CHAPTER IV.

MODERN PANAMA—LOCATION—POPULATION—SKETCH OF EARLY HISTORY, ETC.

MODERN Panama was founded in 1673 on Villa Corta. The first church erected within the city was that of San Felipe, over whose western door the date, "1688," will be found. Modern Panama is therefore over two centuries old. Panama was made a walled city; the walls costing over eleven millions of dollars some two hundred years ago, and that at a time when the Indians of the country were little better than Spanish slaves. In many places, notably on the Battery, the walls and masonry in general are in excellent order. The early Spaniards were magnificent builders. The city is built on a point of volcanic rock jutting well into the bay, and it was specially selected as a site for a walled city, in order to be safe against the fate that destroyed old Panama. As recently as 1849, in the days of the California gold fever, a deep moat crossed the city's front facing Mount Ancon. The moat passed from a point on the Bay of Panama past the famous old church of La Merced to another point in the bay beyond. On the city side were huge walls and the old time gate and drawbridge. Today the greater part of the walls have been removed, and in their place one sees a continuous street. To the left of the main road beyond La Merced, some of the walls still can be seen with the old time embrasures for guns.

Panama was a stronghold of Spain for many decades. The hundreds of millions of treasure that were stored there seem almost unreal to us now, but they were substantial enough in fact, for in those days Spain was the sole mistress of the seas.

There is a story of a king of Spain who once while
looking from a window in his palace, shielded his eyes with his hand. A minister who was present noticed the act, and the king said, "I am looking for the walls of Panama, for they have cost enough to be seen even from here."

The main Plaza or square of Panama in 1880 was in the exact heart of the city. Standing at the Grand Hotel facing the Plaza, by looking across the street to our left, we see an old time building. It is the Cabildo, or town hall, a building dear to all Colombians, as being the spot within which they signed their declaration of independence following the throwing off of the Spanish yoke. The hotel and Cabildo complete that side of the square. Directly opposite the hotel was the Bishop's Palace, a modern building approaching completion in 1880, four stories in height, and of a handsome architectural design. The then resident bishop was one of Colombia's most talented sons, Bishop Paul, now archbishop of Colombia, with residence in the Federal capital of Santa Fé de Bogota. This is the oldest archbishopric in the three Americas; the first church in America having been built in Santa Maria de la Antigua del Darien, a spot not very far from old Panama, out on the Atlantic side of the Isthmus. Returning to the city, opposite the Cabildo is one of the old time Colombian stone houses, three stories high, with balconies, and covered with red tiles. Such buildings generally are whitewashed.

The Cathedral of Panama is to the left of the Grand Central Hotel. A well-known writer* states that it is of the early renaissance, but he is mistaken. The building has two lofty stone towers, of a pure Moorish type, whose domes are covered with the cement for which the early Spaniards were famous, and in which are embedded hundreds of pearl shells with the pearly side out. They are worked up in various designs on a field of red cement. Although having been exposed for upwards of one hundred and twenty-eight years, still on a bright, sunshiny day the sun's rays are reflected from them.

* Trollop's "Spanish Main and West Indies."
This eyes was in the walls noticed the grey stone and the walls were white even.

The Grand Isthmus was in the city except two, the old Grand Central Hotel being the other. A visit to the Grand Isthmus, I noticed the city was being made the Father of the Spanish family, the other being the Bishop's see. Opposite the cathedral in the days referred to (1880) there were the ruins of the old Grand Central Hotel, a building that had been badly damaged by the great earthquake of 1858. Later the old Grand Central was destroyed by fire.

In 1880 the Plaza was divided into four minor squares by intersecting streets, one leading across the city from wall to wall, the other being a part of the long axis of the city. Facing on the Plaza and in some of the streets in that vicinity, are the principal shops.

All the churches are within the city except two, the first being that of Santa Ana in the Plaza of that name. It was a suburban church, built some two centuries ago by a wealthy Spanish nobleman, whose family name was St. Ana. Back of it, and near the entrance to the Quinta Santa Rita, there are the ruins of its old chapel of ease. The Quinta is a charming spot at the foot of Mount Ancon, and is the property of M. Leblanc, who made himself famous during the first visit of De Lesseps to the Isthmus of Panama. He told Le Grande Français that if he attempted the construction of a canal across the Isthmus, there would not be enough trees there to make crosses to place over the graves of his laborers. M. Leblanc was an oldtimer and knew what he was saying. Thousands and thousands of canal men have been buried on the Isthmus, many of whose graves are marked by crosses, while many others are without any crosses at all.

I reached Panama City on the 29th day of May, 1880. It then had a population estimated at fifteen thousand; the majority being black. Negroes, Indians, mulattoes, and a blending of both races, with some Chinese. Perhaps there were as many as two thousand whites on the Isthmus. The principal trade of the Isthmus was then, as it is now, in the hands of foreigners, with foreign enterprise and foreign capital.

The front or façade of the cathedral is attractive. There are huge doors, columns, niches for the twelve apostles, and one above for the Virgin. The edifice is built of a yellow stone strongly resembling sandstone. Over the main entrance there is a double cross, the emblem of a Bishop's see. Opposite the cathedral in the days referred to (1880) there were the ruins of the old Grand Central Hotel, a building that had been badly damaged by the great earthquake of 1858. Later the old Grand Central was destroyed by fire.
CHAPTER V.


An American once wrote his Consul-General in Rio de Janeiro asking for information in reference to the climate of Brazil, and closed his letter thus: "How do people live?" The Consul-General wittily replied that it all depended on the liver. In Panama, and on the Isthmus generally, all does depend upon the liver.

