

## LETTER XVII.

VERA CRUZ.

*Vera Cruz, Monday, 12th February, 1851.*

YES; mankind, as I have said before, is divided into two classes—the stay-at-home, and the go-abroad; the stick-fast and the vagrant; and although I have confessed that the first of the two are the most comfortable, I am not, on a retrospection of the excitements of travel, inclined to wonder that wandering leads ardent minds to a distaste for the monotony of still life. Dr. Johnson says, that “matrimony has many sorrows; but celibacy no joys;” and, in a limited and lower sense, in such wise I may argue of the traveller, and the home-bred. For if, indeed, excitement be a state of our nature which the complete enjoyment of our being demands, then it is certain that he who travels *not*, lacks many of those joys which fall to the lot of him who does travel.

Who could possibly have anticipated—I am sure I never could—that I should run out an account of our passage from Southampton to Vera Cruz, a passage ordinarily of five-and-thirty days, to nearly the length of a fashionable volume? And yet how much and how many things have I suppressed that, as they occurred, I thought interesting? Look back, and observe, after all, how rapidly I have sometimes had to give you my sketches; how many touches, to make anything approximate to a picture, I have omitted; how many diversified incidents, to which I have scarcely alluded, because I feared I was becoming tedious, and because I was frightened at the growing bulk of my journal. Two hundred pages! to say what most stay-at-homes (and, I confess, many others who are *not* stay-at-homes), would have expected to be comprised in—“After a boisterous passage of sixty-two days, during which we changed steamers, and were wrecked (*vide* newspapers), we arrived here on the 9th instant.”

How irresistible is Fate! How inscrutable the decrees which control our ways, direct our course, and throw us upon the most unforeseen events! I look back upon the last six months, and find that



nothing has happened to me as I anticipated it *would* happen: a succession of events instead has come to pass, which, looking forward, would have appeared to me as nothing better than the chaotic incoherences of a troubled dream!

I have said that nothing has come to pass as I anticipated: one special exception, however, is our safe arrival in Mexico, which I indeed willed, yet which, in ways altogether unforeseen by me, has come to pass. Still, how do I know, had the intermediate events been altogether different—had they followed the different course which I had anticipated—whether the ultimate result would have been my arrival here or not? Thus, we must have a will—a settled and definite rational purpose—doing our best to work it out, and not complaining of the intermediate accidents and incidents which are brought about by a controlling Power infinitely higher than that of short-sighted man!

Leaving on one side, however, the deeper themes, which have relation to the things “beyond the visible diurnal sphere,”—themes on which I have just ventured slightly to touch, because, since our shipwreck, my mind has communed more than

usually, with those great interests which lie on the other side of this life; descending again to its ordinary level, let me chronicle anew, that we finished our voyage to Vera Cruz on Friday, the 9th of February, taking up sixty-nine days, instead of thirty-four, being one day more than double the number allowed by the time tables of the Company; and assuredly embracing more than double the number of incidents which any thirty-four days might reasonably be expected to include.

Vera Cruz being reached, I may take leave, for the present, of the residue of our shipwrecked fellow-passengers, who came by the *Rafaela*, and who dispersed on her coming to anchor.

M. A—, as a rich merchant in Mexico, was considered the head of our foreign passengers. He had earned his fortune more by dint of caution and economy, than by bold or active enterprize; and if, as I have been told, he was once in the Imperial army, I can only say that the fire of the soldier had now evidently given way to the frigidity of the merchant. It has not been a very rare case, either in England or in France, since the commencement of our long peace, to see the love of glory pale before the still more exciting



passion for gold—to see one who in his youthful career had started with the sword, lay down the weapon of the warrior for the pen of the trader—to exchange the snorting charger in the field, for the stool and the desk, in the mansion of Mammon in the city.

Returning to M. A—: he was a quiet, unobtrusive man, somewhat advanced in years; unmarried; not forgetting (it is a mercantile trait) number one; of polite, almost obsequious manners; but never mixing much, nor shining in general conversation. He had a most excellent servant with him—a character—Pedro, “Don” Pedro, he was often called; who waited on his master with the utmost deference; but who laid down the law with an easy, yet not unbecoming familiarity, with the Spanish passengers: he read, and played chess. At the wreck, he was a hero; but M. A— was exclusively his idol. While the latter was helpless, and in undoubted trouble at the scene which was passing before us, Pedro fought for his property; ransacked the wreck to get at it, regardless of danger; flew, when we landed at the little island, to secure the least uncomfortable corner for his master; and then

worked, during the whole two days, in rescuing from damage the saturated contents of his master’s trunks, every one of which “Don” Pedro had saved. He was one of the best servants I ever saw, and gave me the idea, that M. A— must certainly be a good master. He appeared, indeed, duly to appreciate the good qualities of Pedro; and master and man seemed counterparts of, and exactly to understand, each other.

