Interesting Extract.

NICARAGUA, AND THE FILLIBUSTERS.

It is a fixed idea with the American people, that in due course of time they are to have the control all the North American Continent, and of the Island of Cuba; they consider this their "manifest destiny," and any movement in that direction is looked on by them as a matter of course, and deserving of encouragement.

The popular name for the agency by which such a state of things is to be brought about, is "fillibusterism." The word "fillibuster" is a French and Spanish corruption of the English word freebooter, an appellation which, in former days, from its being frequently assumed by a class of men who disliked the harsher name of pirate, became familiar to the inhabitants of the West India Islands and Central America; but as fillibusterism is now used, it expresses the action of the American people, or a portion of the people, in the acquisition of territory which does not belong to them, unrestrained by the responsibilities of the American Government.

The sovereign people of the United States, and the United States Government, are two distinct bodies, influenced by different motives. The Government is obliged to maintain the appearance of keeping faith with other friendly powers, but at the same time is so anxious to gain popularity at home, that it does not take really effectual measures to check any popular movement, however illegal it may be, if favoured by the majority of the people.

The manner in which the state of Nicaragua has been reduced, or it should rather be said, raised to her present position, by being occupied and governed by a large body of Americans, affords an instance of the truth of this statement.

For the last two years the American and English Governments have been exchanging diplomatic letters, arguing at great length on the abstract meaning of certain words of a treaty, by which either power was equally bound not to occupy, fortify, colonise, or take possession of any part of Central America. In the meantime a party of American citizens, under command of a certain Colonel Walker, have virtually taken possession of, and do now govern the State of Nicaragua, one of the States specially mentioned in the treaty. When they first landed in Nicaragua, not ten months ago, they numbered only fifty-six men; but in as far as they had the good-will of the majority of the American people, they represented the nation as truly as General Pierce and his cabinet. Colonel Walker was merely the practical exponent of a popular theory, and his success has been so rapid and decisive, and such is the position he now holds in Nicaragua, strengthened by daily accessions to his force from California and from the United States, that the Americanization of Nicaragua may be almost considered as an established fact.

Should the Americans in that country be able to maintain their position, of which, at present, there seems to be every probability, the successful fillibustering of Nicaragua will be but the beginning; the end will be the occupation, by Americans, of all the Central American States, and, in due course of time, of Mexico and Cuba.

In order to show why the fillibustering energies of the Americans have been specially directed to Nicaragua, and how it is that so small a party of them have so quickly got control of that State, and also to appreciate fully the position which their leaders occupy as members of the newly-formed government, it is necessary to give some information on the political condition of the country, and on recent events there, which the writer, while a resident in the country during the greater part of the revolution, had good opportunity of acquiring.

On the discovery of gold in California in 1848, when there was such a rush of gold-hunters to that land of promise, both from the Old and the New World, the route generally followed was that by Panama, as the most expeditious—lines of steamers being established by American companies from New York and New Orleans to Chagres, and from Panama to San Francisco.

The supply of steamers, however, was never sufficient for the accommodation of the crowds of eager emigrants; the profits of the steamship companies were enormous, and American enterprise was not long in discovering and opening a new, and in many respects, superior route to the golden regions of the Pacific.

The new route lay through the State of Nicaragua, one of the five States into which the Central American Confederation was dissolved in the year 1831.

It was to the advantages offered by its geographical position that Nicaragua owed its distinction.—The Lake of Nicaragua, a splendid sheet of water, ninety miles long, by about fifty broad, lies within the State. Its most western extremity is only twelve miles from the Pacific, and at its eastern extremity about one hundred and fifty miles from the Atlantic; it empties itself into that ocean through the River San Juan, which is navigable all the distance for small vessels, and forms at its mouth the harbour of Greytown or San Juan del Norte. An inter-oceanic canal was first talked of, but it was found that it would take all the gold in California to construct it; so that idea was for the time abandoned, and a New York Company, styled the Accessory Transit Company of Nicaragua, got a charter from the State, granting them for considerations the exclusive privilege of steam-navigation, of the river San Juan, and of the Lake Nicaragua, for a period of ninety-nine years.

Steamboats of various capacities, to suit the navigation of the river and of the lake, were sent out—a road over the twelve miles of land, between the lake and the harbour of San Juan del Sur on the Pacific, was commenced—steamships were put on between that port and San Francisco, and between New York and Greytown, and a large share of the Californian emigration began to stream through the country.

The difficulties of the route were at first considerable, owing to the number of rapids in the River San Juan requiring boats of peculiar construction for their navigation, and from the fact of the country through which lies the road to the Pacific, being a mountainous wilderness, the greater part covered by a dense tropical forest.