It goes without saying that a regular life in all torrid climates is its own reward. By a regular life I mean something after the following, which is the régime of many residents within tropical countries: Getting up early—say at six or seven—beginning the day with a bath, and then coffee and rolls. The breakfast is eaten at eleven or twelve, and is a breakfast, properly so called. In temperate climates many would deem it dinner. I, in common with many old residents of the tropics, began mine by taking some ripe fruit, following it with a beefsteak, potatoes and coffee. I made my meals simple; such resulting in the greatest good and the smallest inconvenience. Dinner at six, and dinner as it is understood in all Anglo-Saxon countries, followed by a quiet evening and going to bed early. The regular life pays always; it gives the maximum of health and the minimum of inconvenience. Many would vote such a life slow. Maybe it is, but it keeps one's disease-resisting powers up to the highest standard, and is a source of continual comfort.

A word in reference to the use of alcohol, beer and wine. From my professional experience, and as the result of nearly eight years personal observation within
Rio de Janeiro. It is true, the climate, the joy, the people are not what it all is said. But I love the Isthmus

The region is torrid. I mean the régime of eating. Getting

properly so

deem it

the health, following

good and

dinner

followed

regular health and

vote such

disease-resistant and is a

beer and

as the

within
the tropics, and having tried both moderate stimulation on the one hand, and total abstinence on the other, I am firmly of the opinion, that the people who best resist such wretched climates and make the best fight against disease, are the total abstainers.

The yellow fever of the Isthmus of Panama is a peculiarly malignant disease. I can recall forty-one admissions to the Charity Hospital in a few weeks following my arrival on the Isthmus in 1880. Not a single man escaped. Of seven and twenty admissions to the Officers’ Ward of the Canal Hospitals on the Panama side, one man only escaped. In case after case in practice, death was the rule and recovery the exception. While it is true that some total abstainers on the Isthmus have been swept away by yellow fever, I can recall three desperate cases, one being my own, which had been abandoned and in which death was looked for. All recovered, thanks to abstemious habits.

The idea that any human being in hot climates requires alcohol is an old time myth, kept up by those who like to drink. No fact is better known to every student of tropical disease than that the liver of even total abstainers becomes somewhat enlarged. "Why," say you? Remember the constant malarious conditions; and bear in mind that in temperate climes the organs have their own fair share of work. In the tropics, immediately within the malarial and yellow fever belt, where there is such extreme heat and constant moisture, the lungs are unable to do all of their share, and a part of it falls upon the liver. In keeping with well-known physiological laws this becomes slightly enlarged. Life within the tropics therefore does "depend on the liver," as the quick-witted Consul-General at Rio said.

Another point in this connection. There is a general belief held by many highly intelligent people that a residence within hot countries has a marked tendency to increase the sexual instincts. Such is not the case. The real explanation of it is this. The majority are away from the refining influences of early culture and home life,—generally they are single men,—in a warm climate where
all the conditions are supposed to produce general relaxation. There is little society open to such men. If they become "one of the boys,"—and the vast majority do, that is the end of it, and generally of them too, for this means late hours, gambling and other distractions, largely pour passer le temps. Such men readily become victims to disease. No fact is better known to students of yellow fever than that the very moderate drinkers—men who have never been seen under the influence of liquor—are among the earliest victims in all epidemics of yellow fever, and they are lost from the start.* I wish my readers to understand that I am in no sense a temperance lecturer, nor am I a total abstainer, properly so called; I simply deal with the actual facts.† Dr. Johnson, † in his admirable book, summarizes the whole thing when he discusses his life-long experience in the East Indies. He refers to the loss of home or corrective influences, and the attractive diversions that at first are pleasurable and finally entangle the victim in chains of his own forging. He discusses the whole question as one would expect of a man of his high intelligence and vast experience; and he manfully calls a spade a spade. Referring to his long experience in India, both in military and civil circles, he dwells on the idle life, highly seasoned food, constant stimulation, and want of exercise and healthy employment of body and mind, and then in a masterly way clearly shows how these lead to vices and bad lives; and how the English damn the climate, which is bad enough in all conscience, while they should damn themselves. These moderate drinkers take their pegs, maybe two or three a day. A "peg" is a good stiff dose of brandy and a bottle of English soda water; the name "peg" being a reference to another nail in their coffins. The people who indulge in these pegs are not laying up treasure for themselves, but laying up disease and death. There is no more encouraging sight to a sick man than to see a friend at distance of a few hundred or a thousand miles, especially in all the drinking and gambling circles where all the men live, and where the women live, too. Unmarried girls almost never have access to the places where the men live, and at the time of the epidemic they are almost entirely shut out. The epidemic is due to the ignorance of the people and the ignorance of the women. The ignorant women who care nothing for their health or anything else is due to the ignorance of the physicians and the ignorance of the medicines sold them.

The loss of these rising young men, who are the new parts of the French population, cross to the west, and distribute to the interior of the East Indies, Chili and Canada, over to Chili and over to the West Coast of America. The loco medicine, applied from the East to the Western states, and the extreme climatic conditions in the West, where there is no immediate necessity for hot weather, for no smoking of tobacco, or for no drinking of coffee, is the cause of great death and destruction of life in the West Coast of America.

A few words as to the death in the Isthmus. The French medical men have the health and the life insurance company. They have consigned their lives to their benefactors and have given them their lives, and they have had no choice. The Isthmus is the only place where there is no disease, and the Isthmus is the only place where there is no disease.
themselves above; quite the contrary. Later they will be harnessed to a liver that will make their lives a burden to themselves and to their families. The moral of all this is: Keep out of the tropics if you can. Should necessity force you within them avoid all forms of alcohol, that you may spend your later days in peace and comfort. Anyone who has travelled extensively in the tropics—I refer to the West Indies and the tropical portions of Central and South America—can tell you of dozens of noble young fellows who have gone thither to seek fame and fortune, but who have been wrecked almost at the outset by the general relaxation, which ignorant people charge to the effects of the climate, instead of attributing it to bad associates, wine and women. The climate is not responsible; the mortality is due to want of firmness and those corrective influences so necessary for the best of us.

