

BANANA GARDENS, LAS PALMAS, GRAND CANARY.

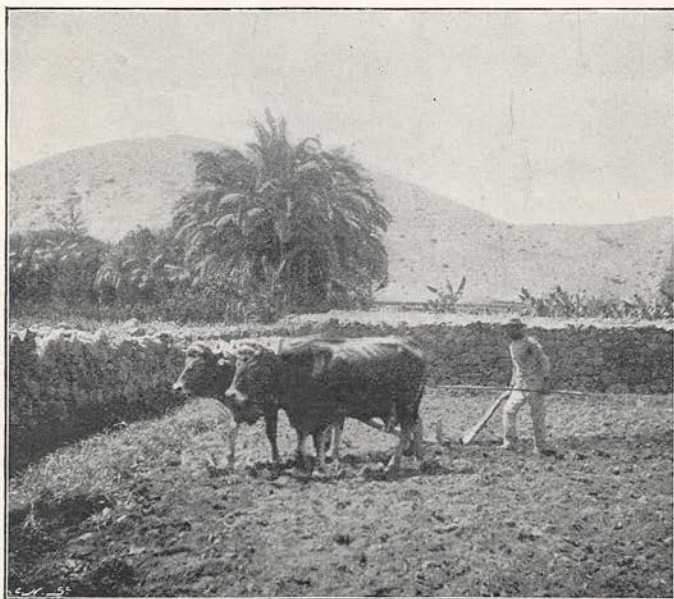
BANANA FARMING IN THE CANARY ISLANDS.

BY CUTCLIFFE HYNE.

ANY attempt on the part of a blockading fleet to starve out either Grand Canary or Teneriffe would meet with very dismal failure. The inhabitant would simply cease exporting bananas, and live on his crop, which is a continuous one all the year round. The crop might deteriorate if the blockade went on for a vast number of years, as it is to some extent nourished by imported chemical manures. But the only way to bring banana growing to a sudden end would be to entirely stop the rain supply, and this would be difficult even for a wrathful and ingenious American.

It is not many years ago since the banana was a comparatively rare fruit in England, a luxury employed only by the rich, an article of distaste and disuse to the poor. But to-day in England the banana is as widespread as the potato. The epicure of Park Lane toys with one for his breakfast; the

resident in the Ratcliffe Highway takes the banana as dessert after his evening whelk; and probably one of these typical persons is as ignorant as the other that the fruit which he has handled originally grew in those little specks of volcanic land which the ancients dubbed the Fortunate Islands.



PLOUGHING GROUND FOR A BANANA GARDEN.

There was a day, before the invention of aniline dyes, when the Canary gentleman earned an easy livelihood by growing cochineal. The industry still survives in scattered patches, as there is still a demand for the scarlet dye to colour the British soldier's coat and to tint the dinner-table jelly. But, as a national industry, cochineal growing

put a new face on affairs. In the commencement these aliens were, for the most part, traders on the sickly West African coast, and their business instinct showed them the opening. They did not work for philanthropy, but they founded the banana trade; and to-day Grand Canary alone exports to England a million bunches of the fruit annually.

The price of the banana may fluctuate, the profits to the shipper may swing about at the mercy of rates of exchange and a thousand other contributory details, but the demand for the banana as a food is constantly on the increase, and the acreage of banana gardens in cultivation is, practically speaking, determined only by the amount of water procurable.

The Canary Islands are all of recent volcanic formation. The outer soil, where it is not cultivated, is merely hard cinder, and drinks up the rainfall thirstily. Great ravines, locally named barrancoes, slice the country in every direction, and if left alone would carry every drop of rain away to sea within an hour of its fall. So the whole system of farming has come to depend upon complicated irrigation schemes. The banana must have abundant moisture—this is the *sine qua non* of its existence, and so every

pint of rain water is jealously collected and guarded. Every hollow has its dam; every little gathering ground, even though it may be only a thousand yards in superficials, is footed by its stone-walled concrete tank, and a man who owns a barren watershed that will grow nothing but a few scattered bushes of euphorbia, and will not support so much as a goat, may well be a person of wealth and position, and, by means



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may be said to have died when the fiend of science (who is certainly not a modern-day Spaniard) invented anilines, and for many years Canary gentlemen genteelly starved. They had never worked in the past, and they preferred dying out to working in the present and future.

