LETTER THE FOURTH


VERA CRUZ, 18th.

This morning, the sanguine hoped, and the desponding feared, for the wind, though inclined to la brisa, seemed unlikely to prove sufficiently strong to enable us to reach Vera Cruz—this being the twenty-fifth day since we left Havana; a voyage that, with a steamer, might be performed in three days, and with a sailing-vessel and a fair wind, is made in six or seven. About noon, the aspect of things became more favourable. The breeze grew stronger, and with it our hopes.

At last appeared in view, faintly, certain spires beside the low sandy land, which for some time we had anxiously watched, and at length we could distinguish houses and churches, and the fort of San Juan de Ulua, of warlike memory. By slow but sure degrees, we neared the shore, until Vera Cruz, in all its ugliness, became visible to our much-wearied eyes. We had brought a pilot from Havana to guide us to these dangerous coasts, but though a native of these parts, it seemed that a lapse of years had blunted his memory, for we had nearly run upon the rocks. A gun was therefore fired, and another pilot came out, who at sight of the Spanish flag waxed enthusiastic, and pointing out the castle to our ignorant friend, exclaimed, alluding to the desperate struggle made by the Spaniards to defend this their last stronghold at the end of the war, "I'll, although but a handful of men, defended ourselves for years like soldiers, and now these Frenchmen took it in three days!" and, walking about in a transport of patriotic despair, he seemed to forget his actual duty in the tide of remembrances which the sight of Spanish colours and a Spanish crew had called forth.

Anything more melancholy, délabré and forlorn, than the whole appearance of things as we drew near, cannot
well be imagined. On one side, the fort, with its black and red wall: on the other, the miserable, black-looking city, with hordes of large black birds, called sopilotes, hovering over some dead carcass, or flying hea·ily along in search of carrion. Still, as the goal of our voyage, even its dreary aspect was welcome, and the very hills of red sand by which it is surrounded, and which look like the deserts of Arabia, appeared inviting.

A boat full of cocked hats was now seen approaching from the city, containing the Consul in full uniform, and other authorities. C—n having sent for and obtained permission from the Governor, to permit the Jason, contrary to established usages, to anchor beneath the castle, a salute of twenty guns was fired from our ship. Being upon deck, I was nearly suffocated with smoke and powder. A salute of the same number of cannon was then fired from the castle, in honour of the first Spanish man-of-war that has appeared in this port since the Revolution.

And now we prepared, before the sun went down, to leave our watery prison; and the captain’s boat being manned, and having taken leave of the officers, we, that is, C—n, the commander, and I, and my French maid and her French poodle, got into it. Then came a salute of twenty guns from the Jason in our honour, and we rode off amidst clouds of smoke. Then the fort gave us welcome with the same number of guns, and, amidst all this cannonading, we were landed at the wharf.

A singular spectacle the wharf presented. A crowd, as far as the eye could reach, of all ages and sexes of Vera Cruzians (and a very curious set they seemed to be), were assembled to witness his Excellency’s arrival. Some had no pantaloons; and others, to make up for their neighbours’ deficiencies, had two pair—the upper slit up the side of the leg, Mexican fashion. All had large hats, with silver or bead rolls, and every tinge of dark complexion, from the pure Indian, upwards. Some dresses were entirely composed of rags, clinging together by the attraction of cohesion; others had only a few holes to let in the air. All were crowding, jostling, and nearly throwing each other into the water, and gazing with faces of intense curiosity.

But a plume of coloured feathers was seen towering above the copper-coloured crowd, and immediate passage
was made for an aide-de-camp from the Governor, General Guadalupe Victoria. He was an immensely tall man, in a showy uniform all covered with gold, with colossal epaulets and a towering plume of rainbow-coloured feathers. He brought to C—n the welcome and congratulations of the General, and those Spanish offers of service and devotion which sound agreeably, whatever be their true value.

We now began to move through the crowd, which formed a line on either side to let us pass, and entered the streets of Vera Cruz, which were crowded, balconies and all, and even roofs with curious faces. The guard formed as we passed, and struck up a march. The principal street is wide and clean, and we reached the house of Señor V—o, a rich merchant, formerly consul, where we are to reside, followed to the door by the whole population. We were received with great hospitality, and found excellent rooms prepared for us. The house is immensely large and airy, built in a square as they all are, but with that unfurnished melancholy look, which as yet this style of house has to me, though admirably adapted to the climate.

A guard of honour sent by General Victoria, trotted into the courtyard, whose attendance C—n declined with thanks, observing that his mission had for object to terminate the coolness hitherto existing between two families of brother; that between members of the same family there was nothing to fear, and all compliments were unnecessary.

