

## MARK TWAIN IN COSTA RICA? THE ENGLISH TEXT AND SPANISH TRANSLATION OF MARK TWAIN'S TRIP TO NICARAGUA AND THE SAN JUAN RIVER

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### RESUMEN

A finales de 1866, Mark Twain viajó a Nicaragua y el Río San Juan. Twain, quien fue un viajero constante por casi una década, necesitaba ir de San Francisco a la ciudad de Nueva York. En vez de cruzar los Estados Unidos por tierra, prefirió hacer el recorrido hacia Nueva York a través de Nicaragua y el Río San Juan. En una serie de cartas al periódico *Alta California*, Twain describe sus experiencias. Al no haberse publicado en forma de libro hasta 1940 bajo el título de *Viajes con el Sr. Brown*, los comentarios de Twain sobre Centroamérica han permanecido desconocidos para un buen número de historiadores y lectores de sus obras. Aquí aparecen tanto el texto original en inglés como mi correspondiente traducción al español, la cual incluye una introducción y notas textuales más sobre el viaje de Twain por lo que se solía llamar en el siglo diecinueve la Ruta Nicaragüense.

**Palabras clave:** Mark Twain, Nicaragua, Río San Juan, Costa Rica, traducción al español, literatura de viajes.

### ABSTRACT

At the end of 1866, Mark Twain traveled to Nicaragua and the San Juan River. A traveler for nearly a decade of his adult life, Twain needed to go from San Francisco to New York City. Instead of crossing the United States by land, he chose to make his way to New York City via Nicaragua and the San Juan River. In a series of letters to the *Alta California* newspaper, Twain describes his travels through Nicaragua and down the San Juan River. Not published in book form until 1940 as *Travels with Mr. Brown*, Mark Twain's commentary on Central America has remained relatively unknown to a good many historians and even readers of Twain. Here is the original English text and the Spanish translation of his account, which includes my introduction and textual notes to his travels over what was commonly called in the nineteenth century the Nicaraguan Route.

**Key words:** Mark Twain, Nicaragua, San Juan River, Costa Rica, Spanish translation, travel literature.

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## 1. Introduction to the Spanish Translation and English Version of Mark Twain's *Travels with Mr. Brown*

At the end of 1866, Mark Twain traveled from San Francisco to New York via Nicaragua and the San Juan River. He went aboard the steamer *America* from San Francisco to San Juan del Sur and journeyed by wagon across the twelve-mile stretch from San Juan del Sur to the Lake of Nicaragua. Then at Virgin Bay, he crossed the Lake of Nicaragua by steamer and at Fort Castillo, on the southeastern tip of the lake, made his way down the San Juan River to Greytown (San Juan del Norte), caught another steamer and, after a short layover in Key West, followed the eastern seaboard to New York City. The trip took eleven days to arrive at San Juan del Sur, three days to cross the isthmus, and eleven more days to sail from Greytown to New York City. Twain, who spent nearly a decade on the road and once said that, if he had his way, he “would sail on forever and never go live on solid ground again,”<sup>1</sup> wrote an account of his journey via Nicaragua to New York for a San Francisco newspaper called the *Alta California* (Rodney v.). He wrote seven letters describing the sea trip from San Francisco to New York. These letters were not collected in book form until 1940 and then published as *Travels with Mr. Brown*, which includes all his letters to the *Alta California*—some twenty-six in total—dealing with his sea voyage from San Francisco to New York as well as his six-month stay in New York City and a few weeks in his native Missouri and elsewhere in the Midwest.

Mark Twain loved traveling and rivers. When he was only 23 and had not yet stepped outside of the United States or traveled much even in the United States, he said about traveling on the Ohio River:

I became a new being, and the subject of my own admiration. I was a traveler! A word never had tasted so good in my mouth before. I had an exultant sense of being bound for mysterious lands and distant climes which I never have felt in so uplifting a degree since. I was in such a glorified condition that all ignoble feelings departed out of me, and I was able to look down and pity the untravelled with a compassion that had hardly a trace of contempt in it. (Twain 1945: 25)

Although near the end of his life Mark Twain denied that he had ever enjoyed traveling, and he even claimed, “That there is no man living who cares less about seeing new places and peoples than I,” there obviously was something in travel that brought out the best in this man, that permitted him to see and feel life in all its complexity, and that no doubt complemented, if not cultivated, his literary skills (qtd. in Neider 23).

As a young man, Twain had wanted to go to Brazil—to participate in the ongoing explorations of the Amazon. He traveled to New Orleans to find passage south. He never made it. No ships. No money (Rodney 1993: 54). In spite of the fact that he had once wanted to go to Brazil, and that he traveled and circumnavigated the world, Twain never traveled, after the crossing of the Nicaraguan route, in Mexico or the rest of Latin America. Nor did he ever travel much in Africa, other than the northernmost countries. When he traveled in Central America, it was to get somewhere quickly and to avoid the treacherous stagecoach ride across the continental United States. He crossed the isthmus three times on his way to and from New York and San Francisco. He did it via Nicaragua the first time and then, a few years later, he crossed the isthmus twice again by taking the easier route via Panama—by train from Panama to Colon (Aspinwall). The more rugged Nicaraguan route apparently cured Twain of any desire to repeat it. He never took on the Nicaragua route again, and he only wrote an account of his Nicaragua crossing—never of the two Panama crossings by train.<sup>2</sup>

One year prior to the trip to Nicaragua, in 1866, Twain boarded a steamer and went off to the Sandwich Islands (present day Hawaii) under the condition that he would write a series of letters detailing his four-month trip to the readers of the *Sacramento Union* (Rodney 1993: 4). He would go to the Sandwich Islands for four months and “describe their people, recount their history, and report on whatever advantages they might have in the way of trade opportunities and economic development” (Rodney 1993: 4). The trip to Hawaii was the first of a long series of journeys outside of the continental United States that would eventually take him around the world. He would go on to record those travels meticulously in a vast corpus of works, *Letters from Hawaii*, *Roughing It*, *Innocents Abroad*, *Following the Equator*, *A Tramp Abroad*, *Travels with Mr. Brown*.

When he returned to California after his four months in Hawaii, at the behest of a friend who worked at the *Alta California*, Twain gave a lecture on the Sandwich Islands, and his career as a raconteur and public speaker was set in stone (Rodney 1993: 21). His lecture on the Sandwich Islands was so warmly received that he went on to give some fifteen lectures in numerous cities in California (Rodney 1993: 21). These lectures set the foundation for hundreds of more appearances on the lecture circuit that would keep Mark Twain busy as a public speaker in the United States and abroad for the rest of his life.

Twain eventually came up with an idea to travel the world and be paid for his travels by continuing the practice that he had begun with the *Sacramento Union*: He would write a series of letters describing his travels, beginning with New York, then Europe and the rest of the world (Rodney 1993: 22). He convinced the editors of the *Alta California* to underwrite this venture, and he set off for New York City, where he would cross the Atlantic and commence his travels (Rodney 1993: 22). The problem was getting to New York City. He had already once taken the overland route by stagecoach across the Midwest with his brother Orion, who, in 1861, had been named *Secretary of the Nevada Territory* (Johnson 1974: 216), and the trip was filled with problems: Indians, rough riding, and the frequent breakdowns of stagecoaches (Johnson 1974: 43-61). Aside from the dangers of crossing the lands of Native Americans and the cumbersome nature of stagecoach travel itself, Twain knew that it would take him some sixteen days to get to St. Louis, and then he would have to take a long, tedious train ride to New York City (Rodney 1993: 22). He chose the Nicaraguan route instead. He would sail to Nicaragua, cross the isthmus via wagon and steamer, and arrive in New York City within a month. His choice was a common one. In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the Nicaraguan route was how most people traveled from San Francisco to New York if they opted not to weather the hazardous crossing of the continental United States by stagecoach (Rodney 1993: 22).

Twain’s journey through Nicaragua and down the San Juan River was not without incident. He and his fellow passengers faced an outbreak of cholera, which killed a good many of his fellow shipmates (Twain 1940: 64-68). Cholera on steamships was common and traveling on a Vanderbilt steamship was not easy.<sup>3</sup> When his ship arrived in San Juan del Sur on the Pacific coast, an epidemic of cholera, as Twain says, was “raging among a battalion of troops just arrived from New York” (Twain 1940: 38). Although no infection occurred in Nicaragua, cholera did break out on the New York leg of the trip, and his steamer *San Francisco* became, as Twain himself describes it, “a floating hospital” and “not a single hour passes but brings its new sensation—its melancholy tidings” (Twain 1940: 66). Passengers were “sheeted and thrown overboard,” and Twain remained sober about the whole affair, noting the responses of his fellow passengers and his own to the epidemic and its toll on human life (Twain 1940: 64).

The Nicaraguan route itself was established by Cornelius Vanderbilt. There was already one route to California via the isthmus at Panama—bongos up the Chagres River to the village of Gorgona and then mule-back to the western coast of Panama<sup>4</sup> (Folkman 1972: 2)—which had been set up by William Henry Aspinwall and the Pacific Mail Steamship Company. Vanderbilt opened the Nicaraguan route for wide commercial use in 1851, and it was done to ferry people to California to “pick nuggets.” After gold was discovered at Sutter’s mine in California, and after President James Polk’s curt but consequential comment before the United States Congress (“Recent discoveries render it possible that these mines are more extensive and valuable than was anticipated”), nothing could stop the stampede to California (Lewis 1949: 3). Vanderbilt had already made a fortune building and operating steamships, and he took note of the mad rush to California (Folkman 1972: 16). He had conceived the idea of creating a passage to California via Nicaragua to compete with the Panama route, and the California gold rush made his plans to traverse the isthmus all the more economically enticing (Folkman 1972: 23-7).

The trip across the isthmus at Nicaragua was difficult in places. On a trip from New York to San Francisco (the directional inverse of Twain’s trip), a passenger once at Greytown (San Juan de Norte) had to go 120 miles up the San Juan River to the Lake of Nicaragua and then another 100 miles across the Lake of Nicaragua to Virgin Bay (Lewis 164),<sup>5</sup> traverse the land portion of the route to the Pacific coast by wagon or mule, some twelve miles, and then catch still another steamer to San Francisco. While the isthmus was wider at Nicaragua (165 miles) than at Panama (60 miles), a passenger who opted for this route would nevertheless shorten the trip to the eastern or western coasts of the United States by 1,000 miles (Lewis 1949: 163). While often uncomfortable, especially the land portion of the trip, the journey was short in time (it could be done in a few days), and this route was better than taking the long sea voyage around Cape Horn, a total of 15,000 miles, which would take some five months to complete (Lewis 1949: 133).

Since the Panama crossing proved to be remarkably profitable, Vanderbilt wanted a piece of this lucrative transportation business (Folkman 1972: 16). Aspinwall’s Pacific Steamship Line was charging “Argonauts,” as the California gold diggers were called, 600 dollars to cross the isthmus through Panama (Folkman 1972: 16). Vanderbilt knew that the route through Nicaragua was shorter and faster, and it offered significant savings in time and distance for travelers who were desperate to get to California before all the gold could be panned and carted home. After the British and the United States governments signed the Clayton-Bulwer treaty, which resolved territorial claims between the two countries over an interoceanic trade route, the Nicaraguan route quickly became the competitor to the Panama crossing, and it was a vastly superior alternative to get to California than the long way around, via Cape Horn (Folkman 1972: 18-21).

By the time Mark Twain took the route in 1867, some sixteen years after its inauguration, it had not changed much. The route had endured, during the intervening sixteen years, the changing of hands, William Walker’s meddling, the United States Navy’s shelling and burning of Greytown, and the territorial disputes between Costa Rica and Nicaragua. But the route that Vanderbilt had marked out in 1851 was still essentially the same in 1867: A steamship to San Juan del Sur, mule or wagons to the Lake of Nicaragua, another steamer to cross the Lake of Nicaragua, and then a riverboat steamer down the San Juan River to Greytown on the Atlantic coast. That Mark Twain loved ships and rivers is a cardinal fact of American literature, and he no

doubt wanted to see both the Lake of Nicaragua and the San Juan River. Cornelius Vanderbilt, the quintessential American robber baron, made all that possible with his explorations and commandeering of the Nicaraguan route across the Central American isthmus.

## 2.

In his *Life on the Mississippi*, looking back on his experiences as a cub-pilot and as a full-fledged pilot on the Mississippi River, Mark Twain details his wonder at life on the Mississippi River, and his singular admiration for the men who piloted ships up and down the river. Mark Twain took his name from the measurements or the soundings of the depths of a river—"mark twain" meant two fathoms deep, and he would convert those two little words into a name known both at home and abroad.<sup>6</sup> Twain piloted steamers on the Mississippi for four years until the American civil war brought to an end his career as a pilot. Much of *Life on the Mississippi*, written years later, concerns both his experiences and the characters that he met on the river.

Twain's reputation as a humorist and raconteur, and as the author of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*, of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and *The Prince and Pauper*, has overshadowed his skills as an observer of nature. We seldom think of Twain as a writer of nature; indeed some critics argue that Twain's descriptive passages often border on being "purple passages" (Rodney 1993: 10). Yet when Twain is writing at his best about a landscape—be it the Mississippi, his stagecoach crossing of the United States, or Nicaragua—his descriptive powers are noteworthy, if not remarkable.

In *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain seldom speaks of the river itself except in relation to piloting—although he warns us precisely of this fact: That a river pilot's eye is not that of a naturalist's and, once you see a river through the eyes of a pilot, you will never see it again in quite the same way:

Now when I have mastered the language of this water, and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river as familiarly as I knew the letters of the alphabet I had made a valuable acquisition. But I had lost something too. I had lost something that could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry had gone out of the majestic river! (Twain 1945: 48).

