations, first of finding, then of furnishing, and lastly of entering into a new house. We were very anxious to hire that of the Marquesa de Juluapa, which is pretty, well situated, and has a garden; but the agent, after making us wait for his decision more than a fortnight, informed us that he had determined to sell it. House-rent is extremely high; nothing tolerable to be had under two thousand five hundred dollars per annum, unfurnished. There is also an extraordinary custom of paying a sum called traspaso, sometimes to the amount of fourteen thousand dollars, taking your chance of having the money repaid you by the next person who takes the house. We next endeavoured to procure a house not far from our present residence,—a palace in fact, which I mentioned to you before as having been occupied at one time by Santa Anna, and at another by the English Legation, but the present proprietor cannot be prevailed upon to let it. It has a beautiful garden and olive-ground, but is not a very secure abode, except with a guard of soldiers. We at length came to the determination of taking up our quarters here. It is a handsome new house, built by General G——, and has the fault of being only too large. Built in a square, like all Mexican houses, the ground-floor, which has a stone-paved court with a fountain in the middle, contains about twenty rooms, besides outhouses, coach-house, stables, pigeon-house, garden-house, etc. The second storey where the principal apartments are, the first-floor being chiefly occupied by servants, has the same number of rooms, with coal-room, wood-room, bath-room, and water everywhere, in the court below, in the garden, and on the azotea, which
is very spacious, and where, were the house our own, we might build a mirador, and otherwise ornament it; but to build for another is too heroic. The great defect in all these houses is their want of finish; the great doors that will not shut properly, and the great windows down to the ground, which in the rainy season will certainly admit water, making these residences appear something like a cross-breed between a palace and a barn; the splendour of the one, the discomfort of the other. I will not inflict upon you the details of all our petty annoyances caused by procrastinating tradesmen. Suffice it to say, that the Mexican mañana (to-morrow), if properly translated, means never. As to prices, I conclude we pay for being foreigners and diplomats, and will not believe in a first experience. However, we are settled at last, and find the air here much purer than in the heart of the city, while the maladies and epidemics so common there, are here almost unknown. Behind this house is a very small garden, bounded on one side by the great wall which encloses the orchard of the old monastery of San Fernando, within whose vast precincts only seven or eight monks now linger. It is an immense building, old and gray, and time-worn, with church adjoining, and spacious lands appertaining to it. At all times it is picturesque, but by moonlight or sunset it forms a most olden-time vision.

At that hour, standing alone in the high-walled garden when the convent bells are tolling, and the convent itself, with its iron-barred, Gothic windows, and its gray-green olive-trees that look so unreal and lifeless, is tinged by the last rays of the sun, the whole seems like a vision, or a half-remembered sketch, or a memory of romance.

Then the sun sets behind the snow-crowned mountains with a bright fiery red, covering their majestic sides with a rosy glow, while great black clouds come sailing along like the wings of night; and there is the hour for remembering that this is Mexico, and in spite of all the evils that have fallen over it, the memory of the romantic past hovers there still. But the dark clouds sail on, and envelop the crimson tints yet lingering and blushing on the lofty mountains, and like monstrous night-birds brood there in silent watch; and gradually the whole landscape—mountains and sky, convent and olive-trees, look gray and sad, and seem to melt away in the dim twilight.
Then the bright moon rises and flings her silver veil over the mountains, and lights up the plains, glittering and quivering upon the old gray stones, and a sound of military music is heard in the distance far and faint. And all the bells are tolling; from old San Fernando that repeats himself like a sexagenarian; from the towers of the cathedral, from many a distant church and convent; and above the rumbling of carriages and the hum of the city, are heard the notes of a hymn, now rising, now falling on the ear, as a religious procession passes along to some neighbouring temple. But it grows late—a carriage enters the courtyard—a visit. There is no romance here. Men and women are the same everywhere, whether enveloped in the graceful mantilla, or wearing Herbault’s last, whether wrapped in Spanish cloak, or Mexican sarape, or Scottish plaid. The manners of the ladies here are extremely kind, but Spanish etiquette and compliments are beyond measure tiresome. After having embraced each lady who enters, according to the fashion, which after all seems cordial, to say the least of it, and seated the lady of most consequence on the right side of the sofa, a point of great importance, the following dialogue is de rigueur. “How are you? Are you well?” “At your service, and you?” “Without novelty (sin novedad) at your service.” “I am rejoiced, and how are you, Señora?” “At your disposal, and you?” “A thousand thanks, and the Señor?” “At your service, without novelty,” etc., etc., etc. Besides, before sitting down, there is, “Pray be seated.” “Pass first, Señorita.” “No, madam, pray pass first.” “Vaya, well, to oblige you, without further ceremony; I dislike compliments and etiquette.” And it is a fact that there is no real etiquette but the most perfect laissez aller in the world. All these are mere words, tokens of good will. If it is in the morning, there is the additional question of “How have you passed the night.” And the answer, “In your service.” Even in Mexico the weather affords a legitimate opening for a conversation battery, but this chiefly when it rains or looks dull, which, occasioning surprise, gives rise to observation. Besides a slight change in the degree of heat or cold which we should not observe, they comment upon.

