

LETTER XLIII.

THE CITY AND THE DESERT.

Mexico, 24th Sept., 1849.

THE time of our leaving Mexico, and our many kind and hospitable friends, and of breaking up the truly agreeable society which we have enjoyed here, is now drawing near. Indeed, we have already lost our two principal "*Tertulianos*," and one of our most agreeable friends. By the packet of the 13th of July, Mr. Falconnet and the Marquis de Raddepont took their departure; and Mr. B—, on the 31st of August, commenced a tour on a scale not much known in Europe. He was to proceed, by the City of Tepic, to the ports of San Blas and Mazatlan, on the Pacific. Thence by steamer, he was to coast the whole of that ocean, touching at Acapulco, Panama, and Guayaquil, remaining some time in Lima; and on, by the intermediate ports of Peru (Pisco, Arica, Islay, etc.), to Coquimbo and Valparaiso,

in Chili. From the capital of this republic, Santiago, Mr. B— proposed crossing the Cordillera de los Andes, and the Pampas, to Buenos Ayres; thence to Brazil, on to the West Indies, and home by the United States. The whole, including a view of all that is most interesting in the republic of Mexico, may be done comfortably within the year; thus visiting almost every country and people in the whole of the Southern Hemisphere. To those who can spare the time and the money, having at the same time a moderate intrepidity and earnestness of character, I recommend Mr. B—'s nice little trip, as the most useful, instructive, and suggestive, that can be undertaken.

Well! we have now arranged as to the mode, form, and time of our own departure; and my Mexican commission being closed, so far as I can arrange it in this country, I have ten or twelve days on my hand, for pleasure and travel. But two or three more letters, and not long ones, must suffice to chronicle what I have yet to say of the city, plain, and people of Mexico.

Mr. B—'s departure was preceded by two pleasant dinner parties, given on the occasion.

Of one, by our host, Mr. M., I will say nothing more than that it was at once a pleasant and a handsome affair. Of the other banquet I must say a few words more, because it came off at the principal hotel in Mexico. It is called the Hotel de Compagnon—it is the Mivart's of the city. Here Mr. Falconnet and Mr. B. had their apartments during their stay; and here the latter gave a dinner, "*de despedida*," to his friends, two days before his departure.

Before the establishment of the Compagnon, the city of Mexico was very poorly off for a good hotel. The Spanish people are noted for their bad inns; and their transatlantic descendants have not much redeemed the character of their fathers. I did not see one really *comfortable* inn or hotel in Mexico, save the Compagnon; the second in rank being that of La Gran Sociedad. The enterprising founder of the new dynasty of hotel-keepers has done his work well, and it pays him well. The house is well furnished, the rooms good, the service very fair, and the creature comforts provided are not to be despised. The dinner got up at the hotel for Mr. B— was as excellent a one as a *bon vivant* could desire, and the wines

of every kind were exceedingly good. The general charges I thought very moderate for an expensive place like Mexico; and accordingly I recommend all travellers, who are looking out for a *good* hotel in the city, to bend their steps to the Compagnon.

During part of Mr. B—'s stay, he had one discomfort, which was but temporary. The town was suddenly filled with great musicians; Bochsa, Mrs. Bishop, Herr Coenen (a splendid violinist) Mr. Douglas, a *black* one, and two or three others of less celebrity. Their individual rehearsals were all at the hotel; so that sounds, however pleasing in solo development, fell in such discordant mixture on Mr. B—'s ear, that morning after morning he had no alternative but to leave the field of battle in possession of the din-stirring enemy.

We found, as the day of the packet's sailing approached, we were likely to have many Mexican passengers; and some of them attached to my own party. In particular, I engaged to take a widow lady and her family, consisting of an unmarried sister, and two daughters, nine and eleven years of age, under my charge from Vera Cruz to London.

