NOTES OF MEXICAN TRAVEL

from THE FOREST VEGETATION OF NORTHERN MEXICO.—II.

POPULUS Fremontii, var. Wislizeni, Watson Cottonwood. — Though the impression was purposely conveyed . . . that the high plains of North Mexico are destitute of arborescent vegetation, a few unimportant exceptions must be mentioned. Conspicuous among these is this Cottonwood, which rears high its rounded head of abundant bright green foliage, in striking contrast throughout most of the year with the gray and brown tints of the surrounding landscape. This tree is not abundant, because water is not abundant; for it is a sure index of the presence of living water either on the surface of the soil or not far below it. It grows scatteringly along streams or clustered about springs. Its centre of distribution is on the Rio Grande, and it follows this river northward to its upper waters in south Colorado and the Tributaries of this river from whatever direction into their narrower mountain caniouns. Westward it ranges along the boundary quite to the Pacific, and southward extensively through the valleys of Mexico, and there often carried by man considerably beyond its indigenous limits.

Cheering to the traveler over heated and dusty hills and plains is the sight of its shining leafage with promise of refreshing shade and water. The Mexicans seem to regard this tree with sentiments similar to those cherished by the Orientals for the Palm or the New Engander for the Maple. They plant it by the water, convenient to which they have built their dwellings, and set it along their irrigating ditches. No visitor to Mexico but has noticed and admired that peculiar feature of Mexican cities, the avenue of grand old Poplars, double-lined on each side it may be, kept alive and flourishing, if on high ground, by streams of water conducted along the rows. The Spanish name for the Cottonwood—for any species of Poplar, in fact—is Alamo, that for this avenue Alameda, a noun having the form of the perfect participle—that is to say, the Poplared place. . . .

C. G. Pringle

[Garden and Forest 1 (1888): 104, 105]
IN A MEXICAN GARDEN

FOR a few hours of a sunny day in October last I was a guest in an old garden in a village situated by the base of the volcano of Toluca, fully 8,500 feet above the sea, and I found interest in observing what plants are employed by the Mexicans to form a flower-garden and how these succeed at so high an altitude. Light frosts fall in the region, but snows never. The season of growth extends from June to October, a short summer; and the sun during this period is obscured one-third of the time, while the temperature scarcely mounts above eighty degrees, Fahrenheit.

The garden was a quinta, that is, a large garden in the suburbs of a town, devoted usually to flowers, fruits and vegetables, mixed. In the little interior court of their town-house the ladies of the family who entertained, cared for a similar collection of plants, growing in beds in the soil around the central fountain or in great red vases set in a line just under the colonnade surrounding the court—vases of Hydrangeas, Tuberoses, Lilies, Irises, Geraniums, Fuchsias, Roses, etc. The quinta was ampler, an acre or more in extent, and was located by the threshing-floor and granaries of the hacienda, where it joined the village. It was enclosed with a high wall of adobes, more to afford seclusion and security than shelter for the plants. Hither came the family with their friends, whenever they wished to leave their close house for a ramble and an hour in the open air. To serve this use is the design of the quinta. It was laid out with broad walks and borders and was shaded by a few trees. There was the Australian Gum-tree, the furor for which of twenty years ago the Mexicans shared, having been induced to plant it to the exclusion of more beautiful native trees by a German, who had a nursery in the capital city. It succeeds here only too well; there was the Montezuma Pine, Bentham’s Cypress, Bonplant’s Willow, of erect growth and dark green foliage, the Weeping Willow and the Pepper-tree, with drooping branches quite as graceful as the last and with finer foliage.

