

**THE
CANARY ISLANDS**

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A PATIO

CANARY ISLANDS

I

TENERIFFE

PROBABLY many people have shared my feeling of disappointment on landing at Santa Cruz. I had long ago realised that few places come up to the standard of one's preconceived ideas, so my mental picture was not in this case a very beautiful one; but even so, the utter hideousness of the capital of Teneriffe was a shock to me.

Unusually clear weather at sea had shown us our first glimpse of the Peak, rising like a phantom mountain out of the clouds when 100 miles distant, but as we drew nearer to land the clouds had gathered, and the cone was wrapped in a mantle of mist. There is no disappointment attached to one's first impression of the Island as seen from the sea. The jagged range of hills seemed to come sheer down to the coast, and appeared to have been torn and rent by some extraordinary upheaval of Nature; the deep ravines (or *barrancos* as I afterwards learnt to call them) were full of dark blue mysterious shadows, a deeply indented coast-line stretched far away in the distance, and I thought the land well deserved to be called one of the Fortunate Islands.

Santa Cruz, or to give it its full title, Santa Cruz de Santiago, though one of the oldest towns in the Canaries, looked, as our ship glided into the harbour, as though it had been built yesterday, or might even be still in course of construction. Lying low on the shore the flat yellow-washed houses, with their red roofs, are

thickly massed together, the sheer ugliness of the town being redeemed by the spires of a couple of old churches, which look down reprovingly on the modern houses below. Arid slopes rise gradually behind the town, and appear to be utterly devoid of vegetation. Perched on a steep ridge is the Hotel Quisisana, which cannot be said to add to the beauty of the scene, and all my sympathy went out to those who were condemned to spend a winter in such desolate surroundings in search of health.

Probably no foreign town is entirely devoid of interest to the traveller. On landing, the picturesque objects which meet the eye make one realise that once one's foot has left the last step of the gangway of the ship, England and everything English has been left behind. The crowd of swarthy loafers who lounge about the quay in tight yellow or white garments, are true sons of a southern race, and laugh and chatter gaily with handsome black-eyed girls. Sturdy country women are settling heavy loads on their donkeys, preparatory to taking their seat on the top of the pack for their journey over the hills. Their peculiar head-dress consists of a tiny straw hat, no larger than a saucer, which acts as a pad for the loads they carry on their heads, from which hangs a large black handkerchief either fluttering in the wind, or drawn closely round the shoulders like a shawl.

Here and there old houses remain, dating from the days when the wine trade was at its zenith, and though many have now been turned into consulates and shipping offices, they stand in reproachful contrast to the buildings run up cheaply at a later date. Through many an open doorway one gets a glimpse of these cool spacious old houses, whose broad staircases and deep balconies surround a shady *patio* or court-yard. On the ground floor the wine was stored and the living rooms opened into the roomy balconies

on the first floor. Here and there a small open Plaza, where drooping pepper trees shade stone seats, affords breathing-space, but over all and everything was a thick coating of grey dust, which gave a squalid appearance to the town. Narrow ill-paved streets, up which struggle lean, over-worked mules, dragging heavy rumbling carts, lead out of the town, and I was thankful to shake the dust of Santa Cruz off my feet; not that one does, as unless there has been very recent rain the dust follows everywhere. An electric tramway winds its way up the slopes behind the town at a very leisurely pace, giving one ample time to survey the scene.

The only vegetation which looks at home in the dry dusty soil is prickly pear, a legacy of the cochineal culture. In those halcyon days arid spots were brought into cultivation and the cactus planted everywhere. In the eighteenth century the islanders had merely regarded cochineal as a loathsome form of blight, and it was forbidden to be landed for fear it should spoil their prickly pears, but prejudice was overcome, and when it was realised that a possible source of wealth was to be found in the cultivation of the cactus, *Opuntia coccinellifera*, which is the most suited to the insect, the craze began. Land was almost unobtainable; the amount of labour was enormous which was expended in breaking up the lava to reach the soil below, in terracing hills wherever it was possible to terrace; property was mortgaged to buy new fields; in fact, the islanders thought their land was as good as a gold-mine. The following figures are given by Mr. Samler Brown to show the extraordinary rapidity with which the trade developed. "In 1831 the first shipment was 8 lb., the price at first being about ten pesetas a lb.; in ten years it had increased to 100,566 lb., and in 1869 the highest total, 6,076,869 lb., with a value of £789,993." The rumour of the discovery of aniline dyes alarmed the islanders,

