

ACROSS THE ISTHMUS.

ACTIVE little M. De Lesseps, with his sanguine disposition and unquenchable good spirits, has succeeded in infecting the whole civilised world with a certain degree of interest in that narrow neck of land concerning which it cared before but comparatively little, since the days when the gallant Cortez and his men gazed upon the broad Pacific, "silent upon a peak in Darien."

And it was with no slight degree of anticipation that the passengers of the good ship *City of Para* seized hat and umbrella as she neared Aspinwall one tropical morning last month, and prepared to see and know the facts of this greatest enterprise the age has seen. Many and diverse were the opinions expressed upon the Atlantic sea-board—there was a singular unanimity in those that prevailed upon the Pacific.

Aspinwall is a revelation. The main street is planked over all the way. Negroes, Italians, Spaniards, Turks, and Chinamen abound. All the streets lead off from the main one, and are exceedingly filthy, being full of mud and unnamable abominations. Pack-mules are tied up here and there. Public gambling prevails in the open street. One boulevard along the coast, down towards the Governor's residence and Aspinwall's monument, is neat and clean and the houses large and airy. The lawns are adorned with tropical plants, and the people seem to live. I leaped over the fence in this quarter and gathered a quantity of corals and shells and returned to the *City of Para* for breakfast. The other passengers were wild over the shells I had, and would not believe that I had gathered them myself. I volunteered to conduct them to the spot, and after breakfast we went back again. Our party got separated, and Mrs. T. and I remained behind to get some corals. Our train was to leave for Panama at half-past ten. We allowed ourselves time to get back, and on our return found all the passengers on board, but Mrs. T.'s baggage was not there. I went for it, but when I got to the steamer found the state-room door locked. I managed to get it open, and, with the aid of a porter, carted out a dozen bundles, and when we got over to the station the train was gone. I indulged in some extraordinary language, but it didn't come back. A herd of negroes shouted at me in Spanish I knew not what, but I ran along the track around a corner through the mud, and saw the train a few yards ahead. I got on board hot and glad enough, for besides the mortification of being left till the evening in Aspinwall, I should have had to pay twenty-five dollars fare if I had gone by any other train, although the distance is only forty miles. I had already purchased a Panama hat, with which I freely fanned myself, but my efforts in that direction were in vain; the heat was unendurable. Just before returning to the boat I saw a funeral procession—four men carrying a rough box and followed by four policemen, as funerals are not private enterprises in this country. This box is carried to a car kept for the purpose, where its contents are dumped out. This is repeated until all of the departed are gathered up, and then a dummy engine runs the lot out to Monkey Hill, about ten miles distant. This is the city burying-ground. The train goes every day with a good consignment, and is known as the "funeral train." I asked a New York merchant, with branch stores in Aspinwall and Panama, if it were true that the mortality on the Isthmus was so great that the Panama Railroad had cost a man for every tie, as I had been informed. He replied: "No; it is a lie; it cost three men for every tie." The police about Aspinwall were very numerous, being principally negroes, each carrying a loaded rifle, with a belt of cartridges around his body.

The ride to Panama was full of interest. Forests on either side, and the entire distance was almost one continuous village of boarding-houses for workmen on the Panama Canal. These houses contained a range of beer bottles on a few shelves, and a tier of bunks extending the whole length of the house. These were arranged so that each sleeper had about three feet, and lay upon an inclined plane with head a few inches from another sleeper on the opposite incline.

The tropical trees and plants, with their massive leaves and beautiful flowers, lined the track. Banana groves, cocconut, bamboo, palm, and mangrove trees formed an almost impenetrable forest. In the interior the people are all negroes and natives. The natives wore very little clothing, and in two or three cases along the line they were *sans* everything. They live in huts thatched with leaves, and the negroes live in frame houses raised up on pillars from six to ten feet high. They are built for the most part by the Canal Company. The canal, from all appearances, is a gigantic failure, and all the people living here to whom I spoke seem to regard it in the same light. There are extensive preparations all along the line and acres of machinery, but scarcely any work is yet done. In a conversation with one of the contractors he said they would do well if it was completed in twenty years.

We arrived in Panama about half-past twelve, and the whole party of through passengers immediately boarded a small steamer to go out to the *Granada*, which was anchored about two and a half miles out. Learning that we could go out again in the afternoon, four of us remained behind to "do" Panama. We walked for two hours through the streets, and unanimously pronounced it to be the foulest and filthiest place we had ever seen. The streets are so narrow in some places as to scarcely admit a mule cart, and garbage of every nature is pitched into them. The stores consist of a row of stalls. On one side of the stall a man sits engaged in the manufacture of cigars and cheroots; on the other a dirty tray full of oranges and bananas, with some yams piled around. Across the rear of this pen is a narrow, greasy counter, with a few bottles of beer and one or two of whiskey, on a shelf behind. Those of a higher (!) class have small gambling-tables, with the proprietor seated behind them and a pile of silver dollars before him. I found it an invariable rule that out of every ten

