

PERSONAL IMPRESSIONS OF NICARAGUA.

WITH PICTURES BY THE AUTHOR.



DAYLIGHT found us well off the coast of Jamaica, bound for Greytown, on the Mosquito Coast, our after-decks covered with darkies and their families going in search of work on the canal. For several days we bowled along over high rollers so blue that the strongest color on the palette would be driven wild with envy could it but appreciate its weakness. The trade-winds were blowing strong, tempering the heat of the sun; not a cloud was to be seen; everything was lovely.

At last a morning dawned upon us at anchor off Greytown. All vessels anchor about a mile from land, as the water is so shallow on the bar that they cannot enter. The bottom and shore of the harbor are of sand, which constantly shifts, changing the coast-line and the depth of the water from year to year.

Those of the passengers about to land walked about the deck, looking strange in their hard hats and white shirts. Satchels and bags were strewn about; cabin-boys were gathering in their tips. Soon a tug came out, towing flats, or lighters, for our cargo. The sea was high: one minute a flat would be almost even with our decks, and the next fifteen or twenty feet below; one minute, thirty feet from the side, and the next, jamming into us with a tremendous crash, making the vessel tremble from bow to stern.

On the flats there were many men to receive the freight, but no one seemingly in command. When a package was hanging over the boat, yells to lower would go up from every one; the constant shifting of the boat would bring some of them under the package, and a wild scramble to get out of the way would begin; again, as it would be lowered, the flat would slide out from under, and all hands would yell to have the engine stopped. Sometimes, as the bale was lowered, the flat would go down at the same time, keeping the same distance between them; then a wave would suddenly lift it up against the bale with such force that one would think it must go through the bottom of the boat. This is the worst thing that can happen to a show-case, even though it is well boxed, as I had a chance to see. On the west coast all goods are taken at the shipper's risk; it must be the same here.

Ladies, babies, and old people are lowered

in the same way, tied in a chair, and one at a time. Two lines are tied to the chair to steady it, one held by a man on the steamer, one by a man in the float; the power is steam. But a man must climb, stay on board, or drown, and no one seems to care which.

The lighters were loaded at last, and we shoved from the steamer, and headed for the harbor. In a short time we were on shore, and on our way to the hotel recommended to us by the American consul. There are several in the place. This one consisted of a very large bar-room opening on a broad veranda that ran the length of the building, a smaller dining-room, and back of that a number of small closets called bedrooms, separated by partitions about six feet high. In each of these apartments was a canvas cot with a grass mat, a sheet of muslin, and a small, very hard hair pillow. A washstand, with a grass mat before it, completed the furnishing.

The town is a small one, supported entirely by the Canal Company and their employees. Most of the houses are frame-buildings; but a few of the natives still cling to the palm-thatched roof. The character and appearance of the town are different from the interior towns from the fact that there are so many foreigners living in it, and what is called the native population is well mixed up with black blood from Jamaica. The old town of the time of the gold fever has almost entirely disappeared, the site being in part washed away, and the unstable buildings that were on the remainder have long since been replaced by others. Decay is very rapid here, the humidity is so great, and such instruments as cameras warp and swell so much as to be practically useless, even when kept wrapped in rubber. Everything is moldy. It is useless to try to keep dry. In the camps where men are cutting out the line of the canal, often for days they are at work in water, and the greater part of the time in the rain. Often the water is poisonous or stagnant.

Near the shore we saw about the only relic of early days left in Greytown: this was the remains of an old fence built of musket-barrels stuck into the ground muzzle down and side by side. The guns were old flint-locks, and were used by, or were part of, the plunder of the filibuster Walker. One hears much and sees many traces of him all through Nicaragua.

I found that the steamer for the head of Lake Nicaragua left Greytown only once in



ENGRAVED BY P. AITKEN.

