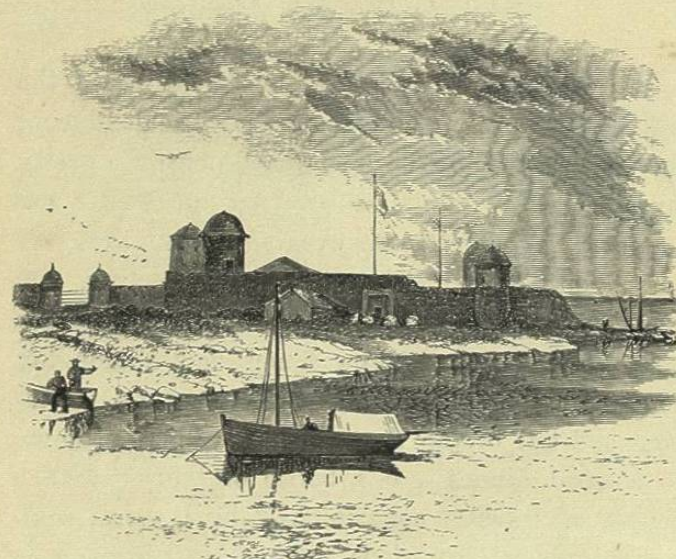


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WATER BATTERY, HAVANA.

## CHAPTER I.

## THE START.

THERE are few sports more fatiguing than a long day's wildfowl-shooting during severe weather. Cramped up in your punt, cold, tired, and with half-frozen hands and feet, you only bear up, in the hope that a good and lucky shot with the "big gun" may possibly bring you home "le Roi de la Chasse." For at this sport, more than at any other, the shooting is "jealous," and every distant report excites great speculation as to who fired it, and what it may have brought to the bag.



We were a very snug little party on board the cutter-yacht 'Z,' in and about the Scheldt, during the winter of 1865-66, and accounted for a pretty large bag of wildfowl, considering the winter was so open. What pleasant evenings those were, we passed on board! After the day's shooting, gun cleaning, and the indispensable "tub" had been got through, cannot you fancy how thoroughly contented one must feel about seven P.M.—the labour and toil of the day being over—seated down to a good dinner and a bottle of "dry," with a couple of "sworn companions," in a warm, well-lighted, almost luxurious little cabin, listening to the cold north-easter shaking the rigging overhead; and after settling the comparative merits of the shooting, and arranging the plans for the next day—over the claret—a general and cosy conversation gradually begins?

Speculations on the hunting at home, politics, racing,—most of these topics received a fair share of our attention; but what the mischief made us discuss Mexican affairs one December evening, I am almost at a loss to surmise. Perhaps it was the recollection of a certain good dinner at the 'Rag,' at which an ex-colonel of the Guards expressed his decided opinion that the Old World was used up, and nothing of real interest in the way of travelling remained to be done but to make a journey to the

Valley of the Great Lakes, and visit Popocatepetl and the Ixtaccihuatl. Besides, we had "Umbra" on board with us—not in the flesh, or in the shadow, but in the shape of his book,—and I imagine he had something to do with it.

Be that as it may, we did talk about Mexico that evening, and resumed the conversation several times before we ran up the river to Antwerp, the next week, to send our slaughtered wildfowl home by the steamer, and lay in provisions for another fortnight's cruise, as was our usual custom. During our stay there, I was infatuated enough about the question to go by rail to Brussels, and set to work to glean what information I could, regarding "le beau pays du Mexique."

On the 14th of March, the same party of three sat once again at dinner together; this time, not on board the yacht, in Dutch waters, but in Paris, and at Véfour's. Later on in the evening, one started by the train to St. Nazaire, to embark for Mexico, and the other two returned to London. I need scarcely tell you that the passenger bound across the Atlantic was myself; the conversations during the winter's shooting had at last borne their fruit.