When Twain does speak of the Mississippi in aesthetic terms, as an artist looking out at nature, he speaks of the beauty of the river in the language that made T.S. Eliot understand the full significance of the river in *Huckleberry Finn*: The river in the novel is God; the river is character (Clemens 1977: 332). It was a boy's story to be sure but, as Eliot argued in his now famous essay on *Huckleberry Finn*, it was a river's story as well. And in *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain's language and ability to conjure the beauty of the Mississippi is surpassed by few writers in American letters:

I still kept in mind a certain wonderful sunset which I witnessed when steamboating was new to me. A broad expanse of the river was turned to blood; in the middle distance the red hue brightened into gold, through which a solitary log came bloating, black and conspicuous; in one place a log, slanting mark lay sparkling upon the water, in another the surface was broken by boiling tumbling rings, that were as many-tinted as an opal; where the ruddy flush was faintest, was a smooth spot that was covered with graceful circles and radiating lines, ever so delicately traced; the shore on our left was densely wooded, and the somber shadow that fell from this forest was broken in one place by a long, ruffled trail that shone like silver; and high above the forest wall a clean-stemmed dead tree waved a single leafy bough that glowed like a flame in the unobstructed splendor that was flowing from the sun. There were graceful curves, reflected images, woody heights, soft distances; and over the whole scene, far and near, the dissolving lights drifted steadily, enriching it every passing monument with new marvels of coloring. (Twain 1945: 48)

In one of his most celebrated and quoted passages from *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain describes rivers as watery manuscripts that erase themselves and then reappear:

The face of the water, in time, became a wonderful book—a book that was a dead language to the uneducated passenger, but which told its mind to me without reserve, delivering its most cherished secrets as if it uttered them with a voice. And it was not a book to be read once and thrown aside, for it had a new story to tell every day. Throughout the long twelve hundred miles there was never a page that was void of interest, never one that you could leave unread without loss, never one that you would want to skip, thinking you could find higher enjoyment in some other thing. There never was so wonderful a book written by man; never one whose interest was so absorbing, so unflagging, so sparkingly renewed with ever reperusal. The passenger who could not read it was charmed with a peculiar sort of faint dimple on its surface (on rare occasions when he did not overlook it altogether); but to the pilot that was an *italicized* passage; indeed it was more than that, it was a legend of the largest capitals, with a string of shouting exclamation points at the end it, for it meant that a wreck or a rock was buried there that could tear the life out of the strongest vessel that ever floated. It is the faintest and simplest expression the water ever makes, and the most hideous to a pilot's eye. In truth, the passenger could not read this book saw nothing but all manner of pretty pictures in it, painted by the sun and shaded by the clouds, whereas to the trained eye these were not pictures at all, but the grimmest and most dead-earnest of reading-matter. (Twain 1945: 47)

And, here, in *Roughing It*, describing the mountains and deserts of Nevada, the language is exquisite, the description sumptuous and wondrous:

From Virginia's [Virginia City] airy situation one could look over a vast, far-reaching panorama of mountain ranges and deserts; and whether the day was bright or overcast, whether the sun was rising or setting, or flaming in the zenith, or whether night and the moon held sway, the spectacle was always impressive and beautiful. Over your head Mount Davidson lifted its gray dome, and before and below you a rugged cañon clove the battlemented hills, making a somber gateway through which a soft-tinged desert was glimpsed, with the silver thread of a river winding through it, bordered with trees which many miles of distance diminished to a delicate fringe; and still further away the snowy mountains rose up and stretched their long barrier to the filmy horizon—far enough beyond a lake that burned in the desert like a fallen sun, though that, itself, lay fifty miles removed. Look from your window here you would, there was fascination in the picture. At rare intervals—but very rare—there were clouds in our skies, and then the setting sun would gild and flush and glorify this mighty expanse of a scenery with a bewildering pomp of color that held the eye like a spell and moved the spirit like music. (qtd. in Neider 76)

In *Travels with Mr. Brown*, looking out on the Lake of Nicaragua, Mark Twain is equally eloquent and struck by the momentary beauty of the world—moments where, in the words of Wordsworth, “the burden of the mystery, / In which the heavy and weary weight / of all this unintelligible world, / Is lightened [...]” (164):

Out of the midst of the beautiful Lake Nicaragua spring two magnificent pyramids, clad in the softest and richest green, all flecked with shadow and sunshine, whose summits pierce the billowy clouds. They look so isolated from the world and its turmoil—so tranquil, so dreamy, so steeped in slumber and eternal repose. What a home one might make among their shady forests, their sunny slopes, their breezy dells, after he had grown weary of the toil, anxiety and unrest of the bustling, driving world. (Twain 1940: 46)

There is as much Keats as Wordsworth in this passage —Twain had read his British poets, and he at times sounds, as many people have noted, like the last Romantic. He sees beauty everywhere—and he loves it when he sees it. From the deck of his river steamboat, on the San Juan River, he stares out at the passing beauty of Central America, which he finds no less enchanting than a Nevadan desert:

The character of the vegetation on the banks had changed from a rank jungle to dense, lofty, majestic forests. There were hills, but the thick drapery of the vines spread upward, terrace upon terrace, and concealed them like a veil. We could not have believed in the hills, except that the upper trees towered

too high to be on the bank level. And everywhere in these vine-robed terraces were charming fairy harbors fringed with swinging garlands; and weird grottoes, whose twilight depth the eye might not pierce; and tunnels that wound their mysterious course none knew whit her; and there were graceful temples—columns—towers—pyramids—mounds—domes—walls—all the shapes and forms and figures known to architecture, wrought in the pliant, leafy vines, and thrown together in reckless, enchanting confusion. (Twain 1940: 49-50)

At times Twain is genuinely impressed with tropical landscape and, like so many travelers to the tropics, the flora and fauna of Central America is seldom mentioned without noting the birds and, dare I say, the beasts—a few distant members of the human family in the trees:

Now and then a rollicking monkey scampered into view, or a bird of splendid plumage floated through the sultry air, or the music of some invisible songster welled up out of the forest depths. The changing vistas of the river ever renewed the intoxicating picture; corners and points folding backward revealed new wonders beyond, of towering walls of verdure—gleaming cataracts of vines pouring sheer down a hundred and fifty feet, and mingling with the grass upon the earth— wonderful waterfalls of green leaves as deftly overlapping each other as the scales of a fish—a vast green rampart, solid a moment, and then, as we advanced, changing and opening into Gothic windows, colonnades—all manner of quaint and beautiful figures! Sometimes a limbless veteran of the forest stood aloof in his flowing vine-ropes, like an ivy-clad tower of some old feudal ruin. (Twain 1940: 50)

And his references, as one would expect from one of the world's greatest humorists, are not without jests and comical asides:

[...] parrots flew by us—the idea of a parrot flying seemed funny enough—flying abroad, instead of swinging in a tin ring, and stooping and nipping that ring with its beak between its feet, and thus displaying itself in most unseemly attitude—flying, silently cleaving the air—and saying never a word! When the first one went by without saying 'Polly wants a cracker,' it seemed as if there was something unnatural about the bird, but it did not immediately occur to me what it was. (Twain, 1940: 51)

A great deal of humor could be had from Mark Twain's desire to transform these poor tropical parrots into polyglots (pun intended); to have these parrots mimic his native English. But Twain's humor, and the intervening passages and phrases describing the wonder of flight, of land and animal, tree and blossom, speak to a man who is deeply moved by the beauty of the natural world—even if he often wants to remake it after his own cultural image.

Surprisingly, for a man so keenly in touch with his surroundings, not a single person from Central America ever speaks in Mark Twain's account of his crossing of Nicaragua.<sup>7</sup> While a good many of his fellow passengers speak, never once does Twain record a direct encounter with a Nicaraguan. No one utters a word to Twain or Twain to them. Not one Nicaraguan is spoken to, be it in English or through a translator. Nicaraguans seem to have no language or voice that might coax Twain out of his sheltering silence. No doubt the trip was short and Twain was corralled amid hundreds of Americans who wanted, like Twain, to get somewhere quickly and, by all accounts, Twain knew little, if no Spanish.

Yet, when Twain does mention Nicaraguans, he describes them as “half-clad yellow natives” (Twain 1940: 39), and the Nicaraguan men, whom he mistakes for soldiers, are “barefooted scoundrels” (39). The Nicaraguan driver of the wagon that facilitated getting Twain and his fellow passengers across the land portion of the trip, “commenced by beating and banging his team,” and the driver rants, according to Twain, not unlike “a furious maniac, in bad Spanish.” (39-40). In addition, when fellow female passengers point out a “dear, dear little baby” (40), Twain calls this Nicaraguan child a “vile, distempered, mud-colored native brat” (40). The gap between what the women and what Twain sees is funny to be sure. His sarcasm is brilliant, and his humorous undercutting of whatever the female passengers saw in the baby,

pokes fun at the mawkishness of the women—more than at the “vile, distempered, mud-colored native brat making dirt-pies in front of an isolated cabin” (40). Yet Twain, who will be deeply moved by the poverty of New York City’s tenement houses, here seems to see Nicaraguan poverty as wholly acceptable and fitting in with the landscape. The poverty of Nicaraguans is not appalling, or tragic, as poverty is later in New York City.

When Twain encounters Nicaraguan women on his trip, it is impossible for him to remain silent:

About every two hundred yards we came across a little summer-house of a peanut stand at the roadside, with raven-haired, splendid-eyed Nicaragua damsels standing in attitudes of careless grace behind them—damsels buff-colored, like an envelope—damsels who were always dressed the same way: in a single flowing gown of fancifully figured calico, ‘gathered’ across the breast (they are singularly full in the bust, the young ones), and ruffled all round, near the bottom of the skirt. They have white teeth, and pleasant, smiling, winning faces. They are virtuous according to their lights, but I guess their lights are a little dim. Two of these picturesque native girls were exceedingly beautiful—such liquid, languishing eyes! such pouting lips! such glossy, luxuriant hair! such ravishing, incendiary expression! such grace! such voluptuous forms, and such precious little drapery about them! such— (Twain 1940: 41)

Mark Twain’s praising of Nicaraguan women is in line with his comments concerning other women around the world.<sup>8</sup> These are standard comments from Twain as he travels from country to country—the traditional representation of unabashed masculine lust mixed with plaintive exuberance. That Nicaraguan women are viewed by Twain as having “dim” virtuous “lights” does not end the matter there.

His imaginary travel companion, Mr. Brown, who had already accompanied Mark Twain on his excursion to the Sandwich Islands and would later accompany him to Europe in the so-called Quaker City letters, and who, as Walker and Dane state in their introduction to *Travels with Mr. Brown*, serves as “Mark Twain’s Sancho Panza,” makes a comment about Nicaraguan women that might make blush even Mark Twain’s normally brazen public self (Twain 1940: 5). Mr. Brown is an “infernal bore,” as Twain himself notes (52). He serves as a foil and utters whatever untoward thoughts that Twain would not utter himself to his readers back in San Francisco. After Twain’s reference and description of Nicaraguan “damsels,” Mr. Brown rejoins: “But you just prospect one of them heifers with a fine-tooth” (41). Humor and imaginary characters aside, the image of Nicaraguan “damsels” reduced now to filthy “heifers,” dirty both physically as well as morally (dim virtuous lights), should not go unnoticed by even the most sympathetic readers of Mark Twain, who should ask themselves whether this comment would have ever been made about Italian women or any other European or American women that Twain so much admires physically.

And here, in Nicaragua, the language is that of desire without touching. Apparently Twain feels some wistful misgivings at his own desires—not at the objectification of women, but at his own yearnings for these women who, however stunning from afar, might lead one to the heart of moral darkness, a world of contamination where dirt and filth (and cholera?) become transmitted through a perceived dark “ravishing” woman unless, in the words of Nick Carraway, one has “interior rules that act as brakes on [. . .] desires” (Fitzgerald 1925: 59). “Interior rules” here mean moral fiber, and moral fiber exists only in relation to the Other—resisting the wanton, the inferior, the Bunuelean object of desire.

In his book *The Rhetoric of Empire*, David Spurr traces twelve tropes common to colonial discourse through a wide array of writings, and Twain hits a few of them in his account of traveling through Nicaragua. Spurr describes the trope of debasement, where



“the Third World is symbolically constructed as a site of filth and contamination” (Spurr 88). One need not go very far into Twain’s account of Nicaragua to find equally common associations. Twain, who later in the Quaker City Letters would describe the countries of Central America “as one-horse Central American Republics [. . .] with a hundred thousand inhabitants, grand officials enough for a hundred millions, an ‘army’ of five hundred ragamuffins and a ‘navy’ consisting of one solitary 60-ton schooner,” writes in reference to the food of Central Americans:

These groups of dark maidens keep for sale a few cups of coffee, tea or chocolate, some bananas, oranges, pine-apples, hard boiled eggs, a dozen bottles of their vile native liquors, some ornamental cups carved from gourds of the calabash tree, a monkey or two—and their prices were so moderate that, in spite of all orders and remonstrances to the contrary, the steerage passengers have been overloading their stomachs with all sorts of beverages and edibles, and will pay for it in Asiatic cholera before they are many days older, no doubt. (Twain 1940: 42)

That the food comes from “dark maidens” reveals what Twain has already hinted at: The covert transference of disease by the dark sexualized women of America. That Twain would encounter cholera, which killed a good many passengers, does not take away from the fact that disease is present here in ways and places beyond the literal. Spurr describes the fact that often in colonial discourse, “The association of the Third World with epidemic disease is epidemiologically sound, but metaphorically loaded” (Spurr 1993: 89). The trope here is sexualized (“eroticized” would be Spurr’s term), and disease comes in all manner of ways and forms, even dark and beautiful.