A NICARAGUA POLICEMAN ON DUTY.

ten days or two weeks; and as I had seen about all there was to see in the place,—all that was left could have been done in a day,—I concluded to go on the steamer that left the next day. The morning found me abroad. These steamers are small stern-wheeled crafts similar to those used on our Western and Southern rivers. There are very few state-rooms, and most of the passengers are obliged to sleep on deck; indeed, many of the old travelers prefer to do so. Each one is expected to provide his own bedding, pillow, and mosquito-net.

The San Juan River averages probably a quarter of a mile in width; its length is about one hundred miles; its banks are very low except at the old town, and just off Castillo, two thirds of the way up, where there is a hill, topped by the old fort, of no earthly use except as a shelter for the garrison. It is very pretty, however, and would be prettier were it not for the fact that its gray stone and brick walls have been given a coat of whitewash. The custom-house is located here, and, after an examination of baggage, passengers are transferred to another steamer at the other end of the town, for there is a difficult rapid here, although the boats of the natives are pulled over it in some way.

Castillo is a small place of one street, built around the foot of the hill on which the fort is situated. A track is laid through this narrow street, over which the freight is transferred. It is purely a native town, and very dirty. Scavenger pigs run around the street and into the houses. No one seems to work; every house and shop has one or two hammocks swinging, and every one is occupied. The Transportation Company brings considerable support to this place, of course, but many of the people live by rubber-hunting through the swamps and jungles, or by buying rubber from those who do.

After leaving Castillo, the banks are again low until you near the mouth of the lake at San Carlos, where the high land of the interior begins to run back into mountains and volcanoes sometimes a mile high. The river-banks are densely covered with timber; fern and cocoanut-palm branches, hanging over into the water in most places, entirely conceal the banks. Where one can see through the trees into the black, dark recesses of the forest, it does not look inviting. One can hear monkeys chattering, parrots screeching, and would not have to look long to find snakes. We were taking on wood one day when a snake of a brilliant green was seen by one of the passengers on the limb of a tree within twenty feet of the boat. Several shots were

fired at it, when one from a Winchester cut the branch that it was on, and it fell to the ground, disappearing under a pile of wood. It must have been at least eight feet long. The deckhands who were passing the wood did not seem to mind the fact that there was a snake, and possibly many, in the pile, but continued at work in their bare feet as though nothing had happened.

One afternoon, at four o'clock, we reached the head of the river, at the entrance to Lake Nicaragua, and tied up at the wharf of the town of San Carlos, which is built on the side of a hill, and protected by two forts, only one of which is garrisoned, the other being abandoned and going to decay. We wandered about the place until it was time to return for dinner, but found nothing of interest except the naked babies and pigs about the streets, the parrots in the doorways, the buzzards on the roofs, and the wrecks of two of the old Vanderbilt line of steamers, the stacks and boilers of which were sticking up out of the water near the shore, where the vessels had been beached and burned by the filibuster Walker.

We had hurried back to the steamer through fear of being left, but she did not sail until next morning at daylight. I was glad of this, as it gave us a chance to see the lake to advantage, which otherwise we would not have had.

Lake Nicaragua is about seventy-five miles long, and thirty or forty wide. Its water is fresh and shallow, and the wheel of our little steamer sucked up the mud from the bottom for miles after leaving San Carlos. A big dam that is proposed at or near Castillo is to raise the water of the lake about twenty feet.

There are many islands, varying in height from a few feet to the volcano Madera, which is 4100 feet, and the volcano Ometepe, which is 4190 feet in height. They are chronic grumblers, these fellows, and one has, on two different occasions, done considerable damage to the towns and plantations on its sides and base, and to Rivas, which is some six or eight miles away on the mainland. Here it has shaken down houses, and covered the tillable land with ashes.

We left the steamer at Rivas, as we wished to go over the old route taken by California miners. Having secured horses and a guide, we started early the next morning, so as to go as far as possible before the sun was high. My companion's horse was a stumbler, and came very near falling two or three times, and the guide did not know the way. After he had lost the road and found it again two or three times, we concluded to send him back; but as he was well mounted, we compelled him to exchange his horse for the stumbler, and pro-



PARROT-SELLERS AT CORINTHO.

