

AN ODD OLD CITY.

President Lincoln in appointing a consul to Quito remarked to him that he had given him "the highest office in the power of the President to bestow."

Nowadays that would mean the post-office at Leadville, but then it was the mission to Quito, the capital of Ecuador.

Quito is remarkable for much else than its great altitude. It lies almost exactly under, or over the equator, and upon the breast of a mighty volcano, Pichincha, whose snow-clad summit towers fifteen thousand eight hundred and twenty-seven feet, but fortunately the crater is on the other side of the peak, so that when an eruption takes place, the fire and lava do not reach it.

The valley in which Quito lies is girdled with twenty-one volcanoes, of which three are constantly active, five dormant, but liable to break out at any time, and twelve extinct and harmless. There are twenty-two mountains whose summits are covered with everlasting snow, although they are directly under the equator, where the snow line is eighteen thousand feet.

There are forty more peaks that are more than ten thousand feet high, and the group forms the most majestic assemblage of mountains on the face of the globe. The monarch, the commander of this grand army of Titans, is Chimborazo, twenty-one thousand seven hundred and twenty-one feet high.

To reach Quito from the sea one must ride nine days on muleback. There is no road for waggons, but only a bridle-path, which crosses the breast of Chimborazo at a height of fourteen thousand feet, and it is a journey of great hardship and discomfort. All freight for the interior of Ecuador is carried upon the backs of mules or men, who travel twelve or fourteen hours a day, and take two or three weeks for the journey.

There was no telegraph line until a few years ago, and it is useless most of the time, for the people cut down the poles for firewood, and steal the wire to repair their harness and panniers with.

But having once reached the capital of the Incas, it seems like entering another world.

Quito is at least two hundred years behind the times in almost every feature of civilization. It is so far removed from the rest of the world that the inhabitants seldom leave it, and people from the outside do not often go there.

The city is without a decent hotel, although there are seventy-five or eighty thousand inhabitants. There is not a carriage or a wagon in the place, and only a few carts of the most primitive pattern.

The history of Quito has never been written, but the traditions make it as old as Jerusalem or Damascus. The Incas have traditions of a mighty nation called the Quitos, who lived there before their fathers came, but of whom the world has no other knowledge. All we know is that Pizarro found a magnificent capital of a mighty empire, extending three thousand miles, and as thickly settled as China or the interior of Europe, with beautiful palaces of stone, full of gold and silver and gems; but it was all destroyed.

Decay and dilapidation, poverty and ignorance, filth and depravity are the most conspicuous features of life in Quito, but the people are as vain and proud as if they had all the good things of the world, and think they have a grander city than London or New York. The only portion of the population who seem to be prosperous consists of the buzzards, the scavengers of the town, and as all the filth and refuse from the houses is pitched into the streets, they have plenty to do.

The men stand idly around the street corners, wrapped in their ponchos, for it is cool in the shade, and repulsive looking beggars reach out their hands for alms to those who pass by. The women are seldom seen in the streets except on feast days or early in the morning when they go to mass, and then they keep their faces so covered that it is impossible to tell one from another.

Almost every second person you meet is a priest or a monk, and they wear all sorts of queer gowns and frocks, with the old-fashioned shovel hats that we see in the pictures of olden times in Italy and Spain. Soldiers are numerous, usually bare-footed, and wearing uniforms of ordinary white cotton sheeting.

Water-carriers are always to be seen with

great jars of clay, holding half a barrel, on their backs, going to and from the fountain in the Plaza. There are no pipes or wells to supply the houses, and all the water used by the families has to be brought by the servants, or purchased from the public carriers at so much a gallon.

The city is traversed by deep ravines that are arched over with heavy masonry, on which the houses rest. All the streets are narrow, and carriages could scarcely pass upon them if there were any. The sidewalks are in proportion to the streets, and one wonders what they were made for, as two people could not possibly go abreast or pass each other upon them.

It is even difficult for one man to keep both feet upon the sidewalk without rubbing the whitewash off the walls of the houses, and the inhabitants, who are never guilty of any unnecessary exertion, have abandoned the effort, and walk in the road. The roofs of the houses, which are made of curved tiles, like sewer pipes cut lengthwise, reach over the pavements two or three feet, and water-spouts project still farther.

Few of the houses have windows looking upon the street on the ground floor, but are lighted from the inner courts.



There is only one entrance through which everybody and everything that enters the house must go, and at night it is closed with great oaken doors securely barred. There is no gas, but a law requires each householder to hang a lantern over his door with a lighted candle in it. When the candles burn out at ten or eleven o'clock the streets are totally dark. The policemen carry lanterns and long pikes, and when the clocks strike the hours they call out "Serenos! Serenos!" which means that "all is well." Therefore, the policemen are called "Serenos."

All the men wear ponchos, blankets with slits cut in the centre through which their heads are passed. The poncho is the most useful of garments, for it is a substitute for a coat by day, a coverlet by night, an umbrella when it rains, and a basket when there is anything bulky to carry.

The women wear a similar garment, the paneulon, or manta, with which they hide their heads and faces as well as their bodies.

The women are notoriously untidy in their dress and habits, but the paneulon

hides their defects. There is no such a thing as a bonnet in all Ecuador. The Indians, said to be the descendants of the Incas, wear nothing but black, as a pathetic, perpetual mourning for Atahualpa, their king, the last of the Incas, who was strangled by Pizarro.

