

## OUR NEXT-DOOR NEIGHBOR.

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### I.

#### *BEFORE THE BEGINNING.*

The Threshold.—From Snow to Flowers.—A Character, and what made him.  
—Our South and its Ethiop.—The Bay and Blaze of Havana.—Off.

THERE is properly a path to the front door of a house, or at least a few steps ere its entrance is reached. So every voyage has a preliminary, a before-the-door-step experience. This is sometimes excluded entirely from the journal of the journey, sometimes inserted in the preface—a proper place for the preliminaries (a fore-talk best occurring at the fore-threshold), sometimes made into Chapter First. The latter course is here adopted, though every reader is at liberty to skip the chapter, leap over the threshold, and press instantly into the centre of the house, that is, the volume.

The nearest things are often the farthest off, the farthest off the nearest. This is true of places as well as of peoples. We know more of Bismarck than of our next-block neighbor, of Paris than of many an American town. This law is verified in our knowledge, or ignorance rather, of our nearest national neighbor, Mexico. Few books are written, less are read, upon the most novel land on our continent, and one of the most attractive on any continent. Prescott's "Conquest" is esteemed a sort of historical romance, the very charm of his style adding to the unreality of his theme. And if it be reckoned strict history, it is still history; not a living, breathing power, as is England or Italy, Germany or Russia, but



a vivid fact of three centuries and over ago, a mediæval story of marvel and mystery. In fact, Prescott's "Conquest" has made that of its subject, Cortez, to fade. And one is half tempted to believe that the real *conquistador* was not the strong-brained, strong-limbed, strong-souled Spaniard, but the half-blind and wholly meditative Bostonian. The Achilles and his Homer are worthy of their several fame. Yet the land on which, or out of which, each won his chief glory is still superior to them both. A run along some of its chief paths of interest may make this fact patent to other eyes.

Just as our North was putting on its winter night-robcs, which it did not take off for four long months, I packed my valise, three of them, as became a "carpet-bagger," and moved southward.

Snow chased me as far as Richmond; moist, mild June met me at Montgomery; oranges, in clusters, plucked fresh from the boughs, were passed through the cars near Mobile; and New Orleans welcomed me to summer skies, and showers, and flowers. A Northern touch of sharp and almost icy weather made the steamer for Havana less unwelcome. So a glimpse at good friends, and a coming and going grasp of hands, including a coming but not going grasp of hearts, and the steamer and I are off.

A character that I met on the steamer, by its strangeness relieved the sea-qualms, and, if for no other reason, deserves a sketch. He was a type of a vanishing class—few, I hope, at any time, but not without existence. He was a Havana planter, who had come to New Orleans to sell his crop, and was returning brimful of cash and whisky; nay, not brimful of the latter, or, if so, with great capacity of enlargement—worse than some prolix preachers possess over their text. When the captain entered the cabin, he greeted him with a shower of oaths—not in rage, but in good humor—that being almost his only vocabulary. He called constantly for every sort of liquor—beer, gin, wine, whisky. He drank all the three days and nights like a fish, if a fish ever drinks. It never drinks such stuff as he constantly poured down his inflamed throat. The stuff that went in and that came out were alike horrible.

A clever colored lad from Philadelphia was the special object of his contemptuous detestation. He ordered him to get the liquors and hot water every few minutes until near midnight. When the fires were out, and hot water was not to be had, and the bar shut, and the liquors also absent, then he raved at the lad for not waking up steward and purser, and securing the delectable elements. If the boy went slowly to his impossible task, how he cursed him! how he blasphemed his people! how he cursed the Abolitionists for setting them free! declaimed against Massachusetts in particular for her share in this matter, and declared their incapacity for liberty, though the boy was tenfold more capable of freedom than himself. Yet he was as shrewd as any other Yankee, and said that slavery was as good as dead in Cuba, and he had persuaded his wife, and sold off all his "niggers" when he could get something for them. I am sure they were glad to get away from the lash of his tongue and arm, and I pitied the hired hands on whom he voided the rheum of an arrogant disposition, a trained contempt and hatred, a false theory, and a fearful appetite. Nay, his wife must suffer often from that scourge.

He was a good Romanist withal, though without any of the orthodoxy of his Church. He said that he prayed nightly to the Virgin, but he did not believe in her, or Christ, or the Bible, or any thing but God. I said, "If you believe in God, you believe in Christ, for Jesus Christ is God." "Jesus Christ!" he broke forth; "— Jesus Christ!" It was the worst oath I had ever heard. I called him quick to his senses, and he halted a moment in his mad and profane career. He was a Free Religionist, like three others whom I have met on this trip, two of whom were also European Roman Catholics, one a Bostonian, showing that there is no distinction of clime or race in this anti-faith. Like the others, he showed his free religion and modern theology by most outrageous swearing. It is the true creed of that churchless church, and shows that men who profess to deny damnation, hell, Christ, and even God himself, are most profuse in using terms which show that these are the profoundest beliefs of their real nature.



