LETTER VIII.

THE CITY OF MEXICO.

You left me retiring to rest at my hotel in Mexico, and soundly did I repose after my last fatiguing ride from the mountains and over the plain to the city. I was roused, however, betimes by the clang of the church bells for early mass. This sound I had not heard since my visit to Italy many years ago, and it brought back to me many pleasant memories, as I lay half awake and half dreaming, during the early hours. When I arose other recollections of Italy were excited. The windows, descending to the ground, of the brick-paved room, thrown open, let in an air worthy of Naples the beautiful! It was the middle of November, but there was a May-mildness in the atmosphere. The sky was of that deep ultra-marine blue peculiar to elevated regions. As I ranged my eye down the street from my balcony, the town was alive with a teeming population; the windows of the houses stood open; fair women strolled homeward from mass; old monks shuffled along in their cowled robes; the butcher urged along his ass with its peripatetic stall hung around with various meats; freshly-leaved flowers and trees stood in the court-yards, of which I caught glimpses through the opened portals; and in the balconies lounged the early risers, enjoying a cigar after their cup of chocolate. It was a lively and beautiful scene, worthy of the pencil of that master painter of cities—*Cannaletti*, who would have delighted in the remarkable transparency and purity of the atmosphere through which the distant hills, some twenty miles off, seemed but a barrier at the end of the street!

The plan of the city of Mexico is precisely that of a checquer-board with a greater number of squares. Straight streets cross each other at right-angles and at regular intervals. The houses are painted with gay colors—light blue, fawn, and green, interspersed with a pure white, that remains long unstained in the dry atmosphere.

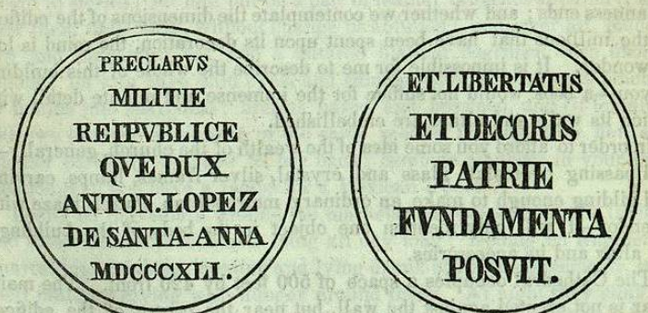
The view of all these from the elevated tower of the cathedral, (to which I soon repaired after my arrival in the capital,) presents a mass of domes, steeples, and flat-roofed dwellings, frequently covered, like hang ing gardens, with flowers and foliage. Beyond the gates, (which you would scarcely think bounded a population of 200,000,) the vast plain stretches out on every side to the mountains, traversed in some places by

long lines of aqueducts sweeping to the city from the hills, and in others, studded with lakes, cultivation, and beautiful groves, until the distant view is closed by the volcanoes, whose snows rest against the blue sky, uncovered, at this season, by a single cloud.

Below is the great square or Plaza; a large paved area, fronted on the north, by the Cathedral; on the east, by the National Palace, (the residence of the President;) to the south of which, again, are the museum, and a stone edifice recently built in tasteful style, for a market. The corner-stone* of this was laid after I arrived in Mexico, and before I left, the building was nearly completed. Until that time the fruits, flowers, vegetables, and most of the necessaries of the table, had been sold on that spot, in shambles and booths built of *bamboos and reeds, sheltered from the rain and sun by thatched roofs!*

In the southwestern corner of the square is the Parian, an unsightly building (erected, I believe, since the revolution,) which greatly mars the effect of the Plaza. It is a useful establishment, however, as it affords a large revenue to the municipality, and is the great bazaar where every article requisite for the dress of Mexicans, male or female, may be purchased at reasonable prices. On the pavement which runs round it, sit numbers of coachmen whose stand is in the neighborhood, and crowds of women with ready-made shoes. Not the least curious, however, among the multitude, with which this side-walk is generally thronged, are about a dozen "*evangelistas*," or "letter-writers," whose post is always on the curb-stones of the eastern front of the Parian. A huge jug of ink is placed beside them; a board rests across their knees; a pile of different colored paper (most of which is either cut, *valentine fashion*, or flourished over and adorned with pen-and-ink ornaments,) is placed on it, and, on a stool before them, sits some disconsolate looking damsel or heart-broken

