LETTER THE THIRTY-SIXTH


MEXICO, 24th.

We went to the concert with our friends, the H—os. The music was better than the instruments, and the Señora Cesari looked handsome, as she always does, besides being beautifully dressed in white, with Paris wreaths. We took leave of our friends at the door of the hotel, at one in the morning, and lay down for two hours, in the full expectation of being robbed the following day, a circumstance which has now grown so common, that when the diligence from Puebla arrives in safety, it excites rather more sensation than when it has been stopped. The governor had ordered us an escort to Mexico, to be stationed about every six leagues, but last week the escort itself, and even the gallant officer at its head, were suspected of being the plunderers. Our chief hope lay in that well-known miraculous knowledge which they possess as to the value of all travellers’ luggage, which no doubt not only makes them aware that we are mere pilgrims for pleasure, and not fresh arrivals, laden with European commodities, but also renders them perfectly familiar with the contents of our well-shaken portmanteaus; so that we trusted that a sarape or two, a few rings and earrings, and one or two shawls, would not prove sufficient to tempt them. We got into the diligence in the dark, half asleep, having taken all the places but three, which were engaged before we came; some sleepy soldiers on horseback, ready to accompany us, and a loaded gun sticking out of each window. Various beggars, who are here innumerable, already surrounded us; and it is, by the way, a remarkable circumstance, that notwithstanding the amazing numbers of the léperos in Puebla, the churches there are kept scrupulously clean, from which Mexico might take a hint with advantage.

Puebla is one of the few cities founded by the Spanish colonists, instead of being built upon the ruins of former
greatness. It was founded in the sixteenth century, on the plains of Acajete, in a site occupied only by a few huts belonging to the Cholula Indians. It is surrounded by productive corn estates, and the landscape, when the light visited our eyes, was fertile though flat. The two finest views of Puebla may be seen from the towers of the cathedral, and from an azotea in the street of San Agustín. The landscape is extremely varied and very extensive.

To the north we see the mountain of Tlascalá, the Matlalciyeletl, better known as the Malinchi; next it the hill and temple of Guadalupe and the mountain of the Pinar, crowned by its white church. Other churches and convents adorn the slopes of the mountains, the Church of Loreto, the Temple of Calvary, etc. The Malinchi is fertile, but these inferior mountains are sterile and bare.

To the south lie the great volcanoes, and between them we can distinguish the difficult and steep road by which Cortes undertook his first march to Mexico. We also see the city and pyramid of Cholula, the hill of San Nicolas, and that of San Juan, where General Bustamante encamped in 1832, when he went out against Santa Anna; near it the farm-houses of Posadas and Zavaleta, one celebrated by a battle, the other by a treaty.

To the east, but at a greater distance than the other mountains, rises the Peak of Orizaba, the Star Mountain; the side now seen, that which rises over the table land of Mexico; its other side descends rapidly to the burning plains of Vera Cruz, and is the first distinguishable land discerned by those who approach these coasts. Even at this distance, its snowy summit is seen contrasting with its fertile woods and pleasant villages. It has, what mortals rarely possess united, a warm heart, with a clear, cold head.

We were awakened at a posada by their bringing us some hot coffee, and a man with a white nightcap on, having poked his head in at the window, in defiance of a loaded musket, I concluded he was a lépero, and sleepily told him I had nothing for him, in the phrase of the country to importunate beggars; “Perdone V. por Dios!” “Excuse me, for God’s sake!”—but he proved to be a gentleman, who merely came to put himself and his property at our disposal, at that early hour of the morning.

When we entered the black forest, and passed through the dark pine woods, then the stories of robbers began,
just as people at sea seem to take a particular pleasure in talking of shipwrecks. Every cross had its tale of murder, and by the way, it seems to me, that a work written with connaissance de cause, and entitled "History of the Crosses," though it might not equal the "History of the Crusades," would be quite as interesting, and much more romantic, than the Newgate Calendar. The difficulty would consist in procuring authentic information concerning them. There were a lady and two gentlemen in the diligence, and the lady seemed to be very much au fait as to their purport and history. Under one her own servant was buried, and she gave rather a graphic account of his murder. He was sitting outside, on the top of the diligence. The party within were numerous but unarmed. Suddenly a number of robbers with masks on came shouting down upon them from amongst the pine trees. They first took aim at the poor mozo, and shot him through the heart. He fell, calling in piteous tones to a padre who was in the coach, entreating him to stop and confess him, and groaning out a farewell to his friend the driver. Mortal fear prevailed over charity both in priest and layman, and the coachman, whipping up his horses, passed at full gallop over the body of the murdered man, so that, the robbers being on foot, the remainder of the party escaped.

Whilst we were listening to tales of blood and murder, our escort took leave of us, supposing that we should meet another immediately, whereas we found that we had arrived at the most dangerous part of the road, and that no soldiers were in sight. We certainly made up our minds to an attack this time, and got ready our rings and watches, not to hide, but to give, for we womenkind were clearly of opinion, that in case of an attack, it was much better to attempt no defence, our party having only two guns amongst them.

There was a diligence some way behind us, full of people, and belonging to another line; driven by a Yankee coachman, so drunk that he kept his seat with difficulty, and, in defiance of all remonstrances, persisted in driving the coach at a gallop close by the brink of the great precipice along which the road wound; so that the poor passengers were exposed to a double danger.