The visit over, the ladies re-embrace, the lady of the house following her guest to the top of the staircase, and
again compliments are given and received. "Madam, you know that my house is at your disposal." "A thousand thanks, madam. Mine is at yours, and though useless, know me for your servant, and command me in everything that you may desire." "Adieu, I hope you may pass a good night," etc., etc., etc. At the bottom of the first landing-place the visitors again turn round to catch the eye of the lady of the house, and the adieus are repeated. All this, which struck me at first, already appears quite natural, and would scarce be worth mentioning, but as affording a contrast to our slight and indifferent manner of receiving and taking leave of our guests. All the ladies address each other, and are addressed by gentlemen, by their Christian names, and those who have paid me more than one or two visits, use the same familiar mode of address to me. Amongst women I rather like this, but it somewhat startles my ideas of the fitness of things to hear a young man address a married woman as Maria, Antonia, Anita, etc. However, things must be taken as they are meant, and as no familiarity is intended, none should be supposed.

But these visitors are gone, and into the open court the consolatory moon is shining. All clouds have passed away, and the blue sky is so blue, as to dazzle the eyes even in the moonlight. Each star shines out bright, golden, and distinct, and it seems a sin to sleep and to lose so lovely a night. But for a true night view, mount upon the Azotea, and see all Mexico sleeping at your feet; the whole valley and the city itself floating in moonlight; the blue vault above gemmed with stars, and the mountains all bathed in silver, the white volcanoes seeming to join earth and sky. Here even Salvator’s genius would fail. We must evoke the ghost of Byron. The pencil can do nothing. Poetry alone might give a faint idea of a scene so wondrously beautiful.

26th.—We went yesterday with Mr. M——, his wife and daughter and a padre to visit the archbishop’s palace at Tacubaya, a pretty village about four miles from Mexico, and a favourite ride of ours in the morning. The country round Mexico, if not always beautiful, has the merit of being original, and on the road to Tacubaya, which goes by Chapultepec, you pass large tracts of country, almost entirely uncultivated, though so near the city, or covered by the mighty maguey plant, the American agave, which
will flourish on the most arid soil, and, like a fountain in a desert place, furnishes the poorest Indian with the beverage most grateful to his palate. It seems to be to them what the reindeer is to the Esquimaux, fitted by nature to supply all his wants. The maguety and its produce, pulque, were known to the Indians in the most ancient times, and the primitive Aztecs may have become as intoxicated on their favourite octli, as they called it, as the modern Mexicans do on their beloved pulque.

