

## LETTER IX.

THE ancient city of Cholula lies on a broad plain, extending to the base of the chains in advance of the Great Nevadas, and at an elevation of six thousand five hundred feet above the sea.

Situated some miles to the south of the great road between the large Spanish-built city of Puebla de los Angeles, and the Capital, it is comparatively seldom visited. To the north, beyond the barren but beautifully formed Sierra Malinche, lies the territory of Tlascala, whose republican inhabitants, spurred on by their hatred to the Mexican yoke, acted such an important part in the history of the conquest, as the allies of Cortez.

Cholula was the sacred city of the Mexican empire, and at the time of the Spanish invasion numbered a population within its precincts, to which, the few thousands who now occupy a small portion of its ancient site, is but a fraction. If we are rightly informed, its decay is far from having reached its term, and this may be easily accounted for by the vicinity of the city of Puebla, which has sprung up within a

few leagues to the eastward. The principal square is very spacious, and there are many large churches; but we found little in the city worthy of withholding our attention, during the brief hours of our halt from the main object of our visit, which it is hardly necessary to tell you was the celebrated Pyramid.

This vast mound, in spite of the waste of centuries, which has destroyed the regularity of its form, rounded and broken down its angles, confounded its terraces, and given it the air of a shapeless mass of earth, is still a marvel and a wonder in the land, and will probably remain so to the end of time.

It stands to the east of the present city, upon a base of one thousand four hundred and twenty-five feet square; and originally consisted of four stages, terminating in a platform, one hundred and seventy-seven feet above the plain.

It is now very difficult to trace the several proportions among the slopes and brushwood, and the heaps of crumbling brick-work with which its acclivity is covered.

As soon as the sun was up we passed through the outskirts of the city, and round the foot of several elevated mounds, evidently artificial in their origin, towards the base of the Teocalli. A little in advance are two enormous masses of earth, displaying in their perpendicular sides the regular courses of unburnt brick and clay, of which they, as well as the principal pyramid, are wholly constructed. A sloping road of

modern formation leads over the three lower divisions of the great Pyramid to the level of the third terrace, when you are conducted by a flight of stone steps, to the principal platform, upon which the church with two towers and a dome has replaced the ancient erection raised here by the Aztecs or their predecessors, to the worship of their principal divinity, Quetzalcoatl.

The area of the platform, according to a former traveller, measures three thousand four hundred square yards. Its sides are well faced with stone, and thus preserved; yet the waste of the soil has been so considerable on the eastern side, that the building is there wholly supported upon arches.

Two large evergreen cypresses and a massive cross stand before the principal entrance of the church. Many groups of trees, principally '*schinus*,' are scattered over the surface of the Pyramid, and the view from the platform, though not to be compared with those in the vicinity of the capital for beauty, is of vast extent and great interest, and includes the three great Nevadas of Mexico—Popocatepetl, Iztaccihuatl, and Orizava, with their advanced chains.

How far the vulgar tradition that the great Pyramid of Cholula is hollow, may be borne out by the fact, it is impossible to say. One chamber was discovered some years ago in the lower story, in consequence of the road to Puebla having been cut through it; and two human skeletons, with a number of idols in basalt,

and some painted vases, were brought to light. This chamber, which was faced with stone and supported with cypress beams, proved to have no connexion with the exterior, and the main mass of the Teocalli has, as yet, remained untouched. In the same manner as I have described at San Juan Teotihuacan, the great pyramid of Cholula was surrounded by many inferior erections of the same character, though I am not aware what was their precise arrangement. The ruins of many are seen from the summit; and doubtless divers of those isolated mounds which break the uniformity of the great level in the vicinity for many miles round have a similar origin.

The pyramid of Cholula, with those of St. Juan Teotihuacan and Papantla, were found by the Aztecs in Anahuac, upon their first arrival in that country. Indeed the city of Cholula, the 'holy city,' was still peopled by such of the Toltec race as had maintained their position on the Mexican table-land after the dispersion of their tribe, as related in a former letter; and its Pyramid is supposed to be more ancient than any other in New Spain.

