LETTER THE SEVENTEENTH


TEPENACASCO.

This is a fine wild scene. The house stands entirely alone; not a tree near it. Great mountains rise behind it, and in every other direction, as far as the eye can reach, are vast plains, over which the wind comes whistling fresh and free, with nothing to impede its triumphant progress. In front of the house is a clear sheet of water, a great deep square basin for collecting the rain. These jagueyes, as they are called, are very common in Mexico, where there are few rivers, and where the use of machines for raising water is by no means general as yet. There is no garden here, but there are a few shrubs and flowers in the inner courtyard. The house inside is handsome, with a chapel and a patio, which is occasionally used as a plaza de toros. The rooms are well fitted up, and the bedroom walls covered with a pretty French paper, representing scenes of Swiss rural life. There are great outhouses, stables for the mules and horses, and stone barns for the wheat and barley, which, together with pulque, form the produce of this hacienda.

We took a long ride this morning to visit a fine lake where there are plenty of wild-duck and turtle. The gentlemen took their guns and had tolerable sport. The lake is very deep, so that boats have sailed on it, and several miles in circumference, with a rivulet flowing from it. Yet with all this water the surrounding land, not more than twenty feet higher, is dry and sterile, and the lake is turned to no account, either from want of means, or of hydraulic knowledge. However, C—n having made some observation on this subject, the proprietor of the lake and of a ruined house standing near, which is the very picture of loneliness and desolation,
remarked in reply, that from this estate to Mexico, the
distance is thirty-six leagues; that a load of wheat costs
one real a league, and moreover the alcaba, the duty
which has to be paid at the gates of Mexico, so that it
would bring r.3 profit if sent there; while in the surround-
ing district there is not sufficient population to consume
the produce; so that these unnecessary and burdensome
taxes, the thinness of the population, and the want of
proper means of transport, impede the prosperity of the
people, and check the progress of agriculture. . . .

I had a beautiful horse, but half-broke, and which took
fright and ran off with me. I got great credit for keeping
my seat so well, which I must confess was more through
good fortune than skill. The day was delightful, the air
exhilarating, and the blue sky perfectly cloudless as we
galloped over the plains; but at length the wind rose so
high that we dismounted, and got into the carriage. We
sat by the shores of the lake, and walked along its pebbly
margin, watching the wild-duck as they skimmed over its
glassy surface, and returned home in a magnificent sunset;
the glorious god himself a blood-red globe, surrounded
by blazing clouds of gold and crimson.

In the evening a troop of asses were driven across the
plain, and led round to the back of the house; and we
were all called out in haste, and each desired to choose
one of the long-eared fraternity for our particular use.
Some had saddles and some had none, but we mounted
to the number of thirty persons, followed by a cavalcade
of little ragged boys armed with sticks and whips. My
ass was an obstinate brute, whom I had mistakenly chosen
for his sleek coat and open countenance; but by dint of
being lashed up, he suddenly set off at full gallop, and
distanced all the others. Such screaming and laughing
and confusion! and so much difficulty in keeping the
party together? It was nearly dark when we set off; but
the moon rose, the silver disc lighting up the hills and the
plains; the wind fell, and the night was calm and delight-
ful. We rode about six miles to a pretty little chapel with
a cross, that gleamed amongst the trees in the moonlight,
by the side of a running stream. Here we dismounted,
and sat by the brink of the little sparkling rivulet, while
the deep shadows came stealing over the mountains, and
all around was still, and cool, and silent; all but the merry
laughter of our noisy cavalcade. We returned about
eleven o'clock, few accidents having occurred. Doña R—a had fallen once. Doña M— had crushed her foot against her neighbour's ass. The padre was shaken to a jelly, and the learned senator, who was of the party, declared he should never recover from that night's jolting. To-morrow we shall set off for Real del Monte.

17th.—After mass in the chapel we left Tepenacasco about seven o'clock, and travelled (I believe by a short cut) over rocks and walls, torrents and fields of maguey, all in a heavy carriage with six horses. Arriving in sight of walls, the mozos gallop on and tear them down. Over the mountain-torrents or barrancas, they dash boldly, encouraging the horses by the wildest shrieks.