In the rainy season, which lasts for about five months, the road was so bad that a mule would sink to his belly at every step; the twelve miles were not unfrequently a two day's journey, and many a poor mule, after vainly struggling to extricate himself, succumbed to his fate, and was absorbed in the mud, leaving his rider to fight his own way through, which he generally did without much trouble. Such little difficulties were not thought much of by Californian emigrants in those days.

The Company, however, soon completed the road, and so far perfected their arrangements, that the passage from ocean to ocean is performed in two days.

The travel to and fro between California and the Atlantic States is not confined to any particular class of the community. Capitalists, merchants, professional men, mechanics, labourers,—in fact, people of all classes, are constantly going and coming For the last five years an average of two thousand Americans per month have passed to and fro by this route, and, during the few days occupied in transit, have had ample time to admire and covet the splendid country through which they passed, to look with utter contempt on the natives, and to speculate what a country it would be if it were only under the Stars and Stripes.

The country, its climate, its advantages, resources, and social and political condition have thus been made gradually familiar to a constantly increasing proportion of the people of the United States and California.

It is in natural consequence of all this, and of the apparent hopelessness of immediate success in Cuba, that the attention of the fillibustering portion of the American community has been gradually directed to the State of Nicaragua, and the late civil war in that country offered too favourable an opportunity to be lost for making a beginning in furtherance of the cherished idea.

The constitution of Nicaragua, like that of all the Spanish American States, is republican—that is to say, in name: in effect it approaches more nearly to a despotism, a mode of government much better adapted to a people, the majority of whom are quite incompetent to form any idea on the subject of self-government.

Since the dissolution of the Central American Confederation the country has been in a constant state of revolution. Two years is about the longest period of peace which has intervened. The people are wantonly destructive and cruel in their civil warfare; and having been so actively employed for nearly twenty years in cutting each other's throats, battering down each other's cities, spending their money in gunpowder, and ruining all producing interests, they had managed to reduce themselves and their country to such a wretched state of misery, that it really seemed to be the duty of some civilized nation to step in and keep them all in order.

In passing through the country, one cannot but be struck with the ruin and desolation every where apparent, and with the remains of bygone wealth and grandeur, but little in accordance with the poverty and listless indolence in which the inhabitants are now contented to live.

Their cities are half in ruins, and the churches, which, in their mode of warfare, they use as fortresses, have come in for their full share of destruction. Those which remain are peppered all over with cannon balls. The ruins on the old indigo and cotton estates give one an idea of the different way in which the people once employed themselves; but now, in a country capable of producing in the greatest abundance indigo, cotton, sugar, rice, coffee, tobacco, and nearly every other tropical production, little else is to be seen but plaintains and Indian corn, the two great staple articles of food. The tobacco grown in the country is good; the people, men, women, and children, are inveterate smokers, but they do not even raise sufficient tobacco for their own consumption. The "cacao," or chocolate, raised in the neighbourhood of the town of Rivas, is the finest in the world; it is a national beverage, and the greater part of the crop is consumed in the country; a small quantity is exported to the neighbouring States; but with the exception of a few bullock hides and deer skins, which are sent to New York, the country cannot be said to have any exports.

The climate generally is by no means unhealthy. It varies very much throughout the State, being in some parts much tempered by a constant breeze off the lake, while in the highlands of Segovia and Mataglapa, the temperature is so moderate that most of the grains and fruits of the north can be raised in great perfection.

The rainy season commences about the end of July, and continues till November or December.—During this season it rains in torrents for days at a time, and the roads become almost impassable.—The most sickly periods of the year are the beginning and the end of this season; fever and ague are then very prevalent, but the natives suffer more than foreigners, chiefly owing to the wretched way in which they live, the habitations of the lower orders affording generally but poor protection against the weather.

In the mountains of the district of Mataglapa, which form part of the great range which traverses all the North American continent, are mines of gold and silver. They have hitherto only been worked by the Indians in a very rude manner, but sufficient has been done to prove that they are rich; if scientifically worked, they will no doubt prove very productive.

The forests abound in rosewood, mahogany, and other beautiful woods, and throughout the State many valuable medicinal gums and plants are found.

The scenery is varied and very beautiful; at certain seasons the trees are completely covered with flowers, and the forests are a confused mass of luxuriant vegetation.

There are several volcanic mountains in the country, all of great similarity of appearance; the finest is Ometepe, which rises out of the lake, in the shape of a perfect cone, to the height of many thousand feet.

The people are very deficient in ambition and energy, and have a very decided objection to labour. As long as a man has sufficient to supply his immediate wants, he cannot be induced to work, but will devote himself to the passive enjoyment of swinging in his hammock, and smoking a cigar.—In this way they pass the greater part of their time as very little labour is requisite to provide plantains beans and Indian corn, which are the principal articles of food.