but for a time they were not sufficiently manufactured seriously to affect the cochineal trade, though the fall in prices began to make merchants talk of over-production. The crisis came in 1874, when the price in London fell to 1s. 6d. or 2s., and the ruin to the cochineal industry was a foregone conclusion. Aniline dyes had taken the public taste, and though cochineal has been proved to be the only red dye to resist rain and hard wear, the demand is now small, and merchants who had bought up and stored the dried insect were left with unsaleable stock on their hands. Retribution, we are told, was swift, sudden, and universal, and the farmer who had spent so much on bringing land into cultivation foot by foot, realised that the cactus must be rooted up or he must face starvation.

Possibly there are many other people as ignorant as I was myself on my first visit to the Canaries on the subject of cochineal. Beyond the fact that cochineal was a red dye and used occasionally as a colouring-matter in cooking, I could not safely have answered any question concerning it. I was much disgusted at finding that it is really the blood of an insect which looks like a cross between a "wood-louse" and a "mealy-bug," with a fat body rather like a currant. The most common method of cultivation, I believe, was to allow the insect to attach itself to a piece of muslin in the spring, which was then laid on to a box full of "mothers" in a room at a very high temperature.

The muslin was then fastened on to the leaf of the cactus by means of the thorns of the wild prickly pear. When once attached to the leaf the *madre* cannot move again. There were two different methods of killing the insect to send it to market, one by smoking it with sulphur and the other by shaking it in sacks. A colony of the insects on a prickly pear leaf looks like a large patch of lumpy

blight, most unpleasant, and enough to make any one say they would never again eat anything coloured with cochineal.

This terraced land is now cultivated with potatoes and tomatoes for the English market, but the shower of gold in which every one shared in the days of the cochineal boom is no more, though the banana trade in other parts of the island seems likely to revive those good old days.

La Laguna, about five miles above Santa Cruz, is one of the oldest towns in Teneriffe; it was the stronghold of the Guanches and the scene of the most desperate fighting with the Spanish invaders. To-day it looks merely a sleepy little town, but can boast of several fine old churches, besides the old Convente de San Augustin which has been turned into the official seat of learning, containing a very large public library, and the Bishop's Palace which has a fine old stone façade. The cathedral appears to be in a perpetual state of repairing or rebuilding, and though begun in 1513 is not yet completed. One of the principal sights of La Laguna is the wonderful old Dragon tree in the garden of the Seminary attached to the Church of Santo Domingo, of which the age is unknown. The girth of its trunk speaks for itself of its immense age, and I was not surprised to hear that even in the fifteenth century it was a sufficiently fine specimen to cause the land on which it stood to be known as "the farm of the Dragon tree."

Foreigners regard the town chiefly as being a good centre for expeditions, which, judging by the list in our guide-book, are almost innumerable. One ride into the beautiful pine forest of La Mina should certainly be undertaken, and unless the smooth clay paths are slippery after rain the walking is easy. After a long stay in either Santa Cruz or even Orotava, where large trees are rare,

there is a great enchantment in finding oneself once more among forest trees, and what splendid trees are these native pines, *Pinus canariensis*, and in damp spots one revels in the ferns and mosses, which form such a contrast to the vegetation one has grown accustomed to.