Monsieur and Madame D— were *protégés* of M. A—, and they took up their quarters with him in his partner’s house in Vera Cruz. A pleasant couple: he, an intelligent French doctor, she, a kind-hearted and unsophisticated Creole lady of Chihuahua, a remote province\* of that name, now the most northerly of Mexico, where he married his comely, naïve, young little wife. Both of amiable temper, they were fond of each other and of their little child, the amusement of the other passengers. Madame rather piqued herself on her knowledge of French, and preferred that idiom to Spanish in her conversation.

Of Herr Kriesmar I have not much more to say.

\* Remote *now*, because it lies contiguous to New Mexico ceded to the United States.



He was a good deal perplexed, and his patience sorely tried by some of the tricks played upon him by two or three of our young men. At Don Pedro's hotel in Campeachy he slept in a hammock. During the utter darkness of the night, his companions in the room got up and began, in total silence, to rock him vigorously in his moveable bed. He thereupon called loudly to Don Pedro. Next, an inoffensive missile was thrown at him, when he started up, and called wildly out: "Mon Dieu! c'est un tremblement de terre! c'est un tremblement de terre!" He tried in vain to get to the door calling for help on Don Pedro. The old black porter—for Don Pedro would not stir—at last appeared with a light. All seemed to be sound asleep save the affrighted K—. The porter told him testily that he had been dreaming (no uncommon thing with him in a psychological sense), and sharply required him not to disturb his neighbours any more. So the herbalist tried to compose himself to sleep, and in the morning anxiously inquired of all, if they had not felt the "*tremblement de terre*."

The day we landed at Vera Cruz, he started off, as he had done at Campeachy, on a botanising

expedition, and I have heard nothing of him since.

Of our friend Herr D— I shall probably have to speak anon. And as young Mr. Jenkins (we always called him by his second Christian name of "Agapito"), was now completely one of our own family—for he had lived with us in Campeachy, and now had a room at Mr. Jonson's—I shall take leave of him, when we bid adieu to Vera Cruz. Pratt, the young miner, was sent off to the capital by his employers, and is, no doubt, by this time on his way to one of the mining districts.

I have omitted to say that, as we approached Vera Cruz, we had a fine view of the coast, of the open harbour and shipping, and of the fortress of San Juan de Ulloa which occupies an island less than half a mile from the shore, and not far from the low lying "Isla de Sacrificios," with its surrounding *arrecifes*. Expecting to see interminable sand-banks on the coast as far as the eye could reach, we were agreeably surprised to find that they only extended something less than two leagues on either side, beyond which the country was green, with small trees apparently lining the coast. The town also looked a great deal better



than we had expected to find it. Indeed it had a handsome and imposing appearance; but with San Juan de Ulloa, of which, among Spaniards, I had heard so much, I was quite disappointed. It presented a black, dilapidated, ruinous look, without any of that frowning grandeur with which I had invested in my own mind, this celebrated fortification.

We landed at the mole,\* one of the handsomest and most commodious I have seen. It runs out from a fine portico way, along one side of which lies the custom-house, a handsome pile, and along the other a range of excellent warehouses. The pier, finely paved with large flag stones, is sufficiently long for a pleasant promenade; and its great width very much enhances the beauty of the structure. The extremity from the shore or terminus is covered by a circular bulwark, having stone-seats inwards for the accommodation of the public. The whole length of the *muelle* is 700 feet. The cargoes of merchant vessels are discharged into lighters or into boats, and from them landed at the *muelle* by means of stairs and cranes. There is ample space and convenience for dispatch by the custom-house officers, before removal of the goods, in carts, to the merchants' warehouses, or

\* The Spanish *Muelle* means, at once, a breakwater and a pier.

on the shoulders of brawny porters to those of the custom-house. Altogether, the pier and custom-house of Vera Cruz form a business-like and handsome entrance to the principal port and mercantile depôt of Mexico.

Passing through the portico, we got into a large, dilapidated, and unfinished square; thence into one of the regular streets; and immediately afterwards, as I have told you, we were in the front court of the spacious mansion of Messrs. Manning, Mackintosh, and Co. There we were accosted, in an easy way, by an English gentleman, who expressed his regret that Mr. J— (the partner of the house) had been suffering all the morning from *jaqueca* (sick headache); but that he hoped to be able to join us at dinner. "Meantime," added Mr. Wiseman, the gentleman in question, "allow me to show you your rooms. I am only, like yourselves, a visitor here; but I can assure you that you may, like me, feel yourselves quite at home."

In these best houses, in Spanish America, the ground-floor is dedicated to business; the *altos*, or upper floors, form the dwelling part. Many have *entresols*, which are sometimes let, but by good



families generally appropriated to their own use. Here, in Mr. J—'s house (as in all others of the first class), the rooms are very spacious, and the lofty ceilings are admirably adapted to a warm climate. So we were lodged in commodious bed-rooms, rejoicing, not a little, to find ourselves once more surrounded by home comforts, valued always, but more especially abroad. At three P.M., we found Mr. J— in his principal drawing-room, pretty well recovered. We adjourned to the dining-room, whence, after partaking of the best fare we had seen for many a day, followed up by a glass or two of wine, we returned to the *salon* for coffee and a cooler atmosphere.

