

CORRESPONDENCE.

OUR CUBAN LETTER.

Havana, Cuba, March 27th.—Returning to Havana from a 300 mile quest of information concerning the culture of sugar-cane, I find an ominous quiet brooding over the capital. It is the stillness that presages a storm—as when a West India cyclone is at hand, beasts and birds flee to their coverts and all nature seems in a swoon, so unnatural is the silence. One alarming fact is the sudden cessation of insults to Americans. The hated race are no longer flouted in public places, and the familiar shouts of "¡muera los Americanos!" is no more heard. The Spanish residents, from the highest officials of the government to the newest importations from Spain—at all times polite, personified—are now almost obsequious in their deportment towards the scions of Uncle Sam. Not that they love us any better; oh no! The true Spaniard is most dangerous when most polite. So is the duellist when he gives, or accepts the challenge; so was Weyler in his bloodiest humor. The Spanish brigand says "Pardonez me Señor," with utmost courtesy while thrusting a dagger between your ribs, and the courtly Hidalgo, like Shakespeare's hero, may smile when he murders and murder when he smiles.

Rumors are afloat in Havana that Congress is making up his mind for President McKinley in the line of doing something at last for suffering Cuba, and that history stands with uplifted pen about to record happenings of gravest consequence; but we really know little of what is going on in the outside world, and least of all in Washington.

Of course the local papers, under the present reign of censorship, publish nothing adverse to Spain. It is no longer possible to get United States journals in the regular way, through the post-office; they are simply destroyed in the lump, or dumped into the bay, and that is the last of them, so far as their Cuban subscribers are concerned. Our only chance of seeing American newspapers at all is through private means—such as an occasional copy, brought by some seaman and given to friends ashore, to be secretly circulated from house to house and from hand to hand, as a precious but dangerous possession. I fancy I hear one exclaim, "Do you mean to say it is actually dangerous to have a newspaper in the house?" Indeed I do! A copy of the "News," for example, with the war-like matters in it which the last issue I saw contained, if found lying today on one's table in Havana would be sufficient to send the whole family to prison, if not to a darker fate. Spanish spies are everywhere, in all manner of guises, from the servant in the kitchen, the beggar at the window, the huckster at the door, to the priest in the confessional, and the professed bosom friend. Nowadays the most talkative people have little to say on any subject. Families discuss their plans in secret, behind locked doors, and admit no outsiders to the smallest confidence. The Royal Spanish Mail steamship on her last trip to the mother country carried nine hapless "prisoners of state," designated for that terrible fortress in Barcelona which has been made infamous in recent years by the cruelties committed within its walls. In Weyler's time that same Royal Mail seldom made a trip without conveying Cubans to perpetual imprisonment in the penal settlements of Africa, or condemned to chains for life in Spanish prisons. The cause of their deportation was the alleged crime of rebellion; but most of them were at least put through a

farcial trial. The victims of the other day—under the new regime of autonomy, with its promise that the rights of all persons should be sacredly respected—had not even the form of a trial. Without a word of warning, or chance to arrange their affairs, or say farewell to their families, they were dragged from their homes or place of business, hurried aboard ship and away to some mysterious punishment. People shudder at the mention of the Barcelona military prison. Blood-curdling tales are whispered of tortures that would shame the inquisition of the lash, the branding iron and slow starvation; of dungeon cells which are flooded with water at regular intervals, when the wretched prisoner is compelled to swim for his life and cling to projections in the slimy walls until the tide recedes; and at last, worn out with suffering, his strength deserts him and he drowns like a rat in a hole. The insurgent general, Ruiz Rivera—a gentleman of culture and once of wealth—was sent to that fortress a few months ago, after his refusal to accept freedom from Blanco on conditions of his supporting autonomy; and there he is now—if yet alive, undergoing what horrors, who can say? Within the last fortnight more than thirty persons within my own knowledge have been arrested on the indefinite charge of "conspiracy." They were respectable, law-abiding citizens—most of them of means and position; but all were Cubans, suspected of favoring the cause of their countrymen in the field. Just where they are now, nobody knows. Not a word has been heard of the evidence against them, or of their defense. Some unknown statement of the police to the authorities led to their arrest; and on this showing, with no opportunity offered of defending themselves, they may be deported—God knows where, or to meet what horrible fate. This is no fancy picture, but absolute facts. The deportations are made in the name of the new autonomy cabinet and under its authority.

