LETTER THE FIFTY-SECOND

Last Day in Mexico—Theatre—Santa Anna—French Minister's—Parting—Diligence—Last Look of Mexico—Fatigue—Robbers—Escort—Second Impressions—Baths at Jalapa—Vera Cruz—Some Account of San Juan de Ulua—Siege of 1825—Siege of 1838—General Bustamante—Theatre—Of the North Winds.

VERA CRUZ, 6th January, 1842.

HAVING concluded our arrangements for leaving Mexico on the 2nd of January, we determined, as the diligence started long before daybreak, not to attempt taking any rest that night. We went out early, and took leave of the Dowager Marquesa de Vivanco, who was confined to the house by illness, and whose kindness to us has been unremitting ever since our arrival. It is a sad thing to take leave of a person of her age, and in her delicate state of health, whom there is scarcely a possibility of our ever seeing again. Some days before we parted also from one of our oldest friends here, the Countess C—a. The last day, besides the Spaniards who have been our constant friends and visitors ever since we came here, we had melancholy visits of adieu from Señor Gomez Padraza and his lady, from the families of Echavarri, of Fagoaga, Cortina, Escandon, Casaflores, and many whose names are unknown to you. Amongst others was the Güera Rodriguez.

About eight o'clock, accompanied even to the door of the carriage by a number of ladies who were with us to the last, and amongst these were P—a C—a and L—z E—n, we broke short all these sad partings, and, with the A—s and the family of the French minister, set off for the theatre of New Mexico. I can imagine your surprise at such a finale, but it was the only means left us of finishing a painful scene, and of beguiling the weary hours yet remaining before the diligence started, for it was in vain to think of rest or sleep that night. The theatre was very crowded, the play an amusing piece of diablerie, called the "Pata de Cabra" (the goat's foot), badly got up, of course, as its effect depends upon scenery and machinery. I believe it was very entertaining, but I cannot say we felt inclined to enter into the spirit of it. The family of General V—a were there, and, this being the day of a great diplomatic dinner given by Santa Anna, various officers and diplomats came in late and in full dress. I was informed by one of the company, that
six colonels stood the whole time of dinner behind his
Excellency's chair! I wonder what French officer would
do as much for Louis Philippe! _Vogue la galère!_ From
the theatre, which concluded about one, we drove to the
house of the — minister, where we spent a very grave
half-hour, and then returned home with a very splendid
_brioche_, of generous proportions, which Madame la
Baronne de — had kindly prepared for our journey.

Arrived at the A——'s, we sat down to supper, and
never was there a sadder meal than this, when for the
last time we sat at the hospitable board of these our
earliest and latest Mexican friends. We were thankful
when it was all over and we had taken leave, and when,
accompanied to the inn by Señor A——d and other gentle-
men, we found ourselves fairly lodged in the diligence,
on a dark and rather cold morning, sad, sleepy, and
shivering. All Mexico was asleep when we drove out of
the gates. The very houses seemed sunk in slumber.
So terminated our last Mexican New Year's Day.

When we reached the eminence, from which is the
last view of the valley, the first dawn of day was just
breaking over the distant city; the white summits of the
volcanoes were still enveloped in mist, and the lake was
veiled by low clouds of vapour, that rose slowly from its
surface. And this was our last glimpse of Mexico!

The diligence is now on a new and most fatiguing plan
of travelling night and day, after leaving Puebla; so that,
starting from Mexico at four o'clock on the morning of the
2nd of January, it arrives in Vera Cruz early on the morn-
ing of the 5th, saving a few hours, and nearly killing the
travellers. The government had granted us escorts for
the whole journey, now more than ever necessary. It
was five in the afternoon when we reached Puebla, and
we set off again by dawn the next morning.

We had just left the gates, and our escort, which had
rode forward, was concealed by some rising ground,
when, by the faint light, we perceived some half-dozen
mounted cavaliers making stealthily up to us across the
fields. Their approach was first discerned by a Spanish
lady who was with us, and who was travelling with
strings of pearl and valuable diamonds concealed about
her person, which made her peculiarly sharp-sighted on
the occasion. "Ladrones!" said she, and every one
repeated "Ladrones!" in different intonations. They
rode across the fields, came up pretty close to the diligence, and reconnoitred us. I was too sleepy to be frightened, and reconnoitred them in return with only one eye open. The coachman whipped up his horses, the escort came in sight, and the gentlemen struck into the fields again. The whole passed in a minute or two. The soldiers of the escort came riding back to the diligence; and the captain, galloping up to the window, gave himself great credit for having "frightened away the robbers."

