blot can be discovered in their character. There must be no moral blemish in the priesthood. In the Catholic religion, where more is professed, still more is demanded, and the errors of one padre or one ecclesiastic seem to throw a shade over the whole community to which they belong.

LETTER THE TWENTIETH


4th June.

Some days ago, having received a message from my nun that a girl was about to take the veil in her convent, I went there about six o'clock, and knowing that the church on these occasions is apt to be crowded to suffocation, I proceeded to the reja, and speaking to an invisible within, requested to know in what part of the church I could have a place. Upon which a voice replied—

"Hermanita (my sister), I am rejoiced to see you. You shall have a place beside the godmother."

"Many thanks, Hermanita. Which way shall I go?"

Voice—"You shall go through the sacristy. José Maria!"

José Maria, a thin, pale, lank individual, with hollow cheeks, who was standing near like a page in waiting, sprang forward—"Madrecita, I am here!"

Voice—"José Maria—That lady is the Señora de C—n. You will conduct her excellency to the front of the grating, and give her a chair."

After I had thanked the voice for her kindness in attending to me on a day when she was so much occupied with other affairs, the obsequious José Maria led the way, and I followed him through the sacristy into the church, where there were already a few kneeling figures; and thence into the railed-off enclosure destined for the relatives of the future nun, where I was permitted to sit down in a comfortable velvet chair. I had been there but a little while
when the aforesaid José Maria reappeared, picking his steps as if he were walking upon eggs in a sick-room. He brought me a message from the Madre — that the nun had arrived, and that the madrecita wished to know if I should like to give her an embrace before the ceremony began. I therefore followed my guide back into the sacristy, where the future nun was seated beside her godmother, and in the midst of her friends and relations, about thirty in all.

She was arrayed in pale blue satin, with diamonds, pearls, and a crown of flowers. She was literally smothered in blonde and jewels; and her face was flushed as well it might be, for she had passed the day in taking leave of her friends at a fête they had given her, and had then, according to custom, been paraded through the town in all her finery. And now her last hour was at hand. When I came in she rose and embraced me with as much cordiality as if we had known each other for years. Beside her sat the Madrina, also in white satin and jewels; all the relations being likewise decked out in their finest array. The nun kept laughing every now and then in the most unnatural and hysterical manner, as I thought, apparently to impress us with the conviction of her perfect happiness; for it is a great point of honour amongst girls similarly situated to look as cheerful and gay as possible; the same feeling, though in a different degree, which induces the gallant highwayman to jest in the presence of the multitude when the hangman’s cord is within an inch of his neck, the same which makes the gallant general whose life is forfeited, command his men to fire on him; the same which makes the Hindoo widow mount the funeral pile without a tear in her eye, or a sigh on her lips. If the robber were to be strangled in a corner of his dungeon; if the general were to be put to death privately in his own apartment; if the widow were to be burnt quietly on her own hearth; if the nun were to be secretly smuggled in at the convent gate like a bale of contraband goods,—we might hear another tale. This girl was very young, but by no means pretty; on the contrary, rather disgraciée par la nature; and perhaps a knowledge of her own want of attraction may have caused the world to have few charms for her.

But José Maria cut short my train of reflections, by requesting me to return to my seat before the crowd
arrived, which I did forthwith. Shortly after, the church doors were thrown open, and a crowd burst in, every one struggling to obtain the best seat. Musicians entered, carrying desks and music-books, and placed themselves in two rows, on either side of the enclosure where I was. Then the organ struck up its solemn psalmody, and was followed by the gay music of the band. Rockets were let off outside the church, and, at the same time, the Madrina and all the relations entered and knelt down in front of the grating which looks into the convent, but before which hung a dismal black curtain. I left my chair and knelt down beside the godmother.

Suddenly the curtain was withdrawn, and the picturesque beauty of the scene within baffles all description. Beside the altar, which was in a blaze of light, was a perfect mass of crimson and gold drapery; the walls, the antique chairs, the table before which the priests sat, all hung with the same splendid material. The bishop wore his superb mitre and robes of crimson and gold; the attendant priests also glittering in crimson and gold embroidery.