Then came the energetic and commercially-minded Englishman from the North, and with him, in small quantities, the Scot, and

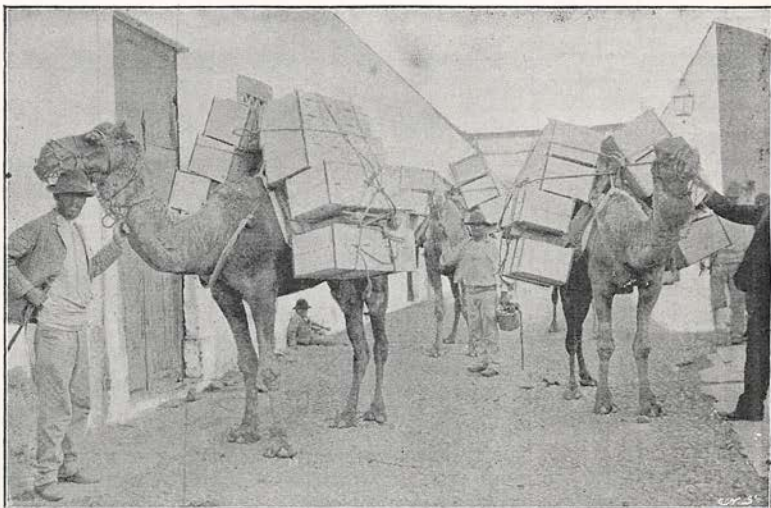
of his water power, autocrat of local agriculture.

The farmer who actually grows the bananas is, nine times out of ten, a tenant, and himself a worker amongst the plants. His holding may be as small as half an acre; it usually runs to about two acres; but, anyway, twelve acres is the largest banana farm in Grand Canary, and this is uncommon. With the land he rents his water; that is to say, the landowner who lets the ground guarantees to supply water for the plants during so many hours per week. If the

landowner's own supply of water holds out, well and good; but if not he must buy and pay the market price. The banana plants must have the water when they want it, or otherwise they will die and the loss will be great.

The cost of these water rights is some-

times surprising; £7 10s. an hour is quite a common figure. But holders of water are people who have to look out for large



CAMELS BRINGING BANANAS DOWN TO HARBOUR.

fluctuations in their stock, for it is not at all an unusual occurrence for £7 10s. water to slump to 8s., merely on the depression caused by an hour's rain squall.

Naturally all kinds of varieties of banana have been tried in the Canary Islands, and



LOADING TOMATOES AND BANANAS AT OROTAVA

new experiments are continually going on. There is the tall silver banana, which runs to twenty-five feet high; but this takes too much out of the soil, and its fruit, moreover, is small. There are other kinds, each with its own special fault. But what is aimed at is a tree that will grow the largest possible bunch of fruit in the quickest time, with the least hurt to the soil; and this is arrived at with a species of plant which sends its uppermost leaves rarely so high as ten feet above the ground.

A newly planted banana garden is one of the most uncomely spots imaginable. The husbandman yokes a pair of cows to a primitive wooden plough, and scratches up the soft, dry loam to the accompaniment of much cigarette smoking. The banana being the oldest cultivated plant in the world—it belongs to the lily family, by the way—has quite outgrown all natural means of repro-

duction. Adam may have raised it from seed, but to-day it has not the least vestige of seed anywhere within its economies. And

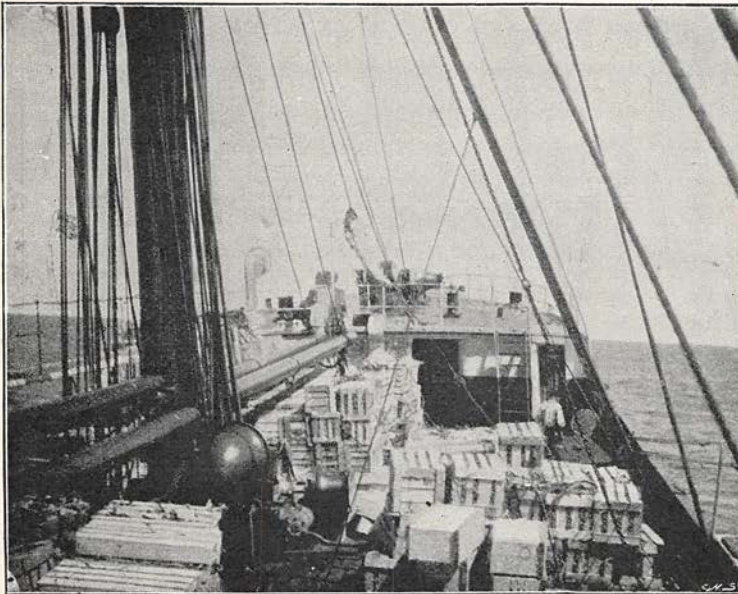


BRINGING UP NEWLY CUT BUNCHES FROM GARDEN TO PACKER.

