

## CHAPTER X

IT was as a result of my several meetings with Senator James J. Walker during his stay in Coral Gables that I somehow became involved in an official visit to Havana at the invitation of the Cuban Government. We were quite a considerable party that went to Cuba, including besides ourselves the miraculous "Doc" Dammers, Mr. Charles F. Flynn, of the Bowman-Biltmore Hotels (popularly described as "The Steam-engine in Boots"), and Police-Chief M. P. Lehman of Coral Gables. The function of this latter was to act as an official bodyguard to Dr. Dammers, who as Mayor of the city always travelled with a considerable amount of pomp. We made an impressive array, and so far as I could make out were generally accepted as being a sort of unofficial ambassadorial expedition from the United States, though the exact status of our party was never quite clear.

A special delegation from Cuba came over to Miami to call for us; and on the morning when the cruiser "Cuba," the flagship of the Cuban Navy, was due to arrive, a party of us, including Dr. Dammers and the Steam-engine in Boots, boarded a magnificent motor-launch belonging to the Mayor of Miami and put out



A CHARACTERISTIC EXAMPLE OF 'SPANISH' ARCHITECTURE (CORAL GABLES)



to meet her. It was a very rough day and the "Marionette," though a splendid little boat, behaved somewhat viciously in the Atlantic rollers. She was fitted with twin screws and two 260 horse-power engines; I never knew a boat before with such astonishing acceleration and such equally astonishing powers of pulling up dead when the engines were shut off. In a very few minutes after leaving the quay an immense wave had swept us from stem to stern, and we were all soaked to the skin. A very fast racing hydroplane, filled with photographers, had come out too; and just after we had been given our initial drenching this hydroplane dashed suddenly across our bows at about forty miles an hour with a great fountain of water rising at its stern and dumped several tons of solid ocean directly on our heads, almost drowning us. Everybody in the hydroplane, which made a noise like a battery of machine-guns in full action, seemed to be in a slightly elevated condition, and their boat was apparently quite out of control. Dr. Dammers and the Steam-engine in Boots, usually the most jocular and good-tempered of men, let fly a stream of curses and abuse behind which the slower, more measured outpourings of the captain of the "Marionette" rose louder still. We were all half-stunned and half-drowned, and there was no particular reason why we had not been sunk; but there, lying at anchor about two miles out, was the good ship "Cuba" with all her flags flying, and we dried ourselves with pieces of tarpaulin as best we could and continued on our way to give her a welcome.

The "Cuba" was not an impressive vessel. She had belonged at one time to the United States Navy, but that—judging by appearances—must have been a

considerable time ago. She had, in fact, been abandoned for some years before she was taken over by the Cuban Navy and raised to the dignity of a flagship. Since then, she had apparently received but little attention, and it is extremely doubtful whether she would have passed muster at Lloyd's as a good insurance risk, even in the piping times of peace.

On this occasion the "Cuba" had for some reason developed a marked list, and as we came nearer we could see what were apparently the members of the delegation leaning over the rails and looking very white about the gills. Dr. Dammers stood perilously in our bows, waving a white handkerchief; an officer on the "Cuba" replied through a megaphone in voluble Spanish, with a great deal of signalling and gesticulating which conveyed nothing to us whatever. Owing to the rough weather, our party could not possibly get near enough to climb aboard, so with a great deal of waving and shouting we turned for home again, very gratified at seeing the hydroplane-load of convivial photographers in difficulty with the breakers half a mile to the north.

At the mouth of the harbour, by the time we arrived back, we found that a large-sized tramp steamer had stuck on the sand-bar, and was now immovably jammed across the channel so as to make it quite impassable. But all difficulties are made to be overcome. Every possible craft in the vicinity, from a dredge's tender to a steam ferry, was requisitioned to help tow the tramp out of the way. So that finally, by four o'clock in the afternoon, with an immense amount of "Yo, heave-ho's" and an incredible quantity of blasphemy, she was eventually shifted a few yards; and the "Cuba," by the grace of

Heaven, was enabled to edge past her undamaged and to find her way inside and to the wharf.