In contrast to these, five-and-twenty figures, entirely robed in black from head to foot, were ranged on each side of the room prostrate, their faces touching the ground, and in their hands immense lighted tapers. On the foreground was spread a purple carpet bordered round with a garland of freshly-gathered flowers, roses and carnations and heliotrope, the only thing that looked real and living in the whole scene; and in the middle of this knelt the novice, still arrayed in her blue satin, white lace veil and jewels, and also with a great lighted taper in her hand.

The black nuns then rose and sang a hymn, every now and then falling on their faces and touching the floor with their foreheads. The whole looked like an incantation, or a scene in Robert le Diable. The novice was then raised from the ground and led to the feet of the bishop, who examined her as to her vocation, and gave her his blessing, and once more the black curtain fell between us and them.

In the second act, she was lying prostrate on the floor, disrobed of her profane dress, and covered over with a black cloth, while the black figures kneeling round her chanted a hymn. She was now dead to the world. The sunbeams had faded away, as if they would not look upon.
the scene, and all the light was concentrated in one great mass upon the convent group.

Again she was raised. All the blood had rushed into her face, and her attempt at a smile was truly painful. She then knelt before the bishop and received the benediction, with the sign of the cross, from a white hand with the pastoral ring. She then went round alone to embrace all the dark phantoms as they stood motionless, and as each dark shadow clasped her in its arms, it seemed like the dead welcoming a new arrival to the shades.

But I forget the sermon, which was delivered by a fat priest, who elbowed his way with some difficulty through the crowd to the grating, panting and in a prodigious heat, and ensconced himself in a great arm-chair close beside us. He assured her that she “had chosen the good part, which could not be taken away from her;” that she was now one of the elect, “chosen from amongst the wickedness and dangers of the world;”—(picked out like a plum from a pie). He mentioned with pity and contempt those who were “yet struggling in the great Babylon;” and compared their miserable fate with hers, the Bride of Christ, who, after suffering a few privations here during a short term of years, should be received at once into a kingdom of glory. The whole discourse was well calculated to rally her fainting spirits, if fainting they were, and to inspire us with a great disgust for ourselves.

When the sermon was concluded, the music again struck up—the heroine of the day came forward, and stood before the grating to take her last look of this wicked world. Down fell the black curtain. Up rose the relations, and I accompanied them into the sacristy. Here they coolly lighted their cigars, and very philosophically discoursed upon the exceeding good fortune of the new-made nun, and on her evident delight and satisfaction with her own situation. As we did not follow her behind the scenes, I could not give my opinion on this point. Shortly after, one of the gentlemen civilly led me to my carriage, and so it was.

As we were returning home, some soldiers rode up and stopped the carriage, desiring the coachman to take to the other side of the aqueduct, to avoid the body of a man who had just been murdered within a few doors of our house.

In the Convent of the Incarnation, I saw another girl
sacrificed in a similar manner. She was received there without a dowry, on account of the exceeding fineness of her voice. She little thought what a fatal gift it would prove to her. The most cruel part of all was, that wishing to display her fine voice to the public, they made her sing a hymn alone on her knees, her arms extended in the form of a cross, before all the immense crowd; “Ancilla Christi sum,” “The Bird of Christ I am.” She was a good-looking girl, fat and comely, who would probably have led a comfortable life in the world, for which she seemed well fitted; most likely without one touch of romance or enthusiasm in her composition; but having the unfortunate honour of being niece to two chanoines, she was thus honourably provided for without expense in her nineteenth year. As might be expected, her voice faltered, and instead of singing, she seemed inclined to cry out. Each note came slowly, heavily, tremblingly; and at last she nearly fell forward exhausted, when two of the sisters caught and supported her.

I had almost made up my mind to see no more such scenes, which, unlike pulque and bull-fights, I dislike more and more upon trial; when we received an invitation, which it was not easy to refuse, but was the more painful to accept, being acquainted, though slightly, with the victim. I send you the printed note of invitation.

