LETTER IX.

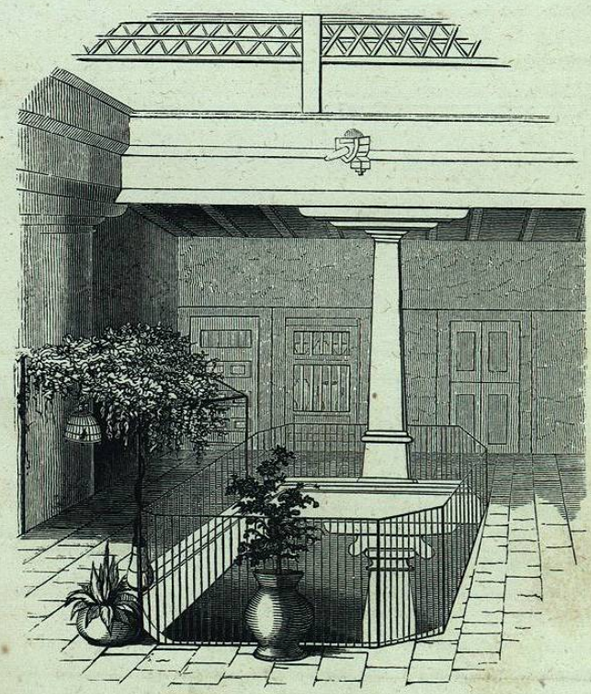
THE CITY OF MEXICO.

When a traveller arrives in an European city, nothing is easier than to find at once every species of accommodation for his comfort. Indeed, it is not necessary to seek them. He can scarcely walk a square in any of the capitals without being attracted by inviting labels, which promise splendid apartments and every luxury requisite in this age of elegance and ease.

Not so in Mexico. The Hotel Vergara, at which I first descended, though kept by a most courteous lady, who does all in her power to render her guests comfortable, is but a miserable establishment compared even with our most ordinary inns. It is but a small remove from the Fondas and Mesones of the olden time in Mexico. This arises from the fact that *travelling* is only of a recent date; a new invention as it were, in Mexico. In former times, articles of merchandise were sent under the care of Arrieros, who were satisfied with the accommodation of the ordinary tavern, to wit: four walls, covered with a roof, in which they might stretch their mats, pile their saddles, and sleep—living, the while, on tortillias, onions, pulque and jerked meats. Whenever the better classes found it needful to visit the Capital, the house of some friend was open to them, and thus, hospitality prevented the creation of an honest race of Bonifaces to welcome the weary wayfarer.

I soon became tired of my comfortless apartment, for which an extravagant price was charged, and betook myself to furnished rooms in a French Hotel, called the "Gran Sociedad," where, for about seventy dollars a month, I got a flea-haunted bed—space enough for my books and papers—a broad balcony shielded from the sun by a fanciful curtain—and two Frenchified meals per day, from a restaurateur kept in the same building.

Here I tarried six months, until, tired in turn of the discomforts and expense, I went to housekeeping in a set of apartments with the American Consul. We took a portion of the first floor of a dwelling in the *Calle Vergara*, belonging to an ex-Marquesa, to whom, and to her worthy son, I must bear the testimony of a grateful heart for unwearied kindness in sickness and in health. The residence was one of the pleasantest, for its size, I know in Mexico. The entrance is into a paved yard, around which the house is built, with its apartments looking into the court from



INTERIOR OF A MEXICAN HOUSE.

all sides, perfectly screened from the street and sun. On the second floor, (on which we lodged,) a corridor runs round the walls, covered with a roof to protect it from the weather, and filled with orange and lemon trees, and a variety of flowering shrubs, planted in vases of rare old India china, that would delight the heart of a London fancier.

