LETTER THE TWELFTH


16th March.

We are now in Lent in the midst of prayer, church-going, and fasting. The carnival was not very gay, with the exception of a few public masked balls and very brilliant pasées. The Viga is one of the most beautiful promenades imaginable, though it might easily be rendered still more so; but even as it is, with its fine shady trees and canal, along which the lazy canoes are constantly gliding, it would be difficult, on a fine evening, just before sunset, especially on the evening of a fête-day, to find anywhere a prettier or more characteristic scene. Which rank of society shows the most taste in their mode of enjoyment, must be left to the scientific to determine; the Indians, with their flower-garlands and guitars, lying in their canoes, and dancing and singing after their own fashion as they glide along the water, inhaling the balmy breezes; or the ladies who shut up in their close carriages, promenade along in full dress and silence for a given space of time, acknowledging by a gentle movement of their fan, the salutations of their fair friends from the recesses of their coaches, and seeming to dread lest the air of heaven should visit them too roughly; though the soft breeze, laden with balm, steals over the sleepy water, and the last rays of the sun are gilding the branches of the trees with a broken and flickering light. . . .

Then at certain intervals of time each carriage slowly draws up beside its neighbour (as in the other paséo); the elegant carratela beside the plebeian hackney-coach; the splendid equipage of the millionaire beside the lumbering and antique vehicle whose fashion hath now departed. There sit the inmates in silence, as if the business of life were over, and it was now their part to watch the busy world from the loopholes of their retreat, and see it rolling along whilst they take their rest. The gentlemen also
draw up their prancing steeds, though not within hail of the carriages, but they in the fresh air and under the green trees have as much advantage over the Señoras as the wandering friar has over the cloistered nun.

Yet enter the Viga about five o'clock, when freshly watered, and the soldiers have taken their stand to prevent disturbance, and two long lines of carriages are to be seen going and returning as far as the eye can reach, and hundreds of gay plebeians are assembled on the sidewalks with flowers and fruit and dulces for sale, and innumerable equestrians in picturesque dresses, and with spirited horses, fill up the interval between the carriages, and the canoes are covering the canal, the Indians singing and dancing lazily as the boats steal along, and the whole under a blue and cloudless sky, and in that pure clear atmosphere: and could you only shut your eyes to the one disagreeable feature in the picture, the number of lóperos busy in the exercise of their vocation, you would believe that Mexico must be the most flourishing, most enjoyable, and most peaceful place in the world, and more-over the wealthiest; not a republic, certainly, for there is no well-dressed people; hardly a connecting link between the blankets and the satins, the puppies and the diamonds. As for the carriages, many would not disgrace Hyde Park, though there are some that would send a shiver all along Bond-street; but the very contrast is amusing, and upon the whole, both as to horses and equipages, there is much more to admire than to criticise. . .

There, for example, is the handsome carriage of the rich — —, who has one of the finest houses in Mexico; his wife wears a velvet turban twisted with large pearls, and has at this moment a cigar in her mouth. She is not pretty, but her jewels are superb. How he made his fortune, partly by gambling, and partly by even less honourable means, let some able chronicler relate. Or look at this elegant carratela, with its glass sides all open, giving to view a constellation of fair ones, and drawn by handsome gray frisones. These ladies are remarkable as having a more European air than most others, brighter colours, longer and simpler dresses, and Paris bonnets. Perhaps they have been in Europe. It is remarkable that the horses of the gentlemen all appear peculiarly un-manageable every time they pass this carriage. Another handsome, plain carriage, containing the family of one
of the ministers; mother and daughters all beautiful, with Spanish eyes and dark glowing complexions, followed close by a hackney-coach containing women with rebosos, and little children, with their faces and fingers all bedaubed with candy. . . . Some of the coachmen and footmen wear Mexican dresses, and others have liveries. . . . But here come three carriages en suite, all with the same crimson and gold livery, all luxurious, and all drawn by handsome white horses. It is the President? Certainly not; it is too ostentatious. Even royalty goes in simpler guise, when it condescends to mingle in the amusements of its subjects. In the first carriage appear the great man himself and his consort, rather withdrawing from the plebeian gaze. There is here much crimson and gold, much glass and well-stuffed cushions, much comfort and magnificence combined. Two handsome northern steeds, white and prancing, draw this commodious equipage. The next is a splendid coach containing the children and servants, while in the third; equally magnificent, are the babies and nurses. By the side of the first carriage rides an elderly gentleman, who, were his seat firmer, might be mistaken for a picador. He wears a rich Mexican dress, all covered with gold embroidery; his hat with gold rolls is stuck jauntily on one side, contrasting oddly enough with his uneasy expression of countenance, probably caused by the inward trepidation of which he cannot wholly repress the outward sign while managing his highbred steed, and with his feet pressing his silver stirrups, cautiously touching him with a whip which has a large diamond in the handle.