When one thinks, however, of the many “racist” accounts (practically all of them are) of traveling through Central America written in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the gap between what Twain says and the unabashed racist is wide enough. Mrs. Alfred Hort, writing in 1887 of her crossing of nearly the same route as Mark Twain, and of getting down off the steamboat to walk the short distance to the other sides of the rapids (as was customary for passengers on the San Juan River), writes this description of Nicaraguan men:

The men had made the most of their time, however, and came on laden with oranges, lemons, and guavas, which they had picked *en route*. Nude natives carried our luggage, screaming and jabbering in an unintelligible manner. They resembled orang-ou-tangs—minus the tails. I found them a hideous race, but a very powerful one, judging from the manner they handled the iron-bound trunks, happily for us, in a few hours our boats reached the lake, a vast body of water, and apparently as rough as any sea. (Holt 1887: 32)

There is some curious symmetry here with what Twain has said earlier—the nakedness, the attention to skin color, the “screaming and jabbering” that rhymes with Twain’s Nicaraguan driver, who “commenced by beating and banging his team and cursing like a furious maniac.” But Mrs. Hort, an English woman who writes with all the detailed refinement of a highly educated Victorian, a novelist like Mark Twain in her own right, is filled beyond the brim with the bile that so much characterizes racist travelers to Central America, and Twain shows no such hostility toward Central Americans although at times he is not particularly sympathetic either.

Yet Twain is not beyond reproach. In Key West, the first stop after Greytown, Twain writes these remarkable sentences:

The negroes seemed to be concentrated in a single corner of the town, to leeward of the whites—so their fragrance is wasted on the desert air, and blows out to sea. As this fragrance blows straight out from near the lighthouse, it has its value—because the storm-tossed mariner with a delicate sense of smell could follow it in, in case the light chanced to go out. (Twain 1940: 71)

We need not here enter the debate over Twain's racism or lack thereof, the debate over Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* has raged now for many years, but, whatever one thinks of Mark Twain and his later adamant stance against the inhumanity of slavery, his brilliant and sincere expressions of outrage at lynching, his friendships with Booker T. Washington and Harriet Beecher Stowe, this seldom cited comment belies and undoes so much that the most loyal of Twain scholars have worked to preserve. No amount of scholarship can eliminate the stereotype of "blacks" that Twain entertains here, and no amount of resorting to injunctions and stipulations, as does De Voto, when he warns that "the critic who for a moment forgets that Mark was a humorist is betrayed," can minimize this reference and make it palatable to the modern reader (Twain 1977: 30).

It is true that Twain's attitude in regards to blacks (and slavery for that matter)<sup>9</sup> changed in time. What the literature on Twain consistently points out is that this was a man who evolved and who, to his credit, righted his own wrongs, edged his way out of blindness into light. In *Satire or Evasion, Black Perspectives of Huckleberry Finn*, the editors emphasize this point: "Samuel Clemens's boyhood letters, and even his early western writings, contain derogatory uses of 'nigger,' but he reformed dramatically when he began courting, and soon married, the daughter of abolitionist Jervis Langdon [. . .]" (Leonard, Tenney and Davis 1992: 7). This is early Twain writing in *Travels with Mr. Brown*, and the language here reveals a man who had not yet taken a stance against the mistreatment or verbal abuse or stereotyping of blacks either by others, or himself. The reformed racist is often a champion of causes (as Twain would become); the unreformed racist is either proud or unmindful of their own excursions into the world of denigration. This is the language of barroom banter between "whites" about "blacks," this is Twain writing, in 1867, with a racist wink and a nod to his audience back home, a largely white audience that would have participated in the shared tradition of the stereotyping, dismissal, and denigration of blacks as persons so described.

Although Twain always tried to be informed about the countries that he visited,<sup>10</sup> being informed, for him, often has a specific purpose: Commerce. At the end of his account of his journey to Nicaragua, Twain runs through a long list of economic opportunities that can be had in Nicaragua, a consistent theme in his early travel writings. A tireless seeker, for most of his adult life, of money and business opportunities, Twain seems to relish the prospect of making Nicaragua into an economic satellite of American or British capitalism. He enumerates, for his readers back in San Francisco, company after company that is doing business in Nicaragua—generally the extraction of raw materials like gold, silver, opal—and informs them of what opportunities and possibilities the enterprising entrepreneur back home might find in Nicaragua.

Twain, who often was a fervent anti-imperialist in terms of culture and values, here seems to have no qualms engaging in a type of tooling for nascent corporate interests and for individuals set on draining wealth from Latin America, who wanted to extract from Nicaragua that which does not belong anywhere else. Like Gauguin in Tahiti, Twain felt particularly angry at the intrusion of western civilization on "noble savages" (Rodney 1993: 5-18), and he developed an anti-imperialist strain to his writings that would last for the rest of his life. But anti-imperialism apparently included for Twain only cultural imperialism, not its nagging economic twin.

### 3.

In the end, for all his love of rivers, Mark Twain never mentions the San Juan River as a river. He stares out from the deck and is entranced by the tropical landscape and animals, the walls of dense tropical vegetation, the frolicking monkeys, the lounging alligators, the dense blossoming forests. The river itself goes unnoticed, but not the scenery, and no doubt Twain probably never separated one from the other. But it would have been nice to hear Twain, this steamboat pilot, speak of the river itself, to compare its twists and turns with those of the great Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. The San Juan is remarkable as rivers go. But Twain seems not to notice its oft-reported magnificence.

As Rodney notes, when Twain arrives finally in New York and is “safe at last in ‘The States,’” he ends his letter, thinking back longingly of Central America: “I would like to go [ . . . ] and see that beautiful scenery on the Lake and San Juan River again” (Twain 1940: 81). Twain is about to enter New York City and would come to find its poverty appalling. From a distance, the Central American landscape must have looked to him like paradise, if I might rephrase Wordsworth, to a blindman’s eyes.

Nor does Twain mention Costa Rica. He must have stared from both sides of the deck, and one pictures Mark Twain “surveying” (the term is Mary Louise Pratt’s) Costa Rica and finding the landscape no doubt very much the same on one side of the ship as the other. Twain was an informed traveler who studied in earnest the countries that he visited, but he is remarkably silent on Costa Rica. The San Juan River is navigated on both sides—the ships no doubt made their way along one bank and then the other. Yet Twain speaks only of Nicaragua. Costa Rica seems not to exist, and while he apparently never set foot on Costa Rican land, he certainly walked over its waters.<sup>11</sup>

Twain’s travel writings are filled with zest and enthusiasm. His syntax is jarring at times, brilliantly uninterrupted, remarkably sinuous and lacy, a spiraling and spinning out-of-control style that seems at times to be similar to a man on a ledge, swerving one way and then another, only to regain his balance with all the serenity and stability of a nun standing firmly before an altar:

There were not a dozen good riders in the two hundred and fifty that went on horseback, but every man seemed to consider that inasmuch as the animals belonged to ‘the Company,’ it was a stern duty to ride them to death, if possible, and they tried hard to do it. Such racing and yelling, and beating and banging and spurring, and such bouncing of blanket bundles, and flapping and fluttering of coat-tails, and such frantic scampering of the multitude of mules, and bobbing up and down of the long column of men, and rearing and charging of struggling ambulances in their midst, I never saw before, and I never enjoyed anything so much. (Twain 1940: 43)

The last sentence is remarkable but not unique for Twain, who wrote this way with ease and apparently with little revision. That he was hastily sending these letters back to San Francisco with ships going in the opposite direction makes the quality of the prose all the more remarkable.

It is understandable that the man known as the American Swift never ceases getting great pleasure at watching the Lilliputians of the world—the treachery, the sniping, the rank stupidity—the unlimited capacity for folly of the whole damned human race. Traveling is a life-force for Mark Twain; it permits the traveler to shed the dullness, the monotony, and endless drudgery of everyday life. The world comes to life again through something as inconsequential as an overheard phrase, a new accent, a word in a different language, a momentary landscape,

all of which might well have been ignored back home, or not even heard or seen, precisely because they occurred within the boredom and monotony of everyday life. The traveler, in short, sees the same old world through a new set of lenses, and no one makes better use of those lenses than Mark Twain.

Here is both the English text of Mark Twain's account of his travels in Nicaragua, and the Spanish translation of that account. It is always worthwhile to hear Mark Twain in the original. I have placed a copy of the English text directly after the Spanish translation for anyone who wishes to enjoy his remarkable prose. I have annotated the Spanish version with footnotes, in English. There are difficult passages and explanation is needed for many of Mark Twain's phrases and historical references. As in *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain often falls into the vernacular, and there are obscure references that would make any reader of English take pause.

#### 4. Spanish Translation of Mark Twain's *Travels with Mr. Brown*

##### Carta IV<sup>12</sup>

###### *San Juan y el virus del cólera*

29 de diciembre. Ha concluido al menos una travesía por el mar. Hemos llegado a San Juan del Sur y debemos dejar el barco para cruzar el istmo, pero no hoy. Han puesto un aviso en el barco informando que la enfermedad del cólera está causando furor entre el batallón de soldados que acaba de llegar de Nueva York, por lo que no se nos permite desembarcar hoy. Sin duda alguna, las verdes colinas nunca antes parecieron tan gratas, encantadoras y completamente adorables a los ojos de nuestra tripulación—cansada de ver el mar—como estas que yacen aquí a tan poca distancia de nosotros. Pero ya se han dado las directrices, así que la mitad de la tripulación del barco no puede más que observar ansiosa la tierra firme o discutir con temor las noticias sobre el cólera; mientras tanto, la otra mitad está en la cabina de proa cantando bulliciosamente sin parar como una tropa de ruidosos niños de escuela.

###### *En tierra firme*

Greytown, 1 de enero. Mientras pasamos toda la noche en San Juan, nuestro equipaje fue enviado a tierra en barcazas y a la mañana siguiente partimos. Encontramos que San Juan consistía de unas pocas casuchas de madera que se estaban cayendo—a las que llamaban hoteles—anidadas entre el verde follaje, a la sombra de pequeñas y pintorescas colinas. El sitio donde desembarcamos estaba poblado de caballos, mulas, vagones<sup>13</sup> y nativos de piel amarilla, medio vestidos, con cuchillos<sup>14</sup> de dos pies de largo—del ancho de una mano y amarrados a la cintura. Pensé que estos sinvergüenzas descalzos eran soldados, pero no, sólo eran ciudadanos comunes y corrientes. Una mujer, de piel blanca, harapienta y sucia, se movía de aquí para allá en la playa. De seguro nuestro barco debió parecerle una visión del paraíso, ya que a una gran cantidad de pasajeros los habían mantenido secuestrados durante quince días bajo la vil incompetencia de un hombre—el agente de la compañía del istmo. Éste había mandado un buque de vapor hacia San Francisco a sabiendas de que la multitud iba llegar a Greytown. Ahora terminarían su viaje en nuestro barco.

Nuestro grupo de ocho personas—el cual habíamos formado la noche anterior y que ocupaba el primer bote que dejaba el barco—tenía el derecho a escoger los vagones o el confort del transporte ecuestre que nos llevaría a través de las siguientes doce millas que debíamos recorrer por tierra entre San Juan y Virgin Bay, en el Lago de Nicaragua. Algunos, en realidad muchos, de los caballos y de las mulas, se veían muy bien, pero si había alguna opción entre los vagones, o especialmente entre los milagrosos espantapájaros que debían halarlos, era difícil percibirla. Nunca había visto tales arneses en mi vida, ni semejantes mulas, ni semejantes conductores. Se veían graciosos tanto individualmente como en grupo, a excepción de las horribles llagas en las espaldas de los animales, donde la áspera y constante rozadura había irritado, raspado y cicatrizado la piel—las pobres criaturas conmovían a cualquiera.

Nos subimos a uno de los vagones más grandes de color rojo desteñido (en la montaña les llamamos vagones de barro<sup>15</sup>), con animales que parecían cuatro pequeños conejos con su espalda adolorida, enganchados al vagón, y nos enrumbamos hacia Bahía de La Virgen. El conductor empezó a golpear y maldecir a su equipo como un maniático furioso, en mal español, y siguió haciéndolo a través del viaje de doce millas, el cual duró tres horas y media sobre un camino duro, llano y hermoso. Sentimos envidia de los que no estaban tullidos y podían andar a caballo.