The people are scrupulously polite, but never do what they promise. If a man should carry out an agreement, as he would be expected to do in other countries, his neighbors would look upon him as a most eccentric individual. If you contract for a horse to be brought to your door at nine o'clock in the morning, you must not look for him till twelve, if he comes at all. If a shoemaker promises to make you a pair of boots by Saturday night you need not expect them for a week or two after.

There are no fixed prices for anything in the stores. If you ask the cost of an article the merchant will reply, "How much will you give for it?" If you name a sum he will then ask twice or three times as much as you offer, and negotio with you. The women in the market will sell nothing by wholesale. If potatoes are a medio, six cents a pound, every pound will be weighed out separately, no matter whether you buy two pounds or a bushel.

There is no money smaller than the quartillo, three cents, so the change is made in loaves of bread. On his way to market the buyer stops at the baker's and fills his basket with bread to make change with, so many rolls to the penny.

If you go to a market-woman, and tell her you want such and such vegetables, she asks for your money. When you give it to her she hands you what you have bought. If you order a coat at the tailor's, or boots at the shoemaker's you have to pay for them in advance, for they may not have

the means to get the materials at a wholesale store, and have no credit. The landlord at the hotel, or at the boarding-house where you are staying, comes around every morning before he goes to market, and asks you to pay your board for the day. Otherwise he could not buy food.

At the entrances of most of the houses are effigies of saints with candles burning before them, and all who enter must take off their hats and cross themselves. Service is going on in the churches almost continuously, and the air is filled with the clangor of bells from morning till night. No lady of quality goes to church without a servant following her, who carries her prayer rug.

There are no pews nor seats in the churches, but the floors are marked off in squares, which are rented like sittings. The servant lays the prayer rug down, the lady kneels upon it during her devotions, and at the close of the service the servant comes again to take it away.

Servants always go in droves. When you hire a cook you take her husband and the rest of her family to board, and they bring their dogs and rabbits, their pigs, their chickens, and all their other property with them. The husband may be a peddler or a blacksmith, or he may be a soldier,

but he continues to live with his wife when she goes out to service. The children of the family may be used for light duties, such as going on errands or watching the baby, and no extra pay is expected, but for every servant you hire you may depend upon having a dozen or more extra mouths to feed.

There is not a stove or a chimney in all Quito. The weather is seldom cold enough to require a fire for heating purposes, and all the cooking is done with charcoal on a sort of shelf like a blacksmith's forge. There must be a different fire for every pot or kettle and generally two persons to attend them, one with a pair of bellows, and the other to keep the pots from tipping over, for they are made with rounded bottoms like a ginger-beer bottle. No laundry work is ever done in the house, but all the soiled clothes are taken to the nearest brook, washed in the cold running water, and spread upon the stones to dry in the sun.

Very little water is used, for drinking, for bathing, or for laundry purposes. There is a national prejudice against it. The people have a notion that water is unwholesome, that it causes dyspepsia if too much is taken into the stomach, and that a fever will result from too free use of it upon the skin.

Women seldom wash their faces but wipe them with cloths, and then spread on a sort of plaster made of magnesia and the whites of eggs.

The Indians constitute the laboring population and they carry all their burdens on their backs. They do not seem to have any strength in their arms. A broad strap is passed around the forehead to sustain the load, and another around the shoulders. They generally take a slow trot when on a journey, which they can keep up for hours without tiring, even with a hundred pounds on their backs.

They never laugh nor sing, have no sports, no songs, no tales, but are sullen, morose, stupid, and submissive to all sorts of cruelty and oppression. The Spaniards have been hard masters, and three hundred and fifty years of cruel persecution and oppression have crushed out the spirit of the poor son of the Inca, so that he no longer smiles.

The Indians, and in fact nearly all the lower classes, seldom marry because they cannot afford to do so, as the fees charged by the priests are so high. Even among the aristocratic classes it is the custom for young people to solicit money among their friends to pay their marriage fee, and it is a common thing to see a man going around with a little basket, among the throngs at the market-place, and saying to those he approaches:

"For the love of the Virgin, most illustrious senor, give me a medio toward the payment of my marriage fee."

The aristocratic ladies never go shopping but have samples brought to them from the stores, and select their goods in that way. Articles purchased are never wrapped in packages, for paper is too expensive. All ladies, as well as gentlemen, are inveterate smokers and gamblers, and spend much of their time with cigarettes and cards.

There are no concerts, or lectures, or museums, or public meetings, and very seldom a dinner-party, for each family has all it can do to provide its own food or drink, without entertaining its friends and neighbors. The ladies do not call upon each other, but do all their visiting from the balconies of their houses, or while they are on their way to and from mass.

Bull-baiting and cock-fighting are the chief amusements, with carnivals and masquerades on feast days. The men and women dress themselves in fantastic costumes on these occasions, and throng the streets, pelting each other with egg-shells filled with perfumed water, or bunches of colored paper cut into little pieces, like snowflakes.

The people are all Catholics, and are much more bigoted and intolerant than in Rome itself, or in any other country in the world. No Protestant is allowed to get married, or testify in the courts, or be buried in the cemeteries, and not many years have passed since they were stoned in the streets. All imported goods are sprinkled with holy water in the custom-houses, before they are sold, so as to sanctify them, and no books are admitted