

On the north, the Indians are giving trouble to the government on a larger scale; but we are promised a quick termination of this internal source of annoyance and complaint. I have little doubt, that, as in the case of Yucatan, the Indians are goaded on to commit excesses by ill usage. They are also excited to rise by lawless hordes of desperate villains, and convicted felons, who rove about in those distant quarters beyond reach of the feeble arm of Mexican law or government.

Before I conclude this letter, I think it proper to bring under your notice a fact, which, however, only constitutes part of a system very disgraceful to the English name, and which is naturally retorted upon us here, when we hold forth upon the smuggling system of Mexico. Her Majesty's ship of war, "Calypso," has recently left the West Coast of Mexico with about two millions and a half of dollars, from which the English Bondholders (for the duty is specially made over to them), ought to have derived a sum of about 150,000 dollars; and I have been informed, that as yet all the duty collected from this enormous shipment of specie, amounts to 113 dollars!

LETTER XXX.

"LA SEMANA SANTA."

Mexico, 13th April, 1851.

ON Saturday, the 7th, the *Semana Santa*, or "Passion Week," came to a close; and although, after all that has been said about it, and so well said, I am unwilling to give you any very detailed account of this momentous part of the year in all Catholic countries, and especially in Mexico, yet I must not pass it over wholly without notice.

Jueves Santo, "Holy Thursday," is remarkable in one point of view; it is impossible to say whether it is most markedly *the* day of the year of the highest or of the lowest classes. The former pour into and occupy the streets and the churches during the whole day and night—the ladies all dressed out in the most gorgeous manner; and they are jostled and confounded, without doors

and within, by hordes of Leperos, by Indians, all squalid as usual, and by the poorer class of natives, *got up*, as well as they are able, for the occasion.

The ostensible business in hand is to *rezar las siete estaciones*; that is, to repeat their *Credos* and *Ave Marias* in seven churches at least—in as many more as the devotee chooses.

Again the churches vie in grandeur with the rich and fashionable class of the community. All the altars, niches, naves, and pillars of the leading places of worship are decked out with every conceivable sort of ornament; and albeit the *tout ensemble*, when viewed as such, has a splendid, grand and novel appearance, yet, when viewed in detail, it is, as in other things, Mexico all over—full of incongruities and contradictions. I suppose the serious is got up for the higher, and the comic for the lower classes.

But walk with me, and you will have a hasty glance of all the principal objects which met my view during the last three days of Passion Week and conclusion of Lent. The scenes, as I have said, have been so fully described by others who have gone before me, that, not to tire with

amplified repetitions, I shall bring into the compass of not many pages what, if it were novel, might be extended with advantage to two or three goodly chapters.

On Holy Thursday the streets are cleared of vehicles of all kinds, as well as of horses and every beast of burden, by ten o'clock in the morning. At that hour I sallied forth, and found the streets gradually filling with pedestrians. In half an hour more, all the main lines were swarming with every class and every age of the Mexican population. The church-bells had all ceased to ring; the monotonous noise of innumerable small rattles, made of wood and bone for the vulgar, and of silver with pretty devices and ornaments for the genteel, formed the only sounds that mixed with the hum of the dense crowds which paraded the streets.

The class of pedestrians which first and most powerfully attracted my attention, was that of the *children*—from the baby carried in the arms of the poor Indian mother, up to the young aristocrat of from six or seven to twelve years of age. Many of these latter looked, to all intents and purposes, like little angels. They were mostly dressed, if

somewhat for theatrical effect, quite splendidly, in the richest materials and finest colours. Many of the children, too, were really beautiful, and almost all well-looking. Descending gradually in the scale of rank, still the children were gaily dressed, according to their class. As that went lower, the dresses became more and more gaudy, but, for all that, striking in the effect. In the processions, Indian children were decked out as angels, according to the ideas of those who dressed them, the little heads being enveloped either in flaming pullicate handkerchiefs, garlands, circlets, or other adornments. The *infants* of the poorest Indians appeared as the usual appendage to their mothers' backs.

The ladies of *haut ton* displayed a profusion of splendid jewellery—were clad in velvets, satins, brocades, adorned with embroidery, lace, and the richest ornaments, the colours all decided, yet all in good taste. Never saw I so many elegant, sumptuous, and beautiful women parading the streets before. And according to their means and station, the whole of the females of the better and well-to-do classes showed themselves off to the best and in their best; while the males also, of corresponding grades, were

in their holiday suits. The commoner female class was dressed mostly in pure white, with more or less of embroidery—while satin shoes and the *rebozo* were, of course, the indispensable adjuncts of all. There were many country costumes to be seen, male and female; and they greatly added to the picturesque effect of the whole. Of Indians, male and female, there were crowds; for religious ceremonies are more dearly prized by them than by any other class. They, too, put forward what finery they could, although that was little; and, as usual, innumerable babies were slung at the backs of the bending and diminutive mothers.