Here my days were passed in the fulfillment of my official duties, and my evenings, when not at the theatre, (which I found a great aid in acquiring the language,) in the midst of this pleasant family. The excellent lady at the head of it had once belonged to one of the wealthiest establishments in the Republic. The revolutions, and a series of mishaps, had broken her fortunes; yet they could not deprive her of her talents, her accomplishments, her vivacity, or the kindness of her heart and temper. Qualities like these were sure to endear the friends of her better days, and, in truth, they had not deserted her. It was thus, that in her apartments, over a quiet game of *monte*, where a thousand *nuts* were the highest stake; I made many of my pleasantest acquaintances, both male and female, in Mexico. Here too I saw the better phases of Mexican character, in private life. The respect for age—the sincerity of friendship—the results of reading and education—and the honest, unpretending *naturalness* of character for which, over all other people I have ever met with, I think the best of them are remarkable.

It has been taxed upon people who live in fine climates—where the warm sun and the teeming fields woo constantly to the open air—that they want the social virtues. They possess no fireside—that focus into which the family affections are gathered and cherished. I will not pretend that the Mexicans are a *home people*, like the Germans, the English, and, perhaps, ourselves; but it is equally certain, that they are not without those social tastes and reunions, which make their dwellings a favorite resort. It is true, that much time is devoted by fashionable society to the morning mass, the evening drive, and to the theatre; but, in a population of 200,000, these should not be regarded as the characteristics of the whole people. It is this partial examination of a class, and an identification of its peculiarities, habits or tastes, with those of the whole nation, that is the error of English tourists in their descriptions of our own country. It is neither by the most fashionable society—which is always the most corrupt, deceitful and unsubstantial; nor by the very lowest class, which is always the most vicious—that we are to characterize nations. In the sober, patient, patriotic, toilsome, well taught, frugal, middle ranks of life—the true virtues, and noblest features of a people are most evident; and, although these characteristics may be found both among the very highest and the very lowest, yet it is alone in this class that they may be sought with certainty.

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The houses of the Mexicans are usually built of the strongest materials, either brick or stone, and without much architectural pretension. They are erected around *patios*, or court-yards, and are from 30 to 40 feet front

on the street—the grand saloon being generally the length of the whole house. On the ground-floor are the porter's lodge, offices and carriage-house. From this, a flight of steps leads to an *entresol*, devoted to the domestics, while the upper story is universally the fashionable and best one. Here the family dwells in perfect seclusion from the street and neighbors, and the arcade which fronts their doors is filled with the choicest fruit and flower-trees in constant bloom. Above all this is the *azotea*, or flat, paved roof, a delightful retreat on summer nights. The front windows of the houses are all guarded by balconies covered with gayly-colored awnings; and on days of festival, when filled with the gay throng of Mexican women, and hung with tapestry and velvet, they present a most brilliant appearance.

The carriage, and ever-harnessed mules, stand constantly in the court-yard below; and the postillion is ready to mount and sally forth at a moments' notice until after dark, when the large front gate is closed, locked and barred; and the house becomes as quiet and secure as a castle, with which no communication from without is permitted, until you tell your name, or signify to the porter the object of your visit. Until this ceremony has passed, no bolt is drawn in the wicket or latch raised to admit you; and the caution is extremely necessary, on account of the frequent robberies that have been committed by allowing unknown persons to enter after dark.

It has been said that "cleanliness is a virtue," and I think that politeness should be classed next to it. Cleanliness does not always proceed from the mere love of personal or domestic purity, but is often a mere evidence of respect for the opinion of the world. The same, perhaps, may be said of politeness. Be it what it may, however, it is one of the most agreeable sacrifices of social intercourse. The "old school" seems to have taken refuge among the Mexicans. They are formally, and I think, substantially, the politest people I have met with. Bowing and shaking hands are common all the world over, and in our country we do it stiffly, and often gruffly enough. Savages salute one another with a grunt, and the Chinese touch noses. But, in Mexico, there is something more than mere *nonchalant* nods of recognition and farewell. If you enter a Mexican's house, there is no rest among the inmates until you are made perfectly at ease, and your hat and cane taken from you. The lady does not sit on the sofa—nod when you come in as if it were painful to bend or rise—talk with you about the weather as if your rheumatisms made you a species of walking barometer—and then expect you to nod again, and take yourself off as a bore; but a frankness and a warmth are immediately thrown into the manner of the whole household as soon as you appear. No matter what they may be engaged in, or how much occupied; all is forgotten in a moment, and they are entirely at your service. Here, in the United States, I have paid fifteen or twenty visits on a morning with a fashionable lady. To do so in Mexico—a man would be set down as an oddity. A visit *is* a visit—it is intended to be something.