The delegation had been expected to lunch, and an immense banquet had been prepared at the Biltmore Country Club; and even though we did not finally arrive until nearly five o'clock, lunch there was. The delegation was met by an orchestra seated in open cars and playing Cuban national airs and the eternal "Sidewalks of New York," the Tammany anthem; and so, preceded by an armed guard of twenty motorcycle police, the procession roared at top speed through the congested streets of Miami, at great danger to life and limb, and finally arrived at the Biltmore.

A few minutes afterwards—so as not to make the delegates uncomfortable by appearing to have been waiting for them—Mr. Walker drove up, and was greeted with a formality and warmth to which he instantly adjusted himself. Obviously he was very glad to meet the Cuban delegates; obviously he was fully cognizant of the importance of the occasion; obviously he recognized that they, representing a country of such power and prestige as Cuba, should be treated with considerable deference. At the same time, there was created immediately after his arrival an atmosphere in which it was felt that, when several important national representatives were meeting together informally, and fully understood one another, there was no need for that stiffness which might be requisite on other occasions. Mr. Walker was, as usual, perfect; in two minutes he was not only a great deal the most popular man there, but had raised the whole tone of the luncheon-party until everyone privately felt that he was being present at a sort of League of

Nations meeting at Geneva. I think that herein lay the greatest of Mr. Walker's subtleties—that art of making everyone feel that he was a much more important and interesting person than was probably actually the case. It is certainly an art of a value altogether incalculable.

The lunch was an enormous success, and increased in uproariousness as time went on. It did not finish until well after dark, and by that time there was only an hour left for us to dash home and change and pack and be back for the formal dinner at the Coral Gables Country Club at nine o'clock. It had been a very splendid lunch, Mr. Volstead having been notable amongst the absentees; and during my long drive back to Miami Beach across the Causeway, and watching the lights spring out across the water in the early evening, I felt that Florida was, after all, a pretty wonderful place—they were all such good fellows, *I* was such a good fellow . . . and so back again to Coral Gables and to the Country Club, to find that all the lights had fused and that a distinctly cheerful crowd had already gathered in the Spanish Patio, singing songs and drinking an occasional glass of water and waving candles about in time to the music.

It was a long but by no means gloomy dinner. In addition to our own dance-orchestra, which was one of the best in America, the orchestra of the Cuban Marines was also in attendance, playing weird Spanish tangoes whenever there happened to be an interval. After every item there was a deafening burst of applause; a great many chairs and glasses seemed to be being knocked over as people got up to dance between the courses . . .

the little strings of coloured lights up amongst the palm-trees mingled with the stars—they were very close, very far away, very close again . . . the soft air of the tropical night wafted through the long leaves, rustling them softly . . . it was all very wonderful. When the dinner was about half through, people began making speeches; after a time there seemed to be two or three people making speeches simultaneously, in Spanish or English indiscriminately, and quite independently of the music, which never ceased for a moment. There was a great deal of applause going on; it was almost continuous. The waiters were still placing an interminable series of dishes before us; we ate and drank mechanically, laughing and talking and singing to the music and making speeches of our own; everything was going with a swing. There was an incredibly pretty girl on my right; but the girl on my left, curiously enough, seemed to be no less beautiful. I had never seen either of them before, and I never saw either of them again. The dinner was still going on, though it was well after midnight now; the singing and dancing and speech-making rose in volume, and there was also—when it could be heard—an occasional cabaret turn which brought down vociferous applause. A very handsome young Cuban officer caught my eye from the far side of the table. He instantly rose, and making his way round to where I sat bowed with great formality and asked if he might have the honour of drinking a glass of wine with me. We both stood up, and he pledged the United States of America while I, no less gallantly, drank to the long life of the Republic of Cuba. A pretty scene, this; no less pretty from the fact that I immediately afterwards



discovered that the compliment had been little more than an excuse for an opportunity of dancing with the very beautiful girl next to me. But no matter. As I say, everything was going with a swing, and I hope and believe that the Cuban delegation was getting a very pleasant impression of the hospitality of Florida. I had seen Mr. Walker, in the earlier part of the evening, shaking hands a good deal with various friends, old and new; he had also made a short and vociferously-applauded speech in which he had referred to the understanding which had always existed between Cuba and the United States, even at times when it might not have been showing itself above the surface of international politics. "Isn't he *too* cute, just!" "C'est magnifique!" "It's the cat's boots!" said people near me. And so it was. It was certainly a wonderful dinner, the like of which I do not hope to see again for many a long day. There must have been hundreds of people there; who paid for it, or what it was all supposed to be about, I never discovered. The number of such vague and enthusiastic functions that were perpetually taking place in Coral Gables had always bewildered me.

