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*Army at Vera Cruz Marks Time Under the Portales*

*Correspondents, as They Chase Rumors and Flies, Wonder Why Editors Keep Them on the Job—Not Even Proclamations Stir the Somnolence of Their Lot*

Vera Cruz, June 13.—Of all the horrors of war, the worst is sitting around for six weeks waiting for the war. At Tampa the correspondents waited for war with Spain for six months. They marked time in Tokio, rested for eight weeks in Budapest, and for the last seven weeks in Vera Cruz they have fought flies, fever and sunstroke, and chased to their lair thousands of will-o'-the-wisp rumors. Seven fortunate ones have gone home.

The rest of us cleverly maneuver to go home, but our editors are more clever than we. That is why they are editors. We are their prisoners. Why they pay cable tolls for what we send them is for us an unceasing subject of debate. For stuff like this the cable company asks eight cents a word. It is worth it. Is it? It is not. But we are blameless; we are the white slaves of Vera Cruz. We were shanghaied on board steamers and brought here under false pretences with promises of a war. By the same fiction the army also was lured here.

There was no need to bring it so far. At Texas City it had just become comfortable, and Texas shopkeepers overcharged the soldiers as scientifically as do the Mexicans. The army came here equipped only for field service, which means fifty pounds, or what each officer and man himself can carry in his combination knapsack and hold-all, and although there soon arrived from Galveston extra baggage and personal effects, the army is on a war footing, and it settled down in Vera Cruz on that footing with a promptness, efficiency and ease that to any one who in 1898 had watched the army disembark and advance upon Santiago was gratifying.

It was not surprising, because in contrast to that first trip to Cuba, the second landing in 1906, when the army occupied Havana, was made just as smoothly and efficiently as the one at Vera Cruz. The army expected to march straight from the wharf to Mexico City, when it found mediation had already set in. Exactly as though it had foreseen this the army proceeded to police the city, to clean and protect it from attack.

*Hardly Arcadia*

But that is not news, and while we wait for news and the army waits to advance or to be recalled we all sit in dark caves, called portales, and wonder why we came here. On two sides of the main plaza at Vera Cruz are cafes and restaurants. In front of them, over sidewalks, stretch arcades like the one in New York in front of Madison Square Garden and in Piccadilly in front of the Ritz. These are the portales, and on the surface the life of the city is the life of the portales.

Under the portales you breakfast, and dine at the portales; you arrange to meet a man there. The people say the portales believe Huerta will resign; and the answer is that it is only

“portales gossip” It is there that the newspapers, extras, handbills and political proclamations are first distributed; it is the distributing center also for all unknown germs and bacilli. These are brought there by flies, dogs, beggars, bootblacks, in the dust from the street, in the food you eat.

Under portales are rows of tables two and three deep, and around the, day after day, gather the same people, the same officers, the same refugees. Occasionally an officer, who is on shore leave for the first time, or who has been on outpost duty in the sandhills, will find at the tables a brother officer he saw last in China or the Philippines, and there will be a roar of welcome. To the jaded ones it is a pleasant diversion. We who for weeks have been prisoners in the portales never see a face that is unfamiliar; we know what every man is going to say before he says it, what he is going to drink before he names it, and even the things he is going to have for dinner, because the things we can have for dinner never change. This is especially true of the tablecloth.

### *Music to Dull Ears*

The portales are patronized almost exclusively by men. The American women here from Mexico City came to Vera Cruz because their men folks were driven here by the fear of death. That is their only reason for coming to Vera Cruz that I can understand. To the wives of navy officers and army officers Vera Cruz is by our government the forbidden city. Possibly the wives believe that by this edict they are hardly used. They are not. To those who know Vera Cruz, it is an act of our government in regard to Mexico which is quite comprehensible.

For those hundreds of enforced bachelors the portales offer but one diversion. Every night an excellent band belonging to one of the regiments plays in the plaza. But contrary to custom in other Latin-American countries, it does not attract the grace and beauty of the city. At that hour, under electric light globes, slow moving carriages and automobiles do not pass in review before the portales upon the tessellated tiles of the plaza in opposite circles; beautiful señoritas do not promenade. Maybe there are none. In any event, we never see them.

Before General Funston, as military governor, destroyed it the portales possessed one distinct attraction—they were the birthplace of all riots, excitements, revolutions. These were started by proclamations, and until the general announced that he alone enjoyed the monopoly the right to issue a proclamation belonged to everybody. It was a precious privilege. If you did not like a man, instead of horsewhipping him or hiring gunmen to shoot him, or on a dark night waiting for him down an alley with a brick in a stocking, you issued a proclamation. In it you called him everything the law of libel forbids. Procedure was simple. You printed your proclamation in the form of handbills, hired the bootblacks to distribute them among the tables when the portales were most crowded and from behind a tree in the plaza watched the effect.

### *Where Things are Started*

In this way in the past many a riot broke loose, many a revolution was launched. It was a recognized game. If after reading your proclamation nobody waved his napkin and shouted death to somebody you lost. But if, before the policemen tagged them, the bootblacks got your proclamation down at each table your revolution won. The only objection to this game was that it always was pulled off at the noon hour and spoiled the luncheon. By the time we had discovered whether the handbills were advertising ice cold American beer or were asking what have you done with the tongue of Vamon Mendez the luncheon was cold or the files had eaten it. The last

proclamation was issued by the Carranzistas, and the two patriots who launched it were arrested by a marine who knew no politics, but whose orders were to discourage disorder. After their patriotism had cooled for twenty-four hours in jail General Funston sent for them.

“This city is under martial law,” he said. “The military Governor is the only person with authority to issue proclamations. And I am the military Governor.” So now at the noon hour the bootblacks cease from troubling, the portales are at rest and the correspondents have taken a vow.

It is that never again will they start toward a war until for six months it has been in violent eruption; or if the next war hopes to be adequate it must first get out and make a reputation. We respond to no more false alarms. Meanwhile under the portales we sit and wonder why we are here. Last night an army officer answered:

“The army is here because the navy was insulted at Tampico.” Then said the officer: “If the navy gets insulted again I hope to heaven it will get insulted in Paris.”