LETTER THE TWENTY-SEVENTH


October 3rd.

YESTERDAY being C——n's fête-day, we had a dinner and small soirée, and according to custom, visits the whole day. A very agreeable guest from Havana, Don J——A——, arrived to spend a few weeks with us. We had rather a pleasant party, and some good singing; but just as dancing had begun, C——n took me aside, and showed me a little friendly note which he had received while at dinner, from General——, in which he informs him that the robbers would in all probability attack our respective houses that night; that he had taken his precautions, and advises C——n to do the same, in the understanding that, if necessary, they should mutually assist each other. A pleasant piece of intelligence! The thing got whispered about, and some of the ladies looked a little blank at the information; but there could be no risk while so many persons were collected. About one they went away, and C——n sent for some soldiers to keep watch all night. Nothing happened, as no doubt the robbers found out what precautions had been taken. The intended attack had been discovered by a servant of the general's, who heard them discussing the matter in the back-room of a pulque-shop.

We have been obliged to procure two old soldiers as porters, in lieu of the two who were shot in the revolution; for though not killed, they are entirely disabled for the present.

Mexico appears particularly quiet just now; and whatever storms may be preparing, no symptoms are visible to the uninitiated eye. The palace has got in its glass eyes again, and externally is almost entirely repaired; but it is not yet fit for the residence of the president, who still holds his court in the convent of San Agustín. I
have been driving about with our Havana friend, like an old resident, showing the beauties of Mexico to a stranger. We have been in the Minería, Museum, Botanical Garden, Biscay College, etc., all of which can bear revision.

The Museum especially, which, owing to the want of arrangement and classification in the antiquities, and the manner in which they are crowded together in the different rooms of the university, appears at first undeserving of much attention, improves upon acquaintance. It is only since the year ’25 that it was established by the government, and various plans have been since made for enriching and arranging it, and also for transporting it to the old building of the Inquisition. But as yet nothing essential has been carried into effect.

It contains upwards of two hundred historical manuscripts, some in hieroglyphical characters anterior to the conquest, and many in the different ancient languages of the country. Of the ancient sculpture, it possesses two colossal statues and many smaller ones, besides a variety of busts, heads, figures of animals, masks, and instruments of music or of war, curiously engraved, and indicating the different degrees of civilization of the different nations to whom they belonged. A great many of the vases of teco, and of the candlesticks in clay, curiously worked, were drawn from excavations in the Isle of Sacrifices, near Vera Cruz, from Oajaca, etc., and from the suburbs of Mexico. There is also a collection of very ancient medals to the number of six hundred, a bronze bust of Philip V, and about two hundred Mexican paintings, comprehending two collections of the portraits of the Spanish viceroys, many of the celebrated Cabrera’s, and various dresses, arms, and utensils, from both the Californias. In the cabinet of natural history there is a good collection of minerals, and some very fine specimens of gold and silver. But in the animal or vegetable branch of natural history there is a great deficiency, and altogether the museum is not worthy of a country which seems destined by nature to be the great emporium of all natural science.

Of course we have revisited old Chapultepec and Our Lady of Guadalupe, with her Legend and Holy Well. In the morning we have rode to Tacubaya and the environs, and the weather at that early hour has the most indescribable freshness, caused by the evening rains. Everything
looks bright and sparkling. The Peruvian trees, with their bending green branches and bunches of scarlet berries, glitter with the heavy rain-drops, and even the hoary cypresses of Chapultepec sparkle with water in all their gigantic branches. Little pools have become ponds, and ditches rivulets, and frequently it is rather wading than riding, which is not so pleasant.

24th.—Last evening we had a very pretty ball in the house of the French minister, where all the Paris furniture was very effective. There were as usual plenty of diamonds, and some handsome dresses—mine white satin, with flowers.