Lastly, that large and never-missing class—the *Leperos*—just the same *Leperos* to-day as every day of the year—dirty tatterdemalions, with their dirty blankets or torn *serapes* thrown about them—were spread about in every direction. A day of supreme delight for them—and of profit, too—particularly in their never-ceasing vocation of pocket-handkerchief abstraction.

I moved with the crowd into the cathedral. It was fitted up and adorned for the occasion in the most elaborate, and, to a new-comer, in the most novel and incongruous manner. The various

lateral altars exhibited new saints, resplendently dressed; and the steps of the great altar itself were covered with a diversity of ornaments. Long rows of oranges, laid on tinsel; little vases with flowers, real and artificial; shrubs, candelabra; small decanters, with coloured water, *cum multis aliis*.

The cathedral was crowded. In the centre indiscriminately knelt all the females, gentle and simple. In the corridors, aisles between and against the pillars, sat, stood, or leant the men. A stream of in-comers and out-goers moved slowly and painfully round and round. The *leperos* were in great force, and every now and then I came upon one of them or on an Indian, standing beside, and almost touching some magnificently-dressed woman, who was sitting by a pillar. No distinction here—no fashionable pews, with a livery servant, loaded with elegant prayer-books, to go before and clear the way for Master and Missus, and the young ladies.

There were a great many "*elegantes*"—dandies, admiring the younger beauties as they knelt at prayer; and I fear there were not a few furtive glances from the *Letanias* to the lobbies—from the

Prayer-book to the pillars—from the saints in print, to the sinners in presence.

The religious ceremonials performed by a vast number of the clergy, covered with their gorgeous garments and dazzling decorations, aided further by the solemnity of subdued music from organ and well-trained voices, were very impressive.

From the Cathedral, I re-entered the square, and now observed that a great many booths had been erected, at all the corners of the square, and other places. They took the appearance of arbores, from the green leaves and flowers with which their fronts and counters were adorned; and it was pleasing to observe that no intoxicating, but only refreshing beverages were sold. All was sobriety and good humour.

I proceeded from the Plaza along the Calle San Francisco, and went into the great Church of that name, which was crowded to excess. The street, one of the best of the city, was, of course, filled with "*Concurrentes*," composed of all the classes I have mentioned. San Francisco is of great extent, and is divided into seven distinct chapels. They were fitted up with a more sober sort of magnificence than the Cathedral. "Before

the altar," says Madame C. de la B—, speaking of her visit to San Francisco on Holy Thursday—"Before the altar, which was dazzling with jewels, was a representation of the Lord's Supper, not in painting, but in sculptured figures, as large as life, habited in the Jewish dresses. The bishops and priests were in a blaze of jewels. The music was extremely good, and the whole effect impressive." The principal Church is very fine, and canvas paintings representing Scriptural subjects adorned the walls.

This Church is, par excellence, the *stand* of the Mexican fashionables, who line the entrance and court, viewing the fair devotees as they enter and depart, in pursuance of the day's religious observances. On my return homewards, I entered *La Profesa*, the really fashionable, and most elegant of the Churches, in a modern sense of the word. It was fitted up *à peu près*, in the same half gorgeous, half gaudy style as the rest, without presenting, perhaps, so many objects calculated for the *ad captandum vulgus*, as some of the others did.

In the evening I visited, among many others, the Cathedral, the Churches of Santa Clara,

St. Domingo, and St. Agustin, three more of the principal places of worship in Mexico.

The first is a comparatively small Church, but more chaste in its general character and outline than any of the others. It belongs to the Santa Clara nuns, who, from a gallery behind a grating, and consequently unseen, assist in public worship. They sing very nicely. The crowd here was very great, and the number of *leperos* present was surprising; the more observable, perhaps, from the fact, that the evening having turned out rainy, the higher classes did not by any means muster so strongly as in the morning.

Saint Domingo, and Saint Agustin (convent Churches) were in a blaze of illumination, and in both, the crowd of the middle and lower classes and *leperos*, was, owing to the damp and rainy weather, almost suffocating. The Churches themselves were decked out with a theatrical splendour which really astonished me. But as, after reading Madame C.— de la B.'s description of these Churches, I could scarcely avoid plagiarism, let me, as a minor offence, avail myself, by quotation, of what she says of Santo Domingo.

