

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

the commandant. At four P.M. the *litera* was at the door. The shape is that of a large berth on board ship. From the four corners rise four posts forming an oblong wooden frame, while two more in the centre, on either side, make doors for entrance and egress. Over the whole frame is thrown an awning with curtains, together with some network to hold articles of use. Then shafts being attached, as in a sedan chair, two mules are harnessed, "fore and aft," one drawing, the other pushing. The *litera* is lifted into the harness, and when comfortably settled in your place, away the mules trot.

Martinez, Mr. J—'s major-domo, and the very prince of good servants, one of those who, after a time, render themselves as indispensable to your comfort as the clothes you wear, Martinez, as caterer, put into the nettings of the *litera* a large roasted fowl, tongue, chocolate, bread, oranges, cognac, claret and sherry. Then Mr. L— presented H— with a box of Huntly and Palmer's Reading biscuits, and Mr. H— insisted on my taking a box of his splendid Havana regalias (idleness and bad example had made me once more a smoker), so you may imagine we were altogether

independent of supplies on the road, considering we had but thirty-six hours of it. A sumpter-mule carried the light luggage actually required, the custom being to send the heavy packages and valuables by *Arrieros* who go in troops for mutual safety against highway robbers.

At Mr. J—'s door we took leave of Agapito (who remained at Vera Cruz waiting an opportunity for Tampico), of Mr. H—, and Mr. M—. Poor Agapito! with fine sensibilities and strong affections, he was always pretending to care for nothing, and on this occasion he was busy repressing a tear, as he hastily and nervously shook hands with us. In fact, I have a suspicion that he would as soon have accompanied us as have remained to proceed to Zacatecas to join his family, from which he had been separated at an early age.

A mattress, four pillows, sheets and coverlet having been placed in the *Litera*, H— got in to recline one way, and I to recline another, heads and tails: up our palanquin was hoisted into the mule's harness; and as we swung laterally and jogged along, a *literero* guided the front mule, while the *capataz*, or conductor, cracked his whip

as he drove his relay mules before him. Finally, in Mexican costume, and on mettlesome Mexican horses, with gay Mexican saddles and bridles, Messrs. J— and L— rode beside us, as a guard of honour, out of the town.

Our road lay along, and close by the beach, for two or three miles, and then, as daylight drew towards a close, our two friends were preparing to return, when suddenly we found our *capataz* in a squabble with some rough-looking fellows who had darted out of a road-side public house, and who, after many menaces, seized hold of his reins. Our escort dashed in among them, and learned that, this being the first day of Carnival, the custom of that place was to levy a sort of *montem* on passengers, as contributions towards the evening amusements and *ball*. Our *capataz* was rusty, the rustics were resolute, but Mr. L— gave them a dollar, and all was right. So we shook hands, our kind friends returning to Vera Cruz, and we pushing on for our resting place, "*el Puente Nacional*," once "*el Puente del Rey*."

Travelling in the dark, we saw nothing distinctly of the country. We had trees on each side; but the scenery, I learned, was not interesting. We

felt by the jolting, however, that the road was terrible for the poor mules: neither was it very easy for us; and, albeit desirous of slumber, what with the bumping, what with the confined space allowed our bodies, and, finally, what with the constant supplications of our *capataz* to keep, now further to this, now further to that side, in order to trim the *litera*, sleep grew shy, and would not be wooed.

About a couple of hours after midnight, we passed three or four men sitting round a fire in the middle of the road; and at the hamlet of Puente our *literero* informed us, that they belonged to the *diligencia* going to Vera Cruz, which he saw, as we passed, was overturned; although, with that *calma** characteristic of the lower classes of the Spanish Americans, he never thought of either stopping when he came to the upset vehicle, nor even of letting us know what had happened.

At four A.M. we reached the *venta*, or "inn," and the little hamlet just mentioned. Here, we found, we must remain till four in the afternoon, to avoid the mid-day heat. So H— and I lay

* *Calma* here means "apathy, nonchalance;" *un calmoso*, an apathetic fellow.

down (as usual, in our clothes) each on a stretcher which we found in the *venta*. We slept pretty soundly till nine. At ten we had a good breakfast *á la Mexicana*, consisting of many dishes; but, best of all, our cold roast fowl, with part of a bottle of claret, and *café au lait*, to wind up the solid repast. Before breakfast, I had strolled to the Puente Nacional; and I was no less surprised than pleased with this noble structure, at once a prominent and useful feature in the picturesque scenery which it adorns. You will find a truthful drawing of this bridge by Mrs. Ward, in her husband's "Mexico," to which I would specially refer you. Mr. Bullock could not ascertain, at the village, the name of the beautiful river, neither could I. *Quien sabe?** said one; "Who knows?" *No sé, señor*, "I don't know," said another. And the most intelligent assured me that it had no particular name, but was just called, "the river of the bridge," which to them appeared as satisfactory as to say, that the structure was called "the bridge of the river." The river, notwithstanding, *has* a name, being properly called, "El

* The *Quien sabe?* of the Spaniard is an untranslatable mode of saying, "I don't know: How should I know?"

Rio de la Antigua;" and it disembogues at the village Antigua, into the Gulf, some six or seven leagues north-east of Vera Cruz.