We stopped at San Miguel, a country-house belonging to the Count de Regla, the former proprietor of the mines which we were about to visit; the most picturesque and lovely place imaginable, but entirely abandoned; the house comfortless and out of repair. We wandered through paths cut in the beautiful woods, and by the side of a rivulet that seems to fertilize everything through which it winds. We climbed the hills, and made our way through the tangled luxuriance of trees and flowers, and in the midst of hundreds of gaudy blossoms, I neglected them all upon coming to a grassy slope covered with daisies and buttercups. We even found some hawthorn-bushes. It might be English scenery, were it not that there is a richness in the vegetation unknown in England. But all these beautiful solitudes are abandoned to the deer that wander fearlessly amongst the woods, and the birds that sing in their branches. While we were still far from the house, a thunderstorm came on. When it rains here, the windows of heaven seem opened, and the clouds pour down water in floods; the lightning also appears to me peculiarly vivid, and many more accidents occur from it here than in the north. We were drenched in five minutes, and in this plight resumed our seats in the carriage, and set off for Guasco (a village where we were to pass the night) in the midst of the pelting storm. In an hour or two the horses were wading up to their knees in water, and we arrived at the pretty village of Guasco in a most comfortless condition. There are no inns in these parts, but we were hospitably received by a widow-lady, a friend of ——'s.

The Señora de ——, in clear muslin and lace, with satin
shoes, was worse than I in mousseline-de-laine and brodequins; nevertheless, I mean to adopt the fashion of the country to-morrow, when we are to rise at four to go on to Real del Monte, and try the effect of travelling with clear gown, satin petticoat, and shoes ditto; because "when one is in Rome," etc. The storm continues with such unabated violence, that we must content ourselves with contemplating the watery landscape from the windows.

TEPENACASCO.

Rose in Guasco at four o'clock; dressed by candle-light, took chocolate, and set off for Real del Monte. After we had travelled a few leagues, tolerably cold, we rejoiced when the sun rose, and dispelling the mist, threw his cheerful light over mountain and wood. The trees looked green and refreshing after their last night's bath; the very rocks were sparkling with silver. The morning was perfectly brilliant, and every leaf and flower was glittering with the rain-drops not yet dried. The carriage ascended slowly the road cut through the mountains by the English company; a fine and useful enterprise; the first broad and smooth road I have seen as yet in the republic. Until it was made, hundreds of mules daily conveyed the ore from the mines over a dangerous mountain-path, to the hacienda of Regla, a distance of six or seven leagues. We overtook wagons conveying timber to the mines of Real, nine thousand feet above the level of the sea.

The scenery was magnificent. On one side mountains covered with oak and pine, and carpeted by the brightest-coloured flowers; goats climbing up the perpendicular rocks, and looking down upon us from their vantage-ground; fresh clear rivulets, flinging themselves from rock to rock, and here and there little Indian huts perched amongst the cliffs; on the other, the deep valley with its bending forests and gushing river; while far above, we caught a glimpse of Real itself, with its sloping roofs and large church, standing in the very midst of forests and mountains. We began to see people with fair hair and blue eyes, and one individual, with a shock of fiery red hair and an undeniable Scotch twang, I felt the greatest inclination to claim as a countryman. The Indians here looked cleaner than those in or near Mexico, and were not more than half naked. The whole country here, as
well as the mines, formerly belonged to the Count de Regla, who was so wealthy, that when his son, the present count, was christened, the whole party walked from his house to the church upon ingots of silver. The countess having quarrelled with the vice-queen, sent her, in token of reconciliation, a white satin slipper, entirely covered with large diamonds. The count invited the King of Spain to visit his Mexican territories, assuring him that the hoofs of his majesty’s horse should touch nothing but solid silver from Vera Cruz to the capital. This might be a bravado; but a more certain proof of his wealth exists in the fact, that he caused two ships of the line, of the largest size, to be constructed in Havana at his expense, made of mahogany and cedar, and presented them to the king. The present count was, as I already told you, married to the beautiful daughter of the Guerra Rodríguez.

We arrived at Real del Monte about nine o’clock, and drove to the director’s house, which is extremely pretty, commanding a most beautiful and extensive view, and where we found a large fire burning in the grate—very agreeable, as the morning was still somewhat chill, and which had a look of home and comfort that made it still more acceptable. We were received with the greatest cordiality by the director, Mr. Rule, and his lady, and invited to partake of the most delicious breakfast that I have seen for a long while; a happy mélange of English and Mexican. The snow-white table-cloth, smoking tea-urn, hot rolls, fresh eggs, coffee, tea, and toast looked very much à l’Anglaise, while there were numbers of substantial dishes à l’Espagnole, and delicious fresh cream-cheeses, to all which our party did ample justice.

