

CHAPTER VIII.

Journey to Bolonchen. — Bad Road. — Large Hacienda. — Imposing Gateway. — An inhospitable Host. — Ruins of Ytsimpte. — Ruined Edifice. — Staircase with sculptured Stones. — Square Building. — Façade decorated with Pillars. — Ruined Walls. — Remains of a sculptured Figure. — Character and Aspect of the Ruins. — Departure. — Arrival at the Village of Bolonchen. — Scene of Contentment. — Wells. — Derivation of the Word Bolonchen. — Origin of the Wells unknown. — The Cura. — Visit to an extraordinary Cave. — Entrance to it. — Precipitous Descents. — A wild Scene. — Rude Ladders. — Dangers of the Descent. — Indian Name of this Cave. — A subterranean Ball-room. — Cavernous Chamber. — Numerous Passages. — Great Number of Ladders. — Rocky Basin of Water. — Great Depth of the Cave. — A Bath in the Basin. — Its Indian Name. — Return to the Rocky Chamber. — Exploration of another Passage. — Another Basin. — Indian Stories. — Two other Passages and Basins. — Seven Basins in all. — Indian Names of the remaining five. — Want of Philosophical Instruments. — Surface of the Country. — This Cave the sole Watering-place of a large Indian Village. — Return. — Visit to the Cura. — Report of more Ruins.

At daylight the next morning the woman was on the spot to remind us of our promise. We gave her a cup of coffee, and with a small present, which amply satisfied her for our forcible occupation of her hut, left her again in possession.

Our party this morning divided into three parcels. The carriers set out direct for Bolonchen; Mr. Catherwood went, under the guidance of Dimas, to make a drawing of the last building, and Doctor Cabot, myself, and Albino to visit another ruined

city, all to meet again at Bolonchen in the evening.

Doctor Cabot and myself were warned that the path we proposed taking was not passable on horseback. For the first league our arms and legs were continually scratched and torn by briars, and only our hats saved us from the fate of Absalom. In that hot climate, it was always uncomfortable to tie the sombrero under the chin; and there were few things more annoying than to have it knocked off every five minutes, and be obliged to dismount and pick it up. Our Indian guide moved easily on foot, just clearing the branches on each side and overhead. We had one alternative, which was to dismount and lead our horses; but, unused to having favours shown them, they pulled back, so that the labour of dragging them on added greatly to the fatigue of walking.

Emerging from this tangled path, we came out upon a large hacienda, and stopped before an imposing gateway, under the shade of great seybo trees, within which were large and well-filled water-tanks. Our horses had drunk nothing since the afternoon before; we therefore dismounted, loosened the saddle girths, and, as a matter of form, sent Albino to ask permission to water them, who returned with the answer that we might for a real. At Chunhuhu it always cost us more than this in the labour of Indians; but the demand seemed so churlish at the gate of this large hacienda, that we refused to

pay, and again mounted. Albino told us that we might save a slight circuit by passing through the cattle-yard; and we rode through, close beside the water-tanks and a group of men, at the head of whom was the master, and, coming out upon the camino real, shook from off our feet the dust of the inhospitable hacienda. Our poor horses bore the brunt of sustaining our dignity.

At one o'clock we came to a rancho of Indians, where we bought some tortillas and procured a guide. Leaving the camino real, we turned again into a milpa path, and in about an hour came in sight of another ruined city, known by the name of Ytsimpte. From the plain on which we approached we saw on the left, on the brow of a hill, a range of buildings, six or eight hundred feet in length, all laid bare to view, the trees having just been felled; and as we drew near we saw Indians engaged in continuing the clearing. On arriving at the foot of the buildings, Albino found that the clearing was made by order of the alcalde of Bolonchen, at the instance and under the direction of the padre, in expectation of our visit and for our benefit!

We had another subject of congratulation on account of our horses. There was an aguada in the neighbourhood, to which we immediately sent them, and, carrying our traps up to the terrace of the nearest building, we sat down before it to meditate and lunch.