It is not often that we see the superb flower with its colossal stem, for the plant that is in blossom is a useless beauty. The moment the experienced Indian becomes aware that his maguety is about to flower, he cuts out the heart, covers it over with the side leaves of the plant, and all the juice which should have gone to the great stem of the flower, runs into the empty basin thus formed, into which the Indian, thrice a day, and during several months in succession, inserts his acojote or gourd, a kind of siphon, and applying his mouth to the other end, draws off the liquor by suction; a curious-looking process. First it is called honey-water, and is sweet and scentless; but easily ferments when transferred to the skins or earthen vases where it is kept. To assist in its fermentation, however, a little old pulque, Madre pulque, as it is called, which has fermented for many days, is added to it, and in twenty-four hours after it leaves the plant, you may imbibe it in all its perfection. It is said to be the most wholesome drink in the world, and remarkably agreeable when one has overcome the first shock occasioned by its rancid odour. At all events, the maguety is a source of unfailing profit, the consumption of pulque being enormous, so that many of the richest families in the capital owe their fortune entirely to the produce of their magueyes. When the owners do not make the pulque themselves, they frequently sell their plants to the Indians; and a maguety, which costs a real when first planted, will, when ready to be cut, sell for twelve or eighteen dollars; a tolerable profit, considering that it grows in almost any soil, requires little manure, and, unlike the vine, no very special or periodical care. They are planted in rows like hedges, and though the individual plant is handsome, the general effect is monotonous. Of the fibres is made an excellent strong thread called pita, of which pita they make a strong brownish paper, and might make cloth if they pleased.
There is, however, little improvement made by the Mexicans upon the ingenuity of their Indian ancestors, in respect to the maguay. Upon paper made of its fibres, the ancient Mexicans painted their hieroglyphical figures. The strong and pointed thorns which terminate the gigantic leaves, they used as nails and pins; and amongst the abuses, not the uses of these, the ancient sanguinary priests were in the habit of piercing their breasts and tearing their arms with them, in acts of expiation. Besides, there is a very strong brandy distilled from pulque, which has the advantage of producing intoxication in an infinitely shorter period.

Together with the maguay, grows another immense production of nature, the organos, which resembles the barrels or pipes of an organ, and being covered with prickles, the plants growing close together, and about six feet high, makes the strongest natural fence imaginable, besides being covered with beautiful flowers. There is also another species of cactus, the nopal, which bears the tuna, a most refreshing fruit, but not ripe at this season. The plant looks like a series of flat green pin-cushions fastened together, and stuck full of diminutive needles.

But though the environs of Mexico are flat, though there are few trees, little cultivation, and uninhabited haciendas, and ruined churches in all directions, still, with its beautiful climate and ever-smiling sky, the profusion of roses and sweet-peas in the desert gardens, the occasional clumps of fine trees, particularly the graceful Arbold de Peru (shinum molle, the Peruvian pepper-tree), its bending branches loaded with bunches of coral-coloured berries, the old orchards with their blossoming fruit-trees, the conviction that everything necessary for the use of man can be produced with scarcely any labour, all contribute to render the landscape one which it is impossible to pass through with indifference.

A magnificent ash-tree (the Mexican fresno), the pride of Tacubaya; which throws out its luxuriant branches, covering a large space of ground, was pointed out to us as having a tradition attached to it. It had nearly withered away, when the Ylustrísimo Señor Fonti, the last of the Spanish archbishops, gave it his solemn benediction, and prayed that its vigour might be restored. Heaven heard his prayer; new buds instantly shot forth, and the tree has since continued to thrive luxuriantly.
Tacubaya is a scattered village, containing some pretty country-houses, and some old gardens with stone fountains. The word country-house must not, however, be understood in the English acceptance of the word. The house, which is in fact merely used as an occasional retreat during the summer months; is generally a large empty building, with innumerable lofty rooms, communicating with each other, and containing the scantiest possible supply of furniture. One room will have in it a deal table and a few chairs; you will then pass through five or six quite empty; then you will arrive at two or three, with green painted bedsteads and a bench; the walls bare, or ornamented with a few old pictures of Saints and Virgins, and bare floors ornamented with nothing. To this add a kitchen and outhouses, a garden running to waste and overrunning with flowers, with stiff stone walls and a fountain in the middle, an orchard and an olive-ground; such are most of the haciendas that I have yet seen. That of the Countess C——a, which seems to be the handsomest in Tacubaya, is remarkable for commanding from its windows one of the most beautiful views imaginable of Mexico, the volcanoes and Chapultepec. From her azotea there is also a splendid view of the whole valley; and as her garden is in good order, that she has an excellent billiard-table, a piano, but above all, a most agreeable society in her own family, and that her house is the very centre of hospitality, one may certainly spend many pleasant hours there, without regretting the absence of the luxurious furniture, which, in Mexico, seems entirely confined to the town houses. The countess herself assured us that she had twice completely furnished the house, but as, in two revolutions, everything was thrown out of the windows and destroyed, she was resolved in future to confine herself to le stricte nécessaire.

