



CITY OF XALAPA.

LETTER IV.

XALAPA AND PEROTE.

WHEN the Neapolitans speak to you of their beautiful city, they call it, "a piece of heaven fallen to earth;"* and tell you to "see Naples and die!"

It is only because so few travellers extend their journey to Xalapa and describe its scenery, that it has not received something of the same extravagant eulogium. I regret exceedingly that my stay was so limited as not to allow an opportunity of beholding the beautiful views around the city, under the influence of a serene sky and brilliant sun.

The town has about ten thousand inhabitants, and is, in every respect, the reverse of Vera Cruz; high, healthy, and built on almost precipitous streets, winding, with curious crookedness, up the steep hill-sides. This perching and bird-like architecture makes a city picturesque—although its highways may be toilsome to those who are not always in search of the romantic.

The houses of Xalapa are not so lofty as those of Vera Cruz, and their exteriors are much plainer; but the inside of the dwellings, I am told, is furnished and decorated in the most tasteful manner. The hotel in which we lodged was an evidence of this; its walls and ceilings were papered and painted in a style of splendor rarely seen out of Paris.

Before breakfast we strolled to the Convent of St. Francisco, an immense pile of buildings of massive masonry, and apparently bomb-proof. The church is exceedingly plain, but there is a neat and tasteful garden with a lofty wall. This convent also possesses a court-yard of about one hundred feet square, with an arcade of two stories, the upper part of which contains a series of spacious cells; but the whole edifice has a ruined appearance, having once been converted into a cavalry barrack, where the bugle as often sounded the morning call as the bell summoned to matins.

From the top of this conventual edifice there is a fine view of Xalapa and its vicinity. We could see the town straggling up its steep and irregular streets; but much of the adjacent scenery, and especially those two grand objects in the descriptions of all travellers, the PEAK OF ORIZABA and the COFFRE OF PEROTE, were entirely obscured by a cloud of mist which hung around the valley in a silvery ring, inclosing the ver-

* "Un pezzo de cielo caduto in terra."

ture of the glade like an emerald. The vapor, rising from the sea, driven inland by the northern winds, here first strikes the mountains; and, lodging in rain and mist and dew among the cliffs, preserves that perennial green which covers this teeming region with constant freshness and luxuriance. Xalapa is consequently a "damp town," yet it enjoys a great reputation for its salubrity. It is now the best season of the year; but scarcely a day passes without rain, while the thermometer ranges from 52° to 76° , according to the state of the clouds and winds. As soon as the mountains have discharged their vapors, the sun blazes forth with a fierceness and intensity, increased by the reflection from every hill, into the town, as to a focus.

Yet I saw enough to justify all the praises even of extravagant admirers. Its society is said to be excellent, and its women are the theme of the poets throughout the republic. As I descended from the top of St. Francisco and wended my way to the hotel, I met numbers of the fair *donzellas* lounging homeward from early mass. The stately step, the liquid eye, the pale yet brilliant cheek, and an indescribable look of tenderness, complete a picture of beauty rarely matched in northern climes, and elsewhere unequalled in Mexico.

After dispatching our breakfast, for which we paid (together with our night's lodging and dinner) the sum of *four dollars*, we mounted the diligence at 10 o'clock, prepared as usual for the robbers, and set out for Perote.

In driving from the town we passed through the public square; and in the market which is held there I first saw in perfection the profuse quantity of tropical fruits (and especially the *chirimoya*, and *granadita*), for which Xalapa is renowned. The market is supplied by the numerous small cultivators from the neighborhood, the females of whom bear a resemblance to our Northern Indians, which is perhaps even stranger and more remarkable than that of the men.

Maiz, the great staff of life for biped and quadruped in our western world, is chiefly used in the *tortillia* cakes of which we hear so much from Mexican travellers.

The sellers of these tough, buckskin victuals, sit in lines along the curb of the side-walks with their fresh cakes in baskets covered with clean napkins to preserve their warmth. There they wait patiently for purchasers; and as *tortillias*, with a little *chilé*, or, red pepper boiled in lard, are indispensable at least twice a day for the mass of the people, they are quite sure of a ready sale.