We arrived at Perote when it was nearly dusk, supped, and started again at eleven o'clock at night. We passed a horrible night in the diligence, and were thankful when daybreak showed us the beautiful environs of Jalapa. It is singular that on a second impression, returning by this road, the houses appear handsomer than they did before, and nature less beautiful. I conclude that this is to be accounted for simply from the circumstance of the eye having become accustomed both to the works of nature and of man, which characterize this country. The houses, which at first appeared gloomy, large, and comfortless, habit has reconciled us to, and experience has taught us that they are precisely suited to this climate of perpetual spring. The landscape, with its eternal flowers and verdure, no longer astonishes and bewilders us, as when we first arrived from a country where, at that season, all nature lies buried in snow. Besides, in our last journey through Michoacan, we have passed among scenes even more striking and beautiful than these. Then the dresses, which at first appeared so romantic; the high, Moorish-looking-saddle, the gold-embroidered manga, the large hat, shading the swarthy faces of the men, the coloured petticoat and reboso, and long black hair of the women, though still picturesque, have no longer the charm of novelty, and do not attract our attention. The winter also has been unusually severe for Mexico, and some slight frosts have caused the flowers of this natural garden to fade; and, besides all this, we were tired and sleepy and jolted, and knew that we had but an hour or two to remain, and had another day and night of purgatory in prospect. . . .

Still, as we passed along the shady lanes, amongst the dark chirimoyas, the green-leaved bananas, and all the variety of beautiful trees, intwined with their graceful creepers, we were forced to confess that winter has little
power over these fertile regions, and that in spite of the
leveller, Habit, such a landscape can never be passed
through with indifference.

Arrived at Jalapa, we refreshed ourselves with the
luxury of a bath, having to pass through half the city
before we reached the bathing establishment, from which
there is the most beautiful view of wood, water, and
mountain that it is possible to behold. The baths are the
property of a lady who has a cotton factory and a good
house in the city, and fortunate she is in possessing a
sufficient portion of worldly goods; since, as she informed
us, she is the mother of twenty children! She herself,
in appearance, was little more than thirty. We then
returned to breakfast, and shortly after left Jalapa.

I will not inflict upon you a second description of the
same journey; of Plan del Rio, with its clear river and
little inn—of Puerto del Rey, with its solid majestic bridge
thrown over the deep ravine, through which rushes the
impetuous river Antigua—or of how we were jolted over
the road leading to Paso de Oveja, etc. Suffice it to say,
that we passed a night, which between suffocating heat,
horrible jolting, and extreme fatigue, was nearly intolera-
able. Stopping to change horses at Santa Fé, we saw, by
the light of the torches which they brought to the door,
that we were once more among bamboo-huts and palm-
trees. Towards morning we heard the welcome sound of
the waves, giving us joyful token that our journey was
drawing to a close; yet when we entered Vera Cruz and
got out of the diligence, we felt like prisoners who have
been so long confined in a dungeon, they are incapable of
enjoying their liberty, we were so thoroughly worn out
and exhausted. How different from the agreeable kind
of fatigue which we used to feel after a long day’s journey
on horseback!

Breakfast, and a fresh toilet had, however, their due
influence. We were in an hotel, and had hardly break-
fasted when our friend, Don Dionisio Velasco, with some
other gentlemen, arrived, and kindly reproaching us for
preferring an inn to his house, carried us and our luggage
off to his fine airy dwelling, where we now are, and where
a good night’s rest has made us forget all our fatigues.

As we must remain here for one or two days, we shall
have time to see a little more of the city; and already,
upon a second survey, sad and dilapidated as it now
appears, I can more readily imagine what it must have been in former days, before it was visited by the scourge of civil war. The experience of two Mexican revolutions, makes it more easy for us to conceive the extent to which this unfortunate city must have suffered in the struggle made by the Spaniards, to preserve the castle, their last bulwark in this hemisphere. San Juan de Ulua, in spite of the miserable condition in which it now is, remains a lasting memorial of the great works which, almost immediately after their arrival on these shores, were undertaken by the Spanish conquerors.

In 1682, sixty-one years after they had set foot on Aztec soil, they began this fortress, in order to confirm their power. The centre of the space which it occupies is a small island, where the Spaniard, Juan de Grijalva arrived, one year before Cortes reached the Mexican continent. Having found the remains of two human victims there, they asked the natives why they sacrificed men to their idols, and receiving for answer that it was by orders of the kings of Acolhua, the Spaniards gave the island the name of Ulua, by a natural corruption of that word.

