

III.

THE SEA-PORT.

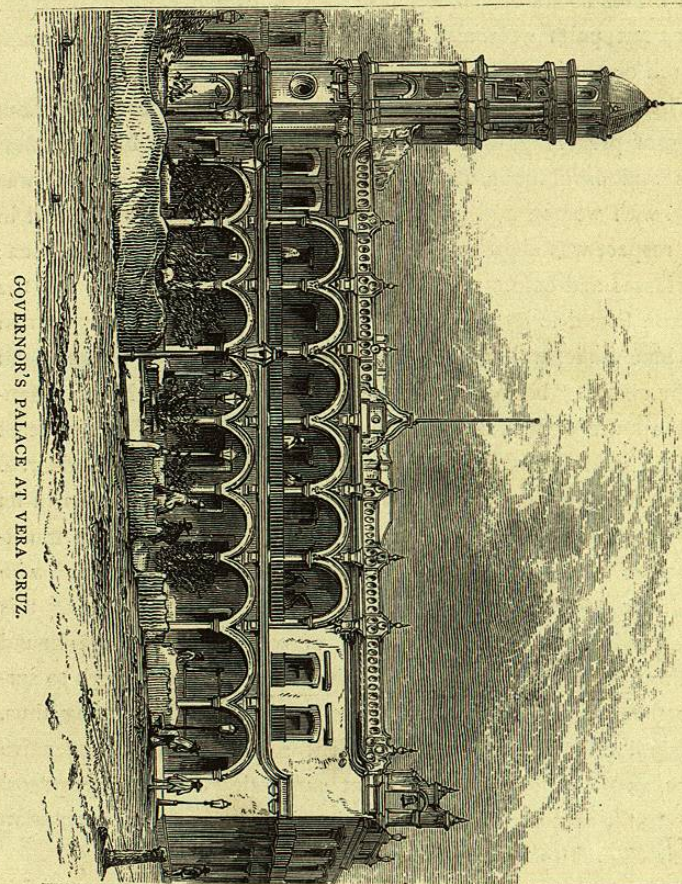
Under the Cocoa-nut Palm.—The Plaza.—The Cathedral.—No Distinction on account of Color either in Worshiper or Worshipped.—The Watering-place of Cortez.—How the Palm looks and grows.—Other Trees of the Tropics.—Home Flowers.—July Breakfast in January.—Per Contra, a Norther.—Its Utility.—Harbor and Fort.—Size and Shape of the City.—Its Scavenger.—Its Houses.—Street Life.—The Lord's Day.—First Protestant Service.—The Railroad Inauguration.

My friend, Theodore Cuyler, has written many a racy talk for *The Evangelist*, with the heading "Under the Catalpa." He is outdone this time—a hard thing to do. He can not write "Under the Cocoa-nut Palm;" nor can he write, as I might also, "Under the Tulipan," whose great scarlet blossoms are now blushing over my head; nor "Under the Chinese Laurel," which a slight change in my seat would enable me to do; nor "Under the Australian Gum-tree," a tall elm-like tree, first brought here by Maximilian, and which rushes up to forty and sixty feet in a few years, in this hot air and soil. I have made a point on him, though it took many a point by sea and land, and many a mile from point to point, to gain even this slight advantage.

I am sitting on a green slat-wood and iron lounge, such as are scattered about the Public Garden of Boston and the Central Park of New York, though they are not much occupied there after this fashion on this New-year's-day. The Plaza de la Constitution, the only plaza of Vera Cruz, is where this bench is located, a square of about three hundred feet to a side, which is well filled with trees and shrubs of every sort of tropical luxuriance, with flowers of many hues and odors, a large bronze fountain in its cen-

tre, and benches girdling its circumference. Carlotta's gift is this, they say, to the city.

The sun lies hot on the house-tops, and wherever it can strike a pavement. The general costume consists of a shirt and pants: the shirt white, short, plaited all around, and worn often by the



GOVERNOR'S PALACE AT VERA CRUZ.

peasantry on pleasure-days as an outer garment—a not unseemly arrangement. Every body is in gay costume, for is it not the first day of the year? And, in addition, does not the daily morning paper, named *El Progreso*, on the ground, probably, that it never

progresses, declare that it is an extra festival-day, because on this day occurred the circumcision of Saint Odilon, and the birth of Saint Euphrosyne the Virgin? Who these are, it does not deign to declare.