The trade and commerce of Panama and vicinity is made up largely of goods in transit from and to various parts of the world. Products from the Pacific lands (loss the Isthmus from Panama to Colon, there to be distributed to the various steam companies for the West Indies, Europe, the United States of America, and Canada. Those by way of Colon to Panama are handed over to the steam carriers on the Pacific going South to Chili and Peru, north to Central America and San Francisco, and from the latter to trans-Pacific ports. The local trade of the State of Panama is largely supplied from the city of Panama. The State of Panama is the extreme northern end of South America, and terminates in the Departments of Chiriqui and Veraguas, where the latter join the southern boundary of Costa Rica, or the extreme Southern Republic of Central America.

A few years ago one of the leading industries of the Isthmus was the exportation of crude India rubber. Its value in those days was considerable, and against such consignments the merchants of Panama and Colon drew their bills of exchange. The Isthmus of Darien to the northeast of the State of Panama, was one of the chief
departments furnishing that elastic gum. Ivory nuts were also an important item, the latter the fruit of a species of palm.

The State of Panama is more of a consumer than a producer. It will be literally true to say that her daily bread depends on flour from San Francisco and New York; and the same thing is true of the greater part of her provisions and vegetables of all kinds. The trade and importance of the Isthmus of Panama are due merely to its situation. Her manufactures are now, as all industries are, handicapped by preposterous concessions. One day the question was asked in my hearing, "What is the leading industry of Colombia?" A quick-witted, talented Colombian instantly replied, "Revolution." So it is. It is at once a profession, a science, and a game. Dr. Rafael Nunez, the President of the Republic of Colombia, denounced it as a profession in the summer of 1884, while I was a resident of Panama City. The last revolution of March, 1885, destroyed Colon, paralyzed canal work, upset transit, and caused a veritable reign of terror, and undoubtedly would have led to the destruction of Panama but for the prompt action of the British and American Consuls. The first man-of-war there was a British one, and later American vessels of war arrived in numbers, when Consul-General Thomas Adamson, representing the interests of that great republic to the north, took prompt action, and it was he who saved the city of Panama from the fate that destroyed Colon.

The holidays on the Isthmus are a feature worthy of lengthy description. They are the breaks in a monotonous life. The festival par excellence is that of the 28th of November, or the anniversary of the signing of their declaration of independence. The 28th, 29th and the 30th of November are devoted to bull-teasings, horse-races, masquerading, and other sports. During one of these festivals a huge circle or temporary bull ring was put up in the Plaza de Santa Ana, outside the walls. It was a substantial structure fenced in. Above were covered-in palcos, or boxes. One of these could be secured for eightecents, and as many chairs as any one wished to place in the room.

The Isthmus is noted for its bull teasings. If you go to the Isthmus at a time when any one of its bull teasings are taking place, you will see a sight that will be always in your mind. The bull teasings are a sort of circus. The bull teasing is simply a bull ring, with a horse, a bull, and a bull teasing band, which is loud and long, and madly, the bull teasing takes place. In the bull teasing the bull is the animal and the band is the orchestra. The bull band is in the gallery, and either to the left or right of it, the bull teasing band is in the gallery, and either to the left or right of it, as the bull takes the bull teasing band is in the gallery, and either to the left or right of it, as the bull takes the bull teasing band is in the gallery, and either to the left or right of it, as the bull takes

The bull teasings are a feature of the Isthmus that will always be remembered. The bull teasings are a feature of the Isthmus that will always be remembered. The bull teasings are a feature of the Isthmus that will always be remembered. The bull teasings are a feature of the Isthmus that will always be remembered. The bull teasings are a feature of the Isthmus that will always be remembered. The bull teasings are a feature of the Isthmus that will always be remembered. The bull teasings are a feature of the Isthmus that will always be remembered. The bull teasings are a feature of the Isthmus that will always be remembered. The bull teasings are a feature of the Isthmus that will always be remembered. The bull teasings are a feature of the Isthmus that will always be remembered. The bull teasings are a feature of the Isthmus that will always be remembered. The bull teasings are a feature of the Isthmus that will always be remembered. The bull teasings are a feature of the Isthmus that will always be remembered. The bull teasings are a feature of the Isthmus that will always be remembered. The bull teasings are a feature of the Isthmus that will always be remembered. The bull teasings are a feature of the Isthmus that will always be remembered. The bull teasings are a feature of the Isthmus that will always be remembered. The bull teasings are a feature of the Isthmus that will always be remembered. The bull teasings are a feature of the Isthmus that will always be remembered. The bull teasing
secured for the fiestas or holidays upon payment of eighteen dollars, the holders being at liberty to put in as many as six chairs.—You have to furnish your own chairs there both for bull fights and theatres, or stand.

