

They were great and intimate friends, inseparable companions, congenial in their nature, feelings, and pursuits. They had been merchants, and after amassing a handsome fortune each, they had retired from the turmoils of active life and pursuits, to enjoy the *otium cum dignitate*. They were all three rich men; but, unlike rich men generally, they had not allowed wealth to warp or destroy the original kindly and benevolent bent of their feelings.

These three old gentlemen were natives of Spain, born in Biscay, and although they had finally cast their lot in Mexico, their love of Fatherland had never been dulled, but continued through their lives to burn with a pure and bright flame.

In one of their evening strolls, they passed through an outskirt of the city, a quarter where many poor Biscayans were located. Their attention was called to the children, healthy and chubby enough, but playing about in the dirty streets, dirty themselves, and neglected. They interrogated many of them, and found they were in a state of great mental destitution.

They proceeded gravely on their walk, when,

after a short time, one of them paused, and thus addressed his two companions,—

“My friends, is it not a sad thing that which we have just witnessed—the children of our own people in the state of unenlightened heathens? Let us educate them.”

“*Bien*,” said the one, and “*bien*” (*good*), said the other in laconical assent.

“I will put down,” said the leader of the three, “a hundred thousand dollars” (£20,000).

“I will do the same,” said the second.

“And I will do the same,” said the third.

This was all the fuss that was made by these worthy Biscaynos, on proposing to commence their philanthropic and noble undertaking, with a capital of sixty thousand pounds!

They went home, and set immediately but quietly about bringing their first idea into a tangible shape. They had more particularly noticed the little *female* children, and conceived, rightly enough, that if they could make good mothers of them, they would lay the best foundation for an improved race.

They bought a large and splendid site, in a healthy and pleasant outskirt of the city, for the

building which they determined to erect; and they proceeded on a scale which was suited to their own large ideas, rather than to the amount of their "first" subscription: and the result was, that they produced, what I believe I am correct in asserting, the noblest asylum which was ever raised in any part of the globe by individual munificence—*El Colegio de las Biscaynas*.

By the kindness of Mr. Mackintosh, we saw the Colegio to the best advantage. He made up a party of our own immediate friends; and the Administrator, a gentleman most highly and deservedly respected in Mexico, received us, and kindly offered his services in shewing us the establishment. Without him, we should only have half comprehended what we went to see.

The building, we found, was after the universal custom, a great square, and modelled, as I understood, after the Regal Palace of Madrid. Built with the highest degree of solidity, which characterises all the Spanish architecture of note, the details of the college were plain, which, on so magnificent a scale, seemed to enhance the grandeur of this noble work. The *patios*, the *corridores*, or galleries, the lofty public rooms, the stair-cases,

and the fountains were strikingly impressive. The whole plan on which the charity was conducted, on the other hand, appeared to me to be absolute perfection.

When the three Founders had arrived at the point of opening the college, they stipulated that, towards admission to it, a preference should at all times, and in every case, be given to the children and descendants of Biscayans. But it was ere long found, that the college was not only sufficient for all such parties thus entitled to it, but for many more. It can commodiously provide for about 500 children, although that number I believe is never reached, besides giving work, as I shall have occasion to remark, to many who are no longer on the foundation.

Let us examine the details of management. The whole establishment is under the charge of the Administrator, who, however, does not reside in the college; but the exact knowledge he possesses of every one, and of every thing done in it, is wonderful. Then comes the *Rectora*, the lady, who, under the Administrator, carries out his orders and plans, and superintends the

whole establishment, having a nice set of rooms for herself. The next arrangement, which struck me as at once novel and admirable, is the division of the children into what may be called families. As thus:—A matron of the very best character has charge of eight or ten of the children; and she has a little *ménage* of her own, entirely independent of the rest of the college. She has every thing within herself — kitchen, parlour, small offices, bed-rooms; and she herself lays in her own marketing and general provision. She receives the money from the *Rectora*, and gives in an exact account of her expenditure at the end of the week. She is the mother of her family. Multiply this by forty or fifty, and you have the domestic establishment of the college. Neatness, cleanliness, order and economy presided over every one of these family quarters; and of course, the matron and her “children” do the whole of the household duties.

Divided into classes, and mustered in splendid school rooms, the work of education goes forward during the day; and a number of female teachers fully adequate to their work, impart the knowledge considered necessary to their pupils — reading,

writing, arithmetic, and from plain sewing up to the most elaborate and beautiful embroidery I ever saw. Indeed, many of the pupils of the college are unrivalled in this department.

The children, when they have finished their education, and arrived at an age when they can earn their own livelihood, are placed out with the greatest care; while the *colegio* provides employment for those who choose to continue to work there with the needle—or those who for this purpose, and preserving an unimpeached character, choose to return to it: all are received and employed. The working rooms are like all the rest, large, commodious and airy; and there we saw many of the young women who had been brought up at the college, busily employed at their avocations, as embroiderers. The work which they put through their hands, whether in plain embroidery of cambric, or in the gorgeous vestments and hangings of the church, in gold and silk—in tissue and brocade—are of unsurpassable taste and beauty.