But the chief wonder of his equipment, and that which has procured him such a retinue of little ragged and shouting boys, is his saddle. This extraordinary piece of furniture, which cost the owner five thousand dollars, is entirely covered with velvet, richly embossed in massive gold; he sometimes appears with another, inlaid with pure silver.

His whole appearance is the most singular imaginable, and the perturbation of spirit in which he must return when it begins to grow dusk, and he reflects at once upon his own value, and his countrymen's taste for appropriation, must balance the enjoyment which his vanity receives from the admiration of the little boys in the Paseo.

Just as these millionaires pass by, an old hackney-coach
in their wake, attracts our attention, exactly the sort of quaint old vehicle in which it sometimes pleases Lady Morgan to introduce her heroines. In it are six figures, closely masked, their faces covered with shawls. After many conjectures, it is impossible to guess whether they are men or women. It was impossible, but as the carriages return, the wind suddenly blows aside the shawls of two of the party, and discloses the gowns and hoods of the—friars! O tempora! O Mores!

There were three masked balls at the theatre, of which we only attended one. We went about ten o'clock to a box on the pit tier, and although a pronunciamento (a fashionable term here for a revolution) was prognosticated, we found everything very quiet and orderly, and the ball very gay and crowded. As we came in, and were giving our tickets, a number of masks came springing by, shrieking out our names in their unearthly voices. Captain G——, brother of Lord ———, came to our box; also a scion of La jeune France, M. de C——, who condescendingly kept his hat on during the whole evening. In a box directly above us were the French legation who arrived lately. Amongst the women, the dresses were for the most part dominoes, adopted for greater concealment, as it was not considered very creditable to be there.

There were also several in men’s attire, chiefly French modistes, generally a most disreputable set here, and numerous men dressed as women. There were masked Poblanas without stockings, and with very short petticoats; knights in armour; innumerable dresses probably borrowed from the theatre, and even more than the usual proportion of odd figures. The music was very good, and the dancers waltzed and galloped, and flew round the room like furies. There was at least no want of animation. Hundreds of masks spoke to us, but I discovered no one. One in a domino was particularly anxious to direct my attention to the Poblana dress, and asked me if it would have done for me to attend a fancy ball in such a costume. Very angry at his absurdity, I began to explain how I should have dressed, when I recollected the folly of explaining anything to a creature whom I did not know. C——n stepped out of the box, to walk amongst the crowd, at which various masks showed great signs of joy, surrounding and shaking hands with him.
The boxes were filled with ladies, and the scene was very amusing. Señor M——, whose box we occupied, ordered in cakes and wine, and about one o’clock we left the ball-room and returned home, one of our soldiers acting as lackey. . . .

I paid a visit the other day, which merits to be recorded. It was to the rich Señora ——, whose first visit I had not yet returned. She was at home, and I was shown into a very large drawing-room, where, to my surprise, I found the lamps, mirrors, etc., covered with black crape, as in cases of mourning here. I concluded that some one of the family was dead, and that I had made a very ill-timed first visit. However I sat down, when my eyes were instantly attracted by something awful, placed directly in front of the sofa where I sat. There were six chairs ranged together, and on these lay stretched out a figure, apparently a dead body, about six feet long; enveloped in black cloth, the feet alone visible, from their pushing up the cloth. Oh, horror! Here I sat, my eyes fixed upon this mysterious apparition, and lost in conjecture as to whose body it might be. The master of the house? He was very tall, and being in bad health might have died suddenly. My being received, argued nothing against this, since the first nine days after a death, the house is invariably crowded with friends and acquaintances, and the widow, or orphan, or childless mother must receive the condolences of all and sundry, in the midst of her first bitter sorrow. There seems to be no idea of grief wishing for solitude.