The charge was an onerous one; but Mrs. Landa was connected with Mr. Escandon. She was going to take charge of her only son; left unprotected in Spain, by the accidental drowning of Mr. Landa, while bathing in the sea. I could not therefore hesitate; though when I considered that those under my charge were to travel through the United States in winter; and that they had never gone farther beyond the city of Mexico than Tacubaya, where Mrs. L— had a very pretty establishment, I could not help feeling dubious as to the results of the new, unimagined, and tempestuous course, into which these poor ladies and children, all of delicate health, were about to plunge.

Up to the time of agreeing to take Mrs. Landa and her family under my wing, neither H— nor I had seen any of them. The matter was arranged with Don Jose Landa (Mrs. L—'s brother-in-law), one of our nicest friends; and of whom, as brother-in-law also of Mr. Escandon, we had had an opportunity of seeing much, during the latter part of our stay.

But it was necessary now to make Mrs. Landa's acquaintance; and to that effect she asked Mr.

and Mrs. Mackintosh and ourselves, to dine with her, and some of her near relations, in her own house at Tacubaya. So we went on the 15th (September), and were entertained in excellent taste and style. Mrs. L— we found a very lady-like person, with a quietness of demeanour approaching to sadness; no doubt increased by her recent heavy and most unexpected bereavement, under the melancholy circumstances of the case. I argued, however, from her calm and placid way, a passive resistance, which would get her well through her coming troubles. The little Misses Landa were amiable, and, evidently, very well brought up.

After we had spent a quiet but agreeable evening at *la Viuda* Landa's, H— and I went, under Don Manuel Escandon's care, to his brother, Don Joaquin's villa, at Tacubaya; not at present inhabited by him. It is one of the many handsome country-houses of the Mexican gentry. The view from it is superb, and the garden rich and luxuriant in its flowers; but above all in its roses. We slept at Don Joaquin's, and at six, next morning, were enjoying the freshness of the air, and the beauty of the scene. We called on the

Count Cortina, and viewed his house and grounds, which, also, are very fine.

The 16th of September is the anniversary of the Independence of Mexico; and the great National trumpet proclaimed a mighty holiday. The Alameda was brushed up, seats and walks were cleaned, statues were whitewashed, and fountains were set playing. Garlands were hung about in profusion; the great town awning was spread from the plaza to the Alameda gate; in the morning, boom went the cannon, and up flew the rockets. In the forenoon were high mass, grand procession—president, ministers, municipality, guards, militia, regulars, bands of music, and citizens—harangues from great men, huzzas from little boys—windows and balconies crowded with beauty—streets thronged with *leperos*—flags, muslin curtains, flowers, everywhere. In short, one would have thought that the people had really something *worth while to celebrate*, in keeping alive the remembrance of their Independence. Alas! I could not but fear that it might all be likened to the heralded and escutcheoned pomp and parade of high and mighty funereal obsequies. Grandeur to the eye,

but on lifting up the shroud—*death*, in all its pallor.

In the evening we went to Mr. G—'s house; the balconies of which look into the Plaza, where there was a grand display of fireworks. The scene was both animated and beautiful. On the massive dimensions of the fine cathedral just opposite to us, deep shade and brilliant light were so happily divided, as to appear the work of premeditated art; not the casual effect, as it was, of the glare from the lights of the Plaza, falling on the fronts and projecting towers and divisions, while others fell into the shade. Much order prevailed amid the dense and motley crowd; and the day concluded to the apparent satisfaction of the worthy citizens.

On Tuesday, the 18th, we had lightning, which frightened many, and nearly blinded me. We have had, during the last four or five weeks, a good many of the heavy rains which constantly fall during this, the rainy season: yet not nearly to the extent, we are told, of ordinary years. In fact, there has not been much more rain than was agreeable, the roads still inclining sometimes to dust rather than to mud.

