CHAPTER VII

SIGHT-SEEING IN MEXICO CITY

THERE is so much to see in Mexico City that it is impossible to describe everything or to say definitely which point of view is most interesting. After the cathedral, however, the stranger usually seeks out the National Museum, where may be seen the sacrificial stone, which has already been referred to in these pages. Indeed, some writers have said that of the sights in the city of Mexico the Museum may be considered the first and most important. To an antiquary it presents many curious things. It contains many Indian antiquities,—the instruments of war used by the Mexicans at the period of the conquest, bows and arrows, lances, swords, cotton armor, and their wooden drums, the sound of which is described by Bernal Diaz as "like a sound from hell."

The most curious of these is the sword described by Bernal Diaz as "*espada como navajas,*" a sword like razors. It was a wooden staff, four or five feet long, with four blades, about ten inches in length and shaped like a razor, inserted on each side at right angles with the staff. These blades are made of obsidian volcanic glass, in which the country abounds, and which is not distinguishable from the glass of a black bottle, and is quite as brittle. Yet Bernal Diaz says that he has seen a horse's head cut entirely off with one of these swords. There is also in the Museum a mask made of this very fragile material and having the polish of the finest glass.

There are some curious specimens of the paper used by the ancient Mexicans, made of one of a species of the cactus (of which there are in Mexico nearly two hundred varieties), with their still more curious hieroglyphic writing upon it. It is much to be regretted that no Rosetta stone has yet been discovered which furnishes a clue to Mexican hieroglyphics. If this is ever done, most important information may be obtained not only as to Mexican history, but also as to the creation and the history of the human race.

Not only the discoverers of Mexico, but those also of every other country on this continent, found the natives familiar with all the leading events in the history of man up to the Deluge. Everything afterward was a perfect blank. With some of them the story of Adam and Eve in the garden was almost identical with the scriptural account. There is in the Museum of Mexico an ancient Mexican painting of the Deluge, the conception of which is very striking. Among other things we see the bird with a branch in its claw. A miniature copy of it may be seen in the Spanish edition of the Abbé Clavigero's history of Mexico.

The armor of Cortez is there also. This was the armor in which he had fought all the bloody battles in that most romantic achievement of all history,—the conquest of Mexico. In reading the history of the conquest of Mexico by Bernal Diaz,—the most enchanting book in any language, combining the beauties of Ossian and Froissart,—one seems to know personally many of the old Spanish heroes.

Bernal Diaz was one of the officers of Cortez, and kept a regular journal, which he afterward wrote out more fully. He came from the province of Old Castile, where every one spoke and wrote with great purity; and his history is the most reliable authority upon the conquest of Mexico. The letters of Cortez are the reports of the commander of an army, and therefore, in some degree, wanting in details. Gomara obtained his facts from conversations with Cortez and others of the conquerors, and the book of Solis is more a romance than a history. But Bernal Diaz describes what he saw personally,—scenes in all of which he was an actor,—and in the simple style of an old soldier recounting his battles by the fireside, with occasionally passages of great beauty and eloquence.

The armor of Pedro Alvarado, the greatest of Cortez's captains, is also in the Museum. In looking at one of these coats of mail the incredulity with which one reads the accounts of the battles of the conquest, when a hundred Spaniards resisted such swarms of Mexicans, is very much diminished. The armor formed a perfect covering of polished steel for the whole body, leaving the wearer vulnerable only at the joints; and with such arms as the Mexicans used it must have been an accident, and a very rare one, that it was penetrated. The horse was almost as effectually protected. Besides the covering of other parts, all his body from the saddle back was protected with an anquera, which was made of the thickest bull's hide, and which was attached to the saddle, and covered all the rump of the horse down to his hocks. The lower part of this anquera had small pieces of iron attached to it like fringe, which jingled like bells. This last was an invention of Cortez's to strike his Indian enemies with terror.

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM.

Nothing better illustrates the tenacity with which the Spaniards adhere to all their old customs and habits, which has made them so striking an exception to the advancement observed in every other country in this age of progress, than the fact that these anqueras are still in general use in Mexico. No horse is fully caparisoned without one. And this is by no means confined to the military, for private gentlemen also use them,—many of them costing a sum which would seem incredible,—bedizened with a profusion of silver and sometimes of gold.

It was Alvarado whose extraordinary personal beauty led the Aztecs to give him the name of Tonatiuh (the sun). He survived the completion of the conquest, and became Adelantado of Guatemala. He had projected a large expedition of discovery in the Pacific Ocean, on which the ships were all ready to sail, when he went to suppress an insurrection among some of the Indian tribes. As he was ascending a mountain, on the sides of which the Spaniards and Indians were engaged in battle, one of the horses was wounded, and, tumbling down the

mountain, fell upon and crushed Alvarado. Nothing could be more touching than the account by Bernal Diaz of his death and the grief of his wife. There is a street in Mexico which still bears his name, and commemorates the extraordinary leap which he made across one of the canals from which the bridge had been removed on the Noche Triste. It is called "El salto de Alvarado" (Alvarado's leap). Bernal Diaz says, however, that Alvarado never made the leap, active as he was. Whether he made the leap or not, he was a glorious hero, such as the world has not often seen since the discovery of gunpowder, which has had pretty much the same effect upon individual heroism as the discovery of the art of printing has had on eloquence.

