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
appearance of a vast bee-hive or ant-hill. San Agustín! At the name how many hearts throb with emotion! How many hands are mechanically thrust into empty pockets! How many visions of long-vanished golden ounces flit before aching eyes! What faint crowing of wounded cocks! What tinkling of guitars and blowing of horns come upon the ear! Some, indeed, there be, who can look round upon their well-stored hacienda and easy-rolling carriages, and remember the day, when with threadbare coat, and stake of three modest ounces, they first courted Fortune’s favours, and who, being then indigent, and enjoying an indifferent reputation, found themselves, at the conclusion of a few successive San Agustins, the fortunate proprietors of gold, and land, and houses; and, moreover, with an unimpeachable fame; for he who can fling gold-dust in his neighbour’s eyes, prevents him from seeing too clearly. But these favourites of the blind goddess are few and far between; and they have for the most part, with a view to greater security, become holders or sharers of banks at San Agustín, thus investing their fortune in a secure fund; more so decidedly, if we may believe the newspaper reports, than in the bank of the United States at this present writing.

Time, in its revolutions whirling all things out of their places, has made no change in the annual fête of San Agustín. Fashions alter. The graceful mantilla gradually gives place to the ungraceful bonnet. The old painted coach, moving slowly like a caravan, with Guido’s Aurora painted on its gaudy panels, is dismissed for the London-built carriage. Old customs have passed away. The ladies no longer sit on the door-sills, eating roast duck with their fingers, or with the aid of tortillas. Even the Chinampas have become stationary, and have occasionally joined the continent. But the annual fête of San Agustín is built on a more solid foundation than taste or custom, or floating soil. It is founded upon that love of gambling, which is said to be a passion inherent in our nature, and which is certainly impregnated with the Mexican constitution, in man, woman, and child. The beggars gamble at the corners of the streets or under the arches; the little boys gamble in groups in the villages; the coachmen and footmen gamble at the doors of the theatre while waiting for their masters.

But while their hand is thus kept in all the year round,
there are three days sacredly set apart annually, in which every accommodation is given to those who are bent upon ruining themselves or their neighbours; whilst every zest that society can afford, is held out to render the temptation more alluring. As religion is called in to sanctify everything, right or wrong; as the robber will plant a cross at the mouth of his cave, and the pulque-shops do occasionally call themselves “Pulquerias of the Most Holy Virgin,” so this season of gambling is fixed for the fête of Pascua (Whitsunday), and the churches and the gambling-houses are thrown open simultaneously.

The village is in itself pretty and picturesque; and, as a stone at its entry informs us, was built by the active Viceroy Revillagigedo, with the product, as — assured us, of two lotteries. It is charmingly situated, in the midst of handsome villas and orchards, whose high walls, overtopped by fruit-trees, border the narrow lanes. At this season the trees are loaded with the yellow chabacano and the purple plum, already ripe; while the pear-trees are bending under the weight of their fruit. The gardens are full of flowers; the roses in their last bloom, covering the crowd with their pink leaves, and jasmine and sweet-peas in profusion, making the air fragrant. The rainy season has scarce set in, though frequent showers have laid the dust, and refreshed the air. The country villas are filled with all that is gayest and most distinguished in Mexico, and every house and every room in the village has been hired for months in advance. The ladies are in their most elegant toilets, and looking forward to a delightful whirl of dancing, cock-fighting, gambling, dining, dressing, and driving about.

The high-road leading from Mexico to San Agustín is covered with vehicles of every description; carriages, diligences, hackney-coaches, carts, and carratelas. Those who are not fortunate enough to possess any wheeled conveyance, come out on horse, ass, or mule; single, double, or treble, if necessary; and many hundreds, with visions of silver before their eyes, and a few clacos (pence), hid under their rags, trudge out on foot. The President himself, in carriage-and-six, and attended by his aides-de-camp, sanctions by his presence the amusements of the fête. The Mexican generals and other officers follow in his wake, and the gratifying spectacle may not frequently be seen, of the president leaning from his box in
the \textit{plaza de gallos}, and betting upon a cock, with a coatless, bootless, hatless, and probably worthless ragamuffin in the pit. Every one, therefore, however humble his degree, has the pleasure, while following his speculative inclinations, of reflecting that he treads in the steps of the magnates of the land; and, as Sam Weller would say, "Vot a consolation that must be to his feelings!"

