

Chapter 20

THE CUBANS

Many times over the years, I have been asked, "What kind of people are the Cubans, and how do you get along with them?"

The following description of them is as I found them when I went to Cuba more than fifty years ago. Recent visits there, the most recent in 1957, show that fifty years have wrought many changes among them—just as it has among us Americans.

In answer to the first question, they are a very intricate mixture of Spanish and Negro, with strong traces of Indian and Irish, and the American soldiers of the First Intervention left a heavy trail behind them. When I first went to Cuba it was rare indeed to see a blond adult; but blond children, five years old or less, were quite common. Today the blond streak is pretty well blended. The first colonists who came to Cuba brought very few women with them. The single men very soon took unto themselves Indian wives and the mixing process began.

The Spanish Conquistadors were looking for gold and adventure. In Mexico, Central and South America, they found plenty of both. In Cuba, they were very much disappointed. The natives were very peaceable, furnishing very little adventure, and they found absolutely no gold. Later they found copper; opened up mines and began enslaving the Indians to work in them. The Indians were not a very hardy race and could not withstand Spanish brutality nor work underground. They died like flies. Others—seeing the fate of their brothers—refused to go into the mines and were promptly killed. Still others—seeing the Spanish tortures—decided it would be much less painful to die by their own hand. Whole tribes committed suicide. The Catholic Church sent a priest, Las Casas, over as a missionary to the Indians. When he saw how they were dying under Spanish cruelty, his heart went out to them and he began looking for a remedy. He had previously been in a country where they had Negro slaves and saw that the Negroes stood up under Spanish brutality; so he introduced Negro Slavery into Cuba,

as a humanitarian measure, to save the Indians. It didn't work out the way he planned. It didn't help the Indians but pleased the Spaniards very much. Instead of one slave, they now had two—the second much better than the first. Between the Spanish cruelty and their own suicides caused by this cruelty, the Indians practically disappeared from the Island.

In all my years in Cuba I never knew but one man who claimed to be a full-blooded Indian. He was an old man; lived near the Cauto River, many miles from any mines; and looked to be what he said he was. His wife was almost white, so the pure-blooded Indian in that family ran out with him. I was told that there were several pure-blooded Indians around the headwaters of the Mayari River, in Oriente Province, but I never got up there to see. General Rabi of Bairie, with whom I was well acquainted, one of the prominent generals in the Ten Years War, looked to be about three-fourths Indian and one-fourth Negro. If he had any white blood in him, it didn't show on the surface. There were thousands in Oriente Province who plainly showed Indian markings. From the introduction of Negro Slavery, the mixing became more with the Negroes than with the Indians and still continues till this day, but not nearly as rapidly as one would expect in a country where there is no color line. By common consent the whites usually marry whites, the blacks blacks, and the mulattoes mulattoes, thus maintaining the status quo pretty well. Of course, there are exceptions. To my very great surprise, there were more Europeans came over and married black wives than there was a crossing of the races among the natives.

When we camped on the banks of the Cauto River, everyone in that vicinity called their babies Negro or Negra, as the case might be, and no one thought anything of it; but Birdie very much resented their calling Elizabeth Negra.

One day one of my workmen, himself as black as the ace of spades, said to me, "People here all wonder why Isabel (Elizabeth) is so white. It seems that they don't realize that her blood is white white. Here in Cuba no one is white white. Some claim to be, but it is like the little girl who went to the store to buy some groceries. She crowded up to the counter and someone said, 'look out Nigger.' 'I'm not a Nigger! Don't you see my father is a Spaniard?'

'And your mother?' 'Hurry up and wait on me. I've got to go'." (Dispacha me pronto. Me voy.)

As to their character, there are exceptions, of course, as there are in all nationalities; but I found the large majority of them courteous, sociable, kind, honest, and hospitable almost to a fault. They would give you almost anything they had when they needed it themselves far more than you did. They appreciated kind treatment and returned it in kind. They were grateful to the Americans for delivering them from the cruelties of the Spaniards.

During World War I, Cuba mortgaged her soul to borrow money to plant cane to supply the world with sugar. Needless to say, both Cubans and Americans speculated in sugar—buying it and holding it for a higher price. They ran the price up to twenty-three cents a pound in carload lots for raw sugar. With sugar up so high, the sugar mills ran the price of labor up in proportion. Most of the country Cubans quit planting things to eat and went to the sugar mills to work, depending on the stores for their living. When the war was over and ships were released from the European service, it was discovered that both Australia and the Philippines had been raising sugar all during the war. They couldn't get ships to ship it in, so just piled up millions of tons that could now be shipped. When they began to ship that, it broke the monopoly and prices started down.

Many banks had loaned as high as seventeen cents a pound on sugar. When the market went down to seven-teen cents, the banks demanded their money. Speculators couldn't pay, so handed over the sugar. According to Cuban law the banks couldn't hold sugar. They had to dump it on an already glutted market, and the price of sugar never stopped going down till it hit three cents a pound. That broke every bank in the Island of Cuba except the Royal Bank of Canada and the National City Bank of New York, both of which had persistently resisted lending money on sugar. As if that was not enough, the U. S. Congress levied a two cent duty on all sugar coming into the U. S.—a measure adopted to protect the beet sugar interests. In protecting one interest, Congress injured several others. Cuba was the United States' very best customer—dependent on the United States for all her machinery, furniture, construction material, clothing,

etc.; and, since she quit planting food crops, even for her food.