Aun así, conformamos un grupo bastante alegre entre nosotros, conversando escandalosa y animadamente. A medida que perdimos de vista el mar y nos adentramos en las oscuras y espesas enredaderas cubiertas de rocío y los árboles del bosque, la primera cosa que las mujeres vieron fue un “¡Lindo, lindo niño, mira que encanto!”—un chiquillo nativo de piel color arcilla, repugnante y malcriado que estaba haciendo unas tortas de barro frente a una cabaña aislada. Por otro lado, lo primero que los hombres notaron—aunque no pudieron distinguirlo bien—fue un letrero quizás, o una cruz, o la modesta lápida de algún desgraciado extraño. Pero no era nada de eso. A medida que nos fuimos acercando, nos dimos cuenta de que era una señal clavada a un árbol que decía: “Pruébese las Camisas de Ward”.<sup>16</sup> En ese tiempo había bastante abuso de parte de Ward y sus ayudantes, y otra gente del mismo tipo, que invadían todo lugar sagrado con rótulos ilegales y ensuciaban cualquier paisaje que uno veía con admiración, convirtiendo en una farsa cualquier pensamiento sentimental que uno evocaba. Sé que si pudiera ir a las cataratas del Niágara y me parara en frente de ellas, sintiendo su brisa húmeda soplando en mi cara y su voz resonando en mis oídos, me llenaría de una noble inspiración y diría, “Oh, grandiosa, sublime y magnífica”—luego miraría hacia otro lado de las cataratas y leería, “S.T. 1860 X Plantation Bitters”.<sup>17</sup> Y me irritaría muchísimo. Es una lástima.<sup>18</sup>

### *La procesión en marcha*

El verde fresco y radiante por todos lados, la deliciosa suavidad y frescura del aire (acababa de llover un poco antes de que saliéramos), el interés por los pájaros, flores y árboles desconocidos, la agradable y nueva sensación del zarandeo y ruido de los vagones—todo tan jovial y animado en comparación con la aburrida monotonía y con el mar sin playa mientras estábamos en el barco—llevó a nuestro grupo a un grado tal de animación y entusiasmo que yo hubiera creído imposible con semejantes palos secos y viejos. Pido mis disculpas a las damas, y a los caballeros también. Todas las personas votaron, “Viva la ruta Nicaragua por siempre”. [N.B. Hacían esto cada uno o dos días—y luego, cada día o dos de por medio, maldecían la ruta Nicaragua para siempre. Así acostumbran comportarse los pasajeros en todo el mundo.]

Aproximadamente cada doscientas yardas aparecía una pequeña cabina de verano del tamaño de un maní ubicada a la orilla del camino y, detrás de estas, paradas con una actitud de gracia descuidada, se encontraban unas damiselas nicaragüenses de pelo color azabache, espléndidos ojos y piel cobriza como del color de un sobre viejo, damiselas que estaban siempre vestidas de la misma manera: con una sola bata ondulante de material de cortina decorada con fantásticas figuras, “anudada” sobre el pecho (las jóvenes estaban singularmente bien dotadas) y fruncida toda alrededor, casi hasta el final de la falda. Estas damiselas tenían los dientes muy blancos y el rostro sonriente, agradable y atractivo. Eran virtuosas por sus conocimientos pero creo que sus conocimientos eran un poco deficientes. Dos de estas pintorescas jóvenes nativas eran extremadamente hermosas: ¡qué ojos tan claros y sentimentales! ¡qué labios tan carnosos! ¡qué pelo tan brillante y frondoso! ¡qué expresión tan arrebatadora e incendiaria! ¡qué gracia! ¡qué formas tan voluptuosas y tan poco ropaje que las cubra! ¡qué . . .

“Pero vaya revise una de esas novillas con un cepillo de cerdas finas”.<sup>19</sup>—

Este intento de interrupción de Brown le granjeó su inmediato destierro. Este hombre no concebía que algo fuera atractivo en sí mismo, sino que siempre tenía que sacar a relucir las características desagradables de todo lo que veía.

Estos grupos de mozuelas de piel oscura vendían unas cuantas tazas de café, té o chocolate, algunos bananos, naranjas, piñas, huevos duros, una docena de botellas de sus pésimos licores autóctonos, algunas tazas ornamentales talladas en frutos de la mata de calabazas, uno o dos monos—y sus precios eran tan bajos que, sin importar todas las órdenes y protestas en contra, los pasajeros de tercera clase<sup>20</sup> habían estado atiborrando sus estómagos con toda clase de bebidas y comidas, y sin duda lo pagarían caro con el cólera asiático dentro de poco tiempo.

Nuestro camino era suave, plano y libre de barro y polvo. Además, el paisaje en los alrededores era agradable, aunque no extraordinario. Muchos de los árboles estaban llenos de flores hermosas. La vegetación no era escasa, y en ocasiones el aire balsámico venía hasta nosotros cargado con una deliciosa fragancia. Pasamos dos o tres colinas altas, cuyos frentes escarpados sin árboles ni arbustos estaban espesamente alfombrados con la hierba más verde y suave—una escena que nuestros ojos jamás se cansarían de ver. A veces revoloteaban pájaros de hermoso plumaje y escuchábamos el alegre canto de otros mientras nos adentrábamos en los bosques. Pero los monos requerían toda la atención. Todos los pasajeros deseaban ver un mono de verdad, vivo y salvaje, peleando con los otros de su manada. Finalmente, nuestro interés se concentró un poco en las mujeres nativas, los pájaros, las enredaderas con sus frutos en forma de calabaza, los enormes y extraños nudos sobre los árboles—que según nos dijeron eran hormigueros—los árboles de limón, y hasta una singular especie de cactus, largo, delgado y verde, que escalaba hasta las mismas cúspides de inmensos árboles, y que ocultaba completamente sus troncos y ramas y los ahogaba en sus tortuosos pliegues—como una fea e interminable serpiente. Aún así, el grupo nunca dejó de considerar al mono salvaje la mayor y más estupenda novedad.

### *Mascaradas en el camino*

Nuestros cuatrocientos pasajeros montados a caballo, en mula y en cuatro vagones tirados por cuatro mulas, formaban la procesión más salvaje, harapienta y tosca que yo jamás había visto. Me recordaba las fantásticas mascaradas que acostumbran realizar el 4 de julio en los estados del oeste, o en el día de Mardigras en New Orleans. Los pasajeros de tercera clase

iban montados sobre mulas y principalmente con chaquetas, bolsas embadurnadas con aceite y mantas colgando de sus monturas. Algunas de estas monturas eran nuevas y estaban en buen estado, pero otras estaban en todas las posibles etapas de mutilación y decadencia. No había ni una docena de jinetes entre los doscientos cincuenta que iban a caballo, pero todos los hombres parecían pensar que, en tanto los animales pertenecieran a “la Compañía”, era su absoluto deber montarlos hasta la muerte si era posible, y vaya que se esforzaban por hacerlo. Nunca antes vi, ni disfruté tanto de semejante corredera y gritería, golpeteo y aguijoneo, de semejante brincoteo de mantas, del aleteo y salto de colas de chaquetas, de semejante frenética carrera de la multitud de mulas, del zarandeo hacia arriba y abajo de la larga fila de hombres, y del difícil avance, carga y forcejeo de los vagones entre ellos.

Tampoco había visto la ecuanimidad de Brown tan perturbada como ese día. El filósofo había recibido un encargo en San Francisco—una viuda con tres niños y una joven sirvienta. Todos los días durante el viaje se vio obligado a bajar en medio de la sofocante hediondez de la bodega del barco para halar y llevar los baúles de la Sra. B de entre el montón de equipaje, y escarbar entre la ropa para encontrar una camisa para Johnny, o un babero para Tommy, o un chal para la madre o la sirvienta, o un pañal para el bebé; pero estas vejaciones no eran nada en comparación con los problemas de transporte que afrontaba este viajero del istmo. Brown había tenido que llevar su grupo a caballo, y para poder mantenerlos juntos en medio de la confusión de la procesión, amarró sus cinco mulas juntas, de lado a lado, y marchó en fila—la cola del caballo delantero atada a la nariz del caballo trasero, y así sucesivamente. Él mismo condujo el caballo delantero con el bebé en sus brazos; le seguían la Sra. B. y los dos chicos, y la sirvienta venía atrás. Era un espectáculo solemnemente cómico. Todo marchó bien, sin embargo, hasta que empezó la corrida de caballos y la mula del filósofo se llenó de ambición y empezó a conducir el grupo en una danza alegre. Brown trató de sostenerla con una sola mano por unos instantes, luego se pasó el bebé debajo de su brazo izquierdo, y haló las riendas con ambas manos. Esto tuvo muy buen efecto, pero todavía el pequeño desprendimiento lo lanzaba como el viento en medio de la procesión principal, causando sensación dondequiera que iba, y era recibido por todos con golpetazos y risotadas. De vez en cuando la mula de Brown se detenía a hacer cabriolas, entonces los otros animales se acercaban unos a otros y se enredaban en un nudo irremediable. Por supuesto, Brown tuvo que zafarse el bebé y arreglar todo de nuevo. Maldijo duramente, pero entre dientes, y sudó como ningún hombre había sudado jamás. La procesión completa había llegado a Bahía de La Virgen y estaba acomodada en el barco antes de que él llegara. Pero sus bestias estaban bastante tranquilas entonces. Todas tenían sus cabezas bajas, y era difícil saber quienes estaban más fatigados y melancólicos—las bestias mismas o sus jinetes. Era como introducir un cortejo fúnebre entre el bullicioso regocijo del resto de la familia del barco.

### *Todos en silencio de nuevo*

Confortablemente acomodados en el pequeño barco de vapor, y confortablemente divididos en cuartos, nos sentamos en la sombra y almorzamos, fumamos y comparamos las notas de nuestra pequeña y alegre corrida por el istmo. Compramos hermosos bastones de caoba a los nativos y, finalmente, nos dispusimos a contemplar plácida y reflexivamente las agitadas aguas del Lago de Nicaragua y las dos majestuosas montañas que se elevaban de sus profundidades azules y cuyas verdes cúspides se envolvían en nubes algodónadas.

**Carta V****Buque de vapor SAN FRANCISCO****Víspera de Año Nuevo***Las montañas gemelas*

De en medio del hermoso Lago de Nicaragua se elevan dos magníficas pirámides vestidas del verde más suave y suntuoso, salpicadas de sombra y de luz, cuyas cúspides perforan las ondulantes nubes. Se ven tan aisladas del mundo y su confusión—tan tranquilas, tan aletargadas, tan empinadas en sueño y reposo eterno. ¡Qué hogar no se haría entre sus bosques sombríos, sus laderas soleadas, sus ventiladas cañadas después de una cansada faena y de la ansiedad e inquietud del bullicioso y ajetreado mundo! Estas montañas no parecen tener un terreno llano en sus bases, sino que salen abruptamente del agua. No hay nada tosco en ellas—son bien delineadas y simétricas, y todos sus contornos son suaves, redondos y regulares. Una mide 4,200 pies de altura y la otra 5,400, aunque debido a que la más alta está más lejos, ambas parecen gemelas. Un extraño las consideraría de igual tamaño. Algunos dicen que miden 6,000 pies de altura, y realmente lo aparentan. Cuando no se ven nubes en ningún otro lugar en los cielos, sus elevadas cúspides aparecen magníficamente cubiertas por ellas. Son volcanes inactivos, por lo que su suelo (lava descompuesta) es maravillosamente fértil. Está bien surtido de haciendas de ganado y fincas de maíz, café y tabaco. El clima es sumamente agradable y es el más saludable del istmo.

*Emparedados, etc.*

Nuestro bote comenzó a cruzar el lago a las dos de la tarde y a las cuatro de la mañana siguiente arribamos al Fuerte San Carlos, donde desagua el río San Juan—cien millas en doce horas—no particularmente rápido, pero muy comfortable.

Aquí nos cambiaron a una larga armazón con doble cubierta, con ruedas a popa y sinmampara—ampliamente abierto, sin que nada obstruyera la vista excepto las delgadas vigas que sostenían el techo. Así que empezamos a recorrer el ancho y hermoso río en el alba gris de la balsámica mañana de verano.

Desayunamos a las ocho. En el buque del lago nos dieron café, té y emparedados que consistían de dos pedazos de pan con una sola rebanada de jamón en el medio. En este buque nos dieron té, café y emparedados compuestos de una sola rebanada de jamón entre dos pedazos de pan. No hay nada como la variedad.

En poco tiempo todos los viajeros estaban absortos observando el paisaje en la orilla—árboles como el ciprés, otros con flores grandes y rojas, helechos que parecían árboles enormes y ligeros así como cactus gigantes, altos matorrales de bambú, árboles y arbustos de toda clase, inclusive entremezclados con viñas. De vez en cuando se habría una vista, estirando su alfombra de pasto verde y fresco más allá en la selva, y luego se cerraba de nuevo muy lentamente.

*La tumba del buque perdido*

En esta tierra de descompuesta vegetación no se puede mantener limpio un espacio de terreno durante una semana. La naturaleza atrapa cualquier átomo de polvo errante y lo fuerza



a liberar sus sobrecargados almacenes. La mala hierba crece en las grietas de los pisos y viste de verde los techos de las chozas. Si un puñado de polvo se asienta en la horqueta de un árbol, allí mismo nacen helechos que mueven su gracioso plumaje en la brisa tropical. Walker,<sup>21</sup> el filibustero, hundió un buque de vapor en el río; la arena se secó y se acumuló a su alrededor, y finalmente formó una pequeña isla ovalada. Más tarde el viento trajo semillas aquí que vistieron cada pulgada de la isla de pasto exuberante. Luego crecieron árboles y subieron viñas que colgaban como radiantes guirnaldas hasta que la tumba del buque quedó terminada. Para nosotros el buque encallado era invisible salvo que los dos grandes refuerzos, de proa a popa, todavía sobresalían de entre el pasto y cercaban los árboles. Era una escena hermosa.

### *El antiguo castillo*

Cerca del medio día navegamos alegremente alrededor de una curva en el río, y de repente saltó a la vista un imponente y viejo castillo de adobe—una reliquia de antaño—de los días bucaneros de Morgan y sus alegres hombres. Este castillo yace sobre una colina verde en forma de cúpula y más al fondo se destacan los bosques. Dicen que Lord Nelson lo conquistó una vez y que esta fue su primer gran hazaña. Le tomó varias horas con 250 hombres, y fue una batalla difícil y sangrienta. En nuestra época, Walker lo tomó con 25 hombres, sin hacer un sólo disparo—mediante la traición, según dicen, del Comandante.