With the great mass of Mexicans there is no such thing as domestic cookery. The laborer sallies forth with his *clacos* in his pocket, and two or three of them will purchase his cakes from an Indian woman. A few steps further on, another Indian woman has a pan boiling over a portable furnace, and containing the required *beans* or *chilé*. The hungry man squats down beside the seller—makes a breakfast or dinner table of his knees—holds out his *tortillia* spread flat on his hand for a ladle of *chilé*



MAKING TORTILLIAS.

and a lump of meat—then doubles up the edges of the cake sandwich fashion, and so on until his appetite is satisfied. He who is better off in the world, or indulges occasionally in a little extravagance, owns a *clay platter*. Into this he causes his frijoles, or *chilé* and meat, to be thrown, and making a spoon of his *tortillia*, gradually gets possession of his food, and terminates his repast by eating the spoon itself! There is great economy in this mode of housekeeping which recommends itself, especially, to the tastes of old bachelors. There are no dishes to be washed—no silver to be cleaned, or cared for. Your Indian—flings down his *clacos*—stretches himself to his full height—gives a valedictory grunt of satisfaction over a filled stomach—and is off to his labor.

Thus wonderful is the frugality not only of the humbler classes, but, indeed, of almost all who have come under my observation in Spanish America. Whether this frugality is a virtue, or the result of indolence, it is not necessary for me to stop to inquire. The reader may draw his own conclusions. But all classes are content with less physical comfort than the inhabitants of other countries. Their diet is poor, their lodging miserable, their clothing coarse, inelegant and inadequate for the climate; and yet, when the energies and intelligence of the very people who seem so supine are called into action, few men manifest those qualities in a higher degree. Let me, as an illustration, notice the *ARRIROS*, or common carriers of the country, by whom almost all the transportation of the

most valuable merchandise and precious metals is conducted. They form a very large proportion of the population, yet, by no similar class elsewhere are they exceeded in devoted honesty, punctuality, patient endurance, and skillful execution of duty. Nor is this the less remarkable when we recollect the country through which they travel—its disturbed state—and the opportunities consequently afforded for transgression. I have never been more struck with the folly of judging of men by mere dress and physiognomy, than in looking at the Arrieros. A man with wild and fierce eyes, tangled hair, slashed trowsers, and well greased jerkin that has breasted many a storm—a person, in fact, to whom you would scarcely trust an old coat when sending it to your tailor for repairs—is frequently in Mexico, the guardian of the fortunes of the wealthiest men for months, on toilsome journies among the mountains and defiles of the inner land. He has a multitude of dangers and difficulties to contend with. He overcomes them all—is never robbed and never robs—and, at the appointed day, comes to your door with a respectful salutation, and tells you that your wares or monies have passed the city gates. Yet this person is often poor, bondless and unsecured—with nothing but his fair name and *unbroken word*. When you ask him if you may rely on his people, he will return your look with a surprised glance, and striking his breast, and nodding his head with a proud contempt that his honor should be questioned, exclaim: “Soy José Maria, Señor, por veinte annos Arriero de Mexico—*todo el mundo me conoce!*”

“I am José Maria, sir, I’d have you know—an Arriero of Mexico for twenty years—*all the world knows me!*”

I regret, that I have been able to give only the faintest pencilling outline of Jalapa, which, with all its beauty, has doubtless hitherto been associated most nauseously in your mind with the drug growing in the neighborhood to which it has given its name.*

A beautiful scene, embracing nearly the whole of this little Eden, broke on me as we gained the summit of the last hill above the town. A dell, deep, precipitous, and green as if mossed from the margin of a woodland spring lay below me, hung on every side with orange trees in bloom and bearing, nodding palms and roses and acacias scenting the air with their fragrance, and peering out among the white walls of dwellings, convents, and steeples. In the next quarter of an hour, the mists that had been gathering around the mountains, whirled down on the peaks along which we were travelling, and as the wind occasionally drifted the vapor away, we could see around us nothing but wild plains and mountain spurs covered with volcanic *debris*, flung into a thousand fantastic forms, among which grew a hardy race of melancholy-looking pines, interspersed

* To give you an idea of the profusion of fruit in Jalapa I will state a fact. I gave a French servant a *real* (twelve and a half cents) to purchase me a few oranges, and in a short time he returned with a handkerchief bursting under the load—he had received *forty* for the money.

