

## CORRESPONDENCE.

## FRUIT CULTURE IN CUBA.

July 6th, 1898.

Among the things of which only pleasant memories remain to the Cubans is the fruit industry, which was once a thriving business on the island, but for years past has been good for nothing. While in the Trinidad valley this Spring, I met a New York produce merchant, who had been a fruit-grower in eastern Cuba, until the loss of the trade to the island compelled him to give it up. Being unable to understand how the Cubans came to lose so valuable an industry, for which the conditions of soil and climate are perfect, I interviewed him on the subject. And this is the substance of what he told me: "It was the Cubans' own fault; and they will be glad enough to get back even a remnant of their once prosperous fruit trade—as they may when Americans have taught them how to manage it. To call the Cubans lazy would be unfair; the good old New England word "shiftless" better describes their temperament. They always choose the easiest way of accomplishing an end, and leave the rest to Providence. *Así Dios quiere*—"as God wills"—is forever on their tongues, applied to neglected crops as to everything else in life; while Anglo-Saxons believe that Providence smiles in bountiful harvests upon the husbandmen who put forth the proper effort, rather than upon those who leave it to Him entirely. Now oranges, pine-apples, mangoes, aguacates, bananas, require the most careful handling, from the time they are picked until offered for sale in the markets. And that is just where the Cubans lost their trade. To get the fruit down, they shook the trees, or knocked it off with a long pole, as they would coconuts. It reached the ground battered by the fall or bruised by the rap from the pole, and was thus handicapped in the start for competition with the carefully picked fruit of the American planter. It must be remembered that the fruit has to make a journey of hundreds of miles before it reaches market, and the slightest bruise rapidly develops decay. When the fruit is off the tree, the next step was to transport it to the nearest town, to be packed for shipment. This was done by mules. The oranges or pines, or whatever it was, were bundled haphazard into paniers, and away went the mule over the rough country roads, jolting the softer fruit into jam in the saddle-bags. When the destination was reached, instead of carefully lifting the cargo from the mules' back, the driver dragged it off regardless, and threw it down in the nearest corner of the store-house.

"The next comer threw his consignment of fruit on top of the other; and so it was piled up, with no thought of the consequences. Then in packing; I have seen Cubans stand several feet away from the barrels or hampers, and actually throw it in, hit or miss, of course adding to the bruises the poor fruit had already received. When the barrel or box was filled, the lid was fitted on, by force if necessary, as one sits on an obstreperous trunk-top! Then in getting it down carefully it was rolled end over end and dropped into the hold, on top of whatever it might hit. Now, this sort of thing won't do at all.

"The inevitable result was that the fruit was rotten when it arrived in American and most of it was wasted. Buyers would not stand that even if Adam and Eve had gone into the fruit business in the garden of Eden. So American planters decided that they could beat the Cubans at fruit growing,

though under far less favorable conditions.

"They tried it, and the Cubans quickly found that there was no longer any market for their rotting pines and oranges. But the fact remains that no country in the world is better adapted to fruit growing than Cuba; and under American management the Cuban fruit trade will soon become an important factor in the industrial life of the hemisphere."

Desiring to see for myself what used to be the greatest banana-shipping port in the world—Baracoa, at the eastern end of Cuba—and the prospects for the investment of American capital there in fruit-growing when the war is over, I made the trip from Trinidad. Not many weeks ago, until our blockade tied it up, a native steamship line sent small vessels at regular intervals to make the circuit of Cuba.

There was not much to be said in favor of the steamers, except on the any-port-in-a-storm principle, when one particularly wanted to go somewhere and there was no other way. The boats were absurdly small for ocean travel, extremely dirty, and always loaded to the guards with passengers, two-footed and four—not counting the variously-footed creeping and crawling and wriggling things that infested every cranny. The four-footed voyagers invariably over-filled the place originally intended for them and were penned so far aft that their noses touched the shoulders of their two-footed traveling companions as they sat at table, amid odors which bear no comparison to those of Araby the Blest.

Sailing eastward from Trinidad, the first stopping-place of importance is Santiago, something over 200 miles distant; but we did not go ashore on this trip, having visited the place a fortnight before. From Santiago to Baracoa, on the extreme northeast of Cuba, is a run of only 17 hours, even by the slow little coasters. The trip is worth making, if for nothing but the splendors of the tropical sunsets.

