

A VISIT TO PALOS AND RABIDA.

BY EDWARD E. HALE.

THE end of a long, lovely summer day;—the western sun, low in the horizon, is streaming in through the windows of the railway carriage. The Spanish gentleman on the Eastern side is looking watchfully across the marshes and the river,—and at last, as some mound of sand is passed by the train, and opens a full view to the other side of the wide estuary,—he raises his hand and says “Palo!”

We were all silent for a moment. I think he knew something of my feeling. And I found I cared for Palos more than I had supposed possible. I had crossed Spain with the intention of seeing the place. I had overcome some local and accidental difficulties in the way,—but I had not, at any moment, pictured to myself the gulf between 1492 and 1882:—nor even asked myself to try to imagine Columbus and Martin Pinzon at work on the equipment of the ships. Of a sudden all the features of the contrast presented themselves. Enough, perhaps, that as we dashed on in the comfort of a railway train, we were looking across the desolate marshes to the forsaken village, where hardly a few white houses could be made out, and told ourselves that from the enterprise and courage of that place, the discovery of America became possible. The seaport of Palos, in the time of Columbus, was a place so important that the crews and vessels for the first expedition were all gathered there, in face of the difficulties which the superstition of the time and the terrors of the voyage presented. I do not suppose it to have been a seaport of the first class, but it was a considerable and active town. It was on the eastern side of the estuary of the Tinto river, a considerable stream known to navigators as far back as the first history of navigation. It takes its name, Tinto, from the color which it brings from the copper and iron mines above, which are the very mines which gave to Spain its interest for Phœnician navigators. In nearly four centuries, since Columbus's time, the current of the river has been depositing silt in what was then the port of Palos, and this port is now entirely filled up. With the destruction of the harbor, the town has gone to ruin. The few white specks, which my Spanish friend pointed out to me, in the light of the evening sun, marked the place of the few houses in which a hundred or two poor people are living, where were once the dockyards and warehouses of the active town. The rival town Huelva, which was even in Columbus's time a place of considerable importance, takes all the commerce of the estuary. I think not even a fishing boat sails from Palos itself; its name will not be found on some of the best recent maps of Spain, and is in very few geographical indexes.

Huelva is a port where large steamers can lie at the pier, and is now a place of active and apparently successful trade. An English company, which is developing the mines, has built a good system of railroads, which unite Huelva with its mining establishments and with Seville, from which beautiful city I had crossed in a four hours' ride. The distance by rail is about sixty-six miles, the railway not being very direct. I will say in passing that the excursion from Seville is an agreeable one for travellers in the south of Spain. There is a new hotel at Huelva where we were comfortably accommodated. I was interested to see that all the furniture, which was new, was of American manufacture, coming very likely from Worcester County, Massachusetts. Thus far, at least, have we been able to pay our debt to Columbus, and to Palos.

I was wakened the next morning to hear the singing of birds in a lofty orange tree in the front of my window, that we might embark at once on our visit to the convent of Rabida, and if possible to the ruins of Palos. A fine half-decked boat, such as one might have hired in Marblehead for a like purpose, with a skipper who looked precisely like his Marblehead congener, but with the lateen-sail which is so curiously characteristic of Southern Europe, was ready for our little voyage. We passed heavy steamers, which suggested little enough of Columbus, but there were fine looking fishing-boats which suggested the plucky little Niña of his voyage; and their seamen are probably dressed to-day much as the men who landed with him at San Salvador.

A run of an hour brought us to the fine headland on which the Convent of Rabida—or of Santa Maria de Rabida—stands; scarcely changed, if changed at all, from the aspect it bore on the day when Columbus “asked of the porter a little bread and water for his child.” Lord Houghton, following Freiligrath, has sung to us how the

“Palm tree dreameth of the pine
The pine tree of the palm”—

and in his delicate imaginings the dreams are of two continents—ocean-parted—each of which longs for the other. Strange enough, as one pushes along the steep ascent from the landing at Rabida up the high bluff on which the convent stands, the palm tree and the pine grow together, as if in token of the dream of the great discoverer who was to unite the continents.

The convent is a large rambling building—of Moorish lines and aspect, built around several *patios* or gardens. Hardly any windows open through the outer walls, but the life of the building engages itself in and around the *patios* within. Here cloisters made by columns with arches surround the pretty enclosures, and here one dines, writes, takes his siesta, or does nothing. Columbus's room—as a fine chamber up-stairs is called—has a large table in the middle, on which is the inkstand which is said to have been used by him.

In this convent Columbus made his home while the expedition was fitted out at Palos hard by and quite accessible. Hither the Pinzons and

the learned physician Garcia Fernandez were summoned by the good prior Marchena, Columbus's steady friend, for the great consultations from which the discovery grew. I shall have the pleasure of presenting to the Society a sketch of the landscape and of the Atlantic seaside which met the eye of Columbus when he looked from his bed-room. I have made a careful drawing of his inkstand,—and if I succeed in reproducing it in a fac-simile, I will bring that to our next meeting for the use of the Librarian and Council.

All around the room there hang pictures, some of him, one of Isabella, one of the good old prior, and some by modern painters of different scenes in the great first voyage, and of his experiences after his return.

The chapel of the convent is down-stairs. It is neat and pretty, and worship could be renewed there at any moment. The Duke of Montpensier, who married a sister of Isabel II., the late Queen of Spain, arranged to have it all put in proper order. There are no longer any monks here or any priors. But the Spanish nation takes a national pride in maintaining the convent, and a charming family of Spaniards—grandfather, grandmother, son, daughter, and three nice boys, Christopher, Immanuel, and Joseph—keep the place.

After a visit full of interest at Rabida, we returned to our boat, and I directed my seamen to take me to some landing whence I could go into the only street of Palos—or what is left of it. To my surprise I was told that this was impossible. No such landing remains, even for a fishing boat of five tons. If the Señor wished, it would be necessary for the boat to come to anchor, and the Señor must be carried on the back of the skipper for three-quarters of a mile or more, over the flat under water which has formed where proud ships once rode. The Señor declined this proposal, and bade the boatman take him to the bar of Saltes, the little island in front of Palos and Huelva, where Columbus's vessels lay,—and from which he sailed at eight o'clock on the morning of Friday, August 3, 1492.¹

The run from Rabida, tacking back and forth with a brisk breeze, was perhaps an hour or a little more. The island, which was the last of Europe to the great navigator, can be scarcely changed. I landed on the beach, and with the hope of being present to-day, gathered the shells which I have now the pleasure of presenting to the cabinet of the Society. The island is a narrow bar, high enough to break the force of the South and Southwest winds, as they sweep in from the Atlantic, and thus makes the admirable harbor of Huelva. We discharged the grateful duty of collecting some memorials of a place so interesting, and then by a rapid run before the wind, returned to the pier at Huelva, which is some six miles up the river.

¹So Mr. Irving says, and the other historians. But in his own Diary Columbus says "half an hour before sunrise."

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