

## CHAPTER II

### CRISTOBAL-COLON; AND THE PANAMA RAILROAD



COLON is the most considerable town on the Caribbean Coast north and west of Cartagena. It is in fact two towns, the older one which is still subject to the jurisdiction of the Republic of Panama and which is properly called Colon; and the new or American town which is in the Canal Zone and is called Cristobal. The two are separated only by an imaginary line, though if you want to mail a letter in Colon you must use a Panama stamp, while if you get into trouble—civil or criminal—in that camp of banditti you will have meted out to you the particular form of justice which Panamanian judges keep expressly for unlucky Gringos who fall into their clutches. The combined towns are called Cristobal-Colon, or in our vernacular Christopher Columbus. The name is half French, half Spanish, and the town is a medley of all

nations. For half a century there has been trouble of various sorts about the name of the spot—which is a sort of caldron of trouble any way. The United States wanted to call the port Aspinwall, after the principal promoter of the Panama Railroad which had its terminus there, but Colombia, which at that time controlled the Isthmus, insisted on the name Colon, and finally enforced its contention by refusing to receive at its post office letters addressed to "Aspinwall." This vigorous action was effective and the United States postal authorities were obliged to notify users of the mails that there was no longer any such place on the world's map as Aspinwall.

The dignity of our outraged nation had to be maintained, however, and when, a little later, the commission of our Consul at Colon expired, the State Department refused to replace him because it ignored the existence of such a place as Colon, while Colombia would not admit the existence of an Aspinwall



TORO POINT LIGHT



TORO POINT BREAKWATER

Before its construction northerners often made the harbor of Colon untenable for ships

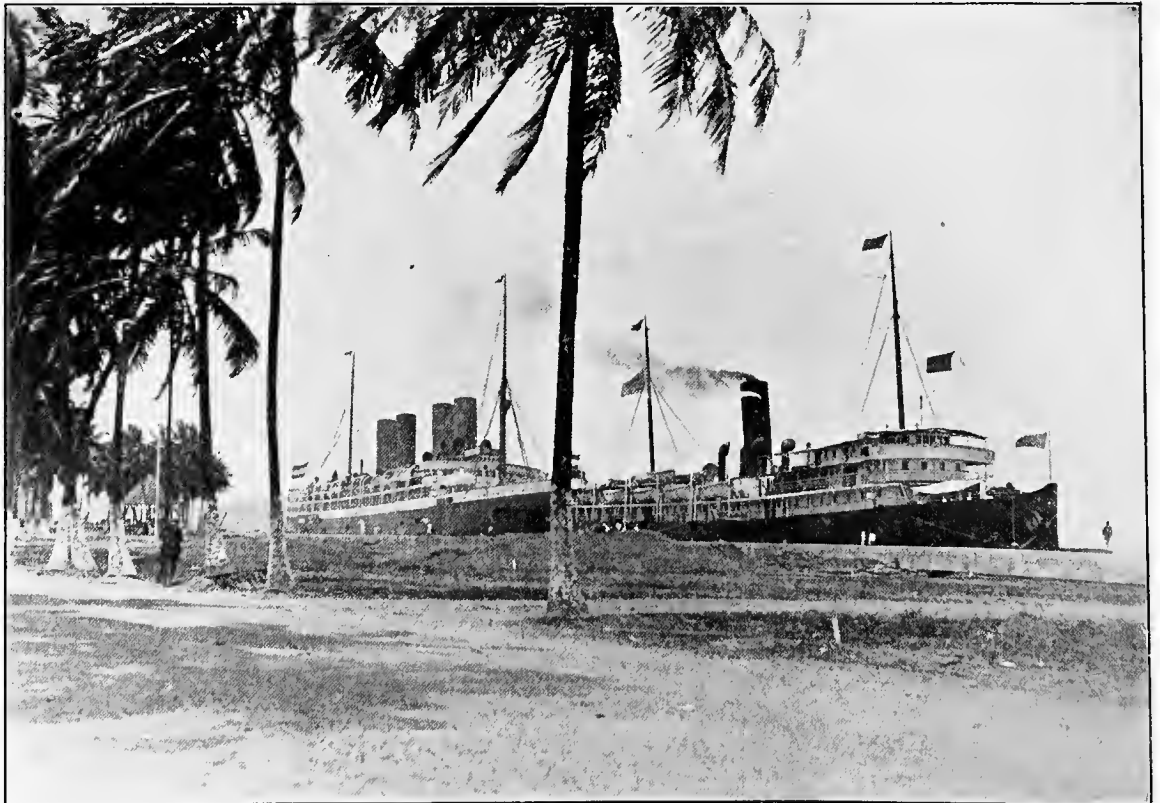
within its borders. Thus for some time a good democrat was kept out of a job—it was the period of democratic ascendancy. Perhaps it was pressure for this job that led our government to yield. When the French began digging the canal they chose Limon Bay, the inlet on which Colon stands, as its Atlantic terminus and established a town of their own which they called Cristobal, being the French

form of Christopher. Hence Cristobal-Colon, the official name which appears on all accurate maps of the present day.

It is one of the traditions of the town that a tramp steamer, commanded by a German, came plowing in from the sea one morning and, passing without attention the docks of Colon, went gaily on up Limon Bay until she ran smack into the land. Being jeered at for his unusual method of navigation the captain produced his charts.

“That town is Colon?”

No? Is it not so? Vell dere are two towns. My port is Colon. Cristobal comes first. I pass it.