The greatest painter would find it an impossible task to depict the exact shadings of sea and sky and mountains. If he were a wise artist, as well as a great one, he would not attempt it, because the nearer he came to the vivid and glorious truth, the more he would be criticized for too-brilliant coloring. The shoreward view is not particularly interesting. At first an endless stretch of keys, all monotonously alike, covered with mangrove bushes.

Then the jumbled and ragged mountains which frown around Santiago, amid a country which looks as if the angry gods had subjected it to the teeth of a harrow; and the nearer sandy slopes, covered with chapparrel—up which our soldiers stormed, under a broiling sun, a few weeks later—the same which our brave boys climbed that fateful morning, many of them to their death, singing the Star Spangled Banner in the face of fearful odds. To all Americans, these blood-baptized slopes will henceforth be sacred soil. Then the shoreward vision is bounded by interminable gray cliffs, surrounded by screaming seabirds and beaten by the restless Caribbean; backed by hills that might be the Blue Ridges of Pennsylvania, if they were only a little higher and were there more of them. Their gentle slopes are bathed in the same blue haze, and their flat tops, with white clouds floating over, look like Titian punch-bowls. Gradually the hills taper down until lost in the sandy mainland; an indistinct that the eastern tip of the island is nearly reached and Cape Maisi may soon be

sighted. Rounding the island in this direction you are almost certain to encounter boisterous billows that cause the most hardened sea-goers to cast their bread upon the waters, hanging in limp bundles over the rail; and when a crowd of passengers, decidedly mixed as to color and "previous condition" are all doing the same thing with more or less vehemence, mules braying and cattle bellowing in sympathy—even historic interest of the region for the moment, falls to charm. Just beyond is the island of Haiti, separated from Cuba by the swift and narrow channel marked on the map as the "Windward Passage." It was at Point Maisi, you remember, that the word West Indies, was first applied. When Columbus sighted it, he believed it to be the extreme eastern end of Asia—the border land of the Grand Khan, whom Marco Polo had so graphically described. Hence he named the cape, now known as Maisi, "Alpha and Omega," and going ashore dispatched an embassy to the imaginary potentate, with gifts and conciliatory messages. As we know there was no Grand Kahn at all, nor any city of mighty proportions, such as that colossal liar, Polo, had described, but Columbus found some Indians at Maisi differing from any he had seen before. They had palm-leaf huts, built in pyramidal shape, and when first seen were smoking tobacco—a plant with which the Spaniards were unfamiliar. Says the historian, Las Casas, in his narrative called "El Primera Viaje de Colon." (The first voyage of Columbus.) "He beheld several of the natives going about with firebrands in their hands and certain dried herbs, which they rolled up in a leaf, and lighting one end, put the other in their mouths, and continued exaling and puffing out the smoke. A roll of this kind they called 'tabac,' a name since transferred to the plant of which the rolls were made." Another historian says that the aboriginal method was to inhale smoke through two cane stalks, forked and hollow, inserting the forked ends into the nostrils and applying the other end of the cane to the burning leaves, and he adds: "It is a very evil and pernicious habit, producing insensibility." Near Maisi are some very extensive and curious caverns, which must have been much frequented by these old-time smokers, for petrified crania and many strange relics are found in their recesses.

Soon after rounding the cape you come to Baracos, a tiny town on a little harbor, whose entrance is extremely narrow and difficult of access. When once inside the land-locked bay, whose tranquil water mirrors the bluest skies and greenest hills and palest palms imaginable, you no longer wonder at the glowing report which Columbus gave of it to his sovereign. Having named it Puerto Sante, he wrote this quaint description, which is as true today as then: "The amenity of the rivers through which the sand at the bottom may be seen; the multitude of palm trees of various forms, the highest and most beautiful I have met with, and an infinity of the great and green trees; the country. Most Serene Prince of such marvelous beauty that it surpasses all others in charms and graces, as day doth the night in luster. I have been so overwhelmed at the sight of so much beauty that I have not known how to relate it to your gracious majesty." The appreciative visitor of today finds himself similarly overwhelmed for in no other part of the world can a lover view he found than that of Baracoa, whether seen from the sea, or from the hills that rise behind it. Graceful palms fringe the shores and adorn the slopes, and mountains rise like islands in a sea of forest, which seems to retain all its primeval freshness and majesty. And