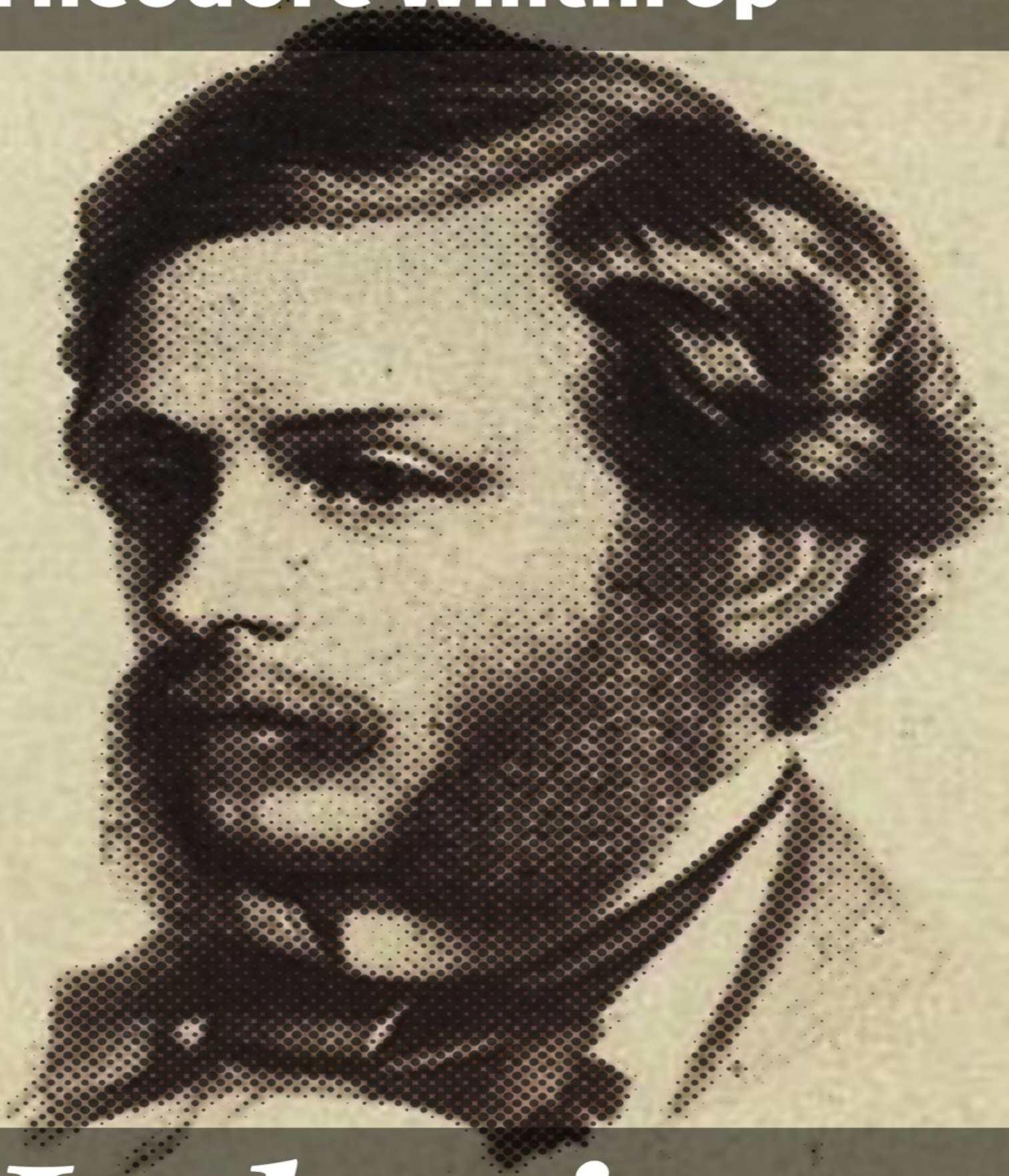


**Theodore Winthrop**



***Isthmiana***

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# Isthmiana



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The following sketch, found among the author's papers after his death, had not received his revision for the press. It was not intended for publication in its present form, and is merely a rapidly-written journal of youthful adventure, in a part of our country then less explored than at present.

# The Cruces Road

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Ardent Californians, after a day of dragging in the mud and squeezing in the alloys of the Cruces Road, remember the Isthmus of Panama only as a geometrical line; a narrow, difficult, slippery, dirty path, paved like the bed of an Alpine torrent, beset with sloughs of despond and despair, with mosquitoes, tired mules, plundering natives, and bad provender. They follow this geometrical line on their way to California, as a pious Mohammedan treads tremblingly the slender bridge that conducts him to the seventh heaven, — looking forward, but very little around him, feeling painfully that the wire is cutting his feet, and regretting that the grave laws of his religion have not allowed amateur funambulistic practice. To American adventurers struggling towards their seventh heaven, the Isthmus seems to concentrate the obstacles of a continent. In dread of the thousand nameless terrors of the tropics, they hasten to Panama, eat one breakfast of eggs in their omelet stage of existence, and are off up the coast in the steamer.

From the moment of their arrival at Aspinwall an Isthmus fever floats before them, tangibly in the air. It bangs a yellow veil before every object. Their sight is jaundiced. They hurry over a railroad, laid, as they have been told, on human sleepers. The rich luxuriance of the forest along its course, now first opened to the eye of man, seems only rank, unwholesome vegetation. Instead of appreciating the almost superhuman enterprise that has placed such a trophy of civilization in the very home of unchanging repose,



they growl because the prudent trains do not despatch them speedily enough to the discomforts of the next stage of their journey. It is nothing strange to them to be greeted by the whistle of a locomotive issuing from the depths of a tropical swamp. Nor strange to pass through an untouched garden of such magnificent, broad-leaved plants, and such feathery palms, as they had only seen before, dwarfed exotics, cherished in warm recesses of a conservatory. The twisted vines that drape the stems and swing from the branches of the massively buttressed trees, are mistaken by their averted glance for the terrible convolutions of gigantic serpents.

They embark on the river, are perplexed by the jabbering confusion of the boatmen, and again hardly observe the beauty that surrounds them. The Chagres is a pure type of the tropical stream. Forests, whose dense luxuriance is only known when you attempt to cut your way wearily through their mazes, overhang its course. High hills rise, covered to the summit with enormous trees, disposed in tiers to display the full effect of their great trunks and spreading foliage. Sometimes a grove of crested palms and cocoanut-trees marks the site of a native village. Its thatched bamboo huts have a shabby picturesqueness among the patches of plantains and sugar-cane. Near, laughing women are grouped in the water, washing clothes and themselves. Soft green savannas open, sprinkled, like a park, with groves and monarch trees; under their shade cattle, have taken shelter from the ardent sun. With constant change of scenes like these, the river winds along, but our party are too much preoccupied, too much distracted, for calm enjoyment.