

CHAPTER XI

CUBA to-day—that island, according to Professor Callahan, of “Monks and locusts, ports without ships, troops without breeches; a brilliant priesthood, banditti, and an exhausted treasury”—is coming into her own. Her monks and locusts still remain, and her priesthood is no less brilliant than of old; but her troops (what there are of them) no longer go unashamed before the Lord, her banditti have become transformed into comparatively respectable bootleggers, and her treasury boasts a veritable surfeit of those strange twenty-cent pieces that are the curse and the bewilderment of the American tourist. The sugar and tobacco industries of Cuba are still passing through difficult times, but as a winter resort for Europe as well as for North and South America she is gradually forging ahead. At the time when we arrived there this development was still in its infancy; but Havana, being only 240 miles by land and water from Miami, had already become a happy and an adjacent refuge from the terrors of the Florida boom. But although the two cities were still as different as Bedlam from the Garden of Eden, there were already signs that the contagion of the boom was spreading.

For all its strange jumble of modern improvements and ancient beauties, for all its impassable streets and hopeless general lay-out, Havana remains as one of the most attractive resort cities in the world. Seen from the harbour, as our ship glided under the beetling black walls of the old castle of Miramar, Havana appeared at first sight to be a far larger city than its official census of 300,000 would indicate. I afterwards found that by night this impression of vastness becomes even more marked, when the long brilliantly-lit sweep of esplanade glitters in the harbour and the lights of the tall buildings on the cliffs wink impossibly high among the stars. But in reality the city extends only a very little way inland, and practically all of its main buildings lie directly along the sea-front. Yet even within the city itself one still receives this impression of spaciousness, and this despite the absurdly narrow streets clogged with their never-ending procession of electric trams, mule carts and automobiles. Its hotels and palaces, its clubs and more important private houses, are almost without exception of enormous size; and quite unexpectedly one may emerge from a narrow alley into some wide, very beautiful, tree-bordered square with fountains and statuary and green lawns. And always there is that faint, sea-scented breeze that prevents the climate of Cuba, even in the height of summer, from ever becoming as unbearable as the climate of Southern Florida.

It is a revelation to stroll down one of the slightly less respectable streets of Havana and peer into its shop windows. As often as not, one will find jumbled up together an incredible mixture of crucifixes, cigars, church ornaments, ribald picture post cards, chess men,

and gorgeous vestments faded by long exposure to the brilliant tropical sun. The striped sun-blinds of the verandahs almost meet over the streets, casting a pleasant shadow on to the beggars and millionaires taking the air below—for in Cuba there are apparently no middle-classes. But nobody seems to worry much about anything; even quite obviously destitute street hawkers are far more concerned with gallantly lifting battered hats to passing Cuban beauties than with begging alms. To anyone only recently arrived from Miami, where the accumulation of dollars was so manifestly the primary consideration of everybody, it was all almost unbelievable.

The season in Havana extends during the late winter from March to June, and it is then that the Argentines, Americans, Spaniards, Mexicans, and all the other nationalities who crowd its great airy hotels find most of its sporting activities in full swing. Racing, yachting and motor-boating are at their height during the winter months; even rowing, in light eight-oar boats such as are often enough swamped in the stormy waters of the Thames, is practised almost daily in the open and unprotected waters of the Mexican Gulf. The Yacht Club, headquarters of all water sports, is a magnificent building possibly superior to anything of its kind in Europe, but it is the Tennis Club of Havana that occupies a position unique among the sporting clubs of the world. The President of the Tennis Club has a status in Cuba fully equal to that of a Cabinet Minister. It is quite a usual thing for a prominent visitor to be welcomed to Havana by a delegation composed of a representative of the President of the Republic, the "Official Introducer," and the President of the Tennis Club. The

wonderful marble smoking-room of the Tennis Club is indeed a Holy of holies, and many problems vital to the future of Cuba have been solved there over its little inlaid tables.