After the model of these, the Aztecs built their great temples in their capital and elsewhere.

I have elsewhere hinted at the probable identity between Quetzalcoatl, who was here worshipped as the 'god of the air,' with the patriarch Noah; and also the supposition that the original purpose with which this pyramidal structure was raised, was one and the

same with that which is known to have given rise to those of Asia. To Quetzalcoatl, all the ancient tribes of Anahuac, attributed their knowledge of melting metals—their rites and ceremonies of religion—and their arrangement of time.

But he, who was at once king, priest, and lawgiver, 'born of a virgin,' the 'precious stone of suffering and sacrifice,'—whose disappearance is recorded, and return to earth so clearly expected by the Mexicans, has well been termed the 'most mysterious and inexplicable personage in the Mexican mythology;' and the mind becomes perfectly bewildered in attempting to glean probabilities from the scattered traditions concerning his history, or to reconcile his various attributes.

La Puebla, to which we repaired in the course of the morning, has been called the City of Angels, from the legend which records the assistance given by those beings in the construction of the cathedral. It may with much more reason be termed the 'City of Bigots, for in no part of Mexico is hatred against those of another faith so undisguised, as the stones hurled against many a European traveller testify. And, if an anecdote which was related me in the Capital was true, it would seem that even the irresponsible hide of a brute beast might not shield it from lapidation, if the owner was known to have been bred and nurtured without the pale of the church.

Some time since two English dray-horses were procured by a European resident in Mexico, and unshipped

at Vera Cruz; colossal, big-boned, muscular animals, compared with which the Mexican breed were but shelties. They may have found their long voyage disagreeable, but they were doomed to find their land journey to the Capital yet more so. Wherever they passed, there was a perfect ferment among the populace. The heretical horses!—there was no possibility of smuggling them through the country, or of concealing their unfortunate lineage. They were every where regarded with detestation. They and their grooms were loaded with maledictions at Vera Cruz,—pelted at Jalapa,—execrated and pelted at Perote—execrated, pelted, and stoned, with might and main, at La Puebla de los Angeles,—and hardly escaped with their lives, to be re-pelted and re-stoned on their arrival at their journey's end. There however they arrived; but for any use they were to the possessor, they might as well have been peaceably employed in starting casks in London among their fellow heretics, biped and quadruped; for they had to be confined to their stable morning, noon, and night,—such was the tumult excited by their appearance and character. At length the possessor was fairly driven to bow to popular opinion.

There is a certain church in Mexico, of which I have omitted to note down the patron saint, but I know that you leave it a little to the left hand as you approach the Garita on the road to San Augustin. To this church, from time immemorial, it has been the custom of the country, for the inhabitants of the City and adjoining Valley to bring their domestic animals for

baptism by the hands of the priest; the popular belief being, that till this is done, they do not belong to the Catholic church, and cannot possibly prosper.

And here, at the proper time, in company with many animals of less pretension, came the two English dray-horses. They were regularly sprinkled, the fee was paid to the Cura, and from that time, being considered as *Christianos*, they were allowed to hold up their heads and perform their labours without molestation!

Our stay at La Puebla was as you may suppose, very hurried, as we here found the report that the packet really sailed on the 1st instant, fully confirmed. My sketch therefore, like my survey, must be hasty and brief. The city is large, and regularly and handsomely built, with a population estimated at 60,000 souls; and the traveller sees much to remind him of the Capital. It was founded three centuries ago, by the Spaniards. A hill clothed with wood rises to the north; and the plain in its immediate vicinity is well cultivated, and produces a vast quantity of wheat and maize. In adornment and arrangement the houses resemble those of Mexico in every particular. Sixty nine churches, many of them richly endowed, many monasteries, nunneries, and colleges, prove the sanctity of the city and the piety of the inhabitants.