I told the story to a Jalapenian with surprise: “They cheated him,” said he; “they should have given him nearly double the number.”



ARRIROS.

with fallen trunks, aloes and *agaves*. Thus the road gradually ascended among desolation, until we reached a height where the clouds were lodged on the mountain tops, and a cold, drizzling rain filled the air. In this disagreeable manner, travelling among the clouds, we reached the village of St. Michel, and afterward La Hoya, over a road paved with basalt. From the latter place the scenery is described as magnificent when the day is clear, and the sun is out in its brilliancy. The vapor is said to be then spread out below you like a sea, and the mountain tops and little eminences peer above it like so many islands.

We passed through the village of "Las Vigas," described by Humboldt, as the highest point on the road to Mexico. The houses in this neighborhood are of different construction from those below the mountains, and are built of pine logs, each tree furnishing but one piece of timber of four inches thickness, and the whole width of its diameter; these are hewn with the axe, and closely fitted. The floors of the dwellings are laid with the same material, and the roofs are shingled. As the houses indicate a colder climate than the one through which we have recently travelled, so does also the appearance of the people, who are hardier and more robust than the inhabitants of the plains skirting the sea.

After winding along the edge of the mountain for some hours, we obtained an occasional view of the plain of Perote, level as the ocean, and bounded by the distant mountains. The Peak of Orizaba again appeared in the southeast, while the Coffre of Perote towered immediately on our left, and, seemingly in the midst of the plain, rose the Peak of Tepiacualca. Beyond it, on the remotest horizon, was sketched the outline of the snow-capped mountains. All these plains have doubtless been the basins of former lakes; but they now appear dry and arid, and it is not easy to distinguish how far they are cultivated at the suitable season. During the summer, they present a very different prospect, and, losing the guise of a waste moor, only fit for the sportsman, put on a lively livery of cultivation and improvement, far more agreeable than the dark and thorny maguey and the wilted foliage of dwarfish trees, with which they are now mostly covered. We occasionally see the stubble of last year, but the chief agriculture is evidently carried on upon the slopes and rising ground, where the irrigation is more easy from the adjacent mountains and is not so rapidly absorbed as in the marshy flats.

We had not travelled this road without our usual dread of thieves. Our guns were constantly prepared for attack, and we kept a wary watch, although during nearly the whole day we were accompanied by a party of lancers, who clattered along after us on nimble horses. Some leagues from Perote we approached the "Barranca Secca," a noted haunt of the *ladrones*; and as we came within gunshot of the place, a band of horsemen dashed out from the ruins of an old *hacienda* on our right and galloped directly to the carriage. The mist had again come down in heavy wreaths around us, obscuring the prospect at a dozen yards distance; and the guard of troopers had fallen considerably in the rear. What

with the fog and the dread of our foes, we were somewhat startled—cocked our weapons—ordered the coach to stop—and were half out of it, when the lancers reined up at full tilt, and after a parley with the new comers, assured us that they were only an additional troop kept here for security. I questioned, and still doubt the truth of this story, as I never saw a more uncouth, or better mounted, armed and equipped set of men. Their pistols, sabres, and carbines were in the best order, and their horses stanch and fleet; but they may have composed a band of old well-known robbers, pensioned off by the Government as a guard; and willing to take regular pay from the authorities, and gratuities from travellers, as less dangerous than uncertain booty with constant risk of life.