I could hardly wish my greatest enemy a worse piece of bad luck, than to find himself compelled to sojourn for twenty-four hours at St. Nazaire. It may have improved somewhat of later days; I sin-



cerely hope it has. All rising seaport towns are naturally disagreeable resting-places, but this one is several degrees dirtier, and more thoroughly uncomfortable, than any other I have ever had the misfortune to pitch my tent in. When, added to the miseries inseparable from a filthy hotel and bad food, one has just taken leave of one's friends, and on the eve of a tolerably long voyage, I think there is a sufficient excuse for being impatient at an unpleasant delay on the very outset of the journey; and, I assure you, notwithstanding every prospect of rough weather, it was positively a feeling of relief to me, to find myself on board the good steam-ship '*Impératrice Eugénie*,' with all ready for a start, on the 16th of March.

Dirty weather we did have with a vengeance, until after we ran past the Azores; but I will do the '*Impératrice*' the justice to testify that she rolls about far less than most large ocean-going steamers of her class; in fact the *mal de mer* is reduced, on board of her, almost to the possible minimum; and about the third day, nearly all the passengers began to show at meals, and "do" pretty fairly.

After losing sight of the Azores the weather was fine, and even became tolerably warm, everything going on prosperously until the 31st. On that day a dreadful rumour began to circulate among the

"talent" that we had run short of coal. Unfortunately, there was no want of foundation for this unpleasant report, for before midnight we were burning wood!

Every available piece of timber on board was seized upon, even the large boom supporting the forward awning was sawn up into blocks to feed the furnaces; and a solemn sacrifice of poultry took place in order to utilize the hen-coops for the same purpose. All to no avail, for by eight o'clock the next morning the fires were out, the floats of the paddle-wheels unshipped, and our speed speedily reduced from thirteen knots an hour down to a little more than two, for of a surety the '*Impératrice*' was not designed or built with a view to fast sailing under canvas.

At last we passed the island of Sombrero, a long dark slip of land, resembling an enormous whale more than anything else, then sighted the Virgin Isles; but we were certainly dead out of luck, for on the evening of the 2nd of April, the captain was obliged to lie-to with a foul wind and blowing fresh, it being quite out of the question trying to fetch St. Thomas.

In this state of affairs, the lifeboat was dispatched to find the best of her way to the port—we were some forty miles from it, I think,—with orders to send us out either a tug or more coal, and early the



next morning our spirits were greatly revived by the arrival of a steamer, for the boat had accomplished her mission; our fires were soon under weigh again, and in a few hours we were riding at anchor in the lovely bay of St. Thomas.

St. Thomas really is charming; it is absolutely a relief to eyes tired by the sameness of an Atlantic voyage, to rest on the bright pleasing landscape which breaks into view as you enter the harbour. The bay is sheltered by large hills, the town itself being built on three eminences of about an equal height, and overshadowed by a mountain, the background making the whole scene stand out in bold relief. Everywhere the tropical foliage is most luxuriant, almost as much so in fact as in the island of Ceylon, of which the palm and cocoa-nut trees growing right down to the water's edge reminded me very forcibly.

There are not many attractions or amusements on shore, and after strolling along the streets and mounting up to the castle, where the view of the harbour is worthy of a few minutes' attention, nothing much remains to be done unless you like to take a swim. The baths, for the benefit of nervous people, are carefully guarded from the attacks of sharks, being fenced in by strong palisading, and you can splash about without fear in the interior of a description of gigantic wooden box. The hotel,

by the bye, is good, and over a fish breakfast we arranged our party, to ride up from Vera Cruz to Mexico. We were altogether four in number; Colonel Boyer, *chef du cabinet* to Marshal Bazaine; the Count de Colbert, captain in the 12th Chasseurs; M. Barrés, editor of the 'Estafette,'\* and myself.

The voyage continued without incident until our arrival off the Havana, on the evening of the 7th. Now at the Havana the Spanish authorities certainly succeed admirably in making themselves as annoying as possible to all steam-navigation companies, with the exception of their own. Listen to the history of our delays and misfortunes. In the first place, we were compelled to cruise about outside the harbour all that night, the port being closed at sundown. The next morning, Sunday, we steamed in and anchored near the wharf of the Compagnie Transatlantique, thinking our troubles were over. Not a bit of it. We were ordered at once into quarantine, and told that we had cholera on board. In vain our captain remonstrated, and assured the port authorities that not only had we a clean bill of health and had never even heard of cholera being either at St. Nazaire or at St. Thomas, but that we actually had not had one single case of illness what-

\* A French journal published in Mexico, but since suspended by the Mexican Government, for giving its opinions too freely.



soever on board since our departure from France. It was no good. "It was Sunday," they said; "all the responsible officers were in the country—could not be found. If they even could be found, would not be disturbed. We must, therefore, at any rate, remain in quarantine until the next morning, then they would see about it," etc. etc.

