very picturesque; I in my riding-habit, and the sandalled friar in his white robes, kneeling side by side, on the broken steps of the altar. He is so pleasant and well-informed, that he is a particularly agreeable companion.

LETTER THE THIRTIETH


25th.

CHRISTMAS-DAY! One year this evening since we made our entry into Mexico. What a different aspect everything has assumed to us in one year! Then every object was new, every face that of a stranger. Now we are surrounded by familiar sights and sounds, and above all by friendly faces. But though novelty, which has its charms and its désagrément, has gone, nothing in Mexico even appears commonplace. Everything is on so large a scale, and everything so picturesque. Then there is so much interest attached to its old buildings, so much to see, even though there are no sights and no show-places, unless we are to put in that class the Minera, Museum, Cathedral, University, and Botanic Garden, usually visited by travellers, that at whatever period we may leave it, I feel convinced we shall regret some point of interest, that we have left unvisited. . . .

Some days ago coloured cards, printed in gilt letters, were sent round, inviting all the senator’s friends to the mass, in this form:—

“J—C B—o G— requests that you will honour him with your presence and that of your family, in the solemn function of Kalends and Mass, with which he annually makes an humble remembrance of the Birth of the Saviour, which festivity will take place on the morning of the 24th of this month, at nine o’clock in the Parish Church of the Sagrario of the Holy Cathedral.

“Mexico, December, 1840.”

By nine we were all assembled in the choir; Don B—o
in his uniform, dark blue and gold, we in mantillas. The church looked very splendid, and, as usual on these occasions, no léperos were admitted, therefore the crowd was very elegant and select. The affair went off brilliantly. Four or five of the girls, and several of the married women, have superb voices; and not one of all those who sang in chorus had a bad voice. The finest I almost ever heard is that of the Señorita C——. Were she to study in Italy, I venture to predict that she might rival Grisi. Such depth, power, extension, and sweetmess, with such richness of tone in the upper notes, are very rarely united. She sang a solo in such tones that I thought the people below must have been inclined to applaud. There are others whose voices are much more cultivated, and who have infinitely more science. I speak only of the raw material. The orchestra was really good, and led by a first-rate musician. I was thankful when my part of the entertainment was over, and I could give an individual attention to the others. The celebration lasted four hours, but there was rather a long sermon. You will shortly receive a detailed account of the whole, which is to be published in the Mexican Annual, called “The Ladies’ Guide.”

In the evening we went to the house of the Marquesa de V——o, to spend the Christmas-eve. On this night all the relations and intimate friends of each family assemble in the house of the head of the clan, a real gathering, and in the present case to the number of fifty or sixty persons.

This is the last night of what are called the Posadas, a curious mixture of religion and amusement, but extremely pretty. The meaning is this: At the time when the decree went forth from Caesar Augustus, that “all the world should be taxed,” the Virgin and Joseph having come out of Galilee to Judæa to be inscribed for the taxation, found Bethlehem so full of people, who had arrived from all parts of the world, that they wandered about for nine days, without finding admittance in any house or tavern, and on the ninth day took shelter in a manger, where the Saviour was born. For eight days this wandering of the Holy Family to the different Posadas is represented, and seems more intended for an amusement to the children than anything serious. We went to the Marquesa’s at eight o’clock, and about nine the ceremony commenced.
A lighted taper is put into the hand of each lady, and a procession was formed, two by two, which marched all through the house, the corridors and walls of which were all decorated with evergreens and lamps, the whole party singing the Litanies. K—— walked with the dowager marquesa; and a group of little children, dressed as angels, joined the procession. They wore little robes of silver or gold lama, plumes of white feathers, and a profusion of fine diamonds, and pearls, in bandeaux, brooches, and necklaces, white gauze wings, and white satin shoes, embroidered in gold.