We went to see a house and garden which has fallen, in chance succession, to a poor woman, who, not being able to occupy her unexpected inheritance, is desirous of selling it. The garden and grounds are a deserted wilderness of sweets. We were joined by several monks from a neighbouring convent, and with them went to visit the archbishop’s palace. Chemin faisant, the padre informed us that he was formerly a merchant, a married man, and a friend of Yturbié’s. He failed, his wife died, his friend was shot, and he joined a small community of priests who
lived retired in the convent of La Profesa, which, with its church is one of the richest in Mexico.

The Arzobispado is a large, handsome, but deserted building, commanding the same fine view as from the house of the countess, and with a garden and fine olive-ground, of which the trees were brought from Europe. The garden was filled with large double pink roses, and bunches of the mille-fleur-rose, which are disposed in arches, a favourite custom here, also with a profusion of sweet-peas and jessamine, and a few orange-trees. The gardener gave us some beautiful bouquets, and we lingered here till sunset, admiring the view. There is no point from which Mexico is seen to such advantage. It is even a finer prospect than that from Chapultepec, since it embraces the castle itself, one of the most striking features in the landscape. But just as the sun sunk behind the mountains, a sudden change took place in the weather. The wind rose, great masses of dark clouds came driving over the sky, and the rain fell in torrents, forcing us to make a hasty retreat to our carriages, and having omitted to take any precautions, and this road not being particularly safe at night, we were probably indebted for our safe return more to “good luck than good guidance;” or, perhaps, we owed it in part to the padre, for the robbers are shy at attacking either soldiers or priests, the first from fear, and the second from awe.

Talking of robbers and robberies, rather a fertile theme of conversation, Señor —— told me the other day that, in the time of a former president, it came to pass, that a certain gentleman went to take his leave at the palace, previous to setting off for Vera Cruz. He was received by the president, who was alone with his aide-de-camp, General ——, and mentioned to him in confidence that he was about to take a considerable sum of money with him, but that it was so well concealed in the lining of a trunk, which he described, that even if attacked by robbers, it was impossible they should discover it, and that therefore he did not think it necessary to take an escort with him. The next day this confidential gentleman left Mexico, in the diligence. Not far from the gates the coach was attacked, and, strange to say, the robbers singled out the very trunk which contained the money, opened it, ripped up the lining, and having possessed themselves of the sum therein concealed, peaceably
departed. It was a singular coincidence that the captain of the robbers, though somewhat disguised, bore a striking general resemblance to the president’s aide-de-camp! These coincidences will happen.

My chief occupation, lately, has consisted in returning visits; and it is certain that, according to our views of the case, there is too wide a distinction between the full-dress style of toilet adopted by the ladies when they pay visits, and the undress in which they receive their visitors at home. To this there are some, nay, many exceptions, but en masse this is the case.

