

Her whole height is not more than a foot, but you cannot number the scratches, knocks, and bruises, that her poor little frame has suffered! Her color is gone—both her eyes, I believe, are out—her nose is knocked off, and there is rather a large hole in one corner of her mouth. The *padres* declare, that all who attempt to repair her charms sicken and die. Indeed, in the midst of all her finery and ornaments, she reminds one of some shrew of a spinster, who, after wasting her stock of charms on a thoughtless world, makes up for them on every public occasion, by a display of lace and diamonds, hiding, if possible, each wrinkle by a gem.

LETTER XXII.

CARNIVAL. LENT. HOLY WEEK.

ONE of the gayest seasons in Mexico is that of the Carnival; and although the amusements are not so numerous or splendid as those of Rome and Naples, yet there is more stirring life and more public exhibition of joy and pleasure than at other periods of the year, among this staid and reserved population.

The theatres are converted into ball-rooms, and decorated with great taste; masters of ceremonies are regularly appointed; and the boxes are filled every night with the *beau-monde*—brilliant with diamonds—while the pit and stage are covered with groups of motley maskers. Within the few last years, the fashionables have refrained from participating in the *ruses* of masquerade; and the floor has thus been abandoned chiefly to the French hair-dressers, pastry cooks, and milliners of the *calle Plateros*, who frisk about with as much gayety as if they were at the grand Opera of their beloved Paris. I went once or twice to witness these amusements; but confess that I had quite enough of them, when, on venturing once to stand up in a quadrille with some unknown fair one, I found an unmasked *negro* (the leader of one of the orchestras in the city,) take the place of my *vis-à-vis* with a white woman! I plead guilty to a prejudice against such exhibitions.

The Carnival over—Lent is observed with considerable rigor until HOLY WEEK. As the ceremonies of that season are not without their peculiarities, I will give you some descriptions of them; and I know not how I can do so better than by extracts from my journal of the period.

JOURNAL.

18th March, Friday. This is the festival of the Virgin of Dolores. It is impossible to trace many of the old customs of the Church, in a country where the ritual is often made up of so many odd and fantastic notions, except by supposing that the idea of the original founders was, to attract the Indians by as many new devices as they could ingraft upon their regular services.

On the festival of Mary, the mother of our Saviour, (who is worshipped here under so many metamorphoses,) the ceremonies are not alone conducted in the churches. There is scarcely a house in the city, where a little shrine is not erected, and adorned with a profusion of glittering ornaments and blooming flowers. Glasses and vases of colored waters flash amid innumerable lamps and wax candles; while the most splendid jewels of the mistress of the mansion adorn the sacred image. The floors of the dwellings are strewn with roses, leaving a path for visitors, and music and refreshments welcome all who are in habits of intimacy with the family. In this gorgeous display, there is considerable rivalry, and it is a feather in a family's cap to have its Virgin spoken of as—*par excellence*—the saint of the season.

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19th—*Saturday*. This is another festival—that of “*El Castisimo Patriarca Sr. S. José, patron principal de la Republica y N. Señora de la Piedad*.” It is a festival, in other words, of San José and of the Virgin Mary, under another name. There were solemn services in the churches.

20th—*Palm Sunday*. At eleven I went to the Cathedral, to hear high mass. The chief altar was shrouded with purple drapery, and all the ornaments were covered. The Archbishop sat under a velvet canopy fringed with gold, and the edifice was filled with a motley, palm-bearing congregation of ladies, léperos, cavaliers, and Indians. The service was odd. Two clergymen mounted pulpits on each side of the altar, while another took his stand in the middle of the steps leading to it. All had books before them, and palm branches in their hands, as had, also, the Archbishop and his suite of servitors. The priests in the pulpit, and the one on the steps, then proceeded to chant a sort of dramatic scene in badly pronounced Latin; and the whole ended with wretched music from the choir and the organ.