25th.—The whole world is talking of a pamphlet written by Señor Gutierrez Estrada, which has just appeared, and seems likely to cause a greater sensation in Mexico than the discovery of the gunpowder plot in England. Its sum and substance is the proposal of a constitutional Monarchy in Mexico, with a foreign prince (not named) at its head, as the only remedy for the evils by which it is afflicted. The pamphlet is written merely in a speculative form, inculcating no sanguinary measures, or sudden revolution; but the consequences are likely to be most disastrous to the fearless and public-spirited author. Even those who most question his prudence in taking this step, agree that in this, as well as in every other political action of his life, he has acted from thorough conviction and from motives of the purest patriotism, unalloyed by any personal feeling; indeed, entirely throwing behind him every consideration of personal or family interest, which even the best men allow to have some weight with them on such occasions.

In a political review of Mexico, written some years ago by a Mexican who deals fearlessly, and it would seem impartially, with the characters of all the leading men of that period, I find some remarks on Señor Gutierrez Estrada, which you will place more faith in, as coming from a less partial source than from persons so attached as we are to him and his family. In speaking of the conduct of the administration, he says—"Señor Gutierrez Estrada was one of the few who remained firm in his ideas, and above all, true to his political engagements. This citizen is a native of the State of Yucatan, where his family, who are distinguished in every point of view, reside. It is unnecessary to say that Gutierrez received
a thorough and brilliant education, as it is sufficient to have conversed with him to discover this fact; nor that he knew how to turn it to account in the career of public service to which he devoted himself, and in which he has remained pure and unblemished in the midst of a corrupt class. From the first he was destined to the European legations, on account of his fluency in speaking and writing both English and French; and he is one of the few who have employed their time usefully in the capitals of the Old World. Flexible by nature, honourable by education, and expeditious in business, his services have been perfect, and above all, loyal and conscientious." He goes on to say that, "notwithstanding the gentleness of his temper, his political conscience is so firm and pure, that he will never yield in what he considers his obligation, even when it interferes with the most intimate friendships, or most weighty considerations." One would think that the writer had foreseen the present emergency. I have not yet read the pamphlet which the friends of the author consider an equal proof of his noble independence, bold patriotism, and vast information; being, to say the truth, much more interested in its domestic effects than in its public results, or even its intrinsic merits.

26th.—Soldiers were sent to the house of the Countess de la C——a, to arrest her son-in-law, but in compliance with the entreaties of his family, he had gone into concealment. I found them in great affliction, but they are so accustomed to political persecution from one party or another, particularly the countess, that her courage has never deserted her for a moment. He is accused in Congress—in the senate-house—a proclamation is made by the president, anathematizing his principles—even the printer of the pamphlet is thrown into prison. Nothing else is spoken of, and the general irritation is so terrible, that it is to be hoped his place of concealment is secure: otherwise the consequences may be fatal.

On pretend that many distinguished men here hold the same opinions, but their voices, even were they to venture to raise them, could not stem the tide of public indignation. The most offended are naturally the military men. ... In short, Señor Gutierrez, who has been passing four years abroad, in countries where hundreds of obscure scribblers daily advocate republicanism or any wild theory that strikes their fancy, with the most perfect security,
was probably hardly aware of the extraordinary ferment which such a pamphlet was likely to produce at the present juncture.

27th.—A few days before Señor A— left us, we went up the canal in a canoe, as far as Santa Anita, to show him all that remains of the Chinampas. It is as pleasant a way of passing an evening as any that I know of here.

We drove lately to Mexicalsingko, where there is a cave in which there is a figure of our Saviour, which they pretend has lately appeared there.

The excitement concerning the pamphlet seems rather to increase than diminish, but Señor Gutierrez has many devoted friends, and the place of his retreat is secure. There is little doubt that he will be forced to fly the country.

29th. Señor Don Xavier Hechavarria, Minister of the Treasury, has sent in his resignation. Being a man of large private fortune, extremely simple in his habits, and the most amiable of men in domestic life, I believe that no minister has ever thrown off with more unaffected satisfaction the burden of state affairs, or will enjoy his retreat from public life with more true philosophy.

