

CHAPTER VI.

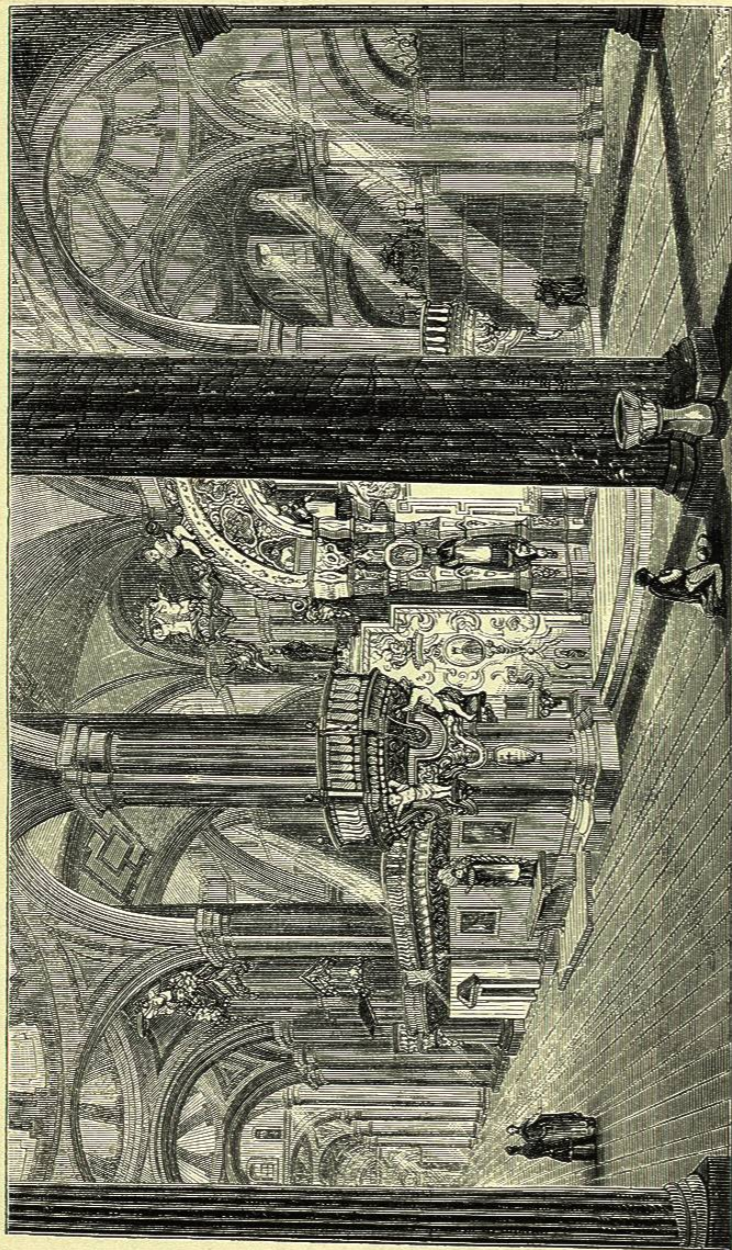
DESCRIPTION OF THE CITY OF MEXICO—CATHEDRAL—ITS ARCHITECTURE AND RICHES—THE PALACE—UNIVERSITY—MARKET—CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES, ETC.—PORTALES—MINERIA—LA MERCED—SAN DOMINGO—CHARACTERS AND COSTUMES—PASEOS—ALAMEDA—AQUEDUCTS—PASSEO NUEVO AND DE LA VIGA—ALAMEDA—DESCRIPTION OF IT—LIFE IN MEXICO—THEATRES—OPERA—DOMESTIC LIFE—GENUINE BUT CAUTIOUS HOSPITALITY—LEGEND OF THE VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE.

THE CITY OF MEXICO.



A STREET IN THE CITY OF MEXICO.

The city of Mexico has generally been reputed by travellers as the most beautiful on the American Continent. Its picturesque site, in the lap of the lovely valley, bordered by broad meadows and lakes, has doubtless contributed greatly to this opinion, and it is, indeed, necessary for a stranger to reside for a long time within



INTERIOR OF CATHEDRAL.

its walls before he becomes sufficiently disenthralled from the spells of climate and national scenery, in order to do justice to the other American capitals. Mexico, unquestionably, is the queen of Spanish cities on this side of the Atlantic; but, in external taste, in modern elegance, and an agreeable combination of splendor and comfort, it does not compare favorably with the chief towns in the United States.

Built in regular, square blocks, on a dead level, it wants the picturesque breaks or abruptness, which are only found on inequalities of surface. Its houses, erected around quadrangles—with a court yard or *patio* in the centre of each,—are stern and massive edifices; but they have rather the air of castles designed for defence or seclusion, than of habitations whose cheerful portals extend a hearty welcome to every passer. They partake of the age in which they were constructed, and of the traditionary architecture of Southern Europe. Yet,—in the pellucid air of these lofty regions,—with its fancifully *frescoed* walls basking in the pure sunshine, and relieved against the dark back ground of surrounding mountains;—its streets filled with a motly and picturesque crowd;—its towers and domes breaking the regular evenness of the flat roofed dwellings,—and its splendid groves in the *alamedas* and *paseos*,—Mexico is, indeed, a capital worthy a great nation, as well as of the enduring recollection and praise of every traveller who visits it.

The plan of the city is as regular as that of a checquer board. Its straight streets divide it from east to west and north to south; whilst, nearly in the centre, the great square or Plaza spreads out for many an acre, surrounded by the chief edifices of the State, the Corporation or the Church.

