

CORRESPONDENCE.

OLD JAMAICA GINGER.

Kingston, Jamaica, Oct. 2, 1898.—Dawn was breaking in the east and the Blue mountains leaping out of their beds of mist and tumbling their cloudy blankets in every direction a result; but in every direction we caught the first glimpse of this far-famed bit of the queen's domain. One who is familiar with our own great West, sees in Jamaica a strong resemblance to the Black Hills of Dakota, set in an ocean of lapiz-lazuli. Some of the peaks of the central range are more than 7,000 feet high, and eternally veiled in clouds. Their lower slopes and ridges are clothed with most luxuriant verdure of the tropics; and the foot hills trending down to the coast in many sharp spurs, like a colossal vandyke pattern, have emerald valleys between, filled with cane fields and coffee groves. No emerald was ever half so green as the "living green" of these deep valleys. They are watered by innumerable streams that come pouring down from the upper heights, through canyons banked with tree-ferns, gigantic bamboos, and a hundred varieties of the great palm-family. Xaymaca, "land of springs," the aborigines called their island, you know. The early Spaniards rendered the word after their own musical fashion—Hah-mack-ah; and it remained for the English, who always ruin the nomenclature and wring the last drop of romance out of every place that comes into their prosaic hands, to flatten it out to Jay-may-key.

To most of us, the name of this small territory, associated with its celebrated pine-apple rum, or with remembered pains under the apron in connection with its pungent ginger. Judging from the enormous quantities of "Jamaica rum" and "Jamaica ginger," which have long been used in all parts of the civilized world, one would expect to find a fair-sized continent here, given up to the exclusive production of those useful articles—instead of an extremely rugged tract, 160 miles long by 50 broad, hardly one-fifth of which is yet cultivated. Perhaps as with Panama hats and Havana cigars and Mexican fillgree work, the articles are made almost anywhere else than in the place whose name they bear.

Nearing Port Royal, the entrance harbor to Kingston, we beheld the usual West India scene—a level stretch between the sea and the hills, formed in the slow course of centuries by debris washed down from above; the plain covered with cane fields, coffee groves and cocoa palms, dotted with villas and the tall chimneys of sugar factories. Presently Kingston came into sight—the white-walled city of a dream as seen from a distance, glorified in the golden and rosy glow of the morning. Between, stretched a sandspit, eight miles long—a natural break-water, rising only a few feet above the water line, in places barely twenty-five yards across and nowhere more than fifty; yet the thundering swells of the Caribbean, pounding ceaselessly upon it, never wear it any thinner. Just beyond the curling surf, wherever the sand is dry enough, cocoa palms grow thickly—a long line of soft green, above which appears the masts and spars of the vessels, anchored on the other side of the spit and apparently mixed up with the houses of Kingston. At the tip end of the sand bank stands Port Royal, the ancient Puerto Real, so famous in West Indian history. A light-house rears its white bulk half way down among the palms, and a gun is fired from it whenever a vessel flying the colors of Great Britain appears;

but the banner of any other country is not considered worthy that delicate compliment. Treacherous coral reefs rise out of the deep water for several miles, some forming low, wooded islets, others indicated only by the breakers dashing over them; and only local pilots can take a vessel through these natural defences. There are two channels through which the lagoon can be approached. The eastern passage, along which we steamed, runs so near the shore that an enemy's ship would be sent to the kingdom come by the batteries hidden among the sand hills, long before it could reach the mouth. The western passage is less intricate, but that is covered by powerful forts. Thus nature and art have combined to render the position so strong that in old times Kingston was considered unattackable. Nowadays a Dewey, Sampson or Schley could shell it easily enough over the spit from the open sea. As we rounded the point and the lagoon opened out before us, the scene was most interesting. Directly in front were the dock-yards, forts and towers of Port Royal, with streets and terraces, roofs and turrets, domes and steeples, all sharply defined in the exquisite transparency of the air. At the farther end of the lagoon, inside the sandbar, lay Kingston—blue and hazy, six miles distant. Back of Kingston, the mountains, now piled in masses of shadowy gray, streaked with orange and amethyst by the newly-risen sun behind them.