People feel that they can see, look at, and pass each other *in the street;* and they think a stare of five minutes from a chair, as meaningless as a stare on one's legs in the highway. In the saloon, they regard it proper to devote much time to the interchange of opinions sociably; and they look upon indifference or a *distrait* air, or what would elsewhere be called *fashionable ease*, as little better than rudeness.

Upon entering a room, after any unusual absence, if well known to all the members of a family, you go through the process of an embrace, and the health and occupations of every member of your family are minutely and affectionately inquired for. After a while, if there are girls in the house, a little music will be given, or their drawings, embroidery, or other pretty works displayed, as you are supposed to have an interest in such things. And if you are a particular favorite, the lady of the mansion, who indulges in a *cigarritto*, will take a delicate one from her golden *etui*, light it, touch it to her lips, and present it to you.

At parting, the ceremony is very formal. You bid good-bye with an embrace, or, if less acquainted, with a profound bow to each individual; you turn at the door of the saloon, and bow again; the master of the house accompanies you to the head of the stairs, where you shake hands and bow again; you look up from the landing of the first flight of stairs, and find him ready with another; and as you pass through the court-yard below, (if he like you, or you happen to be a person of consideration,) you find him gazing from among the flowers over the balustrade, and still gracefully nodding farewell! Before this *finale* it is not very safe to put on your hat.

LADY GOING TO MASS.

There are few things more beautiful than the salutation of a Mexican lady. Among themselves they never meet without embracing. But to men and strangers, on the street, they lift the right hand to near the lips, gently inclining the head toward it, and gracefully fluttering their fingers, send forth their recognition with an arch-beaming of the eye that is *almost* as bewitching as a kiss.

The universal conclusion of the day with a fashionable lady in Mexico, is the theatre. She begins with mass, to which she walks in the morning with her mantilla gracefully draped around her head, and falling in folds of splendid lace over her breast and shoulders. But the night must end in full dress at the opera or theatre. It is as regular and as much a matter of course as her meals.

It is then you may behold the Mexican woman in perfection. And yet, to confess the truth, I cannot say that they are beautiful according to our ideas of beauty in the United States.

You do not see those charming skins and rosy complexions, nor do you observe that variety of tint which springs from the mingling of many nations on our soil; but there is, nevertheless, something in Mexican women, be they fair or dark, that bewitches while you look at them: it is, perhaps, a universal expression of sweetness and confiding gentleness.

There is not much regularity of features; no "Attic foreheads and Phidian noses;" no "rose-bud lips whose kisses pout to leave their nest;" no majestic symmetry to compel admiration; but their large, magnificent eyes, where the very soul of tenderness seems to dwell, and their natural grace, conquer every one. Their gait is slow, stately, majestic.

The commonest woman of the middle ranks you encounter on the streets, with but a fanciful petticoat, and her shawl or *reboso*, struts a queen—her feet small almost to deformity. Her figure, though full to *embonpoint*, you never think too fat; her lively enthusiasm always seems tempered and delicately subdued by the softness of her eye, and you feel that her complexion, sallow or dark as it often is, is yet no more than

> "The embrowning of the fruit that tells
> How rich within the soul of sweetness dwells."

I give opposite, sketches of the costume of the lower class of females, as you see them constantly in the house and on the street, with and without the shawl, or *reboso*. *Without it* the dress is scarcely any dress at all: one garment—besides a petticoat—braced with a sash around the waist, while the hair falls in a long plait down the back. *With it*—their costume is made up. Flung gracefully over the left shoulder and passed across the mouth—you see nothing but the eyes, which are her greatest charm, and she never attempts to conceal them or neglect their power.

