

CORRESPONDENCE.

ON THE EQUATOR.

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On the Equator, March 15, 1898.—As I begin this letter I am on the hottest geographical line on the face of the globe. I am sitting on the deck of the steamship Santiago, opposite, but out of sight, of the coast of Ecuador and almost exactly on the equator. We shall cross it within an hour. If it were not for a slight breeze which still follows us from the northeast trade winds the air would be stifling, and as it is the very sea seems to steam. At my right there is a vast extent of ocean, which the sun has turned into molten silver. Ten billion diamonds are dancing up and down upon the wavelets, and, although I am under cover, the light of the sun as reflected from the water dazzles my eyes as the direct rays of a July sun at home. On the opposite side of the vessel, in the shadow, the water is of an indigo blue, and as I stand up and look about me, I see nothing but a vast expanse of what, in the hot, hazy air, seems to be a steaming sea. To the westward stretches the Pacific, a distance of about 10,000 miles, before it reaches the lower part of Asia, and to the east is the equatorial region of South America, including snow-capped Andes and the mighty Amazon, my present field of travel. It is now three days since I left Panama for Guayaquil, the port of Ecuador, and until this morning we have been sailing by the coast of Colombia, but in many places 150 miles from the shore. In this way we have saved four or five days of travel, and will make Guayaquil in four days, while the coasting steamers take ten.

The boats of the southern Pacific are far different from those on which I have crossed at different times to Asia. They are unlike the steamers of any other part of the world. The cabins are larger, and the quiet of the sea—for you seldom have a storm here—enables them to have several decks or stories and to keep everything open. There is about a quarter of a mile of walking space on the two upper decks of the Santiago, and on the top one there are places where you could almost lay out a croquet ground and have room to spare. I awake every morning thinking I am on my mountain farm in Virginia. There is a bleating of sheep, a crowing of cocks and a quacking and cackling of geese and ducks. Now and then a cow moos or a pig squeals. We carry all our meat with us. On the upper deck within ten feet of where I am writing, there are two big coops full of chickens, ducks and geese. The coops are two story affairs, walled with slats. The chickens are in the top story, some roosting, and others poking their heads out to get at the water and corn in the troughs outside. The ducks and geese are on the ground floor. A little further over there are crates filled with potatoes and onions, and others containing oranges and pineapples. The sheep and cattle are in pens and stalls two floors below. They are in the steerage, near the butcher shops and kitchens, and where there is what you do not find on other ships, a traveling market. There are men who pay big sums for the privilege of selling on the south Pacific ships to the people at the ports. Our marketmen have in their stock at present about a dozen wagon loads of oranges and pineapples from Panama and ten cattle from Chile, and they will load up with other

things at Guayaquil. They will take this stuff to the ports along the deserts of Peru and Chile, and, as nothing grows there, will get very high prices. Travel is very costly in these ships. There are two lines which sail between Panama and Valparaiso. One belongs to the Pacific Steam Navigation company and the other to the Chileans. The two companies have combined, and as they have a monopoly of the business they keep up the rates. I have never paid so much for steamship travel as I am now doing. The fare to Guayaquil from Panama is \$67 in gold for a distance of about 800 miles, or more than 8 cents a mile. The fares to Europe by the first class Atlantic liners do not run more than 3 cents a mile, and on some of the boats you can go for 2 cents or less. The freight rates here are also very high, being about one cent a pound for this trip. These lines have steamers every week north and south from Panama to Valparaiso, a distance of 3,000 miles. The through rate is \$154, but all passengers are charged extra for stopovers at the ports, and the local rates are correspondingly higher.