This over, we commenced a survey of the ruins.

The clearings made by our unknown friends enabled us to form at once a general idea of their character and extent, and to move from place to place with comparative facility. These ruins lie in the village of Bolonchen, and the first apartment we entered showed the effects of this vicinity. All the smooth stones of the inner wall had been picked out and carried away for building purposes, and the sides presented the cavities in the bed of mortar from which they had been taken. The edifice was about two hundred feet long. It had one apartment, perhaps sixty feet long, and a grand staircase twenty feet wide rose in the centre to the top. This staircase was in a ruinous condition, but the outer stones of the lower steps remained, richly ornamented with sculpture; and probably the whole casing on each side had once possessed the same rich decoration.

Beyond this was another large building, square and peculiar in its plan. At the extreme end the whole façade lay unbroken on the ground, held together by the great mass of mortar and stones, and presenting the entire line of pillars with which it had been decorated. In the doorway of an inner apartment was an ornamented pillar, and on the walls was the print of the mysterious red hand. Turn which way we would, ruin was before us. At right angles with the first building was a line of ruined walls, following which I passed, lying on the ground, the headless trunk

of a sculptured body; the legs, too, were gone. At the end was an arch, which seemed, at a distance, to stand entire and alone, like that named the arch of triumph at Kabah; but it proved to be only the open and broken arch of a ruined building. From the extent of these remains, the masses of sculptured stones, and the execution of the carving, this must have been one of the first class of the aboriginal cities. In moral influence there was none more powerful. Ruin had been so complete that we could not profit by the kindness of our friends, and it was melancholy that when so much had been done for us, there was so little for us to do. It was but another witness to the desolation that had swept over the land.

A short ride brought us to the suburbs of the village of Bolonchen, and we entered a long street, with a line of straggling houses or huts on each side. It was late in the afternoon. Indian children were playing in the road, and Indians, returned from their work, were swinging in hammocks within the huts. As we advanced, we saw a vecino, with a few neighbours around him, sitting in the doorway thrumming a guitar. It was, perhaps, a scene of indolence, but it was one of quiet and contentment, of comfort and even thrift. Often, in entering the disturbed villages of Central America, among intoxicated Indians and swaggering white men, all armed, we felt a degree of uneasiness. The faces that looked upon us seemed scowling and suspicious; we always apprehended

insult, and frequently were not disappointed. Here all looked at us with curiosity, but without distrust; every face bore a welcome, and, as we rode through, all gave us a friendly greeting. At the head of the street the plaza opened upon us on a slight elevation, with groups of Indian women in the centre drawing water from the well, and relieved against a background of green hills rising above the tops of the houses, which, under the reflection of the setting sun, gave a beauty and picturesqueness of aspect that no other village in the country had exhibited. On the left, on a raised platform, stood the church, and by its side the convent. In consideration of what the cura had already done for us, and that we had a large party—perceiving, also, that the casa real, a long stone building with a broad portico in front, was really inviting in its appearance, we resolved to spare the cura, and rode up to the casa real. Well-dressed Indians, with a portly, well-fed cacique, stood ready to take our horses. We dismounted and entered the principal apartment. On one side were the iron gratings of the prison, and on the other two long beams of wood with holes in them for stocks, and a caution to strangers arriving in the village to be on their good behaviour. Our carriers had arrived. We sent out to buy ramon and corn for the horses, had our hammocks swung, and sat down under the corridor.

We had hardly time to seat ourselves before the vecinos, in their clean afternoon clothes, and some

with gold-headed canes, came over to “call upon us.” All were profuse in offers of services; and as it was the hour for that refreshment, we had a perplexing number of invitations to go to their houses and take chocolate. Among our visitors was a young man with a fine black beard all over his face, well dressed, and the only one wearing a black hat, whom, as we knew they were about drilling companies in the villages to resist the apprehended invasion of Santa Ana, we supposed to belong to the army, but we afterward learned that he was a member of the church militant, being the ministro, or assistant, of the cura. The cura himself did not come, but one of our visitors, looking over to the convent, and seeing the doors and windows closed, said he was still taking his siesta.