so the Canary farmer dibbles in old banana roots or slips, and from the flanks of these the young plants soon sprout and grow.

But the great feature of a banana garden is the irrigation arrangements. Between each row of plants there is a gutter in the soft earth; across the end of each of these series of gutters there is another gutter, which is fed from others, which in turn draw from the main water supply. In the stowage tank at the head the women folk wash their clothes, and if any water drains through to the further side of the garden, then they feel quite free to use that for drinking purposes.

The banana reproduces by subdivision, and one "house," or root, may have as many as eight heads, each head being



FORE-DECK LOAD OF BANANA CRATES CROSSING THE BAY OF BISCAY.

practically a complete tree, which will during its lifetime produce one bunch of fruit. Two bunches for a "house" is the annual crop, and when a trunk has yielded it is cut down, and the young shoot at its foot sprouts up fast. Occasionally a trunk is ambitious, and attempts to bring forth twin bunches; but infanticide is promptly resorted to by the farmer, and one of the bunches is sacrificed, or otherwise each clump of fruit would be too small to pass muster with the shipper.

In England we see bananas hung up green in the shops and slowly ripening with the help of an indifferent climate, and we promise ourselves that some day we will go and pick for ourselves the mature fruit from the tree, rich, golden, and excellently luscious. But, thanks to its general artificialness of growth, the banana has quite forgotten how to ripen on the tree in the Canary Islands. The birds and the rats are all its enemies, and to guard against their pilfering, the fruit is picked green, and even for domestic consumption it is hung up under cover to ripen and mature.

But for shipping purposes, which brings in the chief livelihood of the Canary banana farmer, the fruit is sold green to the packer for prices which now run to as much as five pesetas a bunch, though not many years ago two and a half pesetas was a good price. Packing costs the shipper as much as the fruit. There is, practically speaking, no wood in the islands, and all timber for crates has to be laboriously carried from Norway. Leaves form some of the packing material, but the supply is short; and paper, cotton wadding, and straw are also used, all of which have to be imported.

The crates are made by woman labour entirely. The packer can hire a woman for a peseta or less a day, whilst a man costs his two pesetas fifty. The man has to stop to

smoke. The ladies do not indulge in cigarettes during business hours; and, moreover, they are handier (queer to relate) with a hammer and French nails; and so they get this job. And after the bunches are packed in their crates, they are loaded on a mule cart, or sometimes on a camel, and taken down to some harbour on the coast, where boats tranship them to the English steamers. On the steamer sometimes they are stowed below, where there is no cargo which will heat or spoil them, but as often as not they travel to England stowed on the open deck, and go through any weather which may befall in the Bay or elsewhere.

The modern-day farmer of the Fortunate Islands does not know much about the outer world, although there is a primitive cunning in his commercial ways. He works in his garden amongst the smell of oranges, and tends his irrigation trenches, and prunes the peach trees and the alligator pears and the custard apples in his fence, and smokes a cigarette, or chews a knot of sugar cane, and leaves care for *mañana*. It is only when *mañana* brings an order and a squad of men, who draft him off and make him part of a ragged, sloppy regiment, that he very much troubles



THE BANANA FARMER HAS OTHER OCCUPATIONS BESIDES BANANA FARMING.

about politics or anything beyond rainfall and the current price of bananas. But take him away to fight the Americano or the Ingles, or anyone else on God's wide earth, and he becomes a red republican or an anarchist at once. He will join any party which promises to upset an existing government which makes necessary such a wearisome thing as war. He wants to be left alone in his own peaceful way, to smoke, to own a fighting cock, to beat an occasional mule to death, and, between whiles, to fleece the English tourist and health seeker, whom the saints have sent to the Islands full to dripping with the ever-desirable peseta.