ON THE EQUATOR.

Queer Features of Life and Travel on the Southern Pacific Ocean.

The Highest Steamship Rates of the World—A Traveling Market—Some Wonders of Colombia—Mines of Gold and Diamonds Which the English are Working—A River of Vinegar and Woods Which Will Cure Diseases—The Cacique Wood Which Stops Hemorrhages—Pepsin Fruit and the Quinine Tree—Trees Which Flow Cow's Milk and Bushes Which Grow Coffee and Chocolate—Some Colombian Concessions—A Gay Sunday in Panama—An American Cocoanut Plantation and How It is Managed.

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On the Equator, March 11, 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.

A SOUTHERN PACIFIC STEAMER.

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 farther 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. The 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 on 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 $80 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 $174, but all passengers are charged extra for stopovers at the ports, and the local rates are correspondingly higher.

SOMETHING ABOUT COLOMBIA.

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 fortune was [illegible] 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 same 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.

A RIVER OF VINEGAR.

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 400 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 Honda, 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.

BOGOTA.

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 the climate is, I am told, much the same. This is the headquarters of the army, and the scene of a revolution now and then.

A LAND OF FAT CONCESSIONS.

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 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 $7,000 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 Frenchman 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 $20,000. The stock pays dividends of 60 per cent a year and 1,000 tickets at a dollar a piece are sold every week. The prizes range from $1,000 downward. You see the lottery ticket peddlers 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 years of age had been picked out of the crowd and put upon a table. In front of him was a revolving wire basket filled with hollow ivory balls, each containing one of the numbers from 1 to 10. The basket was whirled and the boy picked out a ball. The number in it was the thousands of the prize, another whirl gave the figure for the hundreds, a third for the tens and a fourth for the units. The whole thing was fair enough, only, as the alcalde, or the city judge, in charge told me, there was only about one chance in five hundred of a ticket holder drawing anything. The president of this company is a naturalized American citizen named Duque. He is the owner of the only paper in Panama and his profits from his shares of lottery stock are about $25,000 in silver each year.

There is a chance for a concession here for waterworks. Panama is now supplied with water by peddlers, who go about through the streets seated on barrel carts, each of which is pulled by a mule. In the wet season the city relies on the cisterns. There is, I am told, good water in the hills twelve miles away, and it could easily be piped to the city. Panama has about 25,000 people.

THE GOLD MINES OF COLOMBIA.

The idea prevails in the United States that the greater part of South America is low, moist and unhealthful. This is not so. There are vast areas here which are as salubrious as any part of North America. Mr. Kennedy, an American mining engineer who has prospected in all parts of our continent, as well as in many parts of this, tells me that for every habitable square mile in North America there is an equally rich and healthful square mile here, and that south of the equator there are vast areas of undeveloped agricultural territory which have not been touched. He says that this is the Klondike of the future in gold as well as in other things, and predicts that the eyes of the world will soon be turned southward. In Colombia most of the people live back from the coasts, where there are plains and valleys of vast extent from 5,000 to 8,000 and more feet above the sea. Colombia is a land of gold. It is like Alaska in that you cannot wash the soil anywhere along the rivers without finding what the miners call color. I saw men washing the sands of the sea in the bay of Panama, and though they said they did not get much, I have been told they have been doing the same work for years. It was here that some of the Spaniards got some of their first gold, and since the conquest an aggregation of $700,000,000 worth of the precious metals has been taken out of Colombia. A great deal of mining is now going on in the department or state of Antioquia, which is reached by going several hundreds of miles up the Magdalena river. Here small diamonds are sometimes found with the gold. English parties own a number of the best mines in this region, and much capital is invested. There are now between 200 and 300 gold mines being worked in Colombia.

A GOLDEN RULE FOR ALL DISEASES.

