THE SPANISH PROVINCES.

(FROM AN OCCASIONAL CORRESPONDENT.)

ALBACETE, MURCIA, SEPT. 7.

He who desires to know something of the real life of the Spaniard and to feel accurately the pulse of the nation would do well not to take up his residence at Madrid. That city, with its modern, French airs, its crowd of Government hangers-on, has charms for two classes of Spaniards, and for two only. There are the Government officials, who, mindful of the fact that Spanish Ministers are, to say the least of it, shortlived and conscious that, down to well nigh the lowest ranks, the official's tenure of office expires with that of his chiefs, seek only to make hay while the sun shines, and to prop up with all their power the Government which gives them employment; and, next, the confirmed triflers and pleasure-seekers, of whom, Spanish and French, the capital is full. Trade, industry, religion, churches, houses of charity, the poor themselves, their sufferings and struggles, these are all realities too stern and disagreeable to be looked in the face—shadows which must not be suffered to pass, if but through the medium of a newspaper advertisement, across the gay, sunny, and unreal dream of life in the capital. Two very noble institutions for the poor of Madrid have lately been doing a very good work there; they are worked, and very well worked, by French Sisters of Charity. One, in the Calle Hortaliza, trains some 200 destitute children. But I defy any one to find a single guide, of whatever nationality, among the hundred and one extortionate guides of Madrid who has even heard of its existence. Life in the capital is a sham.

Anxious to get away from such a hackneyed whirl of existence, one takes the early train, westward, eastward, northward, or southward, and in a few minutes finds oneself in a newer and truer world. Desirous to see something of the life and industries, and note something of the state of feeling, and the effects produced by the war in the Eastern Provinces, I bent my steps towards the little town of Albacete, on the border land of La Mancha and Murcia, but belonging to the latter Province—one of the richest and most fertile in the Peninsula. The immediate environs of Madrid, as you rattle through them in the Trén Correo, or post train, are uninteresting—a mere stretch of stubble and tawny *despoblado* plains. To an observant eye and ear, however, travelling even by rail in this country always offers something picturesque and attractive. At Ciempozuelos Station, once celebrated for its saline waters, the vineyard country is fairly entered, and the trucks laden with earthenware *amphoras* for wine, so ponderous and large that three form a load for one truck, gives some idea of the richness of the district, which at a superficial glance appears barren. A woman standing at the mouth of one of these huge jars looks quite like a child. Here and there some tiny stream, probably a tributary of the Tagus, is passed, and the dry slopes turn into a veritable garden of Eden along its valley; the market gardens are rich with melons, cabbages, pomegranates, fig trees, and orchards absolutely blazing with their wealth of crimson and yellow pears and pippins; then come the rich, wooded valley of the here sluggish, clayey Tagus, and the gardens and avenues of Aranjuez. More wide-stretching, unhedged plains and slopes of stubbles weary the eye as the train passes onward. You see, to right and left near Villasequilla, some 40 miles from Madrid, the rich vineyards of Yepes, and note the colour of the soil, now white and loamy, now changing to a sandy roseate colour, much like the soil of the wine country around Jerez; here and there a tiny town, its one-storied, crumbling houses clustering round its ancient church, dots the wild landscape; all is seemingly barren, certainly treeless, yet these gently undulating slopes produce some of the finest corn crops in the world.

