

CORRESPONDENCE.

OUR CUBAN LETTER.

Havana, Cuba, April 27, 1898.—I have received a good many letters of late asking about business opportunities in Cuba, and the prospects there will be for profitable investment of capital when the war is over. Speculators have already turned their eyes that way, with divers schemes in view. I have been particularly looking up the chances for the average American who is not overburdened with cash, and does not expect to sit idly by and get rich in a season, but is willing to do a reasonable amount of work for fair returns. When the war ends—as of course it must in the independence of Cuba—the new republic will have to begin at the bottom, economically as well as politically. The island is so largely agricultural that its future prosperity, at least for some generations to come, depends upon the rural districts. Beyond a few tobacco factories, there have never been any manufactories of account in Cuba, and the wasted tissues of industrial life can only draw new blood from the soil. Those who were acquainted with the queen of the Antilles in her golden days of prodigal prosperity, would hardly recognize her in the nefastidies. A trip through the country reveals unexampled desolation—burned fields and orchards, ruined houses and sugar-mills, and often hungry people. Last month I made a railway journey from Havana, 250 miles toward the interior. In all that distance I saw only two cornfields, and not a single garden or occupied farmhouse. Said my travelling companion, "What this island most needs is tombstones;" and truly it looked so. There was plenty of corn standing, though smoke and flames could be seen in every direction. The sugar estates are so very large—often miles in extent—that fires may rage in them for a long time and yet leave a considerable portion unharmed. This year the cane was choked with weeds for lack of laborers, and yielded much less than the customary amount of juice; and that was far below the usual value, being darkened by a large admixture of scorched cane. Yet it was well worth cutting and grinding, whenever permission could be obtained from Maximó Gómez, the insurgent chief. The Spanish authorities readily gave permission to grind, and guaranteed them protection while doing so. This unwonted generosity on the part of the mother country was not entirely for the welfare of Cuba—Bless you no! but because it helped to pay the army and provided a good place for convalescing soldiers. A very large proportion of Spain's boy-troops succumb to yellow fever, typhoid, vomitico, etc., during their first season in the West Indies; and those who survive the acclimating process, must be cared for until strength returns. Soon as released from the hospitals they have been sent to the plantations, where at least they were sure of getting something to eat. Guard-duty does not tax them heavily, and when fully recuperated, they can be utilized again in the field. Meanwhile the men amuse themselves, according to their natural bent, which is usually more pleasing to themselves than to their unwilling entertainers. Every page of this paper might be filled with tales of their cruel pranks, which have been told to me on the various estates I have visited, and are amply verified; but space forbids the recital of but two or three. On the Santa Gertrudis plantation, about 40 miles beyond Cardenas, where a company of soldiers were "protecting" the people, a lad of 14 years, one of the poor reconcentrados quar-

tered on the place, was going joyfully to his parents' hut one morning, carrying a chunk of beef in a sack, which the planters' steward had given him. The soldiers overhauled him and demanded to know what was in the sack. The boy took to his heels in affright, but was speedily captured and brought into camp. Meat was scarce, and the soldiers almost as hungry as the reconcentrados, so they decided that the boy had stolen it. In vain he protested and begged that the steward be sent for; he was tied to a convenient palm tree, and while the soldiers cooked and ate the meat, was flogged at intervals during the day—to make him confess, they said. Being released at nightfall, the boy tried to crawl home, but died on the way.

On another plantation, whenever a new lot of reconcentrados were brought in, the captain of the guard detained all the girls and good-looking women in his tent, and afterwards sold them to his soldiers, making a jocular auction of it—for jack-knives, food rations, etc., as the men had no money—the highest bidder being allowed first choice. On the Santo Tomas plantation, in Pinar del Rio province, lived an honest old colored man, a veritable "Uncle Tom," whose only son was supposed to have joined the insurgents. One day when amusements ran low, it was decided to "kill time" with the old man. He was brought to camp and ordered to disclose the whereabouts of his son. This he could not do, had he so desired, having no idea where the constantly moving rebel army was situated. The soldiers tied him to a tree and flogged him awhile, without avail; he could not or would not tell. Then they compelled him to dig his own grave and kneel beside it—and into it he fell, pierced by a score of bullets.