“On Wednesday, the —— of this month, at six o’clock in the evening, my daughter, Doña Maria de la Concepción, P——e——, will assume the habit of a nun of the choir and the black veil in the Convent of Our Lady of the Incarnation. I have the honour to inform you of this, entreat you to co-operate with your presence in the solemnity of this act, a favour which will be highly esteemed by your affectionate servant, who kisses your hand.

“MARIA JOSEFA DE ——.

“Mexico, June ——, 1840.”

Having gone out in the carriage to pay some visits, I suddenly recollected that it was the very morning of the day in which this young girl was to take the veil, and also that it was necessary to inquire where I was to be placed; for as to entering the church with the crowd on one of these occasions, it is out of the question; particularly when
the girl being, as in the present case, of distinguished family, the ceremony is expected to be peculiarly magnificent. I accordingly called at the house, was shown upstairs, and to my horror, found myself in the midst of a "good little company," in rich array, consisting of the relations of the family, to the number of about a hundred persons; the bishop himself in his purple robes and amethysts, a number of priests, the father of the young lady in his general’s uniform; she herself in purple velvet, with diamonds and pearls, and a crown of flowers; the corsage of her gown entirely covered with little bows of ribbon of divers colours, which her friends had given her, each adding one, like stones thrown on a cairn in memory of the departed. She had also short sleeves and white satin shoes.

Being very handsome, with fine black eyes, good teeth, and fresh colour, and above all with the beauty of youth, for she is but eighteen, she was not disfigured even by this overloaded dress. Her mother, on the contrary, who was to act the part of Madrina, who wore a dress fac-simile, and who was pale and sad, her eyes almost extinguished with weeping, looked like a picture of misery in a ball-dress. In the adjoining room, long tables were laid out, on which servants were placing refreshments for the fête about to be given on this joyous occasion. I felt somewhat shocked, and inclined to say with Paul Pry, "Hope I don’t intrude." But my apologies were instantly cut short, and I was welcomed with true Mexican hospitality; repeatedly thanked for my kindness in coming to see the nun, and hospitably pressed to join the family feast. I only got off upon a promise of returning at half-past five to accompany them to the ceremony, which, in fact, I greatly preferred to going there alone.

I arrived at the hour appointed, and being led upstairs by the Senator Don — —, found the morning party, with many additions, lingering over the dessert. There was some gaiety, but evidently forced. It reminded me of a marriage feast previous to the departure of the bride, who is about to be separated from her family for the first time. Yet how different in fact is this banquet, where the mother and daughter met together for the last time on earth!

At stated periods, indeed, the mother may hear her daughter’s voice speaking to her as from the depths of the
Taking Leave

...tomb; but she may never more fold her in her arms, never more share in her joys or in her sorrows, or nurse her in sickness; and when her own last hour arrives, though but a few streets divide them, she may not give her dying blessing to the child who has been for so many years the pride of her eyes and heart.

I have seen no country where families are so knit together as in Mexico, where the affections are so concentrated, or where such devoted respect and obedience are shown by the married sons and daughters to their parents. In that respect they always remain as little children. I know many families of which the married branches continue to live in their father's house, forming a sort of small colony, and living in the most perfect harmony. They cannot bear the idea of being separated, and nothing but dire necessity ever forces them to leave their fatherland. To all the accounts which travellers give them of the pleasures to be met with in the European capitals, they turn a deaf ear. Their families are in Mexico—their parents, and sisters, and relatives—and there is no happiness for them elsewhere. The greater therefore is the sacrifice which those parents make, who from religious motives devote their daughters to a conventual life.