I have been so much interested in the affairs of the C—a family, that I have forgotten to tell you of my having obtained permission from the archbishop to visit the Santa Teresa, accompanied by one young married lady, who has a sister there. The archbishop desired that our visit should be kept a secret; but it has oozed out by some means or other, probably through the nuns themselves, and exposed him to so much inconvenience and such a torrent of solicitations from those ladies who, having daughters or sisters amongst the nuns, are naturally most desirous to see them, that I fear, notwithstanding his good nature, he will put a veto on all my future applications. You will think I pass my time in convents, but I find no other places half so interesting, and you know I always had a fancy that way.

In some of these convents there still exist, buried alive like the inmates, various fine old paintings; amongst others, some of the Flemish school, brought to Mexico by the monks, at the time when the Low Countries were under Spanish dominion. Many masters also of the Mexican school, such as Enríquez, Cabrera, etc., have enriched the cloisters with their productions, and
employed their talent on holy subjects, such as the lives of the saints, the martyrs, and other Christian subjects. Everywhere, especially, there are Cabreras, an artist somewhat in the Luca Giordano style; the same monotony, facility, and “fa presto Luca!” All his pictures are agreeable, and some strikingly beautiful. Occasionally he copies from the old masters, but rarely. Ximenes and Enriquez are not so common, and some of their productions are very good, and deserve to be better known than I imagine they are in Europe. They are a branch of the Spanish school, and afford striking proofs of the extraordinary talent of the Mexicans for the fine arts, as well as of the facilities which the mother-country afforded them.

But it is in the convent of the Prolesa that the finest paintings are, and there I cannot enter! The galleries are full of paintings, the most part by Cabrera; and C——n speaks with enthusiasm of one exceedingly beautiful painting, in the sacristy of the chapel, said to be an original Guido, being a representation of Christ tied to the pillar and scourged; in which the expression of pure divinity and suffering humanity is finely blended, and well contrasted with savage cruelty in the countenances of his executioners. But most of these paintings are neglected, and so falling to decay that it is pitiable to look at them.

The Santa Teresa, however, has few ornaments. It is not nearly so large as the Encarnacion, and admits but twenty-one nuns. At present there are, besides these, but three novices. Its very atmosphere seems holy, and its scrupulous and excessive cleanness makes all profane dwellings appear dirty by comparison. We were accompanied by a bishop, Señor Madrid, the same who assisted at the archbishop’s consecration—a good-looking man, young and tall, and very splendidly dressed. His robes were of purple satin, covered with fine point-lace, with a large cross of diamonds and amethysts. He also wore a cloak of very fine purple cloth, lined with crimson velvet, crimson stockings, and an immense amethyst ring.

When he came in we found that the nuns had permission to put up their veils, rarely allowed in this order in the presence of strangers. They have a small garden and fountain, plenty of flowers, and some fruit, but all is on a smaller scale, and sadder than in the convent of the Incarnation. The refectory is a large room, with a long
narrow table running all round it—a plain deal table, with wooden benches; before the place of each nun, an earthen bowl, an earthen cup with an apple in it, a wooden plate and a wooden spoon; at the top of the table a grinning skull, to remind them that even these indulgences they shall not long enjoy.

In one corner of the room is a reading-desk, a sort of elevated pulpit, where one reads aloud from some holy book, whilst the others discuss their simple fare. They showed us a crown of thorns, which, on certain days, is worn by one of their number, by way of penance. It is made of iron, so that the nails entering inwards, run into the head, and make it bleed. While she wears this on her head, a sort of wooden bit is put into her mouth, and she lies prostrate on her face till dinner is ended; and while in this condition her food is given her, of which she eats as much as she can, which probably is none.