Accompanied by these six suspicious rascals and the four lancers, we quickly passed the wild mist-covered moor, and entered the Barranca, a deep fissure worn by time and water into the plain, and overhung, on all sides by lofty trees, while the adjacent parts of the flat country are cut up into similar ravines, embowered with foliage. With all the aids of art, the thieves could not have constructed a more suitable covert; and, to add to our dismay, soon after entering the Barranca, our coach broke down!

We tramped about in the mud while the accident was repairing, and the guard and its auxiliaries scoured the pass. The quarter of a mile through which the ravine extended was literally *lined with crosses*, marking the spot of some murder or violent death. These four or five hundred *mementos mori*, seemed to convert it into a perfect graveyard; while the broken coach, the dreary day, shrouding mist, approaching night, and savage figures in the scene, made a picture more fit for a Trappist than a quiet traveller fonder of his ease than adventure.

We were, however, soon again in our vehicle, and for an hour afterward the country gradually ascended, until, at sunset, the sky cleared off and we entered Perote by a brilliant starlight.

Perote is a small town, containing not more than 2500 people. It is irregularly built; the houses are only of one low and dark story, erected around large court-yards with the strength of castles. In the middle of the town there is a large square, abundantly supplied by fountains of pure water from the neighboring hills.

The *Meson* is at the further end of the town, and incloses a spacious court-yard, around which on the ground floor (which is the only floor) are a number of brick-paved, windowless stalls, furnished with a bed, a couple of chairs, and a table. No landlord made his appearance to welcome us. We waited a considerable time in the court-yard for his attendance; but as we received no invitation, S—— and myself got possession of a consumptive-looking candle, and sallied out to hunt for lodgings. We took possession of one of the dens I have described and sent in our luggage; and carefully locking the door afterward, (as Perote is the headquarters of villainy, and the court-yard was full of unshaved, ill-looking devils wrapped up in blankets,) we left our thin tallow as evidence of our tenure.

On one side of the gateway is the *fonda*, or eating part of the establishment, where two or three women were employed cooking sundry strange looking messes. We signified our hunger, and were soon called to table. Several officers of the garrison, as well as the stage-load coming from Mexico, were there before us. The cooking had been done with charcoal, over furnaces, and the color of the cooks, their clothes, the food, and the hearth was identical; a warning, as in France, never to enter the kitchen before meals. The meats had been good, but were perfectly bedevilled by the culinary imps. Garlic, onions, grease, *chilé*, and God knows what of other nasty compounds, had flavored the food like nothing else in the world but Perote cookery. We tasted, however, of every dish, and that taste answered to allay appetite if not to assuage hunger; especially as the table-cloth had served many a wayfarer since its last washing, (if it had ever been washed,) and had, besides, doubtless been used for duster, (if they ever dust.) The waiter, too, was a boy, in sooty rags, who hardly knew the meaning of a plate, and had never heard of other forks but his fingers.

Disgusted, as you may well suppose we were with this supper, I did not remain long at table. We were a set of baulked, hungry men, and withal, tired and peevish. I put my face for a moment outside of the gate, to take a walk, as the night was beautiful; but S—— pulled me back again, with a hint at the notorious reputation of Perote. It was not eight o'clock, but the town was already still as death. Its population had slunk home to their cheerless dwellings, and the streets were as deserted as those of Pompeii, save where a ragged rascal now and then skulked along in the shadow of the houses, buried up in his broad-brimmed sombrero and dirty blanket.

We therefore at once retired to our cells; I threw myself on the bed wrapped in my cloak, in dread of a vigorous attack from the fleas, and slept without moving until the driver called us at midnight to start for Puebla. Being already dressed, I required no time for my toilet, and I doubt much if hair-brushes, orris tooth-powder, or the sweet savors of the Rue Vivienne, were ever thought of by a parting guest at Perote!

In half an hour we were once more in the coach galloping out of the town, followed by three dragoons furnished by the officer we had met at supper, who seemed to entertain as poor an opinion as we did of this citadel of vagabondism.

