

## CORRESPONDENCE.

## OUR CUBAN LETTER.

Washington, April 20, 1898.—When the present war began, Cuba had fifteen hundred and twenty-one prosperous sugar plantations. Today "the sound of the grinding is low," for only six of them are in operation. A few weeks ago I visited one of the six, which is situated in the southeastern corner of the province of Matanzas. It was an all-day's railway journey leaving Habana at 5 a.m. and reaching the goal soon after sunset. Probably 200 miles would cover the distance, as the crow flies; but the road, originally built to accommodate the large estates zig-zags to and fro like the tacking of a ship. Traveling by rail in Cuba is seldom unalloyed delight, and these troubled times discomforts are doubled. Besides the usual slowness and irregularity of service, the heat, dust and absence of eating stations, trains are now-a-days in momentary danger of being fired into, derailed, exploded by bombs, and each has its disquieting attachment of two ironclad cars, filled with Spanish soldiers standing by their guns at the loop-holes. Sophisticated travelers watch every thicket, hill and hollow which might possibly shelter an insurgent, and throw themselves flat on the dirty floor of the car at the first indication of attack. Miles after miles of burned cane-fields, singed trees, the outskirts of Habana, show the boldness of the rebels in spite of the multitude of forts. Avenues of royal palms are passed—magnificent vistas of smooth, round columns, arched with living green. Each of these splendid avenues once marked the entrance to a rich plantation; now they lead to nothing but "melancholy ruins." Falling chimneys standing alone, blackened towers, tumbled walls, piles of rusting machinery, are all that is left of homes and sugar mills. Atop of each ruin perch the scavengers of Cuba, gorged black vultures—the only well-conditioned creatures to be found on the island. Here and there tall ceiba trees (pronounced say-bah), stretch wide their arms, laden with many colored orchids. Occasional sections, burned some months ago, show how nature hastens to hide her wounds in these warm regions. Lusty weeds spring thickly among the charred cane-stubble; blossoming vines creep over blackened walls, and roses riot in the singed hedge-rows—not the delicate pink ones we are accustomed to see growing wild in the north, but tropic roses, gorgeous in crimson and yellow. The voice of the meadow lark is heard, the plaintive call of "Phoebe" and the sweet little song of the Cuban toomeguin. Palms increase in height and number—standing in groves, lining the ravines and crowning the hill-tops; but nowhere in all the desolated country is there the trace of a garden, a cultivated field, or sign of human occupancy outside the fortified villages. On every hand the beehive forts are seen—often as many as 15 or 20 can be counted all at once—all so tiny that one is continually reminded of Senator Proctor's suggestion, to carry one home on his watch chain. Jaruco, Matanzas, Cardenas, and other towns are passed—each with its inevitable accompaniment of reconcentrado wretchedness, in groups of squalid huts under the guns of the forts. At every station Spanish soldiers swarm and starving beggars make piteous appeals. To distribute coin enough to relieve their distress would require the wealth of Croesus. My escort did the best he could for them by rushing out at every stopping place

and buying the entire stocks of all the bread men in sight, with which to fill the skeleton hands. The Cuban bread-seller is worth a special paragraph. Besides parading the city streets numerously, at all times and seasons, he is always found at the railway stations when trains come in, with a very large, low, wicker basket on his head, filled with small, crusty loaves that resemble overgrown biscuits. He is dirty beyond degree, barefooted and generally bareheaded, economizing his battered hat by carrying it in the basket among the loaves.

After hours of slow riding through a totally unoccupied country, between burned cane-fields on either side, with the smoke from more burning fields or insurgent camp-fires visible in several directions—we left the car at nightfall, at a miserable little hamlet of palm-thatched huts. What was our astonishment, on alighting in the mud of this desolate place, to behold, a few yards away, a modern horse-car, exactly like those in use in New York and Washington, only decidedly cleaner. Everything about it was fresh and trim—spotless windows, straps to hold on by, nothing missing but the nickel-box, or the conductor with his bell-punch. We were within the boundaries of the sugar estate, and the car is for the use of the planter and his family, who had come to meet us. Then away we were whisked, over three miles of car track—between rows of stately palms, hedges of giant aloes and boundless stretches of sugar cane,