In speaking of the fine eyes, the beautiful feet, and the queenly tread of the Mexican ladies, and their costume, I should not forget to mention that an embroidered India crape shawl, blazing with all the colors of the

WITH AND WITHOUT THE REBOSO.

rainbow, and a *painted fan*, are indispensable portions of a complete dress. The *fan* is none of your new-fangled inventions of feather and finery, but the old-fashioned reed and paper instruments used by our grandmothers. The opening and shutting—the waving and folding of these is an especial language. They touch them to their lips—flirt them wide open—close them—let their bright eyes peep over the rim—display their jewelled hands and witching eyes, and, in fact, carry on a warfare of graceful coquetry from behind these pasteboard fortresses, that has forced, ere now, many a stout heart to cry for quarter!

LETTER X.

THE CITY OF MEXICO.

SENTIMENTAL BUTCHER AND PROFESSIONAL BEGGARS.

It is the custom for most of the small dealers to hawk their wares about the streets, and indeed, you may thus be supplied with all the necessaries of life. The aguador brings you water. The butcher sends his ass with meat. The Indians bring butter, eggs, fruit, and vegetables; the boatmen, fresh fish from the lake; and cakes and sweetmeats are carried daily in trays to your door. There are, nevertheless, a market and stalls, or small shops in the streets. In a large and poor population like this the competition must necessarily be very great.

One of the butchers in the *Calle Tacuba* always amused me. His shop is about the size of a stall, the whole front being open to the street, with a fine game-cock, tied by the leg on the sill. Suspended from the ceiling, and but two or three feet from the doorway, hangs the entire carcass of a beef; at a short distance behind is the counter; and, in the rear of this again, is a row of kids and delicate morsels, festooned with gilt paper and yards of sausages, hung in the most tasteful lines and curves. In the centre of this carnal show rests an image of the "Holy Virgin of Guadalupe," under whose protection he thus places his larder and his "custom."

The most interesting figure, however, in the picture, is the butcher himself; a sentimental-looking fellow, with black eyes, curling locks, and altogether a most captivating personage, barring a sort of oily lustre that polishes his skin. I invariably find him lounging romantically over his saw and cleaver, strumming his guitar to half-a-dozen housemaids, who, doubtless, are attracted to his steaks by his amorous staves. It is rare to see such a mixture of meat and music. What would be said with us at home, to see the celebrated Jones or Smith, in the Fulton market, mounted on his block, with a blue ribbon about his neck, and a dozen damsels grouped around him, listening, with rapt air, to the pet *morceau* of the last opera! Yet the suggestion might be useful in these days, when invention is taxed to the utmost for new modes of attracting the people. In Mexico at any rate it is characteristic, and I have, therefore, noted it.

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THE OLD BEGGAR.

Go where you will in this city, you are haunted by beggars. Beggary is a *profession;* but it is not carried to quite the extent that it is in some of the Italian States, and especially the Sicilian dominions.

The capital employed in this business is blindness, a sore leg, a decrepit father or mother, or a helpless child; in the latter case, a stout hearty boy usually straps the feeble one on his back, and runs after every passer beseeching succor. With such a stock in trade, and a good sunny corner, or wall of a church door, the petitioner is set up for life. Placed in so eligible a situation, their cry is incessant from morning to night: "Señores amicos, por el amor de dios;" "for the love of the blessed Virgin!" "by the precious blood of Christ!" "by the holy mystery of the Trinity!" repeated with many variations between their eternal scratchings, winking of lids over sightless balls, and the display of maimed limbs and every species of personal deformity. There is no "poor-house" in Mexico, to which such vagrant wretches are forced to go.

One blind beggar, remarkably well dressed, and a person who has evidently enjoyed better fortunes, takes up his place on the seat around the chief fountain of the Alameda, every day at noon, and is attended *by a couple of servants;* his respectful demeanor is, doubtless, a *valuable capital.*

Another beggar has a *burly porter* to carry him seated in a chair on his back.