——, however, was furious at the whole affair, which he said was entirely against the mother’s consent, though that of the father had been obtained; and pointed out to me the confessor whose influence had brought it about. The girl herself was now very pale, but evidently resolved to conceal her agitation, and the mother seemed as if she could shed no more tears—quite exhausted with weeping. As the hour for the ceremony drew near, the whole party became more grave and sad, all but the priests, who were smiling and talking together in groups. The girl was not still a moment. She kept walking hastily through the house, taking leave of the servants, and naming probably her last wishes about everything. She was followed by her younger sisters, all in tears.

But it struck six, and the priests intimated that it was time to move. She and her mother went downstairs alone, and entered the carriage which was to drive them through all the principal streets, to show the nun to the public according to custom, and to let them take their last look, they of her, and she of them. As they got in, we
all crowded to the balconies to see her take leave of her house, her aunts saying, "Yes, child, despídete de tu casa, take leave of your house, for you will never see it again!" Then came sobs from the sisters, and many of the gentlemen, ashamed of their emotion, hastily quitted the room. I hope, for the sake of humanity, I did not rightly interpret the look of constrained anguish which the poor girl threw from the window of the carriage at the home of her childhood.

They drove off, and the relations prepared to walk in procession to the church. I walked with the Count S——o, the others followed in pairs. The church was very brilliantly illuminated, and as we entered, the band was playing one of Strauss's waltzes! The crowd was so tremendous that we were nearly squeezed to a jelly in getting to our places. I was carried off my feet between two fat Señoras in mantillas and shaking diamond pendants, exactly as if I had been packed between two moveable feather-beds.

They gave me, however, an excellent place, quite close to the grating, beside the Countess de S——o, that is to say, a place to kneel on. A great bustle and much preparation seemed to be going on within the convent, and veiled figures were flitting about, whispering, arranging, etc. Sometimes a skinny old dame would come close to the grating, and lifting up her veil, bestow upon the pensive public a generous view of a very haughty and very wrinkled visage of some seventy years standing, and beckon into the church for the major-domo of the convent (an excellent and profitable situation by the way), or for padre this or that. Some of the holy ladies recognised and spoke to me through the grating.

But at the discharge of fireworks outside the church the curtain was dropped, for this was the signal that the nun and her mother had arrived. An opening was made in the crowd as they passed into the church, and the girl, kneeling down, was questioned by the bishop, but I could not make out the dialogue, which was carried on in a low voice. She then passed into the convent by a side door, and her mother, quite exhausted and nearly in hysterics, was supported through the crowd to a place beside us, in front of the grating. The music struck up; the curtain was again drawn aside. The scene was as striking here as in the convent of the Santa Teresa, but not so lugu-
brious. The nuns, all ranged around, and carrying lighted tapers in their hands, were dressed in mantles of bright blue, with a gold plate on the left shoulder. Their faces, however, were covered with deep black veils. The girl, kneeling in front, and also bearing a heavy lighted taper, looked beautiful, with her dark hair and rich dress, and the long black lashes resting on her glowing face. The churchmen near the illuminated and magnificently-decked altar formed, as usual, a brilliant background to the picture. The ceremony was the same as on the former occasion, but there was no sermon.

The most terrible thing to witness was the last, straining, anxious look which the mother gave her daughter through the grating. She had seen her child pressed to the arms of strangers, and welcomed to her new home. She was no longer hers. All the sweet ties of nature had been rudely severed, and she had been forced to consign her, in the very bloom of youth and beauty, at the very age in which she most required a mother’s care, and when she had but just fulfilled the promise of her childhood, to a living tomb. Still, as long as the curtain had not fallen, she could gaze upon her, as upon one on whom, though dead, the coffin-lid is not yet closed.

But while the new-made nun was in a blaze of light, and distinct on the foreground, so that we could mark each varying expression of her face, the crowd in the church, and the comparative faintness of the light, probably made it difficult for her to distinguish her mother; for, knowing that the end was at hand, she looked anxiously and hurriedly into the church, without seeming able to fix her eyes on any particular object; while her mother seemed as if her eyes were glazed, so intently were they fixed upon her daughter.

