

# The Peons of Porto Rico.

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**SAN JUAN, Porto Rico, July 1.**—(Special Correspondence of The Bee.)—Nine-tenths of the people of Porto Rico are miserably poor. Their rude huts, scattered over the country, are meaner than the mud hovels of Egypt, and the rooms which form their tenements in the towns are more thickly crowded than the slums of the cities of China. All the property of this island is owned by a few families. Out of the 800,000 of Uncle Sam's new subjects 700,000 live from hand to mouth and I venture that at least 500,000 during a part of the year go to bed hungry.

Let us first look at the poor of the cities. We talk about hard times, but we really do not know what poverty is. If our fashionable girls who go about slumming should take a trip to Porto Rico they could find an ample field for their sympathy and their curiosity. Take, for instance, San Juan. We have here an average population of 400 to the acre, and I venture there are more than a thousand souls sleeping tonight on this acre where I am writing. San Juan is surrounded by walls, and by the count of our health officers there are more than 16,000 people inside the walls. A large part of the 37,000 citizens are housed outside. The space inside comprises eighty acres, but considerably more than half of this is taken up



A PEON'S HOME.

in streets and plazas and the grounds of Morro castle and San Cristobel. Another large part is devoted to stores and other buildings, so that the people are crowded into a very small section.

### The Human Caves of San Juan.

They live, in fact, in quarters which are more like caves or catacombs than the homes of human beings. The town is made up of two-story houses built in blocks close to the streets, each house having a hall running through the center. The houses are of vast extent. Their upper stories are the homes of the rich and well-to-do, who go through the common hall to reach them. The upper stories have large, airy and well-lighted apartments, and the well-to-do live very comfortably.

The lower stories are made up of little dens, the homes of the poor. In them are scores of rooms from ten to twelve feet square, many of them without any light except from the door, and with no ventilation at night except through holes cut out of the tops of the doors. In such rooms families of six, ten, fifteen and sometimes twenty live, sleeping on the floor or upon cot beds, which are taken outside during the day time.

In going along the streets of San Juan you can look through the halls and you see that every hall ends in a court at the back. About this court open numerous rooms, each of which is the home of a Porto Rican family. Most of the rooms are so small that the people do their cooking out in the court. It is in the court that they wash their clothes, and it also forms their lounging place.

Their water comes from a common cistern, which is usually right next to the cesspool and the common water closet for the court.

When we took charge of San Juan our health inspectors found 1,500 cesspools in the city, the most of them adjoining the cisterns. They were nearly all full and all filthy. Many of them had not been cleaned for years. The majority were without cemented bottoms, and all were more or less leaky. It was indeed a wonder that the whole population was not down with typhoid fever, and you would think that they would be in this condition today. A great deal of cleaning has been done, but not until a thorough system of waterworks is established and the householders are forced to put in modern conveniences can the poor become sanitariously safe.

### Inside the Courts.

During my stay here I have visited many of these courts and have taken pictures of the people who live in them. Their inmates are as cleanly as could be expected in their crowded condition, and considering everything are remarkably peaceable. Few of them have any furniture, with the exception of perhaps a single table and chair. The cooking is done on little iron bowls filled with charcoal. The bowl is about as large as a good-sized washbasin. It has a hole in the bottom for draught, and it is so small that only one thing can be cooked at a time. Each family has a cook stove of this kind, and in some of the courts in the evening a dozen little stoves will be going on once.

The people who inhabit the courts live upon the work which they get in San Juan. Few of the men receive more than 30 cents a day, and many of the women who are servants get much less. When the Americans first came many of the children in the

courts were naked, but the nudity is now confined to the babies.

The population of some of the courts is largely made up of beggars. They are filled with the lame, the halt and the blind.

San Juan has more professional beggars than any town of its size in the United States. Indeed, beggars fare better here than they do with us. The well-to-do people of the island are very charitable, and those who have money will always give something to those who have not.