The bull-teesings next to the horse races are the events. If your palco or box is good, the whole scene passes directly beneath you, just as it does in Madrid. On the Isthmus of Panama the animals are not killed; they are teased. A bull, the points of whose horns have been sawn off, is led into the inclosure. Men specially selected and paid do the teasing. The bulls are from the country and generally are fresh and ready for combat, but, as the points of the horns are cut away, gorings are not in order. One of these dare-devil torreras flaunts a strip of some red material at the bull. The animal, if game, makes a furious charge when the man deftly steps aside and avoids the attack. It goes on and on. At times four and five of these men may be seen exciting the animal. Often the men, if new to the work and careless, are thrown down, trampled upon, or thrown up into the air, when the others immediately divert the animal and drag the man aside. At all such festivities a band is in attendance, generally that of some regiment in the garrison. Whenever the slightest mishap occurs, either to the men or to the bull, the multitude cheer madly, the band plays, and the wildest enthusiasm prevails. It is quite Spanish. After half an hour or more the bull is fagged out, when to stimulate the unfortunate animals the banderilleros are called in. They are men who have nothing to do with the teasing. They are armed with a cruel shaft. This is of wood some eighteen inches long, with a barbed iron head securely fastened to it. At the other end of the shaft amid colored papers and ribbons, fireworks are concealed. The man attracts the attention of the bull and at the right moment, when the animal charges him, he deftly thrusts the banderillero between the horns and drives it into the animal’s neck. I should say that he has previously lighted the fuse from his everlasting cigarretto. Having successfully placed his shaft he steps aside. In bull-teasing this is
an exceedingly dangerous part of the play.* The fuse burns to the large detonating masses. They go off with the report of a gun; they burn the hair and flesh of the infuriated animal, who at times madly roars, jumps clean off the ground, and vainly endeavors to get clear of the Spanish infernal machine. This causel wildest uproar. The crowd is frantic with joy. During one carnival season I saw the bull resting against an enclosure after the torture, when a native got on the top rail and cut the barbed shaft out leaving a wretched wound and huge burn. This literally devilled beef is later on killed and marketed, as is usual there. The animals are furnished to the authorities by the leading butchers of Panama.

Well do I remember my first bull-teasing. The scene below me caused intense nervous excitement, and when the unfortunate animal tossed a banderillero I exclaimed aloud, "Good, good," my sympathy being oilly with the bull, not with his cruel tormentor. As enclosure is an exception to the rule, accidents often happen, for the teasings take place in the square and the throngs are all around its sides at any point of vantage. Occasionally the bull makes a charge toward the crowd, when there is a rush, and often serious accidents happen. I have seen a man knocked senseless. Later on the same day the animal charged out on the side street and all but killed a passer-by. The bull-teasings last two and three days. They are alternated with horse-races and masquerades.

The races often are held on the main thoroughfare, when many fearful croppers are witnessed, due to the animals falling or running over foolish people and children who attempt to cross the street while the races are going on. Accident after accident and death after death have been caused in this way. The Colombians, like the Central and South Americans and Mexicans, are natural horsemen; they ride as if they were a part of the horses, and at times without saddles, at a pace that

is simply appalling. Thousands frequent the races. The people come up to the city from the surrounding pueblos or villages to be present for the festivities. These large masses encourage the reckless riders, and intoxicated by the applause they pass on to victory, broken bones, or whatever is ahead; it is their way.

A masquerading scene there is quite in keeping with what I have noted in St. Thomas, Cuba, and Hayti. Nothing gives a negro or his descendants such intense pleasure as to don a mask and an outlandish garb, and amble about the streets singing and talking in wretched falsetto voice. If he can secure a few white on-lookers it is ecstasy. They caricature everything; no character is sacred—sisters of charity, priests or anyone. For the three days of the festivities and well into the night, they and their monkey-like pranks and shrill voices may be seen and heard. There is a great deal of drunkenness. Our fisticuffs are replaced by stabbing and cutting. A native spirit called anisado produces more drunkenness and more drunken frenzy to the square inch than anything that I have seen anywhere. When the negroes, mulattoes and Indians reach that stage they are ugly and bloodthirsty. It is not unusual for the fiestas to result in five or six deaths, apart from wounds innumerable.

They all carry the machete. This is a long, sword-like knife, the inseparable companion of all the lower classes. It is a linear descendant of the swords of the early Spaniards who had to cut their way, the atrochar or trail, while going through the woods. The natives use these weapons for chopping wood, felling trees, cutting grass and each other. They make beautiful surgery for a doctor. The masses in Panama are little better than semi-civilized, and when more than half drunk they are absolute savages. After three days of "festivities" and unbridled license among the lower classes, the city gets back to its usual calm, and the cries of "Viva Colombia," or "Hail Colombia," are put away for the next occasion.

While at Panama in March last I accompanied a party
of friends to see a night procession from the historic Church of St. Ana. With a fearful clanging of bells the procession came out from the side door of the church. In front there was a huge frame, perhaps sixteen feet long by six wide, on which were built up a series of shelves covered with highly colored cloths. On these were lamps, images, and vases of flowers, the whole surmounted by a large figure of the Virgin, resplendent in muslin and gilt, amidst a blaze of light. The procession was preceded by no end of women with candles in their hands. I failed to ascertain what connection, if any, existed between them and the wise virgins that we read of. Then came the bearers of the Virgin and after them the clergy, all singing. A member of our party, to my mind, summarized the whole thing when he said, "It looks like a lamp shop on leave of absence." It is needless to observe that we uncovered as it went by. "When among the Romans," etc. Late in the fall there is a great religious procession somewhat of this type, when hundreds may be seen carrying candles, and the Virgin and many of the saints are carried about in great state. The eve of Good Friday is made a special festival in the church La Merced.