It is pretended that the fortress cost four millions; and though this immense sum is no doubt an exaggeration, the expense must have been very great, when we consider that its foundations are below the water, and that for nearly three centuries it has resisted all the force of the stormy waves that continually beat against it. Many improvements and additions are gradually made to the castle; and, in the time of the viceroy, a first-rate engineer paid it an annual visit, to ascertain its condition, and to consider its best mode of defence, in case of an attack. In 1806, however, Vera Cruz was sacked by the English corsair, Nicholas Agramont, incited by one Lorenzino, who had been condemned to death for murder in Vera Cruz, and had escaped to Jamaica. Seven millions of dollars were carried off, besides three hundred persons of both sexes, whom the pirates abandoned on the Island of Sacrificios, when they re-embarke'd.

In 1771 the viceroy, then the Marquis de la Croix, remitted a million and a half of dollars to the governor, in order that he might put the castle in a state of defence; and the strong bulwarks which still remain, attest the labour that has been bestowed upon it. The outer polygon, which looks towards Vera Cruz, is three hundred
yards in extent; to the north it is defended by another of two hundred yards; whilst a low battery is situated as a rear-guard in the bastion of Santiago; and on the opposite front is the battery of San Miguel. The whole fortress is composed of a stone which abounds in the neighbouring island, a species of coral, excellent for building, piedra mucara.

In 1822 no stronghold of Spanish power remained but this castle, whose garrison was frequently reinforced by troops from Havana. Vera Cruz itself was then inhabited by wealthy and influential Spaniards. Santa Anna then commanded in the province, under the orders of Echavarri, the captain-general, and with instructions from Yturbi de, relative to the taking of the castle. The commandant was the Spanish General Don José Davila. It was not, however, till the following year, when Lemaur succeeded Davila in the command of the citadel, that hostilities were begun by bombarding Vera Cruz.

Men, women, and children then abandoned the city. The merchants went to Alvarado, twelve leagues off, whilst those who were driven from their houses by a shower of balls, sought a miserable asylum amongst the burning plains and miserable huts in the environs. Some made their way to Jalapa, thirty leagues off; others to Cordova and Orlaza, equally distant. With some interruptions, hostilities lasted two years, during which there was nearly a constant firing from the city to the castle, and from the castle to the city.

The object of General Barragan, now commander-in-chief, was to cut off all communication between the garrison of the castle and the coasts, and to reduce them to live solely upon salt provisions, fatal in this warm and unhealthy country. In 1824 the garrison, diminished to a mere handful, was replaced by five hundred men from the peninsula; and very soon these soldiers, shut up on the barren rocks, surrounded by water, and exposed to the dangers of the climate, without provisions and without assistance, were reduced to the most miserable condition. The next year, Don José Copinger succeeded Lemaur, and continued hostilities with fresh vigour.

This brave general, with his valiant troops, surrounded by the sick and the dying, provisions growing scarcer every day, and those that remained corrupt and unfit to eat, yet resolved to do his duty, and hold out to the last.
assistance arrived from Spain. A Mexican fleet was stationed off the Island of Sacrificios and other points, to attack any squadron that might come from thence; while the north winds blew with violence, keeping back all ships that might approach the coasts. "Gods and men," says a furious republican (Zavala), "the Spaniards had to contend with; having against them, hunger, sickness, the fire and balls of the enemies, a furious sea covered with reefs, a burning atmosphere, and above all, being totally ignorant as to whether they should receive any assistance."

The minister of the treasury, Esteva, then came from Mexico, and proposed a capitulation; and the Spanish general agreed that should no assistance arrive within a certain time, he would give up the fortress; evacuating it with his whole garrison, and with the suitable honours. The Spanish succours arrived a few days before the term was expired, but the commander of the squadron, seeing the superiority in point of numbers of the Mexican fleet, judged it prudent to return to Havana to augment his forces. But it was too late. On the fifteenth of September, the brave General Copinger, with the few troops that remained to him, marched out of the fortress, terminating the final struggle against the progress of revolution, but upholding to the last the character for constancy and valour which distinguished the sons of ancient Spain.