I pitied the poor rich man, and the system of religion and society that had turned such a creature of holy possibilities into a demon; and I prayed all the more earnestly for the abolition of the devil of drink, and that it might speedily follow to eternal destruction its kindred demon already slain.

What wonderful blessings has Abolition brought to all those who were held, like this rich victim, fast in more slavish chains! Our white brethren will rejoice as much over the liberty it has given them and their sons as in that which it has given their darker brothers. It has made such characters as this impossible. Men may drink yet, and curse Christ and his Church, but they can not be developed into such frightful specimens of diseased humanity.

He made me think of a like character I met on the road from Suez to Cairo. He was a genteel, well-dressed Turkish merchant, with his nice silk jacket "all buttoned down before" and behind, and tasteful silk breeches. He was bringing some Nubian boys to the Cairene market. He kept tormenting the poor lads by touching their arms, cheeks, and legs, anywhere, with the burning end of his cigar. He laughed at their silent cringes, and looked at us as if expecting reciprocal smiles. Had we known his language, we would have cursed him to his face. If such were his jokes, what must have been his treatment of them when roused to madness, as he undoubtedly often was! He was very devout withal, and at the sunset station was first from the cars, and on the wilderness gravel, in sight of all, was making his prostrations and muttering his prayers.

It is this frightful exception that proves the rule, an exception not so infrequent as it ought to have been, as the Rev. Mr. Bleby shows in his late most interesting book, entitled "Romance without Fiction; or, Sketches from the Portfolio of an Old Missionary," in which he gives thrilling illustrations of hardnesses of heart and cruelties of conduct in the English West Indies, and by English gentlemen, and clergymen even, that are harrowing after almost a century has passed since their enactment. All our Sunday-schools, North and South, should read this vivid record of modern martyr-

dom, not less horrible and holy than that given by Fox, and executed by false Christians upon the true in the Middle and the later ages. The evil that wrought it has ceased—thanks be to God!—in most lands, and will soon cease in all.

All this conduct was simply because this comely lad was colored. I thought I had escaped from caste and all its effects. When I mounted the *Yazoo* I did not expect to see colorphobia in any shape until I had gotten back to our beloved country, when I again expected to see it everywhere, in every shape. But the presence was not to be put by. It seemed even providential; for the first Sunday that I spent in the South, only the week previous, I opened my Testament and lighted upon the passage, "The angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, 'Arise and go into the south country.'" The next verse says, "He arose and went, and lo! a man, an Ethiop." It was, seemingly, a surprise to him that he was sent to this black Gentile. But he was without prejudice of color, though tempted, as a Jew, by that of blood and faith. For these latter reasons he may have hesitated a little, for the Holy Spirit has to enforce the order of the angel, and he says to Philip, "Go and glue thyself to this chariot." As the Testament was being read in course, I can hardly say the passage was selected by lot or of the Lord; yet it struck me very forcibly, and I fancied (was it fancy?) that the ordering in this case was providential. I had arisen and gone into the South country, and had found there the Ethiop, and now heard the Spirit say, "Glue thyself"—this the original means—"to him." I saw in his conversion the regeneration of all our South land and North land, too; for the Lord will uplift the whole nation only as we uplift our long down-trodden brethren into Christian oneness with ourselves. The Ethiop is riding already in his chariot, and as Lowell wittily somewhere, for substance, says, "The white man will be willing enough to run along by his side, and accept a seat with him, when the black man rides in his own chariot."

But our South country was not sufficiently South. So I am sent yet farther into the South country—the "mid country," as the orig-



inal hath it—till I find myself where our "Sunny South" is far away to the north, and where even our country is printed on the map "the United States of the North." Much as some of our good neighbors may dislike to be called Northern people, they are compelled to endure that affliction from Mexican lips. This proud and sensitive nation calls itself "the United States of Mexico," and it will not allow another body of commonwealths on the continent to call itself "the United States of America."

If our brethren had achieved their independence they might have been compelled to conform to this nomenclature, and called their country the Central United States. Fortunately, they can and will yet rejoice in the continental title which includes centre and circumference in its all-embracing area.

This experience on the steamer has led to all these musings. Better these than that dreary heaving of the stomach and the sea. How the outside and the inside miserably harmonize! The gray I get glimpses of through that bit of a hole in the side of the ship, as the berth tips over, lets me sickly see a like sick sea. The waves toss wearily on their bed, and I am glad, in a miserable way, that I have even this sort of communion with nature.