On the 19th, Wednesday, we had a call from Mr. Herz, who has made both noise and money here, by having himself proclaimed in every possible and impossible manner, the prince of piano performers. The concerts have been famously attended; but Coenen, the violinist, who accompanies him, has been the most attractive of the two.

On Thursday, the 20th, we had "a day at Cuajamalpa, and the desert." Mr. Escandon provided a diligence for the occasion; and at half-past eight, it left his door with himself and his brothers Joaquin and Antonio, Mr. Bringas, Mr. T—, our British *attaché*, Mr. Mariner, from the interior, and Messrs. L— and G—, H— and myself. Mr. G— had sent off his servants at an earlier hour, with all the necessaries of a Mexican breakfast, to be consumed at the *fête champêtre*. An excursion of this kind is called a "*dia de campo*"—a day in the country, as it really is; and therefore the viands include all that is united in a "*dejeuner à la fourchette*," an Ascot provision, and a pic-nic. I added to the numerous delicacies provided for the occasion, a barrel of punch-royal; one-half of which our driver contrived to spill in the street, by

turning the barrel downwards, and shaking the peg out.

We set off in high spirits, the road going through Tacubaya, from which point the ascent to Cuajamalpa is continuous. As we rose above the valley, the beauty of the views and of the country increased; and after passing a little place called Santa Fé, we arrived at a very long and steep hill leading to Cuajamalpa. At the bottom of this ascent we all got out of the diligence (saving H— and Messrs. Joaquin Escandon, and Bringas) and walked to Cuajamalpa. The road was very fine, but the great rarefaction of the air, made the walk somewhat toilsome, the distance being from two to three miles. I enjoyed it, nevertheless, very much, and at half-past eleven we arrived at Cuajamalpa, which is a large inn, with some small houses scattered about it, and the first stage on this road from Mexico.

Here it began to rain, which obliged us to change our plan. The people gave us a capital room, clean, large, and airy,—not the *traveller's* room, but the private *sala* of the family. David (Mr. G.'s butler) here laid out his sumptuous breakfast (we *ought* to have taken it at the

Desierto) and, I assure you, we all did it ample justice.

At one, the day being now fine, we set off for the Desert, which you must not fancy is a bare and arid plain. The ruined convent, to which we directed our steps, is situated in a beautiful and verdant wood.

The walk to it (H—, Mr. Bringas, and Don Joaquin were on horseback, all the rest of us on foot), is the most romantic you can imagine. It is along a wooded *barranca*, skirting a deep and magnificent glen, which lies beneath you. The wood is composed of the finest forest trees, principally of the pine family, and the “woodman's stroke” resounded in divers parts. Two miles brought us to the bottom of the glen, through many a winding path; and then once more ascending to the opposite height, or *barranca*, we had the road by which we had come, just facing us, with the glen lying between.

All at once we came upon the ruins, situated on an open bit of table land, but surrounded by woods. The convent was originally one of the finest hereabouts, and was finished in the year 1616. The walls and the corridors are all still

standing with their roofs; though of most of the rooms, the bare walls only remain. So of the cloisters. Along these long corridors, the walls of which are covered with names of visitors written with charcoal, we advanced to the chapel, which, though dilapidated, with all the windows gone, maintains its lofty roof unimpaired. It was once a splendid structure. It was here we had intended to breakfast; but our leader's good sense had been shewn in exchanging a picturesque banqueting room for a comfortable one.

On the walls, names, sentences, and verses abounded in thousands: and (not to be behind our neighbours) Mr. L—, mounted on the shoulders of two sturdy Indians, with extended arms, and charcoal in his hand, wrote on the wall, twelve or thirteen feet from the ground,

H. ROBERTSON.

WM. PARISH ROBERTSON.

JOAQUIN ESCANDON.

MANUEL ESCANDON.

AND THEIR FRIENDS.