After we had beaten about for half an hour, a pilot boat shot out from shore with the swiftness of a racing shell. The pilot, though of ebony complexion, like all of his calling in these waters, was venerated with "English" from top to toe. His white duck suit was of the nattiest, the trousers with an exceeding flare at bottom, and his silk hat curtailed to the conventional dimensions of a low crowned derby. His conversation was edifying; with a drawl and cockney accent which would drive a New York Anglo-maniac mad with envy, though issuing from blackest lips. "Oh say," I can't do it, doncher yer know," and numerous allusions to "bloody rot" and "beastly warm" and "three penny ha' penny" in change a "bob." His boat was another curiously—a canoe, 37 feet long, hallowed out of the trunk of a cedar tree, carrying six oars and capable of making seven knots an hour. Seeing it skimming the waves like a swallow, one remembers the tales of the discoverers about the incredible swiftness of the canoe in which the Arrowacks, who inhabited Xaymaca, and the Caribs of the Windward Island, went on their predatory excursions against one another.

An English guard ship is stationed in front of Port Royal—an old three-decker afflunting the broad white ensign, among three or four gun boats and half a dozen tenders. There are batteries on the front and batteiles on the opposite shore; morning bugles were ringing out unsparingly, and sunbeams glinting upon the gold and silver lace and shining buttons and accoutrements, as white-coated men and officers passed to parade. No, it would not be easy to take Jamaica—hut all the same it ought to belong to Uncle Samuel, as a companion-piece to Cuba and Porto Rico.

At this entrance the channel is about a mile wide, the open part of the lagoon

being perhaps seven miles long by as many broad. The latter forms the mouth of Cobre river, the largest in Jamaica, on which, ten miles up, stands Spanish Town, the original seat of government, established by the Spaniards soon after the conquest. It was the fashion then—come down from the days of Thucydides and continued to the end of the last century—to build all important towns on estuaries, at a distance from the sea, for greater security against pirates. The Cobre river, running down from Spanish Town, converted the plain through its flows into a swamp. The swamp is covered with mangrove thickets, and the mangroves fringing the circuit of the salt lagoon are encrusted with oysters. What a crowd of historic associations haunt this place! Before the first hut was built in Kingston, Port Royal was the rendezvous for all the English ships which sailed the Spanish main for spoil or commerce. Here, in later times, whole fleets were gathered, to take in stores, or to refit when shattered by engagements; and here the jolly buccaneers sold their plunder and squandered their ill-gotten gain in gambling and riot. Here prizes were brought for adjudication, and pirates to be tried and hanged. Here Nelson and Gordon and Collingwood and Morgan and Drake all figured in their time. Somehow such rollicking cut-throats do not seem like ordinary murderers when their romantic adventures and deeds of blood and lust are seen through the glamour of two hundred years! It is interesting to recall how Morgan became dignified and virtuous "Sir Henry," a pillar of church and state, knighted by the crown for the services he had rendered to civilization.

At the sacking of Panama, you remember, he got away with 175 mule-loads of stolen treasure—a colossal golden key which could not fail to unlock for him the doors of respectability. Having turned his back upon his boon companions, this red-handed pirate became a most popular governor of Jamaica and a vigorous prosecutor of petty thieves. His prototype is not altogether unknown today, in various walks of life.

Since the day of its discovery, this reef-beset lagoon has been considered one of the safest naval ports in the world, and the narrow sand-spit at its entrance the key to the island. Whatever power possessed "Puerto Real," controlled the harbor and the capital of the island—"San Jago de la Vega," in the old days, rechristened Kings Town after the great earthquake in 1682. Thus, for many years, Port Royal was the principal town in Jamaica. If not in all the West Indies. When the Spaniards were driven from the island, they left behind a great many slaves, who sought shelter in the mountains and defied the authorities. These bandits, much mixed with Spanish blood, were nearly exterminated soon after the English occupation; but later the remnant grew to be powerful and greatly disturbed the colony.

They were "The Maroons," celebrated in song and story, and the history of their desperate struggles for freedom read like a romance.

Today their descendants are a separate people, and still enjoy the privileges granted to their forefathers in consideration of their services in suppressing an uprising of the blacks. It would be hard to find a more interesting people than the Jamaicans of this generation. The blacks, which swarm Port Royal and Kingston, are like no other negroes under the sun, yet have little strain of the old Spanish mixture with the Indians. The African blood, imported when slave labor was one of the blessings which white civilization thrust on the heathen, seems still to flow from