On first arriving from the United States, where an ugly woman is a phœnix, one cannot fail to be struck at the first glance with the general absence of beauty in Mexico. It is only by degrees that handsome faces begin to dawn upon us; but, however, it must be remarked that beauty without colour is apt to be less striking and to make less impression on us at first. The brilliant complexion and fine figure of an Englishwoman strike every one. The beauty of expression and finely-chiselled features of a Spaniard steal upon us like a soft moonlight, while a Frenchwoman, however plain, has so graceful a manner of saying agreeable things, so charming a tournure, such a piquant way of managing her eyes, and even her mouth, that we think her a beauty after half an hour’s acquaintance, and even lose our admiration for the quiet and high-bred, but less graceful Anglaise. The beauty of the women here consist in superb black eyes, very fine dark hair, a beautiful arm and hand, and small, well-made feet. The defects are, that they are frequently too short and too fat, that their teeth are often bad, and their complexion not the clear olive of the Spaniards, nor the glowing brown of the Italians, but a bilious-looking yellow. Their notion of inserting the foot into a shoe half an inch shorter, ruins the foot, and destroys their grace in walking, and, consequently, in every movement. This fashion is, fortunately, beginning to fall into disuse. It is therefore evident that when a Mexicana is endowed with white teeth and a fine complexion, when she has not grown too fat, and when she does not torture her small foot to make it smaller, she must be extremely handsome. The general carelessness of their dress in the morning is, however, another great drawback to beauty. A woman without stays, with uncombed hair and reboso,
had need to be very lovely, if she retain any attraction at all. This indolence, indeed, is going out of fashion, especially among the younger part of the community, owing, perhaps, to their more frequent intercourse with foreigners, though it will probably be long before the morning at home is not considered a privileged time and place for dishabille. Notwithstanding, I have made many visits where I have found the whole family in a perfect state of order and neatness, but I have observed that there the fathers, and what is more important, the mothers, had travelled in Europe, and established a new order of things on their return.

Upon the whole, the handsomest women here are not Mexicans, that is, not born in the capital, but in the provinces. From Puebla, and Jalapa and Vera Cruz, we see many distinguished by their brilliant complexions and fine teeth, and who are taller and more graceful than those born in the city of Mexico; precisely as in Spain, where the handsomest women in Madrid are said to be those born out of it.

The common Indians, whom we see every day bringing in their fruit and vegetables to market, are, generally speaking, very plain, with an humble, mild expression of countenance, very gentle, and wonderfully polite in their manners to each other; but occasionally, in the lower classes, one sees a face and form so beautiful, that we might suppose such another was the Indian who enchanted Cortes; with eyes and hair of extraordinary beauty, a complexion dark but glowing, with the Indian beauty of teeth like the driven snow, together with small feet and beautifully-shaped hands and arms, however imbrowned by sun and toil. In these cases it is more than probable that, however Indian in her appearance, there must have been some intermarriages in former days between her progenitors and the descendants of the conquerors. We also occasionally observe very handsome Rancheritas, wives or daughters of the farmers, riding in front of their farm-servants on the same horse, with the white teeth and fine figures which are preserved by the constant exercise that country women must perforce take, whatever be their natural indolence, while the early fading of beauty in the higher classes, the decay of teeth, and the over-corpulency so common amongst them, are no doubt the natural consequences of want of exercise and of injudicious food.
There is no country in the world where so much animal food is consumed, and there is no country in the world where so little is required. The consumers are not the Indians, who cannot afford it, but the better classes, who generally eat meat three times a day. This, with the quantities of chile and sweetmeats, in a climate which every one complains of as being irritating and inflammatory, probably produces those nervous complaints which are here so general, and for which constant hot baths are the universal and agreeable remedy.

In point of amiability and warmth of manner, I have met with no women who can possibly compete with those in Mexico, and it appears to me that women of all other countries will appear cold and stiff by comparison. To strangers this is an unfailing charm, and it is to be hoped that whatever advantages they may derive from their intercourse with foreigners, they may never lose this graceful cordiality, which forms so agreeable a contrast with English and American frigidity.

C—n received an invitation some time ago to attend the houras of the daughter of the Marquis of S—a; that is, the celebration of mass for the repose of her soul. M— was observing to-day, that if this Catholic doctrine be firmly believed, and that the prayers of the Church are indeed availing to shorten the sufferings of those who have gone before us; to relieve those whom we love from thousands of years of torture, it is astonishing how the rich do not become poor, and the poor beggars, in furtherance of this object; and that if the idea be purely human, it showed a wonderful knowledge of human nature, on the part of the inventor, as what source of profit could be more sure? . . .