Gambling is a prevailing vice, cards and dice being chiefly played. Cock-fighting, however, is the great national sport, and at this the most money is staked. The fight is never of a very long duration, being generally nothing more than a flutter of wings for a moment, when one cock crows over the other lying dead at his feet, nearly cut in two by the long sharp knives with which their heels are armed.

They have celebrated breeds of chickens, on which they pride themselves, and in almost every house in the country may be seen one or more gamecocks tied by the leg in a corner. The owner is always ready to fight a cock on any occasion, but Sunday afternoon is the time generally devoted to this amusement, which is patronised by all classes.

The people possess a great deal of natural grace, and are extremely polite and formal in their manners; even the lower orders are remarkable for their gracefulness of gesture, and for their courteous phraseology.

The principal cities of Nicaragua are Granada, on the northern shore of the lake, and Leon, about a hundred and fifty miles to the north, and not far from the Pacific coast. They are both fine cities, built in the usual Spanish-American style, with narrow streets, and large houses of a single story, covering an immense area, and built in the form of a square, the centre being an open space generally planted with trees and flowers, and all round which is a wide open corridor. The houses are very spacious and lofty, and admirably adapted to the climate.

The population of Granada is about 15,000, that of Leon is rather more. Between the inhabitants of these two cities there has always existed a bitter feeling of jealousy and enmity, and in most of their revolutions the opposing factions have been the Granadinos against the Leoneses. So it was in the revolution which is only now terminated, and which commenced in May 1854.

The Government at that time was in the hands of the Grenada party. The President, the late Don Fruto Chamorro, was a man of great energy and determination, but unfortunately also of most stubborn obstinacy. He would listen to advice from no one, but blindly insisted on carrying out his own ideas. After being a little more than a year in power, and becoming more and more despotic every day, he issued a decree, declaring himself president for four years more than the usual term.

The Leon party of course immediately got up a revolution, of which the leaders were a few prominent men, whom Chamorro had a few months before banished from the State, on suspicion of their being engaged in a conspiracy against the government. At the head of them was Francisco Castillon, a man of superior education, and with much more liberal and enlightened views than most of his countrymen, having spent some years in England as minister for Nicaragua. The object of the revolution was to place Castillon in power, and the party professed to entertain liberal ideas, and styled themselves the Democratic Party. They commenced their operations at Realejo, a small port on the Pacific, at the northern extremity of the State, where, with a small force, they surprised the few soldiers of the garrison. They proceeded to Chinandega, a considerable town about six miles on the way to Leon. Here they met but slight resistance the majority of the people being favourable to them; and with a large addition to their force, they marched towards Leon, distant about thirty miles where they established their head-quarters, after fighting one battle in the neighbourhood with the government forces under Chamorro in person who was defeated, and retired to Granada. In Leon they remained some time recruiting their forces, before venturing to attack Granada, which is the great stronghold of the government party.

The system adopted of recruiting is very simple indeed. A few soldiers with fixed bayonets are sent out to bring in fresh men, or, to use their own expressive term, to "catch" men. When the unfortunate recruit is "caught," a musket is put in his hands, and he becomes a soldier. Soldiering is by no means a popular occupation; during a revolution, at the approach of forces of either party, the peace loving natives, in order to escape being "caught," and forced into the service, will remain hidden in the woods till they are nearly starved.—The lower orders take but little interest in the revolutions, or in politics, and from troops raised in this way, of course very valorous deeds are not to be expected. They generally desert on the first opportunity; but, if they do not take their muskets with them, it is of little consequence, as other men are soon caught, and made to carry them. Sometimes, however, men become scarce, the able-bodied having emigrated to some more peaceful locality; in such a case one-half of a garrison is placed to keep guard over the other half, to prevent their running away.

There is consequently no mutual feeling of confidence between officers and men. During impending danger of an attack, the officers will keep their horses saddled all night, and sleep with their spurs on, ready to cut and run at a moment's notice, and leave their men to take care of themselves. The men, in their turn, when led into battle, will turn round and desert their officers at the most critical moment. There are exceptions, of course; and during the late revolution, many, both officers and men, fought well and bravely; none more so than the late President Chamorro.

While the Democrats were recruiting in Leon, Chamorro was busy collecting his forces in Granada, and preparing to stand a siege.

In all these Spanish towns is a large public square called the Plaza in which are generally the principal church, the barracks, and other public buildings. The Plaza in case of war, becomes the citadel, the streets leading into it being all barricaded, and cannon planted so as to command the approaches. Chamorro enclosed within his barricades the Plaza, and a considerable portion of the city immediately surrounding it. The streets being narrow, baricades were soon made of logs and "adobes," a sort of sun-dried bricks, of which the houses are built.

Double and triple barricades of this sort, eight or ten feet high, presented a very effectual resistance to anything which the enemy had to bring against them. The Democrats soon made their appearance, and taking possession of all that part of the city not enclosed in the barricades, they fixed their [illegible]