Hay una pequeña aldea al pie de la colina, una aldea compuesta de una sola hilera de casas que se extiende cerca de trescientas yardas a lo largo de la orilla del río.

Existe un peligroso rápido en este lugar. Se dice que es artificial—construido por el hombre en tiempos antiguos para impedir que los botes piratas penetraran al interior. Tuvimos que desembarcar ahí, caminar alrededor de los rápidos y subir a otro buque con ruedas a popa. Cada casa por la que pasamos constituía un puesto de venta de frutas y provisiones: los bananos, las piñas, y las pepas de cacao y el café eran de buena calidad, y los cigarrillos aceptables, pero las naranjas, aunque frescas por supuesto, eran de una calidad muy inferior. Lo barato estaba a la orden del día. Se podía comprar la cantidad que uno quisiera de cualquier artículo por 10 centavos, y hasta una suntuosa cena para dos o tres personas por medio dólar. Traiga sus monedas de diez centavos<sup>22</sup> cuando venga por aquí. Son la base principal y fundamento de todos los valores, y son recibidas con menos desconfianza que cualquier otra moneda.

### *Un paraíso despoblado*

Al reanudar el viaje por el estrecho río y recorrerlo a gran velocidad, saltó a la vista toda la belleza encantadora de sus alrededores. Por un largo rato todos nos quedamos absortos observando y admirando en silencio conforme el exquisito panorama se develaba, pero finalmente estallamos en un éxtasis conversacional lleno de emocionantes expresiones.

El carácter de la vegetación de las riberas había cambiado de una exuberante selva a bosques densos, sublimes y majestuosos. Había colinas, pero las espesas colgaduras de las viñas se extendían hacia arriba, terraza sobre terraza, y las escondían como un velo. Podríamos no haber creído que había colinas, pero los árboles superiores se elevaban demasiado para estar al nivel de la ribera.

Y dondequiera que se encontraban estas terrazas vestidas de enredaderas, también había escondites encantados, como de cuentos de hadas, con guirnaldas colgantes, y extrañas cuevas cuyo profundo umbral le sería difícil al ojo humano penetrar, y túneles que se retorcían

en un trayecto misterioso hacia donde nadie ha conocido; y también había templos hermosos—columnas—torres—pirámides—montículos—cúpulas—paredes—todas las formas y figuras conocidas en la arquitectura, labradas en forma de viñas dóciles y frondosas y puestas de manera descuidada y con encantadora confusión.

De vez en cuando se asomaba un mono escandaloso, o un pájaro de espléndido plumaje volaba por el bochornoso aire, o se escuchaba la música de algún cantor invisible surgiendo de las profundidades del bosque. Los diferentes paisajes del río renovaban constantemente la vista embriagante, cada recoveco y cima revelaba nuevas maravillas más distantes, de encumbradas paredes de verdor, destellantes cataratas de viñas que colgaban hasta ciento cincuenta pies, entremezclándose con el pasto sobre la tierra—maravillosas cataratas de hojas verdes sobrepuetas diestramente como las escamas de un pescado—una vasta muralla verde, sólida por un momento, y luego, a medida que avanzábamos, cambiaban y se abrían como si fueran ventanas y columnas góticas—¡toda suerte de figuras extrañas y pintorescas!

A veces un viejo árbol del bosque sin ramas se mantenía aislado en su ondeante traje de enredadera como si fuera una torre vestida de hiedra de alguna vieja ruina feudal.

Encontramos otro buque en ruinas convertido en una isla esmeralda—árboles que sobrepasaban la gran armazón de vigas, y las incansables enredaderas escalando sobre la vieja caldera, oxidada y maltrecha. De pronto un punto distante del paisaje revelaba algunas colinas majestuosas a la distancia, empinadas y densamente pobladas de bosques—la copa de cada árbol formaba una delicada cúpula verde alumbrada por un destello de sol, y luego, oscurecidas como por una sombra veraniega, cúpula sobre cúpula se elevaban dentro de la soleada atmósfera contrastando sus matices brillantes con el púrpura borrascoso del cielo a la distancia.

A lo largo de la orilla del río yacían enormes lagartos durmiendo y asoleándose, pájaros de llamativo plumaje y horribles picos ganchudos, parados estúpidamente sobre las colgantes ramas, y lo asustaban a uno de repente y lo hacían cuestionarse la vaga y muy apreciada noción de que ese tipo de pájaro solamente vivía en las colecciones para exhibición. También, algunos pericos volaban—la idea de ver un perico volando era bastante graciosa—volando en el aire en vez de estar balanceándose en una argolla de metal, agachándose para mordisquearla con el pico entre las patas—por el contrario, volaban exhibiéndose con una actitud nunca antes vista—partiendo el cielo silenciosamente, y sin decir una sola palabra! Cuando pasó el primero sin decir “Polly wants a cracker”, parecía como si hubiera algo anormal en el pájaro, pero no se me ocurrió inmediatamente qué era. Y había un pájaro prodigiosamente grande que tenía el pico como un cuerno para polvora, y que doblaba su cuello en forma de S, y que al flotar estiraba sus largas patas hacia atrás como un remo en acción, que pensé se habría visto más apropiado y conveniente en la jaula de hierro donde naturalmente debía estar. Y no voy a negar que desde el momento en que aterricé en ese istmo, la idea de ver un mono subido en un árbol parecía tan totalmente absurda y fuera de todo lugar; nunca había visto ninguno en semejante posición, pero deseaba agarrarlo y atarlo a la rueda de un vagón, debajo de la jaula de un tigre de bengala, donde se sentiría más como en casa y no se vería tan ridículo.

### *El Aburrido*

“¿De qué clase será aquel árbol tan raro, torcido y frondoso que está por allá?”

Miré al hombre que me habló. Era por naturaleza, carácter y costumbre un completo

Aburrido—era fácil percibirlo. Le respondí: “No sé”. En realidad hubiese deseado responder groseramente “¿Cómo diablos podría saberlo?” “¿Le parece que yo he estado antes en un país como este?”

“Me parece que podría ser un roble, o un arce,<sup>23</sup> o algo así, pero creo que tal vez no”.

“No sé. Tal vez lo es, tal vez no”.

“Tiene flores grandes como la malvaloca—”

“No sé—a lo mejor es una malvaloca”.

“No, no quise decir eso—me refería a ¡Caramba! ¡Mira ese mono brincando! ¿Qué clase de ruido hacen—chillan?”

“No, no sé absolutamente *nada* de monos. Puede que chillen, puede que no—¡Espero en Dios que sí lo hagan!”

“¿Por qué?”

Me di por vencido.<sup>24</sup> Esta serena simplicidad con la que yo esperaba responder y cortar la conversación me dejó completamente perplejo. Me retiré sin decir una palabra.

Este compañero acostumbraba acorralarme y aburrirme hasta la muerte con reminiscencias triviales de su insignificante historia, con fútiles fragmentos de información que yo había tenido desde mi infancia; con bromas gastadas que me ponían frenético, y con eternas preguntas sobre cosas de las que no sabía nada y de las cuales no me interesaba un bledo. Uno siempre encuentra personas como esta durante los viajes, pero nunca antes había conocido a un espécimen tan cercano a mi idea de aburrición, exasperación y fastidio infernal.

En este segundo buque de ruedas nos dieron té, café y emparedados preparados ingeniosamente al esconder una tajada de jamón entre dos rebanadas de pan. En verdad no hay nada como la variedad. Le pone buen sabor a la dieta más simple.

### *Emparedados, etc.*

Los muchachos fumaban, cantaban, le disparaban a los lagartos, conversaban acerca de los árboles guayacán, caoba, cacao-bastardo y otros árboles extraños, y miraban el encantado panorama del río durante el largo y feliz día, y en la noche atamos el barco en la orilla, a 30 millas de Greytown. Los que tenían hamacas las colgaban, y los que no improvisaban camas con sus abrigos, y pronto las dos sucias linternas, colgadas adelante y atrás, arrojaban una luz espectral sobre la apretada y vagamente definida multitud de soñolientos. Como mencioné antes, toda la cubierta de la caldera se encontraba completamente abierta; justo antes de amanecer un baño de agua helado nos cayó encima y levantó a todo el mundo. Hubo algunas quejas de huesos adoloridos de parte de las mujeres y algunos caballeros que no estaban acostumbrados a dormir en el puro piso, pero pronto olvidamos estos pequeños inconvenientes cuando los muchachos de la cocina subieron y se desató entre los pasajeros la usual frenética y hambrienta conglomeración, precipitación y griterío de “¡emparedados!” “¡emparedados!” junto con la buena nueva de que no sólo tendríamos el acostumbrado té, café y emparedados para el desayuno, sino también queso! Ciertamente, la variedad es la sal de la vida. Nadie mencionó más el dolor de huesos.

### *Un paraíso poblado*

Llegamos a Greytown temprano el último día del año y vimos el buque anclado que nos llevaría a Nueva York. El pueblo no es gran cosa, pero hay enormes terrenos ahí. Es curioso

que no lo extendieran un poco más . . . por alguna razón no lo hicieron. Greytown está compuesto de doscientas casas con armazones antiguas y algunos lindos lotes vacíos que sobresalen por la agradable vista que presentan. En mi opinión los botes agrupados a la orilla del agua hacen este panorama aún más hermoso.

La población, de 800 habitantes, es mixta, la componen nativos, estadounidenses, españoles, alemanes, ingleses y negros jamaquinos. Por supuesto, el lenguaje que se habla en este lugar es el español. Algunos de los bebés negros no llevan ninguna ropa puesta, y las vacas caminan entre la gente por la vía pública con una libertad que ningún escritor puede describir. Los residentes no son vanidosos ni se preocupan por tener lujos ni mobiliario. La mayoría de ellos vende unos cigarrillos llamados “poco tiempos”, a diez centavos el puño, así como aguardiente, frutas tropicales y hamacas hechas de hierba marina. Todo lo venden barato, hasta los vinos extranjeros de excelente calidad y cosas semejantes, ya que los impuestos de importación son bajos. El negocio del tránsito ha convertido casa de por medio en un lugar de alojamiento, y se puede alquilar una buena cama en cualquier parte por un dólar. No cuesta mucho mantener una cama de Greytown en orden, pues sólo consisten de un colchón, dos sábanas y un mosquitero. Adornan el pueblo los árboles de cacao, y los alrededores están llenos de charral. Además, en todas partes los botones rosados de las sensibles acianos<sup>25</sup> sonríen entre la hierba. [Sonreír entre la hierba es bueno. —M.T.]

El *Santiago de Cuba* trajo cólera al istmo en su último viaje, y murieron treinta y dos personas. También murió un joven residente de Greytown, lo cual dejó a su madre sumamente desesperada. Por eso los ciudadanos levantaron un consejo de salud para prevenir que el cólera llegara nuevamente a las costas. Mientras estábamos lejos del centro del pueblo, llegó el buque con ruedas a popa con el grupo de pasajeros de tercera y segunda clase, y de inmediato se le advirtió que anclaran en alta mar y que nadie desembarcara! No fue sino hasta después de estar allí por veinticuatro horas y de que estuviésemos listos para partir que la multitud de maldicientes pasajeros descubrieron qué había producido el impedimento de bajarse del barco. Resultó que mientras Brown estaba bebiendo algo de aguardiente en uno de los salones, dijo que había probado bebidas más suaves,<sup>26</sup> pero luego mencionó sin querelo que había escapado del cólera en el istmo y de la viruela entre los compañeros de viaje de nuestro buque, y que, por lo tanto, podría sobrevivir ese trago. De inmediato un ciudadano local le refirió este comentario al consejo de salud y de ahí salió la orden—y nunca un pasajero de tercera clase pudo desembarcar en Greytown. Se escucharon algunos rumores entre este grupo acerca de colgar a Brown, pero al fin nada pasó.

### *Nicaragua*

En la República de Nicaragua hay algunas ciudades populosas. Entre ellas están León, con 48,000 habitantes, Massaye [sic], con 38,000, Rivas, con 30,000, Managua, con 24,000, Granada, con 18,000, Chinandaga [sic],<sup>27</sup> con 18,000, y algunas otras ciudades con 3,000 o 4,000 habitantes. La población total es de 320,000, y todos viven en ciudades o pueblos, cerca unos de los otros. Sólo pueden votar los dueños de propiedades que han sido declarados ciudadanos. Greytown no está representada en los consejos municipales de la nación, ya que las propiedades pertenecen a residentes temporales—extranjeros—a los que no les importa en absoluto la política.

Hay una gran cantidad de minas de oro y plata en el país. En los *Choutales*—cuarzos de oro—(Compañía Inglesa—costo 250,000 libras esterlinas)—se trabaja con maquinaria

rudimentaria local, pero ya viene maquinaria moderna en camino. Según mis notas, la primera excavación fue de 200,000 libras esterlinas. Para mantener en alto nuestra reputación diremos que esa cantidad fue realmente 20,000 libras esterlinas—y todavía es una suma cuestionablemente alta, aún esa cifra.

Una compañía de californianos ha comprado dos minas—Albertina y Petaluma—y acaban de empezar a trabajar. Por una de ellas pagaron \$70,000.

Una compañía inglesa también acaba de comenzar sus labores en una mina por la que pagó 30,000 libras esterlinas.

También hay minas de plata, cobre, carbón y ópalo. Una de las últimas, cerca del camino entre San Juan y Bahía de La Virgen, ha producido ópalos que, en bruto, son tan grandes como almendras.