Of its last assault by the French squadron in 1838, there is no need to say anything. Every newspaper, as you will remember, gave an account of the capitulation of what the French gazettes called "San Juan de Ulua, the St. Jean d’Acre of the new world, which our mariners saluted as the Queen of the Seas, vierge sans tache," etc.

6th.—We have just had a visit from General Bustamante, who, with his aide-de-camp, a son of General Calderon (formerly governor of Jalapa), intends shortly to sail in the Jason for Havana. We have also had a visit from the commander of that vessel, Captain Puente, who succeeded our friend Captain E—-a; and who has been kindly endeavouring to make arrangements for taking us also, not having before been aware of our intentions of leaving Vera Cruz at this period. But although we should have much pleasure in returning by the vessel that brought us, we fear that, without putting the officers to great inconvenience, it will be impossible for them to accommodate so many, for we know the carte du pays.
It is therefore probable that we shall go by the English packet, which sails on the eighth, but unfortunately goes round by Tampico, not very agreeable at this season.

We went to mass this morning, which was said to be particularly crowded in consequence of the general desire to catch a glimpse of the ex-president.

I find, personally, one important change in taste if not in opinion. Vera Cruz cookery, which two years ago I thought detestable, now appears to me delicious! What excellent fish! and what incomparable frijoles! Well, this is a trifle; but after all, in trifles as in matters of moment, how necessary for a traveller to compare his judgments at different periods, and to correct them! First impressions are of great importance, if given only as such; but if laid down as decided opinions, how apt they are to be erroneous! It is like judging of individuals by their physiognomy and manners, without having had time to study their character. We all do so more or less, but how frequently we find ourselves deceived!

7th.—We went to the theatre last evening. In the boxes there were only a lady and gentleman, besides our party. The pit, however, was full; but there are no good actors at present. We have been walking about to-day, notwithstanding the heat, purchasing some necessary articles from French modistes and French perfumers, most of whom, having got over the fever, are now very well satisfied to remain here and make their fortune. We afterwards walked down to the Mole, and saw the pleasantest sight that has met our eyes since we left Mexico—the sea covered with ships. It was refreshing to look again on the dark blue waves, after so long an absence from them. Commodore——, of Mexico, who was present, pointed out the Jason, and the Tyrian, Captain Griffin, lying out in the harbour, and strongly recommended us to go in the latter, as did the English consul, with proper patriotism. We have requested him to take our berths, when he goes to visit the captain on board this evening.

No sooner has this been done beyond recall, than we find that comfortable arrangements have been made for taking us in the Jason, which goes direct to Havana. It is now too late, so we can only regret our precipitation. There is another beautiful Spanish vessel just arrived, the Liberal, Captain Rubalcava, who, with Captain Puente,
Of the North Winds

of the Jason, has been to see us this evening. If the wind holds fair, the packet sails to-morrow; but the experienced predict a norther.

The symptoms of this terrible wind, which blows in the Mexican Gulf, from the autumnal to the vernal equinox, are known not only to the sailors, but to all those who have lived some time in this city. The variation in the barometer is the surest sign. A land breeze from the northwest first blows gently, then varies to the north-east, then changes to the south. The heat is then suffocating and the summits of all the great mountains appear cloudless and distinct against the deep blue sky, while round their base flows a veil of semi-transparent vapour.

Suddenly the tempest bursts forth; and all are instantaneously relieved—all but the poor mariners! The air becomes refreshed—clouds of dust come sweeping along the streets, driving away, as it were, the pestilential atmosphere. Then there is no fever in Vera Cruz.

All communication is cut off between the castle and the city, and between the city and all foreign shipping. Sometimes the norther lasts three or four days, sometimes even twelve. If it turns to a southerly breeze, the tempest generally returns; if it changes to the east or north-east, the breeze generally lasts three or four days, and the ships in the port take advantage of the intervals to escape, and gain the high seas. These gales are particularly dreaded off the coasts of Tampico.

8th.—We sail in a few hours, the norte not having made its appearance, so that we expect to get clear of the coast before it begins. The Jason sails in a day or two, unless prevented by the gale. We only knew this morning that it was necessary to provide mattresses and sheets, etc., for our berths on board the packet. Fortunately, all these articles are found ready made in this seaport town. We have just received a packet of letters, particularly acceptable as bringing us news of home before our departure. I have also received two agreeable compagnons de voyage in the shape of books; Stephen’s “Central America,” and Washington Irving’s “Life of Margaret Davison,” opportunely sent me by Mr. Prescott . . .

Our next letters will be written either at sea, or from Tampico.