I found a German piano in the drawing-room, on which I was glad to put my fingers after a month's abstinence. A number of gentlemen came in the evening to visit C—n. We were received by this family with so much real kindness, that we soon found ourselves perfectly at home. We had a plentiful supper—fish, meat, wine, and chocolate, fruit and sweetmeats; the cookery, Spanish Vera-Crucified. A taste of the style was enough for me, garlic and oil enveloping meat, fish, and fowl, with pimentos and plantains, and all kinds of curious fruit, which I cannot yet endure. Bed was not unwelcome, and most comfortable beds we had, with mosquito curtains, and sheets and pillows all trimmed with rich lace, so universal in Spanish houses, that it is not, as with us, a luxury. But the mosquitoes had entered in some un-
guarded moment, and they and the heat were inimical to sleep.

19th.—I opened my eyes this morning on the painting of a very lovely Madonna, which hung unvalue.1 and ill-framed, in one corner of the apartment. At eight, rose and dressed, and went to breakfast. Here, when there are two guests whom they wish to distinguish, the gentleman is placed at the head of the table, and his lady beside him.

To me nothing can exceed the sadness of the aspect of this city and of its environs—mountains of moving sand, formed by the violence of the north winds, and which, by the reflection of the sun’s rays, must greatly increase the suffocating heat of the atmosphere. The scene may resemble the ruins of Jerusalem, though without its sublimity. The houses seemed blackened by fire; there is not a carriage on the streets—nothing but the men with the wide trousers slit up the side of the leg, immense hats, and blankets, or sarapes, merely a closed blanket, more or less fine, with a hole for the head to go through; and the women with rebooses, long coloured cotton scarfs, or pieces of ragged stuff, thrown over the head and crossing over the left shoulder. Add to this, the sopilotes cleaning the streets,—disgusting, but useful scavengers. These valuable birds have black feathers, with gray heads, beaks, and feet. They fly in troops, and at night perch upon the trees. They are not repulistian, nor do they appear inclined to declare their independence, having kings, to whom it is said they pay so much respect, that if one of the royal species arrives at the same time with a plebeian sopilote, in sight of a dead body, the latter humbly waits till the sovereign has devoured his share, before he ventures to approach.

A few ladies in black gowns and mantillas called this morning, and various men. We find the weather sultry. In summer, with greater heat and the addition of the vomito, it must be a chosen city! The principal street, where we live, is very long and wide, and seems to have many good houses in it. Nearly opposite is one which seems particularly well kept and handsome, and where we saw beautiful flowers as we passed. I find it belongs to an English merchant.

There is much deliberation as to the mode in which we are to travel to Mexico. Some propose a coach, others a
litera; others advise us to take the diligence. While in this indecision, we had a visit this morning from a remarkable-looking character, Don Miguel S——, agent for the diligence office in Mexico, a tall, dark, energetic-looking person. He recommends the diligence, and offers, by accompanying us, to ensure our safety from accidents. He appears right. The diligence goes in four days, if it does not break down. The coach takes any time we choose over that; the literas nine or ten days, going slowly on mules with a sedan-chair motion. The diligence has food and beds provided for it at the inns—the others nothing. I am in favour of the diligence.

The couple from Havana, whom we passed in the goleta, have very coolly requested permission to accompany us to Mexico, "under the protection of the Embajador de España." We should set off in select company.

C——n called this morning on General Victoria. Found his excellency in a large hall without furniture or ornament of any sort, without even chairs, and altogether in a style of more than republican simplicity. He has just returned the visit, accompanied by his colossal aide-de-camp.

General Guadalupe Victoria is perhaps the last man in a crowd whom one would fix upon as being the owner of the above high-sounding cognomen, which in fact is not his original, but 'his assumed name, Guadalupe being adopted by him in honour of the renowned image of the virgin of that name, and Victoria with less humility to commemorate his success in battle. He is an honest, plain, down-looking citizen, lame and tall, somewhat at a loss for conversation, apparently amiable and good-natured, but certainly neither courtier nor orator; a man of undeniable bravery, capable of supporting almost incredible hardships, humane, and who has always proved himself a sincere lover of what he considered liberty, without ever having been actuated by ambitious or interested motives.

It is said that his defects were indolence, want of resolution, and too much reliance on his own knowledge. He is the only Mexican president who finished as chief magistrate, the term prescribed by the laws. It is alleged, in proof of his simplicity, though I think it is too absurd to be true, that having received a despatch with
the two-headed eagle on the seal, he remarked to the astonished envoy who delivered it—"Our arms are very much alike, only I see that his majesty's eagles have two heads: I have heard that some of that species exist here, in *tierra caliente*, and shall have one sent for."

The general is not married, but appears rather desirous of entering the united state. He strongly recommends us to avoid broken bones by going it literas, at least as far as Jalapa. Having stumbled about for some time in search of his cocked-hat, it was handed to him by his aide-de-camp, and he took leave.