After breakfast, we went out to visit the mines, and it was curious to see English children, clean and pretty, with their white hair and rosy cheeks, and neat straw bonnets, mingled with the little copper-coloured Indians. We visited all the different works; the apparatus for sawing, the turning-lathe, foundry, etc.; but I regretted to find that we could not descend into the mines. We went to the mouth of the shaft called the Dolores, which has a narrow opening, and is entered by perpendicular ladders. The men go down with conical caps on their heads, in which is stuck a lighted tallow candle. In the great shaft, called Terreros, they descend, by means of
these ladders, to the depth of a thousand feet, there being platforms at certain distances, on which they can rest. We were obliged to content ourselves with seeing them go down, and with viewing and admiring all the great works which English energy has established here; the various steam-engines, the buildings for the separation and washing of the ore; the great stores, workshops, offices, etc. Nearly all the workmen are British, and of these the Scotch are preferred. Most of the miners are Indians, who work in companies, and receive in payment the eighth part of the proceeds. The director gave us some specimens of silver from the great heaps where they lie, sparkling like genii’s treasure.

Although I have not descended into these mines, I might give you a description of them by what I have heard, and fill my paper with arithmetical figures, by which you might judge of the former and the present produce. I might tell you how Don Lucas Alaman went to England, and raised, as if by magic, the enthusiasm of the English; how one fortune after another has been swallowed up in the dark, deep gulf of speculation; how expectations have been disappointed; and how the great cause of this is the scarcity of quicksilver, which has been paid at the rate of one hundred and fifty dollars per quintal in real cash, when the same quantity was given at credit by the Spanish government for fifty dollars; how heaps of silver lie abandoned, because the expense of acquiring quicksilver renders it wholly unprofitable to extract it; and I might repeat the opinion of those persons by whom I have heard the subject discussed, who express their astonishment that, such being the case, an arrangement is not made with the country which is the almost exclusive possessor of the quicksilver-mines, by which it might be procured at a lower rate, and this great source of wealth not thrown away. But for all these matters I refer you to Humboldt and Ward, by whom they are scientifically treated, and will not trouble you with superficial remarks on so important a subject. In fact, I must confess that my attention was frequently attracted from the mines, and the engines, and the works of man, and the discussions arising therefrom, to the stupendous natural scenery by which we were surrounded; the unexplored forests that clothe the mountains to their very summits, the torrents that leaped and sparkled in the sunshine, the deep ravines, the many-tinted foliage, the
bold and jutting rocks. All combine to increase our
admiration of the bounties of nature to this favoured land,
to which she has given "every herb bearing seed, and
every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food,"
while her veins are rich with precious metals; the useful
and the beautiful offered with unsparing hand.

We were obliged to leave Real about two o'clock, having
a long journey to perform before night, as we had the
intention of returning to sleep at Tepenacasco. We took
leave of our hospitable entertainers, and again resumed our
journey over these fine roads, many parts of which are
blasted from the great rocks of porphyry; and as we
looked back at the picturesque colony glistening in the
sun, could hardly believe the prophecies of our more experi-
cenced drivers, that a storm was brewing in the sky, which
would burst forth before evening. We were determined
not to believe it, as it was impossible to pass by the
famous hacienda and ravine of Regla without paying them
at least a short visit.

This stupendous work of the Mexican miners in former
days, is some leagues to the south of Real del Monte, and
is said to have cost many millions of dollars. One should
view it as we did, in a thunderstorm, for it has an air of
vastness and desolation, and at the same time of grandeur,
that shows well amidst a war of the elements. Down in
a steep barranca, encircled by basaltic cliffs, it lies; a
mighty pile of building, which seems as if it might have
been constructed by some philosophical giant or necro-
mancer;—so that one is not prepared to find there an
English director and his wife, and the unpoetic comforts
of roast mutton and potatoes!

All is on a gigantic scale: the immense vaulted store-
houses for the silver ore; the great smelting-furnaces and
covered buildings where we saw the process of amalgama-
tion going on; the water-wheels; in short, all the necessary
machinery for the smelting and amalgamation of the
metal. We walked to see the great cascade, with its row
of basaltic columns, and found a seat on a piece of broken
pillar beside the rushing river, where we had a fine view of
the lofty cliffs, covered with the wildest and most luxuriant
vegetation: vines trailing themselves over every broken
shaft; moss creeping over the huge disjointed masses of
rock; and trees overhanging the precipitous ravine. The
columns look as if they might have been the work of those
who, on the plains of Shinar, began to build the city, and the tower whose top was to reach to heaven. 

But, as we sat here, the sky suddenly became overcast; great black masses of cloud collected over our heads, and the rumbling of thunder in the distance gave notice of an approaching storm. We had scarcely time to get under shelter of the director’s roof, when the thunder began to echo loudly amongst the rocks, and was speedily followed by torrents of rain. It was a superb storm: the lightning flashed amongst the trees, the wind howled furiously, while

"Far along
From peak to peak, the rattling crags among,
Leapt the live thunder."

