

CORRESPONDENCE.

OUR CUBAN LETTER.

June 27th, 1898.

Spanish bullets are not the only dangers our boys in Cuba will have to encounter. First, and more to be feared than all the guns of the enemy, is pestilence "that walketh in darkness." One of the most noted yellow fever centers in the West Indies—even worse than Havana—is Santiago de Cuba, its bottled-up harbor being always a favorite abode of that dread disease, and these mid-summer months the very height of his harvest time. But Yellow Jack, so much talked about since this war began, is by no means the worst disease which will assail our brave men in Cuba. Doctor Burnner, the sanitary expert, who lately left Havana, after having been several years employed there by the U. S. government, says that of the 32,000 Spanish soldiers who died last year in Cuba, only 6,230 died of yellow fever. Twelve thousand of them were carried off by dysentery and inflammation of the intestines, and upwards of 7,000 by malarial fever. The disease which particularly afflicts the Queen of the Antilles—in the order named as to mortality—are dysentery, malarial and typhoid fever, yellow fever, small-pox, cholera and leprosy. An eminent ancient medical authority suggests that unless we are extremely careful, our Cuban campaign may result as disastrously as the French campaign in Madagascar, eight years ago. The French soldiers were all robust men, and were cared for by the best military surgeons in the world; but a very large proportion of them died from malaria, the few who returned to Paris being mostly convalescents. Cuba and Porto Rico are not unlike Madagascar in climate, the same fertile, marshy soil, filled with swamps and lying to the southeast of the main land, surrounded by warm ocean currents. Everybody remembers the terrible mortality along the Chagres river, in the days of '47-'49, when thousands of men took that route to California. The journey across the hyphen of land which connects the two Americas occupied only a week; but so many died from the deadly miasmas of the flowery jungles that "Isthmian fever" became known as a distinct and fatal malady. Portions of Cuba and Porto Rico are no better today than was the Isthmus of Panama in '49. Of course our army surgeons will administer quinine galore—and think of the years it will take to get that poison out of the systems of the men! The universal Cuban custom of drinking strong, black coffee, unadulterated with milk, is as natural and as necessary as for sick cats to seek grass—both being nature's antidotes for certain ailments.

As to small-pox, every town in the West Indies is continually ravaged by it; and like grim death, the loathsome disease has all seasons for his own and loves the "shining mark" of the Anglo-Saxon. The natives expect it as we do mumps and measles once in a life-time, and take no pains to check the spread of the disease by isolating patients. Nearly everybody you meet in Cuba is more or less pitted and infected houses, public or private, are not quarantined. Thorough vaccination is the only safeguard for the foreigner.

Another unexpected bugaboo is glanders—a disease which in our country is confined to horses. Dr. Burgess (another medical expert from the United States who has lived in Cuba many

years), says that there were 137 deaths last year from glanders in Havana alone. As to leprosy—it is a common thing to see the scaly hand of a leper outstretched for alms, and a very dangerous thing to handle public drinking cups, "shin-plaster" currency, or any article in common use among the poorer classes. Even the aristocrats are not exempt. I know a family of wealth and refinement in Havana, one of whose several children is a leper. The little sufferer is perhaps six years old, a beautiful blue-eyed girl, whose face is yet untouched by the dreadful disease; but her hands are scaly as the claws of a bird, and the nails are dropping from the fingers. She is allowed to sleep and play with the other children, to handle the same toys and bath in the same tub. Nobody has the heart to insist upon taking the child from her parents, and if he did, there is no law to sustain him. The lepers' hospital in Havana, in charge of the eminent physician, Dr. Vidal de Sotolongo y Luch, has few, if any, superiors in the world. I have visited it more than once, and seen the several hundred poor creatures, male and female, black and white—all clean, well fed and well cared for, looking positively happy in their affliction. Yet there are many more, mostly beggars, wandering unrestricted around the streets of Havana, there being no Spanish law to compel the confinement of lepers and nobody whose business it is to induce them to take refuge in the hospital.