Nearly all of the Indian tribes have more or less gold. I have been told of a curious method which the church has of getting the Indians to give up their gold. They are prone to hoard it, but as they are very superstitious the priests have in some of the churches the images of certain saints who are supposed to cure diseases, but to whom must first be offered in gold a miniature image of the part which is diseased. If a man has a sore leg he molds a little leg of gold—it may be the size of his little finger, it may be larger—and offers it to the saint. It is hung up before his [illegible] on a string with other similar offerings of golden eyes, teeth, heads and legs for a time and if the sore part gets well the Indian is convinced the saint and the gold did the work. Mr. Mansfield, an American electrical engineer, who is in charge of the electric lights and the street railway of Panama, is my authority for this statement. He says he has often tried to buy such relics from the priests in the interior, but that though they acknowledge that they melt up and use the relics after a time they will not sell them.

A PARADISE FOR A PATENT MEDICINE MAN.

Mr. Mansfield is generally considered one of the best of the foreign authorities on the wonderful wealth of vegetable life of the Isthmus of Panama. Before I left Washington I was asked by the secretary of agriculture to look up certain plants and trees which it is thought might profitably be introduced into the United States. Among those asked for from the isthmus was the Platanic bamboo, which is said to have a leaf a foot wide and fifteen feet long. It was this inquiry that brought me into contact with Mr. Mansfield and gave me much curious information. Said he: "There is a wonderful variety of plant life here, and many specimens I believe which are not generally known.

"There are more than twenty varieties of bamboos on the isthmus. There are woods superior in their lasting qualities to the teak wood of Siam and a great amount of mahogany and dye woods. There are plants and woods which the Indians use for medical purposes, which I am surprised are not taken up by our doctors. Take the cacique wood. This will stop the flowing of blood almost instantly. If you scrape off a little dust from a cacique stick and put it on a cut the blood will immediately stop running. The Indians use it for all kinds of cuts, and they say that if a person who has a hemorrhage of any kind takes hold of a cacique stick it will stop it. You find such a stick in many an Indian hut ready for use in case of accident. This wood is expensive, a piece the size of a walking cane costing in Panama $5 and upward. The mecha fruit is good for cancers and tumors. Another tree is a snake-poison antidote," and Mr. Mansfield says that he learns of some new medicinal plant or tree nearly every time he visits his little plantation away off in the interior where he buys of the Indians and has a factory for the making of alcohol, rum and other such things. During his last trip he was shown a plant which was said to be a wonderful emetic. He asked an Indian girl to make some tea of it for himself and a partner, and they agreed together that they would test the virtues of the plant by drinking a cup. They did so. The liquor tasted sweet and seemed not at all bad as it went down. A moment later both men made a rush for the door. Their stomachs were turned inside out, and as Mr. Mansfield expressed it, they thought that even their boots were coming up through their throats. There is a fruit something like a melon sold in the markets of Panama which is a strong digestant, and which, I am told, has almost as much pepsin in it as a pig's stomach, and farther down in Colombia grows the [illegible] tree, the sap of which is like cow's milk and has much the same nutritious properties. Then in some provinces the cinchona or quinine tree grows, and also the cacao, from which comes our chocolate.

AN AMERICAN COCOANUT PLANTATION.

Along the lowlands of Colombia there are plenty of cocoanut trees. The cocoanuts, you know, grow on a palm tree. They are to be seen by the bushel along the Isthmus of Panama, hanging close to the stem of the tree away up at the top, often as high as thirty feet above the ground, where the great palm leaves spring out. It is only lately that men have gone into cocoanut raising as a business, and I am told that groves of these trees have recently been planted in Florida. There is a big cocoanut plantation owned by an American in partnership with a Colombian on the Lighthouse point just opposite where the steamers land at Colon. The American is the Mr. Hyatt of Washington of whom I have spoken as being connected with the big manganese mine owned by John K. Cowen and others. Mr. Hyatt tells me that the plantation consists of 1,500 acres and that they have already planted 40,000 trees and have about 5,000 in bearing. They are now shipping from fifteen to twenty thousand nuts a month to New York, and within three years from now, when the rest of their trees will be in fruit, they expect the orchard to produce 75,000 nuts a month. Cocoanut trees, you know, bear all the year round, and the blossoms and the ripe nuts are on the tree at the same time. The nuts are not picked, but drop from the tree when they are ripe, and the workmen go daily from tree to tree and pick up the nuts, husk them, and they are then ready for shipment. They bring from $25 to $35 a thousand in New York, and the greater part of this is clear profit.