The port of Havana is almost daily becoming of more and more importance, and is now not only linked with Europe by several direct services, but also with New York, Buenos Aires, and the West coast of the United States. Trucks loaded in New York come direct to Havana through Key West, the extreme southernmost point of the United States, and thence by special train-carrying ferries across the intervening ninety miles of the Mexican Gulf. The policy of making Havana a first-class commercial centre is being carried out vigorously and successfully.

Under the vigorous government of President General Marchada, Cuba to-day is probably as steady and as settled as at any time in her somewhat stormy history. From his enormous gilded palace overlooking the sea—perhaps the only recently-built palace in the world—the President directs the affairs of Cuba with an iron hand that is not always enclosed in a velvet glove. There are not likely to be many revolutions in Cuba while President Marchada, huge, red-bearded and terrifying, is holding the reins. But he is, in common with all other Cubans, the soul of graciousness and courtesy. Nowhere else in the world are there such dinners, such receptions, such speech-makings as there are in Cuba. The extraordinary consideration and politeness with which we were treated during our stay there were alone enough to have made our expedition an unforgettable one.

In spite of the earliness of our arrival, a number of launches came out to meet the "Cuba" as we slid into the harbour. A salute of an incredible number of guns was fired from the castle—a very pretty compliment to Mr. Walker, but as he himself remarked a little difficult to justify on purely technical grounds. Our own vessel saluted in return, and there was a great deal of scuffling round the guns, and arguments among their crews as to who should do what and who should have the honour of actually firing the charges. So far as I could make out, each gun had a crew of at least twenty men, and there was a vast amount of rivalry and jostling as to who should have the foremost positions. From time to time a very small man with a purple face blew various complicated calls on a bugle, which resulted in a great deal of running about for a moment or two afterwards, but in no great permanent effect so far as I could see in the way of getting anything actually done. However, our salute was at last completed without any more serious casualty than the landing of a piece of wadding in somebody's eye; and in due course two little steam pinnaces came puffing out from the wharf, filled with fresh delegations of welcome.

The new arrivals consisted of a representative of the President, the "Official Introducer," Señor Enrique Soler y Baro, the handsomest man I have ever seen and the embodiment of all the social virtues, and the President of the Tennis Club in person. The signal honour conferred upon us by the appearance of this last dignitary was not without its effect on the "Cuba's" crew, who stood back behind their railings watching him with unconcealed awe. The glamour which attaches to the

Tennis Club is astonishing, and is a marked example of the conservative traditions of Cuba in social usages. The delegation which had been with us since we left Miami introduced us to the Official Introducer, who in turn presented us to his colleagues; it was a lengthy and a very formal business, exceedingly serious. Afterwards we descended the gangway, in strict order of precedence, and entered the little plush-covered cabin of the official launch. The Official Introducer pointed out the beauties of the harbour as we covered the half-mile or so to the wharf, and displayed a solicitude for our comfort that was altogether remarkable.

It was still only about eight o'clock when we reached the quay, but a large crowd had collected and we were welcomed with enthusiasm. As we stepped ashore a rather seedy-looking band, composed mostly of trombones, struck up "The Sidewalks of New York" in a weird minor key and with apparently some difficulty in realizing the nicer points of the air; a difficulty which nevertheless did not dissuade the musicians from embroidering it with various skirls and flourishes. A whole fleet of cars was awaiting us, and an escort of mounted police, and as we roared off up the hill towards the centre of the town we must have made an impressive procession. In the car ahead of mine I could see Mr. Walker and Señor Soler y Baro, obviously getting along splendidly together. I do not think that I am betraying any secrets when I say that Mr. Walker, to my knowledge, knew practically nothing of the internal affairs of Cuba—why should he have done?—and of the hopelessly involved and passionate politics of that country; but throughout our very happy stay there he always managed subtly to convey,