This is especially so as to the blind. Blindness prevails very largely, and it is considered an affliction of Providence. I have seen men borrow money to bestow it upon the blind when out of change at the time they were accosted. Some of the blindness is caused by the pollen of the sugar cane getting into the eyes while working, and I am told that the laborers on the plantations are especially liable to it. I have seen blind children in all parts of Porto Rico, and doubt not that it largely comes somewhat from insufficient food and hereditary diseases.

In the cities of Porto Rico there is one day of the week when the beggars are expected to go about asking alms. This has always been the custom, and it is so well established that our governor general has sanctioned it under American rule. The day is Saturday. On this day every merchant and business man expects a call from the beggars and puts a pile of centavos (coins, each worth six-tenths of a cent), on his counter or desk. The beggars come in one by one. They each take one coin and no more and then depart, blessing the giver.

### The Peons.

The above is the condition of the poor of the towns. The peons out in the country fare far worse. The meanest negro of our southern states is richer than a score of the farm laborers of Porto Rico. His cabin is worth a dozen Porto Rican shacks and his monthly wages are equal to the earnings of many of these people for a year.

The nominal wages of the laboring classes here is 50 centavos a day, or 30 cents of our money. This is for first-class labor and is the highest sum that has been paid.

The average planter, however, does not pay his men in money. He pays them in tin disks, the size of a nickel, which are only good at his little store on the plantation. Each of the disks is labeled with his initial. It represents a centavo and can be spent nowhere else. Upon some of the plantations money is not paid at all. The people are given so many bananas for their day's work and their steady work lasts only for about five or six months of the year.

Sunday is the peon's market day. On this day you will see the country roads lined with men, women and children on their way to market. Each man carries a bottle, holding it by a string tied to its neck. The usual bottle is a half-pint and it is taken to bring back the man's supply of rum for the following week. A half pint is not much, but this is all he wants, although rum is the national drink and he takes some every morning before breakfast. Indeed, I have been surprised to see so little drunkenness here. The chief cases of intoxication are among our soldiers, and I have so far seen ten drunken Americans to every drunken Porto Rican.

### A Poor Man's Home.

I wish I could transport one of these Porto Rican huts to the United States. I would



A HUMAN CAVE OF SAN JUAN.

like to show President McKinley how some of his subjects are living on this beautiful island. The house I should choose would be one of a common laborer's on a rich sugar or coffee plantation. There are thousands like it all over Porto Rico. Here is how it looks: It is made of poles about as big around as your arm and palm leaves as thick as the average book cover and about half as wide as a page of this paper.

The framework, including the bridge roof, is of poles tied together. Then the palm leaves are laid on and other poles of about the thickness of a broomstick are tied horizontally across the walls of the house to keep the palm leaves together. The floor of the hut is of poles so loosely put together that all the dirt drops through the cracks. The roof is so poorly made that the rain drips through, and at night the cold breezes whistle through the walls.

The hut has no windows. Its door of

palm leaves can be lifted away during the daytime. It has absolutely no furniture. The family sleeps on the floor. The cooking is done in a little lean-to at the back upon a fire bed of earth, the pot being raised upon stones above the coals.

In this house, which I have described from notes made in the hut itself, there were eight children, three of them stark naked, and one of the three was 5 years old. It was deformed, and could only crawl over the floor in its nakedness. All the children were exceedingly lean, although their heads and eyes were good.

As I look about this hut, which belonged to the peon of a rich coffee planter, I asked its owner why he did not have a garden. He replied that the planter did not allow his laborers to have gardens, for then they could raise what they wished to eat and would not have to buy at his store.

By inquiry I found this was so almost everywhere. These people are surrounded

get all the chairs they wanted. They then asked if they could have one for each member of the family, and were delighted when the reply was "Yes."

### Surprised at American Money.

The peons have not yet gotten over the sensation of receiving actual money for their work. They have been paid in this way by the Americans, and at first it surprised them exceedingly. The men who worked at Ponce and on the south coast said they had never seen so much money before. They commented on the value of the American dollars, which were worth more than their own dollars, and today they are happy at being paid in cash. During this spring the government officials have had 11,000 of them at work upon the road. This was to help the people as much as to help the roads.