Somewhere in the early hours of the morning I was in a huge car with about ten other people, most of whom were trying to sing the Cuban National Anthem in various keys, with only the remotest idea of the melody. We were travelling at an immense speed down some unknown tree-bordered road; it was all very exhilarating. A little later we were all dancing again, to a splendid orchestra in an equally splendid ballroom in somebody's house; I don't know whose house it was, or how the orchestra came to be there, seeing that it was at least

four o'clock in the morning. We were in a good many more cars after that, always travelling very fast along apparently identical roads curving among the pine-trees; there were several other dances, several other suppers . . . and then, feeling not quite so young as we had once felt, we were suddenly and rather wearily eating bacon and eggs at a little coffee-stall in Miami, with the pale, still dawn rising behind the office roofs.

"Come on, boys—we gotta get aboard!" The cheerful, extremely sane Dr. Dammers had suddenly appeared from nowhere, and had taken the party in charge. How he happened to be in that street at that time I don't know, but there he was. The Cuban officers and myself sorted ourselves out of the crowd, piled wearily and sleepily into another car, and were whirled down towards the docks.

"*What* a night, hey?" said Dr. Dammers. I was sitting beside him in the front seat, enjoying our purring progress through the deserted streets. "Hell's bells! It's all right for you young fellers. . . ." But he was, as a matter of fact, the youngest of all of us. He was celebrated for doing eighteen hours of work every day of the week, and a night like this was nothing to him. "You look just about as fresh as a can of cod-roe," said Dr. Dammers commiseratingly. And so we arrived at the wharf, with the sun, pale and watery, rising through the mists over the bay and gleaming on office windows as yet unopened and on the glass porticoes of the Royal Palm Hotel. Mr. Walker had arrived a few minutes before us; and a quarter of an hour later, just as we were going off to sleep, the swaying of the ship and the grinding

of the winches winding up the cables told of our standing out to sea.

Excellent ship of war though the "Cuba," for all I knew, may be, she is certainly not a passenger-ship *de luxe*. We found when we arrived on board that although the Cuban officers were the soul of vague hospitality, and although there was constantly available a profusion of food and wine such as I have never encountered before or since, there was no accommodation whatever arranged for anyone except Mr. Walker and Dr. Dammers. Under an awning out on the quarter-deck a trestle table had been erected, groaning under its load of champagne-bottles packed in ice; any inquiry of anyone as to where we were to go, or where we could find room for a wash and a brush-up, was invariably met with a sweeping off of the hat and a courteous direction towards the wine. Which was all very well, but for all that not so well as might have been at any other time than six o'clock in the morning. Ultimately, wandering about in the dimly-lit passages below decks among machinery and guns and hatchways, I found myself alone in a sort of miniature ward-room. I recovered my suit-case from the bottom of the hatchway, and without asking any further questions undressed and went to sleep on the ward-room sofa, there and then.

It was past midday when I awoke; and there, perfectly polite and taking no notice of me whatever, were a number of officers taking some sort of a meal round the table. On seeing that I was awake, the whole company was immediately vying among themselves to do me honour. I was handed the inevitable glass of wine, and with a good deal of ceremony a steward brought me a sort of

grilled fish on an ornamental plate. I felt very uncomfortable; I could not understand a word that anyone was saying, I was frowzy and still half-asleep, and must altogether have been cutting a sorry enough figure. Though at that hour of the day I boggled hopelessly at the wine, I managed somehow to eat the fish, and things began to go a little better. Everyone was extraordinarily polite, extraordinarily courteous. I don't know what meal it was that the officers were having, but whatever it was it seemed to be going on for ever. Judging by the empty dishes, it had been well under way when I first woke up, and it certainly continued for at least an hour longer. Finally they all rose and left me, with much saluting and bowing, to my own devices.

