

II.

FROM THE CHURCH TOP.

First Attempt and Failure.—At it again.—The Southern Outlook.—Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl.—Cherubusco.—Chapultepec.—Guadalupe.—The patron Saint of the Country.—Round the Circle.

THIS is the highest of all the man-built places from whence I have ever tried to talk. I am sitting on the top of the finest church in this city, except the cathedral—that of the Profesa. It adjoins my hotel, and is easily accessible from the azatea, or flat roof, of that building. The sun is burning his way down the western sky, setting masses of clouds on fire with his effulgence.

Two little girls, children of my landlady, have led me hither, and they are woefully frightened at a man in the belfry fixing the bells. In broken English, the older of the two makes known her fears, "Will he make nothing of me?" she cries. I relieve her, and soon she says her little sister calls her a "false fool" for being so alarmed.

Though the place is excellent for composition, the children keep me so intent upon their perilous pranks that I have no leisure for sketching. And so I sit and see the sun roll down behind Ajusca, the highest of the western hills, and behold the reflex glory on the white brows of the two south-eastern volcanoes, with their terrible names, flushed with the opposing sun, as the brow of death glows with the light from the sun beyond the veil.

The sun gone, the glory is gone; no twilight lingers here, as winsome as a morning nap. Abrupt beginnings and abrupt endings are characteristics of clime and people, with very gay and gracious interludes. The air grows chill as the sky grows dark, and the children and I climb the chancel roof, peep into the dome, and down into the church; that is, I do; they are too timid or too well

trained. All is dark and silent save the ghastly pictures on the roof of the dome, which are silent but not dark. We slide down the smooth sides of that chancel roof, scamper along on the broad-backed ridge of the nave; that is, they do, not I; alas! for this proof of a vanished childhood, and get ourselves upon our own roof, which is attached to that of the hotel, and into our own rooms. Our bird's-eye view, though viewed like all such views of real birds, stays, like theirs, undescribed.

The easel is set up again at the same spot. It is morning now. The sun is up these two hours, and pours a strong flood of warmth and light on this page. The noise of the street carts comes muffled up to this house-top. The morning trumpet-clang and drum-beat of the soldiers mingle with them, and rise above them, clear and steady, a sign that this government is more military yet than civil. Frequent bells put in their heavy musical notes, sometimes rapid; there is one now striking the half-seconds, sometimes slower, but all alike calling a heedless city to an almost voiceless service.

The birds send up their pretty chatterings among the bells, the trumpets, and the rattling carts, those true babes in the wood, and babes in nature, whose very songs are the laugh of childhood threading the graver tones of maturer nature. How deliciously their treble laugh breaks on the ear! Do you not wish you could hear them, poor ice-bound citizens of the Arctic North?

This is a royal place to see this royal city. Never had a town such grand environment. Athens has mountains and sea, but scanty plains. Rome, plains, but no water, and low-browed hills. Jerusalem, mountains, but no plains nor sea. Modern cities are without the least trace of scenic loveliness. London, Paris, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, New Orleans, and Berlin, how cheap their panorama! It is a map and not a picture that one draws when he paints these capitals. Boston and Baltimore make a slight approach to hill effects, but only a hundred feet high are their mountains, and no plains to set off even these.

Look here; turn your eye (and body too, or you will leave your

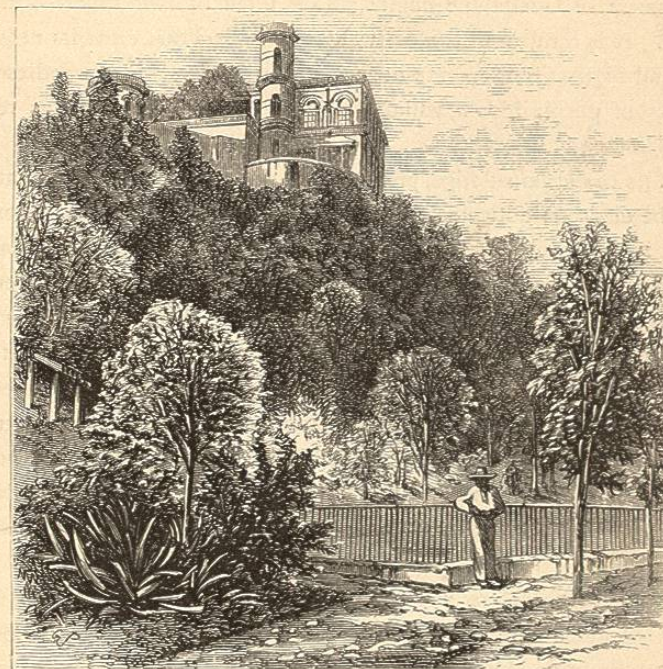
head on this slippery roof-side), and take in this scene. Everywhere a green valley, everywhere dahlia hills—the true dahlia—that deep purple sliding into black, and yet never losing its royal bloom, the finest color of all for the garments of men and women, as well as for Greek and Aztec mountains.

I am now looking southward; so may you. The city lies all about us, its limits being equidistant in all directions. Its flat roofs extend for a mile, domed twice or thrice with spacious churches. Then comes a flat gray field for several miles: it is probably more than ten miles, but distances are as deceitful as is every thing else in this clime. It is sprinkled with trees, especially to the west, and at its farther termination. To its right, or westward, the trees grow denser, and evidently line thoroughfares and fill gardens. A village glistens under the hills in which it is ending. Then comes a mass of dark and rugged peaks, soft in their ruggedness, and light in their darkness, the fields creeping well up their sides, and sometimes, but rarely, climbing on and over their heads.