We had time to look at the only objects of interest in the village, and these were the wells, which, after our straits at Chunhuhu, were a refreshing spectacle, and of which our horses had already enjoyed the benefit by a bath.

Bolonchen derives its name from two Maya words: *Bolon*, which signifies nine, and *chen*, wells, and it means the nine wells. From time immemorial, nine wells formed at this place the centre of a population, and these nine wells are now in the plaza of the village. Their origin is as obscure and unknown as that of the ruined cities which strew the land, and as little thought of.

These wells were circular openings cut through

a stratum of rock. The water was at that time ten or twelve feet from the surface, and in all it was at the same level. The source of this water is a mystery to the inhabitants, but there are some facts which seem to make the solution simple. The wells are mere perforations through an irregular stratum of rock, all communicate, and in the dry season a man may descend in one and come out by another at the extreme end of the plaza; it is manifest, therefore, that the water does not proceed from springs. Besides, the wells are all full during the rainy season; when this is over the water begins to disappear, and in the heat of the dry season it fails altogether; from which it would appear that under the surface there is a great rocky cavern, into which the floods of the rainy season find a way by crevices or other openings, which cannot be known without a survey of the country, and, having little or no escape, are retained, and furnish a supply so long as they are augmented by the rains.

The custody and preservation of these wells form a principal part of the business of the village authorities, but, with all their care, the supply lasts but seven or eight months in the year. This year, on account of the long continuance of the rainy season, it had lasted longer than usual, and was still abundant. The time was approaching, however, when these wells would fail, and the inhabitants be driven to an extraordinary *cueva* at half a league from the village.

At about dark Mr. Catherwood arrived, and we

returned to the *casa real*. In a room fifty feet long, free from fleas, servants, and Indian carriers, and with a full swing for our hammocks, we had a happy change from the hut at *Chunhuhu*.

During the evening the *cura* came over to see us, but, finding we had retired, did not disturb us; early in the morning he was rapping at our door, and would not leave us till we promised to come over and take chocolate with him.

As we crossed the plaza he came out to meet us, in black gown and cape, bare-headed, with white hair streaming, and both arms extended; embraced us all, and, with the tone of a man who considered that he had not been treated well, reproached us for not coming directly to the convent; then led us in, showed us its comforts and conveniences, insisted upon sending for our luggage, and only consented to postpone doing so while we consulted on our plans.

These were, to leave *Bolonchen* in the afternoon for the ruins of *San Antonio*, four leagues distant. The *cura* had never heard of such ruins, and did not believe that any existed, but he knew the *hacienda*, and sent out to procure information. In the mean time it was arranged that we should employ the morning in a visit to the *cueva*, and return to dine with him. He reminded us that it was Friday, and, consequently, fast day; but, knowing the *padres* as we did, we had no apprehension.

There was one great difficulty in the way of our

visiting the *cueva* at this time. Since the commencement of the rainy season it had not been used; and every year, before having recourse to it, there was a work of several days to be done in repairing the ladders. As this, however, was our only opportunity, we determined to make the attempt.

The *cura* undertook to make the arrangements, and after breakfast we set out, a large party, including both Indians and *vecinos*.

At the distance of half a league from the village, on the *Campeachy* road, we turned off by a well-beaten path, following which we fell into a winding lane, and, descending gradually, reached the foot of a rude, lofty, and abrupt opening, under a bold ledge of overhanging rock, seeming a magnificent entrance to a great temple for the worship of the God of Nature. The engraving which follows represents this aperture, an Indian with a lighted torch being seen just entering.