But that sun creeps round the corner of the church on this seat, and blazes so fiercely that I must fly or be consumed. Another cocoa-nut palm welcomes me; really another angle of the great church on the opposite side of the street.

That church has just concluded its service—a service without song, or preaching, or audible prayer, or aught else but genuflections and osculations, and mutterings and millinery. Yet it was filled with women and children dressed in their best attire, and in one respect was ahead of any church I have ever seen in America: all classes and colors meet together. On the same bench sits the Beacon Street lady, in her silks and laces, and the poor beggar in her blue tunic, with her mantle carefully brought up on her head in the church, “because of the angels.” The Indian, Negro, Spaniard, all are here, often rolled together in one. Not the least dressed and genteel are these Indian dames of high degree. When shall our better type of faith and worship equal this in its one grand principle, “Ye are brethren?” How hideous a mockery must a white and a colored church appear to the Lord, who is Maker and Saviour of us all! The Romanist is putting this fact assiduously before the mind of our Southern caste-bound brothers. It is their only stronghold; God give us strength to surpass them in this grace, as we have in all else. Not doing thus, we shall find our excellent ointment sending forth an offensive savor, and their offensive ointment surpassing ours in sweetness. Among the wax virgins of this sacristy is a negress, the adaptation of this Church to its votaries being thus signally marked.

I have just returned from an excursion to Medillin, some twelve miles into the country, the summer watering-place of Vera Cruz. It is winter now, and out of season. From March to June that Saratoga reigns. The consul-general of Mexico, Dr. Skilton, and the consul of the port, Dr. Trowbridge, were my companions—two

physicians who won a high name in the army, and deserve and honor the stations they occupy. The air was soft as June, and our thin clothes, even to seersucker and linen, were all that we needed, and more. Flowers of every hue and fragrance blossomed along the way.

The cocoa-nut palm abounded, of all heights and ages. The older ones had a smooth bark, made of its own dead leaves, crowned with long, bending branches, made up of spines like ribs going out of a backbone. It begins in these spines, and they seem to grow together as new ones shoot out, so that the trunk is itself a leaf. These leaves hang dead and loose in their upper edges, ragged and gray, but bind the trunk at their juncture. Every new burst of leaves gives a new cincture and a new raggedness. The rains wear off the rags, and the old trees stand smooth in bark, with the rings marked upon the bark of these successive growths of leaves. They are of every height, from a few feet to a hundred.

You see on the ride many tall, wide-branching trees of the acacia tribe, with a light gauze leaf; others of deepest green, and wonderful for shade, which are not unlike the maple in shape, but are denser of color and shade. That is the mango, whose apple even the foreigners put as the front fruit of the world, and which, therefore, may have been the very apple that tempted Eve and ruined Adam.

I have not yet followed the example my first mother and father set me, if this be the fruit, and I can not therefore say how strong was their temptation; for though the leaf be green exceedingly, the time of the mango is not yet. The banyan, orange, banana, and other trees, too numerous to mention, especially when you do not know their names, throng the road to Medillin. The convolvulus, or morning-glory, of every color covers the roadside, with its running vine and flowers. And there, on a little marsh, raises its sweet and lovely cup, the water-lily, blooming here just as deliciously, and just as superior to all rivals, on this January the first, as it will blossom unrivalled in the ponds of New England the July following.

A stumpy old man brings a bouquet of roses, common blush and white, for which we pay two reals, or twenty-five cents, and that is as much again as he expected. In this we count thirty-eight large double roses in blossom, with buds many. Had that been bought for a New York table on this New-year's-day, it would have cost nearer ten dollars.

