

CORRESPONDENCE.

CHANCES FOR AMERICAN CAPITAL
IN PORTO RICO.

Ponce, Porto Rico, Sept. 20.—Although you may now make the circuit of this island by railway and visit several interior towns in a parlor car, it is infinitely pleasanter, if time is not pressing, to travel over these tropical countries on horseback, or en coche wherever practicable. Nothing more delightful can be imagined than a saddle-journey from San Juan to Ponce, the capital—a distance of 30 miles as the crow flies, but nearer 50 by the windings of the old camino real, or "royal" road, built by the early Spaniards almost four centuries ago. The interior of Porto Rico is extremely fertile and so well tilled that the entire island looks like one continuous garden. It is remarkably well supplied with towns and villages, there being no fewer than seventy-three with upwards of a thousand population, besides innumerable hamlets, of grass-covered huts surrounding some tile-roofed church or bodega. All the towns are connected by good highways, with many transverse roads; and the railway, begun in 1893, follows the irregular shore-line some 300 miles and already sends several short branches into the interior. When fully completed—as it is likely soon to be, under energetic American management—Porto Rico's railway system will include five lines, with twelve-sections, about 500 miles all told; not a bad showing for the little three-cornered island which is only about one-thirtieth the size of the state of Michigan, or somewhere about 96 miles long by 36 miles wide, in its longest and widest part. Before the war there were 475 miles of telegraph in operation in Porto Rico and a deep-sea cable connecting it with the United States, Europe and the other Antilles. It had also a well established banking institution, whose headquarters were in San Juan, with branches extending throughout the island; and in 1890 a charter was extended for another bank, with the exclusive privilege of a note issue, the original capital being 1,500,000 pesos. Though Porto Rico is only one-twelfth the size of Cuba, it contains fully half as many people, the largest island having so much waste land, while every acre of the smaller is occupied and cultivated. The comparatively level strip between the highlands and the sea is filled with coffee groves, cotton, cane, rice and tobacco. Then comes a mass of irregular hills, apparently piled haphazard, around cloud-capped Yunque, their upper heights yet covered with the magnificent forests which Columbus so much admired. Flourishing plantations extend a long way up the sloping hillsides and down into the green valleys that lie between, while in hundreds of narrow canyons grass grows and flocks and herds find rich pasturage. Porto Rico is famous for its excellent cattle, and for a particularly fine breed of horses from its mountain districts. Through the methods of farming are naturally most primitive and the lazy people invariably put off until tomorrow everything which should be done today—less than a quarter of the crops raised by the present, slipshod methods are needed of the support of the population. Never was there a small country better equipped for sustaining itself, independent of the outside world, than Porto Rico. On the higher grounds European corn and vegetables are cultivated to perfection; and between the coffee, cotton and sugar plantations and the sturdy lines of ancient trees, which stand out in the landscape like a ruff

around the necks of the topmost peaks—rice is grown, of a peculiar mountain variety which does not require flooding and constitutes the staff of life for the laboring classes. There are said to be something over 500 varieties of native trees on the island and in the loftier altitudes apples, pears and other northern fruits might be successfully grown. Every wall and hedge-row is overrun with vines and blossoming creepers, and every spot not devoted to artificial crops is covered with natural fruit-bearing trees, or teeming with flowers, such as are carefully tended in our northern conservatories, here springing in wild and odorous profusion.

When the discoverers named this island the rich port they believed it to contain incalculable mineral riches, Gold, copper, iron, zinc and coal are known to exist in several places, but no serious attempt has ever been made to develop these resources. Possibly under American management they may come to the front in the near future, particularly the iron and coal, which in this locality would prove more valuable, if found in considerable quantities, than most gold mines. The only industry in this line which has been pursued to any extent here are the salt mines, at Salinas, on the south coast and at Cape Rojo, on the west. The sponge-fields, too, are practically inexhaustible and have hardly been touched, and there are extensive quarries of beautiful white stone, granite and marble, which have been entirely neglected for lack of capital, but in Yankee hands would pay well.