Of shrubs I noted Viburnum Opulus, Datura arborea, a variety with blood-red flowers, the Crape Myrtle, the common Philadelphus, Cassia bicapsularis, with abundant yellow flowers long maintained; there were great clumps of a double-flowered Hibiscus ten feet high, Roses of choicest varieties scattered here and there, with a hedge of them hiding the back wall and overtopping it; Fuchsias in variety, six or eight feet high and woody with age, all blooming throughout most of the year, and Hydrangeas, favorite flowers with the Mexicans. Geraniums with double and with single flowers, and Pelargoniums in variety stood, shrub-like, two to five feet high. There were Cactuses leaning against the walls or climbing over them; slender-stemmed species of Cereus and thick flat-jointed Opuntias, whose flowers are among the most striking, and whose fruits are edible. The tall grass, Arundo Donax, which is not uncommon in northern gardens, stood in large old clumps, and there were patches of Ribbon Grass [Phalaris arundinacea].

Here, too, were large old masses of Agapanthus umbellatus, Mirabilis multiflora, Callas, Cannas, Crinums, Tigridias, Gladioluses and Irises, all alike thriving in the open soil. Among pretty native flowers, such as species of Salvia, Cuphea and Ipomoea, mingled many flowers whose acquaintance I made in the old-fashioned gardens of my New England home, such as Larkspurs, Marigolds, Pinks, Chrysanthemums, the Mullen Pink, the Jerusalem Cherry, the Everlasting Pea, the Bugloss, Viola odorata, V. tricolor, Cænothera biennis, Euphorbia, Lathyrus, Saxifraga crassifolia and Vinca major. To meet with these familiar flowers amid foreign scenes was like falling in with old friends abroad.

Charlotte, Vt.

C. G. Pringle

[Garden and Forest 6 (1893): 283]
IN JALISCO (1895)

THE state of Jalisco, by its varied flora, held me closely throughout my ninth season of botanical exploration in the Mexican Republic. I arrived in Guadalajara, its capital, at the beginning of May last, and kept that base until I left the country in the middle of November.

The rains had not commenced when I entered the state, and its plains and hill-sides were brown and dry, as I had never before seen them, for the springs and rills were nearly all dry, and most of the trees and shrubs were still leafless. The few plants gathered during the first two months of my stay were dearly won by diligent glean- ing of wide wastes. By the second week of June thunderstorms were advancing, evening by evening, from the southeast over the coast mountains of Michoacan. These soon traversed the entire state, and were seen, if not encountered, each afternoon with unfailing certainty. About the 1st of July all the landscape was covered with unfolding verdure, and from the middle of that month to the middle of October hosts of plants crowded upon the collector wherever he wandered. The last thunder-shower of the season occurred on the 7th of October, and then followed almost cloudless days in long succession. The sunshine was still warm even on the table-lands, and under its influence the soil rapidly dried again, the springs and brooks ceased to flow, and the ripening and passing of the vegetation was as swift as had been its rise and unfolding. On the highlands a few light frosts fell during early November to complete the destruction of the plants and to turn the botanist homeward, unless he chose to glean in the coast regions.

“For a hundred miles toward the coast there is a labyrinth of barrancas, whose wildness and grandeur are wonderful . . . .”

Next to the four great states of the arid regions of the north—Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila and Durango—this state of Jalisco is the largest within the Republic. It is certainly the most populous and wealthy of all, and is second to none in fertility of soil. During the six years of my visiting it I have never known its varied harvests to fail in any degree. I have turned from other districts in years when rain failed to visit them, distressed by the sight of the hunger and squalor of their inhabitants, to find the Jaliscenses as well fed and as happy as ever. Lying upon the southern verge of the table-land and bordering the Pacific, this state is within the belt of abundant and unfailing summer rains, and this situation also ensures a climate which is nearly perfect. Its winter frosts are restricted to the higher lands, and even there are few and light. The Andean system, when passing through Jalisco, appears to be depressed or broken up. There are few elevations above 9,000 feet over sea-level, or 3,000 to 4,000 feet above the average of its plains. Here are many extensive plains, valleys and slopes of excellent fertility, and all of these are natural grazing-grounds in summer and winter. Wide fields of Wheat whiten the valleys in spring-time, and yield place to luxuriant crops of Maize in autumn, when the hill-sides up to the very summits are checkered with grain-fields. Toward the coast Cane-fields and Coffee-plantations abound, and in the various conditions offered by this state flourish the fruits of the entire list, tropical and temperate. Yet, notwithstanding so great prosperity, there is forced upon the observer the fact that the capacities of the soil are but half-developed.

