

LETTER XIX.

VERA CRUZ CONCLUDED.

Jalapa, 20th and 21st of February, 1849.

On the day following the packet's sailing, we made the acquaintance of Mr. L—, partner, in the house of M'C—, G—, and Co., and a principal personage in the port. He had been unwell since the day of our arrival; but he dined with us on the 16th, and afterwards, with the addition of Mr. H—, we all proceeded to occupy Mr. J—'s box at the theatre. The *comedia* was in the usual style, tiresome enough; but we had some Spanish *boleros* which somewhat enlivened the entertainment.

Saturday, the 17th, was a busy day with us: our farewell-visits to pay; a dinner-party at four, and a grand dress-ball to attend at night!

The first were easily accomplished, being only to Monsieur and Madame D—, with Monsieur A— and Mr. and Mrs. U—. We found that our three remaining shipwrecked friends would be the last of the batch to leave Vera Cruz for Mexico, as they did not intend to set off for 10 days: so that when or how the doctor and his amiable wife will reach their still far-distant home, seems as problematical as ever.

Returning from our visits, I went over the whole of Vera Cruz once more. I visited again the churches which are in the general style of almost all the churches in Spanish America, much adorned with gold, silver, tinsel, velvet, and all sorts of finery; many inferior paintings and few good ones. The market place is commodious and, as in Campeachy, quite animated when thronged with market women in the morning. There is a good supply of every thing for the table, and particularly of excellent fish which abroad, somehow, is always a treat. I went once more to the mole. A second and stronger norther had set in the day before, and was still raging. The breakers made a clean sweep across the mole, and the waves hurried to the shore in frantic impatience to overtake each other.

The mole itself was as deserted as if it had belonged to a city depopulated by the plague.

From Mr. J—'s *mirador*, the highest in Vera Cruz, I got, on two or three occasions, fine views of the town and circumjacent country. I took H— up one day, when the norther was blowing, and there she felt it in all its glory. We saw the surrounding *baxos* or rocky reefs including those of the Isla de Sacrificios. Here also we had a plain view of all the damage which had been done by the American bombardment, two years before. Scarcely a roof, including the one on which we stood, seemed to have escaped, and some had been sadly battered. But all were now substantially repaired, to my no small wonder; and it made me think more highly of Vera Cruz than ever. At Mr. A—'s house one ball had penetrated a wall, and carried away the face of a Saint Cecilia which adorned, and which still, though thus mutilated, occupies its place in the drawing-room.

Almost all travellers pass so hurriedly through Vera Cruz, that none of them who have published (at least, of those whose works I have looked into), say much more, than that it is a miserable place. Vera Cruz and black vomit are with them

exchangeable terms; so that our writers on Mexico just give the poor port a kick, and then leave it. Only *one* thing they *all* mention—the *Sopilote*; but even this not correctly. The *sopilote* (so called in Mexico only) is, as you know, the principal scavenger of Vera Cruz, as it also is in Lima (Peru). It is the Spanish *gallinaza*, the carrion vulture (*Falco Braziliensis*). The carnivorous habits of the bird keep the streets clean, and it may not be harmed, under pain of correctional dealings. To see them roost in the evening—in long, close lines, on the tops of houses; black, grave, orderly, silent—is really very curious.

You are to understand, that Vera Cruz is, just now, a free and independent, although a federal State of Mexico. The Vera Cruzanos have their own institutions, legislative and executive; but, happily, they have scarce any other military force than their National Guard, made up entirely of citizens. With the different provincial costumes, now so well known, I need not occupy your attention.

Mr. J— recommended, and it was accordingly determined, that we should go in a *litera*, as far as Jalapa, thence to proceed onwards in the *diligence*,

although, to prevent disappointment, as to seats, we had to secure them from Vera Cruz, paying, for two, a hundred dollars or £20, instead of £14, charged from Jalapa. Mr. J—, however, with his usual attention, contrived to *sell* our seats to Jalapa; so that, after all, I only paid seventy dollars, and had our seats secured. The *literas* are kept on hire at Jalapa, whence, when you wish to travel, you must order them: so ours was pre-engaged for Sunday evening.

This arranged, we went to Mr. L—'s to dinner, on Saturday; and such a mercantile residence as his, for form and size, I do not think you ever saw in England; and indeed I scarcely think there is the same *kind* of house in Europe. It contains, under one roof, counting-houses, warehouses, vaults, wine cellars, stables, coach-houses, kitchens, servants' offices and rooms, drawing-rooms (three or four), anti-chambers, dining-rooms, breakfast-room, bedrooms, corridors, balconies, all, including the open courts, on a gigantic scale, and, of course, occupying, as a whole, an immense area. The corridor, on the first floor, cannot be less than one hundred and fifty to two hundred feet in length; the drawing-rooms are of magnificent

proportions; and the other rooms are in handsome keeping.

Mr. L—, having only just got into this commercial palace, is fitting it up with every convenience, comfort, and elegance. Of the larger reception rooms, only the dining-room was finished; and we sat down at four to a *recherché* dinner. The *cuisine*, I assure you, is, in Vera Cruz, excellent; while the well-cooled wines are of the best. So, when we rose at seven from dessert, I could not help saying to myself: "Greatly, O Vera Cruz, art thou belied."

At eight, Mademoiselle began to make her *toilette* for the ball. It was to be a magnificent affair, given in the *Lonja* or Exchange, by the polite and courtly subscribers. We were much amused with H—'s *femme de chambre*, an excellent specimen of the Vera Cruzana domestic, who expressed the utmost solicitude that the *niña* should, on this occasion, put on every ornament and jewel she possessed. "*Es preciso, pues, que la Niña luzca en el bayle,*" she constantly repeated; "Well, the young lady must shine at the ball," no doubt, for the honour of the house; and so we were pleased that, although some of the trinkets

were kept back, Mañuela was, in the end, delighted with the ball-dress of the *niña*.