Mr. J— was the pleasantest of young bachelors, and the kindest of hosts. He had not only provided for H— and myself; but finding I had an *attaché* in young Jenkins, with whose father (Dr. J—) he was well acquainted, he immediately assigned him a room, to the no small contentment of Agapito. So we were all as comfortable and as much at home, in an hour or two, as if we had been friends of long standing. Mr. Wiseman, something under the middle age, turned out to be a first cousin of the celebrated Dr. Wiseman, now a

bishop *in partibus*, and one of the most talented and learned Roman Catholics in Europe. I had had an opportunity, some years before, of making the bishop's acquaintance at Oscott, and, although slightly, with both pleasure and profit to myself.

Mr. W— was on his way to Europe, and at Vera Cruz had been detained for a month by the loss of the *Forth*, in which he had intended to go home. But such was the easy nature of the man, that a month was to him what a day would have been to another. His residence, connected with mining affairs, in which he was engaged, had been for years at Guanajuato. He determined, at last, to pay a visit to his friends in Europe, giving on his way, a couple of weeks to the city of Mexico. There his friends were delighted to see him, and he to see them; so, from two weeks, he prolonged his stay to thirteen months! And when the packet arrived at Vera Cruz, I am persuaded that had I said to him: "Let us remain another month here;" he would assuredly have answered, "With all my heart!" then have taken up his hat, lighted his Havana *puro*, and gone out to his accustomed stroll to the pier. Happy, happy temperament!

The Wisemans—listen to me as patiently as



Mr. W— himself would; the Wisemans form one of many distinguished Roman Catholic families which, towards the close of the last century, emigrated from Ireland, on account of the "Troubles" of 1782, to Cadiz, where they have produced an extraordinary number of eminent men, now to be found, both in and out of Spain. The principal of these families were those of O'Donnell, Murphy, Wiseman, Barron, O'Higgins, O'Shea, O'Leary, Lynch, O'Neale, O'Gorman, Lonergan, and others, every one of which has produced men of distinguished reputation in Spain, in the Americas, in England, and elsewhere. All the names I have quoted must be familiar to your ears. Of the eleven families I have enumerated, I have become acquainted with members of seven of them, and with the history, less or more, of all of them. Their head-quarters have always been in Andalusia, where they have long continued to form, and still constitute a small aristocratic colony, too remarkable to be passed over in silence.

Our friend, Mr. W—, then, was one of this talented fraternity, and, as a matter of course, he was shrewd, intelligent, and a man of the world.

He was a good, easy man, and it was alleged that he had allowed himself to be too much Mexicanised. I only found him the more agreeable and the more piquant, on that account. He married, in early life, a handsome young Mexican lady of good family, and, unhappily, losing her at an early age, he has since figured as a great favourite with the fair sex, a widower. Mr. W— had a right appreciation of the *dolce far niente* which I think myself, if not carried too far, is really one of the sweets of life. At any rate we fraternised at once; and I found him, during the short time we were together, a delightful companion, and a most instructive friend.

As H— and I had entirely got over the fatigues of our journey, Mr. J— proposed to amuse us for an hour, on the evening of our arrival, by taking us to his box at the theatre. Thither we went, accompanied by Mr. W— as well as by "Agapito," who seldom liked to lose sight of us. The theatre is a very fair one indeed; but I cannot say much for the *comicos* we saw.

Saturday, the 10th. I took a look at the *Villa Rica de la Vera (verdadera) Cruz*—the wealthy town of the True Cross. It is in some places



dilapidated, but I did not find it at all deserving of the bad character which is generally given to it. At any rate, it is much better than many of the towns of some celebrity in Spanish America which I have seen. The Spaniards are famous for *building* strong and substantial houses, but as for *repairing*, they seem scarcely ever to think of it. Thus after a century or two the house begins to get shabby, goes on to fail, shews symptoms of decay, and at last, from pure want of "a stitch in time," goes to ruin. The process is not often interrupted, and the ruined remains of the house not always removed. Bare walls, in many a town, are left to proclaim that *there* once stood a house. The cause of this is mainly to be found in the mode of renting. The landlord scarcely ever disturbs his original lease with a tenant. But it is not the custom for landlords to repair, and the tenants at will do not choose to incur the expense. Then many houses belong to corporations, to the church, to *testamentarias*, executorships, something almost equal to the blessing of being in chancery. The landlords never raise the rent; the tenant does not even *clean* his house till after a long series of years; and sooner than clean and repair it

himself, he moves off to another habitation. Thus repairing is not the common custom, and hence the general aspect, in many Spanish towns, of gloominess, uncleanness, oldness (which, to make a word, may be termed used-up-ness), and decay. There are many exceptions to the general rule; more especially in those cases, where English residents, and English capital, and English *comforts* have found their way. Indeed, since the emancipation of the colonies, a most decided improvement has taken place in the aspect of the cities and towns generally. The much maligned Vera Cruz is one of those which shewed to me at every turn, in the better quarters of the port, handsome houses in tenantable order. The English have set the example, and including at once proprietors and tenants, it has been largely followed by the people.