"It looked like a little paradise, or a story in

the Arabian Nights. All the steps up the altar were covered with pots of beautiful flowers; orange-trees loaded with beautiful blossom, and rose-bushes in full bloom, glasses of coloured water, and all kinds of fruit. Cages full of birds, singing delightfully, hung from the wall—[these birds were wanting when I paid my visit]—and really fine (qu. *fine?*) paintings filled up the intervals. A gay carpet covered the floor, and in front of the altar, instead of the usual representation of our Saviour crucified, a little infant Jesus, beautifully done in wax, was lying amidst flowers, with little angels surrounding him. Add to this the music of Romeo and Juliet [I had the music of a still more modern composition] and you may imagine it was more like a scene in an opera, than anything in a church. It was the prettiest and most fantastic scene I ever beheld, like something expressly got up for the benefit of children."

The church of Saint Agustin had a much more sombre, grave, befitting, and religious look than any of the others. It was accordingly not so much frequented. Massive draperies deadened the illumination of the grave old-fashioned church, and threw a *chiaro-oscuro* about it. The figures of

those who visited it seemed rather to flit about than to press upon each other; and the *lepero* appeared to cast a furtive glance over the scene, and then to retire.

In Spanish America, perhaps more than in any other Catholic country, the great object of the administrators of the Church seems to be to render palpable to the senses of the multitude, through the medium of a *simulacrum*, however rude, not only every character and incident of the New Testament, but the tradition of many of those who have their appointed places, as saints, in the Roman Catholic calendar. In all the churches, accordingly, you have our Saviour and the Virgin Mary under every possible representation, particularly of suffering. Madame C. de la B— says, "Before each altar was a figure, dreadful in the extreme, of the Saviour, as large as life, dressed in a purple robe and crown of thorns, seated on the steps of the altar, the blood trickling from his wounds, each person devoutly kneeling to kiss his hands and feet."

"As I entered the door of this edifice," (Nuestra Señora de Loreto), says Mr. Brantz Mayer, "the first thing that attracted my notice was a side

altar converted into an arbour, 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 mantua-maker, 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 Guayaquil *sombrero!* (a broad-brimmed straw hat)."

One instance more of my own observation. When in Lima, many years ago, I passed Holy Thursday in marking the religious observances of the day. I came at night to one church, where our Saviour and the twelve Apostles, in wooden effigies, were seated at the Last Supper. The figures were all dressed out in full canonicals, a real *bonâ fidé* supper was laid out on the table, with bottles of wine and glasses; and into the mouth of Judas was stuffed a red Chili pepper, the Cayenne of the country. Let me add, in extenuation of this ultra display of material devotion, that all the viands and wine on the table were, on the close of the church, distributed among the poor.

Then, on Good Friday, not only in the churches of the City of Mexico, but in every one throughout the Republic, the Crucifixion, death, and burial of our Saviour, are enacted materially, the idea being to give a faithful representation, to the mind, through the eye, of the great and solemn event which is commemorated.

Although the same *outline* is taken up in every church and procession, there is a vast variety of modes adopted in filling up the picture, from general down to the minutest features. Where the latter are displayed, it is generally for the gaze and wonder of the vulgar, who must have nothing left to the imagination—no abstract description—but a palpable image set before them of their Saviour's sufferings,—the only sure way of rousing their religious feelings. It is not easy to go into the details of the religious observances in a highly-Catholic country, without offending both Catholic and Protestant. The former are accustomed to all the real paraphernalia of the imitative crucifixion, death and burial, and they consider conscientiously, that from the highest to the lowest representation of the same, as being so adapted to the various capacities of Roman Catholic

worshippers—from the purest to the grossest intellect—it is the best mode of preserving a religious feeling in the country. In a highly-Protestant country, the public mind not only shrinks from such acts themselves, but shudders at a bare recital of them.

I have, therefore, only to say, that in Mexico Good Friday is a day of mourning, prayer, fasting, and sorrow with all *good* Catholics, and that their outward demeanour and vestments correspond with their inward dejection.