The country people are coming to town; for it is somebody's feast-day, and the railroad opening too. This modern secular and ancient ecclesiastical holiday, joined together, is too much for the Aztec. So he has donned his spotless white, and she her spotless gray; for the female human bird, like the feathered biped, is here less gorgeously arrayed than its male. Off they tramp to the city. His shirt, plaited and polished before and behind, depends over like-lustrous trowsers, well buttoned on the side with tinkling bell-buttons that rattle, if they do not ring, to the music of his going. Some are on horseback. Two trotting near the track get frightened at the cars, and back their steeds from the path. A broad ditch is behind the narrow way, and one of the horses plunges therein and tips his clean rider over into the black mush. A loud laugh is all the consolation he gets for the splash and its ruin of his holiday costume.

Medillin is a town of sheds, roofed with thatch, and a few houses of brick or wood, with broad arcades for drinking, dancing, and gambling. The season not being on, none of these were going on, except a breakfast or two, which were excellent. It certainly seemed out of place to wander round that open garden, full of roses and oranges and all manner of hot-house plants, on this New-year's morning, and to sit in the open hall, eating as delightful breakfast as my "International Moral Science Association" brother of Ireland ever got up at somebody else's expense. But the cool hall was a pleasant refuge from the heat, and we found the watering-place refreshing in January. A river, used for bathing, makes it the favorite resort of Vera Cruzians. Cortez frequented it, and built a chapel there. He seems to have done that everywhere; piety and impiety being nearly equal in him.

As we go to the cars, I measure the leaves of lilies growing wild along the track. From the central joint to the tip, I could lay my arm from the elbow to the tip of the finger—just a cubit, or a foot and a half. The whole leaf was over two feet in length, and of corresponding breadth. This was the size of nearly all of them. An Indian and his wife were gathering oranges. Huge fruit, as big as small pumpkins, hung from bushes not unlike the quince. Such is this land; are you not home-sick for it? If so, let me make you contented to stay where you are, by trying to describe that indescribable horror which you must or may encounter to get here.

I had heard of simoons and cyclones, and hurricanes and Hatteras storms, but till I touched this Gulf steamer I had never heard of a "Norther." I began to hear hints about its possibility, and how, when it raged, no ship could leave Havana or land at Vera Cruz; that it occurred about every four or five days this season of the year, and that every seaman disliked and even dreaded it.

Our vessel had pushed on a swift and even keel to the last day but one. I was about concluding that the semi-qualmish state would not develop any more violent stages, and was even getting ready to follow Byron, and stroke the mane of this wild beast of the world, that rages and devours from shore to shore—even as a scared child, holding firmly to the parental arms and legs, may rub its tiny hand on the neck of the huge dog that has frightened it—when, lo! at five o'clock in the morning, after leaving Progreso, I was slung violently up and down, clinging in desperation to the door of the room, which was, fortunately, fastened back to my berth. The ship seemed on its beam-ends. Up and down she flung herself in a rage of fear or madness. Up and down we followed, sick and scared.

After much ground and lofty tumbling, the berth is abandoned, with great reeling and sickness, for the deck. Perched among the shrouds that lash the base of the mast, or reeling along the side of the drunken vessel, I enjoy the Norther. The sea is capped with

foam; the waves leap short and high; the boat goes down these sharp and sudden hills of water, and is hurled back on its haunches by trying to mount the hills coming up on the other side of the hollow. How she staggers and falls down, and picks herself up and is knocked down again, and blindly rears and as blindly falls! Her freight has been chiefly left at Havana and Progreso, and so she behaves worse than she might have otherwise done. I had never seen so crazy a creature on the sea. I thought the long swells of the Atlantic, the short surges of the Mediterranean, and even the chopping waves of the English Channel and the Huron Bay bad enough, but this Mexican Norther excelled them all. Do you wish to pay that toll to see this garden? It will pay; for sea-sickness, like toothache, never kills.

There was not much done that day except to lurch with the lurching ship. "Now we go down, down, downy, and now we go up, up, uppy." Now on your back, and now on your face. Still we contrived to sit it through, and to have a good talk on religion with a Boston gentleman, who, like so many of his city, had no religion to talk about, being not Christian, nor even Pagan, not so much infidel, as faith-less: not anti-believing as non-believing. Like that ignorant backwoodsman who, being asked if he loved the Lord Jesus, honestly replies, "I've nothing agin him." Yet he that is not for Him, having known of Him, is against Him, and so non-Christianity is anti-Christianity.

