LETTER THE THIRTY-THIRD


ATLACAMULCO, 7th.

The cave of Cacahuamilpa, whose actual wonders equal the fabled descriptions of the palaces of Genii, was, until lately, known to the Indians alone, or if the Spaniards formerly knew anything about it, its existence was forgotten amongst them. But although in former days it may have been used as a place of worship, a superstitious fear prevented the more modern Indians from exploring its shining recesses, for here it was firmly believed the evil spirit had his dwelling, and in the form of a goat, with long beard and horns, guarded the entrance of the cave. The few who ventured there and beheld this apparition, brought back strange tales to their credulous companions, and even the neighbourhood of the enchanted cave was avoided, especially at nightfall.

The chain of mountains, into whose bosom it leads, is bleak and bare, but the ravine below is refreshed by a rapid stream, that forms small waterfalls as it tumbles over the rocks, and is bordered by green and flowering trees. Amongst these, is one with a smooth, satin-like bark, of a pale golden colour, whose roots have something snakish and witch-like in their appearance, intertwining with each other, grappling as it were with the hard rock, and stretching out to the most extraordinary distance.

We arrived at the entrance of the cave, a superb portal, upwards of seventy feet high, and one hundred and fifty wide, according to the computation of a learned traveller—the rocks which support the great arch so symmetrically disposed as to resemble a work of art. The sun was already high in the heavens, shining with intense brightness on the wild scenery that surrounded us, the rocks
and trees and rushing waters; a sensation of awe came over us as we stood at the mouth of the cave, and, turning from day to night, strained our eyes to look down a deep descent into a gigantic vaulted hall, faintly lighted by the red embers of a fire which the Indians had kindled near the entrance. We made our way down a declivity of, it may be, one hundred and fifty feet, surrounded by blocks of stone and rock, and remained lost in astonishment at finding ourselves in this gloomy subterranean palace, surrounded by the most extraordinary, gigantic, and mysterious forms, which it is scarcely possible to believe are the fantastic productions of the water which constantly trickles from the roof.

I am shocked to confess it—I would prefer passing it over—but we had tasted nothing that morning, and we had rode for eight hours, and were dying of hunger! Moreover we travelled with a cook, a very tolerable native artist, but without sentiment—his heart in his stew-pan; and he, without the least compunction, had begun his frying and broiling operations in what seemed the very vestibule of Pharaoh's palace. Our own mocos and our Indian guides were assisting in its operations with the utmost zeal; and in a few minutes, some sitting round the fire, and others upon broken pyramids, we refreshed ourselves with fried chicken, bread, and hard eggs, before proceeding farther on our exploring expedition. Unromantic as this proceeding was, we looked, Indians and all, rather awful, with no other light than the ruddy glare of the fire, flickering upon the strange, gigantic forms in that vast labyrinth; and as to what we felt, our valour and strength of mind were increased sevenfold.

Twenty-four huge pine torches were then lighted, each man carrying one. To K—— and me were given lighted wax candles, in case by accident any one should go astray from his companions, and lose his way, as would too certainly happen, in the different windings and galleries and compartments of the cave, and be alone in the darkness! We walked on in awe and wonder, the guides lighting up the sides of the cavern with their torches. Unfortunately, it is indescribable; as in the fantastic forms of the clouds, every one sees some different creation of his fancy in these stupendous masses. It is said that the first sala, for travellers have pretended to divide it into halls, and a very little imagination may do so, is about
two hundred feet long, one hundred and seventy wide, and one hundred and fifty in height—a noble apartment. The walls are shaded with different colours of green and orange; great sheets of stalactites hang from the roof; and white phantoms, palm-trees, lofty pillars, pyramids, porches, and a thousand other illusions, surround us on all sides. One figure, concerning which all agree, is a long-haired goat, the Evil One in that form. But some one has broken the head, perhaps to show the powerlessness of the enchanted guardian of the cave. Some say that there are no living animals here, but there is no doubt that there are bats; and an exploring party, who passed the night here, not only heard the hissing of the rattlesnake, but were startled by the apparition of a fierce leopard, whose loud roarings were echoed amongst the vaults, and who, after gazing at them by the light of the torches, stalked majestically back into the darkness.

We passed on to the second sala, collecting as we went fragments of the shining stones, our awe and astonishment increasing at every step. Sometimes we seemed to be in a subterranean Egyptian temple. The architecture was decidedly Egyptian, and the strange forms of the animals resembled those of the uncouth Egyptian idols; which, together with the pyramids and obelisks, made me think, that perhaps that ancient people took the idea of their architecture and of many of their strange shapes from some natural cave of this description, just as nature herself suggested the idea of the beautiful Corinthian pillar.