THE NEW CRISTOBAL DOCKS



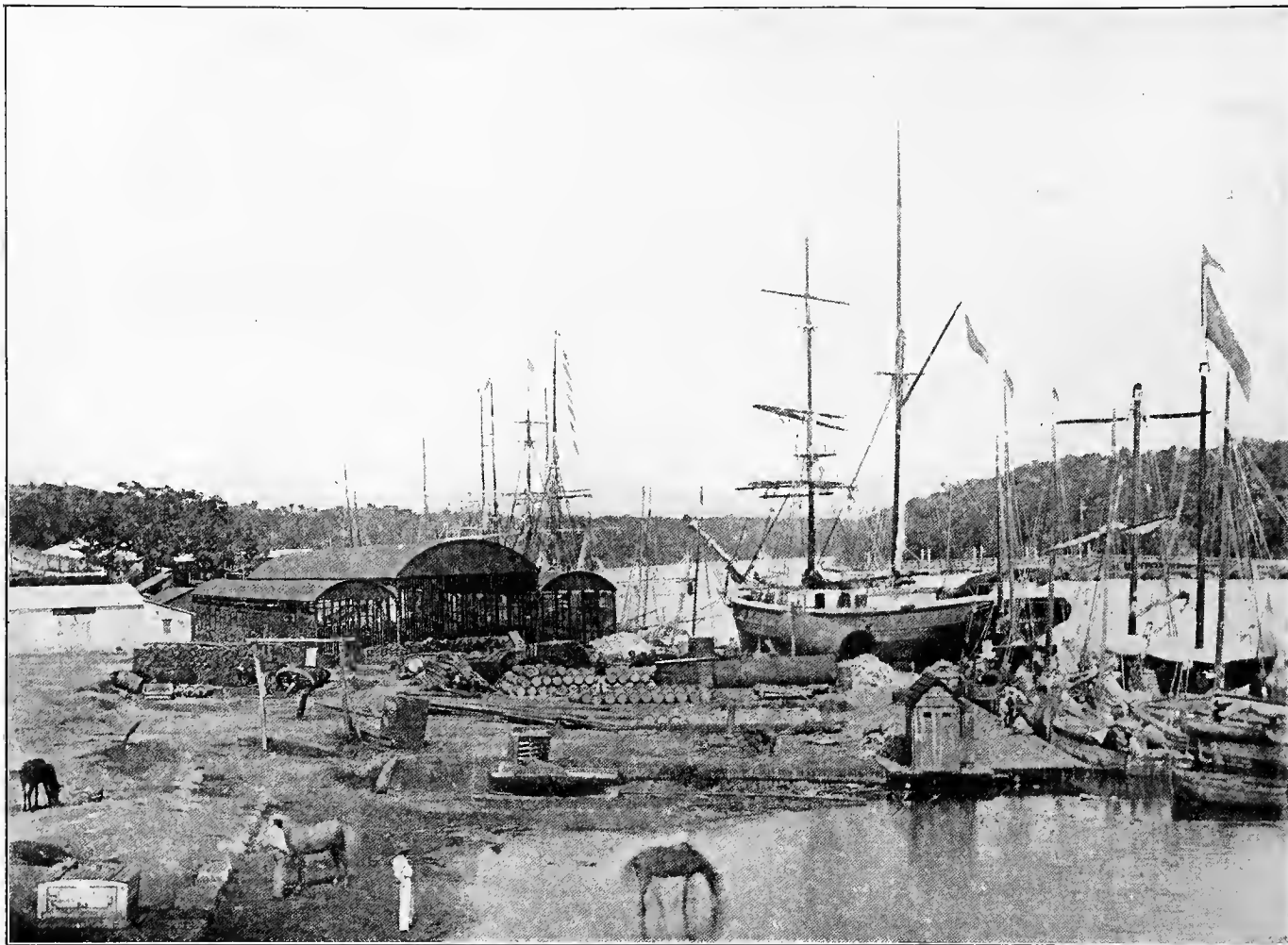
“PALMS WHICH BLEND WITH THE SEA”

I go on to Colon and by thunder dere is no Colon. Nothing but mud.” It is recorded that the skipper’s explanation was accepted and that he was acquitted of wilfully casting away his vessel.

We reach Colon where lie the docks of the Royal Mail in the early morning. To the right as we steam into Limon Bay is the long breakwater of Toro Point extending three miles into the Caribbean, the very first Atlantic outpost of the canal. For it was necessary to create here a largely artificial harbor, as Limon Bay affords no safe anchorage when the fierce northers sweep down along the coast. In the early days of Colon, when it was the starting point of the gold seekers’ trail to Panama, ships in its harbor were compelled to cut and run for the safer, though now abandoned, harbor of Porto Bello some twenty miles down the coast.

That condition the great breakwater corrects. From the ship one sees a line of low hills forming the horizon with no break or indentation to suggest that here man is cutting the narrow gate between the oceans for the commerce of the nations to pass. The town at a distance is not unprepossessing. White houses with red roofs cluster together on a flat island scarcely above the water, and along the sea front lines of cocoanut palms bend before the breeze. No other tree seems so fitly to blend with a white beach and blue sea as this palm. Its natural curves are graceful and characteristic and in a stiff breeze it bows and sways and rustles with a grace and a music all its own.

But the picturesqueness of Colon does not long survive a closer approach. The white houses are seen to be mere frame buildings of the lightest



#### COLON IN 1884

The author counted twelve ocean liners one day at the docks now standing at this spot

construction which along the seafront stand out over the water on stilts. No building of any distinction meets the eye, unless it be the new Washington Hotel, a good bit of Moorish architecture, owned and conducted by the Panama Railroad which in turn is owned by the United States. The activities of Uncle Sam as a hotel keeper on the Isthmus will be worth further attention.

As we warp into the dock we observe that Colon is a seaport of some importance already. The day I reached there last I counted six British, two German, one French and three American steamships. The preponderance of British flags was the first thing to catch the eye; and somehow the feeling that, except for the Royal Mail ship, all the vessels over which they were waving were owned by American capital was not a little humiliating. It is quite probable that in the course of the

year every foreign flag appears at Cristobal-Colon, for the ocean tramp ships are ever coming and going. In time, too, the docks, which are now rather rickety, will be worthy of the port, for the government is building modern and massive docks on the Cristobal side of the line.

At present however one lands at Colon, which has the disadvantage of depositing you in a foreign country with all the annoyances of a custom house examination to endure. Though your destination is the Canal Zone, only a stone's throw away, every piece of baggage must be opened and inspected. The search is not very thorough, and I fancy the Panama tariff is not very comprehensive, but the formality is an irritating one. Protective tariffs will never be wholly popular with travelers.

The town which greets the voyager emerging from the cool recesses of the steamship freight house looks

something like the landward side of Atlantic City's famous board walk with the upper stories of the hotels sliced off. The buildings are almost without exception wood, two stories high, and with wooden galleries reaching to the curb and there supported by slender posts. It does not look foreign—merely cheap and tawdry. Block after block the lines of business follow each other in almost unvarying sequence. A saloon, a Chinese shop selling dry goods and curios, a kodak shop with curios, a saloon, a lottery agency, another saloon, a money-changer's booth, another saloon and so on for what seems about the hottest and smelliest half mile one ever walked. There is no "other side" to the street, for there run the tracks of the Panama railroad, beyond them the bay, and further along lies the American town of Cristobal where there are no stores, but only the residences and work shops of Canal workers. Between Cristobal and tinder box Colon is a wide space kept clear of houses as a fire guard.