At last the procession drew up before a door, and a shower of fireworks was sent flying over our heads, I suppose to represent the descent of the angels; for a group of ladies appeared, dressed to represent the shepherds who watched their flocks by night upon the plains of Bethlehem. Then voices, supposed to be those of Mary and Joseph, struck up a hymn, in which they begged for admittance, saying that the night was cold and dark, that the wind blew hard, and that they prayed for a night’s shelter. A chorus of voices from within refused admittance. Again those without entreated shelter, and at length declared that she at the door, who thus wandered in the night, and had not where to lay her head, was the Queen of Heaven! At this name the doors were thrown wide open, and the Holy Family entered singing. The scene within was very pretty: a nacimiento. Platforms, going all round the room, were covered with moss, on which were disposed groups of wax figures, generally representing passages from different parts of the New Testament, though sometimes they begin with Adam and Eve in paradise. There was the Annunciation—the Salutation of Mary to Elizabeth—the Wise Men of the East—the Shepherds—the Flight into Egypt. There were green trees and fruit trees, and little fountains that cast up fairy columns of water, and flocks of sheep, and a little cradle in which to lay the Infant Christ. One of the angels held a waxen baby in her arms. The whole was lighted very brilliantly, and ornamented with flowers and garlands. A padre took the baby from the angel, and placed it in the cradle, and the posada was completed.

We then returned to the drawing-room—angels, shepherds, and all, and danced till supper-time. The supper was a show for sweetmeats and cakes.
State of Household

To-day, with the exception of there being no service in all the churches, Christmas is not kept in any remarkable way. We are spending this evening alone, and very quietly. To-morrow we have a soirée. I have letters from C—n, from Guernavaca, delighted with the beauties of tierra caliente, and living amongst roses and orange trees. I hope that in January we shall be able to go there, in case anything should occur to induce us to leave Mexico before next winter.

27th.—We had a very crowded party last evening, I think the best we have had yet, a fact which I mention, because I triumph in my opinion that these weekly parties would succeed in Mexico having proved correct.

I have lately been engaged in search of a cook, with as much pertinacity as Japhet in search of his father, and with as little success as he had in his preliminary inquiries. One, a Frenchman, I found out had been tried for murder—another was said to be deranged—a third, who announced himself as the greatest artiste who had yet condescended to visit Mexico, demanded a salary which he considered suitable to his abilities. I tried a female Mexican, in spite of her flowing hair. She seemed a decent woman and tolerable cook; and, although our French housekeeper and prime minister had deserted us at our utmost need, we ventured to leave the house, and to spend the day at Tacubaya. On our return, found the whole establishment unable to stand! Cook tipsy—soldiers ditto—galopine slightly intoxicated—in short, the house taking care of itself—no standing force but the coachman and footman, who have been with us some time, and appear to be excellent servants. I am, however, promised a good Mexican housekeeper, and trust that some order will be established under her government; also, a Chinese cook, with a celestial character...

Letters from Spain, announcing the speedy arrival of a Secretary of Legation and another attaché.

1st January, 1841.—A happy New Year to all! We began it by attending early mass in San Francisco, about the cleanest church in Mexico, and most frequented by the better classes. There you may have the good fortune to place yourself between two well-dressed women, but you are equally likely to find your neighbour a beggar with a blanket; besides, the floor is nearly as dirty as that of the cathedral. This dirtiness is certainly one of the
greatest drawbacks to human felicity in this beautiful country, degrading the noble edifices dedicated to the worship of God, destroying the beautiful works destined for the benefit of his creatures. The streets, the churches, the theatres, the market-place, the people, all are contaminated by this evil. The market-place is indeed full of flowers and green branches and garlands—but those who sell the flowers and weave the wreaths are so dirty, that the effect of what would otherwise be the prettiest possible picture, is completely destroyed. In the theatre there is a series of suffocating odours, especially in the dimly-lighted corridors, which is anything but agreeable. The custom of kneeling on the floor in church seems fitting and devout, but there surely can be no reason why the floor of a sacred building should not be kept scrupulously clean, or why the lower classes should not be obliged to dress themselves with common decency. Those who are unable to do so, though probably there are not half a dozen people in Mexico who do not wear rags merely from indolence, should certainly have a place set apart for them, in which case this air of squalid poverty would no doubt disappear. On occasion of any peculiar fête, the church is washed and beggars are excluded, and then indeed these noble edifices seem fitting temples wherein to worship the Most High.

On other days, in addition to the léperos (especially in the cathedral), the Indian women are in the habit of bringing their babies and baskets of vegetables to church, and the babies on their part are in the habit of screaming, as babies will when they consider themselves neglected. This may be difficult to amend, the poor woman having come in from her village, and perforce brought her progeny with her; but the strong, stout man in rags, who prefers begging to working—the half-naked woman who would consider herself degraded by doing anything to better her condition, except asking for alms—the dogs which wander up and down during divine service,—all these might be brought to order by proper regulations.

