

Something About Venezuela.

Venezuela has been so conspicuously before the public recently that Commoner readers may be interested in an article printed in the Boston Transcript and written by Frederick W. Coburn. The article is entitled "Venezuela and Its People," and is as follows:

It is significant that the capital, Caracas, eight miles from La Guayra as the bird flies, occupies the crater of an old volcano. With the racial egotism goes self-assertiveness easily excited, easily allayed. The Venezuelan is just now "blowing his head off"—or rather having it done for him. Occupation has been found for the crowds of idle men and boys who loaf in Caracas streets, always well dressed, well groomed and with no visible susceptibility toward a job. A gay place Caracas is, a miniature Paris, though Parisians make wry faces at it—a town of which Richard Harding Davis has told to the world his love. A town it is where everybody wears diamonds, even if the shirt is ragged; where champagne is used "to put out fires" and "bank notes to kindle them;" where debtors are far wiser than their creditors.

CURIOUS IDEAS OF HONESTY.

It is contrary to Venezuelan character to pay a bill which he can repudiate tomorrow. Present a claim for a small amount to a Caracas citizen and he will engage a high-priced lawyer to discover a loophole in your contract. Of course the lawyer's bill is never settled either. Yet these Venezuelans pride themselves upon their scrupulous honesty. You may leave a bag of nuggets in the streets of Caracas and nobody will disturb it—unless you lay claim to it (or some other foreigner does). Sneak thieves, according to our former minister, Mr. F. B. Loomis, one almost never encounters anywhere in the country. Thieving is low, dishonest, unworthy a proud descendant of grandes; but cheating—ah, that is otherwise! that is a game.

The people are singularly alive to the dramatic, the artistic. The towns teem with versifiers who fill half the columns of provincial newspapers with classical effusions. Painters there are, too, strong men in landscape and religious art. Grand opera from Europe draws immense audiences; and by night, when nothing is on at the opera house, ladies of high standing organize little street dances with guitar music. A gay, thoughtless population it is.

This of course is the urban Venezuelan. In the hinterland the great mass of population lives without working, too easily, fed by bountiful nature. Most of them have more or less Indian blood; in some districts pure Indians may still be found. The aborigines are simple-minded folk, whose needs do not make them good buyers of textiles, since a blue loin-cloth ordinarily serves for the whole rib.

A RICH BUT UNDEVELOPED LAND

The Spanish-speaking population has been in Venezuela a long time—in fact about four hundred years—long enough to have built up a great empire. But Burke's aphorism regarding "little minds and great em-

pires' holds good to an eminent degree in Venezuela. Not means but men have been wanting. The country has extent sufficient for an empire. It counts nearly 600,000 square miles—more than France, Holland and Germany combined. It is ten times the size of New York state. And in variety of soil and climate it has marked advantages. Of the twenty-three states every one is said to contain mountains. Back from the coast the mountain range crops away to the broad llanos of the Orinoco, a plain of incredible richness. The land of Venezuela, taken as a whole, may be classed as either agricultural, pastoral or sylvan each division showing almost boundless and untouched possibilities. In the fertile mountain valleys grows every crop known to man. Vast forests of mahogany and cedar have scarcely been disturbed. The mineral wealth has long since excited the cupidity of the Briton, giving rise to the boundary dispute of a few years ago. The gold diggings in Yaruarri yielded 42,315 ounces in 1899. Silver is abundant in Bermudez, Lara and Les Anidos. Sulphur, coal, asphalt, lead kaolin and tin are found. Great iron mines have been opened by an American company at Imatica on the lower Orinoco. The pearl fisheries at the island of Margarita employ four hundred boats and still show no signs of exhaustion. The grazing country now supports ten million head of cattle and could easily support more.

Of all these treasures the Venezuelans have proved unfaithful stewards. They have had wealth which they

could not use from mere incapacity to secure and husband it. The country stands in no better condition today than under Spanish rule before 1811. Large tracts of territory remain unexplored. Not only have roads not been built, but no advantage has been taken of the ten thousand miles of navigable waterways. With a long coast and twenty harbors no considerable merchant marine has ever been launched.

In all that concerns the necessities of life the Venezuelans have shown themselves exceedingly lax. Prices in all the cities run higher than anywhere else in the world outside of mining camps. The only cheap thing in Caracas is the violet; you can buy an armful for 20 cents. American sugar costs 30 cents a pound, flour \$12 a sack, eggs 50 cents a dozen, butter 75 cents a pound, coal \$24 a ton.

Everything else corresponds. No efficient street-car service in the cities; hence one must take a cab. Charges on the railroads are extraordinary. First-class passengers pay from 8 to 10 cents, second-class from 5 to 7 cents per mile. Merchants groan constantly regarding freight charges. It costs more to get a ton of coffee to the ship's side from a town ten or fifteen miles back than to send it to England. It is less expensive to ship freight from Chicago to New York than from Caracas to La Guayra, sixty miles by rail. The freight-rate on the German Central railroad—the source of present difficulties—is 30 cents a ton per mile, as against 1 cent a ton per mile on many American roads. No manu-

facturing industries have been developed anywhere in the country. Even the coarse sacking in which agricultural products are wrapped has to be imported. In such conditions commerce naturally languishes. The 530 miles of railroad belong altogether to the foreigner.

LIKING FOR OUR COUNTRY.

American capital has not yet been diverted to Venezuela in any copious stream, perhaps fortunately. Yet, though North Americans have never been profitable accessions to Venezuela's population, they have always been regarded as models for emulation. However we may or may not flatter ourselves while looking at the imitation, there can be no doubt of the intended flattery. G. Washington and G. Cleveland rank with S. Bolivar as patron saints of Venezuela. In all manner of ways we have been copied, though hardly followed. The very name Los Estados Unidos de Venezuela tries to translate us. The Venezuelan constitution has been modelled upon ours. The president is inaugurated on March 4 and lives in a "Yellow House." He enjoys the same length of term as our president—when he has the luck. The chief difference appears to be that the office of ex-president is more lucrative for the Venezuelan than for the Yankee. The typical Venezuelan "former" president lives in Paris upon an income derived from \$20,000,000. Where did he get it? That is the mystery surrounding every apparently opulent native of Castro's country.

WE LEARN BY EXPERIENCE.



A Foretaste of the Power for Evil of a Private Monopoly in a Public Necessity.