Such is the character of the landscape from Madrid to Alcazar San Juan, where the traveller can obtain a good glass of Valencian or English beer, and where he will see at the station a very picturesque sight. At this station—the district being one somewhat disturbed, and the town itself not bearing the best reputation—is generally stationed a picked body of Civil Guards. The usual number of these cannot, in the present state of the country, be allotted to it, and so the force is supplemented by rural volunteers. To see these men, fine, hardy country police, gamekeepers, guards of vineyard or olive-grove, in their buff leather buskins, leather jackets slashed with red, and old-fashioned fowling-pieces, drawn up in line with the splendidly-attired Civil Guards, is a picturesque sight. They are hardy, sturdy, well-meaning little fellows, and in case of necessity would fight well. In Serrano's march on Madrid he enlisted four or five hundred of these rural guards, and their sturdy quiet bearing when they entered the capital, their well-knit forms and sun-burnt faces attracted no slight attention. The tawny stubble plains, the white, dusty roads, the utter absence of any signs of population from Madrid to Alcazar are merely wildly picturesque, not interesting. But one is led to reflect, whenever a patch of irrigated land, a very oasis in the desert, meets the eye, how marvellously different an aspect would this country have presented had the ingenious and industrious Moors been able to prolong their sway. Every garden is of their selection and making; every work of irrigation is of their invention and of their planting. At a little station on this line, Tembleque, an old wooden-faced, sunburnt Toledan peasant woman was bidding farewell to her son. She gave him half of her modest purse, then thought it was not enough, and, regardless of his expostulations, poured more, silver and coppers, into his pocket. Just before the train moved off she flung her arms round his neck for a last embrace; her feelings wholly overcame her, she gave him every penny as the train moved on, and the last I saw of her was that she hid her face in her yellow apron and shook with her sobs. Such a sight as that would never, I fancy, be witnessed in Madrid, save at the barrack gates or the door of the prison.

From Alcazar Junction to Albacete the line passes through the same kind of country; the soil seems chiefly ferruginous; the farms grow wider and wider as the traveller nears Albacete, save where the far-stretching waste of stubbles is here and there broken by a plot of vines, or a common studded with stunted ilexes. Albacete, a little town showing nothing of the fertility of Murcia, is chiefly known to Englishmen as the Sheffield of Spain, but any place less like Sheffield it would be hard to find. It is a quiet, dull country town, inhabited almost exclusively by an agricultural population, with nothing bustling or stirring in its aspect. Englishmen seldom come hither. I went to the little inn, the Fonda Reloj, or Clock Hotel, and the first question the landlord asked me was, "Did you know Richard Ford? He was a great friend of ours." I said, "Mr. Ford is dead." "What a pity!" said he; "he was such a gentleman. Ah, what a pity!" This phrase, "What a pity" (*que lastima*) is the kindly Spaniard's usual elegy on the death of his friend.