We disencumbered ourselves of superfluous apparel, and, following the Indian, each with a torch in hand, entered a wild cavern, which, as we advanced, became darker. At the distance of sixty paces the descent was precipitous, and we went down by a ladder about twenty feet. Here all light from the mouth of the cavern was lost, but we soon reached the brink of a great perpendicular descent, to the very bottom of which a strong body of light was thrown from a hole in the surface, a perpendicular depth, as we afterward learned by measure-



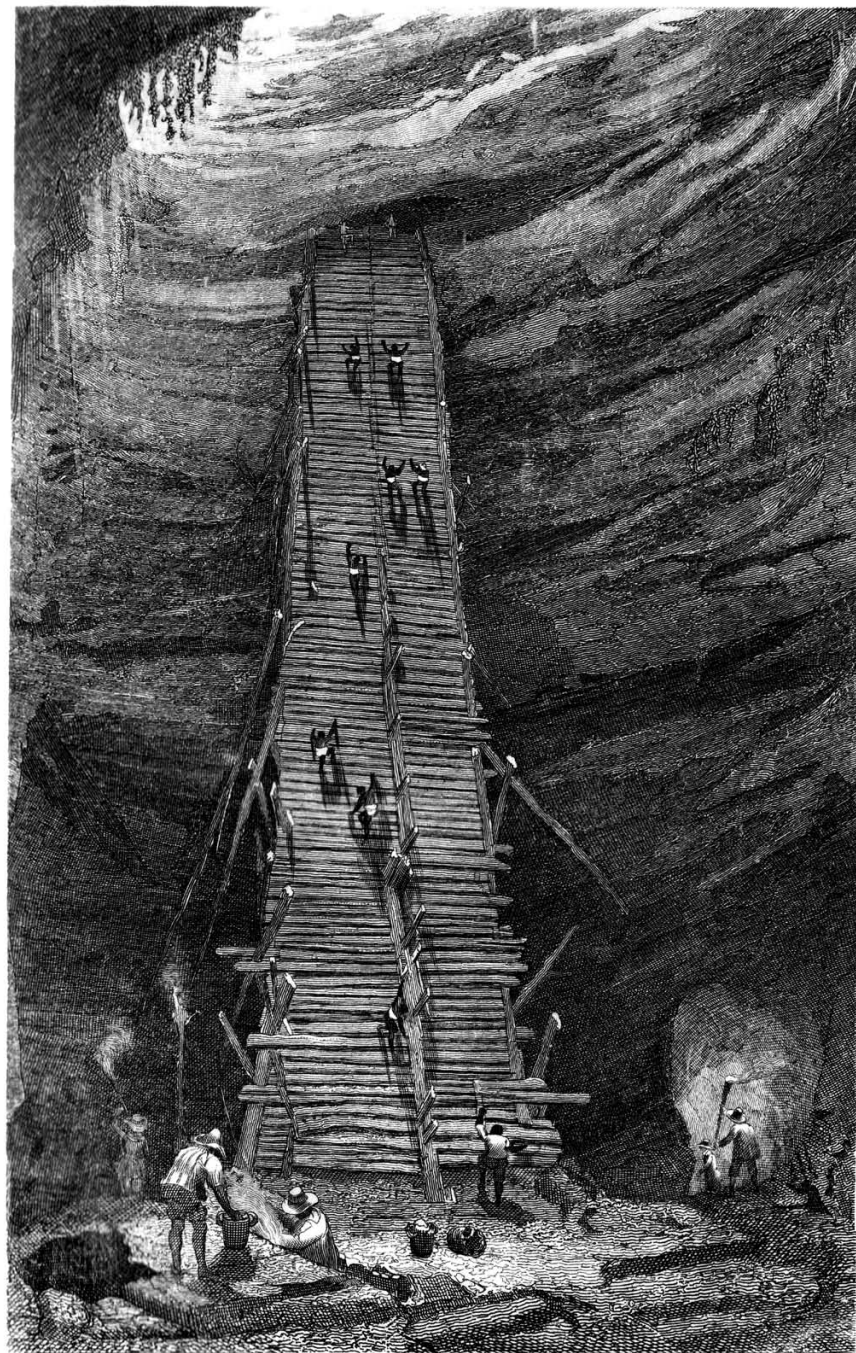
ment, of two hundred and ten feet. As we stood on the brink of this precipice, under the shelving of an immense mass of rock, seeming darker from the stream of light thrown down the hole, gigantic stalactites and huge blocks of stone assumed all man-

ner of fantastic shapes, and seemed like monstrous animals or deities of a subterranean world.