Alexander von Humboldt who spent a few days in Teneriffe, on his way to South America, landing in Santa Cruz on June 19, 1799, was much struck by the contrast of the climate of La Laguna to that of Santa Cruz. The following is an extract from his account of the journey he made across the island in order to ascend the Peak: “As we approached La Laguna, we felt the temperature of the atmosphere gradually become lower. This sensation was so much the more agreeable, as we found the air of Santa Cruz very oppressive. As our organs are more affected by disagreeable impressions, the change of temperature becomes still more sensible when we return from Laguna to the port, we seem then to be drawing near the mouth of a furnace. The same impression is felt when, on the coast of Caracas, we descend from the mountain of Avila to the port of La Guayra.... The perpetual coolness which prevails at La Laguna causes it to be regarded in the Canaries as a delightful abode.

“Situated in a small plain, surrounded by gardens, protected by a hill which is crowned by a wood of laurels, myrtles and arbutus, the capital of Teneriffe is very beautifully placed. We should be mistaken if, relying on the account of some travellers, we believed it rested on the border of a lake. The rain sometimes forms a sheet of water of considerable extent, and the geologist, who beholds in everything the past rather than the present state of nature, can have no doubt but that the whole plain is a great basin dried up.”

“Laguna has fallen from its opulence, since the lateral eruptions of the volcano have destroyed the port of Garachico, and since Santa Cruz has become the central point of the commerce of the island. It contains only 9000 inhabitants, of whom nearly 400 are monks, distributed in six convents. The town is surrounded with a great number of windmills, which indicate the cultivation of wheat in these higher countries....”

“A great number of chapels, which the Spaniards call *ermitas*, encircle the town of Laguna. Shaded by trees of perpetual verdure, and erected on small eminences, these chapels add to the picturesque effect of the landscape. The interior of the town is not equal to the external appearance. The houses are solidly built but very antique, and the streets seem deserted. A botanist should not complain of the antiquity of the edifices, as the roofs and walls are covered with Canary house leek and those elegant *trichomanes* mentioned by every traveller. These plants are nourished by the abundant mists....”

“In winter the climate of Laguna is extremely foggy, and the inhabitants complain often of the cold. A fall of snow, however, has never been seen, a fact which may seem to indicate that the mean temperature of this town must be above 15° R., that is to say higher than that of Naples....”

“I was astonished to find that M. Broussonet had planted in the midst of this town in the garden of the Marquis de Nava, the bread-fruit tree (*Artocarpus incise*) and cinnamon trees (*Laurus cinnamomum*). These valuable productions of the South Sea and the East Indies are naturalised there as well as at Orotava.”

The most usual route to Tacoronte *en route* to Orotava, the ultimate destination of most travellers, is by the main road or *carretera*, which reaches the summit of the pass shortly after leaving La Laguna, at a height of 2066 feet. The redeeming feature of the otherwise uninteresting road is the long avenue of eucalyptus trees, which gives welcome shade in summer. If time and distance are of no account, and the journey is being made by motor, the lower road by Tejina is far preferable. The high banks of the lanes are crowned with feathery old junipers, in spring the grassy slopes are gay with wild flowers, and here and there stretches of yellow broom (*spartium junceum*) fill the air with its delicious scent. Turns in the road reveal unexpected glimpses of the Peak on the long descent to the little village of Tegueste, and below lies the church of Tejina, only a few hundred feet above the sea. Here the road turns and ascends again to Tacoronte, and the Peak now faces one, the cone often rising clear above a bank of clouds which covers the base.

At Tacoronte the tram-line ends and either a carriage or motor takes the traveller over the remaining fifteen miles down through the fertile valley to Puerto Orotava. The valley is justly famous for its beauty, and in clear winter weather, when the Peak has a complete mantle of snow, no one can refrain from exclaiming at the beauty of the scene, when at one bend of the road the whole valley lies stretched at one's feet, bathed in sunshine and enclosed in a semi-circle of snow-capped mountains. The clouds cast blue shadows on the mountain sides, and here and there patches of white mist sweep across the valley; the dark pine woods lie in sharp contrast to the brilliant colouring of the chestnut woods whose leaves have been suddenly turned to red gold by frost in the higher land. In the lower land broad stretches of banana fields are

