IX.

A DAY AND NIGHT AT EL DESIERTO.

A Point of View.—The Woods: their Peril and Preservation.—How we got here.—Chapultepec.—Tacubaya.—Santa Fé.—Contadera.—Guajimalpa.—The Forest.—The Shot.—Solitude.—The Ruin.—Its Inquisition.—A Bowl of Song.—Moonlight Pleasure and all-night Horror.—Morning Glories.—Its History.—A more excellent Way.—Home again.

LET me have Turner's pencil for a moment. How your black and white would burn! On this rock, high and lifted up, come and sit. You are panting from the long pull and the steep pull up the gorge; but you forget it all in the landscape, near and remote, that lies under your eye. It is torrid and temperate at a glance. Could we see round that lofty point, we could add and frigid also; for there sit the snow peaks that bring the north pole to the equator. But these apart, the scene is one of exquisite beauty and grandeur. The gorge beneath us is lined on both sides with munificent pines, firs, and hemlocks; not stinted and spindled, as they are on our northern hills, nor clipped and shaven, but in all their original, untrimmed, uncut magnificence. In the midst of them sits a castle-like ruin, such as the Rhine seldom affords, England seldomer, and other lands never. Its gray walls, thick and high, its several domes and turrets, its archways and entrances are of the best Rhine quality. It is on a cleared point that is well above the bottom of the valley and yet well below our towering observatory. It is a reminiscence of feudal times in looks and situation, and one could easily transfer himself almost three hundred years backward, when its foundations were laid.

It is not a castle, though very like a castle; but a convent, built in 1606, the year before the first permanent English colony was planted on this continent, and quite a while before *the* English colony was planted on a rock—the colony that has colonized the whole continent down to Mexico, and will yet colonize that and all south of it.

This elaborate building was then erected in a country that for eighty-five years, nearly a century, had been under European sway, culture, and religion. So the Pilgrim Rock must abase its head before the rock-built walls of El Desierto. I would like to see it lowering its crest before any thing.

Beyond this grand forest and its romantic ruin lie the plains of Mexico. The sun blazes over them, making it all a lake of golden mist, out of which rises many a bold and brown sierra, that at our height and in this radiance looks neither bold nor brown. For forty or sixty miles this open landscape stretches. A matter of twenty miles is of no consequence in this country, so clear is the atmosphere. Emerson's "Brahma" is here fulfilled in one of its lines,

> "Far and remote to me are near."

The basin is of treeless land, salt-marsh, irrigated meadow, and shallow lake, with knobs of hills embossed upon it. Just round the corner of that neighboring point of pines, to our right, lies the central spot of the park—not a rude upheaval of mountains, but a fair city, with its towers and domes and roofs flashing in the setting sun. We saw it often in our ascent hither. It is a city that perhaps best of all on earth fulfills Tennyson's description,

> "Sown in the centre of a monstrous plain,
> The city glitters like a grain of salt."

The monstrous plain and the dazzling sunshine envelop this town, and make it blaze like a diamond amidst diamonds.

This writing, begun at sunset on the mountain-top, is being continued before the convent walls, not long after sunrise. The rest of the party, gentlemen and gentlewomen, are practicing their pistols on the walls. Small success have most; but one, the guide and guardian of the band, puts his bullet through the mark every time. I content myself with telling Lessing's fable of the Jupiter

and Apollo who went out on a shooting-match. Apollo put his arrow through the centre of the bull's-eye. "I could beat that if I had a mind to try," says Jupiter, and stalks haughtily home. Many a critic of shooting guns and ideas is equally contemptuous, critical, and careful, and so maintains a reputation that one shot or one book of his own would utterly destroy. "Critics are men that have failed," says the sarcastic Disraeli, in "Lothair." They would fail if they tried. This Jupiter critic of sharp shots did try, foolishly, and landed his ball way up the side of the wall. Content, he retreats to his mossy seat by the side of the fountain, and resumes his pen and his true vocation.

How would I love to sit for hours and days on the stone fountain where this is being written, and under the grand cypresses that tower above me with less spreading branches than their twin hemlock of New England, or on the broad parapet that makes a low wall for the front of the cloister. "The sound of the going in the tops" of the pines and hemlocks, which David heard in the tops of the mulberry-trees, comes solemnly on the ear, the same sad wail that they have given forth to the like mortal ear since first these forests were pierced and these walls arose.

How sad are the voices of Nature. The moan of the forest and of the ocean have often been noticed. Was that part of the note of lamentation sent forth from Nature when man fell—that groaning after restoration which she and all that her inhabits still unutterably utter? Why should they not be pleasant sounds, full of music and mirth too? Why should they not laugh for joy? The hills skipped for gladness when their Lord came. So may the whispering of forests be yet full of joyousness. When the earth is redeemed, and man is all holy and all happy within and without, the trees shall clap their hands, and every flower smile audibly its fragrant bliss. Could you mix senses better than in that sentence, Mr. Critic? Mrs. Browning is an authority for part of it; for does not she say of the angels,

"I ween their blessed smile is heard?"