The Cathedral is the most splendid and richest structure in New Spain, superior to that of the Capital in the beauty of its architecture and for the mass of riches collected within its walls. The high altar throughout

its gorgeous details, is of almost unrivalled magnificence. Our short stay was sufficient to show us that the mass of the population comprized a considerable number of *leperos*.

The city was in a disturbed state; and it was rumoured that the general feeling was hostile to the present government; and only awaiting an occasion for a demonstration in favour of the clergy now in disgrace. The Bishop, the most energetic and talented man in the country, being personally obnoxious to the members of the present cabinet, which had given orders for his arrest, was at this time in concealment somewhere in the city; it was whispered in one of the convents.

As it was our intention to pursue our journey the following morning towards Jalapa, we lost no time in taking the necessary steps. A coach was hired with its train of mules, and an escort of five dragoons obtained for it, by an application to the Commandant. As to M'Euen and myself, we stoutly determined to continue our route as hitherto, on horseback, and to trust to our savage appearance, or rather to the keeping of Providence, for escape from the dangers of the road to the coast.

At day-break, April 26th, we were *en route* on the beaten track, and a barren one it was, after quitting the Haciendas de Trigo, or corn estates, in the vicinity of La Puebla, till we reached the swelling hills covered by a pine forest, known by the name of El Pinal. This is one of the most accredited stripping-places on the road.

Here, hardly a month earlier, the *diligence* from Vera Cruz to the capital, was robbed, with the most ludicrous regularity, for weeks together. When stopped, the passengers,—who generally contrived to have nothing on their persons that was worth fighting about, and no arms to fight with,—were told to alight, and to lie down in a row on their stomachs on the sand, into which their noses were unceremoniously thrust, with threats of instant death if they stirred. Their persons and the coach were then thoroughly rifled; and they were left, with the warning, that if any moved or looked up for the space of half an hour, the carbine or the *cuchillo* should settle matters. After some patience and cautious peeping, they would gather themselves up, shake their ears, clamber into the diligence, and proceed thankfully on their journey. But as to ourselves, we have no adventures to relate.

During the whole of our morning's ride, the beautiful mountain, La Malinche, lay on our left hand. It is the highest summit between the chain of Orizava, and that of the Mexican Nevadas. I have, upon what authority I cannot now recollect, elsewhere termed it the volcano of Tlascala, but though its form would favour the conclusion, I am not prepared to prove that it is such. We made our noon-day halt at a village a little beyond the Pinal, after a ride of ten leagues, many of which lay through deep sand.

And here I took the liberty of prying a little into the character of our doughty escort. It consisted of four privates and a corporal; and five more inoffensive war-

riors never mounted on horseback. Their horses were none of the best, but quite good enough for the purpose. The riders were dressed in a species of uniform, consisting of red coats and a black round hat, with a narrow strip of white linen tied round it. Their nether garments were not conformable; and it was evident their pay and discipline did not extend so far down. 'But it is not the dress after all that makes the soldier,' you may say:—true, there are the arms and the valour! As to the arms, all were furnished with a long lance, with a little green and red penoncelle fluttering at the end, which they carried in proper military fashion,—a dangerous weapon if used with determination and discretion. Moreover, all were furnished with carbines and cartridge-boxes, and the leader was armed with a sabre with a leather sheath. This was not so much amiss, and would do very well at a distance: but during the two hours halt at the village aforesaid, I took it into my head, while the owners were enjoying their siesta under the shade of the gateway, just to stride in among them, and take a nearer inspection of the weapons, and I furnish you with the following note made at the moment of my scrutiny.

Carbine I. Much worse for wear;—no flint, and a broken trigger,—cannot imagine how it is to be discharged.

Carbine II. Seen much service, no flint, no ramrod.

Carbine III. Lock broken short off, and otherwise damaged.

Carbine IV. Utterly devoid of all appearance of lock.

Carbine V. Furnished with all the outward signs except ramrod; but from its appearance, doubt very much its efficiency, especially as I have no proof that there is a single cartridge, either in the weapons, or in the cartridge boxes.