both in public speeches and in ordinary conversation, that a study of Cuban affairs had been his life's work and that, although he might not be saying much at present, he was taking back a store of favourable impressions that would work wonders when he disclosed them in the council-chambers of New York. And he may have been, for all I know. "Doc" Dammers, on the other hand, was flagrantly out to sell large tracts of a subdivision near Miami to whatever Cubans would buy; and by some strange means the local papers were—coincident with his arrival—filled with stories of this particular wonderland and with casual allusions to the fact that Dr. Edward E. Dammers, now a visitor to Havana, was its owner and representative and was to be found at the Sevilla-Biltmore Hotel. I believe he did a vast amount of business while he was over there, and with enormous profit; it would have been impossible for him to have done otherwise. When even the most hardened of Miamians were helpless when they were transfixed by Dr. Dammers' portentous forefinger, what chance had the unsophisticated and very charming Cubans? None whatever. But at least up to the time when I left Florida, I believe it was a fact that "Doc" Dammers had never sold anybody anything that had not afterwards risen in value. Once his client, always his client, and if you happened to get into a panic about anything you had bought from him his genial smile and massive bulk were always available to sell it for you, at a high profit, to somebody else. I always regretted that he did not yield to the prayers of a Cuban land syndicate to take over the sales of a big land development that was being put on further along the coast. "Doc"

Dammers let loose among the Cubans with an attendant trombonist would have swept the island like a modern Attila the Hun.

Our party was quartered at the Sevilla-Biltmore Hotel, a large and airy building in the Spanish style, with huge rooms looking out over the wide sweep of the bay. I have never seen anywhere else such an effect of airiness and spaciousness as some of these Havana hotels produced. Every room, even those on the top floors, opened out directly into the open air. In the tradition of all buildings in that part of the world, the Sevilla-Biltmore rises round a wide central court, paved with stone flags and surrounded by tiers of balconies, and every room extends the whole width between the courtyard and the outer walls. The windows are almost as large as the rooms themselves, and there is a constant impression of being in the open air. Waiting for us when we arrived were the inevitable trays with their ice-buckets and glasses, and our rooms were specially decorated with masses of tropical flowers. It was very lovely, and very restful after the cramped sofa of the "Cuba's" ward-room. An enormous number of newspaper and cinematograph men, however, had collected in the lobby to await our arrival, and it was some time before the pleasures of the ice-buckets and the flowers in our bedrooms could be enjoyed in peace.

I will not try to give a connected account of those extraordinary days that we spent in Cuba, as we saw as much of the life of Havana and its surroundings in the course of a few weeks as most people could possibly hope to see in six months. We were taken everywhere; the Official Introducer was constantly at our sides, arranging

that perfect meals should always await us at the furthest points of our journeys, explaining everything, pointing out the places of interest, seeing that the most notable people of every district that we visited were there to meet us and to do us honour.

The hospitality and the courtesy of the Cubans surpassed belief. We were entertained everywhere—by the President and Cabinet of the Cuban Government, by the Tennis Club—that scarcely less august body—by the Yacht Club, the Country Club, the Sugar Planters' Association, the English Club, the newspapers, the banks, the hotels, and apparently every private individual who could find us with a half-hour unoccupied. Outside the Sevilla-Biltmore a great fleet of powerful cars waited day and night, ready to take any one of us anywhere he wanted to go. It was the driver of one of these cars who showed us the way to that wonderful "Brewery Garden" on the outskirts of the town, where one may sit under the trees and be served with every sort of drink imaginable in unlimited quantities, and as the guest of the management. This remarkable privilege was not only extended to our own party—it is, I believe, the privilege of every *bona fide* visitor to Havana.

It was at a dinner at the Havana Country Club that I heard Mr. Walker disclose, for the first and only time during our acquaintance, something of what I believe to be his real self. It was during the finest after-dinner speech that I ever heard him deliver; one of those rare admixtures of humour and sentiment that succeed in avoiding altogether either bathos or sentimentality. Sitting there at the long tables under the trees in the wide flagged courtyard, with the electric lamps winking

down at us among the stars, I think that all of us felt something of that magic that the public speaker of genius can bring, and were moved a little more than we would have cared to admit by Mr. Walker's description, a very simple one after all, of what the United States had meant in his life. To me, even "The Sidewalks of New York" took on a new meaning after hearing this speech, and I understood something of the glamour of America that I had never understood before.

