

## CHAPTER XXXI.

Excursion to Tilotepec, and Religious Fete of the Indians.

EVERY day my surprise is increased at the beauties of this delightful neighbourhood. This morning Mr. Hall, of Vera Cruz, called on me to accompany him to an hacienda, a league on the road to Mexico: but finding on our arrival that the family were gone a league farther, to the Indian village of Tilotepec, the inhabitants of which celebrated the fete of their patron-saint this day—we took some refreshment and proceeded; and never shall I forget the scenery of this place, nor the happiness and simplicity of the multitudes by whom its streets were now thronged. A little more than a league from Xalappa, the road to

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Tilotepec turns off to the right, and a few hundred yards brings you to the edge of the hill on which you have been travelling. On a sudden the whole valley of Tilotepec, with the village and church, breaks on the astonished eye of the traveller: those who have seen some of the finest situations in Switzerland may form an idea of this romantic vale, surrounded and shut in by towering cliffs and pinnacled volcanic mountains of the most romantic forms, and covered with the richest tropical vegetation. The town, with its crowded streets, perfectly distinct, lay almost beneath our feet; but, at an amazing depth, in the front of the elegant little church rises a sugar-loaf mountain, with steps cut in the solid rock, crowned by a temple, in good taste, — a Spanish erection soon after the conquest; and directly behind the town, descending from the high impending cliffs, is seen an amazingly

fine waterfall, dashing its white foam in five distinct steps into the valley, a sight very unusual in Mexico. We commenced our winding descent by a steep road through the woods which form the concave sides of this part—the scene on our way was frequently obscured by the waving feather-like branches of the fern tree, or the luxuriance of the various climbing plants that formed canopies over our heads: half an hour brought us to a stream of water, from which after a small ascent we entered the town close to the church at the time the procession was setting onwards, to the surprise of the inhabitants, to whom the face of a stranger is a rarity. The space in front of the churchyard, the gates, &c. were prepared for an extensive display of fire-works, and decorated with the choicest wild flowers, palm branches, &c. and every house had been ornamented for the occa-

sion, and exhibited chaplets of flowers. We passed through part of the town on our horses, but were immediately summoned back to the church by a discharge of rockets and the sound of music, which announced the commencement of the procession, the sight of which gave me much greater pleasure than any I had witnessed in the great cities: it was the sacrifice, to the Almighty, of a simple, innocent, happy people, who were performing a religious duty to their Creator, in a manner which to them appeared the most acceptable. The procession consisted of several thousand Indians, perfectly clean, orderly, and well dressed; it was preceded by four trumpeters in plain black dresses, followed by about fifty men, after whom came the patron-saint, borne by eight Indian girls, handsomely clothed and holding chaplets of flowers, and followed by four hundred

women, each wearing over their usual dress a manga of white cotton, of their own manufacture, uniformly embroidered with green and crimson wool, and having their fine shining black hair braided, with red tape, into two long tresses, which fell over their shoulders almost to the ground. They marched four abreast, in a steady solemn manner, each bearing a lighted wax candle; and were succeeded by a strong band of musicians, consisting entirely of wind instruments. After these came the men, in regular order, followed by the statue of the Virgin and several clergy, the whole closed by another band, principally of violins: on each side of the procession, at regular distances, children carried baskets of flowers. Having made the circuit of the town, they returned to the church, when the fire-works were displayed, and a general discharge of

rockets announced the close of the solemnity. We ascended the steps of the conical rock near the church with difficulty, to enjoy the prospect from the temple on its summit; and found within it the remains of a fire, and one of the large wooden upright drums used by the ancient Mexicans, and described by Bernal Dias in his account of the siege of the capital; it was the only one we had seen. On descending, the town presented a different appearance to what it had done an hour before; every house was a scene of merriment and feasting, even the sides of the streets were crowded by groups of Indian families enjoying their dinners; some were a little merry with pulque and a pleasant liquor prepared from the dregs of newly distilled spirits; but none were rude—all was happiness and pleasure. We partook of the general hilarity, and my friend Hall

was dancing with several pretty Indian girls whilst I was making these notes, in which I was interrupted several times by intimations that it was not the fashion here to write letters on feast-days. In the afternoon our host and his family took us to examine the waterfall, and then to visit the Padre of the parish, who, on being informed of the object of my visit by Mr. Hall, told me that, when a young man, he had visited a very curious cavern a few miles farther on, in which report had concealed part of Montezuma's treasures, and that it had in heathen times been the residence of a celebrated hermit, and still contained statues and idols; but that the place was so concealed by nature, and so seldom an object of curiosity, that only a few persons in the district near it could point out the spot. He promised however to write to the clergyman of that parish for guides to