* A medal was struck in commemoration of this event, the legend on which I give for the sake of those who are curious in inscriptions of "modern" latin. The medal is perfectly plain, and of silver.



lover, pouring out a passion which the scribe puts into becoming phraseology. It is an important trade; and more money is earned in Mexico by this proxy-making love, than perhaps anywhere else. You can have a "*declaration*" for one *rial;* a *scolding letter* for a *medio;* and an *upbraiding epistle*, full of daggers, jealousy, love, and tenderness, (leaving the unfortunate recipient in a very distracted state of mind,) done upon azure paper be-sprinkled with hearts and doves, for the ridiculous price of *twenty-five cents!*

West of the Parian, and all around the southern and western sides of the Plaza, or those portions of it which are not directly occupied by the Cathedral and National Palace, run the arched PORTALES, similar to the arcades of Bologna. These are filled with gay shops, peddlers, caffés, old clothes, toys, flower-venders, sweetmeats, bookstalls, cutlers, curiosity-hunters, antiquities, (veritable and doubtful,) and the usual crowd of loungers and quidnuncs. Here the last revolution, or the probability of a new one, is in continual discussion, by knots of idlers. Above stairs, in some of the dwellings, are gambling-houses, as formerly in the Palais Royal, with which the scene here presented does not, of course, vie in taste or splendor.

Opposite to the southern end of the Parian is the *Casa Municipal*, or town-hall, in the lower story of which is the Lonja, (the Exchange of the merchants of Mexico,) a noble room, filled with all the gazettes of the Republic, of Europe, and the United States, and adjoined by an apartment in which readers may occasionally amuse themselves with a game of billiards.

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Descending from the tower of the Cathedral, let us enter the doors of the sacred edifice.

Its floor is of loose disjointed boards, filled with dirt and filth—the covering of the many dead who lie mouldering beneath. But with this, all meanness ends; and whether we contemplate the dimensions of the edifice, or the millions that have been spent upon its decoration, the mind is lost in wonder. It is impossible for me to describe the whole of this building to you—a book would not suffice for the immense and minute detail with which its walls and altars are embellished.

In order to afford you some idea of the wealth of the church, generally—and passing over plate glass and crystal, silver frames, lamps, carving and gilding enough to make an ordinary metropolitan church blaze with splendor—I will only mention one object in the body of the building: the altar and its accessories.

The Cathedral occupies a space of 500 feet by 420 front. The main altar is not erected against the wall, but near the centre of the edifice, beneath the dome. From this, extending around the choir probably two

hundred feet, there is a rail between four and five feet high, and of proportionable thickness, composed of *gold*, *silver*, and a small alloy of *brass*. This is surmounted with silver statues for candles. In front of the altar is the choir, itself a church, built of dark woods of the rarest antique carving. The altar (placed upon a marble platform, elevating it from the floor of the building, and covered with gold and silver ornaments, candlesticks and crosses,) is of wrought and polished silver; and the whole is surmounted by a small temple, in which rests the figure of the Virgin of Remedios, who enjoys the exclusive right *to three petticoats; one embroidered with pearls, another with emeralds, and a third with diamonds, the value of which, I am credibly informed, is not less than three millions of dollars!* This, you will recollect, is only *one part of one church in Mexico*, and that one said not to be the richest!

Around this splendid mine of wealth are half-naked Indians, gaping with surprise, or kneeling to the figure of some favorite saint—the misery of the man a painful contrast with the splendor of the shrine!

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Passing from the Cathedral door to the south-eastern portion of the city, you reach the outskirts, crossing, in your way, the canals from the lake. I have rarely seen such miserable suburbs; they are filled with hovels built of sun-dried bricks, often worn with the weather to the shape of holes in the mud, while on their earthen floors crawl, cook, live and multiply, the wretched-looking population of *léperos*.