A figure of Christ may be seen resting on its back, just without the chancel, with its head towards the main altar. It is a life-like figure; the head is covered with a shock of hair; both feet protrude from beneath the robes; the crowd surges forward and one by one reverently drop upon their knees and kiss the right foot, generally the great toe. I can here state for an absolute fact that the great toe of the left foot has been greatly worn away by this custom. This is going on crowds in the church composed of women and led by some awful looking old crone, a negress or a mulattress, keep on repeating endless prayers. It is Babel. One year, while a resident of Panama, I took an elderly Welshman around to see the churches on the eve of Good Friday. After seeing La Merced we visited the church of San José (St. Joseph), an old time edifice. On altars and in glass cases were some awful looking fig-
ures. Near the main entrance on our right, on that occasion, was a life-sized figure of Christ, in a glass case, clad in loud garments with a fearful wig upon the head. It was an extraordinary spectacle. The old gentleman at my side looked at it intently and whispered to me, "He does not look like a gentleman." The remark, his seriousness, and the suggestiveness caused me to get outside instantly to give my mirth fair play. I had never looked at it in that way. The sole religion in Colombia is that of the Church of Rome, or, practically, it is the sole religion. Latterly its fetters have been drawn tighter and tighter.

In order to see the market-place at Panama, and it is a sight well worth seeing, you have to get up just about the time that the first light begins to show in the east. The building is of metal, and was brought to the city all ready to be put up. Reaching it you are struck with the number of people who are up and out at that early hour. The place is full of them. The market is divided into sections, in each of which is one kind of raw material out of which the cooks will manufacture dishes, savory or the reverse. Panama is an Indian word meaning "a place abounding in fish," and as might be imagined the fish-supply in the market is very large. It comes from the river and the sea. There is a kind of giant catfish, weighing from ten to thirty pounds, which is very cheap and therefore popular with the poor class. Another common fish is a species of bream with enormous scales. Of sea fish, the red snapper is very plentiful and very good. Sometimes one comes across a Jew fish or as Tom Cringle calls it in his "Log," a most noble Jew fish; easily one of the best that is caught. Pinkish red shrimps are piled in baskets and alongside are other piles of brown-colored things, the flesh of shrimps dried in the sun. Dried fish is common and finds a ready sale. In the meat market, beef is the staple, although you see some pork and some goat. The meat is all cut into long strips and is sold by the yard. When slightly salted it is dried in the sun and in this form is the staple food. It generally smells somewhat too strongly to be acceptable
to Europeans or Americans. The vegetables are in great heaps on the ground. Yucas, yams, potatoes, rice, plantains, corn, onions, garlic, beans and peas are the most common. Sometimes you see Brussels sprouts, kale, cauliflower or lettuce, and now and then a palm-cabbage. This consists of the young leaves and heart of the cabbage-palm, and is rather good. Of fruit there is no end in spite of the fact that Spaniards consider it unhealthy. Aguacates or alligator-pears, oranges, limes, papeyas, melons, mangoes, bananas, guavas and cocoanuts are the most common.

The system of marketing strikes a stranger as being odd. It is done by the cooks and as they never buy more than just enough for one day, you will see in the wooden bowls carried on the head, a small fish, a piece of meat, a yuca, a yam, a handful of garlic and an onion, four or five mangoes, a couple of plantains, two or three limes, a little rice in a small gourd, and some bread. It is a gay scene, with the women walking about and chaffering with the dealers, while the men are carrying in supplies from the canoes. Standing about are hundreds of the patient little donkeys so characteristic of Spanish towns.
Canal Encampment at Culebra, on the "Divide."
CHAPTER VI.

THE CHURCHES AND ECCLESIASTICAL RUINS OF MODERN PANAMA.

Modern Panama is rich in material for all students of ecclesiastical architecture. These churches, church ruins, the old convents and the ruins of the Jesuit College, deserve a chapter to themselves.

The oldest church is that of San Felipe Neri, in the long past the parish church of the city within the walls. Its side is on a narrow street, and over the sole entrance there one reads, "San Felipe Neri, 1688," cut in a shield. The early Spaniards were famous for making cements, both colored and uncolored. So hard were they that they have stood the effects of the heat and moisture of that destructive climate without damage. This old-time cement to-day is as hard as stone. Over the entrance to public buildings and churches they made their inscriptions in these cements, in many instances filling in odd spaces with ornamental work made of the large pearl shells from the famous Islas de Perlas, or Pearl Islands in the Gulf of Panama. Such designs when new must have been chaste and beautiful, as the smooth mother-of-pearl surfaces of the large shells on a background of reddish cement must have made a beautiful contrast, the shells reflecting the sun rays in thousands of directions.

This quaint and most substantial old edifice faces on a small street. At one time it made the corner of the Plaza San Francisco or St. Francis Square. The large door is reached by a few stone steps, on either side of which are a few plain columns; while there are a few lancet shaped windows above. Its front is very plain. The whole is surmounted by a quaint old tower of the
true Moorish type. It is built wholly of stone with a rounded cupola of the same material. Lashed to cross-pieces are the old-time bells. The door is a huge affair of most substantial make, studded with huge brazen heads or knobs. When closed from within, persons in the church could stand a small siege very successfully. The side windows of the church are fully twenty-five feet above the street, and they were purposely so made in case of attack. The walls of San Felipe Neri are nearly five feet thick, and the windows are so deeply recessed as to remind one of an ancient fortress or prison.

Many and desperate were the battles fought by the early Spaniards against the Indians of those days, and the value of a substantial stone building was duly appreciated. They, when pressed, sought refuge in the churches and closed the doors, when what was the house of God temporarily became a Spanish fortress in miniature—a happy combination of the things of earth with those of heaven. This most interesting relic of the past has had its main front built in, and is thus absolutely lost to sight. The building in front to-day is a school for girls, under the direction of the sisters of charity, the majority of whom are Frenchwomen.