Do you wonder that the Cubans decline to trust in its tender mercies or to pin their faith on any more Spanish promises?

The speeches of Senator Proctor Thurston, Gallinger and others in the United States Congress, have just reached here. In part or entire, and their most thrilling sentences, are being circulated, privately, from mouth to mouth; for in these days nobody in Cuba dares to openly read or repeat seditious language. If the grateful Cubans ever do gain independence, through the intervention of the United States, they will look upon these gentlemen and a few bold journalists as their actual saviors. Fancy Representative Amos G. Cummings, of Senator Thurston, glasses an all, or any modern newspaper man posed as a "Patron Saint?" Because of vague rumors of impending conflict between Spain and Uncle Samuel. Trunks are packed in hundreds of homes, and arrangements secretly completed, so far as possible, for immediate flight. According to the usage of civilized warfare, should the city be bombarded by the United States battleships, due notice would be given the American citizens and means for their transportation to other points provided. With war vessels in front, insurgents pouring in from the rear, and desperate Spaniards at their last gasp in the midst, "a hot time in the old town," would feebly express the situation in doomed Habana! Just now the one predominating element is the military. The streets are literally lined with men and boys in Spain's blue cotton uniforms, hotels are packed

with officers and the quietest pedestrian is jostled on the streets by soldiers and halted at every corner after night-fall by the click of the musket and the stern query, "¿Quien Vive?" The average Spanish soldier is not an object to inspire terror, or even respect. He is undersized, often manifestly underfed, slouching in gait and hang-dog in general appearance—about as wide a contrast as can well be imagined to "the West Point out," which is the American standard of what a warrior should be. These may understand the theory and practice of war all right, but somehow the true martial ardor does not seem to extend down into their backbone and legs. But do not imagine that America will have any easy walk-over if she comes down here to settle the Cuban question by force of arms! These slouchy-looking fellows fight like crazy fiends under excitement and the Spaniards are certain to do wild things when the crisis comes. The tragedy of the Maine, in a time of tranquility, is a faint foreshadowing of what may be expected in the expiring throes of outraged national "honor." Fifteen thousand new recruits have recently arrived from Spain, fresh and well equipped. The hungry army has been having extra rations of late and plainly show the bracing qualities of a few square meals, and the half-starved horses of the cavalry have been replaced by well fed ones, stolen from Cuban haciendas. The uniforms of officers and men are evidently cut from the same piece—coat and trousers of blue and white striped denim. Nobody can accuse any of them of wearing corsets, as do some of our fledglings in the military service; but why, in heaven's name—will somebody tell us why—do army tailors, the wide world over, put the seat of the trousers near the curve of the knee-joints and the waists of the jackets midway to the armpits? The officers wear a few gilt stars on their coat sleeves and a white canvas hat; while the enlisted men wear hats of panama straw, turned up on one side and fastened with a rosette. The volunteers, corresponding to our National Guard, act as adjuncts to the city police. Their guard mounting and inspection every morning in the Prado, is worth coming far to see. It seems to be a sort of "go as you please" arrangement, each man choosing his own carte and deportment. Talking in the ranks at all times, and even cigarette smoking is allowed. At inspection, the men become silent and immovable only when the officer approaches them, and relax into sociability the instant his back is turned. There is no assorting of sizes; perhaps a five-foot boy between men six or eight inches taller, haphazard down the line. Some have leggings, some have not; some have shoes, some sandals; some are barefooted, and like the urchin of the story, are "glad to come off so." In short, they look like a job-lot of misfits, of mixed sizes and colors and conditions, between the ages of fifteen and fifty. The rank and file of the "regulars" have had the worst time of it. Last summer fully fifty percent of them sickened and died, and the hospital de San Ambrosio is crowded with their living skeletons. Until lately it was no uncommon sight to see soldiers begging on the streets, as they have not received a cent of pay in six months. The mounted police of Habana are very much in evidence. They are distinguished by suits of dark blue denim, with crimson bands around the hats and down the trousers legs. They generally "hunt in couples," so to say—two at every street crossing, at the door of every public house, at frequent intervals around the plaza, patrolling every nook and corner around the city. It is they who demand, "who goes there?" as you pass along the streets, and who insist upon