The Puente del Rey (to give the name when it was constructed) is thrown across the Antigua at a fine mountain-pass; and the heights which rise abruptly from either side of the river, being clothed with ever-verdant trees and underwood, give a striking beauty to the scene. The water, clear as crystal, gurgles over its stony bed, encumbered by scattered masses of broken rocks, which, in dry weather, merely dip into the then shallow stream. The river takes a beautiful sweep round, just as it clears the arches of the bridge. This solid, but symmetrical piece of architecture has a level road-way; crosses the river obliquely; stands, as I remember, on six arches; and, running well on to the land, on the west, or north-west end, makes there a fine curve, which adds to the elegance of its outline.

At a quarter of a mile, or less, below the bridge, General Santa Ana built for himself a fine country house, standing on one of the highest precipitous banks through which the Antigua meanders far beneath. I went, of course, to visit this handsome

villa, at present, alas! in a very dilapidated state. It was chosen by the Americans, during the late war, as their head-quarters in that district; and the destructive traces which the soldiery have left, are much more those of Vandals than of a civilised people. The house and surrounding offices which occupy an area of four or five acres, were shewn by the *major-domo*, now in charge of the seat neglected by its banished owner. The American invaders had pulled down the fine ceilings of the handsome suite of rooms running round the corridor. The doors were unhinged, and used as fuel, on the plea of being more "handy" than that of the adjacent woods. The costly furniture was broken or destroyed, and huddled into corners. In the solid walls large excavations were made in a vain search after supposed hidden treasure! And the walls themselves were defaced and mutilated, here or there covered with the glorious and never-dying names of the Smiths, the Browns, the Figginses and the Higginses, "smart" men who had taken this noble and military fashion of displaying their hatred of General Santa Ana. I speak, as I have said, of the soldiery—and perhaps some subaltern officers may be included—but not of those

who held any commanding rank. It is too well known, however, how little control these had, in their desultory marches, over the undoubtedly brave, but heterogeneous masses and desperate characters who composed the principal portion of the invading army.

General Santa Ana, celebrated for his dictatorial career, lauded as a hero, a patriot, the saviour of his country, the bravest of the brave, at one time; at another, banished for his alleged misdeeds and misrule, his avarice, immorality and public peculations;—is a great territorial lord, a *nong-tong-paw* of the state of Vera Cruz. Wherever you go, you hear of his name, and are made acquainted with his possessions of every kind. Among others, he has a much finer seat than that at the Puente Nacional in the same road; although, passing it during the night, I must leave it without farther notice.

After making a good dinner, principally of our fine roasted fowl, washed down with Martinez's sherry and claret, we set off from the Puente Nacional at 4 P.M. We procured for H— a supply of delicious oranges, a refreshing accompaniment on such a journey, and away we jogged, with the usual swing, for Jalapa. Our security between

Vera Cruz and the Puente Nacional made us quite oblivious of "the robbers."

The road was so bad, and so little interesting, that we cared not when, by half past six, the shades of night began to gather round us. You know, there is scarcely any twilight in tropical regions. Towards eight, it began to drizzle, and so it continued to do, when we were let down on the ground to change mules at the village called Plan del Rio, in compliment to its situation on the Rio del Plan.

When I got out of the litter to stretch my legs, a curious scene presented itself to me. We were in front of a *venta*, or public-house, which consists generally, as it did here, of a thatched building of two or three divisions, with a rude, but wide corridor running along the front. Here almost all the villagers were celebrating not only carnival, but the nuptials of a happy pair who had been united that day. The women were in their holiday dresses, and so were many of the men; but it was a motley group, many covering their poor habiliments with the never-failing *serape* (the *poncho* of the South Americans, the *serape* of the Mexicans); but all those connected with the wedding party

putting forth a variety of attempts at many-coloured, barbaric finery. The whole place was crowded, in and out of the ball-room; for a ball there was. The young men and women were standing up in country-dance arrangement, but their dancing consisted of a droll little monotonous shuffle of the feet, every one now and then turning slowly round as on a pivot, anon quietly changing sides; and all with the unshaken gravity and silence of the aristocratic ball at Campeachy. The effect is laughable. The music consisted of a jingling guitar, vigorously thrummed, but not at all attuned to Apollo's lyre; and it was accompanied by a vocal *improvisatore* who suited his words, with what humour he could command, to the scene exhibited before him, and to the characters around him. The spectators were much pleased: some were drinking, all smoking, and in a corner cards were calling up the darker passions of the older men. During the half hour that I was observing the festivities at Plan del Rio, H— remained in the *litera* resting on the ground, close by.

From this place to Jalapa was a wearisome journey in the dark. The rain fell the whole way,

and the roads were something terrific. I could easily understand how the principal upsets of the *diligencia* were between Vera Cruz and Jalapa; for in spite of all the anxious care of our *litereros*, our mules came down twice, causing, however, no inconvenience to us. These *muleteers* of Spanish America, in every part, talk to their mules, as if they were human servants, and understood every word addressed to them, in every variety of intonation. I believe the sagacious mules *did* comprehend all the shades of the admonitions, and all the intensity of the opprobrious epithets lavished upon them. Our principal *literero*, or *capataz*, a pleasant fellow called Romero, kept constantly either animating, exhorting, or upbraiding the animals which were doing his work. "Ah, *mulas sin verguenza!*" "O shameless mules!" was his favourite expression, although he sometimes used even more unworthy appellations. The mules jogged on, patiently bearing all. Then Romero would mix up with his addresses to his dumb friends, and a conversation with his companion, who guided the front mule, interlocutory snatches with myself, as he rode alongside of the *litera*. He was highly amused at last by my telling him that I thought

his sturdy mules were not nearly so "shameless" as he would make them believe; and what entertained us in return, was, that, after my appeal, Romero was less prodigal of his vituperations and anathemas.