Colon's population is as mixed as the complexions of its people. It must be admitted with regret that pure American names are most in evidence on the signboards of its saloons, and well-equipped students of the social life of the town remark that the American vernacular is the one usually proceeding from the lips of the professional gamblers. Merchandising is in the main in the hands of the Chinese, who compel one's admiration in the tropics by the intelligent way in which they have taken advantage of the laziness of the natives to capture for themselves the best places in the business community.

Most of the people in Colon live over their stores and other places of business, though back from the business section are a few comfortable looking residences, and I noticed others being built on made land, as though the beginnings of a mild "boom" were apparent. The newer houses are of concrete, as is the municipal building and chief public school. The Panama Railroad owns most of the land on



FIRE-FIGHTING FORCE AT CRISTOBAL



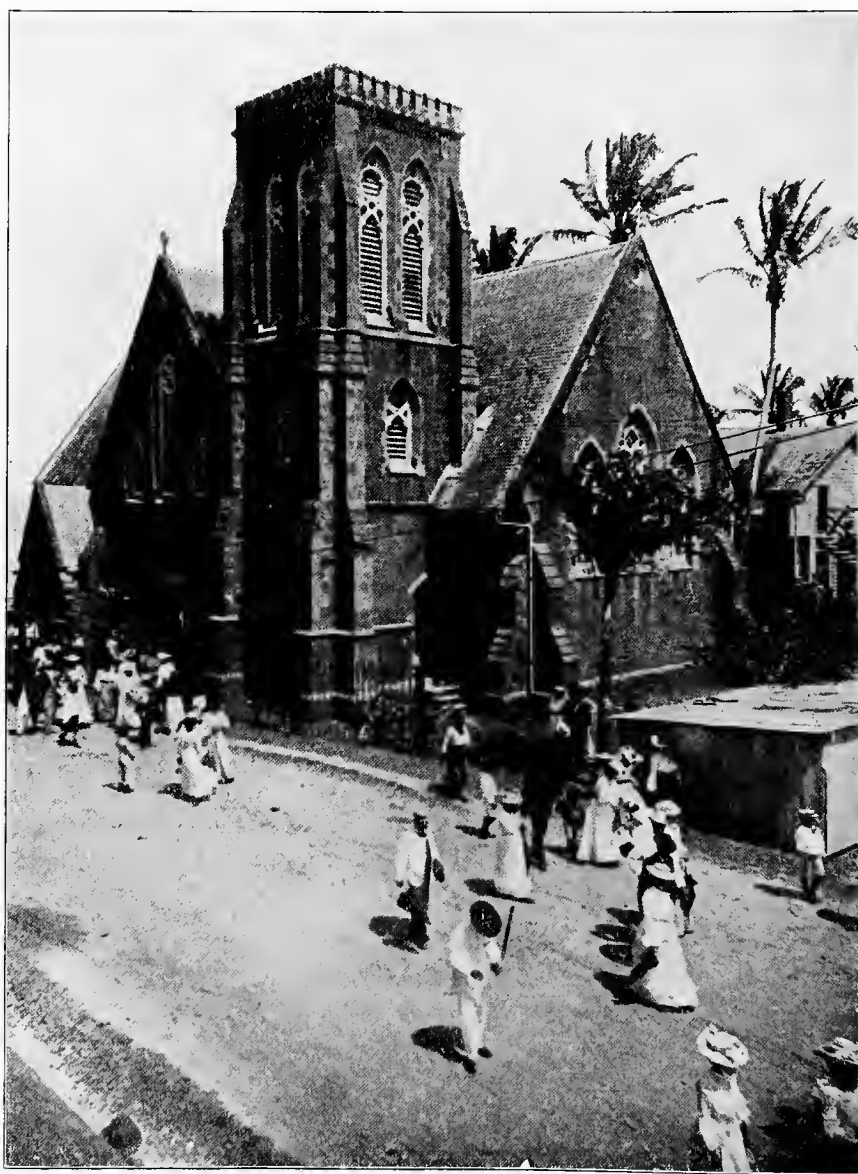
THE NEW WASHINGTON HOTEL

which the town stands, and to which it is practically limited, and the road is said to be encouraging the use of cement or concrete by builders—an exceedingly wise policy, as the town has suffered from repeated fires, in one of which, in 1911, ten blocks were swept away and 1200 people left homeless. The Isthmian Canal Commission maintains excellent fire-fighting forces both in Cristobal and Ancon, and when the local fire departments proved impotent to cope with the flames both of these forces were called into play, the Ancon engines and men being rushed by special train over the forty-five miles of railroad. Of course the fire was in foreign territory, but the Republic of Panama did not resent the invasion. Since that day many of the new buildings have been of concrete, but the prevailing type of architecture may be described as a modified renaissance of the mining shack.

It is idle to look for points of interest in Colon proper. There are none. But the history of the town though running over but sixty years is full of human interest. It did not share with Panama the life of the Spanish domination and aggression. Columbus, Balboa and the other navigators sailed by its site without heed, making for Porto Bello or Nombre de Dios, the better harbors. San Lorenzo, whose

ruins stand at the mouth of the Chagres River, looked down upon busy fleets, and fell before the assaults of Sir Henry Morgan and his buccaneers while the coral island that now upholds Colon was tenanted only by pelicans, alligators and serpents. The life of man touched it when in 1850 the American railroad builders determined to make it the Atlantic terminus of the Panama road. Since then it never has lost nor will it lose a true international importance.