This word, I believe, is not pure Spanish, but is derived originally, it is said, from the Castilian *lepra*, or leper; and although they do not suffer from that loathsome malady, they are quite as disgusting.

Blacken a man in the sun; let his hair grow long and tangled, or become filled with vermin; let him plod about the streets in all kinds of dirt for years, and never know the use of brush, or towel, or water even, except in storms; let him put on a pair of leather breeches at twenty, and wear them until forty, without change or ablution; and, over all, place a torn and blackened hat, and a tattered blanket begrimed with abominations; let him have wild eyes, and shining teeth, and features pinched by famine into sharpness; breasts bared and browned, and (if females) with two or three miniatures of the same species trotting after her, and another certainly strapped to her back: combine all these in your imagination, and you have a recipé for a Mexican lépero.

There, on the canals, around the markets and *pulque* shops, the Indians and these miserable outcasts hang all day long; feeding on fragments, quarrelling, drinking, stealing and lying drunk about the pavements, with their children crying with hunger around them. At night they slink off to these suburbs and coil themselves up on the damp floors of their lairs, to sleep off the effects of liquor, and to awake to another day of misery

and crime. Is it wonderful, in a city with an immense proportion of its inhabitants of such a class, (hopeless in the present and the future,) that there are murderers and robbers?

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In the Indian population which pours into the Capital from the lakes, I must say that there is apparently more worth and character. You see them lolling about in their boats on the canals, and passing and repassing in their canoes, plying between the city and Chalco and Tezcoco. It is a beautiful sight to behold these tiny vessels skim like floating gardens to the quays in the morning, laden to the water's edge with the fruits, flowers and vegetables, that hide the skiff that bears them.

The old houses in this neighborhood, rising out of the canals, the sluggish waters, and the dark multitude of the better classes in fanciful dresses, remind one strongly of Venice.

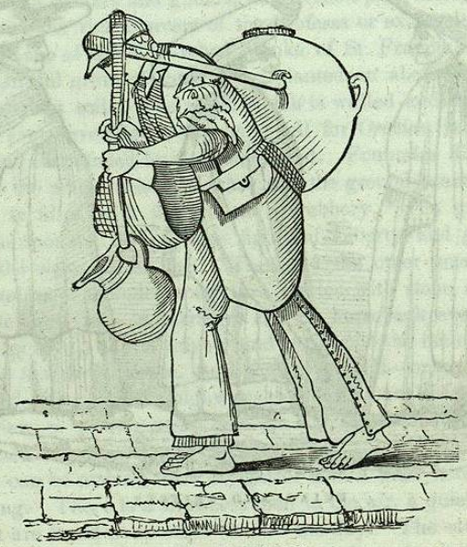
Skirting the canal, and leading to the plain which adjoins the *Chenampas*, or former floating gardens, is the *Passeo de la Viga*, a public drive frequented by the *beau monde*, both in coach and on horseback, during the season of Lent. Scarcely an afternoon passes, at that period of the year, that the observer will not find the canal covered with gay boat-loads of Indians, passing homeward from market, dancing, singing, laughing, strumming the guitar, and crowned with wreaths of *poppies*. I do not know the origin of the custom of wearing this forgetful flower; but it is both a healthier and more poetic oblivion than that resorted to by many folks in other lands, after a day of toil.

Turning once more westward, we again reach the great square.

As we pass the front of the National Palace, from out of its main portal dash fifty gayly-caparisoned huzzars, followed by a coach richly decked with crimson velvet and gold, drawn by four white horses and driven by a Yankee coachman. Behind this dash fifty more huzzars, while at the side of the coach, six aid-de-camps rein in their mettlesome chargers. There is but one person in the vehicle. His dress is that of a General of division, with red facings and gold embroideries. He wears a number of decorations around his neck, while a medal blazing with diamonds, voted to him by the nation, rests on his bosom. His sword-handle is studded with diamonds, and his hand rests on a diamond-headed cane. He is uncovered, and, as he passes and bows gracefully to your salutation, you recognize THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC!