Notwithstanding all these drawbacks, I have sometimes compared, in my own mind, the appearance of a fashionable London chapel with that of a Mexican church, on the occasion of a solemn fête, and the comparison is certainly in favour of the latter. The one, light, airy, and gay, with its velvet-lined pews, its fashionable preacher, the
ladies a little sleepy after the last night's opera, but dressed in the most elegant morning toilet, and casting furtive glances at Lady ——'s bonnet and feathers, and at Mrs. ——'s cashmere shawl or lovely ermine pelisse, and exchanging a few fashionable nothings at the door, as the footmen let down the steps of their gay equipages—the other, solemn, stately, and gloomy, and showing no distinction of rank. The floor covered with kneeling figures—some enveloped in the reboso, others in the mantilla, and all alike devout, at least in outward seeming. No showy dress, or gay bonnet, or fashionable mantle to cause the eye of the poor to wander with envy or admiration. Apparently considering themselves alike in the sight of Heaven, the peasant and the marquesa kneel side by side, with little distinction of dress; and all appear occupied with their own devotions, without observing either their neighbour's dress or degree of devoutness. Religious feeling may be equally strong in the frequenter of both places of worship; but as long as we possess senses which can be affected by external objects, the probabilities of the most undivided devotional feeling are in favour of the latter. The eye will wander—the thoughts will follow where it leads. In the one case it rests on elegant forms and fashionable toilets—in the other, it sees nothing but a mass of dark and kneeling figures, or a representation of holy and scriptural subjects.

However, one consequence of the exceeding dirtiness of the Mexican churches, and the number of léperos who haunt them, as much in the way of their calling as from devotion, is that a great part of the principal families here, having oratorios in their houses, have engaged the services of a padre, and have mass at home. There is a small chapel in the house of General B——a, the handsomest house in Mexico, where there is a virgin carved in wood, one of the most exquisite pieces of sculpture that can be seen. The face is more than angelic—it is divine; but a divine nature, suffering mortal anguish.

27th.—On the first of February we hope to set off on an expedition to tierra caliente, from which C——n returned some time ago. We have, by good fortune, procured an excellent Mexican housekeeper, under whose auspices everything has assumed a very different aspect, and to whose care we can intrust the house when we go. Nothing remarkable has occurred here lately—the usual
routine of riding on horseback, visiting in carriage, walk-
ing very rarely in the Alameda, driving in the Paséo,
dining at Tacubaya, the three weekly soirées, varied by
a diplomatic dinner in the house of the — minister, and
by the dinner of the English club who met here yesterday
—by a sale of books after dinner, in which the president of
the society fined me five dollars for keeping a stupid old
poem past the time, upon which I moved that the poem
should be presented to me, which was carried nem. con.

We have been strongly advised not to attempt this
journey, and the stories of robbers and robberies, related
by credible persons, are not encouraging. Robbers, bad
roads, horrible heat, poisonous animals; many are the
difficulties prognosticated to us. The season is already
rather advanced, but it has been impossible for us to set
off sooner. Our next letters will be written either during
our journey, should we find the opportunity, or after our
return.

LETTER THE THIRTY-FIRST

Leave Mexico—Cuernavaca—Tierra Caliente—Atlacamulco—Orange
Groves—Sugar-cane—Annual Produce—Will of Cortes—Descrip-
tion—Coffee Plantation—Scorpions—List of Venemous Reptiles—
Acapansingo—Doubts and Difficulties—A Decision.

ATLACAMULCO, February 2nd.

A quiet day in a hospitable country-house, too sunny to
go out, and nothing else to do, are temptations sufficient
to induce me to sit down and give you an account of our
proceedings during these last two days. Yesterday, the
first of February, at four in the morning, very sleepy, we
set off in the diligence which we had taken for ourselves;
our sole luggage, two portmanteaus and a carpet bag; our
dresses, dark strong calico gowns, large Panama hats,
rebosos tied on like scarfs, and thick green barègé veils.
A government escort of four soldiers with a corporal,
renewed four times, accompanied us as far as Cuernavaca,
which is about eighteen leagues from Mexico, and the
entrance as it were to tierra caliente. These are supposed
sufficient to frighten away three times the number of
robbers, whose daring, however, has got to such a height,
that no diligence now arrives from Puebla without being
robbed. Six robberies have happened there in the last