Manzanilla Island, on which the greater part of Colon now stands, was originally a coral reef, on which tropical vegetation had taken root, and died down to furnish soil for a new jungle until by the repe-



THE ONLY STONE CHURCH IN COLON

The ritual is of the Church of England; the congregation almost wholly Jamaica negroes

tition of this process through the ages a foot or two of soil raised itself above the surface of the water and supported a swampy jungle. When the engineers first came to locate there the beginnings of the Panama railroad, they were compelled to make their quarters in an old sailing ship in danger at all times

shrubs defying entrance even to the wild beasts common to the country. In the black slimy mud of its surface alligators and other reptiles abounded, while the air was laden with pestilential vapors and swarming with sandflies and mosquitoes. These last proved so annoying to the laborers that unless their





PANAMA POTTERY SELLERS

hotel, while directly across the way the finishing touches were being put to a new hotel, of reinforced concrete which for architectural taste and beauty of position compares well with any seashore house in the world. At the docks were ships of every nation; cables kept us in communication with all civilized capitals. Not an insect of any sort was seen, and to discover an alligator a considerable journey was necessary. The completed Panama Railroad would carry us in three hours to the Pacific, where the great water routes spread out again like a fan. In half a century man had wrought this change, and with his great canal will doubtless do more marvelous deeds in the time to come.

Once construction of the road was begun shacks rose on piles amid the swampy vegetation of the island. At certain points land was filled in and a solid foundation made for machine shops. The settlement took a sudden start forward in 1851 when a storm prevented two New York ships from landing their passengers at the mouth of the Chagres River.

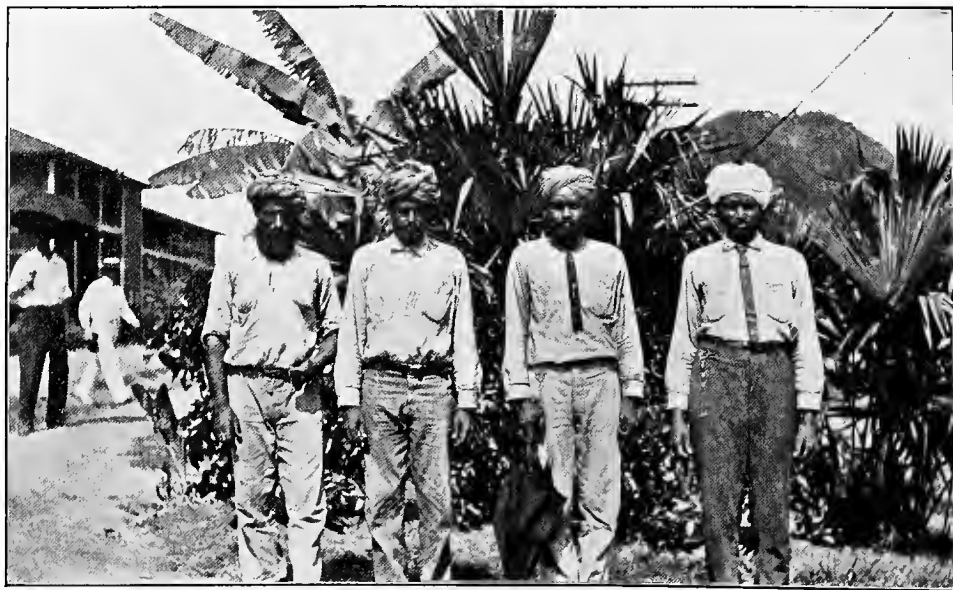
The delayed travelers were instead landed at Colon, and the rails having been laid as

far as Gatun, where the great locks now rise, they were carried thither by the railroad. This route proving the more expeditious the news quickly reached New York and the ships began making Colon their port. As a result the town grew as fast and as unsubstantially as a mushroom.

It was a floating population of people from every land and largely lawless. The bard of the Isthmus has a poem too long to quote which depicts a wayfarer at the gate of Heaven confessing to high crimes, misdemeanors and all the sinful lusts of the flesh. At the close of the damning confession he whispered

something in the ear of the Saint, whose brow cleared, and beaming welcome took the place of stern rejection. The keeper of the keys according to the poet cried:

“Climb up, Oh, weary one, climb up!  
Climb high! Climb higher yet  
Until you reach the plush-lined seats  
That only martyrs get.  
Then sit you down and rest yourself  
While years of bliss roll on!  
Then to the angels he remarked,  
*‘He’s been living in Colon!’*”



HINDOO LABORERS ON THE CANAL

At one time several hundred were employed but they are disappearing





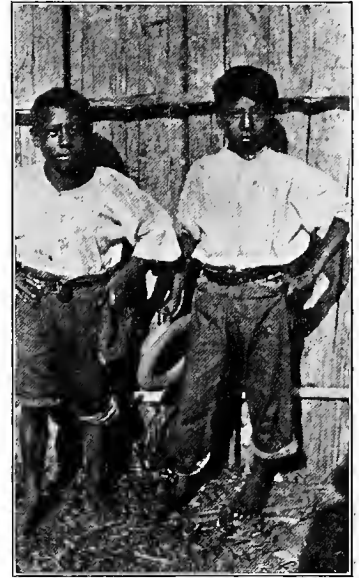
SAN BLAS BOATS AT EARLY DAWN

With the completion of the Pacific railroads in the United States the prosperity of Colon for a time waned. There was still business for the railroad, as there has been to the present day, and as it is believed there will be in the future despite the Canal. But the great rush was ended. The eager men hurrying to be early at the place where gold was to be found, and the men who had "made their pile" hastening home to spend it, took the road across the plains. Colon settled down to a period of lethargy for which its people were constitutionally well fitted. Once in a while they were stirred up by reports of the projected Canal, and the annual revolutions—President Roosevelt in a message to Congress noted 53 in 57 years—prevented life from becoming wholly monotonous. But there was no sign of a renewal of the flush times of the gold rush until late in the '70's the French engineers arrived to begin the surveys for the Canal. By the way, that Isthmus from Darien to Nicaragua is probably the most thoroughly surveyed bit of wild land in the world. Even on our own Canal Zone where the general line of the Canal was early determined each chief engineer had his own survey made, and most of the division

engineers prudently resurveyed the lines of their chiefs.

With the coming of the French, flush times began again on the Isthmus and the golden flood poured most into Colon, as the Canal diggers made their main base of operations there, unlike the Americans who struck at nature's fortifications all along the line, making their headquarters at Culebra about the center of the Isthmus.

But though the French failed to dig the Canal they did win popularity on the Isthmus, and there are regretful and uncomplimentary comparisons drawn in the cafés and other meeting-places between the thrift and calculation of the Americans, and the lavish prodigality of the French. Everything they bought was at mining-camp prices and they adopted no such plan as the commissary system now in



SAN BLAS INDIAN BOYS

vogue to save their workers from the rapacity of native shopkeepers of all sorts.