The greatest care has to be taken, however, to see that the peons actually get the money. There is always a gang about the men on payday. This is made up of ex-



A "TOUCH-ME" STORE.

by good land, but they dare not use it. Many of them may be working among the bananas all day and at the close have to take the tin disks they receive in pay and walk a mile perhaps to the "touch-me" stores and buy the bananas which they use for their evening meals. The streams are full of fish, but they are not allowed to fish in them because the waters belong to their masters. They will be arrested if they steal vegetables, and they dare not cut a stick without the consent of the men for whom they work.

### Taxing Men for Chairs.

It was for a long time a wonder to me that there was no furniture in the houses. I found only a few rude beds and now and then a hammock or so in the huts of the better class. It was very rare to see a table or a chair. I asked one man why this was so. He replied that the possession of chairs largely increased his tax rate. Said he:

"I once bought two chairs and brought them home, and for a time my wife and myself enjoyed them after our hard day's work in the field. Then the tax assessor came along and wanted to increase my taxes three pesos. I asked him why, and

overseers and others who pretend they have claims on the wages of the men.

Sometimes there is a planter who makes demands for alleged debts and thus tries to get a percentage of the wages.

Many of the men have never received real money before and they hardly know what to do with it. The government paymaster told the men that the money was their own and that no one else had any right to it and they should take it home and spend it for themselves. Following the crowd also were peddlers and gamblers, who hoped to get the money of the poor peons as soon as it was paid. The government is regulating these things as far as possible and in time the peon will be able to take care of himself.

The stores on the plantations are much like the "touch-me" stores of our coal mining districts, save that they have no goods to speak of. Their stocks in trade are made up of codfish, jerked beef, bananas and Porto Rican rum.

Some of them have bread and some have clothing. These stores should be abolished and the planters forced to pay in cash rather than in store orders. Methods should be adopted by which every peon can have a garden and be taught to cultivate and accumulate for himself. He should be allowed to have a chance for a living and should be protected in his rights. So far the Spaniards have run everything for the rich. They have done all they could to keep the poor in ignorance, and today nine out of every ten people in Porto Rico cannot read nor write.

Education should be compulsory, and schools should be everywhere.

### They Have Banana Stomachs.

Speaking of starvation in Porto Rico, this is the only part of Uncle Sam's dominion where we can ever have a famine. The soil here is rich, but if there should be such weather conditions as to cause a failure of the banana crop, many of the poor people would die of starvation. The food of many is made up of bananas. Not one man in a dozen has any meat to speak of, and the faces of the people are bloodless. They look anemic, and are so. As it is, the mortality is very great. The poor have so little strength, owing to insufficient and improper food, that when they grow sick they die.

It is only the profligence of the people that keeps up the population. The babies fairly swarm. And such babies. After they have reached the banana-eating age they get what is called here the "banana stomach." They have to fill their little bellies full in order to contain enough to sustain life, and the average child here has an abdomen which protrudes like that of a beer-drinking alderman. It is as tight as a drum and his legs below it are so weak that they look like pipe stems walking around with the great load above.

The majority of the peons are whites, although there are many mulattoes and not a few negroes. They have good faces and are naturally intelligent. They are very quiet and peaceable. They are kind to their families and are, on the whole, good citizens. I am told by Americans who have employed them that they are excellent workers and that they are glad to do all they can to earn their money. They work from sunrise until sunset and are as reliable as the average American workmen. Some trouble is had as to the numerous holidays and feast days, which have been customary, but the most of the men will do their work irrespective of these, asking for Sunday only.

FRANK G. CARPENTER.

## Told Out of Court

A boy 14 years of age, who said "he did not know he had a soul, that he did not know what morals meant or moral responsibility," when asked as to the nature of an oath said "if he told one story he would go to the legislature, if he told two he would go to congress."