Suddenly our escort appeared at the top of the hill, and the officer, riding up, excused himself to C—n. for the
delay, which had arisen from their having been engaged in a skirmish with the robbers in that very place. Two he said were taken, and he had marched them off to Puebla, where they will probably be let off in a few days, after a form of trial. Four had escaped, and had hid themselves amongst the trees and rocks, but could not, according to his calculations, be very far off. However, we were quite reassured by the arrival of the soldiers, and the sight of Rio Frio was very reviving. We got a very tolerable dinner from the Bordelaise in the forest-valley; and although the next part of the road is reckoned very insecure, we had no longer any apprehension, as besides having an escort, the fact that some of the robbers had been taken a few hours before, made it very unlikely that they would renew their attempts that day.

This pestilence of robbers, which infests the republic, has never been eradicated. They are in fact the growth of civil war. Sometimes in the guise of insurgents, taking an active part in the independence, they have independently laid waste the country, and robbed all whom they met. As expellers of the Spaniards, these armed bands infested the roads between Vera Cruz and the capital, ruined all commerce, and without any particular inquiry into political opinions, robbed and murdered in all directions. In 1824 a law was proposed in congress, which should subject all armed bands of robbers to military judges, in order to shorten proceedings, for many of those who had been apprehended and thrown into prison, found some opportunity to escape, while their trial was pending, and many had been imprisoned four or five times for the same offence, yet never brought to justice. In this law were included both robbers by profession and those bodies of insurgents who were merely extempore amateurs.

But whatever measures have been taken at different times to eradicate this evil, its causes remain, and the idle and unprincipled will always take advantage of the disorganized state of the country, to obtain by force what they might gain by honest labour. Count —— says gravely, that he cannot imagine why we complain of Mexican robbers, when the city of London is full of organized gangs of ruffians, whom the laws cannot reach; and when English highwaymen and housebreakers are the most celebrated in the world. Moreover, that Mexican robbers are never unnecessarily cruel, and in fact are very
Return to Mexico

easily moved to compassion. This last assertion may, occasionally hold good, but their cruelties to travellers are too well known to bear him out in it as a general remark.

As a proof of their occasional moderation, I may mention, that the ladies of the E——a family, at the time of their emigration, were travelling from Mexico with a padre, when they were met by a party of robbers or insurgents, who stopped the coach, and commenced pillaging. Amongst other articles of value, they seized a number of silver dishes. The padre observed to them, that as this plate did not belong to the ladies, but was lent them by a friend, they would be obliged to replace it, and requested that one might be left as a pattern. The reasonable creatures instantly returned a dish and cover!

Another time, having completely stripped an English gentleman and his servant, and tied them both to a tree, observing that the man appeared particularly distressed at the loss of his master's spurs, they politely returned and laid the spurs beside the gentleman.

About four o'clock, though nearly blinded with dust, we once more looked down upon the valley of Mexico, and at five, during our last change of horses, we were met by Don M——I del C——o and the English courier Beraza, who had ridden out to meet us, and accompanied us on their fine horses as far as the Garita. Here we found our carriage waiting; got in and drove through Mexico, dusty as we were, and warlike as we seemed, with guns at the windows. In the Calle San Francisco, the carriage was stopped by Mr.——, Secretary to the English Legation, who invited us to a grand masked and fancy carnival ball to be given on Monday, it being now Saturday. On our return home, we found everything in good order. Had some difficulty in procuring ball-dresses in time.

On Sunday we had a number of people to dinner, by chance, it being Spanish fashion to dine at a friend's house without invitation. This evening we go to the ball.

26th.—The ball was in the theatre, and very brilliant, but too many of the first people on these occasions keep their boxes, and do not dance; yet it was wonderfully select for so large an assembly. When we arrived, we were led upstairs by some of the commissioners, those who had charge of the ball, to the E——'s box, whom
we found, as usual, elegantly dressed—the married ladies of the family with diamonds, the younger ones in white crape and gold. I had a black silk mask, but finding myself universally recognized, saw no particular advantage in keeping it on, and promptly discarded it. We took a few turns in the ball-room, and afterwards returned to the box. There were some capital figures in masks, and some beautiful ball-dresses, and though there were a number of dominoes and odd figures, I could not help remarking the great improvement in toilet which had taken place since the fancy ball of last year. One or two girls, especially the Señorita M——, wore ball-dresses which could only have proceeded from the fingers of a Parisian modiste. Madame de ———, dressed as a peasant, and with a mask, was known everywhere by her small foot and pretty figure. But it is impossible to look on at a ball very long, not mingling with it, without growing tired; and not even the numerous visitors to our box could prevent us from feeling much more sleepy than during many a moonlight ride through the lovely lanes of tierra caliente.

Next night there was a public masked ball, but we did not attend it. We feel much the better for our journey, and only hope that some day C—— may have leisure sufficient to enable us to take another ride through some other part of the country. This being near Lent, we shall have no soirées for six weeks, though balls are occasionally given during that time of fasting. The house has become very comfortable in the way of servants; our housekeeper a treasure, the coachman and footman excellent, the cook tolerable, the soldiers rarely tipsy more than once a week, and generally only one at a time, the others decent—so that we have nothing to complain of. ——— has established a hen-house near the stable, and any old Indian woman who brings her a manojo (several hens tied together) is sure to be received with open arms.

One of our first visits on our return was to Tacubaya, where we were sorry to find the Countess C—— a very much indisposed, and her courtyard filled with carriages, containing visitors making inquiries. I shall now send off my letters by the packet, that you may see we are safely re-established in Mexico.