A large and very interesting edifice is the church of San Francisco, or St. Francis. It faces on the Plaza of that name and is within a stone's throw of San Felipe Neri. It is about 150 years old and has two large towers. Its front or façade was, no doubt, in the long past, a masterpiece adorned with much rich masonry. Time, neglect, and climate have not improved it. This building has an enormous pair of doors. They are studded with huge brazen heads or knobs, and if I remember rightly, the knobs are seraphs. These churches are nearly all built of stone from Panama or its vicinity; a stone resembling in color the sandstone so familiar to travellers in the United States, and the Caenstone of the continent. That quarried in the Bay of Panama at low water is said to be a pure volcanic rock from the old volcano of Ancon, just back of the city of Panama.
Panama. In the church of San Francisco the lancet shaped windows on its front are high up and well out of the reach of a possible enemy. The towers of this church resemble those of San Felipe Neri, La Merced, and some others to be described, being of the usual Moorish type. The bells I shall refer to later.

Within the vast edifice as you look from the main entrance you note rows of noble stone columns, rising from the floor to blend with graceful arches. These columns are of the most substantial type, the bases of many being five and six feet in diameter. These rows practically divide the church proper into main and side aisles. The grand altar faces the door, and looking towards it you have on either side these beautiful columns rising before you. The altar of San Francisco is a huge affair and is largely composed of carved wood of the old style. Many of the carvings are classic. The altar, as one familiar with things Spanish would expect, is covered with a profusion of church ornaments. In all Spanish countries the display in such places is greater than in any Anglo-Saxon land known to me. On the right and left of the grand altar or beyond the row of columns there are side altars at the ends of their respective aisles. Looking into the edifice from the main entrance along either of the walls one sees side altars and confessionals, the latter being of an exceedingly simple type. The base is of wood raised a few inches above the floor. It has no covering. A simple wooden partition runs up a distance of perhaps five feet, and about midway in this there is a small lattice. The padre or priest sits on one side while the penitent kneels on the other. Confessionals of this type are common in Spanish American countries.

The great number of mural tablets attracts the attention of a stranger, as do the marble slabs in the stone floor. They bear suitable inscriptions which tell of the last resting-place of the bones of some one.

These churches have a species of pew. For the grand fiestas or holidays the aisles are filled with chairs. People send their servants with chairs to the churches,
to the bull-teasings, and to the theatre. To see a family going home after service with people following them with chairs on their heads is not unusual. It is not unusual to them, but it certainly makes strangers stare.

Near the grand altar were many valued relics. Amongst others I particularly noted the real skull of a departed saint. It was in a species of glass case. One of the eyeless sockets was covered with a fine mould. It looked uncanny, but as the inscription said it was the skull of a true saint, that ended it. These real skulls and pieces of the real cross and portions of the garments of Christ that one meets in travelling sadly disarrange one's mental mathematics and bring about a severe type of mental indigestion, which is, to say the least, very annoying. But one of two issues stare one in the face under such circumstances—either that the majority of mankind are a credulous lot, or that he has been educated above the requirements of the country in which he lives.

During my last visit to Panama I had occasion to call on one of the priests of the church of San Francisco. The beadle led me up a narrow staircase, and at last we stood on a shelf-like passage leading to a species of loft or choir to the right. I looked down on the vast building and its substantial columns and beautiful arches, and its hugeness impressed me. We passed through a small doorway to the left, in what was really an upper part of an outer wall of the church. Along the roof on that side were a number of rooms occupied by the clergy. Thus while living on the church, they really lived outside of it. From the side windows there was a view of the bay and the ruins of the buildings occupied by the priesthood of San Francisco in the past. The walls of the old ruins adjoin the church and extend from it to the sea wall on that side. These large and substantial walls give one an idea of the original vastness of the building. One front of them some years ago was inclosed, covered in, and converted into the Charity Hospital. In that building hundreds and hundreds have died and in any bed of the covered floor there was over 500 crosses. These become hundreds, or these become thousands in the bay. I saw there the signs of fallen altars, and churches washed out of the foundations. In the subcellars of the walls are lying away the stones, or turned into the earth. It is sufficiently incredible enough to have many died that the thousands of Panama died in the other side of the walls and that 50 years ago before the San Francisco earthquake the inhabitants of the Jesuits were who were in San Francisco. The Colombia in the Jesuits generally well, a very instructive chapter, and a very side of the day.
died of yellow fever. At present it is occupied as a storehouse, but as it never was disinfected or fumigated in any way, shape or manner, to my mind it is a hotbed of the disease. From one corner of the building there rises a pure Moorish tower, such as one sees all over Spain—I mean all over that part of Spain that was overrun by the Moors during their occupation of eight hundred years. From the church of San Francisco and these buildings around it there is a magnificent view of the bay and islands. Apropos of the ruins, I may state that the sea wall, or that toward the southeast side, has fallen away, as it has been undermined by the constant washing of the tides. Sections have fallen out, revealing a vaulted or arched way leading into the city proper. It was well constructed and sufficiently high for a man by stooping to walk with considerable ease. No fact is better known to the few who have made the subject a matter of close inquiry than that the ecclesiastical buildings and churches of modern Panama had an underground communication. On the other side of the church of San Francisco there are walls and another lofty Moorish tower, and, a few years ago, beyond these were the ruins of the convent of San Francisco. In the good old days, when Spain was a power and the Isthmus was flourishing, it was a convent of cloistered nuns. As the term implies, their lives were wholly passed within the walls; there they lived, died and were buried. Some forty years ago, when the Colombians threw off the then oppressive yoke of Rome, the Jesuits and sisters of charity, with the priesthood generally, were expelled from the country. Mr. Bidwell, a former British Consul at Panama, in his most instructive book,* gives an insight into the life of these very sisters of charity. The hungry and thirsty always found food and water at the main entrance at all hours of the day and night. They knocked, and the hand of an

---

invisible sister relieved their wants. At the time of their expulsion there were several sisters so aged and feeble that their being sent away really was at the risk of their lives, and it was left to Mr. Bidwell, a foreigner, to see them safely on board of some vessels in the bay which were bound south. It is said that bones have been discovered within these walls. Such, no doubt, was the case, for the nuns were buried in them. In the early days the sisters entered that building never to leave it. To-day what was then the main front of the convent is a theatre.