A popular judge recently took a pleasure drive through the country with a party of four (of whom his wife was one). Rolling along in a white high-bull trap, they seem to have been taken for high rollers, as an innocent-looking countryman, of whom the judge blandly inquired for a hotel, replied: "Yes, there is a hotel right down yonder, but it's a temperance hotel."

How a greater trouble overshadows a lesser was aptly illustrated in one of the minor courts, relates the Detroit Free Press. The accused was a big, strong, honest-faced German, greatly excited and disposed to do more talking than is permissible under such circumstances. The court distinctly said that the big man was charged with disturbing the peace and asked him whether he was guilty or not guilty.

"Dot vos not'ing, schudge," came the response. "Der prew'ry he hired me ter drive dot vagon. Tony Velters, he say, 'Shake, it vos besser and you join der union,' und den he say why I don't vait a leetle and see how vos it. So I vait."

"Purdy gwick der boes he say, 'Shake, you can get your moneys und give up your deam. We vos a union prew'ry. I say I would see Tony and ask him vot der reason mit him dot he advise me out of a job. Vhen I find Tony he say did I haf some sense, und I told him he vos schmarder und I vos und he didn't know not'ings."

"But they say that you argued with a club and that Tony's strongest proposition was a brick."

"Dot vos nod der boint, schudge. Vot I vant der vind out is, how do I stand on der union labor question?"

There are pleasantries about courts and lawyers, and Attorney W. E. Hale is not exempt from the rule, reports the Minneapolis Times. In conversation with a group of well known barristers recently he told them how he came to lose his first case.

"It was an assault and battery case," he said, "and I was counsel for the complaining witness. Unfortunately for him, Irish wit defeated me. The defendant, an Irishman and the aggressor in the fight, was charged among other things with having chewed my client's thumb. That he had masticated the member was admitted. At the same time the attempt was made to show that he had done so only in self-defense. On the stand he testified that while steadily closing his grinders on the thumb he had yelled to his wife, forty rods away, to come to his assistance. And she had responded.

"I had a very high opinion of my ability to corner a witness and make him contradict himself, even at that early date. This was where I thought I had him 'g'ing.' 'Do you mean to say,' I asked, 'that at the same time that you had your teeth tightly compressed on his thumb so as to make articulation, if at all possible, very indistinct, you nevertheless managed to make enough noise to attract your wife, forty rods away?'"

"Sure, an' yer pint is well taken," he replied. "O! don't know jist how O! managed to do it meself. But O! think O! kin illustrate it if yez be willin' to put yer thumb in me mou't."

"Needless to say, I did not care to have it acted out. He made a great, big hit with the jury, and I—why, I lost the case."

## Holes in Indiana

They are having a terrible time down "on the banks of the Wabash," reports the Chicago Tribune. In half a dozen places in that section of the state the bottom has dropped out and nobody has been able to fill up the holes. Over at Bolivar, in Wabash county, several hundred feet of highway got tired and simply dropped out of sight. The county commissioners dumped a considerable portion of the township into the cavity, but it still yawned for more. They finally gave it up and built a bridge over the chasm.

The Chicago & Erie railroad found that their track near Disko was apparently built upon water and spent three years to make a solid foundation under it. They pored in thousands of cars of filling with apparently no effect, so they built a spur three miles long around the opening and admitted their defeat.

Last week trouble broke out near Laketon, in Pleasant township. This new hole, according to voracious correspondents, has a tremendous and impartial appetite. It swallows up stones, timbers, earth, and whatever is thrown into it, and cries for more. It even refuses to be bridged, the foundations breaking off and falling into the hole each time the attempt to cross the chasm has been made. The road supervisors acknowledged that it was too much for them and have referred the case to the county commissioners, who went out in a body last Friday and held a meeting—not too near the edge of the hole—to determine what should be done about it.

## Evangelistic Movement

Mr. Moody says: "The coming year in America, I believe, is going to see a widespread evangelistic movement in which, I trust, thousands may be reached by the churches." He adds: "Destructiveness on the one side and the no less evil spirit of intolerance on the other side have wrought wide dissensions in America."