How much is Christian faith needed in that Christian town! And what a record have they to meet who have taken away our Lord, and given the people a stolid self-reliance, or more stolid fatalistic indifference as their only religion! But our lively friend could sing—what Bostonian can not, since the Jubilee?—and he mingled "Stabat Mater," "Coronation," and camp-meeting melodies in a pure Yankee *olla-podrida*. May this song-gift yet lead the singer to the grace it springs from and to!

Toward night the winds and waves abated slightly, and after midnight they lulled to sleep. But long after the Norther had blown itself away, the waves rolled slow and steady but deep and

long, as if they themselves were tired out, and the steamer swung to and fro evenly and weariedly.

As the storm is gone, so that more violent one of sin shall blow over, and the race of man, like a convalescent but tired child in the arms of its mother, shall rock itself to sleep in the arms of its Saviour, God. Cowper's words, so befitting that sick and weary ship-company, are not an unbecoming prophecy. I was comforted with them as I lay in that tossing berth:

"Six thousand years of sorrow have well-nigh
Fulfilled their tardy and disastrous course
Over a sinful world; and what remains
Is merely as the working of a sea
Before a calm that rocks itself to rest."

Are our present waves the passing away of this Norther of sin? Is the level sea of universal grace and goodness appearing? It is; but perhaps many a Norther must yet rage before the heavenly and perpetual calm prevails.

A good word may be said for most of God's creatures, and the Norther has its bright side. But for it, Vera Cruz could not exist. It may create qualms on shipboard, but it drives away the yellow fever on shore. Its coming concludes that pestilence, though it is said to also conclude the lives of all prostrated with the disease at its coming, their relaxed system succumbing to its over-tonical force. So we may accept the lesser evil in view of the greater blessings that it brings, and rejoice that Northers rage in the Gulf of Mexico.

The reason why this storm prevents a landing is that there is no real harbor here, and the situation of the port is such that the north wind drives the waves straight on and over the mole, its only dock, which is a few hundred feet long. The waters rise and roll over this wharf, and prevent all landing. Indeed, the waves could hardly allow a boat upon them, were a landing possible, so high they mount. When it is on, communication ceases, and visitors to the ship, or sailors on the shore, have no means of getting to

*Debris of
"ha centado
habanero."*

their own place. Yet all this could be cured by a few score thousand dollars. The castle lies two miles, perhaps, from the shore, and reefs extend a third of the way toward it on the northern side. A breakwater could easily be built over the rest of the way, and the harbor of Vera Cruz laugh at the peril of the north wind, and enjoy its refreshment. Some time the government will make this improvement. Yet "*mañana*" (to-morrow), they would say here: their word for all enterprises and duties.

Our Norther has subsided, and we enter the sunny bay, on the last Saturday morning in December, as warm and delicious a morning as ever broke over New York Bay in June, as George L. Brown's painting of that city superbly represents. The walls of the city of the True Cross break on the eye—a speck of superior whiteness amidst the glittering sand-dunes that inclose it, but a whiteness that does not increase as you approach. Small palms scantily scatter themselves among the sand-hills, and thin grass and a parched vegetation, though far-away hills lift a solid terrace of green to your fascinated eyes, and, towering over all, Orizaba raises its snow-capped spear, a peak of unequaled beauty. All the zones are around and before you, from Greenland to Abyssinia.

The harbor is empty of shipping; only four or five vessels lie on its dangerous sea. The famous castle, San Juan d'Ulloa, is a large, round fortress, of a dingy yellow. A castle impregnable, it is said, except to assault, which was never attacked that it was not taken. Cortez professed to expend thirteen millions upon it; and Charles the Fifth, once calling for his glass, and looking through it, westward, was asked what he was looking for. "San Juan d'Ulloa," he replied. "I have spent so much on it, that it seems to me I ought to see it standing out on the western sky."

We anchor off the costly folly, and are greeted by officials and friends. Boats soon put us on the mole, and we are in the sea-port of the United States of Mexico.

This city consists of sixty acres, be they more or less, inclosed with a begrimed wall, from ten to twenty feet in height. Boston Common is not far from the size of Vera Cruz; its burned district