Although the sky had been clear and the stars were shining brightly when we retired to bed, a mist was now hanging in low clouds over the plain. The road was, however, smooth and level; and we scampered along nimbly, fear adding stings to our coachman's lash, inasmuch as he was the driver of a diligence that had been robbed last spring, and had received a ball between his shoulders, from the effects of which he had just sufficiently recovered to drive on his first trip since the conflict. We galloped during the whole night, stopping only for a moment to change horses; nor did we meet a living thing except a pack of jackals, that

came bounding beside the coach along the level and almost trackless plain. I never saw half so frightened a man as our coachman, especially when we passed the spot where he had been wounded. Every shrub was a robber—and a maguery of decent size was a whole troop!

The early morning, from the rain which had fallen during the night on this portion of the plain, was as cold and raw as November at home; nor was it until an hour after sunrise that the mists peeled off from the lowlands, and, folding themselves around the distant hills, revealed a prospect as bare and dreary as the Campagna of Rome.

LETTER V.

CITY OF PUEBLA.

I SHALL say nothing more of our journey from Perote to Puebla, or of the several uninteresting villages through which we passed. The road led among deep gullies, and was exceedingly dusty on the plains. The towns were usually built of the common *adobes*, or sun-dried bricks of the country, and neither in their architectural appearance, nor in the character of their inhabitants, offered any attractions for the attention of a traveller. It was, indeed, a tedious and uninteresting drive over the solitary moors, and I have seldom been more gratified at the termination of a day's fatigue than I was when we entered the gateway of our spacious and comfortable inn at Puebla. In addition to the usual discomforts of the road, we had suffered greatly from the heat during the two or three last hours of our ride, and were annoyed by a fine dust, which, heated by a blazing sun, rolled into our coach from every side, and fell like a parching powder on our skins. A bath was, therefore, indispensable before the dinner, which we found excellent after our fare of the previous night at Perote. In the afternoon I paid a visit to the governor, who promised an escort of dragoons for the rest of the journey to the Capital; and I then sallied forth, to see as much as possible of this really beautiful city.

My recollections of Puebla (comparing it now with Mexico) are far more agreeable than those of the Capital. There is an air of neatness and tidiness observable everywhere. The streets are broad, well paved with flat stones, and have a washed and cleanly look. The crowd of people is far less than in the Capital, and they are not so ragged and miserable. House rents are one-half or one-third those of Mexico, and the dwellings are usually inhabited by one family; but, churches and convents seem rather more plentiful in proportion to the inhabitants. The friars are less numerous, and the secular clergy greater.

A small stream skirts the eastern side of Puebla, affording a large water-power for manufacturing purposes. On its banks a public walk has been planted with rows of trees, among which the paths meander, while a neat fountain throws up its waters in the midst of them. The views from this retreat, in the evening, are charmingly picturesque over the eastern plain.

On the western side of the Puebla lie the extensive piles of buildings belonging to the Convent of St. Francis, situated opposite the entrance of

the ALAMEDA—a quiet and retired garden walk to which the *cavaliers* and *donzellas* repair before sunset, for a drive in view of the volcanos of Istazihuatl and Popocatepetl, which bound the westward prospect with their tops of eternal snow. Near the centre of the city is the great square. It is surrounded on two sides by edifices erected on arches through which the population circulates as at Bologna. On the northern side is the Palace of the Governor, now filled with troops; and directly in front of this is the Cathedral, equal perhaps in size to that of Mexico, but, being elevated upon a platform about ten feet above the level of the square, it is better relieved and stands out from the surrounding buildings with more boldness and grandeur.

This church is, in all its details and arrangements the most magnificent in the Republic; and although not desirous to occupy your time with a description of religious edifices, yet, with a view of affording some idea of the wealth of this important establishment in a country where the priesthood is still very powerful, I will venture to remark on a few of those objects that strike the eye of a transient traveller.