La República también tiene, entre sus numerosas atracciones y fuentes de prosperidad comercial, algunos lagos y ríos con sulfuro, además de algunos volcanes inactivos (una compañía americana ha comprado uno de estos y está hundiéndose en él—ellos creen que pueden activarlo de nuevo.)

Nicaragua exporta loras y monos, caucho indio, madera, azúcar, cueros, cochinillas, café, pieles de venado, caoba, chocolate, oro, ópalos, zarza parrilla, caparazones de tortuga (un negocio bastante pesado) y frutas tropicales.

El comercio de caucho es muy amplio, el año pasado sólo Greytown exportó la cantidad equivalente a \$112,000. El caucho se vende a 28 centavos la libra en Nicaragua, en Europa a 54 centavos.

Un sólo hombre maneja el negocio de caoba que se efectúa en la costa norte de Nicaragua. Tenía un tronco que costaba \$12,000, y era tan grande que debió estar tendido por varios años antes de que hubiera suficiente agua para hacerlo flotar sobre el banco de arena. Dicen que este año su ganancia será de \$500,000.

La comercialización de madera y cacao es muy fuerte. Algunas de las plantaciones son muy extensas. Por ejemplo, la que pertenece a la Compañía Menier Manufacturing, de Francia, costó \$500,000. Exportar aceite de cocoa podría ser un negocio lucrativo, pero nadie se ha ocupado de él.

Hay un recargo arancelario del diez por ciento a las importaciones que van a Greytown, y una tarifa incomprensible del cuarenta por ciento para el interior.

El salario que reciben los trabajadores en el interior es de 20 a 40 centavos por día, lo que incluye alimentación,<sup>28</sup> pero no cuesta nada alimentarlos, pues no comen otra cosa más que plátanos, y los comen verdes, maduros o podridos—no son muy exigentes—les da igual comerlos de una u otra forma.

Hay un buque inglés que sale todos los meses de Greytown a Jamaica y uno o dos puntos más, y de ahí parte rumbo a Southampton.

La carta constitutiva de la Compañía de Tránsito se ha extendido a 50 años, y ahora se espera que mejoren los alojamientos en los buques con ruedas a popa. Sin embargo, no creo que semejante cambio vaya a ocurrir, a menos de que inventen algunas otras alegres variaciones en los emparedados. Las aguas de los ríos Colorado y San Juan estarán unidas, pero los diques y otros proyectos destinados al mejoramiento del puerto de Greytown sin duda que, eventualmente, harán posible que los barcos puedan entrar más allá del arrecife de arena, en vez de tener que lanzar y fijar el ancla en mar abierto como sucede actualmente.<sup>29</sup>

### *El Aburrido derrotado*

Dormimos en tierra firme en Greytown, y movido, supongo, por no tener algo mejor que hacer, Brown arrinconó al Aburrido y empezó a explicarle que un lagarto no puede trepar un árbol. El Aburrido le respondió que ya lo sabía, pero el filósofo reparó en detalles elaborados y lo demostró, de todos modos, sin importar las protestas e interrupciones, y finalmente cansó a la víctima que huyó frenético y vencido. Puede ser que Brown hiciera esto a modo de broma, pero lo cierto es que no lo demostraba con su voz ni manera de actuar. Si realmente no estaba tratando de buena fe de probar que un lagarto no puede trepar un árbol, yo no lo pude saber, pero nunca disfruté tanto de algo así.

## **5. English Text of Mark Twain's *Travels with Mr. Brown***

### **Letter IV**

#### **San Juan and cholera**

DECEMBER 29th. —One sea voyage is ended anyhow. We have arrived at San Juan del Sur, and must leave the ship and cross the Isthmus—not to-day, though. They have posted a notice on the ship that the cholera is raging among a battalion of troops just arrived from New York, and so we are not permitted to go ashore to-day. And to the sea-weary eyes of some of our people, no doubt, bright green hills never looked so welcome, so enchanting, so altogether lovely, as these do that lie here within pistol-shot of us. But the law is spoken, and so half the ship's family are looking longingly ashore, or discussing the cholera news fearfully, and the other half are in the after cabin, singing boisterously and carrying on like a troop of wild school children.

#### *Ashore*

GREYTOWN, January 1st. —While we lay all night at San Juan, the baggage was sent ashore in lighters, and next morning we departed ourselves. We found San Juan to consist of a few tumble-down frame shanties—they call them hotels—nestling among green verdure and overshadowed by picturesque little hills. The spot where we landed was crowded with horses, mules, ambulances and half-clad yellow natives, with bowie-knives two feet long, and as broad as your hand, strapped to their waists. I thought these barefooted scoundrels were soldiers, but no, they were merely citizens in civil life. Here and there on the beach moved a soiled and ragged white woman, to whom the sight of our ship must have been as a vision of Paradise; for here a vast ship-load of passengers had been kept in exile for fifteen days through the wretched incompetency of one man—the Company's agent on the Isthmus. He had sent a steamer empty to San Francisco, when he knew well that this multitude of people were due at Greytown. They will finish their journey, now, in our ship.

Our party of eight—we had made it up the night before—being the first boat-load to leave the ship, was entitled to the first choice of the ambulances, or the equestrian accommodations that were to convey us the twelve miles we must go by land between San Juan and Virgin Bay, on Lake Nicaragua. Some of the saddle-horses and mules—many of them, in fact—looked very well; but if there was any choice between the ambulances, or especially between the miraculous scarecrows that were to haul them, it was hardly perceptible. You never saw such

harness in your life, nor such mules, nor such drivers. They were funny individually and funny in combination. Except the ghastly sores on the animals' backs, where the crazy harness had chafed, and scraped, and scarified—that part of it would move anybody's pity for the poor things.

We climbed into one of the largest of the faded red ambulances (mud wagons we call them in the mountains), with four little sore-backed rabbits hitched to it, and cleared for Virgin Bay. The driver commenced by beating and banging his team and cursing them like a furious maniac, in bad Spanish, and he kept it up all through that twelve-mile journey of three hours and a half, over a hard, level, beautiful road. We envied the people who were not crippled and could ride horseback.

But we clattered along pretty lively, and were a jolly party. The first thing the ladies noticed as we lost sight of the sea, and wound in among an overshadowing growth of dewy vines and forest trees, was a “dear, dear little baby—oh, see the darling!”—a vile, distempered, mud-colored native brat, making dirt-pies in front of an isolated cabin; and the first thing the men noticed was—was—but they could not make it out; a guideboard perhaps, or a cross, or the modest grave-stone of some ill-fated stranger. But it was none of these. When we drew nearer it turned out to be a sign nailed to a tree, and it said “Try Ward's shirts!” There was some round abuse indulged in, then, of Ward and plantation bitters men, and all such people, who invade all sacred places with their rascally signs, and mar every landscape one might gaze upon in worship, and turn to a farce every sentimental thought that enters his brain. I know that if I were to go to old Niagara, and stand with his mists blowing in my face and his voice thundering in my ear, I would swell with a noble inspiration and say, “Oh, grand, sublime, magnificent—” and then behold on his front, “S. T. 1860 X Plantation Bitters,” and be incensed. It is a shame.

### *The procession under way*

The bright, fresh green on every hand, the delicious softness and coolness of the air (it had just showered a little before we started), the interest of unknown birds and flowers and trees, the delightful new sensation of the bumping and rattling of the ambulance—everything so cheery and lively, as compared with our old dull monotony and shoreless sea on board the ship—wrought our party up to a pitch of joyous animation and enthusiasm that I would have thought impossible with such dry old sticks. I ask pardon of the ladies—and even of the gentlemen, also. All hands voted “the Nicaragua route forever!” [N.B. —They used to do that every day or two—and then every other day or two they would damn the Nicaragua route forever. Such are the ways of passengers, all the world over.]

About every two hundred yards we came across a little summer-house of a peanut stand at the roadside, with raven-haired, splendid-eyed Nicaragua damsels standing in attitudes of careless grace behind them—damsels buff-colored, like an envelope—damsels who were always dressed the same way: in a single flowing gown of fancifully figured calico, “gathered” across the breast (they are singularly full in the bust, the young ones), and ruffled all round, near the bottom of the skirt. They have white teeth, and pleasant, smiling, winning faces. They are virtuous according to their lights, but I guess their lights are a little dim. Two of these picturesque native girls were exceedingly beautiful—such liquid, languishing eyes! such pouting lips! such glossy, luxuriant hair! such ravishing, incendiary expression! such grace! such voluptuous forms, and such precious little drapery about them! such—

“But you just prospect one of them heifers with a fine-tooth”—

This attempted interruption was from Brown, and procured his banishment at once. This man will not consent to see what is attractive, alone, but always unearths the disagreeable features of everything that comes under his notice.

These groups of dark maidens keep for sale a few cups of coffee, tea or chocolate, some bananas, oranges, pine-apples, hard boiled eggs, a dozen bottles of their vile native liquors, some ornamental cups carved from gourds of the calabash tree, a monkey or two—and their prices were so moderate that, in spite of all orders and remonstrances to the contrary, the steerage passengers have been overloading their stomachs with all sorts of beverages and edibles, and will pay for it in Asiatic cholera before they are many days older, no doubt.

Our road was smooth, level, and free from mud and dust, and the scenery in its neighborhood was pleasing, though not particularly striking. Many of the trees were starred all over with pretty blossoms. There was no lack of vegetation, and occasionally the balmy air came to us laden with a delicious fragrance. We passed two or three high hills, whose bold fronts, free from trees or shrubs, were thickly carpeted with softest, greenest grass—a picture our eyes could never tire of. Sometimes birds of handsome plumage flitted by, and we heard the blythe songs of others as we rode through the forests. But the monkeys claimed all attention. All hands wanted to see a real, live, wild monkey skirmishing among his native haunts. Our interest finally moderated somewhat in the native women; the birds; the calabash trees, with their gourd-like fruit; the huge, queer knots on trees, that were said to be ants’ nests; the lime trees; and even in a singular species of cactus, long, slender and green, that climbed to the very tops of great trees, and completely hid their trunks and branches, and choked them to death in its winding folds—so like an ugly, endless serpent; but never did the party cease to consider the wild monkey a charming novelty and a joy forever.

### *Masquerading on the road*

Our four hundred passengers on horseback, muleback, and in four-mule ambulances, formed the wildest, raggedest and most uncouth procession I ever saw. It reminded me of the fantastic masquerading pageants they used to get up on the Fourth of July in the Western States, or on Mardigras Day in New Orleans. The steerage passengers travelled on muleback, chiefly, with coats, oil-skin carpet sacks, and blankets dangling around their saddles. Some of the saddles were new and good, but others were in all possible stages of mutilation and decay. There were not a dozen good riders in the two hundred and fifty that went on horseback, but every man seemed to consider that inasmuch as the animals belonged to “the Company,” it was a stern duty to ride them to death, if possible, and they tried hard to do it. Such racing and yelling, and beating and banging and spurring, and such bouncing of blanket bundles, and flapping and fluttering of coat-tails, and such frantic scampering of the multitude of mules, and bobbing up and down of the long column of men, and rearing and charging of struggling ambulances in their midst, I never saw before, and I never enjoyed anything so much.

I never saw Brown’s equanimity so disturbed as it was that day, either. The philosopher had received a charge at San Francisco—a widow, with three children and a servant girl. Every day on the trip, he had been obliged to go down among the sweltering stenches of the ship’s hold, to pull and haul Mrs. B.’s trunks out from among piles of other



baggage, and rummage among them for a shirt for Johnny, or a bib for Tommy, or a shawl for the mother or the maid, or a diaper for the baby, but these vexations were nothing to his Isthmus transportation troubles. He had to take his party horseback, and in order to keep them together amid the confusion of the procession, he tied his five mules together, end to end, and marched in single file—the forward horse’s tail made fast to the next one’s nose, and so on. He rode the leading horse himself, with the baby in his arms; Mrs. B. and the two boys came next, and the servant girl brought up the rear. It was a solemnly comical spectacle. Everything went well, though, till the racing began, and then the philosopher’s mule got his ambition up and led the party a merry dance. Brown tried to hold him back with one hand for a while, and then triced the baby up under his left arm, and pulled back with both hands. This had a good deal of effect, but still the little detachment darted through the main procession like the wind, making a sensation wherever it went, and was greeted with many a whack and many a laugh. Occasionally Brown’s mule stopped and fell to bucking, and then his other animals closed up and got tangled together in a helpless snarl. Of course, Brown had to unlimber the baby and straighten things out again. He swore hard, but under his breath, and sweated as no man ever sweated before. The entire procession had arrived at Virgin Bay and were stowed on the boat before he got there. But his beasts had grown tranquil enough by that time. Their heads were all down, and it was hard to tell which looked the most jaded and melancholy—themselves or their riders. It was like intruding a funeral cortege upon the boisterous hilarity of the balance of the ship’s family.

*All quiet again*

Comfortably quartered on the little steamer, we sat in the shade and lunched, smoked, compared notes of our jolly little scamper across the Isthmus, bought handsome mahogany walking-canes from the natives, and finally relapsed into pensive and placid gazing out upon the rippling waters of Lake Nicaragua and the two majestic mountains that tower up out of its blue depths and wrap their green summits in the fleecy clouds.