Again we seemed to enter a tract of country which had been petrified. Fountains of congealed water, trees hung with frozen moss, pillars covered with gigantic acanthus leaves, pyramids of ninety feet high losing their lofty heads in the darkness of the vault, and looking like works of the pre-Adamites; yet no being but He who inhabits eternity could have created them. This second hall, as lofty as the other, may be nearly four hundred feet in length.

We then passed into a sort of double gallery, separated by enormous pyramidal formations—stalagmites, those which are formed by water dropping on the earth. The ground was damp, and occasionally great drops trickled on our heads from the vaults above. Here Gothic shrines, odd figures; some that look like mummies, others like
old men with long beards, appal us like figures that we see in some wild dream. These are intermingled with pyramids, obelisks, baths that seem made of the purest alabaster, etc. A number of small round balls, petrifications of a dead white, lie about here, forming little hollows in the ground. Here the cave is very wide—about two hundred feet, it is said.

When we left this double gallery, we came to another vast corridor, supported by lofty pillars, covered with creeping plants, but especially with a row of the most gigantic cauliflowers, each leaf delicately chiseled, and looking like a fitting food for the colossal dwellers of the cavern. But to attempt anything like a regular description is out of the question. We gave ourselves up to admiration, as our torches flashed upon the masses of rock, the hills crowned with pyramids, the congealed torrents that seem to belong to winter at the north pole, and the lofty Doric columns that bring us back to the pure skies of Greece. But amongst all these curious accidents produced by water, none is more curiously exquisite than an amphitheatre, with regular benches, surmounted by a great organ, whose pipes, when struck, give forth a deep sound. It is really difficult not to believe that some gigantic race once amused themselves in these petrified solitudes, or that we have not invaded the sanctuary of some mysterious and superhuman beings. It is said that this cavern has been explored for four leagues, and yet that no exit has been discovered. As for us, I do not know how far we went: our guides said a league. It seemed impossible to think of time when we looked at these great masses, formed drop by drop, slowly and rarely and at distant intervals falling, and looked back upon the ages that must have elapsed since these gigantic formations began.

At length, on account of the loose stones, the water, and the masses of crystal rock that we had to climb over, our guides strongly recommended us to return. It was difficult to turn away our eyes from the great unformed masses that now seemed to fill the cave as far as the eye could reach. It looked like the world in chaos—nature's vast workshop, from which she drew the materials which her hand was to reduce to form and order. We retraced our steps slowly and lingeringly through these subterranean palaces, feeling that one day was not nearly
sufficient to explore them, yet thankful that we had not left the country without seeing them. The skeleton of a man was discovered here by some travellers, lying on his side, the head nearly covered with crystallization. He had probably entered these labyrinths alone, either from rash curiosity or to escape from pursuit; lost his way and perished from hunger. Indeed to find the way back to the entrance of the cave is nearly impossible, without some clue to guide the steps amongst these winding galleries, halls, and issues and entries, and divided corridors.

Though there are some objects so striking that they may immediately be recognised, such as the amphitheatre for instance, there is a monotony even in the variety! and I can imagine the unfortunate man wandering amongst obelisks and pyramids and alabaster baths and Grecian columns—amongst frozen torrents that could not assuage his thirst, and trees with marble fruit and foliage, and crystal vegetables that mocked his hunger: and pale phantoms with long hair and figures in shrouds, that could not relieve his distress—and then his cries for help, where the voice gives out an echo, as if all the pale dwellers in the cave answered in mockery—and then, his torch becoming extinguished, and he lying down exhausted and in despair near some inhospitable marble porch, to die.

As we went along, our guides had climbed up and placed wax candles on the top of all the highest points, so that their pale glimmering light pointed out the way to us on our return. The Indians begged they might be left there “on account of the blessed souls in purgatory,” which was done. As we returned, we saw one figure we had not observed before, which looks something like a woman mounted on an enormous goat. To one hall, on account of its beauty, some travellers have given the name of the “Hall of Angels.” It is said that, by observation, the height of the stalagmites might determine the age of their formation, but where is the enterprising geologist who would shut himself up in these crystal solitudes sufficiently long for correct observation?

I never saw or could have imagined so beautiful an effect as that of the daylight in the distance, entering by the mouth of the cave; such a faint misty blue, contrasted with the fierce red light of the torches, and broken by the pillars through which its pale rays struggled. It looked so pure and holy, that it seemed like the light from
an angel’s wings at the portals of the “città dolente.” What would that poor traveller have given to have seen its friendly rays! After climbing out and leaving the damp, cool subterraneous air, the atmosphere felt dry and warm, as we sat down to rest at the mouth of the cavern, surrounded by our Indian torch-bearers. Truly, nature is no coquette. She adorns herself with greater riches in the darkest mountain cave, than on the highest mountain top.