From the brink on which we stood an enormous ladder, of the rudest possible construction, led to the bottom of the hole. It was between seventy and eighty feet long, and about twelve feet wide, made of the rough trunks of saplings lashed together lengthwise, and supported all the way down by horizontal trunks braced against the face of the precipitous rock. The ladder was double, having two sets or flights of rounds, divided by a middle partition, and the whole fabric was lashed together by withes. It was very steep, seemed precarious and insecure, and confirmed the worst accounts we had heard of the descent into this remarkable well.

Our Indians began the descent, but the foremost had scarcely got his head below the surface before one of the rounds slipped, and he only saved himself by clinging to another. The ladder having been made when the withes were green, these were now dry, cracked, and some of them broken. We attempted a descent with some little misgivings, but, by keeping each hand and foot on a different round, with an occasional crash and slide, we all reached the foot of the ladder; that is, our own party, our Indians, and some three or four of our escort, the rest having disappeared.

The plate opposite represents the scene at the foot of this ladder. Looking up, the view of its broken sides, with the light thrown down from the orifice



F. Githerswood.

S.H. Gimber.

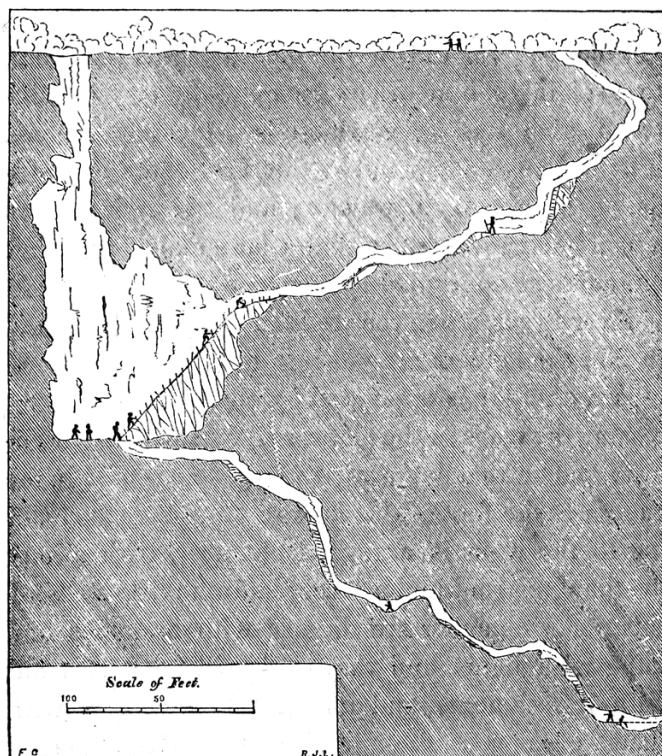
BOLONCHEN
Cueva or Well.

above, was the wildest that can be conceived. As yet the reader is only at the mouth of this well ; but, to explain to him briefly its extraordinary character, I give its name, which is Xtacumbi Xunan. The Indians understand by this La Señora escondida, or the lady hidden away ; and it is derived from a fanciful Indian story that a lady stolen from her mother was concealed by her lover in this cave.