ENGRAVED BY J. W. EVANS.

W. Heath

ceeded on our way, crossing the line marked by the Nicaragua Canal Company; and at last, having stopped at a native ranch for something to eat, we reached the site of the old town of Virgin Bay and the landing for the Vanderbilt line of steamers. The piles of the long pier are yet sticking out of the water here and there, but the upper woodwork has long since been washed away. What was once the street of the place is now overgrown with weeds and burs. The only family living here is that of a Jamaica negro. His wife is a Nicaraguan. Stopping our horses in the shade of a tree where his children were gathering oranges, we asked for some, and the little ones filled their skirts,—those that had them, the naked ones carrying all they could in their hands,—and gave them to us. They were delighted with the small pieces of silver we gave them in return, as they were overpaid, a bushel of oranges being worth only about five or seven cents here.

We opened the door of the old hotel, and looked into the bar-room, once filled with miners, filibusters, gamblers, and natives, and in which many an exciting affair has occurred, but were met only by a cloud of bats, startled by the noise and light. The stairs had fallen down, so that we could not visit the second story, as we wished to do.

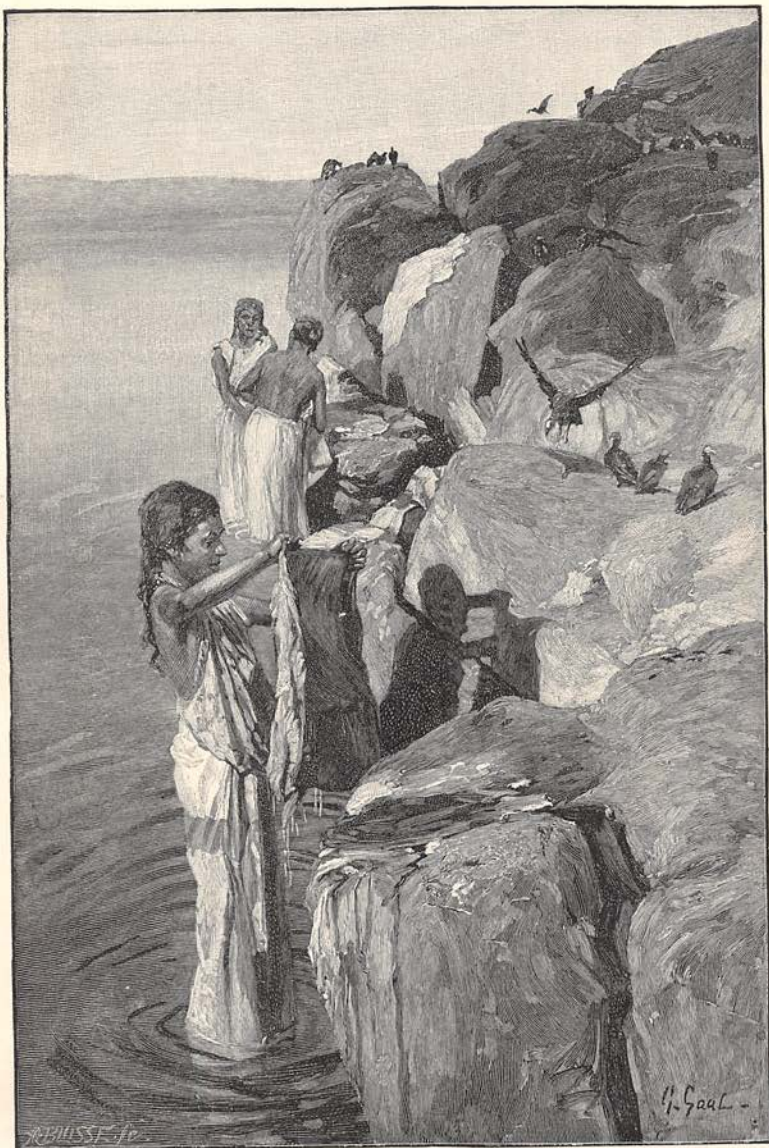
Following the old road, which is about fifteen miles long, one comes to San Juan del Sur. Before reaching this place, however, the country grows hilly, and the road somewhat better, as it is used by the people of San Juan del Sur for a little distance to reach the main road running north to Rivas. Along this portion of the road are a few small plantations.