While this service was going on, there seemed to be great indifference in the demeanor of the well-dressed men. The ladies sat on the dirty floor, and with their books open before them, read away for very life; ever and anon crossing their foreheads, mouths and bosoms; while the whole of the lower classes stood by like the audience at some strange drama in an unknown language, which they thought as queer as it was unintelligible. The Indians, especially, who were grouped around the base of the columns, in all their usual dirt and rags, appeared particularly surprised at the *Latin*. Among the multitude, I could not help noticing an old, vicious-looking lépero, (a scarred veteran in crime and villainy, if we may judge by his countenance) who was extraordinarily zealous in pounding his breast, as if exorcising an evil and tormenting spirit.

After the ceremony was over, no one omitted going to the basins and sprinkling with holy water. The Indians, as usual, enjoyed this privilege greedily; and after devoutly crossing themselves, spirted a quantity of the fluid in their eyes, and last of all, put a handful over their hair and faces. The infants, especially, came in for a wholesome ablution.

23rd. I went to the Cathedral this afternoon to hear the *Miserère*. It was a different affair from that of the Sistine Chapel, where the agonizing music is wailed out by the Pope's *eunuchs*. I only remained until four or five candles had been extinguished on the great candlestick of ebony, inlaid with silver. The music was execrable.

24th. This day, which is elsewhere perhaps the saddest and holiest to the spiritual-minded of Christ's Church—preparing the soul for the dreadful trials of to-morrow—is in Mexico one of the gayest of the season.

From 10 o'clock in the morning, not a horse or vehicle of any sort is permitted to appear on the street, and all who venture abroad must do so on foot. In the olden time, this was no doubt intended to mark the day with peculiar solemnity; both by dispensing with one of the most needful luxuries of the upper classes, and detaining the gay and fashionable at home, or inducing them to go on humble and prayerful pilgrimage to the churches. It is now, however, but an excuse for ostentation; and as at all other seasons of the year fashion has made it imperative for no lady to walk the streets, so has fashion made it the rule for the sex to appear on this day, apparelled in all the splendor their purses will admit. Silks, satins, velvets, embroidery, lace, jewels, diamonds, ball-dresses, dinner-dresses—every species of vesture to attract attention and envy, and these again are changed several times in the course of the day! For weeks previous the mantuamakers are all bought up—not a stitch is to be had for love or money—and, on Holy Thursday, the cunning of their needles is displayed for once in the year to the rude and open air.

The professed purpose of this display is to visit, on foot, *seven* of the churches—which are adorned with all their plate, jewels, flowers, and finery, for the occasion, while their floors are spread with the richest carpets.

Although there is much that is singular to Protestants who are accustomed to a simple ritual, in the splendor of the Roman Church in Italy and France, yet there is always a picturesque fitness of the ceremony to the season, and there is an evident meaning in its dramatic effect, illustrating the incidents of the time. In those countries, we can never free ourselves from the associations of the place and the ceremony upon which there are no corrupt grafts of heathenism. The rites at the altar are gorgeous, but chaste and beautiful; the music is select, and suitable to the moment; the temple in which you kneel, is hallowed by historical memorials; the dead of hundreds of years—illustrious through all time—

rest in the carved tombs around you; and the master-pieces of the greatest artists realize once more, on their eloquent canvas, the triumphs of saints and martyrs. But not so here. The ritual is Indian, rather than civilized or intellectual. The show is tasteless and barbaric. The altars display a jumble of jewelry, sacred vessels, and utensils of the precious metals mixed up with glass through which is reflected the tints of colored water, and the whole is overlaid with fruits and flowers. It is a mixture of the church and apothecary shop. Instead of the glorious pictures of the old masters, you have innumerable bad figures, badly drawn and worse colored, set in frames, the gilding and carving of which form the greatest attraction; and in place of the airs of Mozart and Haydn, you have the music of the last Opera, and the favorite *morceaux* of Robert le Diable.

When the carriages cease to roll to-day, at ten o'clock, the bells are also silenced. Not a clapper is allowed to strike against bell-side until next Saturday. Yet, in order not to be without incessant noise in the streets, they have substituted rattles, and you scarcely meet a youth who has not one of these discordant instruments in his hand. The rattles are usually made of wood and bone, surmounted by the wax-figure of a bird, baby, or even, sometimes, a naked *Venus*; but for the higher classes they are of richly chased silver with tasteful ornaments, and become the fashionable presents of the season. This, too, is a relic of barbarism, and I am told is derived from the Indians, who, in the olden time, used rattles to exorcise the Evil Spirit.