These woods, I fear, will never see the leaf-clapping day; for the Yankee is around, and a forest of primeval grandeur affects him precisely as a company of first-class negroes used to affect "a good old Southern gentleman, all of the olden time." Mr. John M. Mason, Buchanan's minister to France, met the Haytien minister at an imperial levee. As he carelessly contemplated his ebon equal, in all the pomp and circumstance of ambassadorial dignity, he was asked what he thought of his sable associate. "I think he would be worth eighteen hundred dollars in Richmond," was his prompt reply. So the American of to-day says, when he sees these magnificent trees, "I think they would cut into so many thousand feet, and be worth so many petty dollars." Let us enjoy them while we may, for they are soon to vanish.

Has not General Palmer and his troupe of engineers been up this very pass exploring for a route from Mexico to Toluca, and so to the Pacific? The railroad is coming, and these trees must prepare to go. Only one thing can save them — a camp-meeting. Maximilian tried to buy them, and could not, though he offered eighty thousand dollars for the place. The Methodists may get a few hundred of the acres by the grace of General Rosecrans, including, I trust, the old convent, and so preserve a bit of this grand picture for future generations. They are about the only conservators of our forests. Their presence is timely here. With the railroad that comes to level these original woods let the Church come to save a portion thereof from devastation.

It is well located, too, for such a service. Less than twenty miles from the capital, easily accessible by the multitudes, we may yet hear the voice of prayer and praise ascending in its newer and better forms from these most venerable cloisters and forests.

Let me tell you a little more fully our visit to each of these choicenesses. Taking to horse, we cantered merrily through the silent streets of the city at six o'clock of the morning of Tuesday, the 11th of February. No shawl or overcoat burdened our shoulders or stifled the breathing. A summer morning, soft as July, it was. Just as we were pacing through the Alameda, and had en-

tered the paseo, or fashionable drive, the sun met us, and smiled responsive to our smile. The road ran along the arches of the aqueduct, looking very Roman, and hiding under them robbers, who not unfrequently here waylay coach and horseman, which is very Roman also.

A half-hour, and we pace along the base of Chapultepec, standing high above the aboriginal pines and cypresses that skirt its base and climb its steep sides. Tacubaya is next passed, a pretty suburb, with superb parks and grounds of Mexican millionaires. Here, a few Saturday nights ago, one of these chiefs, Señor Escandron, gave a *fête champetre* to nine hundred persons, at an expense, it was said, of forty thousand dollars. Dancing and drinking were the chief amusements of the Sabbath-breaking hour and its preliminary preparation; gambling and gorging were the interludes. These grand pavilions and gardens are so infested with robbers that none of these gentry dare spend a night here except they are strongly guarded. So safe is this country in a large village not four miles from the palace of the President!

Now comes a long pull of a dozen miles up a broad and dusty road, amidst mules and men equally heavy-laden and equally sad-faced—mules often diminishing into donkeys, and men into boys. The human beasts of burden carry on their backs huge crates filled with earthenware and other commodities, weighing, one would guess, several hundred pounds. These are held to their backs by a broad strap going over the forehead, and the hair is left thick, and made to grow thicker over the eyes, in order to make a matting for this strap. I have seen stones and bricks so carried that weighed, I was told, four hundred pounds. Their heads bow to the burden, and they trot along under their huge loads as fast as a horse can walk.

The road ascends the spurs of the Toluca range; through Santa Fé, a string of adobe huts; through Contadera, where a body of troops are stationed that eye us soldierly, that is, quietly and searchingly; and at last leaves us at the venta of Guajimalpa, a wayside station for changing mules on the stage to Toluca.

Here we turn off the dusty highway and climb a smooth, open, steep hill. The water rattles gayly down a brisk stream, which a mile or two back we had turned aside into a pasture path to enjoy. The smooth upland soon becomes rougher and more wooded, and after a mile or more we enter a cleft in a smooth-faced wall of a venerable look, and are in the grounds of the Convent of El Desierto.

The woods grow thicker in numbers and in size. No needy knife-cutter has been allowed to ply his trade in this sacred inclosure. For two hundred and sixty-nine years they have been let alone. Only the path, of a single horseback width, has been cut through them. This path winds along the sides of lofty hills and deep ravines, densely shaded, now climbing, now declining, for a mile and a half; then, winding up a steep acclivity, it emerges upon the open space on which the convent stands.

One notices in this location the same taste that governed the abbots of England and Europe. They always chose the most beautiful spots for their retreats. They had an eye to the beauty of nature, all the keener, perhaps, because they were forbidden to look upon all other beauty. They knew how to make a wilderness blossom like the rose, but they selected the wilderness most susceptible of such blossoming. This rare combination is one of the best. Few ever equaled; none, we believe, surpassed it. Their whole area was nine leagues square—three miles in each direction; and all encompassed with a choice brick wall, that still survives in large part and perfect form.

The clearing is narrow, woods hugging the buildings closely on either side, removed not a hundred feet in the rear, but opening on the front to the breadth of a single pasture lot, a slope of five or ten acres.

Was ever solitude more solitary? In this bright, warm morning not a creature is stirring except the visitors and visited. Not a bird or insect, or man or beast. In fact, I only saw one insect in all the woods and walks, and that was a wasp, that had fallen on the ground, and fluttered and fainted from sheer loneliness. The