A good many Americans are already here, to look up the prospects for investment of capital and the business chances of men of smaller means. They represent every element of professional, commercial, manufacturing and industrial life; and it is safe to say that they are a shrewd lot who will make searching and conclusive investigations. I have talked with several of them, and in every case they express disappointment. They did not realize at a distance that Porto Rico is not in the least like our western states and territories, with extensive tracts of unoccupied and unclaimed lands, or even like New England and our Southern states with their abandoned farms and broken down plantations; but here every inch of land is owned by somebody and can only be acquired by the payment of a good round sum. Since Americans have taken the island, prices have advanced to an absurd extent, it being now pretty generally understood that we are a wealthy people and liberally inclined. Ever the ignorant market people, spying an American afar off, immediately jump on their prices for the simplest things, a hundred per cent more. They seem to think that, as a nation, we are literally "made out of money" and have come to disburse it.

There is no doubt that certain manufacturing would do well in Porto Rico—such as a paper mill, for instance, an ice-making plant, and others of similar nature to supply the needs of the island. There are a few good openings for well-conducted American hotels, restaurants, barber-shops, laundries, tailoring establishments, livery stables, hack and express lines; and in the professional lines American doctors, dentists and photographers will doubtless soon absorb most business of that nature; while the native lawyer—who, like other Spanish-Americans are born limbs of the law, will continue to monopolize the legal

business. When the building era begins, as it is bound to do by next year at farthest, there will be work for a while for mechanics of all sorts. Probably in time the agricultural lands will pass into the hands of Americans, their superior methods and commercial sagacity being bound to eventually absorb the holdings of a race so ill-fitted to compete with them as the Porto Ricans. Today, in spite of adverse circumstances, coffee-growing in this island is about the most profitable industry in the world. Under ordinary circumstances it never falls to pay from 30 to 40 per cent on the investment, years in and out. Where the bounties of nature are so lavishly bestowed as in Porto Rico, there must be many new industries within the reach of far-seeing Americans—such as chocolate and cocoa factories; utilizing the palm oil nuts, castor and vanilla beans with which the island abounds, as well as the spice and dye plants; fruit packing establishments, raising chickens and eggs with incubators (a thing yet unheard-of here); and especially breweries. In the last named line there is certainly a most excellent opening. The people consume a vast amount of beer, which is all brought from the United States and Germany, at great expense. The fashion here is to serve it with broken ice in the glass, which of course renders it disagreeably flat and tasteless.

Porto Rico is not so very hot—not a circumstance to New York or Washington in mid-summer—the average daily temperature being 80 degrees; but the fact remains that it is extremely trying to foreigners.

It stands to reason that a climate in which iron corrodes in six weeks and paper is in a short time reduced to powder, must be hard on the human frame. While the natives sometimes live to good old age, a few instances being recorded of persons past one hundred years, people from the north are sure of having a serious time for a year or two; and if they survive the acclimating process, are generally cut off long before the natural three score years and ten.

Yesterday I was talking with a Chicago real estate man whom I met in Ponce. The gist of what he told me is as follows: "I left home with the idea that Porto Rico would offer some splendid openings for men of small means, and came here expressly to seek information in that line. And I have been disenchanted, not to say grievously disappointed. You know how it is in the United States—that a man who has only a few thousands at command is quite lost sight of in this age of pools and trusts and combines and syndicated department stores; and I supposed that here was one of our new possessions to which he might come and with his limited means begin life under more hopeful conditions. But I was altogether mistaken. I find that the coffee, sugar and tobacco plantations are of great extent, and although their owners are willing to part with them, they want anywhere from \$50,000 up to half a million.

Fruit farming, being a new venture, is uncertain and unreliable, data upon which to base estimates are impossible to obtain. After investigating all these, I turned my attention to dairying and minor industries; but there are unfavorable circumstances surrounding each of them, more or less insurmountable; and on the whole I have concluded to go home and be contented. It is an undoubted fact that nowhere on God's green earth does the poor man stand so good a chance as in the United States."