



A "STREET BREAKFAST" ON THE ISTHMUS OF PANAMA.

SUNRISE over the Isthmus—a real tropical sunrise, lighting up sky and sea with one wide blaze of glory, under which the white ribs of the "skeleton light-house" at the Point, the square tower of the modest grey church, the two long straggling streets that compose the little toy-town, and the wide waste of oozy swamp and matted jungle that fill up the background, glow as if transfigured.

And not without reason; for if celebrity deserve a crown, few "glories" have been better earned. This little handful of particoloured wooden buildings, suggestive of a country fair, is one of the great gateways of the world's commerce, variously known as Colon, Aspinwall, and Puerto de Naos—for, like other great criminals, it has more than one *alias*. And a very great criminal it has been—a murderer of the deepest dye, as the foul creeping mist which is now stealing away, like a detected slander, before the honest light of the broadening sunshine, sufficiently testifies. Looking round upon the acres of black slimy morass which cover not merely the shore of Manzanilla Island (on which the town is built), but the whole distance which the eye can measure beyond it, one can readily believe the hideous tradition quoted to every new-comer, by way of encouragement, the moment he sets foot on shore—that every sleeper on the forty-seven miles of railway which crosses the Isthmus has cost a human life!

Early as it is, the air is already warm as I come through the gate of the wharf, and find myself in the main street of Colon—if that can be called a street which has only one side to it, the other being formed by the water of the harbour, while the centre is traversed by the railway, very much as a tram-line might pass through an English thoroughfare. Along the front of the line of buildings runs a shady piazza paved with brick (no slight boon under the vertical sun of the Spanish Main), and here I come at once into the midst of a scene of motley life and bustle. For in this abnormal region, where people start on a round of calls at sunrise, and the favourite hour for transacting business is between six and seven a.m., the Colon shopkeeper has his shutters down at an hour when his English brother is just turning round for another nap.

Every shop in the *Colonnade* (pardon the accidental joke) is already in full action, from the huge double-entranced "American Store," with its picturesque omnium-gatherum of miscellaneous goods, down to the meek little barber's shop at the end of the Row, which, in virtue of its possession of one book and three fly-specked sheets of paper, boldly announces "BOOKS AND STATIONERY" on the canvas screen that forms its door. Shirt-sleeved gentlemen of colour, magnificent in paper-collars and rainbow-neckties, are officiating behind the counters, or else standing in the doorway like Giant Pope in the mouth of his cave, ready to pounce upon any customer who may turn up. Hideous

black women with pipes in their mouths, suggestive of an unlimited game of "Old Aunt Sally," stare down from the crazy wooden balconies overhead; and the whole piazza is gay with painted signs and polyglot advertisements, part English, part French, part Spanish, vividly recalling Morier's famous signboard on the Wallachian inn:—

"In questa casa troverete,
Toutes les choses que vous souhaitez,
Vinum bonum, panis, carnis,
Good po'chaise, and horse and harness."

The train does not start for Panama till seven o'clock, but the cars are already there, awaiting their locomotive—two long American cars, with a passage down the centre between two rows of seats—while around them cluster, with the eagerness of men in whose vapid lives even the starting of a train is a great event, all the idlers of the street—*i.e.*, nine-tenths of the entire population. Meanwhile, the intending passengers are see-sawing in rocking-chairs under the shade of the piazza, with their white jackets thrown open and their broad-leaved hats on their knees, cooling themselves with a succession of those marvellous "cocktails" which the American seems to carry with him to all parts of the earth, as infallibly as the Englishman his beefsteak and porter.

Here and there amid the gathering crowd, surmounted by the traditional straw hat, appears the lean dark face of a genuine "native"—not the crisp wool and shining blackness of the negro, nor the yellow skin and soft delicate outline of the mulatto, but the straight lank hair, sharp features, and small, narrow, deep-set eye, which indicate unmistakably, both here and in South America, the admixture of Indian blood—that curious mixed type which I have seen by the thousand in Venezuela and Colombia, and which, while discarding the virtues of either race, seems to have retained the vices of both.

But the sun is rising higher, and the crowd thickens apace; for in this torrid region, where only the seasoned "nigger" can venture to brave the Great King in his wrath, every minute of these cool morning hours is worth half-an-hour later on. Here comes a black servant girl returning from her marketing, with a scarlet handkerchief wrapped turban-fashion round her woolly head, and a huge basket of fruit and vegetables perched upon it like an overgrown helmet, under which her white teeth glitter in a perpetual grin, as she retorts the bantering salutations of the surrounding "gentlemen of colour." There, a shipping agent, in white jacket and "ducks," with his broad-leaved straw hat pulled down over his fallow face (on which the tropical sun has already left its *visa* only too legibly), saunters past on his way to the wharf on the other side of the road, which he will reach in time if he do not fall asleep on the way. Just behind us, with hands buried in his pockets, and his ample "Panama" cocked knowingly on one side, stands an American trader from San Francisco, eyeing everything as keenly

as if he meditated purchasing the whole town at a valuation. Yonder go three or four brawny English sailors, out for a "skylark" on shore—surveying their new surroundings with a smile of good-humoured contempt, and making pithy comments upon everything and everybody, with that freedom of speech which is the birthright of an Englishman. And here, to the inspiring music of a cracked fife and a drum with a hole in it, come marching—gorgeous in shakos of polished leather, blue overcoats, and red Zouave trousers—a dozen soldiers of the "Ayacucho Battalion," which, having succeeded in putting down the annual revolution somewhere or other (the only duty, except the getting up of one, which South American soldiers ever seem to perform), is now awaiting its transmission back to Santa Fé de Bogotá, the renowned but exceedingly dirty metropolis of the Colombian Confederation, lying all secluded amid the endless swamps of the Upper Magdalena.