We visited the different cells, and were horror-struck at the self-inflicted tortures. Each bed consists of a wooden plank raised in the middle, and on days of penitence crossed by wooden bars. The pillow is wooden, with a cross lying on it, which they hold in their hands when they lie down. The nun lies on this penitential couch, embracing the cross, and her feet hanging out, as the bed is made too short for her upon principle. Round her waist she occasionally wears a band with iron points turning inwards; on her breast a cross with nails, of which the points enter the flesh, of the truth of which I had melancholy ocular demonstration. Then, after having scourged herself with a whip covered with iron nails, she lies down for a few hours on the wooden bars, and rises at four o'clock. All these instruments of discipline, which each nun keeps in a little box beside her bed, look as if their fitting place would be in the dungeons of the Inquisition. They made me try their bed and board, which I told them would give me a very decided taste for early rising.

Yet they all seem as cheerful as possible, though it must be confessed that many of them look pale and unhealthy. It is said, that when they are strong enough to stand this mode of life, they live very long; but it frequently happens that girls who come into this convent are obliged to leave it from sickness, long before the expiration of their novitiate. I met with the girl whom I had seen take the
veil, and can not say that she looked either well or cheerful, though she assured me, that "of course, in doing the will of God," she was both. There was not much beauty amongst them generally, though one or two had remains of great loveliness. My friend, the Madre A——, is handsomer on a closer view than I had supposed her, and seems an especial favourite with old and young. But there was one whose face must have been strikingly beautiful. She was as pale as marble, and though still young, seemed in very delicate health; but her eyes and eyebrows as black as jet, the eyes so large and soft, the eyebrows two pencilled arches; and her smiles so resigned and sweet, would have made her the loveliest model imaginable for a Madonna.

Again, as in the Incarnation, they had taken the trouble to prepare an elegant supper for us. The bishop took his place in an antique velvet chair, the Señora —— and I were placed on each side of him. The room was very well lighted, and there was as great a profusion of custards, jellies, and ices, as if we had been supping at the most profane café. The nuns did not sit down, but walked about, pressing us to eat, the bishop now and then giving them cakes, with permission to eat them, which they received laughing. They have the most humble and caressing manners, and really appear to be the most amiable and excellent women in the world. They seem to make no ostentation of virtue, but to be seriously impressed with the conviction that they have chosen the true road to salvation; nor are there in them any visible symptoms of that spiritual pride from which few devotees are exempt.

After supper a small harp was brought in, which had been sent for by the bishop’s permission. It was terribly out of tune, with half the strings broke; but we were determined to grudge no trouble in putting it in order, and giving these poor recluses what they considered so great a gratification. We got it into some sort of condition at last, and when they heard it played, they were vehement in their expressions of delight. The Señora ——, who has a charming voice, afterwards sang to them, the bishop being very indulgent, and permitting us to select whatever songs we chose, so that when rather a profane canticle, "The Virgin of the Pillar" (La Virgen del Pilar), was sung, he very kindly turned a deaf ear to
it, and seemed busily engaged in conversation with an old madre, till it was all over.

We were really sorry to leave them; particularly as it is next to impossible that we shall ever see them again; and it seemed as if in a few hours a friendship had been formed between us and these recluses, whose sensations are so few, they must be the more lasting. The thoughts of these poor women cost me a sad and sleepless night. They have sent me some wax figures, dressed in the costumes of the different orders, beginning with their own. They wear the coarsest and hardest stuff next their skin, in itself a perpetual penance.

In these robes they are buried; and one would think that if any human being can ever leave this world without a feeling of regret, it must be a nun of the Santa Teresa, when, her privations in this world ended, she lays down her blameless life, and joins the pious sisterhood who have gone before her; dying where she has lived, surrounded by her companions, her last hours soothed by their prayers and tears, sure of their vigils for the repose of her soul, and above all, sure that neither pleasure nor vanity will ever obliterate her remembrance from their hearts.

At matins, at vespers, at the simple board, at the nightly hymn, she will be missed from their train. Her empty cell will recall her to their eyes; her dust will be profaned by no stranger’s footstep, and though taken away she still seems to remain amongst them.

As for the monasteries, not only no woman can enter, but it is said, with what truth I know not, that a vice-queen having insisted on the privilege of her vice-royalty to enter, the gallery and every place which her footsteps desecrated were unpaved. This was very Saint Senanus like, and peu galant, to say the least.