The story of "Alvarado's leap" is as follows. On that "sad night" (July 1, 1520), the rain falling in torrents, the moon and stars refusing their light, the sky covered with thick clouds, Cortez commanded the silent march of his troops. Sandoval, the unconquerable captain, led his vanguard, and the stern hero, Pedro de Alvarado, brought up the rear. A bridge of wood was carried by forty soldiers, to enable the troops to pass the ditches or canals, which must otherwise have impeded their retreat. It is said that in choosing the night for this march Cortez was guided by the counsels of an astrologer. Be that as it may, the first canal was happily passed by means of the portable bridge. The sentinels who guarded that point were overcome; but the noise of the struggle attracted the attention of the vigilant priests, who in the silence of the night were keeping watch in the temple. They blew the holy trumpets, which called to arms and awakened the startled inhabitants from their slumbers. In a moment the Spaniards were surrounded by water and by land. At the second canal, which they had already reached, the combat was terrible. All was confusion, wounds, groans, and death, and the canal became so choked with dead bodies that the rear-guard passed over them as over a bridge. We are told that Cortez himself swam more than once over the canal, regardless of danger, cheering on his men, giving out his orders, every blow aimed in the direction of his voice, yet cool and intrepid as ever in the midst of all the clamor and confusion and darkness. But, arrived at the third canal, Alvarado, finding himself alone and surrounded by furious enemies, against whom it was in vain for his single arm to contend, fixed his lance in the bottom of the canal, and, leaning against it, gave one spring to the opposite shore.

El Monte de Piedad.

An Aztec author and contemporary of Cortez says that when the Indians beheld this marvellous leap and saw that their enemy was safe, they bit the dust, "*comieron tierra;*" and that the children of Alvarado, who was ever after known as "Alvarado of the leap," proved in

the course of a lawsuit before the judges of Tezcuco by competent witnesses the truth of this prowess of their father. In an annual called the "Mosaico Mexicano" there are some curious particulars concerning the "Noche Triste." It is said that the alarm was given by an old woman who kept a stall, and mention is made of the extraordinary valor of a lady called Maria de Estrada, who performed marvellous deeds with her sword, and who was afterward married to Don Pedro Sanchez Farfan. It is also said that when the Indians beheld the leap they called out, "Truly this man is the offspring of the sun;" and that this manner of tearing up the ground and eating earth by handfuls was a common Indian mode of expressing admiration.

I have already mentioned the great sacrificial stone upon which human victims were offered to the Aztec gods. It is some four feet high and eight feet in diameter, of circular form, with figures in relief elaborately cut on the top and sides. It is the best specimen of sculpture among the antiquities of Mexico. It is a curious question how the Aztecs were able to cut stone without other instruments than those made of copper, jade, and obsidian.

Custom demanded that the captive or other victim to be sacrificed should fight seven of their best gladiators. If he was victorious his life was spared, but if vanquished he was placed on this stone and his heart taken out, and whilst yet palpitating it was offered to their god. That this was really the sacrificial stone there can be no doubt, as the Spaniards were themselves made to witness the sacrifice at one time of sixty-two of their companions who fell into the hands of the Mexicans at the battle of the "Narrow Causeway" in Mexico, where Cortez was in such imminent peril. Bernal Diaz thus describes the scene:

"And again the great drum of Huichilobos (the idol) sounded, with many smaller drums, and shells, whistles, and a kind of small trumpets, the combined sounds of which were most sad and frightful; and when we looked above at the lofty idol temple whence the sounds came, we saw them pushing and buffeting our companions whom they had made prisoners when they defeated Cortez, as they were carrying them to be sacrificed; and when they had arrived at the top of this temple where their accursed idols were kept, they put plumes on the heads of some of the prisoners and made them dance before Huicholobos (their idol), and immediately after they had finished dancing they laid them on their backs on the stones, which had been made for such sacrifices, and with knives made of flint they cut open their breasts and took out their hearts. The bodies they threw down the steps to the Indian butchers who were waiting below to receive them, who cut off the arms and legs and skinned the faces, which, with the beards on, they dressed as skins are dressed to make gloves. These they exhibited at their feasts. And in this manner they were all sacrificed. They ate the arms and legs, the hearts and blood were offered to their idols, and the other parts of their bodies were thrown to the lions, tigers, and serpents which were kept in the menageries. All these cruelties were seen from our tent by Pedro Alvarado and Sandoval, and all our other captains. The curious readers of this narrative will imagine what our grief must have been, and we said among ourselves, Oh, thanks to God that they have not also sacrificed me! And let it also be considered that, although we were not far off, we could not prevent it, but could only pray to God that He would save us from so cruel a death."

There are many other interesting things in this museum also, among them the "Goddess of War" and the portraits of all the viceroys, beginning with Cortez. It contains upward of two hundred historical manuscripts, some in hieroglyphical character anterior to the conquest, and many in the different ancient languages of the country. Of ancient sculpture, it possesses two colossal statues and many smaller ones, besides a variety of busts, heads, figures of animals, masks, and instruments of music or of war, curiously engraved, and indicating the