

CORRESPONDENCE.

DAYS SERENE IN PORTO RICO.

San Juan Bautiste, Porto Rico, Sept. 18.—Perhaps the most interesting object in the capital of our new possession is La Casa Blanda (the White House), which Juan Ponce de Leon built for himself, 390 years ago, and as where he lived during his long term as governor of the island. It stands in a narrow, roughly-paved street, about half-way between the Castillo del Moro and the present government palace; and although in its unsightly old age it looks little like the one-time abode of so great a potentate, nobody can mistake it on account of the double line of splendid palms in front.

Trees are few in Porto Rico's capital, there being no others except inside the walls of the Marina—and these are fine enough to form a conspicuous landmark anywhere. The water-side is guarded by a very ancient and picturesque wall, with queer little openings on top for cross-bowmen to shoot through; and within the wall is a charming garden full of pepper and cinnamon trees, with passion vines running riot around a mossy fountain in the center. The Casa Blanca is anything but a "white" house today, but gray with the flight of time, mottled with lichens and stained by the storms of centuries. The passing feet of many generations have worn deep hollows in its stone stairways; and the dim rooms, with their heavily-barred casements, slimy walls and sunken floors, have the odor of grave-mold in them. One has an uncanny feeling of spooks flitting ahead up the ancient staircase and lurking in shadowy corners, and expects at any minute to meet a ghostly knight in armor. The view from the upper windows is unsurpassed. Immediately below, on the seaward side, in the great gray wall of the line of defense, with its massive battlements, antiquated cannon and little sentry-turrets, hanging like oriole-nests over the waves; beyond, the sparkling waters of the bay, and on either hand the palm-fringed coast of the mainland, sweeping to the east and west, with green hills crowding down to the water's edge. Tier above tier rise the hills, in close ranks, to the clouds that veil magnificent Yunque—the Indian name of the loftiest mountain. The central range which forms the back bone of Porto Rico, averages only about 1,800 feet in height, but there are several peaks, each something over 4,000 feet. Between these hills lie some of the richest lands on the globe, capable of producing astonishing crops, four times a year. There are uplands and lowlands, pasture lands, sandy bottoms and loamy bottoms—but no fever-breeding swamps and marshes, such as are found in Cuba. There are districts which grow as fine tobacco as the celebrated Vuelta Abajo of the sister island; coffee-lands, better than those of Guatemala, Honduras or Brazil, and sugar lands which yield greater crops than any other spot on earth. Chemists have never been able to discover what there is in the soil of this particular island to make it better for sugar than others of the West Indies; but the fact remains, demonstrated over and over again, that a quintal of Porto Rico cane yields from two to twelve per cent more sugar than can be obtained from a similar quantity grown in Cuba, Jamaica or Santa Domingo. Perhaps it is because this island is so exceptionally well watered, without being marshy—sev-

enteen rivers running to the sea on this north shore alone, all of them navigable several miles above their mouths.

Doubtless in Leon's time, the space between the fort and castle was open, so that, sitting in his own windows, he had an unobstructed view to the horizon's rim. After the natives of Borinquen were mostly killed and the remnant subjected to his will, the ambitious Conquistador sighed for more island worlds to conquer. It is said that in one of those seaward rooms in the Casa Blanca he planned the voyage which resulted in the discovery of Florida and the upper Bahamas. Sitting day after day in his window, during the three or four years of enforced idleness, looking out over the ocean as it billowed away to unknown regions, and speculating upon wonders that might lie beyond his vision, he brooded over the story he had heard from his Indian servants about mysterious islands in the far Lucayan chain, one of which held deep in its forests the enchanted fountain of eternal youth—and as by that time the heyday of his youth was passed and his hair beginning to whiten, he was doubly anxious to find an unfailing elixir—for which most of us would journey far and wide. So in 1512 he sailed out of this bay, which was then called Aguadilla, as Columbus had named it, headed due north in search of "Bimini"—the fabled island on which was to be found the wonderful fountain, according to the Indians, who were thus repaying treachery with treachery. We know how he cruised the Bahamas, and landed on Guanahani, or San Salvador—the first bit of the Western world which Columbus sighted on his first voyage, just twenty years before; and thence, still steering toward the north star, Leon discovered a coast banked with ball trees all abloom. He named it "Florida"—but did not pronounce it as we do, the Spanish fashion of the word being as if spelled Flow-read-ah; and to the day of his death he believed it to be an island, although the king of Spain made him Adelantado of the new land. We may as well finish the story while about it, as we go from the casa blanca to the tomb of its builder. Leon did not stay long in Florida, but under the guidance of an old woman whom he captured on one of the keys, searched the outlying islands, up and down, for the Bimini of his dreams.