interspersed with ridges of uncultivated ground, where almond, fig trees and prickly pears still find a home, and clumps of the native Canary palm trees wave their feathery heads in the wind. Small wonder that even as great a traveller as Humboldt was so struck with the beauty of the scene that he is said to have thrown himself on his knees in order to salute the sight as the finest in the world. Without any such extravagant demonstration as that of the great traveller, it is worth while to stop and enjoy the view; though, to be sure, carriages travel at such a leisurely rate in Teneriffe, one has ample time to survey the scene. The guardian-angel of the valley—the Peak—dominates the broad expanse of land and sea, in times of peace, a placid broad white pyramid. But at times the mountain has become angry and waved a flaming sword over the land, and for this reason the Guanches christened it the Pico de Teide or Hell, though they appear to have also regarded it as the Seat of the Deity.

Humboldt himself describes the scene in the following words: “The valley of Tacoronte is the entrance into that charming country, of which travellers of every nation have spoken with rapturous enthusiasm. Under the torrid zone I found sites where Nature is more majestic and richer in the display of organic forms; but after having traversed the banks of the Orinoco, the Cordilleras of Peru, and the most beautiful valleys of Mexico, I own that I have never beheld a prospect more varied, more attractive, more harmonious in the distribution of the masses of verdure and rocks, than the western coast of Teneriffe.

“The sea-coast is lined with date and cocoa trees; groups of the *musa*, as the country rises, form a pleasing contrast with the dragon tree, the trunks of which have been justly compared to the tortuous form of the serpent. The declivities are covered with vines, which throw their branches over towering poles. Orange trees loaded with

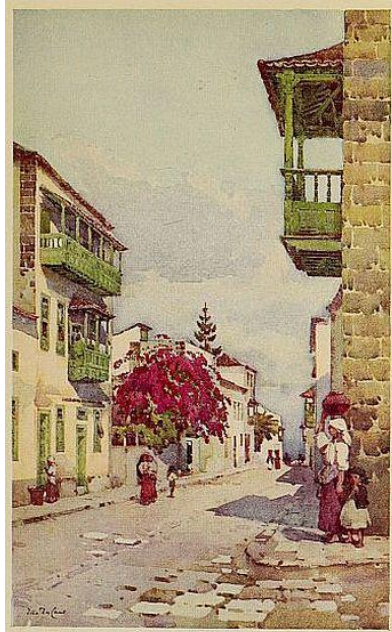
flowers, myrtles and cypress trees encircle the chapels reared to devotion on the isolated hills. The divisions of landed property are marked by hedges formed of the agave and the cactus. An innumerable number of cryptogamous plants, among which ferns most predominate, cover the walls, and are moistened by small springs of limpid water.

“In winter, when the volcano is buried under ice and snow, this district enjoys perpetual spring. In summer as the day declines, the breezes from the sea diffuse a delicious freshness....

“From Tegueste and Tacoronte to the village of San Juan de la Rambla (which is celebrated for its excellent Malmsey wine) the rising hills are cultivated like a garden. I might compare them to the environs of Capua and Valentia, if the western part of Teneriffe were not infinitely more beautiful on account of the proximity of the Peak, which presents on every side a new point of view.

“The aspect of this mountain is interesting, not merely from its gigantic mass; it excites the mind, by carrying it back to the mysterious source of its volcanic agency. For thousands of years no flames or light have been perceived on the summit of the Piton, nevertheless enormous lateral eruptions, the last of which took place in 1798, are proofs of the activity of a fire still far from being extinguished. There is also something that leaves a melancholy impression on beholding a crater in the centre of a fertile and well-cultivated country. The history of the globe tells us that volcanoes destroy what they have been a long series of ages in creating. Islands which the action of submarine fires has raised above the water, are by degrees clothed in rich and smiling verdure; but these new lands are often laid waste by the renewed action of the same power which caused them to emerge from the bottom of the ocean.