HOW COCOANUTS ARE RAISED.

I asked Mr. Hyatt to tell me something of the expense and management of such an orchard. Said he:

"It costs very little to run it. We are now paying out, all told, only about $150 a month, and our receipts are from $300 to $500 a month. You see, the trees need practically no cultivation, and after they are once in bearing all we have to do is to gather and ship the nuts. We have one part of the plantation which we call the nursery. Here we raise the young trees. The nuts are placed on the top of the ground a short distance apart. Within a short time each nut sends out a sprout from one of the little eyes or holes which are found in one end of it. The sprout shoots up into the air and a root shoots down into the ground. Within a few months, without any attention whatever, the sprout grows from two to three feet high and it is then ready for transplanting. This is done by breaking off the root and putting the nut and sprout into a little hole in the ground just a little deeper than the thickness of the nut. We press the earth around it and the planting is done. We set the trees out about fifteen feet apart. For the first three years we cut out the brush from around the trees, but after this they are left to take care of themselves. They begin to bear at about seven years of age and keep on bearing for many years. A good tree should drop about seventy-five nuts a year, and many of ours do much better than that."

SOME QUEER INSTITUTIONS IN PANAMA.

I found Panama one of the queer towns of the world. It is like a little city of old Spain, and looking out at it from the harbor it makes you think of Venice. The houses along the sea front jut out over the water, and the waves dash in some places against their walls. The streets of Panama wind in and out, up hill and down. The houses are close to the narrow sidewalks, and every house has an overhanging porch or gallery extending out from its second story, so that you are protected from the sun as you walk along the streets. The richer classes live on the upper floors. The ground floors are given up to the poor and to the stores. Few of the ground-floor rooms have windows, and you can look in the open door as you pass through the streets and see all sorts of household operations going on. Here a woman is combing her hair, there one is sewing, and a little further on one is cutting up beef for her breakfast stew. The stores have no display windows, and the goods seem to be piled about without regard to show or order. There are no fixed prices, I am told, and most of the trading is a matter of dickering. The Grand Central Hotel, where I stopped, was opposite the Cathedral of Panama, and facing the plaza, about which the soldiers paraded in the morning and in which the band played at night.

SUNDAY IN PANAMA.

I happened to be in Panama on Sunday. There was service at all the places of worship in the morning, and after that the town was run on what Chicago's young mayor calls "the wide open" order. Promptly at 1 o'clock the Panama lottery had its weekly drawing; at 2 a cock fight came off, and at 4 there was a bull fight inside the ruined walls of one of the great churches of Panama's past. Five bulls were tortured and one was killed by the bull fighter thrusting a sword into it, and having missed its heart, pounding and stabbing it in the back of the neck while the audience howled with delight. In the evening the whole town turned out and walked up and down the plaza, while the band played. There were many pretty girls among the promenaders, but each of the marriageable maidens had one or more of her sisters, her cousins or her aunts of mature years with her, and there was neither flirting nor spooning openly seen. I am told that even an engaged couple are not allowed by the better classes of Panamanians to go about alone, and that if one invites his best girl to the theater he is supposed to include all of the ladies of the family in the invitation. One of the Americans now on the isthmus when he first came here gave a young Panama lady such an invitation and when he arrived at the house found a party of thirteen old and middle-aged women ready to go along with him and his inamorata. The bills for that night were more than his weekly salary, and it was only by chance that he happened to have enough money with him to pay for them.

FRANK G. CARPENTER.

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