On the northern portion of the plaza is erected—on the alleged site of the great *teocalli*, or pyramid temple of the Aztecs,—the cathedral, with its adjacent *Sagrario*. It is, externally and internally, an imposing building of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; for although its architecture is neither regular, classical, nor conformable to the rules of any distinct order, yet its massiveness and elaborate detail, impart to it a certain degree of effective grandeur. We have always found it impossible to receive, or impart an idea of architectural beauty or magnificence by description alone. The best writer can but catalogue dimensions and details, and his account is, therefore, always more of a builder's estimate or bill, than a picture which impresses our minds with a vivid image of the real object. We turn, therefore, gladly from the feeble pen to the graphic pencil, and refer the curious reader to the accurate

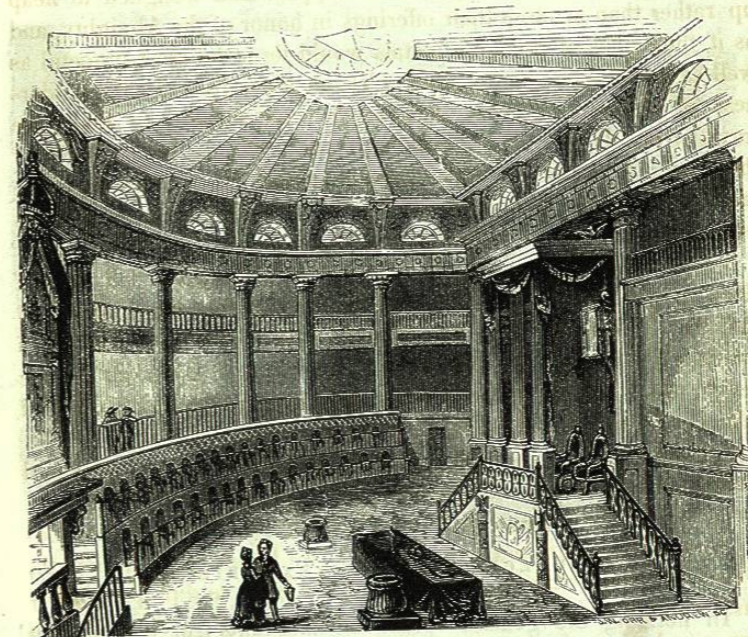
plates which accompany this volume, for a better idea of the internal and external appearance of this sacred edifice, than we can convey by language alone.

Yet there are parts of the cathedral to which even the pencil cannot do justice. The floor of this magnificent temple,—made of loose and heavy boards, which are moveable at pleasure, in order to allow sepulture beneath them,—is the only part of it which seems neglected or shabby. Every thing else is gorgeous beyond conception, although the splendor is more colonially barbaric, than nationally classic. Profusion is the chief characteristic. It seems as if the priests and the pious worshippers had designed to heap up rather than arrange their offerings in honor of the Almighty, and as if their piles of precious metals would form the most graceful as well as grateful emblem of their religious sincerity. In the wilderness of columns, statues, shrines, oratories, altars and fonts, the traveller stands amazed and confused; and leaving the pictures of the church to demonstrate its complete effect, he retreats upon the *metallic* standards which surround him, in order to convey the best estimate of this queen of American temples.

The exterior walls front upwards of four hundred feet on the plaza, and run back about five hundred feet to the narrow street of Tacuba. Entering the main portal, whilst the huge bells are clanging in the two steeples above it, you face the *choir* for the clergy, which is built of rare, carved woods, and elaborately covered with gilded images, whose burnished surface flashes in the sunlight. Beyond this is the high altar, raised from the floor on an elevated platform, and covered with ornaments, crosses, and candle-sticks, wrought in the precious metals. From this sanctuary,—extending around the choir, and probably near two hundred feet in length,—runs a railing, between four and five feet high, and proportionally massive, composed of gold and silver very slightly alloyed with copper. And on the summit of the high altar rests the figure of the Virgin of Remedios, whose dowry in dresses, diamonds, emeralds and pearls is estimated at not less than three millions of dollars.

On the east of the cathedral, fronting the west, and bounding the whole eastern limit of the plaza, is the national palace, formerly the residence of the viceroys, and now occupied by the president, as a dwelling. It is an immense quadrangular building, constructed on the ground which it is supposed was covered by the palace of Axayacatl, in which Cortéz was lodged by Montezuma, when he first arrived in the Aztec capital. Besides affording room for the president and his family, this huge edifice contains all the offices of

the several secretaries of state; the general treasury and tribunal of accounts; the supreme court; the headquarters of the general-in-chief; the two chambers of deputies and the senate, both of which are elegant apartments, and, especially that of the deputies;—two barracks for infantry, cavalry, and a park of artillery;—two prisons; some shops; a botanical garden; and the mint. South of the National Palace, but not fronting the plaza, are the University, containing the National Museum, in front of which is the magnificent modern market, built during the administration of Santa Anna in 1842.



THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES.

Directly opposite the façade of the cathedral, in the south-eastern corner of the plaza, is the Casa Municipal, or City Hall, which is occupied partly by the corporate authorities, and partly by the merchants' Lonja, or exchange. On the western side of the square there are no public buildings; but the palace of Cortéz, which was erected by the conqueror and rebuilt and still owned by his descendants, covers a portion of its front and deserves to be mentioned for its associations if not for its architectural beauty. The whole of the side walks on the southern part of the plaza, and a portion of the