Islets, which are now but heaps of scoriæ and volcanic ashes, were once perhaps as fertile as the hills of Tacoronte and Sauzal. Happy the country where man has no distrust of the soil on which he lives.”



A STREET IN PUERTO OROTAVA

Low on the shore lies the little sea-port town of Orotava, known as the Puerto to distinguish it from the older and more important Villa Orotava lying some three miles away inland, at a higher altitude. Further along the coast is San Juan de la Rambla, and on the lower slopes of the opposite wall of the valley are the picturesque villages of Realejo Alto and Bajo, while Icod el Alto is perched at the very edge of the dark cliffs of the Tigaia at a height of about

1700 ft. A gap in the further mountain range is known as the Portillo, the Fortaleza rises above this “gateway,” and from this point begins the long gradual sweep of the Tigua, which, from the valley, hides all but the very cone of the Peak. Above Villa Orotava towers Pedro Gil and the Montaña Blanca, with the sun glittering on its freshly fallen snow, and near at hand are the villages of Sauzal, Santa Ursula, Matanza and La Victoria.

Though Humboldt describes them as “smiling hamlets,” he comments on their names which he says are “mingled together in all the Spanish colonies, and they form an unpleasing contrast with the peaceful and tranquil feelings which these countries inspire.

“Matanza signifies slaughter, or carnage, and the word alone recalls the price at which victory has been purchased. In the New World it generally indicates the defeat of the natives; at Teneriffe the village Matanza was built in a place where the Spaniards were conquered by those same Guanches who soon after were sold as slaves in the markets of Europe.”

In early winter the terraced ridges, which are cultivated with wheat and potatoes, are a blot in the landscape, brown and bare, but in spring, after the winter rains, these slopes will be transformed into sheets of emerald green, and it is then that the valley looks its best. For a few days, all too few, the almond trees are smothered with their delicate pale pink blooms, but one night’s rain or a few hours’ rough wind will scatter all their blossoms, and nothing will remain of their rosy loveliness but a carpet of bruised and fallen petals.

The valley soon reveals traces of the upheavals of Nature in a bygone age; broad streams of lava, which at some time poured down the valley, remain grey and desolate-looking, almost devoid

of vegetation, and the two cinder heaps or *fumaroles* resembling huge blackened mole-hills, though not entirely bare, cannot be admired. No one seems to know their exact history or age, but it appears pretty certain that they developed perfectly independently of any eruption of the Peak itself, though perhaps not “growing in a single night,” as I was once solemnly assured they had done. One theory, which sounded not improbable, was that the bed of lava on which several English villas, the church and the Grand Hotel have been built, was originally spouted out of one of these cinder heaps, and the hill on which the hotel stands was in former days the edge of the cliff. The lava is supposed to have flowed over the edge and accumulated to such a depth in the sea below that it formed the plateau of low-lying ground on which the Puerto now stands.

The little town is not without attraction, though its streets are dusty and unswept, being only cleaned once a year, in honour of the Feast of Corpus Christi, on which day at the Villa carpets of elaborate design, arranged out of the petals of flowers, run down the centre of the streets where the processions are to pass. My first impression of the town was that it appeared to be a deserted city, hardly a foot passenger was to be seen, and my own donkey was the only beast of burden in the main street of the town. Gorgeous masses of bougainvillea tumbled over garden walls, and glimpses were to be seen through open doorways of creeper-clad *patios*. The carved balconies with their little tiled roofs are inseparable from all the old houses, more or less decorated according to the importance of the house. The soft green of the woodwork of the houses, and more especially of the solid green shutters or *postijos*, behind which the inhabitants seem to spend many hours gazing into the streets, was always a source of admiration to me. The main street ends with the mole, and looking seawards the surf appears to dash

up into the street itself. The town wakes to life when a cargo steamer comes into the port, and then one long stream of carts, drawn by the finest oxen I have ever seen, finds its way to the mole, to unload the crates of bananas which are frequently sold on the quay itself to the contractors.



THE PEAK, FROM VILLA OROTAVA

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