Life is but a series of contrasts. There the excellent sisters prayed and died. Mademoiselle Sarah Bernhardt electrified the modern Panamanians some eighteen months ago by one of her plays which was rapturously received, the city fairly going wild over it. At a later performance, with a view of doing her honor, some huge Chinese crackers were attached to the main door. While the immortal Sarah was on the stage, off went these miniature bombs. Great was her fright, and it resulted in a violent fit of hysterics, and the awful newspapers stated that the French beauty kicked like a Texas steer. Of all places, fancy Sarah in a convent!

Leaving these nuns and crossing the city, almost from side to side, on the left-hand corner of Calle San José, or St. Joseph Street, are the ruins of San Domingo, or the church of St. Dominic. There is much of interest about this ruin not found in connection with the other buildings. The brethren of the order built the church; they planned and built it with their own hands. Its façade or front is a mass of ruins, and the upper part has fallen away. Along the upper walls there is quite a dense growth of shrubbery, and from the chinks in the wall there spring numerous tropical bushes. As one would expect, it had a huge main entrance, on either side of which were the columns terminating above in capitals; there were niches, and above all a few lancet-shaped windows. The front of this church is partly of stone and partly of brick. Cement or concrete entered largely into all the work of the early Spaniards; and
FIVE YEARS AT PANAMA.

...hoa... work they did. The latter... lion ... give... appear... white... marble... columns. 

...towers of St. Dominic are of the past— not a vestige remains. Within the edifice previous to the great earthquake of September 7, 1882, there was a lofty arch in front of the grand altar. Springing from either wall it crossed fully eighty feet above the floor of the church. There it stood, bold and substantial, against the blue sky. The earthquake destroyed it. A more interesting arch from a historic standpoint is that just near the main entrance, and above which was the old... F... the old... fell. It was rebuilt and fell again; it was rebuilt and fell a third time and the brethren were in dismay. Their plans had been at fault. A new design was prepared, and for a fourth time it was built, and before the supports were finally removed, its designer stood under the arch, saying it was well made, if he would be... It did not fall, and to this day it remains, the most interesting relic of church architecture in the city. It is an arch in name, but is almost flat along its centre; such an arch I have never seen in my wanderings. On the side walls of the church were windows some thirty feet above the ground, and on both sides were entrances, one to the grounds occupied by the clergy, and the other on the side street. Speaking of the growth of shrubbery all along the walls of St. Dominic, I recall a terrific thunder-storm when I was in the Grand Hotel. While I was watching it from a window, a flash of lightning dazzled me; it had struck the side of the church nearest the hotel and set fire to the shrubbery there. On the same Calle San Jose just beyond the main entrance to the church of St. Dominic, there is the quaintest of all the churches and chapels in modern Panama. Its front is of masonry and has a huge entrance, and a few bells are placed in a tenuous wooden tower in the corner. Its pews are of the smallest and most primitive character, and the Christians who worshipped in it certainly got small comfort by a...
attending church. Just within the large doorway a few wooden columns support a loft or choir, all of the most primitive type. There is a main aisle and two tiny side aisles. Standing at the door and looking towards the grand altar, you can see midway on the wall on either side, side altars with extraordinary figures of Christ, the Virgin, and the Saints, occasionally draped in garments of the loudest hues. High up on the right wall looking towards the chancel, there is an old fashioned pulpit, which is reached by a narrow, steep stairway.

The grand altar in this little chapel to me was a matter of endless curiosity. The paraphernalia of the church placed upon it, the gaudy drappings of the saints, and the violet colored paint of its woodwork were astonishing. In the dresses sea-green and yellow were predominant colors. Such combinations only seem to obtain in Spanish America and in the mother country. They offend the eye, and one vainly looks for that pure taste and elegance that one expects to find in churches.

The resident priest lived back of the church, and he was so aged and infirm that it seemed a wonder that he lived on; yet he did, and occasionally officiated. Misfortune overtook the old gentleman just prior to my leaving the Isthmus in 1885. The savings of his lifetime had been stolen. The sum was not fabulous, but it was his all. In that long life of nearly eighty years he had actually amassed nearly four hundred dollars! The robbery was a cruel one, and at his time of life the shock would be sufficient to hasten his end, so I doubt not that he has been gathered to his fathers. I may state here that this magnificent simplicity is the exception and not the rule.

The church of San José faces on the street of that name and its rear walls abut on what was a part of the embankment of the sea wall, on the western face of the city. This old-time church claims but little from one, save the respect that attaches to age. Its front is not ornate; it has the usual huge door or doors, and a small square Moorish tower on one corner.
Within it is a huge, dreary, barn-like structure. Its grand altar has little that claims attention, save a few hammered out silver book-rests—I mean the silver has been hammered out and secured to wooden backs. The plainness of the grand altar and its lack of gaud, is in pleasing contrast to other churches. Some of the side altars have figures of saints in many colored garments, the saints being of wood and of plain workmanship. The poverty of the church within indicates a poor congregation.

I visited it once on the eve of Good Friday, and saw that it had also introduced a figure of Christ with the feet exposed; but La Merced has the monopoly. The latter is on a main thoroughfare, and Christians there as elsewhere, seem to prefer publicity in their religion, and are not given to side streets and poor churches. La Merced was thronged on that occasion, while San José had a mere handful; but at the latter I noticed a more general practice of kissing both feet. This sort of thing obtains in Central America as well. Once while in the city of Guatemala, in the highlands of Central America, I visited the Church of the Calvary, and there saw a figure of Christ in a glass case with one foot projecting. The faithful ascended two steps, knelt and kissed it.