At Cristobal you are gravely taken to see the De Lesseps Palace, a huge frame house with two



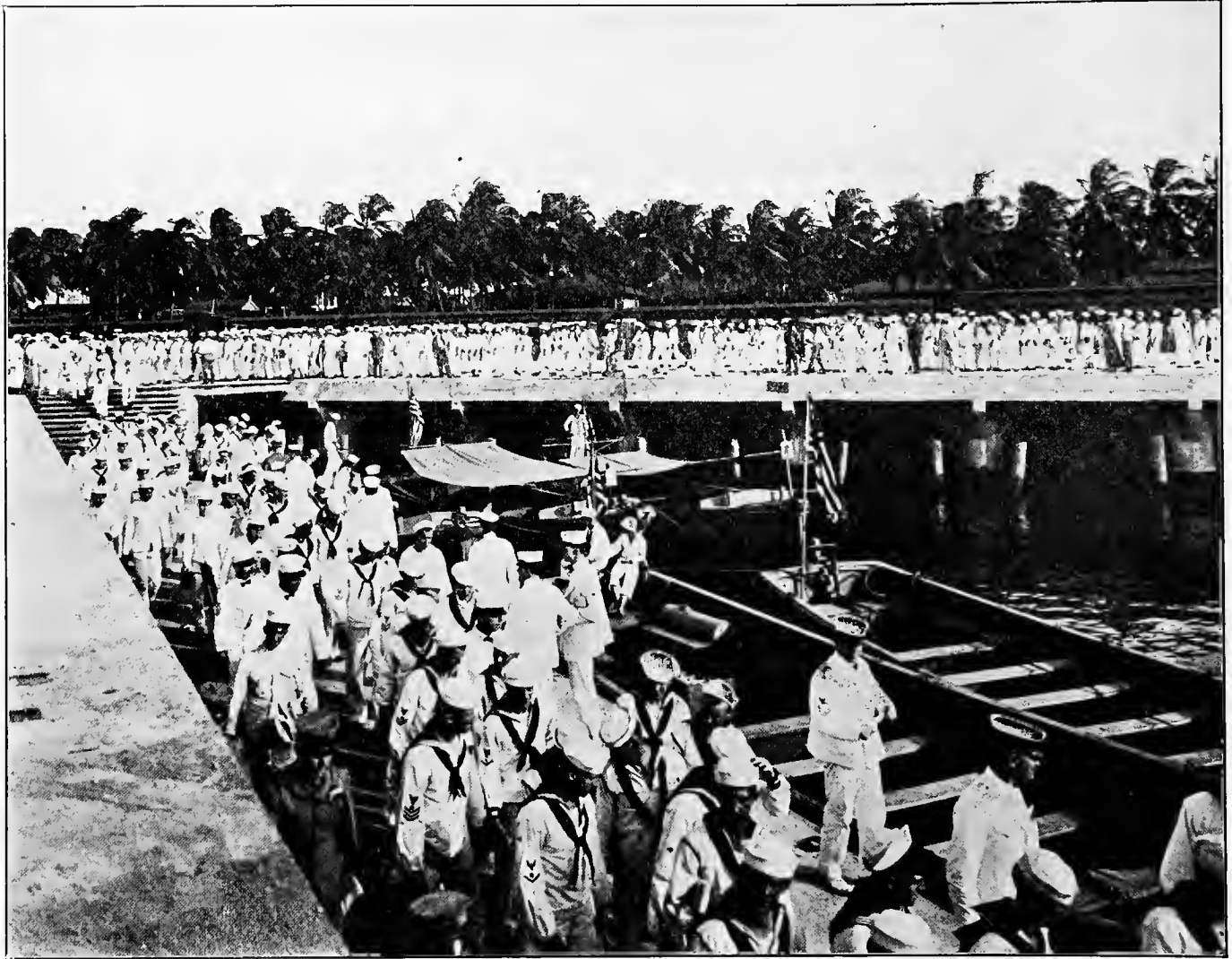
SAN BLAS LUGGER PUTTING OUT TO SEA

wings, now in the last stages of decrepitude and decay, but which you learn cost fabulous sums, was furnished and decorated like a royal chateau and was the scene of bacchanalian feasts that vied with those of the Romans in the days of Heliogabalus. At least the native Panamanian will tell you this, and if you happen to enjoy his reminiscences in the environ-

'When the money flowed like likker . . .

With the joints all throwed wide open, and no sheriff to demur.'

Vice flourished. Gambling of every kind and every other form of wickedness were common day and night. The blush of shame became practically unknown."



THE ATLANTIC FLEET VISITS THE ISTHMUS

ment of a café you will conclude that in starting the Canal the French consumed enough champagne to fill it.

Mr. Tracy Robinson, a charming chronicler of the events of a lifetime on the Isthmus, says of this period: "From the time that operations were well under way until the end, the state of things was like the life at 'Red Hoss Mountain' described by Eugene Field:

The De Lesseps house stands at what has been the most picturesque point in the American town of Cristobal. Before it stands a really admirable work of art, Columbus in the attitude of a protector toward a half-nude Indian maiden who kneels at his side. After the fashion of a world largely indifferent to art the name of the sculptor has been lost, but the statue was cast in Turin, for Empress Eugénie, who gave it to the Republic of Colombia when the

French took up the Canal work. Buffeted from site to site, standing for awhile betwixt the tracks in a railroad freight yard, the spot on which it stood when viewed by the writer is sentimentally ideal, for it overlooks the entrance to the Canal and under the eyes of the Great Navigator, done in bronze, the ships of all the world will pass and repass as

white foam upon the shore, unlike the Pacific which is usually calm. Unlike the Pacific, too, the tide is inconsiderable. At Panama it rises and falls from seventeen to twenty feet, and, retiring, leaves long expanses of unsightly mud flats, but the Caribbean always plays its part in the landscape well. Unhappily this picturesque street—called Roosevelt



ROOSEVELT AVENUE, CRISTOBAL, ABOUT TO LOSE ITS BEAUTY

they enter or leave the artificial strait which gives substance to the Spaniard's dream.