The room was a capital one, and everything remarkably well got up. The ladies displayed the best taste in their attire—no gaudiness—but, on the contrary, great simplicity running through the whole. There were a few—truth obliges me to say, only a few—very pretty girls; but every one cannot be the *belle* of the room, and even in England one does not always see any great number of first-rate beauties assembled.

The whole went off extremely well; but H—having danced herself into a headache, by half-past two, we then retired, the ball breaking up at five. There was no supper; but the ladies were amply supplied with refreshments, and, at a bar, gentlemen got what they liked, by paying for it. Card tables were laid out in different rooms, and I fancy a good deal of what *we* should call high play was going on. At one of those tables sat a notability, whom I have omitted to mention—Don Rafael Beraza—the courier employed by the British Legation, and *élite* of the mercantile houses. He is constantly going between Mexico and Vera Cruz with the Packet correspondence. He accom-

plishes the journey in thirty-six or thirty-eight hours, while the regular post occupies four days. Don Rafael is a Spaniard by birth, speaks English well, cannot be under sixty-five years of age, is as punctual and rapid in his journeys now as he was five and twenty years ago, has a nice young wife living in Vera Cruz, and is so general a favourite, and so completely the gentleman, that there is not a foreign house (including our Legation) where Don Rafael has not a knife and fork at his service, along with a hearty welcome. I sat next to him one day at dinner at Mr. J—'s table; and he gave me proof that he deserved the good reputation which he enjoyed. The very robbers on the road seem now to know and respect him; they rarely trouble him, although, he says, he always travels with a watch of the moderate value of *eight dollars*, in case of accidents. Don Rafael is favourably mentioned by Mr. Ward, in his book, published twenty-two years ago.

On Sunday, the 18th, we prepared, with some reluctance, to quit. We intended originally to remain in Vera Cruz but four and twenty hours; yet we stopped there nine days. The climate was beautiful; our quarters (delightful in

themselves) gained not a little by a contrast with our late roughing in the world; the scenes around us were new, and above all, Mr. J—, our host, aided by his friends, brought forward so many pleasant things to do and to see, that we were much more willing at last to stay than to start; for, indeed, we were leaving pleasant friends behind.

Having said so much in favour of Vera Cruz, although, as I can assure you, with no exaggeration, I must, as a faithful historian, advert to two of its drawbacks:—of one I have only known by report, the other, I have assuredly felt. I allude to the *vomito negro* (black vomit), and the little black(guard) mosquitoes.

The *vomito negro* is the fatal disorder, the yellow fever, in fact, which, they say, attacks all comers at a certain time of the year; but, as we passed through in the healthy season, we saw nothing of the *vomito*. I was told generally, and Mr. J— fully confirmed what I heard, that the course and nature of the disease being well understood, it never, *with common care*, now proves fatal. *Without care*, or when arising from excesses which no rational man commits, no doubt the *vomito* is as dangerous and fatal

as ever. For myself, I should not feel nervous about it, even in the sickly season.

The mosquitos, for a considerable time after arrival, tease or torment you incessantly. Although we had our mosquito bed-curtains, they did not always defend us from the buzzing plagues through the night; and, indeed, to keep them at bay is a science to be learned. I myself had, long before, acquired it tolerably; and in Campeachy and Vera Cruz, I was of great service to H—, by burning the mosquitos out before she went to bed. You must take your light, and get it within the mosquito net, keeping it all closed. As mosquitos settle upon it, draw the candle down close to the net towards the mosquito, and it will invariably jump into the flame. But, with all my skill (it does not avail through the day), the plaguy insects contrived to cover us with undeniable proofs of the pungency of their venomous bite.

Not to leave Vera Cruz with disagreeable impressions, which would be at variance with my own, but which can scarcely fail to be produced by *vomito negro* and mosquitoes, I will say a word of another sort of living thing which I fell in with, during our short residence at the port.

One night, towards ten o'clock, Mr. Wiseman, having invited me to go with him, and have *an English supper*, we walked arm in arm through two or three streets, till we entered a nice, clean, and rather genteel coffee-room. Here Mr. W. called for oysters and Scotch ale! The oysters were indubitable Brobdignagians, for each, I think, was equal to half a dozen of our natives. But no native could you find of a more delicate flavour, or better fed and plumper, or whiter, than these mangrove oysters, for that was the kind we ate. A very feast for an alderman! and I really grudged, while eating these enormous delicacies, the absence of the more refined members of our London Corporation. What a rush! could these mangroves be transferred to Pimm's oyster-room, in the Poultry.

The oysters take the name of mangrove, from the marine shrub, to the roots of which they attach themselves under water. The shell is deep and oblong. The ale, the bread and butter, and the service were as at Pimm's aforesaid. In short, it was altogether a London supper, saving and excepting always the size of the monsters of the deep which we swallowed.

LETTER XX.

THE "LITERA" JOURNEY.

Jalapa, February, 1851.

THIS world is a world of mutabilities, of chop-pings and changes, of dissolving and reconstructing views, of migration and transmigration of the body *from place to place*; through the terraqueous, across the aqueous; still the order to man, as it was to the wandering Jew, is—MARCH!

Under these peripatetic (my words are getting rather *altisonant*) laws of this world, the day arrived when we must march from Vera Cruz. We packed up early on Sunday morning, Agapito assisting us, as usual, but, on this occasion with a rueful visage, as he did not at all relish the idea of separation.

We spent a quiet day at home, enlivened, however, by visits from our four *tertulianos*, and