At all events, nothing can be gayer than the appearance of the village, as your carriage makes its way through the narrow lanes into the principal plaza, amidst the assembled crowd of coaches and foot-passengers; though the faces of the people bear evidence that pleasure alone has not brought them to San Agustin. All round the square are the gambling-houses, where for three nights and three days every table is occupied. At the principal \textit{montes} nothing is played but gold, but as there is accommodation for all classes, so there are silver tables in the inferior houses, while outside are rows of tables on which are heaps of copper, covered with a rugged awning, and surrounded by leperos and blanket Indians, playing monta in imitation of their betters, though on a scale more suited to their finances.

Having left Mexico early in the morning, we stopped to breakfast at San Antonio, a noble hacienda, about four leagues from Mexico, belonging to the Dowager Marquesa de Vivanco, where we breakfasted with a large party. It is a fine solid mass of building, and as you enter the courtyard, through a deep archway, the great outhouses, stables, and especially the granary, look like remains of feudalism, they are on so large and magnificent a scale. It is an immense and valuable property, producing both maize and maguey, and the hospitality of the family, who are amongst our earliest friends here, is upon as large a scale as everything that belongs to them. We had a splendid breakfast, in a fine old hall, and stayed but a short time to visit the gardens and the chapel, as we were anxious to arrive at San Agustin in time for the cock-fight.

It is singular, that while San Agustin is situated in the midst of the most fertile and productive country, there should lie opposite to it, and bounded as it were by the graceful Peruvian trees and silver poplars which surround a small church on the other side of the high-road, a great tract of black lava, sterile, bleak, and entirely destitute of vegetation, called the \textit{Pedregal}. This covers the
country all along to San Agustín and to the base of the
mountain of Ajusco, which lies behind it, contrasting
strangely with the beautiful groves and gardens in its
neighbourhood, and looking as if it had been cursed for
some crime committed there. The high-road, which runs
nearly in a direct line from the hacienda to San Agustín,
is broad and in tolerable repair; but before arriving there,
it is so little attended to, that during the rainy season it
might be passed in canoes; yet this immense formation
of ferruginous larva and porphyritic rock lies conveniently
in its vicinity. A large sum, supposed to be employed in
mending the road, is collected annually at the toll, close
to San Antonio. For each carriage two dollars are asked,
and for carts and animals in proportion. The proprietor
of this toll or postasgo is also the owner of the plaza
de gallos, where a dollar is paid for entry, the sums
produced by which go exclusively to enrich the same
individual. The government has no advantage from
it.

The last day of the fête is considered the best, and it is
most crowded on that day, both by families from Mexico
and by foreigners who go solely for pleasure, though not
unfrequently tempted to do a little business on their own
account. In fact, the temptations are great; and it must
be difficult for a young man to withstand them.

We went to the gallos about three o'clock. The plaza
was crowded, and the ladies in their boxes looked like a
parterre of different-coloured flowers. But whilst the
Señoras in their boxes did honour to the fête by their
brilliant toilet, the gentlemen promenaded round the circle
in jackets, high and low being on the same curtailed
footing, and certainly in a style of dress more befitting
the exhibition. The president and his suite were already
there, also several of the foreign ministers.

Meanwhile, the cocks crowed valiantly, bets were
adjusted, and even the women entered into the spirit of
the scene, taking bets with the gentlemen sotto voce in
their boxes, upon such and such favourite animal. As a
small knife is fastened to the leg of each cock, the battle
seldom lasted long, one or other falling every few minutes
in a pool of blood. Then there was a clapping of hands,
mingled with the loud crowing of some unfortunate cock,
who was giving himself airs previous to a combat where
he was probably destined to crow his last. It has a curious
Life in Mexico

effect to European eyes, to see young ladies of good family, looking peculiarly feminine and gentle, sanctioning, by their presence, this savage diversion. It is no doubt the effect of early habit, and you will say that at least it is no worse than a bull-fight; which is certain—yet cruel as the latter is, I find something more en grande, more noble, in the

"Ungentle sport, that oft invites
The Spanish maid, and cheers the Spanish swain;"

in the roaring of the "lord of lowing herds," the galloping of the fine horses, the skill of the riders, the gay dresses, the music, and the agile matador; in short, in the whole pomp and circumstances of the combat, than when one looks quietly on to see two birds peck each other's eyes out, and cut each other to pieces. Unlike cock-pits in other countries, attended by blacklegs and pickpockets and gentlemanly roués, by far the largest portion of the assembly in the pit was composed of the first young men in Mexico, and for that matter, of the first old ones also. There was neither confusion, nor noise, nor even loud talking, far less swearing, amongst the lowest of those assembled in the ring; and it is this quiet and orderly behaviour which throws over all these incongruities a cloak of decency and decorum, that hides their impropriety so completely, that even foreigners who have lived here a few years, and who were at first struck with astonishment by these things, are now quite reconciled to them.