meet us at his house, to conduct us to it. A little before dark our whole party were mounted, and, winding up the sides of the hill, soon reached the hacienda, where we halted a short time and were early at Xalappa, where our report of the cave and its treasures procured us many offers of company to examine it. In two days after we received a letter from the good Padre, saying that all would be ready on the following day, when we set off, about a dozen in company, and arrived early at Tilotepic, where we met four Indian guides, and our party was increased to nearly twenty persons, several of whom carried a plentiful supply of provisions, &c. under the superintendence of our friend Don Juan Hall, as he was here called. On first leaving the town, our route lay through a fertile valley for a short mile, when, having passed what was pointed out as a silver mine, we began a

steep ascent over a ridge of low hills on a very indifferent road, the higher part of which was cut through the rock, and was so narrow that two horses could with difficulty pass each other. When the road opened at the top of the hill the prospect was most enchanting,—down a long valley to which we descended to an hacienda in one of the finest situations imaginable. It was nearly under a high ridge of mountains, whose perpendicular cliffs reached almost to the clouds; the face of the lofty crags was thickly wooded, and from the top poured a cascade to a great depth, but which was lost in the foliage before it reached the ground. Part of the hacienda was used as a distillery, and our party were invited to take refreshment:—a very pleasant liquor, much resembling new cider was produced, and in one part of the enclosed square a quantity of coffee,

grown in the neighbourhood, was drying in the shade. Soon after leaving this house we found the road so precipitous and steep, that our horses had difficulty in proceeding amidst huge masses of solid and compact lava, which rose on all sides and in every form; yet among these masses many neat cottages are seen, surrounded with an appearance of plenty not often met with in such situations. When we came to the top of the hill, such a scene presented itself as I can convey no idea of by description. If I was surprised in passing the crater of the volcano, in my way to Perote, I was astonished at here beholding the contents probably of that very crater before me, filling an extensive valley, of many leagues in length, with an immense sea of melted lava, which, from the slope of the mountain that bounded it, I should judge in

several places to be many hundred fathoms thick, converting what had been a deep valley into a vast plain of solid rock, on whose surface the marks of its progress and violent agitation, when in a state of fusion, are as fresh as if the event had taken place but yesterday, except that in some places a few stunted and scanty specimens of vegetation appeared in some of the fissures of the iron-like lava. We rode on for about a mile and a half with tolerable ease, when the route gradually became worse: it began to assume a wave-like appearance, and the cracks or fissures were so large that our horses were in momentary danger of falling into them, so that it was impossible to take them farther: we therefore left them with the Indians who had the charge of our dinner, and dispatched three of our guides to the cavern, to prepare the way to the entrance, now about a

mile distant, and to which they informed us it was necessary to clear the road with axes from the vegetation which had choked it up. We accordingly rested about half an hour, which gave me time to examine the place where we had halted, which certainly exhibits one of the most extraordinary and wonderful effects of the convulsions of nature that has ever come under my observation. The basaltic formation of the Giant's Causeway, of Staffa, or the more gigantic one of the Shant Isles, falls far short of the wondrous appearance of this valley. On our first entrance upon it, the lava appeared to have cooled in almost a quiescent state, its surface being only marked by slight concentric circles; but in a short time these increased in size and rose in sharp ridges of several feet high, and occasionally swelled in the bubble-like forms seen in the crater; to these succeeded

large waves, rising to a considerable height, and their tops rent into the most fantastic shapes; in other places the lava exhibited the appearance of huge boiling cauldrons, which had burst and emptied themselves in violent torrents. On the left, near the edges, cataracts of several hundred yards wide had swept down immense masses of broken rocks, some of them many hundred tons weight;—these, floating like corks on the melted lava, had met with some impediment in their way, and remain piled upon each other by the impetuous burning stream, in the most extraordinary manner, leaving to distant ages these striking proofs of the horrid combustion of internal subterraneous fires, by which the higher mountain districts have been formed.

One of our guides returned to say they had found the cave, and to accompany us to it: we commenced our short journey

over the scene of desolation I have been attempting to describe, but we moved forward with difficulty, as, independent of the steep and sharp precipices we had to cross, there was much danger of falling into the deep fissures and rents formed by the cooling and shrinking of the melted matter which occupied the whole valley.

