

The HEMP INDUSTRY of the PHILIPPINES

THE hemp product of the Philippines in one year exceeds in value the sum the United States paid Spain for the quit claim of the islands. In a fair year, with good prices the value of hemp exportation from the archipelago doubles that sum.

The prospector seeking for investment need not dig below the surface in the Philippines. The culture and harvesting of hemp is the biggest gold-mine he will find. The English capitalist discovered the fact nearly half a century ago. In 1872 over thirty thousand tons were exported. In 1897 five times that amount. Under favorable conditions with American enterprise the exports will double in the next five years. The Philippines should produce from three hundred thousand to four hundred thousand tons. The profits on hemp-growing is 100 per cent., provided labor is obtainable at the former rates.

Of course, this roscate picture will not materialize for several years. The war has devastated thousands of acres of the best hemp districts of the islands, and it will take some time to restore the crop to a profitable condition. At present the great "godowns" in the hemp ports in Manila, in London, Boston, and New York are practically empty, and hemp has gone up to a prohibitive price. A jump from four cents to ten, and even fifteen cents per pound, simply means that the supply is exhausted. No one would buy at such a price. Hemp grows in India, Russia, and Mexico, and other parts of the world, but the Manila brand is the best in the market, and no other will take its place.

Hemp made the Philippine Islands worth something to Spain. England stepped in and gobbled up the trade, and, in the future, the American, if he be wise, will put his money in hemp cultivation and let the alleged gold and coal deposits wait. The islands seem to have been especially made for the benefit of the abaca-plant. The moist though not swampy country to the south of Manila, the Camarines, Samar, Leyte, and Cebu, would produce a solid overgrowth of the abaca-tree if left to take its own course.

The tree itself resembles closely the banana-palm, but differs essentially in the fineness of its fibre and its barrenness of fruit.

The natives, too, seem to have been especially provided for the hemp country. Tending to improvidence and indolency, the hemp industry furnishes them employment whenever they run short of rice and tobacco, for hemp can be harvested almost at any time except during the short rainy season. Attempts have been made to transplant the hemp-trees, taking them only as far away as Borneo, but the *musa textiles* refused to cohabit with any but Philippine soil. The Pacific slopes of the volcanic regions of the islands produce the best plants. Although the abaca-tree coddles to thin soil, and rather dry, quickly drained localities, the trunk and leaves demand frequent and abundant moisture. Given the proper conditions, the vast plantations will thrive like asparagus-beds. Very little cultivation is required; an occasional weeding and a replanting at

the harvest-time and nature does the rest. The crop is not gathered as if it were a corn-field, but the trees are found in all stages of growth, and the native passes through regular routes, slashing a plant here and there, his practised eye the sole judge of its maturity. Three years is the proper age for harvesting. The hemp-stripper goes forth much as a huntsman would. With his bolo in belt and a bamboo canteen full of rice slung over his shoulder, he hies himself to the uplands.

After feeling the plants, which at the age of three years are about ten feet high, he proceeds to clip off a shoot and replant it. After a number of trees are cut the stripping process begins. All the leaves are torn off and the outer skin of the stalk is peeled off. Inside of the trunk is a pithy substance, and around this are layers of fibre imbedded in a soft juicy substance. The fibre must be separated from the stalk at once lest it rot. Many Americans have cherished the idea of ex-



HARVESTING THE ABACA, OR HEMP-PLANT.

* Warehouses.



DRYING HEMP ON A MANILA WHARF.

porting the trunk intact, but the enterprise is not feasible because of the perishable nature of the pulpy segment.

A bamboo-made bench is improvised, and at one end the stripper binds his bolo; the handle attached to his foot by another bamboo strip. Across the blade he draws the stalk until the fibre is thoroughly separated without injury, preserving its length of from eight to ten feet, and leaving it fine and beautiful that the tropical sun may lick up the moisture still bleeding from the operation. The work of stripping is very tiresome and requires the skill of a trained hand.