The children are healthful and happy; in both which respects, the space and air they enjoy—the interminable corridors—the great *patio*—the foun-

tains, the gardens, and the *azotea* (the level roof)—tend greatly to promote such health, and such happiness.

To those who have inspected the Foundling Hospital in London, I can at once convey an idea of the cleanliness, order, decorum and method of the *Colegio de las Biscaynas*; the one competes with the other, and both are unimpeachable.

The room in which the church vestments are kept, serves as a confessional for the pupils. But *the priests are in another room*, with gratings in the wall, for the purposes of confession.

Forming part of the establishment of the *Colegio*, is a large and handsome chapel, richly adorned and gilded. Though belonging to the great building, the body of the chapel, is entered by a door from the street, open to all Catholics; but the inmates of the establishment itself hear mass from a gallery above, to which they ascend from the college, where a grating in front obstructs the gaze of the multitude below. This gallery is extremely curious in its shrines, saints, and relics. The organ stands in it, and many of the young people join the sacred music with their voices.

In another part of the gigantic edifice, is to be

found a very different place from the chapel. It is a great oblong hall, fitted up as a theatre, for the amusement of the scholars! At one end is the stage and proscenium, and seats and accommodation for the audience fill up the rest of the large hall. I need scarcely say that the theatricals are of a primitive kind—something, I fancy, like our old “Mysteries;” and that both actresses and audience, consist of those who live in the college, or are attached to it as having been pupils in earlier life.

After traversing a very long aisle, or corridor, running towards the back of the college, having a deserted look, not in keeping with the other parts, we stopped at a low door, through which, on being opened, we entered, and found ourselves in the open air. We were in the cemetery of the *Colegio de las Biscaynas*; a touching *memento mori*, and suggestive, somehow, of the whole history of the charity and its founders. They could do all for the happy little inmates of the college, while they lived: but no care—not the best—will keep out the visits of death. So here was the habitation of death. Some very plain inscriptions, inserted in the walls, marked where lay *Rectoras*, who after

fulfilling well their responsible duties, had gone the way of all living. And round about were the graves of the departed pupils. I may say, the most sedulous attention is paid to the health of the living: an excellent laboratory is fitted up in the college, and the first medical assistance is always at hand.

The *azoteas* are admirably adapted for morning and evening exercise; and the gardens, the corridors, and the great *patios*, with their fountains, render the resources for *health* most complete.

We finished our long tour and examination at the Board-room, where the trustees meet occasionally and transact their business. It is a neat, plain, business-like room; and its great attraction and ornament, are the full length portraits of the three Biscaynos, who built and founded the college in which we stood. I will not say much for the artistic merit of the paintings; but it was sufficient to make me look with reverence on the effigies of the three worthies; and I felt, after once seeing them, that I should not like to have them replaced by any higher works of art.

Before concluding, I have one very remark-

able fact to lay before you; it is, that without doubt, the trustees of the college of las Biscaynas, established long before we ever thought of it—the system of *ragged schools*. Ten years ago, writers on Mexico had not even the name to give; but they bear testimony to the fact. In one part of the college—with a quite separate, side entrance, there are two very large school rooms, fitted up as such, and in the strictest sense, ragged schools. All the children who choose to enter—or all who are taken there day by day—are gratuitously educated. The poorest and most wretched may go, without enquiry into what or who they are. It is of course a day school; and excellent teachers are provided. They are divided into classes; and writing, reading, and arithmetic are taught to all, and sewing and embroidery to the girls. We found the children better clad than could have been expected; and the order and decorum established, shewed what *may* be done with the poorest and the lowest, if we will only condescend to consider them as God's creatures, and to treat them as such.

I have gone largely into my details of the

*Colegio de las Biscaynas*, for three reasons:— first, that, as superior to any thing of the same kind established by individual munificence I had ever seen, it made a powerful impression on my mind. Secondly, that *as a perfect model*, I thought it my duty to hold it up, as far as my feeble powers go, to the admiration and imitation of the good and the wealthy of England; and lastly, to impress upon you, my readers, that where such an institution as this exists now, in all its pristine vigour and healthfulness, there must be germs, even if they lie latent, of general good.

The Administrator told me, that during the whole of the troubles which had fallen upon Mexico during her revolution; during the disorders of contending parties, and the excesses of internal war; during bloodshed and riot, and invasion of foreign foes, the *Colegio de las Biscaynas* had followed up the even tenor of its way: no one had dared to interfere with the hallowed sanctuary for young and defenceless females.

The funds possessed by the college have always been ample for all the purposes of its foundation: and such is the exact economy, unstained by the slightest parsimony (for peace and plenty are

evident everywhere), exercised in the management of this great establishment, that you will be surprised to hear, as I was, that the whole annual expenditure of this princely institution does not exceed twenty-five thousand dollars—something less than five thousand pounds per annum.