We are told that time and tide waits for no man, and unless some steps are taken to repair the sea wall just at the back of the old church, some day the rear walls of that venerable building will go to sea. The constant action of the tides has undermined the massive foundations, and a portion of the sea wall has fallen outward in huge masses, and through the gap the rollers, as they come in, are slowly and surely cutting away the embankment. Owing to the great rise and fall of the tides on the Bay of Panama, from 18 to 24 feet, the destruction is sure. Already a part of the street has been cut away, and when I was last on the Isthmus but about fifteen feet of earth remained between the rear walls of San José and the gap.

It is usual there, as in Spain, to do nothing until the
expected happens. In illustration of this statement, I recall reading of the great damage done that most classic of old buildings, the cathedral of Saville. This, one of the grandest monuments of Spain, was greatly damaged recently by the falling in of the greater part of its stone roof and columns and the destruction of its choir. The damage to this grand old edifice impressed me the more, as during my trip through Spain it had greatly interested me.

On the Isthmus, as in Spain, politicians are too busy with schemes for self-aggrandizement and self-profit to take into consideration the needed repair of old monuments.

The cathedral of Panama was built at the sole expense of one of the bishops of Panama, and was completed about 128 years ago. The bishop's father was a Panamanian by birth—a colored man. He made charcoal near the Boca de la Rio Grande, or the mouth of the Grand River, a stream entering the Bay of Panama some two miles from the Panama City of to-day. This colored man made his charcoal and brought it on his back to sell from house to house,—a custom that obtains to this very day. He gave his son, the future bishop, as good an education as was possible. In due time he became a deacon, priest and finally bishop of Panama—a bishop of proud Panama, for in those days it was a wealthy city. He was the first colored bishop of Panama. This son of a charcoal burner developed into a grand man, and in time crowned a life of usefulness by building the cathedral from his private means. Much of the stone used in its construction is from the highlands of the interior and was brought many leagues on the backs of men. After long years the building was completed in 1760.

The main doorway faces the Plaza as previously stated. The huge doors swing back on ponderous old pivots, and are made of hard wood, fully four inches thick. The fastenings in brass would set many archaeologists wild. Just within and facing the door, is a small, square altar or shrine in white and gold to the Virgin.
A few years ago a real Murillo hung on the inner face of this, facing the grand altar. Rows of pure white columns at once attract attention; their solidity, exquisite proportion, and whiteness, with their arches above, to me were very beautiful. These columns divide the building into main and side aisles. The first pair terminate above in an almost flat arch, the upper surface of which resembles a miniature viaduct. Above is the roof, of a dark, rich wood, of a reddish tint. The contrast of the arches with the dark colored wood is grand. The next set of columns have a different species of arch, higher up and running directly up to the roof. Then there is the kind of arch first described. These arches alternate until they terminate in the distance near the grand altar. Some of them have the coats-of-arms of Leon and Castile. It is impossible to visit that grand old building without being filled with admiration.

Looking from the door down the main aisle with the pure white columns rising on either side to the arches and roof above, the whole terminating in the grand altar in the distance, makes a most effective picture. The outer rows of columns make side aisles. Their arches are not nearly so lofty, and cross to join the main columns. Looking down either of these aisles one sees the usual side altars at their ends. Along the side walls of the church are two side altars and the Stations of the Cross. That old building was a special admiration of mine; its interior, its fittings, all appealed to me. The grand altar is enclosed within a neat chancel railing. The bishop's throne is to the left as you enter the building. Opposite it are the stalls for the clergy and choristers. There are the usual lecterns. The altar proper is chaste, its fittings are rich, and on the great festivals of the church, it is grand and impressive. In the past the cathedral of Panama was very wealthy. Its figure of the Virgin was covered with precious stones and pearls, these being largely votive offerings, and coming from the Pearl Islands in the gulf. Its service was of the purest silver and gold. Following the expulsion of the priests and the sisters of charity it was despoiled of its
wealth, and while no doubt a great deal of the church property reverted to the State, it is claimed, and I think with reason, that many of its treasures in gold and silver and precious stones enriched some of the despoilers. The gold and silver went to the melting pot, and the jewels—ah! *Dios sabe*—the Lord knows; certain it is that they were lost to the church and failed to reach the government treasury. The side windows are high above the ground and doubly recessed, owing to the very thick and massive walls.

In connection with this old building there is an underground way passing directly under the main square by way of the convent already described, to the old sea battery, or extreme point of the city looking seaward. It is said that these underground ways were especially devised to allow the besieged, if in danger, to escape from one point to another. I have never been in this underground passage, but I am well acquainted with a gentleman in Panama who has been in it and who has traversed it for some distance. The great earthquake of September 7, 1882, threw a part of the façade into the square of the cathedral, as well as some of the saints in the niches. The pretty arches within were cracked and the tile roof was badly damaged. This church, in common with all the others at Panama, is covered with red tiles—a species of oval tile made in the country. "Its front has been renovated and yellow-washed by the Panama lottery. Fact! There is nothing like being 'solid' with the church. The devil having repaired the church—I really beg his pardon, I mean the lottery—it gives one a new mental study."*

There are a number of minor points regarding this building, which while not architectural, at least are amusing and true. Once a lot of English Blue Jackets were on shore on a spree, when they lassoed some of the saints and hauled them into the Plaza. You can fancy the horror of the faithful at this sacrilegious act of the gringos.

---

* The *Gazette*, Montreal, April, 1888.