

III.

FROM THE SIDEWALK.

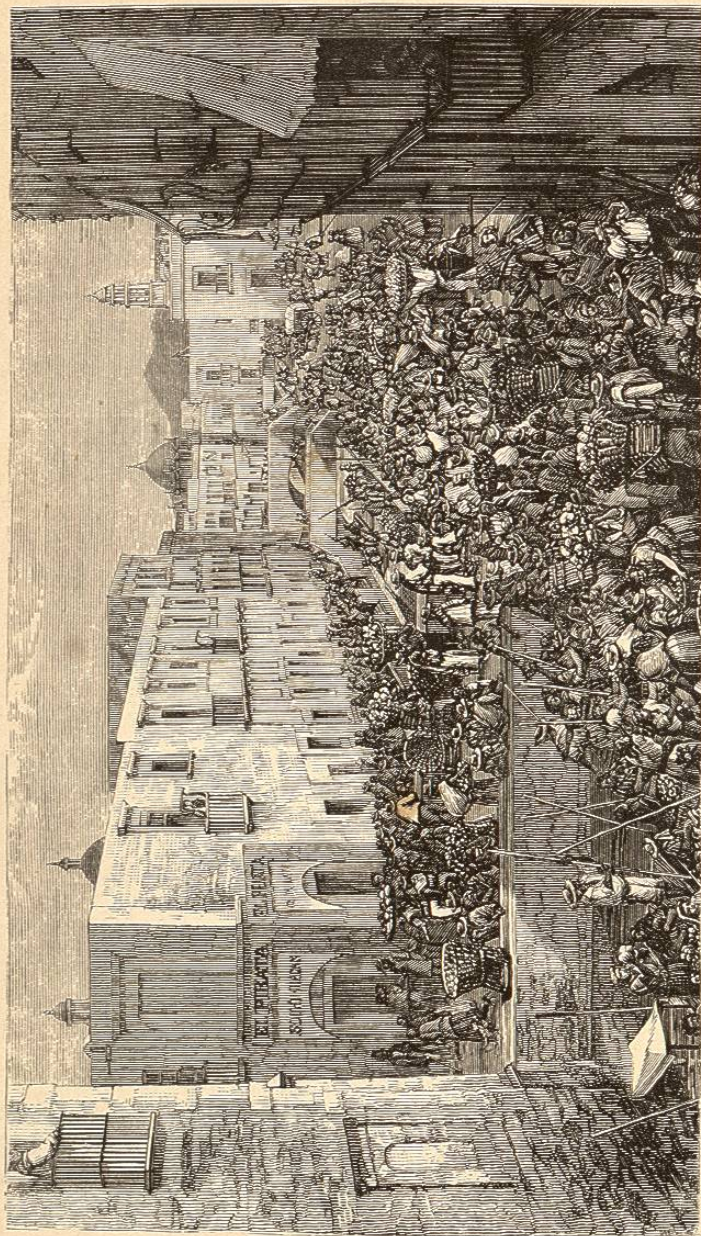
Views from Street Corners.—Chief Street.—Shops, Plaza, Cathedral.—High and Low Religion.—Aztec Calendar Stone.—The Sacrificial Stone.—The President's private House.—Hotel Iturbide.—Private Residences.—Alameda.

THE dizzy church top from which we swung round the circle of the town is not half as agreeable as this sturdy and simple pavement at its foot. After all, there is nothing like the solid earth under your feet. Even this not too solid earth is better than all airy spirits and domes and azateas. Not too solid, because you remember Mexico is located on a dry, salt marsh, which was a salt lake when Cortez conquered it, and which is yet a lake a few inches below the surface, and often, in its sewers and odors, upon the surface also.

These odors sometimes surpass those of Cologne, but, unlike those of that fragrant town, are not especially pestilential. The high altitudes preserve it from this peril. Nor is it altogether blamable for this defect. Drainage is hardly possible. The flat plain surrounded by high mountains prevents any sufficient descent for sewerage. When the street is opened for such purposes, you see the moist mud not two feet below the pavement. Efforts are being made, or rather being talked about, for opening channels to the Tulu River, some forty miles to the west, and thereby getting up a movement of this sort from the centre. But it is not likely soon to be.

Turning away our eyes, if we can not turn up our noses, from this offense, which is not very offensive on the chief thoroughfares, let us note the map and the traits of the town.

The first peculiarity you will observe is the romantic outlook almost every street corner affords. You look straight through the



THE MARKET-PLACE.

city, and bound your vision by the purple mountains, whichever direction you gaze. Take any corner where the streets pass clear through the town, you see, north, south, east, and west, or as near that as the lines run, the all-embracing mountains. They are from three to thirty miles distant, some even sixty miles, and yet they look as if only just down to the farther end of this telescopic tube of a street. They rise from two to ten thousand feet, and so are never diminutive, often very magnificent.