When I stood up I realized for the first time that the ship was rolling heavily. I looked out of the porthole; we were away out at sea, but there did not seem to be so much as a ripple to account for the eccentricity of our movements. I afterwards found that this was a characteristic of the "Cuba"—she always developed the most colossal roll, even in harbour. There was some defect in her design, apparently, which rendered this inevitable. Feeling rather foolish, I went out into the passage in my pyjamas to look for a bathroom, and met a steward, coming to visit me with a bottle of wine and glasses on a tray. I waved him away, and said "Bath! Wash! Water!" several times, very loudly, with expressive gestures.

"Si!" said the steward, intelligence dawning over his face like the rising sun. He set down the tray, and motioned me to follow him along the companionway and up some stairs. At the top of the stairs there was a

small door, which he held open for me to pass through. And suddenly, and apparently inevitably, I was once again being confronted by that long trestle table on the quarter-deck, covered with bottles and glasses. For an instant it was difficult to decide whether to laugh or to be sick, but in the end laughter conquered.

I wandered about alone for a little time after that, and finally found a seemingly-deserted cabin fitted with a wash-basin. Furtively I made some ablutions, and was just completing the brushing of my teeth when there was a roar behind me, and what I had thought to be a heap of tousled bed-clothes suddenly took shape and animation and revealed itself as an officer in pink silk pyjamas. The officer sat up in bed, pointing to the basin and pouring out a stream of violent language which completely disconcerted me until I realized that it was being directed not at me, but at an unfortunate steward standing in the doorway behind me.

"I tell my servant, hell!" said the officer, suddenly turning to me with a charming smile. "I ver' sorry there is no water hot for such visitor distinguished. Perhaps you would 'ave the wine with me, no?"

I shook my head and smiled and bowed myself out as best I could; the very thought of wine was beginning to be too much for me.

It was a beautiful sunny day when finally I emerged on to the quarter-deck, clothed and in my right mind. The "Cuba," rolling heavily, was shivering in every timber at a steady nine knots. Smoke was pouring from her twin funnels, and she was evidently all-out. A number of officers, accompanied by "Doc" Dammers, who looked as fresh as the proverbial daisy, were eating

kidneys and bacon and drinking beer at a table in the open air, and feeling very much revived I went over and joined them.

Up on the bridge I caught a glimpse of Mr. Walker, pacing up and down with the Commander and deep in earnest conversation. I couldn't hear what he was saying; but even at that distance, I could see from the attitudes of both of them that it was quite obviously the right thing. The other members of the party had not yet appeared, and it seemed that I was, after all, one of the early birds. As soon as we had finished our breakfast a steward appeared and began to lay the table for lunch, and to bring up fresh bottles and glasses.

In the afternoon there was a boxing-match arranged for our entertainment, the principal event being a bout between a heavyweight negro and an even heavier mulatto. It was a most astonishing exhibition. Neither of them had the slightest idea of defence, but both were tremendously powerful and accurate hitters, and every blow reached its mark. The whole crew, which seemed to be an extraordinarily large one, crowded on to masts and spars and anything else that would hold their weight on the further side of the ring, while the two fighters stood toe to toe and slogged each other fairly and squarely on their respective jaws, over and over again. Neither of them appeared to make any attempt to avoid the other's blows, and so far as I could see neither of them ever missed. There were no rounds, and it was quite incredible to me that they did not both kill each other. It was a sickening sight to see their heads jolted back at every impact, and almost a relief when one or other of them, with brilliant variation, let drive at his opponent's

stomach and landed with the usual deadly accuracy. But beyond the loss of a great deal of blood, neither of them seemed to suffer any very material damage. During the progress of the fight, which lasted about a quarter of an hour, there was a gradually increasing crescendo of excitement which towards its climax was accompanied by an outbreak of blows and scuffles among the spectators. Everybody threw largesse into the ring at the close of the battle (which was drawn, both contestants reeling back into the crowd simultaneously as the result of a couple of pile-driving blows delivered on both sides at closer range than usual) and the crew, still wrangling, were jostled back towards their fo'c'sle.

In the evening there was a ceremonial dinner, at which the band of marines played "The Sidewalks of New York" over and over again, with occasional variations on to the Cuban tango. But the sea had suddenly become fairly choppy, and most of us were feeling the effects. I retired early, this time finding that a bed had been made up for me in the ward-room; and slept the long-delayed and refreshing sleep of the just, until at six o'clock next morning a bugle blew us out of bed and marked our arrival at Havana.