"Do you wonder that I love New York," Mr. Walker had said, "after all that New York has done for me? My father, a penniless emigrant, was tossed into that seething cauldron when the hardships and privations of his own country had finally become beyond bearing; and New York, though he had nothing to give in return, took him in and gave him a new life. I was born in New York; I played in its streets, I lived its life. Every opportunity that I have had New York has given to me. New York has regenerated me; through New York I have regained that which my family, generations ago, had not been able to hold in the bitter struggle for existence. To every tired, disillusioned exile from home, as his ship comes over the horizon at the end of his journey and he sees for the first time that sky-line of the most wonderful city in the world, there comes new hope, new vigour, new romance. And to-night, as I find myself here among you as the honoured guest of an old and cultivated civilization, I am realizing as I never realized before how enormous is the debt to New York that I owe, and how deep is my responsibility in being her representative."

I believe that Mr. Walker meant that speech; I

believe, as we sat listening afterwards to the eternal "Sidewalks of New York" being played by the Cuban Marines under the trees, that he was seeing again the white lights of Broadway and the grim back-alleys of the Bowery and feeling again that strange power of New York that makes tired men new and old men young. Mr. Walker was, as I have said, the most accomplished actor that I had ever met, but I think that on that evening he had, for a moment at least, let the mask fall.

The other speech of Mr. Walker's which I particularly remember was of a very different sort—it was delivered at a luncheon of sugar-planters, which these gentlemen had very kindly tendered to the representatives of the press. The sugar-planters were deeply involved in some obscure conflict with the selling-agencies, and had seized upon the presence of so many New York pressmen as a Heaven-sent opportunity of airing their grievances in a wider sphere. The subject was an involved one, and without, I should have thought, any great interest beyond Cuba; but the planters spared no pains to explain the position to us most thoroughly, in a series of lengthy speeches delivered with great feeling though often almost unintelligible to their not very enthusiastic listeners. Towards the end of the luncheon, when most of the speeches were over, Mr. Walker himself—who had not been among the guests—was seen passing through the lobby of the hotel, and the President of the Planters' Association ran out to ask him to come in and say a few words before we broke up. Mr. Walker was quite willing, and sat down next to me for a moment while he was being introduced (in Spanish) to the assembled company. "What's it all about?" he

asked me, in an undertone; and I had to confess that I still hadn't the vaguest idea, even after the long explanations to which we had been subjected. His other neighbour was no more helpful, and a moment later he rose to speak in reply.

Mr. Walker said, in effect, that these troubles and difficulties which the Cuban planters were at present facing had long been a matter of grave concern to him; and though up to now it might appear that he had not taken any active steps in the redress of their grievances, he could assure them that it was not through any lack of interest in their cause, but rather because the delicacy of such negotiations—a delicacy which only those versed in the intricacies of New York politics could adequately realize—made any premature move extremely dangerous. A premature move might, in fact, easily result in more harm than good being done to the cause which they all had at heart. "But the ground is being prepared, even if slowly," he added. "I cannot, of course, promise you anything definite; even if I could, it would obviously be unwise for me to do so at the present juncture. But I can and will say this; that if in the near future there are certain developments along the lines that we all wish, you may congratulate yourselves that your efforts to-day have not gone unrewarded. It is impossible for any student of Cuban affairs who has seen anything of her problems at first hand not to realize that you gentlemen are indeed placed in a very difficult position; a position from which I, for one, shall be only too willing to lend my weight in extricating you if it be in any way within my power."

To do this remarkable speaker justice, I should add

that Mr. Walker did afterwards take steps to find out what the whole trouble was about, and I have no doubt that his feelings towards Cuba were as entirely friendly as he had indicated. But taking into consideration the fact that at the moment he had no idea whatever of what he was supposed to be talking about, his speech struck me as being a particularly masterly one.

Contrary to what had been my preconceived impression, my visit to Cuba showed me that the Cubans were an extremely sporting people, and took games at least as seriously as we ourselves do in England. We saw every sort and kind of sport going on during our stay there, though it was not strictly the sporting season; but the sporting event that remains most vividly in my memory was our visit to the Fronton, a sort of Olympia-like building devoted to the game of Jai-Alai, surely one of the most remarkable ball-games ever invented.