It is about this Cathedral, I am told, that there is a legend of Puebla, which states that while in process of building, it gained mysteriously in height during the night as much as the masons had wrought during the day. *This was said to be the work of Angels*, and hence, the city has acquired the holy name of "Puebla de los Angeles." Be this, however, as it may, the church, though neither exactly worthy of divine conception and execution, nor a miracle of art, is extremely tasteful, and one of the best specimens of architecture I saw in Mexico. The material is blue basalt; the stones are squared by the chisel; the joints neatly pointed; and the whole has the appearance of great solidity, being supported by massive buttresses, and terminated at the west by lofty towers filled with bells of sweet and varied tones. Between the towers is the main entrance, over which there is a mass of sculpture of Scripture history in stone and moulded work.

Entering by this portal, the edifice, though lofty and extensive, has its effect greatly marred by the erections over the crypt, altar and choir, which fill the building to near its arched and elevated ceiling. As usual, the church is divided into three parts by rows of massive columns. Outside of these, under lower arches, are the side aisles, and in the wall the lesser chapels are imbedded, as it were, between columns, and screened from the main edifice by a graceful railing and fanciful gates of wrought iron. A similar rail also incloses the choir and other portions of the building; and the whole, painted green, is picked out with gilded ornaments.

From the centre of the vast dome depends the great chandelier—a weighty mass of gold and silver. It weighs *tons*. The sum at which it is valued I will not mention; but you may judge of its extent and price from the fact that, when cleaned thoroughly some years ago, the cost of its purification alone amounted to *four thousand dollars*!

The great altar, too, is a striking object. It was erected about thirty years ago by one of the bishops of Puebla, and affords the greatest display

of Mexican marbles in the Republic. The variety of colors is very great, among which is one of a pure and brilliant white, as transparent as alabaster. The rail and steps, which, of course, are of fine marble, lead to a circular platform eight or ten feet above the floor, beneath which is the sepulchre of the bishops, (constructed entirely of the most precious materials,) divided into niches and panels, and covered with a depressed dome of marble, relieved by bronze and gold circles, from the centre of which depends a silver lamp, for ever burning in the habitation of the dead.

To the right of the altar is the gem of the building. It is a figure of the Virgin Mary, nigh the size of life. Dressed in the richest embroidered satin, she displays strings of the largest pearls hanging from her neck below her knees. Around her brow is clasped a crown of gold, inlaid with emeralds of a size I had never seen before; and her waist is bound with a zone of diamonds, from the centre of which blaze numbers of enormous brilliants!

But this is not all. The candelabras surrounding the platform before the altar, are of silver and gold, and so ponderous that a strong man could neither move nor lift them. Immediately above the altar, and within the columns of the large temple erected there, is a smaller one, the interior of which is displayed or concealed by secret machinery. From this the Host, amid a blaze of priceless and innumerable jewels, is exhibited to the kneeling multitude.

The principal dome is, of course, in the centre of the church; and opposite the front of the altar is the choir, remarkable, principally, for the workmanship and preservation of the richly carved woodwork of its stalls for the canons and clergy. Above the seat of the bishop is a picture of St. Peter, formed by the inlaying of different woods; yet so skillfully is this work of art executed, that at a short distance it has all the effect and gracefulness of a painting in oil. It is to be regretted that the organ is rather too small for so large a building, and that the rich tone of the noble instrument is therefore greatly lost in the services of a church where the effect of the Catholic rite, amid so many other magnificent adjuncts, would be greatly enhanced in pomp by the perfection of solemn music.

It was too obscure to see the pictures which are said to be worthy of notice, or the three sets of valuable jewels of the bishop; and we therefore departed at dusk from this mine of wealth and splendor.

As I went out of the door in the dim twilight, and found a miserable and ragged woman kneeling before the image of a saint, and heard the hollow sounding of her breast as she beat it with penitential fervor; I could not help asking myself, if the church that subsisted upon alms, in order to be the greatest almoner of the nation, had fulfilled its sacred charge while there was one diamond in the zone of the Virgin, or one homeless and foodless wretch in the whole Republic.