We were sitting in thoughtful silence, ourselves, Indians and all, in a circle, when we saw, stumping down the hill, in great haste, and apparently in great wrath, an Indian alcalde, with a thick staff in his hand, at whose approach the Indians looked awe-struck. He carried in his brown hand a large letter, on which was written in great type; “Al Señor dominante de esta caravana de gente.” “To the Commander of this caravan of people!” This missive set forth that the justice of peace of the city of Cuautla Amilpas, begged to know by what right, by whose authority, and with what intentions we had entered this cave, without permission from government; and desired the “Señor dominante” to appear forthwith before the said justice for contempt of his authority. The spelling of the letter was too amusing. The Indians looked very much alarmed, and when they saw us laugh, still more astonished. C——n wrote with a pencil in answer to the summons, that he was the Spanish Minister, and wished good day to the alcalde, who plodded up the hill again, very ill pleased.

We now took leave of this prodigious subterranean palace, and again put ourselves en route. Once more we wound our way round the brink of the precipice, and this time it was more dangerous for us than before, for we rode on the side next it, our gowns overhanging the brink, and if caught by a branch there, might have been dragged over. Our two guides afterwards said that if alone, they would have dismounted; but that as the ladies said nothing, they did not like to propose it.

Some day, no doubt, this cave will become a show-place, and measures will be taken to render the approach to it less dangerous; but as yet, one of its charms consists in its being unhackneyed. For, long after, its recollection rests upon the mind, like a marble dream. But, like Niagara, it cannot be described; perhaps even it is more
difficult to give an idea of this underground creation, than of the emperor of cataracts; for there is nothing with which the cave can be compared.

Meanwhile, we had rather a disagreeable ride, in all the force of the sun’s last rays, back to the rancho. No one spoke—all our thoughts were wandering amongst marble palaces, and uncouth, gigantic, half-human forms.

But our attention was again attracted by the sudden reappearance of our friend, the alcalde, on the brow of the hill, looking considerably indignant. He came with a fresh summons from the judge of Cuautla Amilpas, which lay white and glittering in the valley below. C—n endeavoured gravely to explain to him that the persons of ambassadors were not subject to such laws, which was Greek and Hebrew to him of the bronze countenance. “If it were a Consul indeed, there might be something in that.” At last our guide, the ranchero, promised to call upon the judge in the evening, and explain the matter to his satisfaction; and again our alcalde departed upon his bootless errand—bootless in every sense, as he stalked down the hill with his bare bronze supporters. As we passed along, a parcel of soldiers in the village were assembled in haste, who struck up an imposing military air, to give us some idea of their importance.

Politically speaking, Cuautla Amilpas has been the theatre of important events. It was there that the curate Morelos shut himself up with a troop of insurgents, until the place being besieged by the Spaniards under Calleja, and the party of Morelos driven to extremity for want of food, he secretly abandoned his position, drawing off his forces in the night.

When we arrived at the rancho, we found that a message had come from the judge, prohibiting Don Benito from accompanying strangers to the cave in future, which would be hard upon the old man, who makes a little money by occasionally guiding strangers there. C—n has therefore written on the subject to the prefect of the department.

In the cool of the evening, we had a delightful ride to Cocoyotla. The air was soft and fragrant—the bells of the villages were ringing amongst the trees, for every village, however poor, has at least one fine church, and all the bells in Mexico, whether in the city or in the villages, have a mellow and musical sound, owing, it is said, to the quantity of silver that enters into their composition.
Return to Cocoyotla

It was late when we arrived at Cocoyotla, but we did not go to rest without visiting the beautiful chapel, which we had omitted to do on our last visit; it is very rich in gilding and ornaments, very large and in good taste. We supped, and threw ourselves down to rest for a few hours, and set off again at three o'clock, by the light of a full moon. Our greatest difficulty in these hurried marches is to get our things in and out of our portmanteaus, and to dress in time in the dark. No looking-glasses of course—we arrange our hair by our imagination. Everything gets broken, as you may suppose; the mules that carry our trunks cantering up and down the hills to keep up with us, in most unequal measure.

The moon was still high, though pale, when the sun rose, like a youthful monarch impatient to take the reins from the hands of a mild and dying queen. We had a delightful gallop, and soon left the fires of Cocoyotla far behind us. After riding six leagues, we arrived at six in the morning at the house of the Perez Palacios. We should have gone farther while it was cool; but their hospitality, added to a severe fit of toothache which had attacked C—n, induced us to remain till four o'clock, during which time we improved our acquaintance with the family. How strange and even melancholy are those glimpses which travellers have of persons whom they will probably never meet again; with whom they form an intimacy, which owing to peculiar circumstances seems very like friendship—much nearer it certainly, than many a long acquaintance which we form in great cities, and where the parties go on knowing each other from year to year, and never exchanging more than a mere occasional and external civility.