The departure of the President from the Palace has attracted a crowd, The adjoining market, ever filled with people, pours forth its multitudes into the square.

First, there is the Aquador or water-carrier, with his two earthen jars—one suspended by a leathern belt thrown around his forehead and



THE AGUADOR.

resting on his back, and the other suspended from the back of his head in front of him, preserving the equilibrium.*

Next, there is the Indian with a huge coop of chickens and turkies or a crate of earthenware, or a pannier of oranges, borne on his back, like the aquador's jar. Then a woman, with peas, or ducks, or fish from the lake; another with potatoes; another drives along a poor stunted ass, laden with radishes and onions; and all the members of this motley crowd, are crying their wares and merchandise at the top of their voices. It is a Babel!

Amid the throng treads onward, with step majestic, the queenly Spanish woman; by her side is a friar, and hard by a couple of priests in their graceful black cloaks and shovel hats.

* An Englishman passing an *aguador* in the street, struck the jar on the fellow's back with his cane. It broke—and the weight of the other jar immediately brought the poor carrier on his nose. He arose in a rage. The offender, however, immediately calmed him with a couple of dollars. "I only wanted to see whether you were *exactly balanced*, my dear fellow, and *the experiment is worth the money!*"

FRIAR AND PRIESTS.

In the shadow of a pillar of the Portales sneaks a miserable looking wretch, wrapped in his tattered blanket—a lépero, porter, beggar, thief, as the occasion offers; and he takes the advantage of the latter employment in this moment of excitement, to ease an unsuspicious stranger of his handkerchief!

A tinkle of a bell at the door of the Cathedral sacristy, and a roll of drums calling out the guard of honor at the palace gate, give warning of a change of scene.

Slowly issues a gayly-painted coach with glass windows on all sides, drawn by spotted mules; a priest in his vestments sits within; a band of boys walk on each side, chanting a hymn; and in a moment, a deathlike stillness pervades the whole square. From the tradesman, selling his tapes under the Portales, to the thief, who has barely time to conceal the handkerchief in his dirty blanket, the whole crowd is uncovered and kneeling: the Host is passing to the house of some dying Catholic!

The carriage turns a corner, and the square is alive again; the tradesman to sell, the lépero to steal, and the lesson of death is forgotten for ever!

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Turning westward from the square we reach the Alameda, by a very short walk through the *Calle Plateros*, a street filled with the shops of goldsmiths, watchmakers, French hairdressers, French cooks, French milliners, French carvers and gilders, and French print-sellers; and we pass on our way the rich Convent of the Professa or ex-Jesuits—and the more splendid one of the blue-robed Monks of St. Francis. The Alameda is a beautiful grove of forest-trees, planted on about ten acres of moist and luxuriant soil. The wood, which is walled and protected by gates closed every evening as the bells toll for *Oracion*, is intersected with walks and surrounded by a carriage road. Fountains fling up their waters where the paths cross each other, and the ground beneath the full-grown trees is filled with flowers and shrubbery. The great centre fountain is surmounted by a gilded figure of Liberty, and gilded lions spout forth the water at its feet. This, and the other smaller jets, in pleasanter and more secluded nooks, are circled with stone seats. It is the fashion to come here in carriages and on horseback every evening, (except during Lent,) and to drive round and round the inclosure, on the soft roads in the dense shade, until the vesper bell—or, to draw up in line on the side of one of the highways, while the cavaliers pass up and down in review, or prattle away half an hour at the coach-window of some renowned belle.

But there can be nothing more delightful than a walk here during the early morning. There is a freshness then in the air, a quiet and peacefulness, that are found at no other time of the day. The student comes with his book; the priest, from his early mass; the nurse, with her baby; the sentimental miss, to sigh for her lover, (and perhaps to see him;) the dyspeptic, to earn an appetite for his breakfast; the monk, the lounger, and even the laborer, stop for a moment beneath the refreshing shades, to take breath for the coming day. It is almost druidical in the solemn stillness of its groves, placed in the midst of a population of two hundred thousand. Even the birds seem to have been made sacred; scared from the plains, they are here in sanctuary, and no profane hand dares touch them. They have consequently planted, as if by consent of each other, distinct colonies in different parts of the wood; the owl, sitting on her branch, in one place; the doves, making love the business of their lives in another; the mocking-birds, making a third spot a perfect choir; and innumerable sparrows and wrens, like so many Paul Prys, chattering and pottering about with an intrusive pertness through the dominions of all the rest.