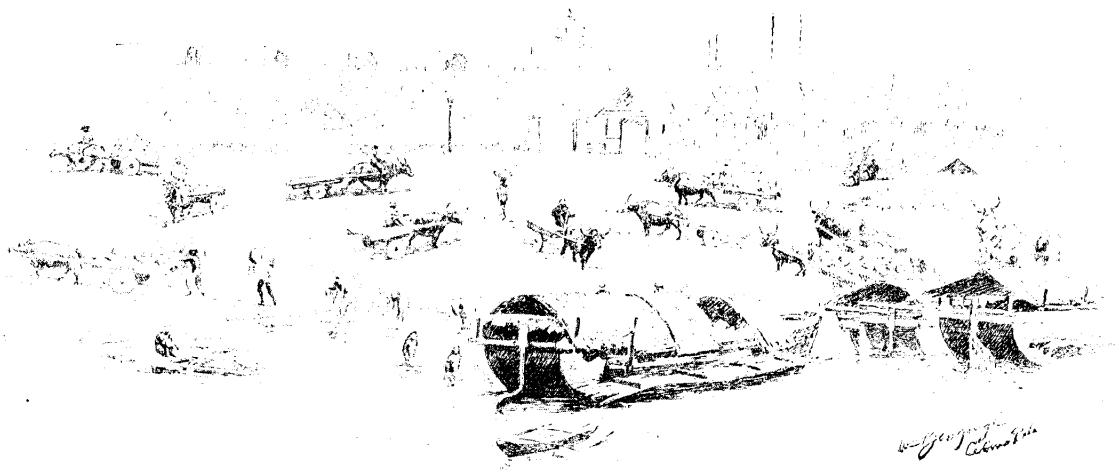
The white man has often attempted to improve upon the brown man's method of stripping the hemp, but despite large expenditures and ingenious mechanical contrivances no machine has been produced that takes the place of the native. Patents have been taken out, and large sums of money spent upon experimental machines, but the texture and peculiar nature of the abaca-plant seem to require the touch of human hands to separate its parts. As well try to produce a machine to comb the snarls out of a woman's hair as to make a mechanical hemp-stripper.

The native is paid for his work in hemp, dividing the product equally with the plantation-owner. When he cuts and strips all he can carry, he twists up the fibre into a great roll and goes down to the plantation-owner's house, and there the division is made. They then hang up the rolls until the middle-man or contractor comes along and a bargain is struck. The bales are crudely fastened together and carried to the nearest port and shipped usually to Manila, where they are separated, rebaled and shipped either to Hong-kong, where there is an immense rope-walk, or to New York, Boston, or London. The rope-walk at Hong-kong is one of the largest in the world. Its product practically supplies China, Japan, and Australia. Very little hemp is made into rope or twine in Manila. Although crude rope-walks exist in different parts of the island, their manufactured article, although strong and durable, would not compete in the foreign market. Hemp subserves every purpose that leather might with the native. He twists it into sandals, uses it for harnesses, and it answers for binders in the building of his nipa hut. The utility of hemp is well understood to the Filipino. The finer quality is selected and reserved for weaving purposes, being made up into really handsome cloth, while the ordinary hemp is universally used to make a coarse though durable material, worn generally by the natives, who delight in gaudy colors and picturesque though scanty costumes. There is still another texture woven from the selected strands of outer fibre, intermixed with the fibre of the pine-leaf. The cloth has the semblance of unfinished silk, and is pretty and durable, though not as beautiful or dressy as the pure pine-leaf fibre silk known as piña cloth, the best woven product of the islands.

The entire hemp industry of the Philippines is still worked by primitive methods and with simple contrivances. The native, though unambitious himself, is jealous of the Chinaman and is averse to the Celestial getting control of the plantations or contracts, while scorning up-to-date methods himself. The "Cheno," however, has made inroads in this industry, as well as in others in the Philippines. Had he not, the development would not have been as rapid as it has. The

native is thoroughly capable and understands the treatment of the plant and its harvesting, and could he be induced to work with regularity would be as good a laborer as the Chinaman, but the Celestial usually controls the baling and local marketing of the hemp.

The presses at the seaport towns are crude affairs.



UNLOADING HEMP AT CEBU.

After the fibre is classified and separated into three piles or classes, it is dumped in bulk into a huge press and a screw applied. After this operation it is taken out and put into another press of more regular design and of more imposing character. The second press is operated by an eight-armed capstan on an overhead platform, and a score or more of naked coolies, usu-

ally Chinese, push it around. The sight is most amusing. With grunts, laughs, and confused jargon and raillery they urge each other on and manage to bring their strength together at loudly accentuated periods. A good-sized press will turn out three to four hundred bales a day, and in the course of a year a million or more bales are prepared for shipment. In Cebu large quantities are handled, principally the products of Leyte and Samar, although in Manila the largest presses are in operation.