It was four o'clock when we left Meacatlan, and we rode hard and fast till it grew nearly dark, for our intention was to return to our head-quarters at Atlacamuco that night, and we had a long journey before us, especially as it was decided that we should by no means attempt to recross the barrancas by night, which would have been too dangerous. Besides an eclipse of the moon was predicted, and in fact, as we were riding across the fields, she appeared above the horizon, half in shadow, a curious and beautiful spectacle. But we should have been thankful for her entire beams, for after riding for hours we discovered that we had lost our way, and worse still,
that there were no hopes of our finding it. Not a hut was in sight—darkness coming on—nothing but great plains and mountains to be distinguished, and nothing to be heard but bulls roaring round us. We went on, trusting to chance, and where chance would have led us it is hard to say; but by good fortune our advanced guard stumbled over two Indians, a man and a boy, who agreed to guide us to their own village, but nowhere else.

After following them a long and weary way, all going at a pretty brisk trot, the barking of hundreds of dogs announced an Indian village, and by the faint light we could just distinguish the cane huts snugly seated amongst bananas and with little enclosed gardens before each. Our cavalcade drew up before a hut, a sort of tavern or spirit-shop, where an old half-naked hag, the beau idéal of a witch, was distributing fire-water to the Indians, most of whom were already drunk. We got off our horses and threw ourselves down on the ground too tired to care what they were doing, and by some means a cup of bad chocolate was procured for us. We found that we had entirely lost our way, and it was therefore agreed, that instead of attempting to reach Atlacamulco that night, we should ride to the village of el Puente, where our conductors knew a Spanish family of bachelor brothers, who would be glad to harbour us for the remainder of the night. We then remounted and set off somewhat refreshed by our rest and by the bad chocolate.

It was late at night when we entered el Puente, after having crossed in pitch darkness a river so deep that the horses were nearly carried off their feet; yet they were dancing in one place, playing cards on the ground in another, dogs were barking as usual, and candles lighted in the Indian huts. We were very well received by the Spaniards, who gave us supper and made us take their room, all the rest of the party sleeping upon mattresses placed on the floor of a large empty apartment. We slept a few hours very soundly, rose before daylight, wakened the others, who, lying on the ground, rolled up in their sarapes, seemed to be sleeping for a wager, and remounted our horses, not sorry at the prospect of a day's rest at Atlacamulco. It was dark when we set off; but the sun had risen and had lighted up the bright green fields of sugar-cane, and the beautiful coffee-plantations
that look like flowering myrtles, by the time we reached
the hacienda of Señor Neri del Barrio, whose family is
amongst the most distinguished of the old Spanish
Mexican stock. We stopped to take a tumbler of milk
fresh from the cow; declined an invitation to go in, as
we were anxious to finish our journey while it was cool;
and after a hard ride galloped into the courtyard of Atla-
camulceo, which seemed like returning home. We spent
a pleasant, idle day, lying down and reading while the
sun was high, and in the evening sauntering about under
the orange-trees. We concluded with a hot bath.

7th.—Before continuing our journey, we determined to
spend one more day here, which was fortunate, as we
received a large packet of letters from home, forwarded
to this place, and we have been reading them, stretched
under the shade of a natural bower formed by orange-
boughs, near a clear, cold tank of water in the garden.
To-morrow we shall set off betimes for the hacienda of
Cocoyoc, the property of Don Juan Goriva, with whom
C—n was acquainted in Mexico. After visiting that
and some other of the principal estates, we shall continue
our ride to Puebla, and as we shall pass a few days there,
hope to have leisure to write again from that city.

LETTER THE THIRTY-FOURTH

Ride by Starlight—Fear of Robbers—Tropical Wild Flowers—Stout
Escort—Hattecé—Hacienda of Cocoyoc—A Fire—Three Thou-
sand Orange-trees—Coffee Mills, etc.—Variety of Tropical Fruits
—Prodigality of Nature—Casasano—Celebrated Reservoir—Ride
to Santa Clara—A Philosopher—A Scorpion—Leave Santa Clara
—Dangerous Barranca—Colon—Agreeable House—Civil Adminis-
trador—San Nicolás—Solitude—Franciscan Friar—Rainy Morn-
ing—Pink Turban—Arrival at Hilsco—Cypress—Department of
Puebla—Volcanoes—Dona Marina—Verses—Popocatepetl—Cho-
lula—Great Pyramid—Arrival at Puebla.

On the 9th of February we took leave of Atlacamuco
and the hospitable administrador, and our party being
diminished by the absence of Don Pedro, who was obliged
to go to Mexico, we set off as usual by starlight, being
warned of various bad bits on the road, where the ladies
at least were advised to dismount. The country was
wild and pretty, mountainous and stony. When the light
came in we separated and galloped about in all directions.