No city I have ever seen has any equal cincture. Athens approaches it. Her chief streets look out on Pentelicus and Hymettus; but she is not level herself, and so can not get up these vistas; nor is she large, and does not, therefore, match her mountains. They overpower her, not she them. Mexico is equal to her grander mountains. Popocatepetl is not ashamed to call her sister, nor is she unworthy of such a companionship. Athens historically overtops all its peaks. Mexico in its present proportions well fits her magnificent frame. One never tires of this resting-place for the eye. It is so exquisite in calm and color, that it seems as if made on purpose for exhibition and exhilaration.

This fact, too, seems to put the city in your grasp at the start. Most towns of this size you find it somewhat difficult to master. They are so tossed up and down, or stretched out, or have no perceptible limits, that one is a long time in getting hold of them. Though a dweller in Chicago for a month, it still bewilders me to arrange the streets of its west and south sides. Its north side I never attempted to subdue. I left that for the fire. Boston, every body says, except its own people, is untamable. Even the fire got tired of running round and round its narrow and crooked thoroughfares, and gave up in despair, especially when it drew near its narrowest and crookedest portion. Philadelphia's perfect rectangularity is equally bewildering, while Washington makes the head swim, no less in its everlasting radiations than its political plannings. As for New York, Brooklyn, London, and such like villages, they are all under the same ban as their superior sisters.

The real reason of this is, they have no perceptible boundaries;

nothing to which they can be adjusted. Cincinnati, held in a pocket of hills, is much more easily grasped than Chicago, on a wall-less prairie. Jerusalem is seen at a glance, despite its crooked and narrow alleys, for it is on a hill-top, with higher hills inclosing it. But Mexico is pre-eminent in this respect. You know the town at a glance. There are large portions of it I have not visited, yet I have seemed to see it all at any corner. There it lies, each four of the ways straight to the mountains.

It is not crooked. Every thoroughfare is straight, and the blocks regular. William Penn in 1680 did not surpass Hernando Cortez in 1522. Unlike his ever-stretching, never-girdled town, this city has its natural metres and bounds that put the whole under the eye at once. It is like the observation of a witty judge to a brother lawyer on Hempstead Plains. When urged to stop longer, and see the country more thoroughly, after a brief ride, he stood up in the buggy, turned himself slowly round, and said, "I have seen it. Drive on." So at this corner where the Church of the Profesa stands, you have only to look in four directions, and can say, "I've seen Mexico. Drive on." But if the general appearance is the same, the special and nearer views are varied, novel, and attractive.

Take the spot at the base of our church-tower of the Profesa. It is simply a corner in a city street. The names of the streets are devotional enough to make us pause; for here come together the Street of the Holy Spirit and the Street of St. Joseph, the Royal. You can see north to the Guadalupe range, west to Tacubaya, south to Ajusco (called Ahusca), a tall, dark, purple range, and east to the giant peaks of snow. The mountains are indeed round about Mexico as about no other capital, while the town lies as level at their bases as Chicago by its lake.

The Aztec priest, himself probably a prince and warrior, announced by divination that where they should see an eagle on a cactus, holding a serpent in his beak, there their city should be planted—located rather, for it would be difficult to plant a city on the sea. Such a sight was asserted to be seen at the southern end of Lake Tezcuco. The city was placed there for military protec-

tion, whatever were the divinations of the priests; for, being on the water, it was not easily assailable. They took the eagle with the serpent and cactus for their national symbol, and the conquerors accepted that national coat of arms from their subjects. Some irreverent Yankees assert that a more appropriate symbol would be a Greaser sitting on a jackass drinking pulqui. But so they could retort that our symbol could better be a whisky-jug and a turkey than our like chosen eagle.