As soon as Uncle Sam has rescued the Queen of the Antilles from the clutch of Spain, he will have a harder task to make her clean enough for the society of civilized nations. And the sanitary invasion will be as expensive as the military; but if neglected, will eventually cost more American lives than the war. Soon as hostilities are ended, our commerce will, of course, be greatly stimulated—free trade, absolute commercial reciprocity and all that sort of thing being established with the independence of Cuba. But work costing millions of dollars should first be accomplished in the cities and harbors. Under existing unsanitary conditions in Cuba, intimate relations with her would yearly slay thousands; and on the other hand, the enforcement of necessary quarantine would be a serious drawback to trade. Habana—a perfect hot-bed of disease, planted at our back door, so to say—should be first attended to. Uncle Samuel will find it wise to accomplish the work himself, before turning the rescued island over to the Cubans; because they are now too poor to do it thoroughly—even if they develop sufficient enterprise, which is doubtful. At present Habana harbor is an immense cess-pool, in the form of a ditch with one end closed. This end must be dredged out, to make the proposed flushing of the gulf stream possible. For more than 500 years the stagnant water has been receiving all the sewerage of a great city—and the wonder is not that the neighborhood is unhealthy, but that anybody can live in it at all. The menacing demons of disease which have been concentrating themselves there for three centuries must be exterminated. The United States must also provide Habana with a sewerage system. Indeed, to render the city even tolerably healthy, a good deal of it will have to be annihilated.

Hardly one-quarter of the entire population live 50 feet above sea level, and a great many of the houses are built upon land formed by the dumping of garbage and street refuse in what is surely one of the most

densely populated localities of all the cities on the globe.

The other ports are not much better. Santiago, on its sloping hillside, has excellent natural drainage, but is to the highest degree unsanitary. Cardenas—the flourishing Chicago of the island, which before the war numbered among its business citizens a good many Americans, is wholly devoid of sanitation. The center of its population being only four feet above sea level, the death-rate is high, and would doubtless be a good deal higher were it not for the fine, large harbor in front. Nature intended Matanzas for a healthful place, its beautiful harbor being widest and deepest at the entrance, thus allowing the sea to flow freely in and out; and it is also flushed by three big rivers. Let a thorough scrubbing and disinfecting is necessary to make the dirty old city habitable. In Cienfuegos—the so-called Philadelphia of Cuba, more than a third of the population living only three feet above subsoil water. Trinidad city, aloft on its mountainside, is considered the healthiest place on the island—thanks to the accident of situation, not to the wisdom or work of its builders. In many Cuban towns the water is totally unfit to drink; and so scarce in others that were the entire population to indulge in the luxury of bathing and to agree on "taking turns," each person would get no more than one bath a year. In these hot fever-infested countries, one should drink as little water as possible and eat no food until it is cooked. If a law to that effect were enforced in our army, it would save the lives of many men.

The cities and villages of Porto Rico are even worse than those of Cuba—only we hear less about them. Nineteenths of the inhabitants are lazy, dirty negroes, and modern sanitary arrangements are unknown. The water supply is poor, scant and generally polluted; houses huddled together and densely crowded, and small-pox and yellow fever continually stalk the streets. San Juan, the capital, is as compactly built as Canton, China.

Fortunately our troops on their Cuban marches will find no ferocious beasts or venomous serpents to contend with. Snakes are few, even in the jungles; but they include some freakish reptiles. Such is the "maya"—from 12 to 15 feet long and of proportionate circumference. It looks formidable enough to put a whole regiment to flight, but it is only a bluff, for his huge snakeship is harmless, and too indolent even to hug, like his near relations of the boa family. One of the greatest pests our soldiers will have to encounter is the chigoe, or "jigger," as the wretched little insect is commonly called. It insinuates itself somehow through the stoutest leather and burrows under the toe-nail. Then it has to be dug out with a pen-knife; for if left twenty-four hours the insect has not only established a home, but raised a family under the nail—and the result may be the loss of the whole pre-empted toe by amputation. Sand flies and mosquitoes are not much worse in the West Indies than in many of our fashionable seaside resorts; but we have nothing in our country to match the brown, hairy spiders of Cuba, large as the palm of your hand, whose bite is not fatal but causes fever. Nor have we anything like the belligerent ants known as "vivajajuas," which go out of their way to attack you and leave a mark which will keep their memory green through many a weary day. The Cuban scorpions though not particularly dangerous, cannot be said to be agreeable companions, for they have a too soci-