Every year, when the wells in the plaza are about to fail, the ladders are put into a thorough state of repair. A day is appointed by the municipality for closing the wells in the plaza, and repairing to the *cueva* ; and on that day a great village fête is held in the cavern at the foot of this ladder. On the side leading to the wells is a rugged chamber, with a lofty overhanging roof and a level platform ; the walls of this rocky chamber are dressed with branches and hung with lights, and the whole village comes out with refreshments and music. The cura is with them, a leader of the mirth ; and the day is passed in dancing in the cavern, and rejoicing that when one source of supply fails another is opened to their need.

The engraving which follows will give some imperfect idea of a section of this cave from the entrance to the foot of the great ladder, with the orifice through which the light descends from above, and the wild path that leads deeper into the bowels of the rock and down to the water.

On one side of the cavern is an opening in the



rock, as shown in the engraving, entering by which, we soon came to an abrupt descent, down which was another long and trying ladder. It was laid against the broken face of the rock, not so steep as the first, but in a much more rickety condition; the rounds were loose, and the upper ones gave way on the first attempt to descend. The cave was damp, and the rock and the ladder were wet and slippery. At this place the rest of our attendants left us, the ministro being the last deserter. It was evident that

the labour of exploring this cave was to be greatly increased by the state of the ladders, and there might be some danger attending it, but, even after all that we had seen of caves, there was something so wild and grand in this that we could not bring ourselves to give up the attempt. Fortunately, the cura had taken care to provide us with rope, and, fastening one end round a large stone, an Indian carried the other down to the foot of the ladder. We followed, one at a time; holding the rope with one hand, and with the other grasping the side of the ladder, it was impossible to carry a torch, and we were obliged to feel our way in the dark, or with only such light as could reach us from the torches above and below. At the foot of this ladder was a large cavernous chamber, from which irregular passages led off in different directions to deposits or sources of water. Doctor Cabot and myself, attended by Albino, took one of the passages indicated by the Indians, of which some imperfect idea is given in the section.

Moving on by a slight ascent over the rocks, at the distance of about seventy-five feet we came to the foot of a third ladder nine feet long, two or three steps beyond another five feet high, both which we had to go up, and six paces farther a fifth, descending, and eighteen feet in length. A little beyond we descended another ladder eleven feet long, and yet a little farther on we came to one—the seventh—the length and general appearance of which induced us to pause and consider. By this

time Albino was the only attendant left. This long ladder was laid on a narrow, sloping face of rock, protected on one side by a perpendicular wall, but at the other open and precipitous. Its aspect was unpropitious, but we determined to go on. Holding by the side of the ladder next the rock, we descended, crashing and carrying down the loose rounds, so that when we got to the bottom we had cut off all communication with Albino; he could not descend, and, what was quite as inconvenient, we could not get back. It was now too late to reflect. We told Albino to throw down our torches, and go back for Indians and rope to haul us out. In the mean time we moved on by a broken, winding passage, and, at the distance of about two hundred feet, came to the top of a ladder eight feet long, at the foot of which we entered a low and stifling passage; and crawling along this on our hands and feet, at the distance of about three hundred feet we came to a rocky basin full of water. Before reaching it one of our torches had gone out, and the other was then expiring. From the best calculation I can make, which is not far out of the way, we were then fourteen hundred feet from the mouth of the cave, and at a perpendicular depth of four hundred and fifty feet. As may be supposed from what the reader already knows of these wells, we were black with smoke, grimed with dirt, and dripping with perspiration. Water was the most pleasant spectacle that could greet our eyes; but it did not satisfy us to drink it only, we

wanted a more thorough benefit. Our expiring torch warned us to forbear, for in the dark we might never be able to find our way back to upper earth; but, trusting that if we did not reappear in the course of the week Mr. Catherwood would come to the rescue, we whipped off our scanty covering and stepped into the pool. It was just large enough to prevent us from interfering with each other, and we achieved a bath which, perhaps, no white man ever before took at that depth under ground.