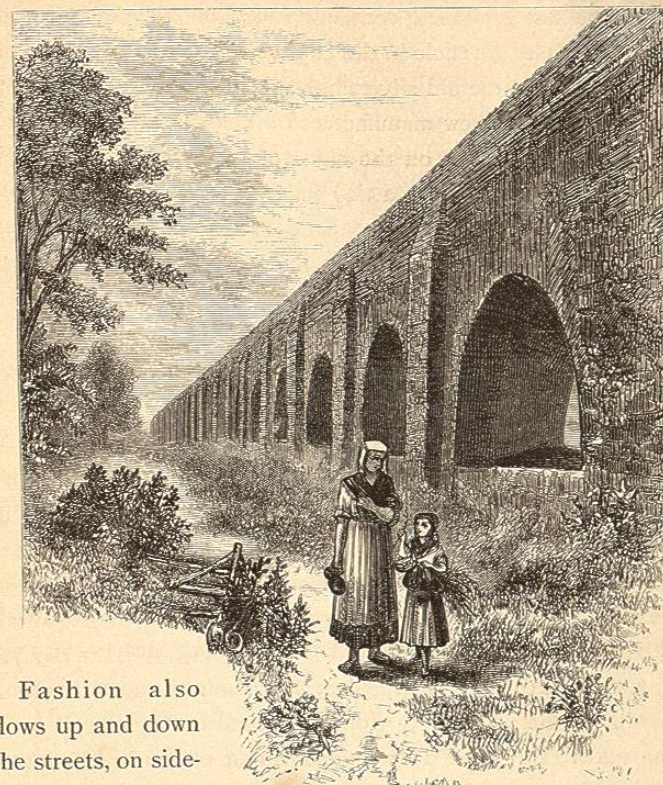
The city thus laid out has since had the water dry up from beneath it sufficiently to give it solid streets. The water of the lake was in it, in canals, and close to it, in its own shallow waves, when Cortez captured it. To-day it is two or three miles from its outermost eastern gate. While the streets are straight, but few are noticeable, and only two or three are really attractive. The chief thoroughfare from the *dépôt* to the plaza and its two nearest parallel streets are the main avenues of the city.

The San Cosme Avenue starts out from the station very broad, but it narrows as it passes the Alameda, and enters the thick of the town, where it terminates at the eastern end of the Grand Plaza. This is the very street over which Cortez made his famous escape from the infuriated town, rendered doubly mad by the interference of his lieutenant, Alvarado, in his absence, with the bloody rites of human sacrifice. The town woke up before they were well started, roused by a sentinel, chased them along this dike, which is all this then was, crossed with rude and frequent ditches, and inclosed on either side with water. The multitudes dragged them off the narrow causeways, caught them as they tried to clear the chasms, their pontoon train being pressed into the mud of the first broad ditch, so that it could not be taken up. The band of adventurers lost their arms, ammunition, horses, precious metals, and gems, and all but a score of their men were left along the ravine, a prey to the destroyer. They assembled a few miles up, under the cypress-tree still standing, and a few days later, with their good swords and strong hearts cut their way through two hundred thousand men, swinging down upon them from the Sierra of Guadalupe, in the

plains at Otumba. The avenue is now solid, and Alvarado's famous leap across one of these ditches is an undistinguishable bit of the hard highway. Over the same road marched the American army into town, Scott and Grant and Lee, the known, and the then unknown, being in the little host of later conquerors. If we are seeking a like and larger, bloodless and better, conquest, we can properly pass to our quarters over the same path. It may be ominous of a bloody retreat under the uprisings and assaults of reigning superstition, but it will only thus be prophetic of ultimate and perfect victory.

A parallel street to the central thoroughfare goes out from the western end of the same plaza, and is heavily shaded at the start with covered arcades, like a deep sombrero, behind which shop-men of all sorts ply their trades. It runs straight to the luxurious northern hamlet of Tacubaya. Between these two is the street at whose corner you have been standing. It lies between the green plats of the Plaza and the Alameda, each of which appears at either extremity. This street is the busiest and most fashionable of all in the town. It is half a mile long, forty to fifty feet wide, about three stories high, faced with stone or mortar, but, except three or four buildings, without especial ornament. It bears the names of Calle del Plateros (or Street of the Silversmiths), Calle de Profesa, and Calle de San Francisco. It is, however, one in every respect but its name. They have a way here of giving almost every block a name of its own, which in a long street is as perplexing as the multitude of names given to a royal heir would be if he were called by a different one of them every day.

This street is lively with hackney and private coaches; carts with three mules abreast; burros, or donkeys, with their immense burdens; and men and women with theirs almost equally heavy, the women with rebosas, or blue or brown fine-wove mantles, wrapped about their shoulders, and half hiding the faces; the men with their white blankets with bright-colored borders, or with only their dirty white shirts and trousers, carrying heavy loads on their trained shoulders.



SAN COSME AQUEDUCT, CITY OF MEXICO.

Fashion also flows up and down the streets, on sidewalks, and in carriages. The high-

est fashion is never to appear on the sidewalk, not even to shop; but the grand lady, sitting in her carriage, has the goods put in her lap, and daintily indulges her feminine passion.

Come up to the plaza, the old centre of the city. It is only a few rods—an eighth of a mile, perhaps. You pass a few dry-goods stores, two or three, in this chiefest resort of the ladies and the trade; many jewelry stores, into which the former silversmiths that gave their name to the street have changed; tobacconists, who have only smoking-tobacco, the chewing variety being here unknown. Their cigarettes are done up in paper of different colors, and so packed as to make the shop look tasteful as its Parisian