Naturally, he did not find what never existed, and finally returned disheartened to Porto Rico. He had hardly reached the casa blanca before one of his officers, in a ship left behind to continue the search, brought him the glad tidings that the long-sought fountain had at last been discovered; a lie, of course, but it is said that often a falsehood well told is as good as the truth. At any rate on the strength of this one, Ponce de Leon was elevated to the exalted rank of Adelantado of Florida and Bimini; but rested content in Porto Rico, meaning to drink of the magic waters before old age overtook him. Meanwhile, engrossed in Porto Rican affairs, he almost forgot the new domain—until the great discoveries of Cortez in Mexico electrified the world and brought again his spirit of adventure. In 1521 he fitted out two ships and made another voyage to the north, determined to stop en route at Bimini and head off old Father Time by copious draughts from the fountain of youth. But alas! that the best laid plans "gang aft agley." Landing on the Florida coast, he was at once attacked by the Indians and so severely

wounded that he had to be conveyed in haste to Cuba, where he died. His body was brought back to this island and deposited beneath the altar of the Dominican church of San Juan, just fourteen years after the beginning of his administration in Porto Rico and the building of the casa blanca. There it rested for more than three hundred years; when, in 1863, the lead casket that contained the remains of the conqueror were disinterred. The intention was to build a splendid monument to his memory and to place the coffin beneath it; but why they began at the wrong end of the business, by disturbing the bones before the new receptacle was ready to receive them, I am unable to say. The monument was never completed, and after thirty-five years above ground, the remains of the discoverer of Florida and the subjugator of Porto Rico, yet lie unburied. Spain seems to have quite forgotten one of the bravest of her early Conquistadores, for nothing has been since said of the American conquest of taking his bones home to the mother country, along with those of Columbus.

Uncle Samuel is very remiss in his duty if he lets the latter go, for since we took the island with all it contained, Spain has clearly no more right to those sacred relics than to the Habana cathedral which holds them.

The Dominican church of San Juan de Bautiste de Porto Rico is a fine old pile, though greatly the worse for the wear and tear of nearly four centuries and apparently tottering to its fall. In a corner of a musty little chapel attached to the church you may any day see the lead case which contains the dust of Ponce de Leon. Sic transit gloria mundi! The casket is only about three feet square, bound with leathern straps, sealed in the center with the great municipal seal. On the monument against which it rests, the inscription—in Spanish, of course—reads as follows: "This narrow grave contains the remains of a man who was a Lion by name, and much more by his deeds." Rather ambiguous and not altogether true—remembering his cruel deeds and the fierce mastiff, Berexillo; but perhaps Ponce's spook appreciates the intended compliment. The old church is full of curious decorations, rags of antique paintings and moldy relics of by-gone centuries; and it is earnestly to be hoped that the ponderous key will be turned in the rusty lock and the whole thing burned to ashes, before careless alien hands are allowed to disturb them.

Aside from the quaint fortifications and Ponce's home and tomb, there are few "sights" to interest the tourist in the city of Saint John the Baptist. There is the government "palace"—so-called the palace of justice, a shabby opera house, market palace and a few dim shops and churches. Among the most picturesque things are the massive arched gateways in the old wall that surrounds the city, built for defence nearly four hundred years ago. When the gates fronting the sea are closed, the only way to get out of San Juan into the country, or into the city from any part of the island, is through an arched entrance in the lower wall, by the one narrow street which communicates with the outer world. This is the beginning of the old Camino Real (royal road)—the magnificent highway constructed by the early Spaniards which leads to Ponce, on the other side of the island.

Nothing can be more delightful than an early morning horse-back ride a few miles along this road. The way leads first through green fields and gardens, passed the thatched huts of the poorer class of Porto Ricans, who are most of American descent, via Jamaica, more or less adulterated by native blood. Each tiny cotaage is surmount-