The game of jai-alai—pronounced “Hi-Li”—is played on an immense court about a hundred feet in length and some twenty-five feet wide, though these dimensions vary. At the two ends and along one side of this court there is a high wall of black-painted concrete, extending to perhaps fifty or sixty feet. The players, either two or four in number, have strapped to their right arms a sort of wicker basket shaped like a banana-skin about eighteen inches long, and from this, by a whirling motion of the arm, they hurl a ball like a large golf-ball with terrific velocity against the end wall. The ball is caught and returned in one action, as in the familiar game of deck tennis, either on the full or on the first rebound, and is hurled back again against the end

wall. So great is the velocity developed, and so tremendous the speed of the ball off the court and in the air, that in the singles game especially an immense amount of agility and skill is needed to keep it in play at all. It is quite possible for the ball to be hurled so hard against the end wall that it will rebound the whole length of the court without touching the ground, thus making the game not a little dangerous as well as strenuous.

In Cuba this game is played almost entirely by professionals, and there is an immense amount of betting on the more important matches. In spite of its intricacies and the subtleties of its tactics it has a wide popular appeal, and the nightly games—it is invariably played by artificial light—are always watched by large audiences. The bookmakers, who parade on a sanded strip between the front row of the gallery and the court, wear brilliant red caps and carry a supply of hollow wooden balls which they throw, with extreme accuracy, to the punters in the upper seats. The recipients unscrew the balls, put their money inside, throw them back again, and receive a betting-ticket in exchange. An immense amount of money changes hands in this way; jai-alai, indeed, is as popular as racing as a means of making and losing easy money. Everyone gets tremendously excited during the progress of the rallies, and the missing of an easy shot rouses a storm of passionate abuse which immediately changes to equally delirious applause when the player redeems himself by the execution of a master-stroke. As might only be expected after the distances they have to cover, the players themselves are completely exhausted after the game is over. Amateurs, I believe, find that jai-alai is almost impossible without a course

of special training that makes the carrying out of an ordinary daily routine almost out of the question.

We re-embarked on the "Cuba" at midnight on the evening of our departure, after such a scene of farewell as I never hope to see again. There were cheering crowds, deputations of farewell, messages from the President, mounted escorts to the dock-side, brass bands, salutes, and waving banners—such a complete disturbance, all in all, as must have prevented any semblance of sleep in the whole of Havana. We had all made many friends during our stay in Cuba, and had seen and learned much; and I for one shall always look back on it as being one of the most friendly and cheerful places that I have ever visited in any part of the world.

There is one little incident in connection with our return to Florida that is perhaps worth recording, as illustrative of the astonishing lack of self-consciousness with which some individuals are blessed. We were being disembarked on this occasion at Key West, and arrived there at nine o'clock on a bright, sunny morning. In the Customs launch that came out to meet us there were various officials, and among them a Colonel ——, representing the Key West Military Station. They all came aboard the "Cuba," and Colonel —— was introduced to Mr. Walker.

"I've always wanted the pleasure of making your acquaintance, sir," said the Colonel. "I used to be a bit of a singer in my young days, and 'Will You Love Me in September' was my star turn. Yessir—I'll say I had a voice when I was a chicken, but I'm too old now."

"I can't believe that, Colonel," said Mr. Walker.

“Why, a man doesn’t reach his prime till he’s around fifty.” (The Colonel, I should say, was an easy sixty.)

“Give us a tune now, Colonel!” said one of the Customs officers, with a wink in our direction.

“With the Mayor’s permission, I will indeed,” said the Colonel; and then and there, despite the fact that we were in a considerable hurry to get ashore and were all standing waiting at the top of the gangway, he stood at attention and quite unaccompanied sang “Will You Love Me in September” to the bitter end. He then obliged with “Mother Machree” and several other compositions, all very slowly and feelingly. Whether he was playing a game with us, or we with him, I never quite decided; but it was all very uncomfortable, and blazingly hot on the iron decks. The whole performance was no less remarkable than it would have been for the military commandant at, say, Portsmouth to oblige with a song for the benefit of a visiting ambassador. And so, at long last, we all went ashore, and boarded the Overseas Pullman for Miami.