We met some teamsters on their way to the interior with loads of goods that had been landed at San Juan del Sur by one of the Pacific Mail steamers. Their carts were drawn by oxen, one, two, or three pair to each cart. I should think it would take one team to draw an empty cart, for they seemed very heavy; the wheels were solid, and looked as if they were simply sections cut from the trunk of a large tree, with a hole bored through the center to admit the axle.

San Juan del Sur is a very small place. There is a small harbor here, whence miners embarked for California. The window at which they used to buy tickets, and the hole in the wall in which they dropped their letters for home, can still be seen. Rivas is back from the lake about a mile and a half, and the people are building a horse-car route to the landing. Communication is kept up with Granada by boat and by a line of stages. I took the stage early in the morning, while it was yet so dark that one could not see the nearest thing. How the driver kept the road is more than I can tell; but he did, and the mules, be-

ing fresh, were making fast time, when I saw a spark of fire waving in the road. The mules stopped, and the spark approached and came into the stage, and then I saw that I was to have a fellow-passenger. The spark was his lighted cigar. We picked up one or two more people before we left the outskirts of the town, and then came a wild rush for miles at a gallop, every one of us hanging on as best he could. As it grew lighter, one could see groups of women on their way to town, carrying loads of fruit and vegetables to the market-place to sell. It was chilly until the sun came up, when it became very warm. On we went, sometimes between high hedges of cactus of various kinds surrounding beautiful fields and orange groves; again through open and treeless prairies, looking desolate and drear; over all kinds of roads, rough and well-made ones, hilly and level ones; past small collections of Indians' huts thatched with palms, and with side-walls daubed with clay; by the homes of well-to-do planters, with their white adobe walls and thatched roofs. In front of one ranch we saw three deer hanging; a man, naked to the waist, with his white linen trousers tucked up as high as he could get them, and covered with blood, was cutting them up. On the prairies we met several herds of cattle, and at eight o'clock stopped for a bowl of chocolate and to change mules at a very dirty Indian hut. Then we rattled on until ten, when we stopped at a cattle-ranch for breakfast. By this time it was very warm, and we were glad to occupy one of the hammocks which were invitingly stretched under the shadow of the thatched porch in front of the house until the meal was prepared.

Soon we were off again. It had grown unbearably hot; a white, chalky dust filled our eyes, noses, and ears, and the mules could not be induced to go very fast. How long this continued I do not know, but it seemed a long time, when, as we entered a small town, a tire came off one of the wheels, and we had to stop in front of the prison-house and send for a blacksmith. It took some time to make the repairs, and while this was going on I took a look at the prison-pen and the church. The church was not an interesting one, but this was my first view of a Nicaragua prison. A soldier was on guard at the door, which was open. There was only one room, the walls of which were very thick; about five feet from the wall, and parallel to it, two long, squared logs of oak were placed. The lower one was fastened to the floor; the upper one, which rested on it, could be raised and lowered at will, and was held in position by wooden pins at the ends. Holes were scooped, partly from the upper and partly from the lower log, through which the ankles of the prisoners were



WASHING NEAR MASAYA.

ENGRAVED BY A. BLOSSE.

placed; straw was thrown on the floor back of the logs, and the prisoners could lie down or sit up as they pleased, but could not stand. A jar of water was placed within reach. A veranda ran across the front of the building, under which was a bench for the accommodation of the guard. This constituted all the furnishing. The floors were of tile, and everything looked tolerably clean.

Then through more villages we passed, causing children and pigs to scamper, and returning the salutes of adults, all of whom came to the doors. Over more hills and down into the valleys we went, skirting the base of a volcano

(Mombacho), and reaching the outskirts of Granada about seven o'clock.