As far as the company went, it might have been the House of Representatives in Washington; the ladies in the gallery listening to the debates, and the members in the body of the house surrounding Messrs. — and ——, or any other two vehement orators; applauding their biting remarks and cutting sarcasms, and encouraging them to crow over each other. The president might have been the speaker, and the corps diplomatique represented itself.

We had an agreeable dinner at the E——s, and afterwards accompanied them to the Calvario, a hill where there was a ball al fresco, which was rather amusing, and then paid a visit to the family of General Moran, who has a beautiful house and gardens in the neighbourhood. We found a large party assembled, and amongst them the president. Afterwards, accompanied by the —— minister,
and the ladies of our party, we went to take a view of the gambling-tables, and opened our eyes at the heaps of gold, which changed owners every minute. I saw C—a, a millionaire, win and lose a thousand ounces apparently with equal indifference. A little advocate having won two thousand five hundred ounces, wisely ordered his carriage and set off for Mexico, with the best fee he had ever received in his life. Ladies do not generally look on at the tables, but may if they please, and especially if they be strangers. Each gambling-room was well fitted up, and looked like a private apartment.

We then returned home and dressed for the ball, which was given in the evening in the plaza de gallos. We first went upstairs to a box, but I afterwards took the advice of M. de —and came down to see the dancers. There were ladies in full dress, and gentlemen in white jackets—rather inconsistent. The company, though perfectly quiet and well-behaved, were not very select, and were, on that account, particularly amusing. Madame de —and I walked about, and certainly laughed much more than we should have done in a more distinguished society.

About two in the morning we returned to Mexico, and as I this moment receive a note from the American minister, informing me that the packet from Vera Cruz is about to sail, I shall send off my letters now; and should we still be here next year, I shall then give you a more detailed description of the fête, of the ball, both at Calvario and in the cock-pit, and also of the “high life below stairs” gambling, at which the scenes are impayable. In one respect the fashions of San Agustin are altered from what they were a few years ago, when the Señoras used to perform five elaborate and distinct toilets daily; the first in the morning, the second for the cock-fight, the third for the dinner, the fourth for the ball on the hill of Calvary, and the fifth for the ball in the evening. I am told that as they danced in the open air, on the hill, with all their diamonds and pearls on, in the midst of an immense concourse of people, a great many jewels were constantly lost, which the léperos used afterwards to search for, and pick up from the grass; a rich harvest. Though they still dress a great deal, they are contented with changing their toilet twice, or at the most, three times in the course of the day.

Upon the whole, these three days are excessively
amusing, and as all ranks and conditions are mingled, one sees much more variety than at a ball in the city.

On their way home, C—, and Señor — discussed the effects likely to be produced on the morals of the people by this fête. Señor —, like nearly all the wisest men here, persists in considering gambling an innocent amusement, and declares, that at all events, this fête ought never to be done away with. In his opinion, it conduces to the happiness of the people, gives them an annual pleasure to look forward to, and by the mingling of all ranks which then takes place, keeps up a good feeling between the higher and lower orders. C— asked him why, if such was the case, the government did not at least endeavour to draw some advantage from it, after the manner of the Count de Revillagigedo—why, as the bank, by the nature of the game, has, besides a great capital, which swallows up all the smaller ones, an immense profit, amounting to twenty-five per cent., they do not make the bankers pay four or five per cent., and charge half a dollar or more to each individual who enters to gamble; with which money they might beautify the village, make a public pasoe, a good road, a canal to Mexico, etc.

I thought that whatever the government might feel on this subject, neither the bankers nor the gamblers would relish the insinuation. I shall write in a few days by the Baron de——, minister from——, who leaves Mexico in a fortnight.

LETTER THE TWENTY-SECOND


17th June.

As we dine nearly every Sunday with the Countess de la C—a at Tacubay, where she keeps open house to all her friends, we have had the pleasure of becoming intimately acquainted with her son-in-law, Señor Gutierrez Estrada, who, with his amiable wife, has lately returned from Europe.