The little inn at Albacete is a fair type of the middle-class *fonda*—a two-storied building, standing round its little square, paved court-yard, where the servants wash, and draw water from the well in the centre, and where the landlord and his family sit from morning until evening, and invite each passing guest to come and join their simple social circle; its stairs all of brick; its rooms brick-floored throughout; its walls whitewashed or painted, and garnished with a few rude paintings of the saints—it might seem to an English stranger, at first sight, somewhat comfortless. But the inn and its internal arrangements are, in reality, well suited to the climate of the country. An Englishman who at first deems it bare and mean would soon find that papered walls would harbour vermin, and a carpeted floor dust and heat beyond measure in this scorching climate. Perhaps you will find iron pegs hung round the walls—a poor substitute for wardrobes and drawers. The absence of these latter betoken one feature of the national character. We are not here for long; why trouble to unpack everything? Besides, the Spaniard is wonderfully simple in his travelling equipages—a second suit of clothes, three or four clean shirts, and half a dozen handkerchiefs; these suffice him for his journey. As to books, he does not need them; overcoats and thick boots are an abomination in this ever-sunny clime. At 7 we sit down to dinner. One or two tradesmen from the town, one or two travellers staying in the hotel, an officer or two from the barracks—all cheerful, courteous, pleasant, open-hearted fellows—make up the party. The table absolutely groans with fruit—pears, rosy-cheeked apples, melons, peaches, white and black grapes are here, and, cut in huge, rock-like slices, the delicious *sandiás*, or water-melons, show their wealth of crimson flesh beneath the oil lamps. We talk of the Carlist War; one of the party is a Republican; the feeling is in favour of the young King; and all the vials of wrath of the assembled company are emptied on the one *intransigente*. Will the present Government last, or no? All have their own opinion. At last a sage elder settles it, and with much shrewdness and good sense, "There can be no revolution in Spain without the aid of the Army. So long as the King can keep the Generals on his side, his Government is safe." And then a capital, and, I believe, true, anecdote of the young King was told. It was announced that he was going to La Granjc to shoot. And so he was. But it would have been unsafe for him, in the present unsettled state of affairs, to repair thither without at least two battalions of soldiers, which number, in the present emergency, it were hard to spare. Accordingly, of his own free will and accord, the young King refused the pleasure offered him and elected to stay at the Palace at Madrid. Every one knows what Spanish hotel fare is—soup, savoury stews, tomatoes, pimientos, garlic, luscious fruit, and black wine. Then come the cigar and the cup of coffee, and the pleasant chat; and now the evening air is cool and refreshing, and some go to the circus, some to the Casino for cards, billiards, chess, or dominoes, and some—but few—sit down quietly in their own rooms to read or write. Presently you hear some strangely sweet, silvery tones of music outside the window, and, sauntering to the ever-open door, find all the servants gathered round a stranger from Southern Murcia, who is playing that least known, but sweetest of instruments, the Murcian *psalterio*, in the notes of which is blended the sweetness of the harp with the sprightliness of the guitar of Andalusia. He comes, at invitation, into the cool kitchen of the hotel, seats himself, and as he plays his most thrilling tunes, guest, and host, and all the girl-servants gather round to listen. All are equal, all as one in the enjoyment of this simple feast, until he strikes up the *Marcha Real*, as a signal that he must be off and away. So simple, so unsophisticated, so untrammelled by all the usages of polite society is the life of the true, unpolluted Spanish town. This *psalterio* approaches very nearly to the Bavarian zither, but is much larger and more powerful. It is in shape like a tray, covered with silver chords, and slung round the neck, and is played with the fingers. It is by no means common in any part of Spain and in Andalusia unheard of.

The life and amusements of these little towns are exceedingly simple; indeed, all is refreshingly primitive. In the summer months amusements are almost unknown. There is, for both higher and middle class, the early morning or late evening walk; or, perhaps, some strolling circus comes round—one, a wretched troupe, is here now—and all classes freely crowd to see its performances. The best seats (stalls) cost one peseta; the worst, one real. Those who can afford it go to the nearest baths—those of Novelda, near Alicante—and drink the sulphur waters and take the hot baths. These baths are said to cure all diseases of the skin and blood. There is a good hotel attached to them, and about 200 people are there from June to the end of September. Every Sunday and on Feast Days a priest from the neighbourhood goes to perform the *Misa* and minister to the spiritual needs of this little community. A joyous, hearty fellow he is, and just the man to cheer up the patients who are somewhat sad with his bright smile and ringing laugh. The Spanish Church always selects for this kind of duty one of her cleverest and most winning clergy; and so at the Spanish baths you constantly have the most efficient and able clergyman of the neighbourhood. No Church so well as that of Rome knows how to utilize her forces and turn the talents of her good and gifted men to real account. When the summer heats and baths are over, the townsfolk of Albacete have a capital Amateur Theatrical Club, composed of the gentry and upper tradesmen of the town. The amateurs take really good pieces, and, I am told, act exceedingly well. As to other amusements, there is shooting in the hills a few miles to the North-East. Wild boar can be bagged at Ciudad Real in profuse abundance, and deer, and even wolves, at Cuença, where the almost impenetrable pine forests offer splendid cover for game of every sort. But, as a rule, the Spaniards do not care much for sports, *quâ* sport; a *battue* would be more to their liking. Doubtless English sportsmen are enjoying good sport on the stubbles just now. Our 1st of September came and we looked in vain over these arid stubbles for the usual swarm of quails. Not a bird has appeared. The poor Manchegan peasant, whose decoy whistle hangs useless in his hat, looks out on the silent stubbles, where nothing is heard save the silvery bell of the *cicada*, or the twitter of the lark, and says, "We have long neglected the Church, and now God has neglected to send us the quails!"