All important towns in Nicaragua are laid out on one plan, and the architecture is the same in all. There is a plaza, around which are grouped the church or cathedral, public buildings, barracks, stores, bank, hotel, and sometimes some of the principal residences. In this square the market is usually held, and every morning picturesque men and women can be seen with trays and bags of all the products of the country for sale. The houses are all adobe, and very few have more than one story, excepting the public buildings



PINEAPPLE-SELLER, GRANADA.

ENGRAVED BY S. DAVIS.

or hotels, and even these rarely, earthquakes being too frequent. The Indian huts on the outskirts of the town and in the villages are palm-thatched, but pretentious houses have tile roofs. All the floors are made of red tiles or of mother earth. The windows are not glazed,— the climate is too warm to make it either necessary or comfortable,— but are closed at night on the inside by large, heavy shutters hung on hinges, and frequently cages of iron or wood are built over them on the outside. Living- and sleeping-rooms are large, averaging eighteen feet in width, with large doorways on both the street and the inside court of the house, which give a good circulation of air.

The interior court, around which the different rooms are built, is often filled with trees and flowers in beds or pots of very pretty designs, and often there is a fountain in the

houses of the rich. Under the veranda, hammocks are swung and parrots hang; the veranda is used also as a dining-room.

Pictures are everywhere : women bearing burdens on their heads, their draperies blown into action, and their usually strong and beautiful figures accentuated by the gentle trade-winds; bathers or washerwomen on the beach, the sunlight glancing from their wet bronzed bodies and coal-black hair, relieved against the deep blue of the sky, and reflected in the waters of the lake and the white of the incoming waves; the market-places; the hammocks full of naked and sleeping babies; the beautiful young girls; the withered and wrinkled crone sucking her cigarette as she crouches over her spark of a charcoal fire, surrounded by her pots and pans; the islands of the lake; the volcanoes; the tropical rich-

ness of the cultivated country, with its feathery palms and orchids; or the weird, lonesome, gloomy jungle, with its majestic trees and festooned vines.

Here is a young boy selling pineapples; he wears nothing but a breech-cloth. Here comes a girl who is a perfect scheme of color, her bronze face, black hair, yellow-white chemise, red rebozo full of quality, and her brown skirt and sandals covered with dust. You watch her until she turns the corner, and you have half a mind to follow for one more glance; but look in another direction, and behold! something

but in the larger towns they are on their mettle, and are as spruce as can be.

A broad sand-bank borders the lake at Granada, and is the fashionable drive for the inhabitants. There is always a cool breeze coming over the water, making it very comfortable, and there are many things of interest—the picturesque little thatched huts, shaded by large trees and palms that make them look like toy houses; the naked babies playing in the sand or chasing the buzzards, which are as tame as chickens; people washing, bathing, driving.

We came at last to Corinto, which is only a



DELIVERING MEAT, GRANADA.

ENGRAVED BY C. SCHWARZBURGER.

equally fine is before you. Maybe it is a young señor, with a mane of black hair about his forehead and sticking out from under his hat-brim, his mustache twisted into saucy curls, a gay sash about his waist, a short sword at his side, and his game-cock under his arm. The soldiers, too, are picturesque. They are always expecting a revolution, when life is eventful; but in times of peace, the arresting of stray pigs, goats, etc. is about all they have to do. They are small men, but look like good material, and, I have no doubt, fight bravely. They wear hardly any uniform, and remind one of Falstaff's men;

railroad terminus on a sand-bar. Our steamer came in that night, and we made our way to her the next day in a canoe, our boatman winding his way among the canoes of natives that were selling parrots, fruit, cigars, etc. to the sailors and passengers.

After the busy time I had been having on my travels, very enjoyable were the long, dreamy days on board, with nothing to do but read, smoke, and rest, watching the natives load and unload, and the fish and sharks in the clear water around us. Then, too, I could hear English speech about me, and felt that I was home at last.

Gilbert Gaul.