**Letter V**  
**Steamer SAN FRANCISCO,**  
*New Year’s Day*

*The twin mountains*

Out of the midst of the beautiful Lake Nicaragua spring two magnificent pyramids, clad in the softest and richest green, all flecked with shadow and sunshine, whose summits pierce the billowy clouds. They look so isolated from the world and its turmoil—so tranquil, so dreamy, so steeped in slumber and eternal repose. What a home one might make among their shady forests, their sunny slopes, their breezy dells, after he had grown weary of the toil, anxiety and unrest of the bustling, driving world. These mountains seem to have no level ground at their bases, but rise abruptly from the water. There is nothing rugged about them they are shapely and symmetrical, and all their outlines are soft, rounded and regular. One is 4,200 and the other 5,400 feet high, though the highest being the furthest removed makes

them look like twins. A stranger would take them to be of equal altitude. Some say they are 6,000 feet high, and certainly they look it. When not a cloud is visible elsewhere in the heavens, their tall summits are magnificently draped with them. They are extinct volcanoes, and consequently their soil (decomposed lava) is wonderfully fertile. They are well stocked with cattle ranches, and with corn, coffee and tobacco farms. The climate is delightful, and is the healthiest on the Isthmus.

### *Sandwiches, etc.*

Our boat started across the lake at 2 p.m., and at 4 a.m. the following morning we reached Fort San Carlos, where the San Juan River flows out—a hundred miles in twelve hours—not particularly speedy, but very comfortable.

Here they changed us to a long, double-decked shell of a stern-wheel boat, without a berth or a bulkhead in her—wide open, nothing to obstruct your view except the slender stanchions that supported the roof. And so we started down the broad and beautiful river in the gray dawn of the balmy summer morning.

At eight we breakfasted. On the lake boat they fed us on coffee and tea, and on sandwiches composed of two pieces of bread enclosing one piece of ham. On this boat they gave us tea, coffee, and sandwiches composed of one piece of ham between two pieces of bread. There is nothing like variety.

In a little while all parties were absorbed in noting the scenery on shore—trees like cypress; other trees with large red blossoms; great feathery tree ferns and giant cactuses; clumps of tall bamboo; all manner of trees and bushes, in fact, webbed together with vines; occasionally a vista that opened, stretched its carpet of fresh green grass far within the jungle, then slowly closed again.

### *The grave of the lost steamer*

In this land of rank vegetation, no spot of soil can be cleared off and kept barren a week. Nature seizes upon every vagrant atom of dust and forces it to relieve her over-burdened store-houses. Weeds spring up in the cracks of floors, and clothe the roofs of huts in green; if a handful of dust settles in the crotch of a tree, ferns spring there and wave their graceful plumes in the tropic breeze. Filibustering Walker sunk a steamboat in the river; the sands washed down, filled in around her, built up a little oval island. The wind brought seeds thither, and they clothed every inch of it in luxuriant grass. Then trees grew and vines climbed up and hung them with bright garlands, and the steamer's grave was finished. The wreck was invisible to us, save that the two great fore-and-aft braces still stood up out of the grass and fenced in the trees. It was a pretty picture.

### *Ancient castillo*

About noon, we swept gaily around a bend in the beautiful river, and a stately old adobe castle came into view—a relic of the olden time—of the old buccaneering days of Morgan and his merry men. It stands upon a grassy dome-like hill, and the forests loom up beyond. They say that Lord Nelson once captured it and that this was his first notable feat. It cost him several

hours, with 250 men, and good, hard, bloody fighting, to get it. In our time, Walker took it with 25 men, without firing a shot—through the treachery of the Commandante, they say.

There is a little straggling village under the hill, a village composed of a single rank of houses, extending some three hundred yards down the shore. There is a dangerous rapid here. It is said to be artificial—formed by man in former times to keep the pirate boats from penetrating the interior. We had to get ashore here, walk around the rapids, and get on another stern-wheeler. Every house we passed was a booth for the sale of fruits and provisions. The bananas, pine-apples, cocoa-nuts and coffee were good, and the cigars very passable, but the oranges, although fresh, of course, were of a very inferior quality. Cheapness is the order of the day. You can buy as much of any one article as you can possibly want for a dime, and a sumptuous dinner for two or three for half a dollar. Bring along your short bits when you come this way. It is the grand base and foundation of all values, and is better received, and with less suspicion, than any other coin.

### *An unpeopled paradise*

As we got under way and sped down the narrowing river, all the enchanting beauty of its surroundings came out. All gazed in rapt and silent admiration for a long time as the exquisite panorama unfolded itself, but finally burst into a conversational ecstasy that was alive with excited ejaculations.

The character of the vegetation on the banks had changed from a rank jungle to dense, lofty, majestic forests. There were hills, but the thick drapery of the vines spread upward, terrace upon terrace, and concealed them like a veil. We could not have believed in the hills, except that the upper trees towered too high to be on the bank level.

And everywhere in these vine-robed terraces were charming fairy harbors fringed with swinging garlands; and weird grottoes, whose twilight depth the eye might not pierce; and tunnels that wound their mysterious course none knew whither; and there were graceful temples—columns—towers—pyramids—mounds—domes—walls—all the shapes and forms and figures known to architecture, wrought in the pliant, leafy vines, and thrown together in reckless, enchanting confusion.

Now and then a rollicking monkey scampered into view, or a bird of splendid plumage floated through the sultry air, or the music of some invisible songster welled up out of the forest depths. The changing vistas of the river ever renewed the intoxicating picture; corners and points folding backward revealed new wonders beyond, of towering walls of verdure—gleaming cataracts of vines pouring sheer down a hundred and fifty feet, and mingling with the grass upon the earth—wonderful waterfalls of green leaves as deftly overlapping each other as the scales of a fish—a vast green rampart, solid a moment, and then, as we advanced, changing and opening into Gothic windows, colonnades—all manner of quaint and beautiful figures!

Sometimes a limbless veteran of the forest stood aloof in his flowing vine-ropes, like an ivy-clad tower of some old feudal ruin.

We came upon another wrecked steamer turned into an emerald island—trees reaching above the great walking-beam framework, and the tireless vines climbing over the rusty and blistered old locomotive boiler. And by-and-by a retreating point of land disclosed some lofty hills in the distance, steep and densely grown with forests—each tree-top a delicate green

dome, touched with a gleam of sunshine, and then shaded off with Indian-summery films into darkness; dome upon dome, they rose high into the sunny atmosphere, and contrasted their brilliant tints with the stormy purple of the sky beyond.

Along shore, huge alligators lay and sunned themselves and slept; birds with gaudy feathers and villainous hooked bills stood stupidly on overhanging boughs, and startled one suddenly out of his long cherished, dimly-defined notion that that sort of bird only lived in menageries; parrots flew by us—the idea of a parrot flying seemed funny enough—flying abroad, instead of swinging in a tin ring, and stooping and nipping that ring with its beak between its feet, and thus displaying itself in most unseemly attitude—flying, silently cleaving the air—and saying never a word! When the first one went by without saying “Polly wants a cracker,” it seemed as if there was something unnatural about the bird, but it did not immediately occur to me what it was. And there was a prodigiously tall bird that had a beak like a powder horn, and curved its neck into an S, and stuck its long legs straight out behind like a steering oar when it flew, that I thought would have looked more proper and becoming in the iron cage where it naturally belonged. And I will not deny that from the moment I landed on that Isthmus, the idea of a monkey up a tree seemed so consumedly absurd and out of all character, that I never saw one in such a position but I wanted to take him and chain him to a wagon wheel under the Bengal tiger’s cage, where he would necessarily feel more at home and not look so ridiculous.

### *The bore*

“What sort of a crooked, spready, cur’us looking tree is that out yonder?”

I looked at the speaker. He was by nature, constitution and habit a Bore—I could see that. I said:

“I don’t know.” I wanted to say, savagely, “How the devil should *I* know? Do I look like I ever was in this kind of a country before?”

“Looks like it might be an oak, or a slippry ellum, or something. But I reckon it ain’t, maybe?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it is, maybe it ain’t.”

“It’s got big blossoms on it like a hollyhock—”

“I don’t know—it may be a hollyhock.”

“Oh, no—I didn’t mean that—I meant—Geeminy! see that monkey jump! What kind of a noise do they make—do they squawk?”

“Now, I don’t know anything *whatever* about monkeys. They may squawk, or they may not—I hope to God they do!”

“Why?”

I struck my colors. This serene simplicity where I expected to make a telling shot, completely nonplussed me. I left without saying a word.

This fellow used to corner me and bore the life out of me with trivial reminiscences out of his insignificant history; with trifling scraps of information I had possessed from infancy; with decayed, worm-eaten jokes that made me frantic, and with eternal questions concerning things I knew nothing about and took no earthly interest in. One always meets such people on voyages, but I never met a specimen before that so completely tallied with my idea of a tiresome, exasperating, infernal bore.

On this second stern-wheel boat they gave us tea, coffee, and sandwiches formed by ingeniously secreting a slice of ham between two slices of bread. Truly, there is nothing like variety. It gives a zest to the simplest diet.

*Sandwiches, etc.*

The boys smoked, sang, shot at alligators, discussed the lignum-vitae, mahogany, bastard-cocoa and other curious trees, and gazed at the bewitching panorama of the river the livelong happy day, and at night we tied up at the bank within 30 miles of Greytown. Those who had hammocks swung them, and those who hadn't made beds of their overcoats, and soon the two dingy lanterns, hung forward and aft, shed a ghostly glimmer over the thick-strewn and vaguely defined multitude of slumberers. As I said before, the whole boiler-deck was wide open; just before daylight a chilly shower came driving in and roused everybody out. There was some complaining of sore bones by women and certain gentlemen who were unused to sleeping on hard, bare floors, but these little troubles were soon forgotten when the galley-boys came up and the usual frenzied and famishing rushing and crowding and shouting of "Sandwiches! Sandwiches!" took place and disclosed the happy truth that we had not only the usual tea and coffee and sandwiches for breakfast, but also cheese! Verily, variety is the spice of life. Nobody said anything about sore bones any more.

*A peopled paradise*

We got to Greytown early on the last day of the year, and saw the steamer at anchor that was to take us to New York. The town does not amount to much. There is a good deal of land around there, and it is curious that they didn't build it larger—but somehow they didn't. It is composed of two hundred old frame houses and some nice vacant lots, and its comeliness is greatly enhanced, I may say is rendered gorgeous, by the cluster of stern-wheel steamboats at the water front.

The population is 800, and is mixed—made up of natives, Spaniards, Germans, English and Jamaica negroes. Of course the spoken language is Spanish. Some of the negro babies do not wear any clothes at all, and the cows march through the public thoroughfares with a freedom which pen cannot describe. The inhabitants are not vain, and do not care for luxury and furniture. Most of them keep for sale small cigars called "poco tiempos"—ten cents a grab—and native brandy, tropical fruits and sea-grass hammocks. They sell everything cheap—even excellent foreign wines and such things, for import duties are light. The transit business has made every other house a lodging camp, and you can get a good bed anywhere for a dollar. It does not cost much to keep a Greytown bed in order; there is nothing to it but a mattress, two sheets and a mosquito bar. The town is ornamented with cocoa-nut trees, the outskirts are bordered with chaparral, and everywhere the pink bachelor-button blossoms of the sensitive plant smile among the grass. [Smile among the grass is good.—M. T.]

The *Santiago de Cuba* brought the cholera to the Isthmus last trip, and thirty-five people died of it. A young man, a resident of Greytown, also died of it, which exasperated his mother very much. So the citizens got up a Board of Health, and prohibited the cholera from coming ashore there any more. While we were up town the stern-wheeler containing our steerage and second-cabin passengers arrived, and was at once warned to anchor in the stream

and let no one come ashore! Not until we had been there twenty-four hours, and were ready to take final leave, did those crowded and cursing passengers discover what bred the *tabu*. It then came out that while Brown was drinking some native brandy in one of the saloons, he remarked that he had tasted milder stuff; but then, he said, he had escaped cholera on the Isthmus and smallpox among the steerage folks, and he guessed he could survive that drink. A citizen at once reported the remark to the Board of Health, and hence the order—and never a steerage passenger got a chance to go ashore at Greytown. There was some talk in the steerage of hanging Brown, but it never came to anything.

### *Nicaragua*

The Republic of Nicaragua has some populous cities in it. Leon, 48,000; Massaye [sic], 38,000; Rivas, 30,000; Managua, 24,000; Granada, 18,000; Chinandaga [sic], 18,000; and several other towns of 3,000 and 4,000. The total population is 320,000—all in towns and cities, nearly. Only property-holders who are declared citizens can vote. Greytown is not represented in the councils of the nation at all. The property there is held by temporary residents—foreigners—who care nothing about politics.

There are a good many gold and silver mines in the country. The Choutales—gold quartz —(English Company—cost £250,000)—is worked by rude native machinery, but has new, modern machinery on the way. It's first clean-up (my notes say) was £200,000. For the sake of our reputation we will consider that that was meant for £20,000—and it is unquestionably large enough, even at that.

A Company of Californians have bought two mines—the Albertin and Petaluma—and have just begun work. They paid \$70,000 for one of them.

An English Company are just beginning work on a mine which they paid £30,000 for.

There are also coal, silver, copper and opal mines. One of the latter, near the road between San Juan and Virgin Bay, has produced opals which, in the rough, were as large as almonds.

The Republic also has, among its numerous attractions and sources of commercial prosperity, some lakes and rivers of sulphur, and some extinct volcanoes—(an American Company has bought one of these and are sinking on it—they think they can make it go again.)

Nicaragua exports parrots and monkeys, India-rubber, logwood, sugar, hides, cochineal, coffee, deerskins, mahogany, chocolate, gold, opals, sarsaparilla, tortoise shells (quite a heavy business), and tropical fruits.

