

*New York Journal*  
September 23, 1898

### ***The Grocer Blockade***

The Spaniard is evidently an epigrammatic person. He makes a serious attempt to reduce everything to a basis of one line. Sometimes he misses it, but more often he hits it. The people here are now saying, "We were not blockaded by the warships; we were blockaded by the grocers." It is quite true. Immediately the blockade was declared the grocers of Havana, stirred by a deep patriotism, arose to the occasion and proceeded to soak the life out of the people. It was a wonder that some sensible person did not go quietly about rearranging matters with an axe, but no one did so, and the grocers throughout the war continued to gracefully pillage the public pockets.

Blanco's order establishing a standard of reasonable prices had no effect upon them. Before war was declared they put into hiding a large amount of stock. War came, and soon they declared that they had nothing to sell. Their stores were all empty. They had nothing; no, not so much as a pound of rice. The war had ruined them. Ah! those devils of Americans, thus to torment the honest grocers. In time, however, wealthy citizens might be seen wending their way with much gold to secret conferences with a grocer. Oh, no. Impossible! At no price! A pound of bread is worth more than a pound of gold. It is impossible. Well, if I sell some to you I would have to take it probably from the mouths of my own children, who are in danger of starving. A little, a very little; yes, perhaps.

Thereupon ensued the spectacle of a respectable citizen digging into his own bowels for gold to buy a little of the flour which the grocer had cleverly made to appear like pounded pumice stone.

Of course, in all wars there is invariably a class of patriots who seize their commercial opportunities to trade upon the preoccupation, the consequent vulnerability of the people who are deeply engaged with the palpable facts of the conflict. Doubtless during the civil war in America our particular breed of sutlers defended themselves in argument on the purest, most virtuous business lines. It was not until afterward that the people got their sense of proportion adjusted truly and saw that the system usually operated as a crime. And by that time the individual culprit was safely blurred in a sentimental resentment against a class. In the end, the affair was mainly a joke.

The grocers here were forced to play a bolder game. Upon the news of the raising of the blockade the market slumped from under them. The people simply refused to pay so much. They evidently felt capable of enduring until the supply ships came. The time of arrival of the supply ships was not known.

And now the grocers, as men with honest faces, were in a fair quandary. They would either have to give themselves away as cheats and lower prices and sell stocks as fast as possible, or—they would have to lose money.

What did they do? Did they lose money, like men who would care for an appearance of consistency, or did they give themselves away rather than lose a centavo?

In one day they lowered the price of rice 60 per cent. They lowered other staples proportionately. There had been no influx to the market. There had been simply a rumor that the blockade was about to be raised.

It was shameless. Our chill-blooded Northern race would have hung each grocer to his own signboard. These people, so fiery, so dangerous in temper, so volcanic, alive with passion, they did nothing. They perhaps expended themselves in talk—which is not impossible to their natures. They made an epigram: “We were not blockaded by the warships; we were blockaded by the grocers.” At any rate, one must admit that it is a good epigram.