I am astounded at the extent of these South American countries. The republic of Colombia, along which we have been sailing, and of which the Isthmus of Panama forms a part, is longer from north to south than the distance between St. Paul and New Orleans and wider in some parts than a beeline from New York to Chicago. It contains more than 500,000 square miles. It is one-sixth the size of the United States without Alaska, and it would make over nine states the size of New York or ten as big as Ohio or Kentucky. The Isthmus or department of Panama has an area almost four times as big as that of Massachusetts, and the Colombian state of Cauca is almost as large as Texas. I have met a number of Americans and others who have recently traveled in many parts of Colombia. They tell me the country is an undeveloped empire and that a great part of it is as yet unexplored. There are some Americans engaged in business of one kind or another in Colombia. Some are in the extreme north in the Chiriqui lands of the upper Isthmus, raising coffee, and others have been buying lands in the Cauca valley. This valley is over the mountains, a little back of the Pacific. It is several hundred miles long and about twenty or more miles wide, and it is said to have some of the most fertile lands on the globe. One American, named Eder, who has recently died, is said to have left a big fortune made out of his coffee plantations. I have heard it said that his income was \$100,000 a year from them; and another had a contract for a railroad, upon which he did so little work that the Colombian government finally paid a million dollars to get rid of him. This was in the case of the concession for the Cauca Valley railroad, which was to connect this rich region with the port of Buenaventura. I am told that English capitalists have now the concession and that they will complete the road. It is now about twenty miles long, and the intention is to build it on to the capital of the province, the city of Cali, which is sixty-four miles from Buenaventura. In addition to this road, there are a half dozen other little railroads in the country, comprising altogether about 400 miles of track, more than one-fourth of which has been built by Americans. The chief bank of Panama, that of Henry Ehrman, is American. The head of the firm came to Panama with 25 cents thirty years ago. He is now worth

several million dollars and lives in Paris.

The chief means of getting about through Colombia is on the rivers and on the mule and donkey paths which cross the mountains everywhere. There is no country which has a greater number of more curious streams. What would you think of a river of vinegar? Colombia has one. It is the upper part of the Cauca river. The Cauca rises in the southern part of the country near Ecuador and flows 680 miles north and empties into the Magdalena. During the first part of its course it has waters which contain 11 parts of sulphuric acid and 9 parts of hydrochloric acid in every thousand. It is so sour within some miles of its source that no fish can live in it, and it goes by the name of the Rio Vinagre, which means the Vinegar river. The Magdalena, the chief river of Colombia, corresponds with our Mississippi. It is more than 1,000 miles long. It is as wide, but not so deep, as the Mississippi, but it cuts the country right in two. Steamers of light draft sail weekly from Barranquilla, on the Caribbean sea up the Magdalena to Hondo, where you take mules and climb up to the great plain of Bogota, on which Bogota, the Colombian capital, is situated. Then there are branches of the Amazon and of other big rivers in Colombia, so that the country is almost as well watered as China. Ten of the little steamers on the Colombia were made at Pittsburg and brought from New York in pieces and here put together.

Just a word or so about Bogota. It is a town of 100,000 inhabitants, and it has electric lights and a street railroad, which were put in by Americans. It has a university ninety-five years old, a national theater, a library of 50,000 volumes, an astronomical observatory and a poor house. The town is on a plain about a half mile higher up in the air than Denver, and its climate is, I am told, much the same. This is the headquarters of the army, and the scene of a revolution now and then.

It is at Bogota that the president lives, and here that congress meets. It is here that the fat concessions are given out, Colombia is a land of concessions. I have told you of the big fortunes which Americans have made out of the Panama railroad, which now pays a quarter of a million dollars a year to the government. Another valuable concession is the salt monopoly. No salt can be sold except by the party owning this concession. At present the owner is Mrs. Nunez, the widow of the late President Nunez. She has salt mines and furnishes the 5,000,000 people of Colombia with a very poor article at very high prices. Tobacco is another concession, and playing cards another. The gambling houses at Panama pay \$48,000 a year for the right to keep other people out of the business, and as far as I can learn they are glad to do it. There is, of course, nothing like the money afloat now that there was during the old canal days, but every once in a while they catch a sucker, as they did just before I arrived, when a young Irishman lost \$5,000 in one night at roulette. Another concession at Panama is the lottery. This is owned by a stock company, which has a capital of \$200,000. The stock pays dividends of 45 per cent a year, and 10,000 tickets at a dollar a piece are sold every week. The prizes range from \$3,000 downward. You see the lottery ticket peddler everywhere. Men, women and children, black and white, accost you in the hotels, on the streets and in the railroad trains, and offer you chances for the next drawing. I happened to be passing the lottery office on Sunday when the drawing was going on and stepped in. A little boy of about eight