Directly west of the Alameda, and on the same street, is the *Passeo Nuevo*, another delightful drive of a mile in length, bordered with paths and trees, and divided by fountains adorned with statuary and sculpture.

Passing out of the western gate of the Alameda, the fashionables every evening take a turn or two along this drive. On festivals it is crowded. All the equipages of the city *must be there*, and it is the *mode* for every person of consideration, or who desires consideration, to

possess an equipage. It is not thought "*exactly proper*" for a lady ever to walk, except to mass—or, sometimes, when she goes shopping. The coach, therefore, on all gala days, is sure to appear on the Passeo with its fair burden, dressed in the French style, as for a dinner party or a ball. When I first arrived in Mexico, it was rare to see a bonnet on such occasions; but that awkward appendage of fashionable costume was becoming gradually in vogue before I left.

For an hour, or more, it is the custom to pass up and down the sides of the Passeo, nodding and smiling at the cavaliers, who show off their horsemanship along the centre of the road. Here the utmost luxury and style are exhibited in the equipment of carriage and animals. Gold embroidery, silver plating, and every ornament that can add splendor to harness and livery are brought forth. To such an extent is the taste for these exhibitions carried, that one of the millionaires of Mexico appears occasionally at the Passeo, on a saddle which (without counting the value of the rest of his caparison,) cost the sum of five thousand dollars. It was the *chef d'œuvre* of an honest German saddler, who made it, and—*retired* from trade to his beloved "father land."

On approaching this charming drive, the whole plain of the Valley of Mexico is at once revealed to you, without passing a dirty suburb. On your right, is the cypress-covered and castle-crowned hill of Chapultepec, formerly the site, it is alleged, of one of Montezuma's palaces; before you and behind, stretch two immense aqueducts—the one coming from the hills, the other from a greater distance, near Tacubaya, and screening that village as it leans against the first slopes of the western mountains. On your left tower the volcanoes, on whose summits the last rosy rays of sunset are resting.

The gay throng disperses, as the moon rises from behind the mountains, pouring a flood of clear light, bright as the day in other lands, over the tranquil landscape.

The moonlight of Mexico is marvellously beautiful. That city, you remember, is 7,500 feet above the level of the sea, and nearly that number of feet closer to the stars than we are; the atmosphere, consequently, is more rarefied, and the light comes, as it were, pure, and pellucid from heaven: you seem able to touch the stars, so brilliantly near do they stand out relieved against the back-ground of an intensely blue sky. Strolling on such nights in Mexico, when I saw the sharp lines of tower and temple come boldly out with shape and even color, almost as bright, yet softer than at noon-day, I have often been tempted to say that the moonlight you get at home (much as it is the theme of poets and lovers,) is but second-hand stuff, compared with that of Mexico.

And so with the climates. Between the sea-shore at Vera Cruz and the volcanoes, whose eternal snows hang over Mexico, you have every climate of the world.

In the Valley there is a perpetual spring. For six months in the year (the winter months, as they are called,) rain never falls; during

the other six months showers occur almost daily. It is never hot—never very cool, and you may wear your cloak or your summer dress the whole year according to the temper of your nervous system. One side of the street is always *too* warm at noon. Cold and sleeting as it is here in January, the roses are already blooming freshly in the gardens of Mexico. Nor is there perceptible change of foliage on the forest trees; the new leaves push off the old ones with a "gentle force," and the regeneration of the seasons is effected without the process of fading, wilting, withering and dying, which makes with us the melancholy days of autumn "the saddest of the year."

To look at the external world, you would say there was no such thing as death in Mexico. The rose and the leaf you admire to-day, are replaced to-morrow, by fresh buds and renewed verdure.