Pending these reflections, I sat uneasily, feeling or fancying a heavy air in the apartment, and wishing, most sincerely, that some living person would enter. I thought even of slipping away, but feared to give offence, and in fact began to grow so nervous, that when the Señora de —— entered at length I started up as if I had heard a pistol. She wore a coloured muslin gown and a blue shawl; no signs of mourning!

After the complimentary preface, I asked particularly after her husband, keeping a side glance on the mysterious figure. He was pretty well. Her family? Just recovered from the smallpox, after being severely ill. “Not dangerously?” said I, hesitatingly, thinking she might have a tall son, and that she alluded to the recovery of the others. “No;” but her sister’s children had been
alarmingly ill. "Not lost any, I hope?"—"None."
Well, so taken up was I, that conversation flagged, and I answered and asked questions at random, until, at last, I happened to ask the lady if she were going to the country soon. "Not to remain. But to-morrow we are going to convey a Santo Cristo (a figure of the Crucifixion) there, which has just been made for the chapel;" glancing towards the figure; "for which reason this room is, as you see, hung with black." I never felt so relieved in my life, and thought of the Mysteries of Udolpho.

The houses being so large, and the servants not drilled to announce visitors; besides that the entresols are frequently let to other families, it is a matter of no small difficulty for a stranger to pioneer him or herself into the presence of the people of the house. The mistakes that I have made! for not being aware of this fact concerning the entresols, which are often large and handsome, and the porter having begged me to walk up, I generally stopped at the first landing-place, and then walked up to the first door that I saw. I did walk in one morning upon two gentlemen who seemed marvellously startled by my visit. They looked like two medical students, and were engaged before a table, Heaven knows how; dissecting, I imagine. I inquired for the Señora ——, which astonished them still more, as well it might. However, they were very civil, and rushed downstairs to call up the carriage. After that advent—re I never entered a house unaccompanied by a footman, until I had learnt my way through it.

We had a pleasant dinner-party a few days ago at the Prussian Minister’s, and met the C—s family there. The Condesa de C—— has been a long while in Europe, and in the best society, and is now entirely devoted to the education of her daughters, giving them every advantage that Mexico can afford in the way of masters, besides having at home a Spanish governess to assist her, an excellent woman, whom they regard as a second mother.

Though there is very little going on in Mexico at present, I amuse myself very well; there is so much to see, and the people are so kind and friendly. Having got riding-horses we have been making excursions all round the country, especially early in the morning, before the sun is high, when the air is delightfully cool and refreshing. Sometimes we go to the Viga at six in the morning,
to see the Indians bringing in their flowers and vegetables by the canal. The profusion of sweet-peas, double poppies, bluebottles, stock gillyflower, and roses, I never saw equalled. Each Indian woman in her canoe looks as if seated in a floating flower-garden. The same love of flowers distinguishes them now as in the time of Cortes; the same which Humboldt remarked centuries afterwards. In the evening these Indian women, in their canoes, are constantly crowned with garlands of roses or poppies. Those who sit in the market, selling their fruit or their vegetables, appear as if they sat in bowers formed of fresh green branches and coloured flowers. In the poorest village church the floor is strewed with flowers, and before the service begins fresh nosegays are brought in and arranged upon the altar. The baby at its christening, the bride at the altar, the dead body in its bier, are all adorned with flowers. We are told that in the days of Cortes a bouquet of rare flowers was the most valuable gift presented to the ambassadors who visited the court of Montezuma, and it presents a strange anomaly, this love of flowers having existed along with their sanguinary worship and barbarous sacrifices.