The *Yazoo* carries us to Havana and to midsummer in sixty hours. The hot bay seems hotter than New York's hottest. Its round rim is ablaze with direct and reflected burnings. The golden sand-hills shoot back the golden rays in increased fervor and brilliance. The palm gives a shadeless shade, as would an umbrella stuck on the top of a twenty-foot pole. The catcus, least lovely and not least useful of tropical plants, thick sets its quoit-like leaves with thorns. Deep sheds cover the quays, protecting from the fiery blaze both man and beast: which is which, is yet undecided, since both are beasts here, the mule often less so than the man. Under their broad roofs goes ceaselessly on the busy loading of sugar and oranges and bananas, the busy unloading of bales and barrels of Northern fields and mills.

The slave is still here. He is a vanished institution northward across that blue gulf, and already in his last stages of serfhood

here. He exhibits, in this decay of brutehood and beginning of manhood, some traces of both natures. Here is a big, oily fellow, lifting freight out of the New York steamer. He is as lithe as a Greek wrestler, and, like him, anointed with fresh oil, his own oil, extracted by the Adamic curse, not from his brow alone, but from his back and breast and legs and arms, even the whole body. Like the precious oil on Aaron's head, it flows down to the bottom of his garments, or would if he had any on, a *couvert* alone composing his wardrobe.



THE BAY OF HAVANA.

He will make a good Touissant, give him education, or a bad one if he has not soon given him liberty. This he is soon to have; and some future visitor may see him clothed and in his right mind, well-cultured, sitting in the council chamber or standing in the pulpit, serving in high places as he now serves in low.

This glimpse from the bay is all I can enjoy; for the steamer *City of Merida* is in, and will leave before night for Vera Cruz. The vessel must be off before sundown, or it can not leave for two



days; for this is the night before Christmas, and the Church authorities forbid all leaving of ships or doing of any other work on this holiday, except on payment into their palms, professedly into her treasury, of double fees of doubloons; so, to escape committing the sin or paying the price of bribery, the captain is determined to get outside the Castle before sunset vespers ring.

The hot streets are touched; the collector and commandant are paid their demanded and needless fee; the filth and fever of the narrow streets about the wharf are duly interviewed; a coachman lashes his sick horses from officer to officer; a cup of coffee is drank at those best saloons of Spanish-speaking countries; and some ten dollars are spent for the privilege of entering the port and exchanging steamers. Then the black sides of the goodly steamer are scaled, and Havana is left almost or ere it is reached.

"Out to sea the streamers fly."

We leave the port left three centuries and a half ago by a daring soldier-farmer, with his small accompaniment of ships and soldiers, for the land, whisperings of whose wonders had allured the commandant of Cuba to embark his treasures in its discovery and subjugation; and who also, less wisely for himself, but not for the world, had been induced to give command of the fleet to a reconciled foeman, who had made peace with his adversary, that he might thus gain over him the greater victory.

Velasquez, however, began to fear him before he sailed, and had revoked his commission. But Cortez, before he had received official knowledge of the revocation, hoisted anchor and sail, and fled in the night. We follow after at not far from the same hour. The city lights glimmer along the shore ere we lose sight of it and them, and we skim all night along the way that adventurer sailed.

## II.

## A DAY IN YUCATAN.

The First-born. — An Opportunity accepted. — An Index Point. — Cocoa-nut Milk. — The Market-place. — Euchre as a Food. — A Grave Joke. — The Drink of the Country. — The Cocoa Palm. — The Native Dress. — A Hacienda. — A Pre-adamite Haciendado. — Jenequen. — Prospecting. — Almost a Panic. — Done into Rhyme.

EVERY thing is affected by first impressions. Sometimes they can never be overcome. That like or dislike often abides incurable. The first sight of a foreign shore is a love or a hate forever. How perfect Ireland is in my memory, because it looked so beautiful, rising, a green wave of stillness and strength, out of that sick and quaking sea, over which I had been rolling so long! Egypt is not a river of verdure so much as a strip of blazing sand, for Alexandria, and not Cairo, is its first-born in my experience.

Mexico has its first picture in my gallery. Whatever grandeurs of mountain or glories of forest it may unfold, its first impression will always be that first day in Yucatan. I never dreamed a month before of seeing Yucatan. Even if Mexico itself had crossed the mind as a possibility of experience, Yucatan had never been included in that concept. That prettily sounding name was as far off as Cathay or Bokhara.

Yucatan was, to me, Central America; a museum of ancient monuments; an out-of-the-world corner. In fact, it did not belong to Mexico till Maximilian's time. He annexed it, and they hold together still. We often strike an unknown rock in our sail through life, and Yucatan was the unexpected shoal on which we first stranded. It happened in this wise:

The *City of Merida* makes a landing as near as possible to the