The most striking part of the religious ceremonies of *la Semana Santa*, in Mexico, are the evening processions; and they are the great passion of the common people, and apparently acceptable to all ranks. To see those of Holy Thursday and Good Friday, you would have fancied that the whole population of the city was gathered together. The balconies and the windows along the whole line of the circuitous route were completely filled with fashionable people; and the crowd in the streets was dense and compact throughout. The *chiaro-oscuro* light thrown upon the innumerable costumes and figures, added much picturesqueness to the scene; and the full moon rising

brilliantly over the great cathedral, showing it in all the softened grandeur of its lights and shadows, was a truly splendid sight. The processions were of an immense length, and of the most imposing nature. That of Thursday consisted of what I may call an almost interminable succession of *tableaux*. The Virgin Mary, on a resplendent throne, and under a velvet canopy, in different characters; our Saviour, before and after the crucifixion; the Trinity; and the Apostles—all moved on, borne aloft on scaffoldings resting on the shoulders of companies of men. The dresses were of the richest kind, and the spaces between each *tableau* were filled up with the dignitaries of the Church, the monks of all the convents, *cofradias* or companies, laymen of rank, and others. Torches and tapers, wax candles and lanterns, illuminated the procession as it moved along; and the rear was brought up by a mingled crowd of devotees, male and female, with many Indian children dressed up in a fantastic but picturesque style, and accompanied by their admiring friends and relations.

Madame C— de la B— gives a very animated account of the procession of Good Friday; and as

I could only repeat badly what she says so well, I will condense her account of this closing ceremony of Passion-Week. To avoid repetition, I have myself omitted those particulars which equally apply to Thursday and Friday.

Our fair authoress saw the procession from the balconies of the palace in the great square; and she doubts "whether any other city could compete with it in the brilliancy of its *coup-d'œil*." From her elevated situation she saw all the different streets which branch out from the square filled with gay crowds, hurrying towards it. Refreshment-booths, covered with green branches and garlands of flowers, were everywhere, and thirsty souls in and around them. All were in their gayest dresses, and they looked "like armies of living tulips." Here was a group of ladies, some with black gowns and *mantillas*; others, now that their church-going duty was over, equipped in velvet or satin.

"As a contrast to the Señoras were the Indian women, trotting across the square, their black hair plaited with dirty red ribbon, a piece of woollen cloth wrapped round them, and a little mahogany baby hanging behind," its head jerking, but with

the most resigned expression on earth. The respectable secondary classes were in smart white embroidered gowns, with white satin shoes, neat feet and ancles, and *rebózos* as usual. There were also "the peasantry and country women with their short petticoats of two colours, generally scarlet and yellow, their satin shoes, and lace-trimmed chemises; or bronze-coloured damsels all crowned with flowers, strolling along with their admirers, and tingling their light guitars. And above all, here and there a flashing *Poblana*, with a dress of real value and much taste, and often with a face and figure of extraordinary beauty, especially the figure large and yet *elancée*, with a bold coquettish eye, and a beautiful little brown foot, shewn off by the white satin shoe. The petticoat, fringed or embroidered, in real massive gold, and a *rebózo* shot with gold" completed in some instances dresses costing not less than five hundred dollars.

Then in the motley crowd were men dressed *à la Mexicaine*, large ornamented hats and serapes, or embroidered jackets; *leperos* in rags, Indians in blankets, officers in uniform, priests in their shovel hats, monks of every order—Frenchmen,

Englishmen, Germans, Spaniards. The venders of hot chesnuts and cooling beverages plied their trade briskly; a military band struck up an air from *Semiramide*; and the noise of innumerable *matracas* (rattles) broke forth again, as if by magic, while the sale of the Judases (fireworks to be let off next day, in the form of that archtraitor), again commenced. These hideous figures were tied together on long poles, and held up aloft.

"But the sound of a distant hymn rose on the air, and shortly after there appeared, advancing towards the square, a long and pompous retinue of mitred priests, with banners and crucifixes and gorgeous imagery, conducting a procession, in which figures representing scenes in the death of our Saviour, were carried by on platforms. There was the Virgin in mourning at the foot of the cross, the Virgin in glory, and more saints and more angels, St. Michael and the dragon, etc. etc., a glittering and innumerable train. Not a sound was heard as the figures were carried slowly onwards, in their splendid robes, lighted by thousands of tapers, which mingled their unnatural glare with the fading light of day."

On Saturday morning all is noise, bustle, and

rejoicing. Fireworks were let off in every direction. Salvos were fired—the bells rang as if they had been seized with a sudden attack of St. Vitus's Dance. Private carriages dashed about; and every *Simón* (such is the name given to the rumbling old machines which do the work of our street cabs), seemed to be engaged. The "Semana Santa" had closed.