We went the other evening on the canal, in a large canoe with an awning, as far as the little village of Santa Anita, and saw, for the first time, the far-famed Chinampas, or floating gardens, which have now become fixtures, and are covered with vegetables, intermingled with flowers, with a few poor huts beside them, occupied by the Indians, who bring these to the city for sale. There were cauliflowers, chili, tomatoes, cabbages, and other vegetables, but I was certainly disappointed in their beauty. They are however curious, on account of their origin. So far back as 1245, it is said the wandering Aztecs or Mexicans arrived first at Chapultepec, when, being persecuted by the princes of Tlatocacan, they took refuge in a group of islands to the south of the lake of Texcucuo. Falling under the yoke of the Tezcuican kings, they abandoned their island home and fled to Tezapan, where, as a reward for assisting the chiefs of that country in a war against other petty princes, they received their freedom, and established themselves in a city to which they gave the name of Mexicalingo, from Mejitli, their god of war—now a collection of strong barns and poor huts. But they did not settle there, for to obey an oracle
they transported themselves from this city to the islands
east of Chapultepec to the western side of the lake of
Tezcuco. An ancient tradition had long been current
amongst them, that wherever they should behold an eagle
seated upon a nopal whose roots pierced a rock, there
they should found a great city. In 1325 they beheld this
sign, and on the spot, in an island in the lake, founded
the first house of God—the Teocalli, or Great Temple of
Mexico. During all their wanderings, wherever they
stopped, the Aztecs cultivated the earth, and lived upon
what nature gave them. Surrounded by enemies and in
the midst of a lake where there are few fish, necessity
and industry compelled them to form floating fields and
gardens on the bosom of the waters.

They weaved together the roots of aquatic plants, inter-
twined with twigs and light branches, until they had
formed a foundation sufficiently strong to support a soil
formed of the earth which they drew from the bottom of
the lake; and on it they sowed their maize, their chili,
and all other plants necessary for their support. These
floating gardens were about a foot above the water, and
in the form of a long square. Afterwards, in their natural
taste for flowers, they not only cultivated the useful but
the ornamental, and these small gardens multiplying were
covered with flowers and aromatic herbs, which were used
in the worship of the gods, or were sent to ornament the
palace of the emperor. The Chinampas along the canal
of the Viga are no longer floating gardens, but fixed to
the mainland in the marshy grounds lying between the
two great lakes of Chalco and Tezcuco. A small trench
full of water separates each garden; and though now in
this marshy land they give but a faint idea of what they
may have been when they raised their flower-crowned
heads above the clear waters of the lake, and when the
Indians, in their barks, wishing to remove their habitations,
could tow along their little islands of roses, it is
still a pretty and a pleasant scene.

We bought numerous garlands of roses and poppies
from the Indian children, both here and at Santa Anita,
a little village where we landed, and as we returned
towards evening we were amused by the singing and
dancing of the Indians. One canoe came close up to ours,
and kept beside it for some time. A man was lying lazily
at the bottom of the boat tingling his guitar, and one or
two women were dancing monotonously and singing at the same time to his music. Sundry jars of pulque and earthen dishes with tortillas and chili and pieces of *tasajo*, long festoons of dried and salted beef, proved that the party were not without their solid comforts, in spite of the romantic guitar and the rose and poppy garlands with which the dancing nymphs were crowned. Amongst others they performed the *Palomo*, the Dove, one of their most favourite dances. The music is pretty, and I send it to you with the words, the music from ear; the words are given me by my friend the Señora A—d, who sings all these little Indian airs in perfection. If we may form some judgment of a people’s civilization by their ballads, none of the Mexican songs give us a very high idea of theirs. The words are generally a tissue of absurdities, nor are there any patriotic songs which their new-born freedom might have called forth from so musical a people. At least I have as yet only discovered one air of which the words bear reference to the glorious “Grito de Dolores,” and which asserts in rhyme that on account of that memorable event, the Indian was able to get as drunk as a Christian! The translation of the Palomo is as follows:

“What are you doing, little dove, there in the wine-shop? Waiting for my love until Tuesday, my life. A dove in flying hurt her little wing. If you have your dove I have my little dove too. A dove in flying all her feathers fell off. Women pay badly; not all, but some of them. Little dove of the barracks, you will tell the drummers when they beat the retreat to strike up the march of my loves. Little dove, what are you doing there leaning against that wall? Waiting for my dove till he brings me something to eat.” At the end of each verse the chorus of “Palomita, palomo, palomo.”