At one time the quarters of the Canal employees—the gold employees as those above the grade of day laborers are called—were in one of the most beautiful streets imaginable. In a long sweeping curve from the border line between the two towns, they extended in an unbroken row facing the restless blue waters of the Caribbean. A broad white drive and a row of swaying cocoanut trees separated the houses from the water. The sea here is always restless, surging in long billows and breaking in

Avenue—is about to lose its beauty, for its water front is to be taken for the great new docks, and already at some points one sees the yellow stacks of ocean liners mingling with the fronded tops of the palms.

Cristobal is at the present time the site of the great cold storage plant of the Canal Zone, the shops of the Panama Railroad and the storage warehouses in which are kept the supplies for the commissary stores at the different villages along the line of the Canal. It possesses a fine fire fighting force, a Y. M. C. A. club, a commissary hotel, and along

the water front of Colon proper are the hospital buildings erected by the French but still maintained. Many of the edifices extend out over the water and

the Atlantic side, make a hasty drive about Colon—it really can be seen in an hour—and then go by rail to Panama, anticipating the arrival of their ship

there by seven hours and getting some idea of the country en route. Visitors with more time to spare will find one of the short drives that is worth while a trip to the cemetery of Mount Hope where from the very beginning of the town those who fell in the long battle with nature have been laid to rest. The little white headstones multiplied fast in the gay and reckless French days before sanitation was thought of, and when riot and dissipation



THE DE LESSEPS PALACE

the constant breeze ever blowing through their wide netted balconies would seem to be the most efficient of allies in the fight against disease. One finds less distinct separation between the native and the American towns at this end of the railroad than at Panama-Ancon. This is largely due to the fact that a great part of the site of Colon is owned by the Panama Railroad, which in turn is owned by the United States, so that the activities of our government extend into the native town more than at Panama. In the latter city the hotel, the hospital and the commissary are all on American or Canal Zone soil—at Colon they are within the sovereignty of the Republic of Panama.

At present sightseers tarry briefly at Colon, taking the first train for the show places along the Canal line, or for the more picturesque town of Panama. This will probably continue to be the case when the liners begin passing through the Canal to the Pacific. Many travelers will doubtless leave their ships at

were the rule and scarcely discouraged. "Monkey Hill" was the original name of the place, owing to the multitude of monkeys gamboling and chattering



THE NATIONAL GAME—COCK-FIGHTING

in the foliage, but as the graves multiplied and the monkeys vanished the rude unfitnes of the name became apparent and it gave place to "Mount Hope." It is pitiful enough in any case; but if you will study the dates on the headstones you will find

the years after 1905 show a rapid lessening in the number of tenants.

If you consider the pictures of certain streets of Colon during two phases of their history, you will have little trouble in understanding why the death rate in the town has been steadily decreasing. In a town built upon a natural morass, and on which

reaching a floating board benevolently provided by some merchant who hoped to thus bring custom to his doors. Along the water front between the steamship piers and the railroad there was an effort to pave somewhat as there was heavy freight to be handled, but even there the pavement would sink out of sight overnight, and at no time could it



HOW THE JUNGLE WORKS

Silently but persistently the advance of nature enshrouds man's work in living green

more than eleven feet of water fell annually, there was hardly a foot of paving except the narrow sidewalks. In the wet season, which extends over eight months of the year, the mud in these filthy by-ways was almost waist deep. Into it was thrown indiscriminately all the household slops, garbage and offal. There was no sewage system; no effort at drainage. If one wished to cross a street there was nothing for it but to walk for blocks until

be kept in good condition. The agents of the Panama Railroad and the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, whose freight houses adjoined, dumped into the seemingly bottomless abyss everything heavy and solid that could be brought by land or water, but for a long time without avail. Under the direction of the United States officers, however, the problem was solved, and today the streets of Colon are as well paved as those of any Ameri-

can city, vitrified brick being the material chiefly used.

In the days when there was no pavement there were no sewers. Today the town is properly drained, and the sewage problem, a very serious one in a town with no natural slope and subject to heavy rains, is efficiently handled. There was no water supply. Drinking water was brought from the

failing died like the flies that swarmed about their food and their garbage indiscriminately. Not until the Americans declared war on filth and appointed Col. W. C. Gorgas commander-in-chief of the forces of cleanliness and health did Colon get cleaned up.

About the base of the Toro light cluster the houses of the engineers employed on the harbor work, and on the fortifications which are to guard



“BOTTLE ALLEY”

A typical Colon street before the Sanitary Department concluded the work of cleaning up

mainland and peddled from carts, or great jars by water carriers. Today there is an aqueduct bringing clear cool water from the distant hills. It affords a striking commentary upon the lethargy and laziness of the natives that for nearly half a century they should have tolerated conditions which for filth and squalor were practically unparalleled. The Indian in his palm-thatched hut was better housed and more healthfully surrounded than they.

Even the French failed to correct the evil and so

the Atlantic entrance of the canal on the west side—other defensive works are building about a mile north of Colon. To these and other forts in course of construction visitors are but grudgingly admitted and the camera is wholly taboo. They are still laughing in Col. Goethal's office at a newly elected Congressman—not even yet sworn in—who wrote that in visiting the Canal Zone he desired particularly to make an exhaustive study of the fortifications, and take many pictures, in order that he

might be peculiarly fit for membership on the Military Affairs Committee, to which he aspired.

Toro Point will, after the completion of the Canal work, remain only as the camp for such a detachment of coast artillery as may be needed at the forts. The village will be one of those surrendered to the jungle from which it was wrested. Cristobal will remain a large, and I should judge,

group of children, among whom even the casual observer will detect Spanish, Chinese, Indian and negro types pure, and varying amalgamations of all playing together in the childish good fellowship which obliterates all racial hostilities. The Chinese are the chief business people of the town, and though they intermarry but little with the few families of the old Spanish strain, their unions both legalized



D STREET, COLON, PAVED

Before being sewered and paved this street was as bad as Bottle Alley on preceding page

a growing town. Colon which was created by the railroad will still have the road and the Canal to support it.

Without an architectural adornment worthy of the name, with streets of shanties, and rows of shops in which the cheap and shoddy are the rule, the town of Colon does have a certain fascination to the idle stroller. That arises from the throngs of its picturesque and parti-colored people who are always on the streets. At one point you will encounter a

and free, with the mulattoes or negroes are innumerable. You see on the streets many children whose negro complexion and kinky hair combine but comically with the almond eyes of the celestial. Luckily queues are going out of style with the Chinese, or the hair of their half-breed offspring would form an insurmountable problem.