We walked out in the evening to take a look of the environs, with Señor V—o, the commander of the Jason, and several young ladies of the house. We walked in the direction of an old church, where it is or was the custom for young ladies desirous of being married to throw a stone at the saint, their fortune depending upon the stone's hitting him, so that he is in a lapidated and dilapidated condition. Such environs! the surrounding houses black with smoke of powder or with fire—a view of bare red sandhills all round—not a tree, or shrub, or flower, or bird, except the horrid black sopilote, or police-officer. All looks as if the prophet Jeremiah had passed through the city denouncing woe to the dwellers thereof. Such a melancholy, wholly deserted-looking burial-ground as we saw!

War and revolutions have no doubt done their work, yet I find difficulty in believing those who speak of Vera Cruz as having been a gay and delightful residence in former days, though even now, those who have resided here for any length of time, even foreigners, almost invariably become attached to it; and as for those born here, they are the truest of patriots, holding up Vera Cruz as superior to all other parts of the world.

The city was founded by the Viceroy, Count de Monterey, at the end of the seventeenth century, and ought not to be confounded, as it sometimes is, with either of the two colonies founded by the first Spaniards. Built in front of the island of San Juan de Ulua, it has one interesting recollection attached to it, since on the same arid shores, Cortes disembarked more than three centuries ago. Unlike the green and fertile coast which gladdened the eyes of Columbus, the Spanish conqueror beheld a bleak and burning desert, whose cheerless aspect might
well have deterred a feeble mind from going further in
search of the paradise that existed behind.
We returned to the house, and heard some ladies play
upon a harp, so called, a small, light instrument in that
form, but without pedals, so light, that they can lift it
with one hand; and yet the music they bring from it is
surprising; one air after another, a little monotonously,
but with great ease and a certain execution, and with the
additional merit of being self-taught.
I imagine that there must be a great deal of musical
taste thrown away here. There are pianos in almost
every house, and one lady, who came to see me to-day,
and whose mother was English, had been extremely well
taught, and played with great taste. They attempted
dancing, but having no masters, can only learn by what
they hear. On the balcony this evening, it was delightful,
and the moon is a universal beautifier.
21st.—We walked about the city yesterday, and re-
turned visits. The streets are clean, and some few
churches tolerably handsome.
The Comicos came in the morning to offer us the centre
box in the theatre, it being the benefit night of Donna
Inocencia Martinez from Madrid, a favourite of the public,
and, in fact, a pretty woman and good comic actress.
The theatre is small, and, they say, generally deserted,
but last night it was crowded. The drop-scene represents
the fine arts, who are so fat, that their condition here
must be flourishing. We were, however, agreeably dis-
appointed in the performance, which was the “Segunda
Dama Duende,” nearly a translation from the “Domino
Noir,” and very amusing; full of excellent coups-de-
théâtre. Donna Inocencia in her various characters, as
domino, servant-girl, abbess, etc., was very handsome,
and acted with great spirit. Moreover, she and her sister,
with two Spaniards, danced the Jota Aragonesa in per-
fection, so that we spent a pleasant evening, upon the
whole, within the precincts of the city of the True Cross.
To-morrow is the day fixed for our departure, and we
shall not be sorry to leave this place, although this house
is excellent, a whole suite of rooms given to us, and
neither ceremony nor gêne of any sort. The weather is
certainly beautiful. The heat may be a little oppressive
in the middle of the day, but the evenings are cool and
delightful.
Departure from Vera Cruz

We had a visit yesterday from the English and French consuls. M. de --- prophesies broken arms and dislodged teeth, if we persist in our plan of taking the diligence,—but all things balanced, we think it preferable to every other conveyance. General Victoria returned to see us this morning, and was very civil and amiable, offering very cordially every service and assistance in his power. We are to rise to-morrow at two, being invited to breakfast with General Santa Anna, at his country-seat Manga de Clavo, a few leagues from this.

We have been sitting on the balcony till very late, enjoying the moonlight and refreshing breeze from the sea, and as we rise before daybreak, our rest will be but short.

LETTER THE FIFTH


JALAPA, 23rd December.

YESTERDAY morning at two o'clock we rose by candlelight, with the pleasant prospect of leaving Vera Cruz and of seeing Santa Anna. Two boxes, called carriages, drawn by mules, were at the door, to convey us to Magna de Clavo. Señor V—o, C—n, the commander of the Jason, and I being encased in them, we set off half-asleep. By the faint light, we could just distinguish as we passed the gates, and the carriages ploughed their way along nothing but sand—sand—as far as the eye could reach; a few leagues of Arabian desert.

At length we began to see symptoms of vegetation; occasional palm-trees and flowers, and by the time we had reached a pretty Indian village, where we stopped to