The streets are alive with the gay throng, and I visited the churches of San Francisco, La Señora de Loreto, the Cathedral, Santa Clara, and the Profesa. *San Francisco* and *La Profesa* divide the fashionable world; but the old Jesuits seem to have carried the day with the ladies.

I took a seat on the benches, placed against the pillars which support the roof of the church, as I found it to be the custom for men to sit, while the aisle of the church is occupied by the kneeling females. When I entered the edifice there were but few at their devotions, but the crowd gradually increased, and in half an hour the building was filled with the gentle hum of a thousand lips in prayer.

Near me knelt a lady, whose dress must have cost thousands in this expensive country. She wore a purple velvet robe embroidered with white silk, white satin shoes, and silk stockings; a *mantilla* of the richest white blonde lace fell over her head and shoulders, and her ears, neck, and fingers were blazing with diamonds. By her side, and almost touching, crouched an Indian, in rags scarcely sufficient to hide her nakedness, with wild dishevelled hair, bare legs, and a vacant stare from the gorgeous altar to the gorgeous dame! And so, over the whole church, the floor was a checker-board of ladies and *léperos*—of misery and pride!

At a little distance knelt a group of fashionable girls under the guardianship of their mamma, and followed by a female servant—a substitute for the old *dueña*. After the sign of the cross and the bow to the altar, the two lines of *beaux* on each side of the edifice, first attracted the attention of the penitents; but their prayer-books were immediately opened, the forehead, mouth, and breast were again crossed, and they hummed a prayer, with an occasional *aside* to mother or sister, in the midst of their devotion. After this mingled occupation of prayer, chatting, crossing, and criticism had been carried on for ten minutes, they closed their books, sank from their knees backward on the floor, and sitting thus on the boards, threw aside their *mantillas* so as to display a pet dimple or a pet diamond. Presently, remembering that there were other churches to visit, they rose slowly, and lounged off to another chapel to bring up the arrears of their *aves* and *paters*.

I have thus sketched both the street-walking and church-praying of to-day, but there was one church which I must mention specially. The Chapel of "*Nuestra Señora de Loreto*" is situated some distance from the centre of fashion in Mexico, and is considered quite a pilgrimage by the pedestrians who walk but once a year. I visited it, both in the morning and at night. In the early part of the day, the crowd was small; but after sunset it was almost impossible to effect an entrance, notwithstanding the doors and square in front were guarded by sentinels with fixed bayonets.

The church was transformed into a grove of orange, lemon, and flowering shrubbery; and the blaze of a multitude of wax torches was reflected from the altar, around which the twelve Apostles were seated at the Last Supper, amid a pile of silver and gold plate and jewels, arranged in a multitude of odd devices, not only on the table but from the floor to the ceiling. In grotesque contrast with all this splendor, there were common oranges sprinkled with tin foil, and twopenny glass decanters filled with dyed waters.

As I entered from the front door of this edifice, the first thing that attracted my notice was a side altar converted into an arbor, in the centre of which was a *well*, with Christ and the woman of Samaria beside it. The lady had been fitted out by a most fashionable mantuamaker, in a costume of blue satin picked out with pink, and while she leaned gracefully on a silver pitcher, resting on the edge of the well, our Saviour stood opposite in a mantle of purple velvet, embroidered with gold, and covered with a *Guyaquil sombrero*!

A short distance from this, in the place of another side altar, next to the chief one, was the representation of the entombment of our Lord. The body, swathed in linen, was laid in a *glass coffin*. "Mary the Mother," dressed in a full suit of black velvet, with a fine cambric handkerchief in hand, stood among the shrubbery at its foot. In the foreground, two little urchins of waxen angelhood, also dressed in black velvet, (with black wings and skirts looped up in front, so as to display their

neatly-turned ankles in richly-worked stockings, and somewhat more of he leg than befits other persons than opera dancers,) put themselves in such an attitude, that you might naturally imagine they were in the act of pirouetting off to the music of a piano in the opposite corner, that gave forth the most fashionable waltzes and airs from the operas. Two dogs, (emblems, I suppose of "watchfulness,") but who did not seem to understand their duty very well, amused themselves, meanwhile, by wandering about among the pots and smelling at the flowers!