The finest convent of monks in Mexico is that of San Francisco, which from alms alone has an immense annual rent. According to Humboldt, it was to have been built upon the ruins of the temple of Huitzilopochtli, the god of war; but these ruins having been destined for the foundation of the cathedral, this immense convent was erected where it now stands, in 1531. The founder was an extraordinary man, a great benefactor of the Indians, and to whom they owed many useful mechanical arts which he brought them from Europe. His name was Fray Pedro
de Gante—his calling that of a lay-friar—and his father was the Emperor Charles V!

Of the interior of this convent I am enabled to give you a partial description, but whether from hearsay, in a vision, or by the use of my natural eyes, I shall not disclose. It is built in the form of a square, and has five churches attached to it. You enter a gate, pass through the great, silent, and grass-grown court—up the broad staircase, and enter the long, arched cloisters, lighted by one dim lamp, where everything seems to breathe a religious repose.

The padre prior, seated alone in his cell, with a thick and richly-clasped volume before him, a single lamp on his table, on the wall a crucifix, plain but decent furniture, with his bald head, and pale, impressive face, would have made a fine study for a painter. By such men, the embers of learning and of science were nursed into a faint but steady flame, burning through the long, gloomy night of the dark ages, unseen by profane eyes, like the vestal fire in pagan temples.

A small room, opening into his little parlour, contains his bed, on which is a mattress; for the padres do not perform such acts of self-denial and penitence as the cloistered nuns—and I am assured that his cigars are genuine Havana.

Beggars lounging in the courtyard—a group of monks talking together within the walled enclosure.

Change the scene to the monastery of San Agustin, and you might fancy yourself in the days of one of Walter Scott's romances, in the mélange of soldiers and friars; for here his Excellency the President has his temporary abode; and the torch-light gleams brightly on the swarthy faces of the soldiers, some lying on the ground enveloped in their cloaks; others keeping guard before the convent gate. This convent is also very large, but not so immense as that of San Francisco. The padre prior is a good little old man, but has not the impressive, ascetic visage of the guardian of the other convent. His room is as simple, though not in such perfect order; and his bed is also furnished with a comfortable mattress. An air half military, half monkish, pervades the convent—aides-de-camp of the president passing along the galleries, their uniforms contrasting with the dark robe of a passing monk, returning at nightfall to his cell.
The president had an alarm the night preceding, the prisoners in the jail having broken out. A serious affray had been expected, and everything was prepared for putting the person of the president in safety. The back stairs and secret passages in these old convents lead to excellent hiding-places, and have been put to frequent use during the revolutions. In the old Monte Pío there is a communication with a convent of nuns, and in cases of pillage, the jewels used to be carried by a private staircase out of Monte Pío, and placed under the care of the nuns of Santa Brígida.

The convent of La Profesa is also a fine and spacious building, but excepting that it has a greater number of good paintings than the others, when you have seen one, you have seen all, and I believe none are as large as that founded by the illegitimate scion of the Imperial Charles, who himself ended his days in a similar retreat.

LETTER THE TWENTY-EIGHTH


SANTIAGO, November 3rd.

YESTERDAY, the second of November, a day which for eight centuries has been set apart in the Catholic Church for commemorating the dead, the day emphatically known as the “Dia de Muertos,” the churches throughout all the Republic of Mexico present a gloomy spectacle; darkened and hung with black cloth, while in the middle aisle is a coffin, covered also with black, and painted with skulls and other emblems of mortality. Every one attends church in mourning, and considering the common lot of humanity, there is, perhaps, not one heart over the whole Catholic world, which is not wrung that day, in calling up the memory of the departed.

After early mass, we set off for Santiago, where we intend to spend a week, to be present at the Irradayers—the marking of the bulls with a hot iron with the initials of the proprietor’s name; stamping them with the badge of slavery—which is said to be an extraordinary scene;