The classification of hemp requires the skill of an old hand, and the experienced eye of a buyer who knows all the tricks of the trade. The native will bring his hemp down from the plantation in a moist state and offer it for sale at night, hoping thus to fool the middle-man as to weight and quality, but as this part of the business is mostly in the hands of the Chinese, there is little danger that they will be deceived or cheated. The Chinaman is the sharpest bargain-driver in the world, and whether it is hemp, silk, or old junk, he is fully capable of looking after his interests. Fineness of fibre, color, strength, and length determine the value and grade of hemp. If it be carefully stripped over a smooth knife, immediately and thoroughly dried, and of good length, it will bring the highest price. If it be carelessly stripped, juice being left in the fibre, it loses its color and becomes coarse. It then is considered of a second and third grade quality and brings a smaller price. The native watches the market, and if he hear that the demand is heavy he takes advantage of the middle-man and compels him to pay first-grade prices for second and third grade products. Formerly hemp brought in Manila from \$70 to \$150 per ton, always fluctuating according to the supply, at times going up to \$300 per ton, but at present the price is practically prohibitive, and it looks as if it would remain so for the next two years.

A half-dozen large English firms in Manila handle the bulk of the trade. These firms are old and well established, and have associated with them steamship lines running to Hong-kong and Singapore, where they usually transship to London and New York. There are also a few American firms who handle the hemp direct, in some cases sending out sailing-ships and taking on cargo at Manila or Cebu.

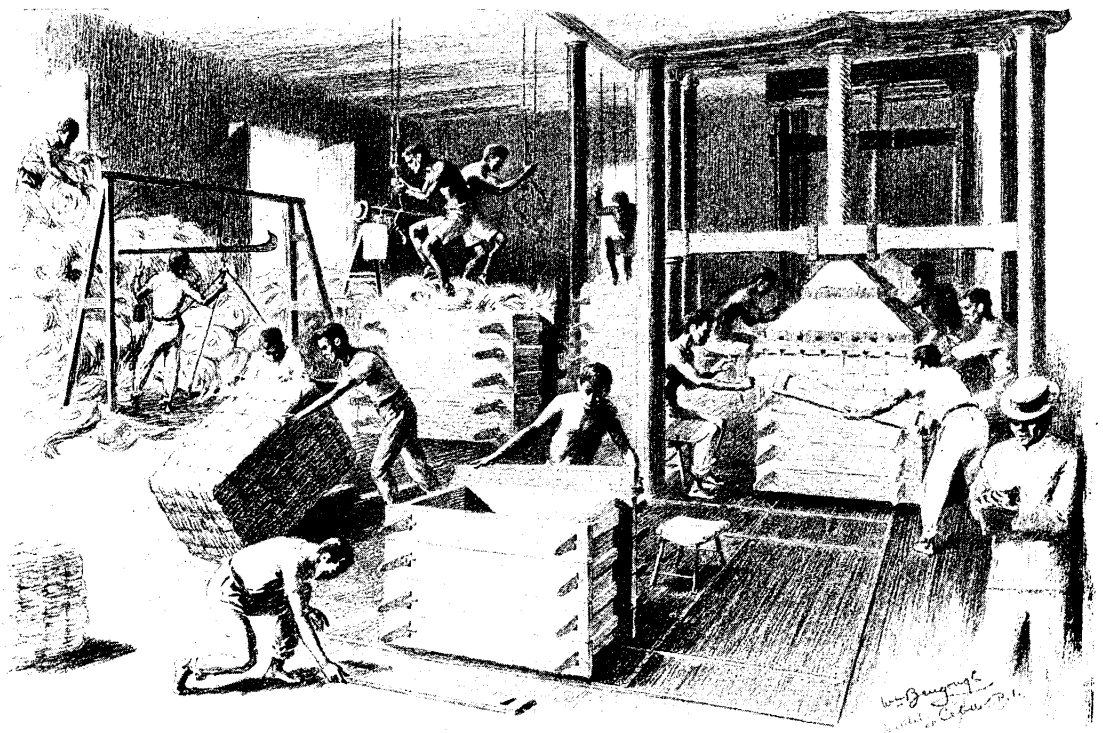
Hemp-culture offers a large field for American capital. The field is practically unlimited. Vast tracts of

land suitable to hemp-raising could be secured at a nominal price. The plant practically grows wild, and with a little encouragement and attention enormous results could be obtained.

There is little probability of over-supplying the market and practically no danger of competition. The English, French, and Dutch have made repeated attempts at transplanting the Philippine plant to Borneo, Tonquin, India, and Australia, but the experiments have been largely unsuccessful in every instance. While the plant has taken root and apparently thrived, for a time, the fibre lacked the fineness and strength of the Philippine product.

The peculiar condition of the climate and the volcanic soil seem to be essential to hemp-growing, and as the combination exists to perfection in the southern Philippines, there is no reason why the vast waste-lands of the Camarines, Samar, and Leyte should not, in time, become the new commercial Klondike for American prospectors and ambitious colonizers.

EDWIN WILDMAN.



BALING HEMP.