Public characters throng in Colon. A town with but sixty years of history naturally abounds in early inhabitants. It is almost as bad as Chicago



BACHELOR QUARTERS AT TORO POINT

was a few years ago when citizens who had reached the "anecdote" would halt you at the Lake Front and pointing to that smoke-bedimmed cradle of the city's dreamed-of future beauty would assure you that they could have bought it all for a pair of boots—but didn't have the boots. One of the figures long pointed out on the streets of Colon was an old colored man—an "ole nigger" in the local phrase—who had been there from the days of the alligators and the monkeys. He worked for the Panama Railroad surveyors, the road when completed, the French and the American Canal builders. A sense of long and veteran public service had invested him with an air of dignity rather out of harmony with his raiment. "John Aspinwall" they called him, because Aspinwall was for a time the name of the most regal significance on the island. The Poet of Panama immortalized him in verse thus:

"Oh, a quaint old moke, is John Aspinwall,  
 Who lives by the Dead House gate,  
 And quaint are his thoughts, if thoughts at all  
 Ever lurk in his woolly pate,  
 For he's old as the hills is this coal-black man,  
 Thrice doubled with age is he,  
 And the days when his wanderings first began  
 Are shrouded in mystery."

If you keep a shrewd and watchful eye on the balconies above the cheap john stores you will now and again catch a little glimpse reminiscent of Peking. For the Chinese like to hang their balconies with artistic screens, bedeck them with palms, illuminate them with the gay lanterns of their home. Sometimes a woman of complexion of rather accentuated brunette will hang over the rail with a Chinese—or at least a Chinesque—baby in the parti-colored clothing of its paternal ancestors. Or as you stroll along the back or side streets more given over



to residences, an open door here and there gives a glimpse of an interior crowded with household goods—and household gods which are babies. Not precisely luring are these views. They suggest rather that the daily efforts of Col. Gorgas to make and keep the city clean might well have extended further behind the front doors of the house. They did to a slight degree, of course, for there was fumigation unlimited in the first days of the great cleaning up, and even now there is persistent sanitary inspection. The Canal Zone authorities relinquished to the Panama local officials the paving and sanitation work of the city, but retained it in Colon, which serves to indicate the estimate put upon the comparative fitness for self government of the people of the two towns.

Down by the docks, if one likes the savor of spices and the odor of tar, you find the real society of the Seven Seas. Every variety of ship is there, from the stately ocean liner just in from Southampton or Havre to the schooner-rigged cayuca with its crew of San Blas Indians, down from their forbidden country with a cargo of coconuts, yams and bananas. A curious craft is the cayuca. Ranging in size from a slender canoe twelve feet long and barely wide enough to hold a man to a considerable craft of eight-foot beam and perhaps 35 to 40 feet on the water line, its many varieties have one thing in common. Each is hewn out of a single log. Shaped to the form of a boat by the universal

tool, the machete, and hollowed out partly by burning, partly by chipping, these great logs are transformed into craft that in any hands save those of the Indians bred to their use, would be peremptory invitations to a watery death. But the San Blas men pole them through rapids on the Chagres that would puzzle a guide of our North Woods, or at sea take them out in northers that keep the liner tied to her dock. Some of these boats by the way are hollowed from mahogany logs that on the wharf at New York or Boston would be worth \$2,000.



A COLON WATER CARRIER

The history of the Panama Railroad may well be briefly sketched here. For its time it was the most audacious essay in railway building the world had known, for be it known it was begun barely twenty years after the first railroad had been built in the United States and before either railroad engineers or railroad labor had a recognized place in industry. The difficulties to be surmounted were of a sort that no men had grappled with before. Engineers had learned how to cut down hills, tunnel mountains

and bridge rivers, but to build a road bed firm enough to support heavy trains in a bottomless swamp; to run a line through a jungle that seemed to grow up again before the transit could follow the axe man; to grapple with a river that had been known to rise forty feet in a day; to eat lunch standing thigh deep in water with friendly alligators looking on from adjacent logs, and to do all this amid the unceasing buzz of venomous



AN OPEN SEWER IN A COLON STREET



BY A COCLÉ BROOK

insects whose sting, as we learned half a century later, carried the germs of malaria and yellow fever—this was a new draft upon engineering skill and endurance that might well stagger the best. The demand was met. The road was built, but at a heavy cost of life. It used to be said that a life was the price of every tie laid, but this was a picturesque exaggeration. About 6000 men in all died during the construction period.

Henry Clay justified his far-sightedness by securing in 1835 the creation of a commission to consider the practicability of a trans-isthmian railroad. A commissioner was appointed, secured a concession from what was then New Granada, died before getting home, and the whole matter was forgotten for ten years. In this interim the French, for whom from the earliest days the Isthmus had a fascination, secured a concession but were unable to raise the money necessary for the road's construction. In 1849 three Americans who deserve a place in history, William H. Aspinwall, John L. Stevens and Henry Chauncy, secured a concession at Bogota and straightway went to work. Difficulties beset them on every side. The swamp had no bottom and for a time it seemed that their financial resources had a very apparent one. But the rush for gold, though it greatly increased the cost of their labor, made their enterprise appear more promising to the investing public and their temporary need of funds was soon met.

every nationality were experimented with but none were immune. The historian of the railroad reported that the African resisted longest, next the coolie, then the European, and last the Chinese. The experience of the company with the last named class of labor was tragic in the extreme. Eight hundred were landed on the Isthmus after a voyage on which sixteen had died. Thirty-two fell ill almost at the moment of landing and in less than a week eighty more were prostrated. Strangers in a strange land, unable to express their complaints or make clear their symptoms, they were almost as much the victims of homesickness as of any other ill. The interpreters who accompanied them declared that much of their illness was due to their deprivation of their accustomed opium, and for a time the authorities supplied them, with the result that nearly two-

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THE MANGOES MARCHING ON STILT-LIKE ROOTS



