Dia de Muertos

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 Pio there is a communication with a convent of nuns, and in cases of pillage, the jewels used to be carried by a private stair-case out of Monte Pio, 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 Herraderos—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;
to which al. rancheros and Indians look forward with the greatest delight. We had a very pleasant journey here, leaving Mexico at six in the morning, and travelling at the usual rate, with seven horses and plenty of mocos. Indeed, no one attempts a journey of any length into the country, without at least six horses or mules.

Near Sopayuca, while they were changing horses, we went to mass, in the picturesque church of San Cristobal. The magnificence of these places of worship is extraordinary. Here was this country church crowded with léperos, the officiating priests, Indians with bare feet; yet the building large and rich, hung with black cloth, and lighted with great tapers which threw their gloomy rays on as much of the rich gilding that encrustèd they walls, as the dark pall left visible.

We got into the carriage a basket of that most refreshing of fruits, the tuna, which grow wild in abundance all over the country. The first time I unwarily pulled them off the trees, I got my fingers full of the innumerable little prickles which cover the skin, and which it is very difficult to get rid of. The Indians have great dexterity in gathering and peeling them. There is the green and the red tuna; the last the prettiest to look at, but not nearly so agreeable a fruit as the other.

When we arrived at Santiago, we sat down to a dinner to the number of about fifty persons, and in the room next to us was a party still larger, of lower degree, for all the world has come to be present at this annual festivity.

6th.—The next morning we set off early to the plaza de toros. The day was fresh and exhilarating. All the country people from several leagues round were assembled, and the trees up to their very topmost branches presented a collection of bronze faces and black eyes, belonging to the Indians, who had taken their places there as comfortably as spectators in a one-shilling gallery. A platform opposite ours was filled with the wives and daughters of agents and small farmers, little rancheras, with short white gowns and rebosos. There was a very tolerable band of music, perched upon a natural orchestra. Bernardo and his men were walking and riding about, and preparing for action. Nothing could be more picturesque than the whole scene.

Seven hundred bulls were driven in from the plains, bellowing loudly, so that the air was filled with their fierce
Marking the Bulls

music. The universal love which the Mexicans have for these sports, amounts to a passion. All their money is reserved to buy new dresses for this occasion, silver rolls or gold linings for their hats, or new deerskin pantaloons and embroidered jackets with silver buttons. The accidents that happen are innumerable, but nothing damps their ardour. It beats fox-hunting. The most striking part of the scene is the extraordinary facility which these men show in throwing the lasso. The bulls being all driven into an enclosure—one after another, and sometimes two or three at a time, were chosen from amongst them, and driven into the plaza, where they were received with shouts of applause, if they appeared fierce, and likely to afford good sport; or of irony, if they turned to fly, which happened more than once.

Three or four bulls are driven in. They stand for a moment, proudly reconnoitring their opponents. The horsemen gallop up, armed only with the lasso, and with loud insulting cries of "Ah toro!" challenge them to the contest. The bulls paw the ground, then plunge furiously at the horses, frequently wounding them at the first onset. Round they go in fierce gallop, bulls and horsemen, amidst the cries and shouts of the spectators. The horseman throws the lasso. The bull shakes his head free of the cord, tosses his horns proudly, and gallops on. But his fate is inevitable. Down comes the whirling rope, and encircles his thick neck. He is thrown down struggling furiously, and repeatedly dashes his head against the ground in rage and despair. Then, his legs being also tied, the man with the hissing red-hot iron in the form of a letter, brands him on the side with the token of his dependence on the lord of the soil. Some of the bulls stand this martyrdom with Spartan heroism and do not utter a cry; but others, when the iron enters their flesh, burst out into long bellowing roars, that seem to echo through the whole country. They are then loosened, get upon their legs again, and like so many branded Cains, are driven out into the country, to make way for others. Such roaring, such shouting, such an odour of singed hair and biftek au naturel, such playing of music, and such wanton risks as were ran by the men!

I saw a torcador, who was always foremost in everything, attempting to drag a bull by the horns, when the animal tossed his head, and with the jerk of one horn,
tore all the flesh off his finger to the very bone. The man coolly tore a piece off a handkerchief, shook the blood off his finger with a slight grimace, bound it up in a moment, and dashed away upon a new venture. One Mexican, extraordinarily handsome, with eyes like an eagle, and very thin and pale, is, they say, so covered from head to foot with wounds received in different bull-fights, that he cannot live long; yet this man was the most enthusiastic of them all. His master tried to dissuade him from joining in the sport this year; but he broke forth into such pathetic entreaties, conjuring him “by the life of the Señorita,” etc., that he could not withhold his consent.

