

A STUDY IN CAMPECHE.

By WALTER CLARKE BELLOWES.

When that profound old philosopher who digs into our innermost being and lays bare the secrets of our every instinct, gets into the philatelic arena, as he will some day, there will be rare doings. Perhaps some will take issue in the matter and hold that a philosopher could never logically be a collector,—that one is essentially passive, the other active to a degree, that one deals in inner-consciousness, dissects motives, finds and tags stages of development, and all that sort of thing, while the other has to hustle to keep up with the new-issue service. But perhaps after all the philosopher-collector is not altogether a fanciful creature. While we are sorting, arranging, changing, our thoughts fly afield and many of them roost on strange branches. Yes, surely the Isaac Walton of philately will from the very nature of the case appear, and then believe me, he will be worth listening to.

A fair beginning would be to analyze our love of possession, then switch over and formulate our delights in the beautiful, have a fling at the secrets and influences of colour, and descend gracefully on the subtle charms of classification, order and arrangement. He will perchance liken us to moles digging into antique dust-heaps for lightly cancelled pearls, to bold explorers who strike off into an unknown country impelled by the sheer hope of discovering an impossible philatelic North pole. He will trace to their very roots—

And so my thoughts ambled on. I was working like a beaver—(The common belief is that they work but it is all hearsay to me)—This time it was trying to put a somewhat unruly collection into fairer condition, remounting a page here, substituting a better specimen there, now and then making a note of some ridiculously common variety lacking, changing the entire scheme of a group of well-beloved imperforates,—in short doing just what we instinctively do when a lazy afternoon allows us a formal call on our stamps, when I noticed a most peculiar thing. There was a name on one of them plainly out of joint. Whoever heard of such a thing!

Stamps are too carefully made, as we all know, to allow names in large prominent letters to be mis-spelled. A thing like that could not happen once in a hundred years. I rubbed my eyes and squirmed into a better light, but there

it stuck in my eye as plain as a pike-staff: ADMON. PRAL. DE CORREOS EN CAMPECHE.

It was one of those provisionals issued by that state in Mexico back in the time when Maximilian was having a bad quarter of an hour. I had never paid much attention to the poor thing which had evidently been silently protesting in my album for some years. PRAL. was the unlucky word. Of course that was a mis-print for CRAL. It was such a shock as one would get should he, while posting a letter, notice that the inscription on the stamp was U. S. ROSTAGE. I had seen the correct word. CRAL. in the catalogue many times, and yet to make sure that the spring water previously taken had not gone to my head, to the catalogue I went. There was the fac-simile of the stamp and there was the CRAL. There must be some logical explanation. I try Moens, the *Advanced*, Heitmann's *Handbuch*, the *French Official*, Stanley Gibbons, Senf, Kohl, everyone I can lay my hands on. They all show CRAL., and that insignificant little stamp before me all the time saying PRAL as loud as it possibly could in its restricted way!

It was very annoying!

And after all what did the confounded little word mean anyway? I have a smattering of Spanish but not a smat that sounds a little bit like either word.

Ah, the *Philatelic Dictionary*! That is profound, and knows what it is talking about. It does help a little. It says that Cral. is an abbreviation for *General*. I don't exactly see it, as the first letter is plainly a C, without a symptom of a G, but the book says the words mean Administration General, and so, like a joke the point of which I don't see, my smile is forced.

Mystified I turn to my collection again, only to receive another shock,—a cancellation, in very thick black aggressive letters: ADMON. PRAL. DE CORREOS, MORELIA.—Another, ADMON. PRAL. DE CORREOS, ORIZAVA, Then the same in C. VICTORIA, PUEBLA. Oh, this is getting monotonous; surely they could not all be wrong. On second thought, even with a *Philatelic Dictionary* to the contrary, what would be the sense in a little one-horse postal district in the backwoods somewhere, using a stamp inscribed General Postal Administration? It might consistently say Adm(inistraci)on Pr(incip)al for the

district in which it was used.

Eureka!

It was simple enough, and all the catalogues, from Moens down have been reproducing the fac-simile of a counterfeit,—and strange to say, the same fac-simile. The large figures of value on the stamp, being stamped by hand over the upper oval would never be found twice in the same relative position to the design of the background,—but every one in the catalogues to which I had access were identical.

To be sure the stamp is a rare one and not easily obtainable for the purpose of securing a cut, but it seems incredible that a glaring fanciful creation has been used to illustrate this stamp for so many years by so many different hand-books, and the facts of the case never suspected.

An attempt to obtain further information about this stamp resulted in some unexpected and very remarkable contradictions, nearly every one who has written of it differing from the others, as though in describing a stamp it was a matter of individual opinion instead of plain facts.

The *Advanced Catalogue*, for instance, tells us that the upper oval is stamped in blue, the lower one in black, and the figures of value in blue. Then Heitmann's *Handbuch* rises up and declares that the lower oval is in indigo and the figures of value in black! Some of the handbooks in order to escape embarrassing details lightly skim over the thin ice and just say "Blue" although three different colours are used. And some attempt no description whatever in spite of the fact that the stamp is as authentic as any ever issued. Even the date of issue is disputed, some authorities giving 1867, others jumping ten years and saying 1877!

Here is a field indeed for the philatelic explorer. The genuine specimens are rare, the counterfeits numerous, and what is more to the point, some are extremely dangerous copies.

So who can say that it is idle to dream! Had it not been for that lazy afternoon, and a train of thought beginning with philosophy and ending in a mis-spelled word, that long neglected and rather suspicious looking Campeche might have snuggled in my album, unnoticed, uncared for and unsung until the end of time.