A PICTURESQUE INLET OF THE CARIBBEAN

thirds were again up and able to work. Then the exaggerated American moral sense, which is so apt to ignore the customs of other lands and peoples, caused the opium supply to be shut off. Perhaps the fact that the cost of opium daily per Chinaman was 15 cents had something to do with it. At any rate the whole body of Chinamen were soon sick unto death and quite ready for it. They made no effort to cling to the lives that had become hateful. Suicides were a daily occurrence and in all forms. Some with Chinese stolidity would sit upon a rock on the ocean's bed and wait for the tide to submerge them. Many used their own queues as ropes and hanged themselves. Others persuaded or bribed their fellows to shoot them dead. Some thrust sharpened sticks through their throats, or clutching great stones leaped into the river maintaining their hold until death made the grasp still more rigid. Some starved themselves and others died of mere brooding over their dismal state. In a few weeks but 200 were left alive, and these were sent to

Jamaica where they were slowly absorbed by the native population. On the line of the old Panama Railroad, now abandoned and submerged by the waters of Gatun Lake, was a village called Matachin, which local etymologists declare means "dead Chinaman," and hold that it was the scene of this melancholy sacrifice of oriental life.

The railroad builders soon found that the expense of the construction would vastly exceed their estimates. The price of a principality went into the Black Swamp, the road bed through which was practically floated on a monster pontoon. It is not true, as often asserted, that engines were sunk there to make a foundation for the road, but numbers of flat cars were thus employed to furnish a floating foundation. The swamp which impeded the progress of the road was about five miles south of Gatun and was still giving trouble in 1908, when the heavier American rolling stock was put upon the road. Soundings then made indicate that the solid bottom under the ooze is 185 feet below the surface, and

somewhere between are the scores of dump cars and the thousands of tons of rock and earth with which the monster has been fed. The Americans conquered it, apparently, in 1908, by building a trestle and filling it with cinders and other light material. But every engineer was glad when in 1912 the relocation of the road abandoned the Black Swamp to its original diabolical devices.

Even in so great an affair as the building of railroads, chance or good fortune plays a considerable part. So it was the hurricane which first drove two ships bearing the California gold seekers from the mouth of the Chagres down to Colon that gave the railroad company just the stimulus necessary to carry it past the lowest ebb in its fortunes. Before that it had no income and could no longer borrow money. Thereafter it had a certain income and its credit was at the very best. Every additional mile finished added to its earnings, for every mile was used since it lessened the river trip to the Pacific. In January, 1855, the last rail was laid, and on the 28th of that month the first train crossed from ocean to ocean. The road had then cost almost \$7,000,000 or more than \$150,000 a mile, but owing to the peculiar conditions of the time and place it had while building earned \$2,125,000 or almost one-third its cost. Its length was 47 miles, its highest point was 263 feet above sea-level, it crossed streams at 170 points—most of the crossings being of the Chagres River. As newly located by the American engineers a great number of these cross-

ings are avoided.

Traffic for the road grew faster than the road itself and when it was completed it was quite apparent that it was not equipped to handle the business that awaited it. Accordingly the managers determined to charge more than the traffic would bear—to fix such rates as would be prohibitive until they could get the road suitably equipped. Mr. Tracy Robinson says that a few of the lesser officials at Panama got up a sort of burlesque rate card and sent it on to the general offices in New York. It charged \$25 for one fare across the Isthmus one way, or \$10 second class. Personal baggage was charged five cents a pound, express \$1.80 a cubic foot, second class freight fifty cents a cubic foot, coal \$5 a ton,—all for a haul of forty-seven miles. To the amaze-



CHILDISH BEAUTY WITHOUT ART

ment of the Panama jokers the rates were adopted and, what was more amazing, they remained unchanged for twenty years. During that time the company paid dividends of 24%, with an occasional stock dividend and liberal additions to the surplus. Its stock at one time went up to 335 and as in its darkest days it could have been bought for a song those who had



A CORNER OF MOUNT HOPE CEMETERY

Names of forgotten French martyrs are carved in the stones

bought it were more lucky than most of the prospectors who crowded its coaches on the journey to the gold fields.

Too much prosperity brought indifference and lax management and the finances of the road were showing a decided deterioration when the French took up the Canal problem. One of the chief values of the franchise granted by New Granada and afterward renewed by Colombia was the stipulation that no canal should be built in the territory without the consent of the railroad corporation. With this club the directors forced the French to buy them out, and when the rights of the French Canal company passed to the United States we acquired the railroad as well.

It is now Uncle Sam's first essay in the government ownership and operation of railroads. Extremists declare that his success as a manager is shown by the fact that he takes a passenger from

the Atlantic to the Pacific in three hours for \$2.40, while the privately owned Pacific railroads take several days and charge about \$75 to accomplish the same result. There is a fallacy in this argument somewhere, but there is none in the assertion that by government officials the Panama Railroad is run successfully



THE SOULFUL EYES OF THE TROPICS

both from the point of service and of profits. Its net earnings for the fiscal year of 1912 were \$1,762,000, of which about five-sixths was from commercial business. But it must be remembered that in that year the road was conducted primarily for the purpose of Canal building—everything was subordinated to the Big Job. That brought it abnormal revenue, and laid upon it abnormal burdens. The record shows however that it was directed with a singular attention to detail and phenomenal success. When passenger trains must be run so as never to interfere with dirt trains, and when dirt trains must be so run that a few score steam-shovels dipping up five cubic yards of broken rock at a mouthful shall never lack for a net ear on



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SCENE ON ALMIRANTE BAY

the Zone is that the Panama is the only railroad that runs crosswise as well as lengthwise. This jest is partly based on the fact that nine-tenths of the line has been moved to a new location, but more on the practice of picking up every night or two some thousand feet of track in the Canal bed and moving it bodily, ties and all, some feet to a new line. This is made necessary when the steam-shovels have dug out all the rock and dirt that can be reached from the old line, and it is accomplished by machines called track shifters, each of which accomplishes the work of hundreds of men.

The Panama Railroad is today what business men

call a going concern. But it is run with a singular indifference to private methods of railroad management. It has a board of directors, but they do little directing. Its shares do not figure in Wall Street, and we do not hear of it floating loans, scaling down debts or engaging in any of the stock-jobbing operations which in late years have resulted in railroad presidents being lawyers rather than railroad men. The United States government came into possession of a railroad and had to run it. Well? The government proved equal to the emergency and perhaps its experience will lead it to get possession of yet other railroads.