After resting and dining amidst a running accompaniment of plashing rain, roaring wind, and deep-toned thunder, we found that it was in vain to wait for a favourable change in the weather; and certainly, with less experienced drivers, it would have been anything but safe to have set off amidst the darkness of the storm, down precipitous descents and over torrents swelled by the rain. The Count de Regla, who, attracted by the plentiful supply of water in this ravine, conceived the idea of employing part of his enormous fortune in the construction of these colossal works, must have had an imagination on a large scale. The English directors, whose wives bury themselves in such abysses, ought to feel more grateful to them than any other husbands towards their sacrificing better halves. For the men, occupied all day amongst their workmen and machinery, and returning late in the evening to dine and sleep, there is no great self-immolation; but a poor woman, living all alone, in a house fenced in by gigantic rocks; with no other sound in her ears from morning till night but the roar of thunder or the clang of machinery, had need for her personal comfort, to have either a most romantic imagination, so that she may console herself with feeling like an enchanted princess in a giant’s castle, or a most commonplace spirit, so that she may darn stockings to the sound of the waterfall, and feel no other inconvenience from the storm, but that her husband will require dry linen when he comes home.

As for us, we were drenched before we reached the carriage, into which the water was pouring, and when we set off once more amidst the rapidly-increasing darkness,
and over these precipitous roads, we thought that our chance of reaching the proposed haven that night was very small. After much toil to the horses, we got out of the ravines and found ourselves once more on the great plains, where the tired animals ploughed their way over fields and ditches and great stones, and among trees and tangled bushes; an occasional flash of lightning our only guide. Great was our joy, when, about eleven o'clock, a man riding on in advance shouted out that the lights of Tepenacasco were in sight; and still more complete our satisfaction when we drove round the tank into the courtyard of the hacienda. We were received with great applause by the inmates, and were not sorry to rest after a very fatiguing yet agreeable day.

MEXICO, 21st.

We left Tepenacasco the day before yesterday. Our journey was very dangerous, in consequence of the great rains, which had swelled the torrents; especially as we set off late, and most of it was performed by night. In these barrancas, carriages and horsemen have been frequently swept away and dashed in pieces over the precipices. But to make our situation more disagreeable, we had scarcely set off, before a terrible storm of thunder and rain again came on with more violence than the night preceding. It grew perfectly dark, and we listened with some alarm to the roaring torrents, over which, especially over one, not many leagues from Sopayuca, where we were to spend the night, it was extremely doubtful whether we could pass. The carriage was full of water, but we were too much alarmed to be uneasy about trifles. Amidst the howling of the wind and the pealing of thunder, no one could hear the other speak. Suddenly, by a vivid flash of lightning, the dreaded barranca appeared in sight for a moment, and almost before the drivers could stop them, the horses had plunged in.

It was a moment of mortal fear such as I shall never forget. The shrieks of the drivers to encourage the horses, the loud cries of Ave Maria! the uncertainty as to whether our heavy carriage could be dragged across, the horses struggling and splashing in the boiling torrent, and the horrible fate that awaited us should one of them fall or falter! . . . The Señora —— and I shut our eyes and held each other's hands, and certainly no one breathed
till we were safe on the other side. We were then told that we had crossed within a few feet of a precipice over which a coach had been dashed into fifty pieces during one of these swells, and of course every one killed; and that if instead of horses we had travelled with mules, we must have been lost. You may imagine that we were not sorry to reach Sopayuca; where the people ran out to the door at the sound of carriage-wheels, and could not believe that we had passed the barranca that night; as two or three horsemen who had rode in that direction had turned back, and pronounced it impassable.

Lights and supper were soon procured, and by way of interlude a monstrous bull, of great fame in these parts, was led up to the supper-table for our inspection with a rope through his nose, a fierce brute, but familiarly called “el chato” (the flatnose), from the shortness of his horns. The lightning continued very vivid, and they told us that a woman had been struck there some time before, while in the chapel by night.

We rose at four o’clock the next morning and set off for Mexico. The morning, as usual after these storms, was peculiarly fresh and beautiful; but the sun soon grew oppressive on the great plains. About two o’clock we entered Mexico by the Guadalupe gate. We found our house in statu quo,—agreeable letters from Europe,—great preparations making for the English ball, to assist at which we have returned sooner than we otherwise should, and for which my femme-de-chambre has just completed a dress for me, very much to her own satisfaction.

LETTER THE EIGHTEENTH


25th.

The English ball at the Minería has passed off with great éclat. Nothing could be more splendid than the general effect of this noble building, brilliantly illuminated and filled with a well-dressed crowd. The president and corps diplomatique were in full uniform, and the display of