Yet, monotonous as it is, the air is so pretty, the women sang so softly and sleepily, the music sounded so soothingly as we glided along the water, that I felt in a pleasant half-dreamy state of perfect contentment, and was sorry when, arriving at the landing-place, we had to return to a carriage and civilized life, with nothing but the garlands of flowers to remind us of the Chinampas.

Unfortunately these people generally end by too frequent applications to the jarro of pulque, or what is worse to the pure spirit known by the name of *chinguirite*; the
consequence of which is, that from music and dancing
and rose-becrowning, they proceed to quarrelling and
jealousy and drunkenness, which frequently terminates in
their fighting, stabbing each other, or throwing each other
into the can." "The end crowns the work."
Noble as this present city of Mexico is, one cannot help
thinking how much more picturesque the ancient Tenoch-
titlan was, and how much more fertile its valley must
have been, on account of the great lakes. Yet even in
the time of Cortes these lakes had no great depth of
water, and still further back, in the time of the Indian
Emperors, navigation had been so frequently interrupted
in seasons of drought, that an aqueduct had been con-
structed in order to supply the canals with water.
After this, the Spaniards, like all new settlers, hewed
down the fine trees in this beautiful valley, both on plain
and mountain, leaving the bare soil exposed to the vertical
rays of the sun. Then their well-founded dread of inun-
dation caused them to construct the famous Desagüe of
Huehuetoca, the drain or subterranean conduit or channel
in the mountain for drawing off the waters of the lakes;
thus leaving marshy lands or sterile plains covered with
carbonate of soda, where formerly were silver lakes
covered with canoes. This last was a necessary evil,
since the Indian emperors themselves were sensible of its
necessity and had formed great works for draining the
lakes, some remains of which wor's still exist in the
vicinity of the Penon. The great Desagüe was begun in
1607, when the Marquis of Salinas was viceroy of Mexico;
and the operations were commenced with great pomp, the
viceroy assisting in person, mass being said on a portable
altar, and fifteen hundred workmen assembled, while the
marquis himself began the excavation by giving the first
stroke with a spade. From 1607 to 1830, eight millions
of dollars were expended, and yet this great work was
not brought to a conclusion. However, the limits of the
two lakes of Zumpango and San Cristobal, to the north
of the valley, were thus greatly reduced, and the lake of
Tezcuco, the most beautiful of all the five, no longer
received their contributions. Thus the danger of inunda-
tions has diminished, but water and vegetation have
diminished also, and the suburbs of the city, which were
formerly covered with beautiful gardens, now present to
the eye an arid expanse of efflorescent salt. The plains
near San Lazaro especially, in their arid whiteness, seem characteristic of the unfortunate victims of leprosy enclosed in the walls of that hospital.

We rode out the other day by the barrio, or ward of Santiago, which occupies part of the ancient Tlatelolco, which once constituted a separate state, had kings of its own, and was conquered by a Mexican monarch, who made a communication by bridges between it and Mexico. The great market mentioned by Cortes was held here, and its boundaries are still pointed out, whilst the convent chapel stands on the height where Cortes erected a battering engine, when he was besieging the Indian Venice.

LETTER THE THIRTEENTH


Early this morning we rode to the convent of San Joaquin, belonging to friars of the Carmelite order, passing through Tacuba, the ancient Tlacopan, once the capital of a small kingdom, and whose monarch, Tetelpanquetzaltzin (short and convenient name), Cortes caused to be hung on a tree for a supposed or real conspiracy. The number of carts, the innumerable Indians loaded like beasts of burden, their women with baskets of vegetables in their hands and children on their backs, the long strings of _arríeros_ with their loaded mules, the droves of cattle, the flocks of sheep, the herds of pigs, render it a work of some difficulty to make one's way on horseback out of the gates of Mexico at an early hour of the morning, but it must be confessed, that the whole scene is lively and cheerful enough to make one forget that there is such a thing as care in the world. There is an indifferent, placid smile on every face, and the bright blue sky smiling over them all; dogs bark, and asses bray, and the Indian, with near a mule's load on his back, drags his hat off to salute a bevy of his bronze-coloured countrymen, nearly equally laden with himself, and they all show their teeth and talk their liquid Indian and pass on.