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Returning from Nuestra Señora de Loreto, I found the streets crammed with people, among whom were crowds of ladies dressed quite as splendidly as in the morning; many of them still wore their diamonds, notwithstanding the imminent danger of robbery in such a concourse. The stores were all closed, the bells were silenced, and all was quiet but the hum of the crowd and the crack of the thousand rattles that filled the air like a meadow of grasshoppers.

I went to the Profesa and found a similar display. I continued on to San Francisco, and there beheld the most tasteful and least childish of all these exhibitions. The walls of the church were hung with large pictures, portraying parts of the life of Christ; and over the altar was a large architectural design, the outlines of which were marked with lights fastened on the canvas, so that the whole picture seemed drawn with fire. The effect was novel and beautiful, and the better for a misty atmosphere in the church arising from the multitude of candles.

In another of the seven chapels of San Francisco, a figure of our Lord, as large as life, was seated at the foot of the altar, crowned with thorns and bleeding at every pore; while, at a side altar, was the Virgin, (again in becoming black velvet,) with a large straight sword thrust through her heart, and her eyes upturned like a dying Cleopatra. The crowd here was immense, and it was necessary to preserve order by stationing guards at all the doors.

As I passed down the street, I observed that numbers of booths had been erected at the principal corners and in the plaza. They are neatly made of reeds and matting, and their counters are woven over in front with sweet clover interlaced with flowers. Orgeat and other refreshing drinks only are sold in them, and in the whole throng of this day of idleness I have not met a drunken Indian or lépero.

The Cathedral was also lighted up like the rest of the churches, and there was a similar display of ornaments. In the middle of the left aisle a silver altar had been erected, since yesterday, which reached nearly to the ceiling; but it was tastelessly crowded with figures of saints and wooden pillars, painted to imitate marble. On this altar was displayed the Holy Sacrament during the period in which no consecration of the elements is permitted by the Church.

At the doors of most of these sacred buildings ladies were seated, who received alms on large silver dishes, and rewarded you with a sweet smile; but in the sacristy of the Cathedral a system of begging was carried on that I did not notice elsewhere. It was a regular fair for Indulgences.

The body of our Lord, in wax, was laid on a bier near the door as you entered from the Cathedral, and near it, another figure was set up, representing him as he came bleeding and wasted from the scourgers. Close to these two figures sat priests begging every passer for a donation in return for indulgences. "Ten years' indulgence for an alms to the Holy Sepulchre," said one of them, with the plate before him;—and "twenty years' indulgence for an alms for the redemption of the faithful in captivity," shouted a tall blue-gowned Franciscan, who stood near the door as you went out, over-bidding his less liberal competitor between the figures.

25th, Good Friday. The gay dresses of yesterday are exchanged for deep black, worn by both men and women, and the day is celebrated by solemn services. I missed seeing the "descent from the cross," in the church of Balbanera, which is said to be performed by puppets, and to be admirably well executed.

26th. This is the last day of the ceremonies, and at half-past nine in the morning the injunction was taken from the bells and carriages. The streets were of course immediately filled with all the equipages of the city, whose postillions only waited for the first sound from the church-towers, to dash out of their court-yards. The clang of the bells was incessant, and at the same moment, the air was filled with the smoke and explosion of myriads of crackers and fireworks, called "*Judas*" and "*heretics*" extended on ropes across the streets. The multitudes of dogs with which the city is infested, scared at the unusual racket, howled along the streets, and the great amusement of the léperos was to trip the poor beasts with ropes as they dashed wildly over the crowded thoroughfares. And so ended in smoke, yells, jingling, carriage-rolling, horse-tramping, Judas-bursting, dog-tripping, and folly, this farcical caricature of the most awful event in the history of religion. In the vanity of personal ostentation its effect is thrown away on the better classes, and it is entirely lost in the barbaric spectacle and tinsel show which are got up to bewilder and surprise the ignorant and low.