The planters say that in any event there must soon be acute famine in Cuba, because nobody within the zones of cultivation and the garrisoned places has planted vegetables or other food-products for two years past, but has devoted himself to raising crops which would bring in most money, in order to hurry his family out of the country. Most of them took to tobacco-planting, as promising quicker results than sugar. The insurgents cannot stop the production of tobacco as easily as they can prevent cane-grinding, and maybe they are less disposed to interfere with it, as any Cuban would rather forego his bread, and certainly his sugar, than cigarettes. I saw one particularly fine-looking tobacco farm, and was informed that it belonged to the captain of the local guerrillas. His place was duly guarded by Spanish troops, which he got detailed at government expense; and he also paid the insurgents not to molest his crop, by giving them one-third the value of it. Last winter several Americans took advantage of the times and made large purchases of tobacco lands. At present the tobacco industry is good for nothing, principally owing to Weyler's decree of two years ago, forbidding the exportation of Habana leaf tobacco. The insurgents retaliated by burning factories and all the stored tobacco they could lay hands on. But the marquis of Tenerife appears to have been a thrifty fellow as well as a "butcher." Already a millionaire, he made another fortune out of his celebrated order, for many so-called American tobacco firms exported thousands of bales in spite of the prohibitory decree, pretending that it was a diplomatic transaction between Washington and Madrid. The real secret was that Weyler graciously per-

mitted shipments to be made by those who gave him liberal commissions. The very best tobacco raising region in the world is Cuba's "Vuelta Abato;" but today every plantation in it is abandoned and in ruins. After Weyler's little game became known, the rebels attacked it with special fury and destroyed upwards of four million pounds of tobacco in a few months. It will take twenty years for this famous region to become as flourishing as it was in January of 1896. But the incomparable soil, climate and natural conditions remain, unimpaired by war's wild alarms; and those who come in with a little money when peace is restored, may buy the best tobacco lands very cheaply and become Croesuses in due course.

Among the refugees at Key West I met an ex-sugar planter, who was anxious to sell his estate; and for a Cuban he seemed to have developed remarkable adaptation to the ways of the "trading Yankees." His method was to edge up to every group of men he saw talking together and join in the conversation. Presently he would be heard to say, "the soil of Cuba is too rich; that's what's the matter with the island," then he would go on relating what ruinously large crops he had himself been raising—so remarkably large that they had invited destruction by envious rebels and Spaniards; and invariably ended by inquiring who wanted to buy 30,000 acres of the finest sugar land in Cuba, worth \$10,000 the acre, for 30 cents the acre. To be sure his plantation, house and mills are in ruins, but he pointed out what profit could be made on the same in the line of scrap-iron and old bricks. Up to date he has not found a purchaser. I heard one man tell him that he would "rather have three measley acres of corn and potatoes in Ohio, Pennsylvania or Illinois, than the whole 30,000 of 'Cuba's best' under present conditions."

Somebody will no doubt be making money out of Cuba's ruined homes and mills within the next few months. The boilers and machinery and other junk of thousands of destroyed plantations can be had for almost nothing; but the market for scrap iron must be outside of the island. The brick and mortar would hardly be worth buying, but might be used on the spot in rebuilding. Now, grasses and wild vines, growing over the melancholy heaps, have softened their harsh outlines and made them a picturesque feature of the landscape; but they are not to be considered as an element toward building up the resources of rural Cuba. In spite of the war, several syndicates, with an eye to the future, have lately purchased large tracts of land. Last winter a company of New Englanders bought eight thousand acres in the beautiful Trinidad valley, near Santiago. They are not doing anything with it now, but say they can afford to wait for years and then realize heavy interest on the money invested.

As to business enterprises on a smaller scale, they are innumerable for men with a little money, and more energy. A few acres in market gardening, with their continuous crops from one year's end to another, would perhaps yield the quickest and largest returns for the smallest amount of capital. Chicken-raising too, has always been a strangely neglected industry in Cuba. Fowls and eggs figure conspicuously every day in the Spanish-American menu; but nobody on the island has ever gone into the business of supplying the demand on a large scale, with incubators and brooders, as in the United States.

All winter, before the present siege began, eggs sold in Havana at a dollar the dozen, and poultry fifty cents the pound; and what it is now, goodness knows, with beef, at the last advices