Many of our Congressmen just don't seem to realize that people who can't sell, can't buy. Just to protect the interests of one group, they injure many other groups in our own country; and, in this case, they made thousands in Cuba destitute. And the Cuban people haven't forgotten it yet. The Cubans had just as big a hand in the speculation as the Americans, but it was the Americans that slapped on the tariff and so nearly starved so many of them. After all these years, the Cuban attitude toward the Americans is not what it was before that catastrophe. It makes a person who has been through it realize the senselessness of holding one individual of a nation responsible for the acts of other members of that nation.

Until the Spanish American War, Cuba was Catholic. The Government of Spain and the Catholic Church were one and the same. So in rebelling against Spain she also rebelled against the Catholic Church. But Religion and Superstition are deeply imbedded in the human character and hard to leave behind. So when I went to Cuba, a few old women went regularly to church. The big majority wanted the priest to marry them, baptize their babies and bury them; but spent the rest of their days cursing the Catholic Church, the Catholic Priests, and all that they stood for. I can't speak for the cities because I was not around them very much, but the rural population was somewhere around eighty or ninety per cent both illiterate and illegitimate. That sounds appalling—and is. The Spanish Government and the Catholic Priesthood were to blame.

The only legal marriage was a Church wedding. Wages for common labor was forty cents a day if you could find work—and there was much more of the time you couldn't find any than that you could. The priests' standard fee for a wedding was one hundred dollars. What chance did a poor man have of ever getting enough money saved to get married? The answer is he didn't. So when he found the girl of his choice, he took his ax and machete and went out into the woods to build a shack, and invited her to it; and not all, but a large portion, of these people were more faithful to each other than the legally married. Men who had the price of a marriage license, also had the

price of sin. Most of the more well-to-do Cubans were cattlemen, who lived in the city with their legally-wedded wife, and had a querida (concubine) on every cattle ranch they owned. Of course, all children born to either a common-law wife or a concubine had to be recorded as illegitimate.

This breaking away from the Catholic Church left something of a religious vacuum, and many of the Protestant Churches took immediate steps to fill the vacuum. They established missions, and built both churches and schools. The Catholics did everything they could to hinder the Protestants, even to following them around and picking up the literature they left. In at least one case I knew of, they interfered in a funeral till the Baptist preacher had to leave the pulpit and go out to get a policeman to take the priest out of the church. When they found they couldn't keep the Protestants out, they reversed their tactics. They began putting in schools, themselves, and they were good schools, too. I became quite well acquainted with the Priest who was Professor of Chemistry and Physics at the San Francisco School in Camaguey. He invited me in to go through his laboratories, and I must say they were much better equipped than the ones where I studied.

Today, Cuba is counted a Protestant Country.

General Wood took a big hand in abolishing illegitimacy. He passed a law that all marriages must be recorded in the Civil Registry at a fee of only two dollars. He licensed all duly accredited ministers, whether Catholic or Protestant, to solemnize weddings. I knew one couple that was married under that law, who had been living together so long they had grandchildren who attended their wedding.

As further evidence of their inherent honesty, when I first went there I lived for eight months in a palm-leaf shack that could not be locked up. I had one of the only two wells in the entire neighborhood, so about half the people came there for water. On one occasion I was gone for an entire week. Yet in all the time I lived there, I never missed a single thing. Few places in the U. S. could show as good a record. As to getting along with them, I found most of them very easy to get along with if you treated them decently.

Chapter 21

FLORIDA, U. S. A.

Many times through life it is much easier to decide to do a thing than it is to do it. That is what I soon found out about going back to the U. S. When I went to Cuba no passport was required. Now, a war was on and passports were required. To get a passport you had to have a birth certificate. I was born away out on the plains of Kansas long before the Kansas authorities ever heard of such a thing as vital statistics. Father was living, but I couldn't get a birth certificate on his word alone. I had to have at least one more witness who could swear that I was born, and where and when. I wrote to Father to see if he could tell me the names of some of our old neighbors who might be living after thirty-nine years, and who could help me out.

He wrote back something I did not know before. The Quaker Church, ever since its beginning, has kept records of the births, deaths, and marriages of its members. He told me to write to the clerk of the Monthly Meeting at Friendship, Kansas. At the time of my birth, Friendship was only a Preparative Meeting—hence no records. But the clerk very obligingly contacted the clerk of the Timbered Hills Monthly Meeting where my parents had their membership when I was born. She, in turn, got me a certified copy of the record. Then I had to send the birth certificate to Washington, D. C., to get the passport. All very simple after I learned how; but, including the learning how, it took an awful lot of time and I didn't start to the States when I thought I was going to.

In the meantime, the question arose, "What part of the States are we going to?" Every part I knew anything about was in the cold, cold North. I remembered the intense pain of the inflammatory rheumatism with which I had suffered so much and from which I had now been free for fifteen years, and decided it must be in the South. But where? Through Dr. Mosley, head of the Baptist Missions in Cuba, I contacted a real estate man in Mississippi, who offered me what looked like a pretty good proposition.