We at length arrived opposite the mouth of the cave, which a smoke made by the Indians pointed out to us. It was situated about 150 feet high, on the steep side of the ridge of mountains that form the valley, amidst a thick cover of trees and underwood, in a place where there was not the slightest indication of its existence. To this it was necessary for us to climb in an almost perpendicular direction, obstructed by the roots and fallen trees often piled together or lying one over the other; in some parts it would have been impossible to have

forced a passage, had not the Indians with their bills cut down the opposing bushes. Completely exhausted, breathless, and soaked in perspiration, I lay down as soon as I reached a spot where it could be done in safety, as in the ascent the ground was so soft that we sunk knee-deep, when unsupported by the roots and branches on its surface. After cooling for a few minutes, our flambeaus of torchwood were lighted; we entered the cavern and were greatly disappointed in our object, as this cave, the wonder of the neighbourhood, did not repay the labour of climbing to it. It was in a rock of limestone of no size or depth:—some large mutilated pieces of stalactite on the floor and low roof had been magnified into statues and gods; the rest was all imagination, and we soon prepared to return to the place where we had left our horses. Mexico is not the country of

caverns, and therefore this trifling den is esteemed a miracle, whilst the really curious valley we passed in our way to it, being every day before the eyes of the natives, excites no surprise, and is never mentioned. Round the mouth of the cave, and in our descent, we noticed many fine trees, different from any we had seen before: one very remarkable, the stem of which was as thick as a man's arm, was covered from the ground to four or five feet high by what appeared at a little distance to be a gelatinous substance, of a pale pink colour, but on closer inspection was found to consist of thick clusters of fruit, resembling small raspberries, in such quantities as to produce this effect. Much fatigued, we reached our horses, and found an excellent hot dinner and a few bottles of sherry, to which ample justice was done by the whole party. This welcome task over, most of the company



took their siesta, or afternoon's nap, on the bare lava, and it was near sunset before we were on our return. After leading our horses a short distance over the most rugged part, we were enabled to mount, and soon reached Tilotepic, and at the end of a pleasant evening's ride came to Xalappa, tired, but delighted with the ocean of stone on which we had spent great part of the day;— I shall never recollect it but with pleasure.

Soon after my arrival here, I received a letter from Captain Sturt, of his Majesty's ship *Phaeton*, then off Vera Cruz, stating that he was going down to Tampico, but should shortly return to take in a cargo of dollars, and sail direct for England; and politely offering to convey myself and the articles I had collected to Portsmouth free of expense. This determined me to wait here till the *Phaeton* returned, as the security of sailing in a British frigate, through

seas infested by pirates, was, independent of many other advantages, sufficient to induce me to avail myself of the kindness of Captain Sturt. Dr. Mackie also intended to proceed to England in the same ship, and the society of a gentleman so long a resident in and so well acquainted with most parts of New Spain, was another powerful motive for adopting this course. I had now time to make little excursions with my gun in the neighbourhood, and to add to my collection of birds and seeds. I also began to be known to the Indians who supplied the market with game, and procured many interesting animals by their means, till the yard and court of my hostess began to have the appearance of a menagerie, as I had already several armadillos, deers, parrots, currassow-birds, quans, tiger-cats, &c. &c. most of which were unconfined, and, with

my extensive collection of preserved animals, which were generally exposed to the air, excited the curiosity of the neighbourhood, which could assign no use for such things except that they might be intended for medicinal purposes.

On my return to Xalappa, I was immediately struck with the alteration that had taken place in the appearance of many of the ladies during the short time of my absence. Instead of their universally appearing in black, as formerly, many were now to be seen in the last fashions of England, in white muslins, printed calicos, and other manufactures of Manchester and Glasgow; and the public promenade on the evening of a Sunday or holyday presented an appearance of gaiety hitherto unknown. On inquiring the cause of this change, I was informed that it principally arose from the volumes of Ackermann's

fashions which I brought with me from England, and the arrival of an English lady, whose newly imported wardrobe had made a hasty tour through most of the respectable houses in the city, and from which the belles had taken their new costumes. I believe a few of our dashing milliners, with a tolerable stock in trade, would soon realize a property, and by introducing British manufactures where they are at present little known add considerably to their consumption: the revolution in dress and fashion will probably be as great as that in politics, and I hope will change more frequently.