After an enormous number of bulls had been caught and labelled, we went to breakfast. We found a tent prepared for us, formed of bows of trees intertwined with garlands of white moss, like that which covers the cypresses of Chapultepec, and beautifully ornamented with red blossoms and scarlet berries. We sat down upon heaps of white moss, softer than any cushion. The Indians had cooked meat under the stones for us, which I found horrible, smelling and tasting of smoke. But we had also boiled fowls, and quantities of burning chile, hot tortillas, atole, or atolli, as the Indians call it, a species of cakes made of very fine maize and water, and sweetened with sugar or honey; embarrado, a favourite composition of meat and chile, very like mud, as the name imports, which I have not yet made up my mind to endure; quantities of fresh tunas, granaditas, bananas, aguacates, and other fruits, besides pulque, à discrétion.

The other people were assembled in circles under the trees, cooking fowls and boiling eggs in a gipsy fashion, in caldrons, at little fires made with dry branches; and the band, in its intervals of tortilla and pulque, favoured us with occasional airs. After breakfast, we walked out amongst the Indians, who had formed a sort of temporary market, and were selling pulque, chia, roasted chestnuts, yards of baked meat, and every kind of fruit. We then returned to see a great bull-fight, which was followed by more herraderos—in short, spent the whole day amongst the toros, and returned to dinner at six o’clock, some in coaches, some on horseback. In the evening, all the people danced in a large hall; but at eleven o’clock I could look on no longer, for one of these days in the hot
sun is very fatiguing. Nevertheless, at two in the morn-
ing, these men, who had gone through such violent
eexercise, were still dancing jaranas.
8th.—For several days we lived amongst bulls and
Indians, the herraderos continuing, with variation of
colear, riding the bulls, etc. Not the slightest slackening
in the eagerness of the men. Even a little boy of ten
years old mounted a young bull one day, and with great
difficulty and at a great risk succeeded in forcing him to
gallop round the circle. His father looked on, evidently
frightened to death for the boy, yet too proud of his
youthful prowess to attempt to stop him.
At night, when I shut my eyes, I see before me visions
of bulls’ heads. Even when asleep I hear them roaring,
or seem to listen to the shouts of “Ah toro!” The last
day of the herraderos, by way of winding up, a bull was
killed in honour of C——n, and a great flag was sent
streaming from a tree, on which flag was inscribed in
large letters, “Gloria al Señor Ministro de la Augusta
Cristina!” a piece of gallantry which I rewarded with a
piece of gold.
The animal, when dead, was given as a present to the
torcadores; and this bull, cut in pieces, they bury with his
skin on, in a hole in the ground previously prepared with
fire in it, which is then covered over with earth and
branches. During a certain time, it remains baking in
this natural oven, and the common people consider it a
great delicacy, (in which I differ from them).
Yesterday, we climbed to the top of a steep mountain,
which cost us as much labour as if it had been that steep
path which “leads to fame.” Fortunately, it has a good
deal of wood, and we had an occasional rest in the shade.
We mounted the hill on horseback as far as horses could
go, but the principal part could only be performed on foot.
Most of the party remained half way. We reached the
top, swinging ourselves up by the branches, in places
where it was nearly perpendicular. We were rewarded,
first by the satisfaction one always has in making good
one’s intentions, and next, by a wonderfully fine and
extensive view. Our return was more agreeable, as the
weather, except in the heat of the noonday sun, is very
cold in this part of the country. The hills are covered
chiefly with tunas, low firs, and numbers of shrubs, with
flowers and berries. . . . Met on our return a horseman
Life in Mexico

who came to announce the arrival of a guest, Señor H——, from Puebla, who proved a pleasant addition to our society.

15th.—We went out early this morning on horseback, and breakfasted at an hacienda, five leagues distant from Santiago, belonging to the widow of ——'s agents, a good looking, respectable woman, who, alone, in this solitary place, brings up her eight children as she best can. This may really be called solitude. From one year to another she never sees a human being, except an occasional Indian. She is well off, and everything in her house is clean and comfortable. She herself manages the farm, and educates her children to the best of her abilities, so that she never finds time to be dull. She expected us, and gave us breakfast (we being about twenty in number), consisting of everything which that part of the country can afford; and the party certainly did justice to her excellent fare. She gave us pulque, fermented with the juice of the pineapple, which is very good.