This southern route was the one chosen by Cortez and Scott for entering the town. Between the two snow volcanoes they came over a lofty pass, around the western edge of that broad, flashing lake, by the side of the canal that you see stretching out, lined with trees and floating gardens. Along well-built causeways, amidst a frightened mass of living people, the invaders marched. Cortez had more than one bloody fight on that passway; and Scott made a rough lava height and Cherubusco, a not wide plain, famous with his victories. There, too, you note a purple hill, two hundred feet high, where the Aztec priests kindled the sacred fire at the close of each half century. They thought the world had come to an end. Light was never to come again; everywhere it was extinguished. The people march in solemn procession from the city to this hill; the priests take the chosen human victim to its summit. His heart is extracted. A new flame is kindled upon it. It is transmitted to waiting torches, and sent through the whole nation, re-illuminating the face of society, and keeping fresh the hope and heart of man. One can hardly fancy that low and silent and

shrubless peak to have been so long the scene of such a sad and memorable festival.

Keep your eye and head moving westward, and you see the same city, landscape beyond, and tall hills in the rear. Almost due west lies Chapultepec, the favorite haunt of the rulers of this people from



CHAPULTEPEC.

Montezuma to Juarez, a superb park, palace, and picture. It is a fortress and a garden, a sort of Windsor Castle set down with its hill-top, forests, and views, three miles from London town. It deserves a visit and a page of its own, and so we now swing round the circle, leaving its yellow walls, a little haughty in their frowning at our presumption to come and go without more obeisance.

On getting round toward the north, the girdle of nearer hills dips down, giving glimpses of mountains beyond. The level lands stretch out farther, fifteen and twenty miles, before the passes are

touched. The country is full of trees, which are also full of greenness. Church towers peer above their tops, and white and drab specks appear among the interstices, the proofs that this wide area has villages amidst its verdure.

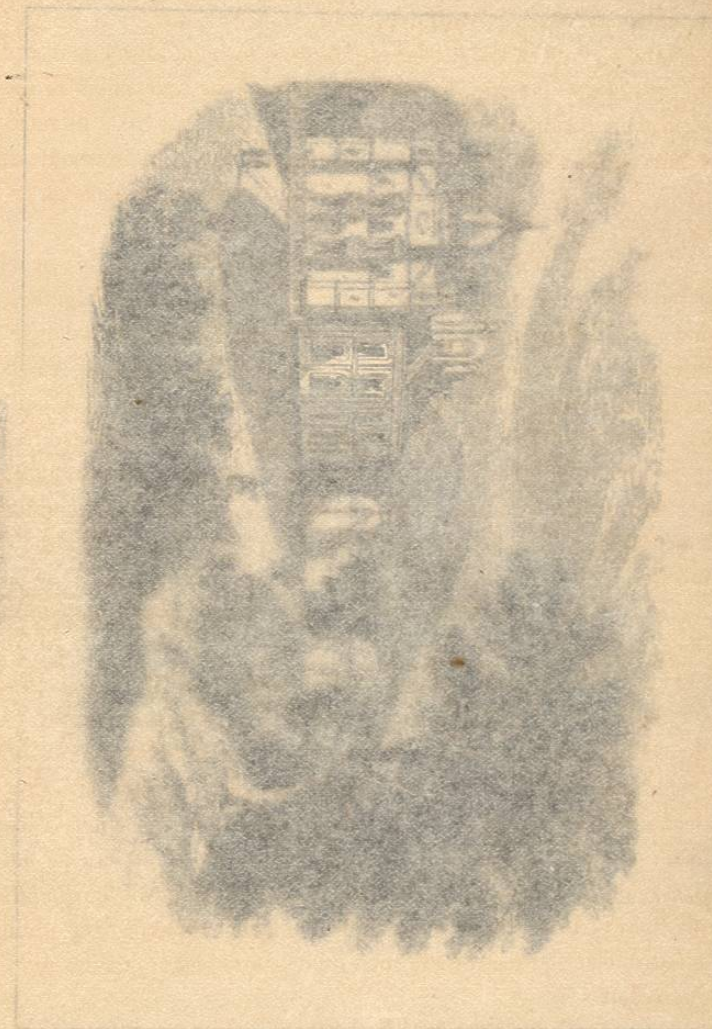
To the right still, the landscape narrows to its closest limits, and the sierra of Guadalupe comes within three or four miles of the town. It is a range fifteen or twenty miles long, that casts its nearest and highest battlements over against the city. It is woodless, bright, of purple bloom, without a shady retreat, save such as recesses may give.

At its easternmost edge, just where it drops into the plains nearest the city, you notice several domes and towers massed together. That is the group of temples dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe, the most famous, popular, and powerful of all the virgins of America, if not of the Church that worships her. That spot is a curious evidence of the manner in which Romanism adapts itself to the people it governs. The Indians were sullen and unsubdued after Cortez had conquered their nation. They were a dangerous element, being, like the subjects of the East India Company, a thousand to one more numerous than their rulers. How shall they be subdued? Their priests and worship were gone, but not their faith in both.

They had a seat of worship in this spot. An Indian coming over the mountains, seeking for a priest at a church built by Cortez, a mile or so from its base, is met by the Virgin, who tells him to build a church to her in that spot. He flees affrighted to the priest, and tells his tale. It is not idle words to not empty ears, though it is so assumed. He is repulsed by the priest, meets her twice again, asks a sign, has his soiled blanket filled by her hands with flowers from these barren and burning rocks, which when poured out at the feet of the incredulous archbishop are no more flowers, but

“A fair maiden clothed with celestial grace,”

even the maiden mother herself. Her flowers had changed to a flowery Madonna, with a bud of a boy in her arms, as on a branch.



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CHURCH OF GUADALUPE.