Until within a few years Jalisco has lain remote from the activity and progress of the world. Its capital was only reached by a journey of several days by diligence from the city of
Mexico, or by long rides in saddle and diligence from the seaports of Manzanillo and San Blas. To-day the tourist is conveyed in a Pullman car over a branch of the Mexican Central, diverging from the main line at Irapuato. A ride thence of only seven or eight hours along the fertile valley of the Lerma brings him to Guadalajara, the proud "Pearl of the West," as the Mexicans style this beautiful city with white-walled palaces and churches and flowery, umbrageous parks, a city second in size only to the national capital. It is situated on an undulating plain at an elevation of 5,000 feet above sea-level. In all directions from the city the view is bounded by hills either of volcanic or of granitic formation, five to ten miles distant, and 1,000 to 2,000 feet higher than the plain. Some of these hills appear of the most rocky and rugged character; others show softer lines, and are covered with a sparse and low forest composed chiefly of Pinus oocarpa and Quercus fulva. Twenty-five miles away to the south, beyond several small lakes, rises a chain of mountains some 8,000 feet in altitude, while in the west and north-west, thirty to forty miles distant, appear summits quite as elevated. These higher mountains are clad with forests in which Pinus Montezumae, Quercus reticulata and Q. grisea, and Arbutus varians are the more important species.

Every visitor to Guadalajara must see the great barranca. Passing northward over gravelly swells for five or six miles, one comes to the brink of a river-cut 1,500 feet deep. In the bottom he sees the Lerma, or Santiago, foaming white in its swift descent to the sea. The width of this barranca, from plain to plain, is about a mile. On its sides steep slopes alternate with sheer precipices hundreds of feet in height. The upper slopes are either open and grassy, or are covered with woody growths of numerous species. The lower or more accessible slopes are occupied by plantations of Bananas, Oranges, Mangos and other tropical fruits; for into this gorge, where are gathered the warm rays of the sun, frosts and mountain breezes cannot descend. A paved trail, two miles in length, leads down to the river by zigzag windings over successive terraces, along the verges or bases of cliffs, and through dark alleys in Banana fields. The banks of the river are shaded by immense wild Figs and Cypresses. Beneath the shade is an Indian village, the huts being of the simplest construction, loose walls of rock surmounted by a thatch of coarse grass. Here, despite the shade, we find ourselves in the oppressive temperature of the tierra caliente. Passengers and freight are ferried across the river in rude canoes, while the beasts of burden are made to swim over. From the farther side of the river the traveler climbs out of the barranca by a trail equally long and difficult. During all the day there is a ceaseless stream of travel crossing this frightful chasm.

As I have descended into this barranca almost daily for weeks of several different seasons, and have searched about its cliffs of various exposures, clambered over its dizzy slopes, or crowded through its thickets, it has seemed that the number of plants which it holds must be inexhaustible. Each year it has yielded new species. Yet this is but the first and uppermost of the barrancas of the Santiago and its tributaries. For a hundred miles toward the coast there is a labyrinth of barrancas, whose wildness and grandeur are wonderful, and similar barranca systems have been formed by every stream which flows down from the table-lands.

During five seasons I had sojourned in Guadalajara for a few days or a few weeks at a time in different months of the year to work the surrounding country, its hills and plains, as well as its barrancas, and had taken out many hundreds of species; so my return last May was only to secure for general distribution certain new or rare species known to me, and to make one or two trips toward the sea before moving to a distant and fresh field. But while this object was being accomplished, so many plants offered themselves to my hand which were strange to me and promised novelty, that I kept to this field until the end of the season, and then brought out a richer harvest than ever before .

C. G. Pringle

[Garden and Forest 7 (1894): 152-153]