We next proceeded to inspect the vaults which ran completely round the whole quadrangular building. Three or four of the Indians with us

lighted our way with huge blazing faggots of resinous pine. What an interminable range of deep, dark vaults and dungeons! What massive walls to divide one from another! Some were used during the time of the monks, we were told, as penitentiary prisons, some as cellars: and certainly for deeds of darkness—for fanatical vengeance—for the imposition of lingering human suffering—nothing could be either more appropriate or more complete. The mind shuddered as fancy conjured up all the terrible scenes which these dungeons must have witnessed, and all the groans of despair to which their walls must have listened. It was a relief to the spirits to emerge once more into open day.

At some distance from the convent, and at the bottom of what had once been extensive gardens, now tangled with underwood and trees, stood a large alcove. Thence we walked round the convent, and read the tablet fixed on one of the walls, which bore witness to the date of the completion of the buildings. Next we contrived to get on the parapet of one of the domes, whence we had a splendid view of the surrounding country. Descending once more to the chapel, we found our

caterer standing in the centre with a basket containing glasses, pastry, and loads of ice; while the barrel, containing the punch, stood at his side. It seemed delicious after all our rambles and researches. We found we had a superabundant supply both for ourselves and servants, and our party brought the scene at the Desert merrily to a close.

We now resolved, instead of returning to Cuajamalpa, to proceed down the gorge of the whole Barranca, about six miles in length, emerging from it a league nearer Mexico than the post-house. Messengers were despatched to order the diligence to go on to the point at which we were to come out; and H—, Mr. Bringas, and Don Joaquin once more on horseback, the rest of us on foot, set off to traverse this most beautiful of glens. L— put a bottle of brandy in his pocket, and M— armed himself with a tumbler from the butler's stock.

The beauty of that glen! it is in vain to attempt to paint it—you must just imagine everything most exquisite in wooded scenery, and then you have it. Our path was narrow, and so rugged that H—'s horse was led all the way by the

gallant Mr. T—. Our whole way lay along the clear and rapid stream, which, over its rocky and pebbled bed, fretted its way. The noise of the waters was music to the ear; and I think they were most particularly grateful to the jolly Mr. M— at those points where we halted by the rivulet side, and where, seated on the broad flat rocks, we drew crystal water from the stream, and sparkling cognac from the bottle, to assuage the thirst caused by our long and warm, though truly splendid walk.

And when at last, to gain the main road, we mounted a steep ascent from the valley, and suddenly stood on a high table-land, what a scene burst on my astonished view! The sun was descending on the most lovely of all tropical evenings—the light perfect but soft—the air balmy but cool. On one side, in a single *coup d'œil*, I got the whole winding glen through which we had passed, with wooded hills, one range rising above another, as they receded in the distance. The Barranca itself is three or four hundred feet deep—all wooded. On the other side, stretched away the great valley of Mexico, the wonder and glory

of this splendid country; cultivated, planted, green, dotted with haciendas, and in the centre the city of Mexico, with its towers, and spires, and palaces, glittering in the rays of the setting sun. Beyond, lay the semi-circle of lower mountains, and, verging on the horizon, the great snow mountains, Iztaccihuatl and Popocatepetl, rearing their hoary heads to the clear blue sky, and also illumined by the sun's now softened light! I was rivetted to the spot: I waved to Don Manuel to go on, and before I could force myself to the carriage, my friends were half angry and half amused with the way in which I had delayed them.

We had an accident going home, which detained us upwards of an hour. As we approached the *garita*, or city gate, leading into the *Paseo nuevo*, Mr. T—'s horse, ridden by his servant, shied violently, and leaped right into the wide, deep ditch running along the road, and filled with water. The poor fellow scrambled out—the horse remained—and being a favorite one of Mr. T—'s, he, with two or three others jumped out of the diligence to assist in pulling the animal out.

This was effected with difficulty; and nine o'clock had struck, when we joined Mr. and Mrs. Mackintosh at the dinner-table.

Thus ended our Desierto excursion; one of the pleasantest we have had in Mexico.