stores nine were beer shops and gambling dens. This vile practice is more extensively carried on here than in Aspinwall. On the corner of one of the best streets was a gambling-table; fifteen or twenty men and boys were gathered about it engaged in the nefarious little game. On either side of the "boss" stood a policeman, shouting, brawling, and endeavouring to keep the players in order, and giving all the protection he could to the owner, who evidently was regarded among them as a highly respectable gentleman and following an honourable vocation. The police are boys ranging from fifteen to twenty-five years of age. An ordinary man could handle half a dozen of them. Upon enquiring from a captain of one of the bay steamers what use they had for such policemen, he said that individually they were of no service, but there was a great number of them, and they rarely went about alone. The place is ruled—if it can be said to be ruled at all—by Spaniards, and all positions are filled by appointees of their own nationality, regardless of qualifications. I saw only ten or twelve beasts of burden in the entire city, and I was over the greater portion of it; for although it contains 20,000 inhabitants, it extends over just about as much territory as a northern village of 600. The horses are very poor and the mules most demoralised looking creatures.

The only redeeming features of this place are two old churches, and they were surpassingly magnificent. Built of a light brown stone and overgrown in spots with moss and ivy, and with bushes sprouting up here and there from the roof, they look quaintly pretty. Turkey-buzzards, large and not over handsome birds, run about the streets, roost upon the porches, trees and house-tops, and are ever busy gathering up the garbage. They are the only scavengers in the city, which has no drainage system except surface sewers in one or two streets.

We started for the *Granada* about four o'clock, and when a few hundred yards from the shore we, for the first time, saw what a pretty place Panama is. A huge hill rises in the sea to an immense height, the shores are lined with tropical trees, and the bay just south of the city is full of pretty islands. Between two of these the *Granada* lay. We soon were on board, much to the delight of our fellow-passengers and ourselves. A commotion was created by the report being spread about that Panama was infected with small-pox. We who had remained ashore were taken to task for so doing, for the report was confirmed that the disease did prevail; that cases were walking about the streets, and that one of the islands, a few hundred yards off our port, was infected; and on another island, no farther away, was a pest-house, to which had been taken six patients that very morning from the other island, on which were situated this steamship company's building, and where the employes of the company lived. We were not much alarmed, but to satisfy the other passengers we all went to the surgeon, who told us that their fears were well grounded and that we had run a great risk. He vaccinated us all.

All the people in this country, who have any pretensions to civilisation, carry umbrellas. There is one quiet, respectable looking hotel in Panama, other decent looking residences I found not, and upon enquiring from one of the sea captains where the respectable citizens lived, his reply was: "There are none, sir," and I believed him.

Mr. R. and I were conversing with one of the captains about gambling "on a small scale" in the city. "Small, indeed," said he; "I have seen a man lose \$12,000 at one sitting." He informed us of a very extensive gambling-house run by one P., and upon further enquiry we discovered that he was the same P. who had accompanied us from New York to this place, having been up there to engage a variety troupe to come down and play for six weeks, as he is also interested in a theatre here. He is regarded as a very desirable citizen and leading light of the place.

Sara Bernhardt and company played here last week, a most monstrous thing to do, but just like that eccentric actress. She made, as her share of the proceeds, from \$4,000 to \$6,000 a night, the general admission being \$10.

It is difficult to understand how the people here live at all. The exports of the country in this district amount to nothing; the people do nothing, yet here is a city of 20,000 existing some way. It can be figured out only this way: 15,000 men are employed on the canal, several hundred on the railway, about 200 by the steamship company. These work hard, get their money; the city loafers steal it or win it from them, and gamble among themselves for it until it is gone, or there is another influx of gullible workmen.

The *Granada* is a very decent steamer, and is kept clean, even of cockroaches. The waiters are Chinamen, and they are not so submissive and obedient as one usually imagines; for this morning I heard a row in the dining-hall, and looking out saw a Celestial wildly gesticulating at the steward, and shouting at the top of his voice: "Me no fearee you no savee." The altercation arose over the disobedience of some order as to the manner in which the dish-washing was being conducted in the kitchen. I have heard loud talking from the same quarter several times, and have concluded that the lot of a steward who has Chinese subordinates, is not a happy one.

The next object of interest that attracted our attention was a stretcher with a dark object upon it, being carried by four men from the nearest island towards the pest-house. The tide was out, so what were two islands the night before was now one continuous body of land. There was no doubt as to what the dark object was. The four bearers deposited it on the ground about half way, when three men came from the pest-house and took the poor unfortunate back with them. About half an hour later we saw the operation repeated, but this time the bearers who had gone the first half of the distance were unable to get an answer to their signals, so they deposited their burden on the sand in the hot sun, with the thermometer eighty-five degrees in the shade, and left him there to live or die,