The heat was terrific, not a breath of air, the sea like molten glass; and there for twenty-four long hours we stagnated on board. Finally, about ten o'clock on Monday morning, it was discovered that there was no impediment whatever to our landing, and accordingly we landed. To complete our annoyance, it rained all day, and in making an expedition to see the Captain-General's country residence, we got drenched, and on the whole were too bad-tempered and far too damp to appreciate the beauties of the Havana. In fact, we were more than half pleased to be off again, with the prospect of Vera Cruz before us in three days' time at the most.

The next Friday evening, while we were all at dinner, we heard the rattling of the anchor chain, and going on deck found ourselves lying between the fort of St. Juan d'Ulloa and the town of Vera Cruz. I can hardly describe to you my first impressions of the view: they have changed considerably since that evening. There was a wonderful sunset, such a one as you only see in tropical

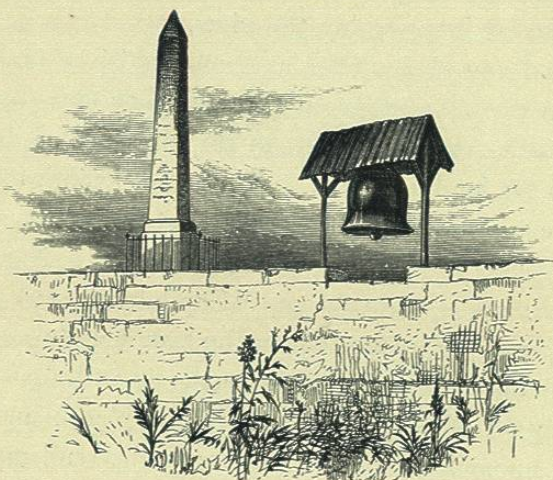
countries, and then not very often. Vera Cruz rejoices in many steeples and domes, and they shone out clear and white, like marble, against the deep blue of the mountains far away inland. In the distance, the last rays of the sun faintly lit up the snow-peak of Orizaba, whilst on our left lay long, dangerous-looking, black reefs, half covered by the tide, the castle of St. Juan d'Ulloa looming darkly in the half-light; while just visible in the distance was "La Isla de los Sacrificios,"—the wreck of a large vessel, driven on the sands by a strong "norte," standing out in black and ominous effect, and almost intercepting the view.

Mind you, I don't for a moment wish to idealize Vera Cruz into either an extraordinary or a charming place; it has more than its fair share of drawbacks on landing, even leaving the "vómito" out of the question. As in most Eastern towns, so in this country, one is soon disenchanted. Narrow, dirty streets; crowds of "Zopilotes," vultures, privileged and protected by the law, hopping about in the open and pestiferous gutters; a disagreeable deadly air of decay about the whole place; and the most uncomfortable hotels conceivable, tend rapidly to make one change one's opinion, that "really, after all, Vera Cruz is not so bad a place."

Probably my first impressions were due, more to the time and circumstances of the day than the ac-



tualities of the view. Of course everybody was in a hurry and bustle to get ashore; but had it not been for the firmness of Colonel Boyer, we should have been again put into quarantine, the Spanish steamer having reported that we had arrived at the Havana with cholera on board. Fortunately for us, the authorities here listened to reason, and just as night began to fall, we found ourselves standing on the mole of Vera Cruz. In Mexico at last!



ALARM BELL, MORO FORT, HAVANA.



PEAK OF ORIZABA.

## CHAPTER II.

## A RIDE UP THE COUNTRY.

VERA CRUZ was a very Babel. Zouaves, Turcos, Chasseurs d'Afrique, and Nubians—belonging to the Egyptian Legion—were bustling about, and hurrying their way through the crowds of Mexicans, Indians, cargadores,\* arrieros,† and impatient travellers, who, on the eve of the departure of the mail-steamer, invariably block up the *zaguan*, or portal, of the Custom-house; for the homeward-bound passengers had been impatiently awaiting

\* Cargadores,—porters.      † Arrieros,—mule-cart drivers.