Suddenly, and without any preparation, down fell the black curtain like a pall, and the sobs and tears of the family broke forth. One beautiful little child was carried out almost in fits. Water was brought to the poor mother; and at last, making our way with difficulty through the dense crowd, we got into the sacristy. “I declare,” said the Countess — to me, wiping her eyes, “it is worse than a marriage!” I expressed my horror at the sacrifice of a girl so young, that she could not possibly have known her own mind. Almost all the ladies agreed with me, especially all who had daughters, but many of the old
gentlemen were of a different opinion. The young men were decidedly of my way of thinking; but many young girls, who were conversing together, seemed rather to envy their friend, who had looked so pretty and graceful, and "so happy," and whose dress "suited her so well," and to have no objection to "go, and do likewise."

I had the honour of a presentation to the bishop, a fat and portly prelate, with good manners, and well besuiting his priestly garments. I amused myself, while we waited for the carriages, by looking over a pamphlet which lay on the table, containing the ceremonials of the veil-taking. When we rose to go, all the ladies of the highest rank devoutly kissed the bishop's hand; and I went home, thinking by what law of God a child can thus be dragged from the mother who bore and bred her, and immersed in a cloister for life, amongst strangers, to whom she has no tie, and towards whom she owes no duty. That a convent may be a blessed shelter from the calamities of life, a haven for the unprotected, a resting-place for the weary, a safe and holy asylum, where a new family and kind friends await those whose natural ties are broken and whose early friends are gone, I am willing to admit; but it is not in the flower of youth that the warm heart should be consigned to the cold cloister. Let the young take their chance of sunshine or of storm: the calm and shady retreat is for helpless and unprotected old age.

—, to whom I described one of these ceremonies, wrote some verses, suggested by my account of them, which I send you.

In tropic gorgeousness, the Lord of Day
   To the bright chambers of the west retired,
   And with the glory of his parting ray
   The hundred domes of Mexico he fired,
When I, with vague and solemn awe inspired,
   Entered the Incarnation's sacred fane.
The vaulted roof, the dim aisle far retired,
   Echoed the deep-toned organ's holy strain,
   Which through the incensed air did mournfully complain.

The veiling curtain suddenly withdrew,
   Op'ning a glorious altar to the sight,
   Where crimson intermixed its regal hue
   With gold and jewels that outblazed the light
Of the huge tapers near them flaming bright
   From golden stands—the bishop, mitre-crowned,
Stood stately near—in order due around
   The sisterhood knelt down, their brows upon the ground.
San Agustin

The novice entered: to her doom she went,
Gems on her robes, and flowers upon her brow.
Virgin of tender years, poor innocent!

Pause, ere thou speak th' irrevocable vow.
What if thy heart should change, thy spirit fail?
She kneels. The black-robed sisters cease to bow.
They raise a hymn which seems a funeral wail,
While o'er the pageant falls the dark, lugubrious veil.

Again the veil is up. On earth she lies,
With the drear mantle of the pall spread o'er,
The new-made nun, the living sacrifice,
Dead to this world of ours for evermore!
The sun his parting rays has ceased to pour,
As loth to lend his light to such a scene...
The sisters raise her from the sacred floor,
Supporting her their holy arms between;
The mitred priest stands up with patriarchal mien,

And speaks the benediction; all is done.
A life-in-death must her long years consume.
She clasped her new-made sisters one by one.
As the black shadows their embraces gave
They seemed like spectres from their place of doom,
Stealing from out eternal night's blind cave,
To meet their comrade new, and hail her to the grave.

The curtain fell again, the scene was o'er,
The pageant gone—its glitter and its pride,
And it would be a pageant and no more,
But for the maid miscalled the Heavenly Bride.
If I, an utter stranger, unallied
To her by slightest ties, some grief sustain,
What feels the yearning mother, from whose side
Is torn the child whom she hath reared in vain,
To share her joys no more, no more to soothe her pain!

LETTER THE TWENTY-FIRST


15th June.

Since my last letter we have been at San Agustin de las Cuevas, which, when I last saw it, was a deserted village, but which during three days in the year presents the