—to the archway of roses and jessamine which leads to the door of the monor-house. And here new surprises awaited us. The enormous, two-story casa, with its many windows and latticed verandas, was brilliantly illuminated with electricity, and is furnished with all the elegancies of city life. The apartment assigned to my use was the most beautiful I have occupied in many a day, with its handsome French furniture and delicate frescoes, under the soft glow of electric lights in the form of pink lilies; and better than all, it had the welcome adjunct of a perfectly appointed bathroom, "with all modern improvements," as the advertisements say. Presently dinner was served in the wide, cool hall—fine old silver, monogrammed china, exquisite napery, well-drilled servants, oysters, game, rare wines—made it difficult to realize that we were in the heart of an impoverished, war-beleaguered island. I had been told that wealthy Cuban planters lived like princes—and in truth, many an Old World potentate might change places and get by far the best of the bargain. The estate of which I speak is by no means one of the largest in Cuba. The proprietor told me that it is only 16 miles long by 9 or 10 wide, comprising about 30,000 acres. At present it supports over 5,000 people, collected in four villages. In ordinary times, 2,000 was the usual number of retainers, all employed upon the estate in one capacity or another. Since the war, the planter has been compelled to maintain 1,500 Spanish soldiers, in 12 forts, erected at his own expense along the edge of the estate. After Weyler's concentration order, 2,000 reconcentrados were quartered upon him. The poor people were driven from their homes and forced to go to the cities, or to the fortified plantations. There is no city in this section, and no other plantation in operation; so they flocked in here and could not be left to starve. The humane planter built them houses and protected them as best he could, and for more than

two years has furnished them with food, clothes and medicine.

Of course they have more than absorbed the profits of his business, though some of them have been able to work a little on the place. The greatest trouble is with their alleged protectors, the soldier-guard. If the latter want beef, they kill the first cow they see, though it be the finest Jersey. If fresh horses are needed, they help themselves to the best the plantation affords. When the spirit moves them to recreation, they troop over to the manor house and demand its use for a dance. On such occasions "a high old time" but tamely expresses it. They pick up female partners wherever they can—the daughters of plantation hands, good-looking reconcentrado girls, and camp followers. Champagne (the proprietor's) flows like water, or rather, as water never flowed for the external use of these sons of Mars; and if they do not end the orgie by smashing things generally and making a bonfire of the buildings, the planter considers himself lucky. There has never been any danger from the insurgents, to make this so-called "protection" necessary, because the proprietor and his family are known to be in sympathy with the Cuban cause; but there is everything to fear from the Spanish soldiers. And when the crisis comes, if Spain is forced to withdraw her forces, they will probably celebrate their departure by burning the place, if not murdering the people upon whose bounty they have so long subsisted.

The magnitude of things on this "small" estate amazes the stranger. There are 25 miles of broad-gauge railroad within its limits, besides the 3-mile tramway. Its equipment includes 5 locomotives, 300 freight cars of largest size and 150 box-cars for a narrow-gauge track. There are thousands of mules and horses and carts; a dry goods and general supply store, pharmacy, school house, church, ice-making plant, machine shop, carpenters and blacksmith's shops; in short, all the requirements of an isolated community. The enormous grinding house contains several great engines and a wilderness of wheels, bands and machinery. It is lighted by electricity, and has 720 tanks, each of which holds a ton of crude sugar. In prosperous times this plantation turns out 100,000 bags of sugar every year; but this year, when more than ever ought to be made to keep up extraordinary expenses, it will hardly make half the amount. The sugar is sent to New York to be refined, and much of this season's yield will bring low prices because of scorched cane. Passing bands of soldiers often burn a few acres. The stalks are generally ground with the rest, but the first squeezing turns out juice black as ink. It lightens considerably in the process of refining, but is yet too dark for first-class sugar. We occupied a long day going over the plantation, but several days would be required to see all its "points of interest." Besides the extensive flower gardens, with its fountain and shrubbery and shaded walks, there is a park of many acres, containing the choicest trees of the tropics—cinnamon, spice, Peruvian pepper, thickets of bamboo, fruits of every variety, an aviary with countless birds, artificial lakes covered with water fowl, deer—in short, a regular "zoo" and botanical garden combined. Then we took a 16-mile car ride to visit one of the villages. What would my readers give to have just one of those sky-scraping palms in his front yard—and here are thousands of them to spare! Our host sent a man to climb one of them, just to show us how it is done. The smooth, round-trunk looked like a telegraph pole—fully 70 feet from the ground to the tuft of splendid plumes on top.