When the sun had gone down a little, we rode to the fine hacienda of Reyes, belonging to Señor A——, where he is making and projecting alterations and improvements. When we left Reyes it began to rain, and we were glad to accept the covering of sarapes, as we galloped over the plains. We had a delightful ride. Towards evening the rain ceased, and the moon rose brightly and without a cloud; but we were certainly tired enough when we got home, having rode in all ten leagues.

17th.—These two days have been passed in seeing the mules marked. They are even more dangerous than the bulls, as they bite most ferociously while in their wild state. When thrown down by the lazo, they snore in the most extraordinary manner, like so many aldermen in an apoplectic nap.

This is, perhaps, the most useful and profitable of all Mexican animals. As beasts of burden and for draught, they are in use over the whole republic, and are excellent for long journeys, being capable of immense fatigue, particularly in those arid, hilly parts of the country, where there are no roads. Those which go in droves, can carry about five hundred pounds weight, going at the rate of twelve or fourteen miles a day, and in this way they can perform journeys of more than a thousand miles. For
constant use they are preferable to horses, being so much less delicate, requiring less care, and enduring more fatigue. A good pair of carriage mules will cost from five hundred to a thousand dollars.

After dinner we saw some of these wild creatures, that had just been caught, put into a carriage, each wild mule harnessed with a civilized one, and such kicking and flinging up of heels I never witnessed. However, the mosos can manage anything, and in about half an hour, after much alternate soothing and lashing, they trotted along with the heavy coach after them, only rearing and plunging at decent intervals.

MEXICO, 12th.

We have passed ten days in the country, taking constant exercise, and have been obliged to return home rather sooner than we should have wished, in order to mark Queen Ysabel's Day with a diplomatic dinner.

Though less is now said on the subject of the pamphlet than when we left this, the irritation seems to continue as before. Señor Gutierrez remains concealed, communicating only with his family and a few devoted friends; a most disagreeable position, and one which it is impossible for him to endure long.

20th.—Our dinner has gone off as well as could be expected. The party were twenty-six in number, consisting of His Grace the Archbishop, their Excellencies of the Cabinet and Corps Diplomatique, together with Count Cortina, the Valencias, and Gorostizas. The gentlemen were in full uniform—the ladies en grande toilette—the archbishop in his robes. We had a band of music in the gallery, and walked in to the sound of Norma, precedence being given to the archbishop, who took me, or rather whom I took, as I found some difficulty in getting my arm into his robes. I believe no blunders in etiquette were committed. The dinner lasted three and a half mortal hours. The archbishop proposed the health of Her Majesty the Queen, which was drank standing, the band performing God save the queen. I was dreadfully tired (though in a very agreeable position), and have no doubt every one else was the same, it being eleven when we returned to the drawing-room.

The archbishop's familiars, two priests who always accompany him, respectable black guards, were already in
waiting. As for him, he was as kind and agreeable as usual, and, after coffee, took his departure to the sound of music.

LETTER THE TWENTY-NINTH


21st.

We received a few days since an invitation to attend the sumptuous mass, annually given by the Asturian Brotherhood, in honour of the Virgin of Cavadonga, in the church of Santo Domingo. The invitation being printed on blue satin, with gold lace and tassels, seems worthy of a place in a box of wax figures, which will be sent by the next packet.

The church was superbly decorated, and only well-dressed people were admitted. C——n was carried off to a post of honour near the altar, and a padre gave me a velvet chair. The music was beautiful, but too gay for a church. There were violins and wind instruments, and several amateur players. Some pieces from the Cheval de Bronze were very well played. The sermon, preached by Guerrero, a chanoine who has some reputation as an orator, contained a prudent degree of praise of the Spaniards, and even of a king, could that king be a pelayo.

In the evening we dined at the Prussian minister’s—a pleasant party.

Yesterday we went to Chapultepec, C——n and I, M. de G——t, and M. de N——, to take views with the Daguerreotype, which C——n had the pleasure of receiving some time ago from Boston, from our friend, Mr. Prescott. While they were working in the sun, I, finding that the excessive heat had the effect of cooling my enthusiasm, established myself with a book under Montezuma’s cypress, which felt very romantic. The poetry of the scene, however, was greatly weakened by the arrival of