Then there are silent beggars—"*poveri vergognosi,*"—as you see in Italy; men who make no oral demand for charity, but crook their bodies, and bow their concealed faces, in such a shape of interrogative supplication, that the heart must be hard that could resist them. One of this species particularly arrested my notice. I never met him by daylight, and he may not have been what he appeared to be; but often at midnight, when returning from the theatre, I have encountered him, cold and shivering under the portales. He seemed to be at least 80 years of age; was bent almost double, had a shocking bad cough, and squeaked out in the most piping treble you ever heard, that "*he was just waiting for some one to take him home.*" He had been waiting thus for many a year!

They all have different voices according to the length of time they have been employed. There are your old sturdy beggars who bellow out their ritual; then the modest novice; then an old fellow who never utters a distinct word, but *rolls on the ground and howls,* as if with pain; the while his eyes glance from right to left to see *how it operates!* Near my dwelling, at a church door, always sat a gray-headed blind man, who was as much a fixture as one of the pillars of the edifice. The oldest neighbors could not remember when he first came there. He usually arrived about noon, as soon as the shadow of the church fell over his wonted seat and afforded shade. He begged stoutly for an hour or so, when a daughter brought him an excellent warm dinner. This dispatched, he went to work again with the "por el amor de dios," until he literally sang himself into a *siesta.* Yet the ruling passion never deserted him even in sleep. His

head nodded, but his open and outstretched palm rested on his knee—a permanent money-box!

Although exhibitions like this are enough to shut the heart in a country where the earth yields almost for the asking, yet there are cases of misery that do not appeal in vain.

A poor little beggar-boy attracted my attention by haunting the door of the Gran Sociedad. We noticed him first by seeing something coiled up in the corner of the portal, which looked like a dirty puppy dog, shivering with the cold. Slowly, however, at our approach, it unwound itself from the lair, and a poor little boy tottered toward us with the most wan and wretched look I ever beheld, and the most beautiful black eyes that ever appealed for charity. He was a personification of poor Oliver Twist—a perfect little atomy. We gave him a *real*, and he trotted off delighted; yet his feeble limbs, around which there was scarcely any clothing, refused to carry him twenty steps: he tottered and fell against the wall to which he clung for support. I went to him again: "Muero de los frios, señor,"—I am dying of the chills, said he, in his little piping voice, rendered almost inarticulate from pain, accompanied by that slow motion of the head from side to side indicative of suffering.

We put a small blanket over him, gave him shoes and food, and thus strengthened and warmed, he gradually reached home.

The next day he made his appearance again, without shoes, shirt, or blanket, and with no covering but his ragged trowsers of cotton, tied across his shoulder with a piece of twine, and an old handkerchief about his neck. It was decided that he was a professional beggar, and his pains were but capital acting.

I did not think so, however; and while others speedily rejected him, I determined to satisfy myself that a human being would voluntarily starve himself until the bones peered through his shrunken skin, before I would deny the sufferer the comfort of a daily morsel. Upon inquiry, I found that his story was true: that he was the only child of a bed-ridden mother, who, confined with rheumatism to a mat stretched on the earthen floor of a hovel in the suburb, had been unable to provide food for herself or her son for more than a month. Besides this, the urchin had sold the shoes and blanket we had given him to buy bread for his parent.

He was a regular pensioner afterward, and his mother recovered. The last time I saw him was in the Alameda, to which he had crawled, saying that the "sunshine felt so comfortable, and that in its broad walks he did not suffer so much from the '*frios*.'"

For a long period, after this, I missed the urchin, and knew not what had become of him; until one afternoon passing the wall of the convent of Santa Clara, I saw a man trotting along at the usual Indian gait, with a tray on his head which appeared to be covered with roses. Behind him was a ragged *lépera*, in tears, with her long black hair hanging over her shoulders. As the man passed me, I looked into the tray and found it contained a corpse. It was that of a child who had died of consumption. The flesh, worn to the utmost emaciation, was stretched tightly over the prominent bones; his little hands were bound over his breast, with a single thread of gold, in the attitude of prayer; the body was sprinkled with faded artificials, and its mouth was perked up, and its lips parted, as if the sufferer had died with a wail of pain.

It was my little beggar-boy. The "*frios*" had been too much for him.