The Indians call this basin Chacka, which means *agua colorado*, or red water; but this we did not know at the time, and we did not discover it, for to economize our torch we avoided flaring it, and it lay on the rock like an expiring brand, admonishing us that it was better not to rely wholly upon our friends in the world above, and that it would be safer to look out for ourselves. Hurrying out, we made a rapid toilet, and, groping our way back, with our torch just bidding us farewell, we reached the foot of the broken ladder, and could go no farther. Albino returned with Indians and ropes. We hauled ourselves up, and got back to the open chamber from which the passages diverged; and here the Indians pointed out another, which we followed till it became lower than any we had yet explored; and, according to Doctor Cabot's measurement, at the distance of four hundred and one paces, by mine, three hundred and ninety-seven, we came to another basin of water. This, as we afterward learned,

is called Puouelha, meaning that it ebbs and flows like the sea. The Indians say that it recedes with the south wind, and increases with the northwest; and they add that when they go to it silently they find water; but when they talk or make a noise the water disappears. Perhaps it is not so capricious with white men, for we found water, and did not approach it with sealed lips. The Indians say, besides, that forty women once fainted in this passage, and that now they do not allow the women to go to it alone. In returning we turned off twice by branching passages, and reached two other basins of water; and when we got back to the foot of the great staircase, exhausted and almost worn out, we had the satisfaction of learning, from friends who were waiting to hear our report, that there were seven in all, and we had missed three. All have names given them by the Indians, two of which I have already mentioned.

The third is called Sallab, which means a spring; the fourth Akahba, on account of its darkness; the fifth Chocohá, from the circumstance of its being always warm; the sixth Ooiha, from being of a milky colour; and the seventh Chimaisha, because it has insects called ais.

It was a matter of some regret that we were not able to mark such peculiarities or differences as might exist in these waters, and particularly that we were not provided with barometer and thermometer to ascertain the relative heights and temperatures.

If we had been at all advised beforehand, we should at least have carried the latter with us, but always in utter ignorance of what we were to encounter, our great object was to be as free as possible from all encumbrances; besides which, to tell the truth, we did some things in that country, among which was the exploring of these caves, for our own satisfaction, and without much regard to the claims of science. The surface of the country is of transition or mountain limestone; and though almost invariably the case in this formation, perhaps here to a greater extent than anywhere else, it abounds in fissures and caverns, in which springs burst forth suddenly, and streams pursue a subterranean course. But the sources of the water and the geological formation of the country were, at the moment, matters of secondary interest to us. The great point was the fact, that from the moment when the wells in the plaza fail, the whole village turns to this cave, and four or five months in the year derives from this source its only supply. It was not, as at Xcoch, the resort of a straggling Indian, nor, as at Chack, of a small and inconsiderable rancho. It was the sole and only watering place of one of the most thriving villages in Yucatan, containing a population of seven thousand souls; and perhaps even this was surpassed in wonder by the fact that, though for an unknown length of time, and through a great portion of the year, files of Indians, men and women, are going out every day with cantaros on their backs,

and returning with water, and though the fame of the Cueva of Bolonchen extends throughout Yucatan, from the best information we could procure, not a white man in the village had ever explored it.

We returned to the casa real, made a lavation, which we much needed, and went over to the cura's to dine. If he had not reminded us beforehand that it was Friday and Lent, we should not have discovered it. In fact, we were not used to dainties, and perhaps the good cura thought we had never dined before. It was not in nature to think of moving that afternoon, and, besides, we were somewhat at a loss what to do. The cura had unsettled our plans. He had made inquiries, and been informed that there were no ruins at San Antonio, but only a cueva, and we had had enough of these to last us for some time; moreover, he advised us of other ruins, of which we had not heard before. These were on the rancho of Santa Ana, belonging to his friend Don Antonio Cerbera, the alcalde. Don Antonio had never seen them, but both he and the cura said they intended to visit them; and they spoke particularly of a casa cerrada, or closed house, which, as soon as the dry season came on, they intended to visit con bombas, to blow it up! The cura was so bent upon our visiting this place, that almost in spite of ourselves we were turned in that direction.