But just as I am beginning to take stock of a picturesque group of genuine "niggers," in every variety of costume from coat and trousers to cotton drawers and a straw hat, the whole gang suddenly break into a shambling rush toward the nearer end of the Colonnade—the tallest of the party licking his huge blubber-lips like a hungry ogre, and accounting for his raptures by the single exclamation, "Dere come b'ekfast!"

Following the popular movement, and peering with some difficulty over half-a-dozen pairs of brawny black shoulders, I discover the centre of attraction to be a tiny stall, consisting merely of a wooden tray supported on trestles, very much in the style of that upon which Mr. Silas Wegg displayed his deleterious gingerbread and "collection of ballads beyond all price." But our Western stall exhibits wares of a much more inviting description. Half-a-dozen saucers of boiled rice, thickly sprinkled with cinnamon; several bowls of undeniable "hominy," white and succulent as the tastiest on a South Carolina plantation; a few queer-looking square slabs that might pass for pieces of brown soap, but which are in reality the famous "sugar-cakes" that meet one in every port from Greytown to Barbados; a goodly pile of those curious twisted rolls—like bulging napkins tightly screwed up at either end—which seem to be universal in the Spanish Main; a tall coffee-pot smoking altar-like in the midst; and, presiding over the whole, a big, plump, jolly-looking negress (addressed as "Aunty Rose" by her customers), who, as she sits beside her board, looks the very model of some well-fed Indian deity, with the steam of the coffee-pot curling round her head in a kind of glory.

"Now, Aunty Rose, you gib me cup coffee, quick!"

"O, go 'long, you Sambo! You always want help fust—hab no more manners dan black nigger!* You no see dese coloured lady waiting? when dey serve, den you come in!"

The coloured ladies being served, Mr. Sambo (a huge raw-boned negro boatman, whose bare limbs display

the muscles of a gladiator) "comes in" accordingly. He would seem to be in funds just at present, for he inspects the saucers of rice and cinnamon rather fastidiously, as if meaning to give himself a good treat; till, finding one to his liking, he seizes it in one paw, and a cup of hot coffee in the other, and begins to demolish both with the swallow of Miss Sinclair's giant, who "walked round the world every morning before breakfast to improve his appetite."

Presently arrives another guest—a half-caste clerk from one of the adjacent shipping offices, whose loose lips and red eyelids betray a somewhat excessive weakness for early "cocktails." Two or three of these latter he has already disposed of, a little further up the Colonnade; and he is now correcting his liquor with a little hot coffee before sitting down to his desk for the morning. After him come three or four native fishermen, who, having been "out" all night, come to their morning meal with the appetite of lions. Too much in earnest to talk, or even to laugh, they despatch three or four cups of coffee apiece, and the same number of rolls, in little more than as many mouthfuls—and are off again almost before I can take a good look at them.

To these succeed half-a-dozen sinewy mulattos, whom I recognise at once as a part of the gang employed in discharging our cargo, and who, mindful of the hot work that awaits them in the depths of the after-noon an hour hence, are fortifying themselves in advance with a good breakfast, in unconscious obedience to the sage counsel given by the negro patriarch to his son:—

"Sam, my boy, nebber you do no work 'fore breakfast; if you hab work to do 'fore breakfast, always get your breakfast *fust!*"

Being by this time pretty well appetised, I step forward in my turn.

Aunty Rose, flattered by the unwonted patronage of a white "buckra" (for, thanks to the large admixture of the American element, distinctions of colour are as strong in this remote corner of the earth as in Georgia and Louisiana), salutes me with a gracious bend of her huge black head, which, with the flaming handkerchief that crowns it, looks very much like a volcano in full action.

"Mornin', sar. What you take to-day?"

"How much for the coffee?"

"Five cent. [$2\frac{1}{2}$ d.] to you, sar"—this last in an insinuating under-tone.

"And the rolls?"

"Roll five cent. too, sar; ten cent., roll and coffee togedder."

The coffee, though made in some haste, is very passable of its kind, and the bread really excellent. Indeed, in many parts of the Isthmus (and especially in the Indian village of Matachin, midway between Colon and Panama) I have seen as fine wheaten bread as any in Paris. I pay my ten cents. (for, though every coinage on earth seems to be in circulation here, all reckonings are kept in American currency) and stroll back to the steamer, musing on my first experience of "life on the Neck."

* Curiously enough, the term "nigger" is the *ne plus ultra* of insult among the blacks themselves in every part of the West Indies.