Certainly no expense was spared on this occasion. San Augustin, in itself a beautiful church, was fitted up with extraordinary splendor. The walls and pillars were covered with draperies of rich crimson velvet. Innumerable wax candles were lighted, and an invisible band of music played during the intervals of the deep-rolling organ. All the monks of San Augustin, with their white hoods and sandalled feet, and carrying lighted tapers, were ranged near the altar. All the male relatives of the family, dressed in deep mourning, occupied the high-backed chairs placed along one side of the church, the floor of which was covered with a carpet, on which
various veiled and mourning figures were kneeling, whom I joined. The whole service, the chanting, the solemn music, and the prayers, were very impressive, yet more joyous than sad, perhaps from the pervading feeling that each note, as it rose to heaven, carried some alleviation to the spirit of the young and beloved one for whose repose they played, and brought her nearer to the gates of the Holy City.

She was but twenty when she died; and our first house is close to that of the Marquis de S—a, her father, so that we were shocked to learn that she had expired on the night of our great serenade (we, of course, not aware of her illness), actually to the sound of that gay music, and amidst the shouting and clapping of hands of the multitude. When the service was over the procession passed out, every one kissing the hand of the bishop as he went along, and we found some difficulty in making our way through the crowds of léperos, who, though not allowed to enter the church on this occasion, were swarming at the gates. Our carriage, as we returned home, formed one of a file of at least one hundred.

We found on our table another invitation to a very splendid mass, which is to be performed in San Francisco, on account of the death of a friend of ours, a senator of a distinguished family. The style of these invitations is as follows:—A device is engraved on the paper, such as a tomb and cypress, and below is printed,

"José Maria A——,
José G—— de la C——a, and Basilio G——,
brothers and uncle of the
Senator Don Augustin T——,
who died on the twenty-eighth of last month,
request you to assist at the suffrage of the funeral honours, which, by the desire of his wife, Doña J——A——, will be celebrated in the church of San Francisco on the morning of the eighth of his month of February, 1840, at nine o'clock."

Beside this invitation, was a piece of information of a different description:

"General A—— and Anna R—— beg to inform you that they have contracted matrimony, and have the honour of offering themselves to your disposal.

"M—— Street, No. 24. Mexico, 1840."

Here, as in Spain, a lady, after her marriage, retains
her maiden name; and though she adds to it that of her husband, she is more commonly known by her own.

From ignorance of another Mexican custom, I made rather an awkward blunder the other day; though I must observe, in my justification, that I had lately been in the agonies of searching for servants, and had just filled all the necessary departments pretty much to my satisfaction. Therefore, when the porter of the Señora de —- brought me the compliments of his mistress, and that she begged to inform me that she had another servant at my disposal (otra criada á mi disposicion), I returned for answer, that I was greatly obliged, but had just hired a recamérera (chambermaid). At this the man, stupid as he was, opened his great eyes with a slight expression of wonder. Fortunately, as he was turning away, I thought of inquiring of the señora’s health, and his reply, that “she and the baby were coming on very well,” brought the truth suddenly before me, that the message was merely the etiquette used on informing the friends of the family of the birth of a child—a conviction which induced me slightly to alter the style of my answer. Experientia docet!

LETTER THE ELEVENTH


The street in which we live forms part of the Calle de Tacuba, the ancient Tlacopan, one of the great causeways by which ancient Mexico communicated with the continent. The other two were Tepeyayac (now Guadalupe) and Iztapalapan, by which last the Mexican emperor and his nobles went out to receive Cortes on his entrance to Tenochtitlan. The ancient city was divided into four districts, and this division is still preserved, with a change from the Indian names to those of San Pablo, San Sebastián, San Juan, and Santa María. The streets run in the same direction as they did in former times. The same street frequently changes its name in each division, and this part of the Calle de Tacuba is occasionally called