The rubber trade is large; last year Greytown alone exported \$112,000 worth. Rubber is worth 28 cents a pound when it starts—in Europe, 54.

One man does all the mahogany business that is done on the northern coast of Nicaragua. He had one log, worth \$12,000, which was so large it had to lay several years before there was water enough to float it over the bar. He will clear \$500,000 this year, they say.

There is a very heavy export trade in logwood. Also in cacao (chocolate). Some of the plantations are very extensive. One owned by the Menier Manufacturing Company, of France, cost \$500,000.

They could export cocoa-nut oil profitably, but no one takes hold of it.

There is an *ad valorem* duty of ten per cent. on imports for Greytown, and a sort of incomprehensible tariff of forty per cent. for the interior.

Laborers' wages in the interior are 20 to 40 cents a day and found. But it don't cost anything to board them; they never eat anything but plantains, and they eat them green, ripe or rotten they are not particular—they would as soon have them one way as the other.

There is an English steamer monthly from Greytown to Jamaica and one or two other points, and thence to Southampton.

The Transit Company's charter has been extended to fifty years, and now it is expected that they will improve the accommodations on the stern-wheel boats. I don't see any room for it, however, unless they can hatch out some more of those happy variations on the sandwiches. The waters of the Colorado and San Juan Rivers are to be joined together, however, dykes built, and other projects instituted tending to the improvement of the Greytown harbor, that will eventually make it possible for ships to come inside the reef, no doubt, instead of pitching and charging at anchor in the open roadstead as at present.

### *The bore conquered*

We slept ashore in Greytown, and for the want of something better to do, I suppose, Brown cornered the Bore and fell to instructing him that an alligator could not climb a tree. The Bore said he knew that before, but the philosopher went into elaborate details and demonstrated anyhow, unmindful of protests and interruptions, and finally wore out the victim and drove him off a frantic and vanquished man. Brown may have done it for a joke, but surely there was no semblance of it in his voice or manner. If he had not really set his heart in good faith on proving that an alligator could not climb a tree, I was not able to discover it. But I never enjoyed anything better.

### Notas

1. Rodney uses this phrase as the epigraph for his book on Twain's travel writings, *Mark Twain Overseas*.
2. Twain did mention one of his crossings of Panama by train in a letter to the *Chicago Republican*, dated August 17, 1868.
3. Folkman describes the unsanitary conditions aboard many of these ships. Although Folkman is writing about life on ships circa 1851, his description was still apt for the short fifteen years later when Twain boarded the steamship *America* bound for San Juan del Sur: "Many of the discomforts aboard ship stemmed from the overcrowding of the vessels, this being the rule rather than the exception during the first two years of operation. Many of the passengers did not even have a berth in the steerage and had to find a coil of rope or plank on deck on which to lay their heads at night. Under these conditions sanitary facilities proved totally inadequate and often as not four water closets served over 300 people. During warm weather the steerage and even the staterooms became unbearably hot and nighttime found the dining saloon and main deck a mass of tangled arms and legs, with men, women, and children sprawled promiscuously throughout the ship, some swinging in hammock in the rigging and others propped up in the companionways. Seasickness was the rule, and often passengers could not find their way through the mass of humanity to the rail in time. The limited space allowed the ship to carry only enough water for drinking and there were no bathing facilities. Consequently, the passengers soon found themselves living in their own dirt and filth, particularly in the steerage. Under such conditions, any person infected with disease soon spread it to their companions, and epidemics of yellow fever and cholera were not uncommon" (Folkman 41-42).

4. The crossing of Panama by train was not established until 1855 (Folkman 1972: 58).
5. The original trip, prior to Vanderbilt, was from San Juan del Norte up the San Juan River to Lake Nicaragua, then across the lake to Granada, and from there by mule to Realejo (Folkman 1972: 5-7).
6. He first used his pen name in 1863 working as a reporter for the *Territorial Enterprise*. The passenger list published by the *Alta California* for his trip to Nicaragua lists him as Mark Twain, not Samuel Clemens (Twain 1940: 281).
7. Mary Louis Pratt has described thoroughly this phenomenon in travel writing. In her essay, “Scratches on the Face of the Country: or, What Mr. Barrow Saw in the Land of the Bushmen,” Pratt describes what she terms the “manners-and-customs” style of travel writing. In this type of discourse within the larger, overarching discourse of travel literature, Pratt claims, with a good deal of insight, in reference to John Barrow’s *Account of Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa in the Years 1797 and 1798*, “Though he [Barrow] was traveling was a colonial official, charged with mediating disputes between Boer colonists and indigenous people, and though he was traveling with a large party of European, Boers, and Hottentots, human interaction plays little role in his narrative” and that Barrow’s work contains “a strange attenuated kind of narrative because it does everything possible to minimize all human presence [. . .] indigenous inhabitants are there only in the abstract (‘man’)” (Pratt, 1986, 138-144).
8. He seldom fails to notice women on his travels. In Italy, in *Innocents Abroad*, he says of Italian women: “I scanned every female face that passed and it seemed to me that all were beautiful. I never saw such a perfect freshet of loveliness before . . . I fell in love with a hundred and eighty women myself, on Sunday evening, and yet I am not of a susceptible nature” (qtd. in Rodney 42).
9. Twain was a member of the confederate army for a short time.
10. Mistakes do creep into Twain’s writings, however. When he says of Nicaraguans that they “never eat anything but plantains, and they eat them green, ripe or rotten they are not particular—they would as soon have them one way as the other,” to Central Americans the joke is on Mark Twain, not them (Twain, 1940, 57).
11. For a detailed analysis of the territorial boundaries between Costa Rica and Nicaragua and the role of the San Juan River see Sibaja, Luis Fernando *Nuestro Limite con Nicaragua*. San José, Costa Rica: *Comisión Nacional de Conmemoraciones Históricas*, 1974.
12. The section on arriving in Central America, i.e., San Juan del Sur, begins halfway through Letter IV to the *Alta California*.
13. *Ambulances*. Twain uses the word “ambulances” throughout his narrative of the crossing of the isthmus. *The Dictionary of the American West* defines ambulances as “a light, canvas-topped army wagon for carrying personnel, wounded or healthy; might mean almost any government wagon for transporting people. Also called a prairie wagon, it had no necessary association with hospitals or medical care” (Blevins 5). One historian translates the term *ambulances* as “rustic waggons” (Rodney 24).
14. Here Twain calls the knives, “bowie knives two feet long” as opposed to the Spanish word “machetes,” a term that he was familiar with.
15. Twain’s term is “mud wagons.”



16. A satirical reference to Artemus Ward, whose real name was Charles Farrar Browne (1834-1867), an American humorist and friend of Twain, whose reputation and writings would have been familiar to many readers of the *Alta California*. Ward dies March 6 of that same year (1867)—some three months after Twain was writing.
  
17. *S.T. 1860 X Plantation Bitters*. Eugene Fitch Ware, politician, poet, lawyer, soldier, and writer, wrote the following comment on Plantation Bitters in his book, *The Indian War of 1864*: “That good old ancient time was an era of drinking. There was no such thing known then in the West as ‘prohibition,’ and nearly everybody drank a little. It was also the age of bitters. Sometime back in the early ‘50s the manufacture of artificial bitters had been introduced. Before that time an old invention called ‘Stoughton’ had been for a long while in vogue. In every saloon was a bottle of ‘Stoughton bitters,’ and if anybody wanted any bitters he called for some Stoughton and put it in. It was only occasionally the Stoughton was used, but the Stoughton bottle was always at the bar, and the synonym for an idle fellow, always in evidence and doing nothing, was to call him a ‘Stoughton bottle.’ And frequently men were spoken of in politics or religion or in a story as a mere ‘Stoughton bottle.’ That is, they were in evidence, but nobody paid much attention to them. The simile survived for a lifetime after the Stoughton bottle had gone. But someone afterwards invented ‘bitters’ as a beverage; three celebrated kinds were thrown onto market, and made great fortunes for their inventors, as were early occupants of the field. The first in order was ‘Plantation Bitters’; next, ‘Hostetter’s Bitters’; third, ‘Log Cabin Bitters.’ By the time the war broke out these bitters had been advertised with an expenditure of money which at that time was thought remarkable. Plantation Bitters appeared in 1860, and every wall and fence and vacant place in the United States was placarded with the legend, ‘S. T. 1880 X.’ For several months everybody was guessing what the sign meant. It was in the newspapers. It was distributed in handbills on the street. It was seen at every turn, ‘S. T. 1860 X.’ After the world had long grown tired of guessing, there appeared the complete legend, ‘Plantation Bitters, S. T. 1860 X.’ Plantation Bitters became the bottled liquor of the age. It was made out of alcohol, water and flavoring, and was really very attractive as to taste and results. The Hostetter and the Log Cabin followed closely behind in popularity. The Log Cabin got into sutler tents all over the district which the army occupied. Its principal advertisement was the strange glass bottle made in the shape of a log cabin. At about the time I speak of, all three of these liquors were on sale at Boyer’s. The legend of the Plantation Bitters was that it meant ‘Sure thing in ten years from 1860.’ That is, when the inventor had made the decoction, and submitted it to a friend as an invention and marketable article, the friend, so the story goes, told him that it was a sure thing for a fortune in ten years. So, acting on this thought, he had billed the United States, ‘S. T. 1860 X.,’ and spent half a million advertising ‘S. T. 1860 X.,’ before anybody knew what it was all about” (Ware).
  
18. Writing some ten years later than Mark Twain, in 1874, Robert Ingersoll (1833-1899) in *Hard Times And The Way Out*, writes a remarkably similar passage to Twain’s. One wonders if Ingersoll had read Twain’s letter to the *Alta California*: “Everybody advertised, and those who were not selling goods and real estate were in the medicine line, and every rock beneath our flag was covered with advice to the unfortunate; and I have often thought that if some sincere Christian had made a pilgrimage to Sinai and climbed its venerable crags, and in a moment of devotion dropped upon his knees and raised his eyes toward heaven, the first thing that would have met his astonished gaze would in all probability have been: St.1860 X Plantation Bitters” (Ingersoll).
  
19. Here is Brown’s actual phrase, “But you just prospect one of them heifers with a fine tooth.”
  
20. For anyone who knows nothing about the accommodations of passengers on ships, the nomenclature for different classes can be bewildering. There were three main classes of passengers. Generally on a steamboat there was first, second, and third class. The first was called cabin or saloon, the second was called second-cabin passengers, and third class, where the majority of the passengers ate and slept, was called steerage. For a detailed description of the differences in classes see Folkman (40-42) and Lewis (192-195).

21. William Walker (1824-1860).
22. "Short bits." The *American Dictionary of the West* defines "short bits" as a dime (Blevins 26). Walker and Dane mention that "In the West, the long bit was fifteen cents, the short bit ten cents. As nickels were almost non-existent on the frontier [North American], change for a quarter nearly always left the buyer with a short bit" (283).
23. *Slippry ellum*. In a Texas slave narrative, William Mathews writes, "I is old and my eyesight am gone, but I can still 'lect. I ain't never forgit it. My massa, old Buck Adams, could out-mean de debbil heself. He sho' hard-hard and sneaky as slippry ellum." As used by Twain, the term "slippry ellum" is probably slang for a sugar maple.
24. **"I struck my colors." Compare Walt Whitman in *Song of Myself*:**  
 "Our frigate takes fire,  
**The other asks if we demand quarter?**  
**If our colors are struck and the fighting done?**  
**Now I laugh content for I hear the voice of my little captain,**  
*We have not struck, he composedly cries, we have just begun our part of the fighting."* (58)
25. "[. . .] and everywhere the pink bachelor-button blossoms of the sensitive plant smile among the grass." The "pink bachelor-button" flower that Twain refers to is a cornflower (*centaurea cyanus*). **In Spanish it is translated as an "aciano" or "azulejo."** **The entire plant is called a "febrífuga."**
26. "Milder stuff." Twain's irony is apparent.
27. The correct spellings are Masaya and Chinandega. Twain most likely took these spellings from maps of Central America, done in English, in the nineteenth century. See his spelling of "Choutales" for "Chontales" above.
28. "Laborers' wages in the interior are 20 to 40 cents a day and found."
29. The problems with the harbor at Greytown were serious at the time, and Twain, a exriverboat pilot, understood the difficulties all too well. The harbor was slowly being swamped by sand and to dredge it would have been costly. Folkman describes the problem of the sand build up in detail in *The Nicaraguan Route*: "In the years 1851 to 1857 over twenty-three feet of water flowed over the bar at the entrance to the harbor, and vessels of all sizes easily entered the port. During these years the ocean steamers anchored inside the harbor just off Point Arenas while the river steamers pulled alongside to discharge and take aboard passengers. However, by the time the company reopened the route in 1862, it was apparent that the alluvial growth which had created the point of land called Point Arenas was slowly filling up the harbor. At that time the company felt confident that it could restore the harbor. Then in July of 1863 an earthquake lifted the bar at the entrance of the harbor and reduced the water depth to less than ten feet. After this occurrence the ocean sometimes caused delays of several days in transferring passengers to the river steamers. In addition, the raised bar restricted the flow of water out of the San Juan River and increased the rate of build up of sand bars in the harbor and lower river. As the silt became deeper, the water diverted more and more through the Colorado branch flowing through Costa Rica. In 1848 some nine-tenths of the water had flowed out the lower San Juan; by 1865 eleven-twelfths of the water flowed through the Colorado branch to the ocean. Unfortunately, no harbor existed at the entrance of the Colorado branch, and the combination of silt deposit and restricted flow of water made the lower San Juan almost impossible to navigate during the dry season" (115-116).

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